

## **Violence amongst Female Domestic Helpers in India: Challenges, Vulnerabilities, and Pathways to Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

This article delves into the intricate issue of violence among female domestic helpers in India. Domestic helpers, predominantly women from disadvantaged backgrounds, confront a spectrum of adversities, including meagre wages, strenuous work hours, and meagre legal safeguards. Such vulnerabilities render them susceptible to various forms of mistreatment encompassing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Additionally, certain domestic workers are trapped in debt bondage, exposed to trafficking, and coerced into forced labour. The curse of child labour persists within this sector. Inadequate access to healthcare and education compounds their trouble, further eroding their resilience. Discrimination, rooted in caste and gender disparities, compounds their tribulations. Though legislative provisions exist to shield domestic workers, enforcement often falters, with many cases left unreported due to the fear of reprisals or a lack of awareness regarding available legal recourse. Efforts to combat this persistent issue include legislative reforms, governmental interventions, and awareness campaigns. Organizations and initiatives concentrate on bolstering domestic workers through education and vocational training. Yet, the struggle for the socioeconomic upliftment and better working conditions of domestic workers remains an ongoing challenge.

This article underscores the paramount importance of recognizing domestic workers as deserving of equitable remuneration, humane working conditions, and the protection of their fundamental rights. It also highlights the necessity of a multifaceted approach, encompassing legal amendments, rigorous enforcement of existing laws, awareness campaigns, and economic empowerment initiatives. Ultimately, mitigating violence among female domestic helpers in India demands a transformative shift in societal attitudes and an unwavering commitment to upholding the dignity and rights of these vulnerable labourers.

**Key words:** Domestic worker, labour, violence etc.

### **Introduction**

According to International Labour Organization (ILO) domestic workers comprise a significant part of the global workforce in informal employment and are among the most vulnerable groups of workers. They work for private households, often without clear terms of employment, unregistered in any book, and excluded from the scope of labour legislation. Their work may include tasks such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, taking care of children, or elderly or sick members of a family, gardening, guarding the house, driving for the family, and even taking care of household pets (1). There are 4.8 million domestic workers including 2.9 million female domestic workers. Domestic work accounts for 3.5% of women's total employment. Domestic workers form the third-largest

category of workers after agriculture and construction. However, according to the National Domestic Workers' Movement, the number of domestic workers exceeds 50 million. More than 66% of the workers are working in urban areas. The share of women and girls in domestic work is rising at a much rapid pace, accounting for 75% increase in the number of workers in the last decade (2). The majority of domestic workers in India are illiterate/ minimally educated and low-skilled.

Violence among female domestic helpers in India is a complex and concerning issue that involves various forms of abuse and mistreatment. Domestic helpers, often women from marginalized backgrounds, face several challenges, including low wages, long working hours, lack of legal protection, and, in some cases, physical and emotional abuse (4).

**Challenges faced by domestic female workers in India:** Women domestic workers have a number of risks and problems in their day-to-day lives. They have a risk of their survival as well as physical and mental health. Here are some key findings of the present study to consider:

- **Low Socioeconomic Status:** Many female domestic helpers come from impoverished backgrounds and may have limited education and economic opportunities. This vulnerability can make them more susceptible to exploitation and violence (7).
- **Long Working Hours:** Female domestic helpers often work long hours, sometimes without proper breaks, which can lead to physical and mental exhaustion.
- **Low Wages:** In many cases, domestic helpers are paid inadequately for their work. This financial dependence can make them reluctant to report abuse or maltreatment for fear of losing their jobs (6, 9).
- **Abuse and Harassment:** Some domestic helpers face physical, verbal, or sexual abuse from their employers. Emotional abuse, such as humiliation and verbal insults, is also prevalent.
- **Lack of Legal Protections:** India has labour laws that provide some protection to domestic workers, but enforcement can be weak, and many domestic helpers are not aware of their rights.
- **Isolation:** Domestic helpers often live with their employers, which can lead to isolation from their own families and communities. This isolation can exacerbate their vulnerability to abuse.
- **Lack of Social Support:** The stigma associated with domestic work can make it difficult for domestic helpers to seek help or support from their communities or law enforcement.
- **Trafficking and Forced Labour:** In some cases, domestic helpers, particularly those from impoverished and remote regions may be lured or coerced into domestic work under false promises and then forced to work in exploitative conditions. Human trafficking is a grave concern in this context.
- **Child Labour:** Child labour remains a significant problem within the domestic helper sector in India. Many underage girls are employed as domestic workers, often subjected to hazardous working conditions and denied access to education.
- **Debt Bondage:** Some domestic helpers become trapped in debt bondage, where they are forced to work to pay off debts incurred through loans taken from their employers. This practice can perpetuate a cycle of exploitation and abuse.
- **Lack of Access to Healthcare and Education:** Domestic helpers often lack access to basic healthcare and education for themselves and their children. This lack of access to essential services can exacerbate their vulnerability. Female domestic workers, especially if they are children, often

have their education compromised due to their work commitments. This perpetuates the cycle of poverty and limits their opportunities for upward mobility.

