

Presenting Some Empirical Evidence on the Plight of Domestic Labour in India

Prithvi Jain

Class XII, The Heritage School, Kolkata, India

Abstract: *The availability of cheap domestic help is an ingrained and much-touted perk of living in India. What is often overlooked are the frequently abject socio-economic conditions under which these very domestic workers live. This project is an attempt to examine some of their basic demographic parameters to highlight these issues.*

1. Introduction

India's strident and much admired economic growth has an ugly underbelly, as rapid urbanization has pulled in vast numbers of domestic helpers who often work for long hours under tenuous conditions in the unorganized or informal sector [1]. As stated in the statement of objects and reasons in the Domestic Workers (Welfare and Regulation of Employment) Bill, 2015, Page 4 [2]:

“Domestic workers constitute a workforce which has largely remained in the unorganized sector. As a result, domestic workers have often been subjected to unequal treatment vis-a-vis their industrial counterparts, such as excessive working hours, inadequate wages and lack of social security. Of late, there have been incidents of illegal confinement and even violence against domestic workers. The lack of any regulatory framework in this area has often been blamed for the problems afflicting domestic workers. It, therefore, becomes necessary that a suitable legal framework is put in place, which not only defines the employer- employee relationship but also provides certain safeguards to the domestic workers”

Despite legislation entitling domestic help to pensions and decent work conditions, it would be fair to conclude that most domestic helpers live on the fringes of peri-urban hubs and have to work multiple jobs for meagre incomes, signifying a low productivity trap [3]. We confirm this using a small sample of data from domestic workers in Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

2. Methodology & Findings

A sample of 50 domestic workers were interviewed on a range of topics relating to their household characteristics as well as employment characteristics (Annex 1 contains a description of the questionnaire). The sample was overwhelmingly female: 68% of the surveyed population were females; the mean age of the surveyed population was 39 years; on an average, the domestic workers lived in households of size 4-5. Domestic workers in our sample typically worked 3 jobs per day, working on an average, 10 hours per day. Most often domestic workers got 1 day of leave per week.

Our sample suggested that domestic workers tended to live in households where at most half the members were working – the other half typically being children, elderly or other relatives. This suggests that 2 working members in the household (typically head of household and wife) have to support 2-3 other members. The average monthly income of a typical domestic worker in our sample came to roughly INR (Indian Rupee) 7714/month (\$120.5/month¹). This earning is used to supplement the other household member's earnings so that the average household income for a family of size 4-5 was roughly 16,100/month (\$250/month).

These numbers suggest that most households are extremely vulnerable to income poverty: per capita earnings per day amounts to just INR 64 – barely \$1. At such low levels of income, expenditure on basic items such as food, education and health tend to get squeezed or households may be forced to use coping mechanisms (such as reduce food intake) that could hurt the households in the long run. Our data suggest that household spend about 64% of their income on basics such as food, education for their children and health. The pressure to spend on consumer non-durables such as electricity for lighting, mobile phones for communication and information and the rising cost of food tends to put

¹ Using an exchange rate of INR (Indian Rupee)64=\$1

a fence around expenditures on food, health and education. This is worrisome: not only is working 10 hours a day 6 days per week for prolonged periods of time unhealthy and risky, this hard labor still leaves the household exposed to poverty and unable to spend on basics such as food, education and health.

Table 1

| | |
|---|----------|
| Mean Age | 39 years |
| % Female | 68 |
| Household size | 4 |
| No. of jobs per person | 3 |
| Hours worked/day | 10 |
| Monthly income | 7714 |
| Total household income | 16102 |
| No. of holidays/month | 3 |
| Employed members/Household size | 0.46 |
| Income spent on food | 5456 |
| Income spent on health | 2290 |
| Income spent on education | 2585 |
| Average total expenditure on basics | 9212 |
| Expenditure on basics/Total income | 63 |
| Household per capita income | 4350 |
| Household per capita spending on basics | 2419 |
| No. of completed interviews | 50 |

As is well known, averages tend to mask differences among people. Our data confirm that lower income domestic workers tend to spend less on average on basics as shown in Figure 1 and hence likely to be among the most vulnerable groups.

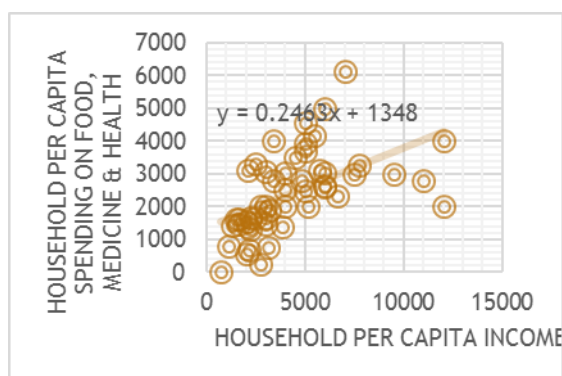


Figure 1: Spending on basics and per capita income

The regression line – which shows the best fitted line through the scatter plot, suggests an upward trend: $y=1348+0.25x$ where y and x denote per

capita spending on basics and per capita household income per month respectively. This suggests that the minimal level of consumption, even when household income is zero, is about INR 1348/month (\$221/month) or INR 45/capita/day: substantially less than the international poverty line of \$1.25/day/person. The regression also confirms that expenditures on basics tend to rise quickly. A one unit increase in per capita income results in a 0.24-unit increase in spending on basics.

