

**WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS:  
THEIR LIFE, PROBLEM AND DREAM**

GROUP WORK FOR SURVEY RESEARCH

SUBMITTED BY

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## **WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS: THEIR LIFE, PROBLEM AND DREAM<sup>1</sup>**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Women in our society have so far had only a secondary status. It is well known that the economic dependence of women upon men is one of the primary reasons which has pushed them into the background and resulted in their having only a secondary status both within and outside the family (Wadhera,1976). In spite of the fact that the fair sex has proved their mettle in every walk of life, their contribution is not given due credit in most cases. In India women constitute nearly half of the total population and they play a vital role in domestic sphere, in the rural field and also in urban economy. Yet, their economic status is still low as reflected by the census data itself that present a distorted picture of women particularly of those who are engaged in the informal sector of urban economy (Tripathy, 1991).

It is found that among all categories in the informal sector, domestic servants' income is the lowest and the problems are many (Sundaram,1966). They are engaged in household tasks, which include washing utensils, floor cleaning ,washing of cloths, cooking as well as some outdoor tasks such as purchase of vegetables etc. Most of them live in slums, lead a monotonous life without any colour, struggle every day for their survival and face a numerous problems in their day to day life like long hours of work, insecurity regarding jobs , low status within the house as well as in the outside world (Gathia,1983).

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<sup>1</sup> This has been done as a 'Group Work for Survey Research' as a part of requirement for the degree of Master of Population Studies by the authors in February-April 1999 under the supervision of Prof. G. Rama Rao and Dr. S. Acharya at the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai

A number of studies have been done on female construction labourers but little effort has been made on the domestic maid. So an attempt has been made to know about the history, experiences, emotions, feelings and aspirations about children of this vulnerable group of the society having negligible safe guards.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

The main objectives of our study are:

- 1) to know the reasons behind selecting the job of domestic helper;
- 2) to examine the basic characteristics of these workers including socio-economic condition;
- 3) to know their problem at workplace and home; and
- 4) to study their aspirations regarding their children;

### **LOCATION OF STUDY AREA:**

The study has been conducted in five areas of Mumbai, namely Ganeswari Slum, Deonar; Patwardhan Colony, Deonar; Acharya Nagar (Green Garden Apartments), Chembur; Bhaba Atomic Research Centre (BARC) Colony, Trombay; Madhuban Housing Complex, Deonar.

### **METHOD:**

Our total sample size is 50, out of which 3 case studies have been done to gather detail information. Samples are chosen randomly, 10 from each of the five areas mentioned above. Interviews are taken either at working place or at the residence of the domestic maids.

The questionnaire that we prepared is a combination of structured and unstructured questions. To know the incidence of the respondents' life, their feelings and ideas emphasis has been given on unstructured interviews. 3 case studies are conducted to

know all aspects of life of the domestic maids in details, giving due emphasis on the emotional side, which could have not been extracted by interview techniques.

- To fulfil our first and second objectives we have applied a particular technique to know their life history (UNFPA,1994). The respondents are requested to recall their past life from which the reasons for choosing the job and their basic characteristics came out automatically.
  
- To know their problems in day to day life and also their daily routine we have adopted an approach which had been adopted by the Swedish International Development Agency to outline a typical day for a man and a woman in Africa (UNFPA,1995). To present information in a tabular form respondents were requested to tell their daily routine.
  
- To know socio- economic condition question are asked on their monthly income and expenditure, contribution of other family members, relation with husband, behaviour of the employer, their leisure time and also dream about their children.

### **RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING THE JOB:**

Two types of domestic maids can be easily identified from our survey work. One group of women is not the bread winners of their family but willing to do the work for 'additional income'. On the other hand most of the domestic maids are working to earn their livelihood.

The first group of women started working mainly after giving birth of their first child. According to them they enjoy and like this work. But most of the respondents are forced to do this job to feed their family. According to them there is no other way to earn money with their little education and technical skill. In other words 'we are familiar with this type of work, it does not extract our energy totally as it happens in construction or other factory- works, we get least some time to look our family'.

Our study shows that , out of the total respondents 60% are migrants (migrated either due to marriage or family movement). Most of the maid started working after marriage when they realised that their husbands' income is not enough to meet their basic needs.

From the family history it is very clear that most of the respondents' fathers were engaged as agricultural labourer or construction works. No respondents have been found in our study who are working presently along with their mother, willing to take their children to help them in work place, hence indicating a gradual social change.

**BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOMESTIC HELPERS AND THEIR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION:**

TABLE 1. PERSONAL DETAILS

Age	Marital Status			Avg Ch	Family Type		Mig Sta	
	U	M	W		NU	JO	N	M
10-19	8	1	0	0	2	7	2	7
20-35	0	28	4	2.6	29	3	17	15
36+	0	4	5	4	9	0	1	8
Total	8	33	9	-	40	10	20	30
% Total	16	66	18	-	80	20	40	60

Foot Note: U: Un- married, MA: Married, NU: Nuclear, JO: Joint, W: Widow  
M: Migrant, N: Non-migrant, Ch : Children

TABLE 2. SOCIO- ECONOMIC DETAILS

Age	Schooling			Working Hrs			Mean Year Work	Mean Self Income	Mean Other Contribution	Mean Total Exp
	0	1-4	5+	1-5	6-8	9+				
10-19	1	3	5	3	3	3	2.67	668	2467	2711
20-35	5	15	12	7	19	6	6.53	917	1865	2468
36+	5	3	1	1	1	7	20.1	1338	1416	2411
Total	11	12	18	11	23	16	8.28	948	1893	2502
%Total	22	42	36	22	46	32	-	-	-	-

**Characteristics of the Sample:** Fifty respondents have been taken for this survey. Out of this 50, as Table 1 reveals, currently married women constitute 66 percent, widowed and unmarried constitute 18 and 16 percent respectively. Among the currently married women most of them belong to the middle age group. The middle age group is having 2.6 children on an average, the same for the old age group is 4. Sixty percent of the respondents are migrants and mostly from Ratnagiri, Thane, Raigarh and Pune Districts.

Table 2 highlights the socio- economic conditions of the sample. 64 percent of the women are either illiterate or primarily educated and the rest have more than 5 years of schooling .Working hours increase with age. This indicates their increasing responsibility to their family. As age increases mean year of work also increases. This implies their unchanged way of livelihood. Self-income increases as age increases, however, contribution of other family members’ decreases. This implies as most of the women are from nuclear family their husbands’ efficiency decreases as age increases in unorganised sector. Women from the younger age group reported maximum contribution by their family members as most of them belong to joint family. Their expenditure is also high which acts as a push factor for their involvement in work.

**TABLE 3. DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT**

Age	Father’s Behaviour			Husband’s Behaviour			Entertainment		
	G	B	W	G	B	W	N	R	T
10-19	4	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
20-35	0	0	0	8	12	8	7	7	18
36+	0	0	0	0	3	1	6	1	2
Total	4	3	0	8	15	9	13	8	29
% Total	8	6	0	16	30	18	26	16	58

Footnote: G: Good, N: Nothing, B: Bad, R: Radio, W: Worse and T: TV

## **PROBLEMS FACED BY MAIDS AT WORK PLACE AND AT HOME:**

(A) **Problems At Work Place:** The major problems faced by the women domestic servants at work place are as follows:

- 1) 80% of the women are not satisfied with their present salary and expect more. On an average they get Rs. 200- 250 per month for cleaning floor and washing clothes; Rs. 400-500 monthly for cooking food twice a day, but they expect at least Rs. 100-200 more, that is, Rs. 300-400 for cleaning and washing and Rs. 600 for cooking.
- 2) 10% women expressed their grievances for doing 'extra work' when guests come.
- 3) Salary of 20% women get reduced for their absence in work. However, all of them get leave if they fall sick and inform the employer.
- 4) They want at least one holiday per week. But 90% of the employer are not in favour of this demand as expressed by the respondents.

Women working to add to the family, as mentioned earlier, are satisfied with their present job. They praised their employers being friendly, cordial, helping them by providing breakfast, tea, clothes, medicine and valuable suggestions.

(B) **Problems at Home:** Table 3 reveals domestic environment. Adolescent girls suffer less from unpleasant behaviour of their respective fathers where as most of women have drunkard husbands. Some of them suffer very much due to the violent attitude of their husbands. However, most of them watch TV to forget stress and strains of their daily life. Their problems in details are discussed below:

- 1) Most of the women are the bread winners of their family and getting less economic support from their kith and kin. Out of this 45% women's husbands drink and 30% faces severe problems as their husbands drink as well as torture them.
- 2) 16% of the respondents are unmarried. Out of which 12% started working as their father expired, 50% started this work to cope up with poverty. While 38% respondents' fathers of this group are drunkards and instead of contributing anything they create problems.

- 3) Most of the women after returning back to their home repeat the same work as there is no helping hand to reduce their burden of work. However, a very few respondents reported that their daughter-in-laws or mother help them doing household-work.
- 4) Though they usually go to Satabdi Hospital, some of them prefer to get treatment from private practitioners as the latter requires less time. Hence their expenditure increases when health deteriorates.
- 5) They also face problems to collect drinking water. They usually stand in long queue for hours together to get two buckets of water.
- 6) Many of the respondents express their inefficiency to look after their children in study because of their inadequate knowledge. A few of their husbands spent time to teach their off springs and the rests, in spite of having free evening hours watch television hours watch or spend time by playing cards and taking drinks.

Table 4 shows daily work profile of women from different age groups. This table is made taking average and/or more frequent activities performed by them. Column 2 shows activities of an adolescent girl. Adolescent girls usually work at a particular place for a long time in a day as helping hands for all kind of domestic works, which is reflected from the table.

Column 3 shows tight schedule of a mother working as a domestic maid. Their main activities at work place include washing utensils, clothes, cleaning floors etc., and they cover many places. However, their activities (as perceived) do not go against the health of their infants as they perform the crucial task of breast feeding regularly.