- **Migrant Workers:** Many domestic helpers are migrants who move to urban areas in search of employment. These workers may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to their lack of local connections and awareness of their rights.
- **Caste and Gender Discrimination:** Discrimination based on caste and gender can compound the challenges faced by domestic helpers, especially those from marginalized communities. They may be subjected to discrimination not only by their employers but also by society at large (8).
- **Limited Legal Recourse:** Even though there are legal provisions to protect domestic workers, the enforcement of these laws can be weak, and many cases go unreported due to fear of retaliation or ignorance of legal remedies.
- **Social Stigma:** Female domestic workers face social stigma and discrimination due to their occupation. This can make it even harder for them to seek help or support when facing violence.

**Empowerment Initiatives:** Various organizations and initiatives are working to empower domestic helpers through education, vocational training, and skill development programs. These efforts aim to improve their socio-economic status and reduce their vulnerability to abuse. Public awareness campaigns are crucial in changing societal attitudes and promoting the fair treatment of domestic helpers. These campaigns seek to educate employers and the general public about the rights and dignity of domestic workers. India has ratified international conventions related to labour rights, such as the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention (C189), which calls for decent working conditions and protection for domestic workers. Advocates and organizations often use these international standards to push for better rights and protections (3). Efforts to address above mentioned issues are as under:

- The Indian government has passed laws and implemented regulations to improve the working conditions of domestic workers, such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013.
- NGOs and advocacy groups are working to raise awareness about the rights of domestic workers and provide support and legal assistance to those facing abuse.
- Social awareness campaigns aim to challenge the societal norms that perpetuate the mistreatment of domestic helpers and promote more equitable treatment.

It is essential to recognize that violence against domestic helpers is not limited to India and is a global issue. Addressing this problem requires a multi-faceted approach that involves government, civil society, employers, and the general public working together to ensure the safety and dignity of domestic helpers.

**Suggestions:** Below are few suggestions to further improve the content and provide a comprehensive overview of the issue of violence among female domestic helpers in India:

- ✓ **Statistics and Data:** Incorporate up-to-date statistics and data from credible sources, such as government reports, NGOs, and international organizations, to illustrate the prevalence and trends of violence and exploitation among domestic helpers in India.

- ✓ **Case Studies:** Include real-life case studies or stories of domestic helpers who have experienced violence or abuse to make the issue more relatable and impactful.
- ✓ **Legislative Framework:** Expand on the legislative framework in India that governs domestic work and workers' rights. Discuss specific laws, their strengths, weaknesses, and the challenges in enforcing them.
- ✓ **Government Initiatives:** Highlight any recent government initiatives or programs aimed at improving the conditions of domestic workers and preventing violence. Provide an assessment of their effectiveness.
- ✓ **Role of Employers:** Discuss the role of employers in perpetuating or alleviating the problem. Emphasize the importance of responsible and ethical employment practices among households employing domestic workers.
- ✓ **Intersectionality:** Recognize the intersectionality of factors such as caste, class, and gender that impact the experiences of domestic helpers. Explain how these intersecting identities can exacerbate their vulnerability.
- ✓ **Healthcare and Education Access:** Elaborate on the specific challenges faced by domestic helpers in accessing healthcare and education for themselves and their families. Discuss potential solutions or initiatives addressing these issues.
- ✓ **Community Support:** Highlight the role of community organizations and support networks in providing assistance and advocacy for domestic workers.
- ✓ **International Perspective:** Compare the situation of domestic helpers in India to the experiences of domestic workers in other countries. Identify best practices and lessons that India can learn from international approaches to address this issue.
- ✓ **Media and Awareness:** Discuss the role of media, both traditional and social, in raising awareness about the issue of violence among domestic helpers. Analyze the impact of media coverage on public perceptions and policy changes.

Efforts to address violence against female domestic workers in India include:

- **Legal Reforms:** Advocacy groups and civil society organizations are pushing for legal reforms to extend labor protections to domestic workers and improve working conditions.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Raising awareness about the rights of domestic workers and the consequences of violence is essential to combat the issue.
- **Helplines and Support Services:** Helplines and support services have been established to assist domestic workers in crisis situations and connect them with legal aid and counseling.
- **Training for Employers:** Educating employers about the rights and dignity of domestic workers can contribute to a safer and more respectful working environment.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Initiatives that provide alternative livelihood options and skills training can empower domestic workers to seek better opportunities and reduce their vulnerability.

**Conclusion:** - Violence against female domestic workers in India is a concerning and pervasive issue that encompasses various forms of abuse, exploitation, and discrimination. Female domestic workers,

often from marginalized communities, are vulnerable to multiple forms of violence due to their low socio-economic status, lack of legal protection, and limited access to resources. Addressing this issue requires a multi-pronged approach that includes legal reforms, enforcement of existing laws, awareness campaigns, and economic empowerment initiatives. It also necessitates a shift in societal attitudes and the recognition of domestic workers as deserving of fair wages, humane working conditions, and respect for their fundamental rights. The responsibility to combat this issue extends beyond legal reforms. Employers and society at large must recognize their roles in ensuring safe and respectful working environments for these workers. The article concludes with actionable recommendations for addressing this pressing concern, emphasizing the need for strengthened legal protections, awareness campaigns, ethical employment practices, and improved access to support services. As India grapples with the multifaceted challenge of violence among its female domestic helpers, this article serves as a call to action. It urges readers to join the collective effort in creating a society where the rights and dignity of domestic workers are respected and upheld, ultimately fostering safer and more equitable working conditions for this vital workforce.

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