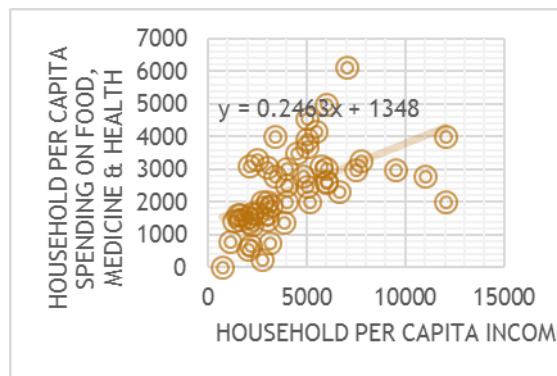


Figure 2: Monthly income and hrs worked/day

The earnings profile of our sample of domestic workers show great heterogeneity in terms of incomes earned and hours worked. This distribution is no doubt influenced by the type of domestic work, negotiating or bargaining power, situation in the household and so on. The data show clustering of incomes for different working hours per day. However, it is still possible to point to an upward drift which suggests that in order to escape the poverty trap and earn a sustainable livelihood, workers must work 10-12 hours per day. The data show that for each hour increase in work, monthly income increases by INR 504 (Figure 2).

Our sample data also show evidence of segmentation in the domestic workers' market. In particular, we can detect a gender imbalance - women domestic workers appear to hold more jobs but earn less than males despite working the same number of hours per day. In other words, their hourly salary is considerable lower than their male counterparts as confirmed by the sample data (Table 1).

Table 1: Gender differentials

| | Male | Female |
|------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Average earnings per month | INR 8909 (\$139) | INR 7151 (\$112) |
| Average no. of jobs | 2 | 3 |
| Average hours worked per day | 10 hours | 10 hours |

| | | |
|---------------------|--------|--------|
| Average salary/hour | INR 25 | INR 29 |
|---------------------|--------|--------|

QKHZ7QCDAQFgg3MAM&url=http%3A%2F%2Fin.orne.un.org%2Fpage%2Frights-for-domestic-workers%2F&usg=AFQjCNGwnJEZ3mYFWe-HiYRNTurGzN6Urg

2. Conclusion

The sample of domestic workers may not be nationally representative and hence results must be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, we were able to find evidence of certain crucial aspects of the unorganized domestic workers labour market and suggest the need for a deeper examination. Apart from the arduous working conditions, low wages and multiple jobs, signifying low human capital and productivity, the discrimination women tend to face and the fragmented nature of this job market, it would appear that those members of our society who look after us are quite vulnerable themselves on numerous fronts, including income. Other developing countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia have realized the non-sustainability of this situation and enacted and enforced tighter legislation [3]. It is time that digital India, where millions of families have to eke out a living on the fringes of poverty, learns from these countries: labor rights are fundamental for its working population and crucial for India to reap the true gains in productivity and employment it is capable of.

3. Acknowledgements

- [1] Dr. Aniruddha Bonnerjee (PhD, Econ, USA), Policymetrika, India and senior advisor UNICEF Myanmar, for overall supervision and guidance on statistical analysis.
- [2] Mr. S.C. Jain (MSW, LLB) senior consultant in labour law and industrial relations.
- [3] Note of acknowledgement to all those domestic workers who spared their precious time to answer the survey

4. References

- [1] World Bank: East Asia and the Pacific can do better in labor regulation and social protection: <http://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/east-asia-and-pacific-countries-can-do-better-labor-regulation-and-social-protection>
- [2] Government of India (2015): The domestic workers (welfare and regulation of employment) Bill 2015. Bill No. 21 of 2015
- [3] United Nations India (2015): Rights of domestic workers
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&ved=0ahUKEWjG3_3V9JfWAhUJKJ

ANNEX 1

Description of Survey & Variables

A survey was conducted on fifty domestic workers which included household servants and drivers residing and working in various households in Kolkata. They were asked about their background characteristics, work-related characteristics, household statistics and child-related characteristics.

Background Characteristics

Subjects were asked introductory questions about their name, age, gender and their relationship to the head of the household.

This was followed by the number and list of all their household members living with them.

Work Related Characteristics

This part of the survey included questions relating to the domestic helpers' job related characteristics. The following were the components of this part-

- 1) The number of jobs the subject has. This is the number of houses in which the subject works.
- 2) The number of hours worked by the subject on a daily basis.
- 3) Income earned by the subject alone in a month from all households.
- 4) The number of holidays the subject gets, if any, on a monthly basis.
- 5) On the job benefits (if any) that the subject gets like medical benefits, paid leave, pensions, health insurance, etc.

Household Characteristics

This part included a detailed inquiry into the household condition of the subject. The following were the questions asked-

- 1) The number of members in the household working for pay.
- 2) The total income earned by all members of the household on a monthly basis.
- 3) Current Job status of the spouse of the subject. (if applicable)
- 4) Whether the subject's parents live with them (if applicable) and if so, whether they work or not.
- 5) The household member who takes care of the children in the house (if applicable) in the subject's absence with respect to feeding, bathing, helping out with homework, etc.
- 6) The break-up of the total household expenditure on basics which includes

- i) Food
- ii) Medicines
- iii) Education of children which includes school fees, tuition fees, etc.

Child Related Characteristics

This part focused on the children in the household (if applicable) between the age of 5-17. The following were the questions asked-

- 1) Whether all the children in the household go to school.
- 2) If not, why?
- 3) The current grade of the child.
- 4) Whether the child is happy at school.
- 5) If not, why?