Column 4 highlights a day of a woman in the old age group. Women in this group are found as cooks at both work place as well as at home. They also have a very tight schedule but spend some time interacting with neighbours.

## A WOMAN'S DAILY WORK PROFILE:

TABLE 4: DAILY WORK PROFILE

Time	Young Age Group	Middle Age Group	Old Age Group
05.30	-	-	Rises
06.00	-	Rises	Fetch water
06.30	Rises	Breast-feeds the baby	Prepares/takes food
07.00	Takes food	Prepares/takes food Takes child to school	Attends w p 1 Washes utensils Prepares food
08.30	Goes to w p	Attends w p 1 Washes utensils, cloths Cleans floor	Attends w p 2 Prepares food Washes cloths
10.00	Does domestic work at w p	Leaves w p takes child home breast feed the baby prepares food	Attends w p 3 Repeats as above
12.30	Helps cook	Attends w p 2 Repeats as in w p 1	Returns home
01.00	Takes food	Works at w p 2	Washes cloths Prepares/takes food
02.30	Returns home	Attends w p 3 Washes cloths Cleans floor	Does other household work
03.30	Takes rest	Attends w p 4 Repeats as above	Goes to w p again
05.30	Goes to w p	Returns home Breast-feeds the baby	Works at w ps
07.30	Returns home	Washes cloths	Returns home
08.00	Helps mother	Prepares food Breast feeds the baby	Interacts with neighbour
09.30	Takes food Watch TV	Takes food Watch TV	Prepares/takes food
11.00	Goes to bed	Watch TV	Goes to bed
12.00	-	Goes to bed	-

Footnote: w p: work place

## **ASPIRATION ABOUT CHILDREN:**

Mothers who are working as domestic maids do not want their daughter to become the same. They want to educate their girls. Some of them do think about higher education. However, they are very much concerned about the increasing cost of education. Most of the mothers agreed that girls should not be married before age 19.

Boys are free to make their own fortune. If they want to continue study mothers will be supporting them. Most of the young mothers want their boys to become technicians or mechanics. And they are free to marry after age 20 if they become self-sufficient.

## **CASE STUDIES**

### **Case No 1. Work For Satisfaction, Not For Money**

Laxmi bai in her mid- thirties, a fair complex with a smile face, is a mother of two small boys. She used to work as a maid servant since before her children were born, but only for few hours a day. This schedule makes it easy for her to combine work and family. She speaks her own work –satisfaction and difficulties.

Q: Would you like to give a general idea of why you work?

A: Well, I suppose my reasons are pretty. I work for the simple reasons . I am more or less cooped up in the house for all the day long. My husband goes for work and returns late in the evening and my sons go to school in the morning. And so I want to release some of my monotony and boredom that I develop by staying all day at home. So I prefer to go work. I have been working half a day and staying other half at homes, relaxes me quite a bit. I am more or less able to cope with the problem at home better than if I was at home day long.

Q: So you don't have to work for money? It's really for your own peace of mind, I mean satisfaction?

A: Yes, I don't have to work for money because my husband's income is quite sufficient to support me and children, I think, I just want to work, it gave certain amount of

independence too, I suppose. I really enjoy working, and the work that I do it in a different environment.

Q: How old are your children?

A: I have two children, Abhisek a ten year son and Anubhav who is seven and half years.

Q: What different problems have you experienced with your children so far as your work is concerned? Was it easier when they are younger or has it got more difficult as they have grown older?

A: Well, I worked until I was in my fifth month pregnancy with the first one and I stayed until he was a year old. Then I went back to the work and I worked until he was 2. Then I became pregnant with my second son and I worked up until 6 months of pregnancy also with him.

Q: What do you think about the future of your sons ?

A: I want to make them educated. I will continue my support up to and until we could. Rest depends upon their destiny. Abhisek has a dream to be a 'samuddar wala fauji' (NAVY Personnel).

Q: How have your children responded to your work? Do they sometimes cry when you leave in the morning or do they wish you would stop working?

A: When I first started working with Abhisek I had problems for a while but not very long because his "nani", my mother was there whom he liked much. So I don't have so much trouble with him. The same thing happened again with Anubhav until he got used to idea that I was going to work he used to cry a little in the morning but once I had gone he completely forget about it. And during the afternoon we spend much time together. Anyway, I don't think it really bother them much.

Q:What is your work schedule ?

A: I usually wake up early in the morning and prepare breakfast for all. And also lunch pack for my husband, tiffin for the children and for myself. My work timing is from 9.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. which is not so bad as I am not away from them for all the day. And now Abhisek and Anubhav in school from 9.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. who return home only after 30 to 45 minutes after I return home.

Q: That means you work only during the day when they're at school or somebody's taking care of them?

A: That is true. That was one of my 'must'. My husband and I came to an agreement. He doesn't really want me to work but I less insist on it, as I said before to release some of my boredom and monotony that I used to build up all the year. And he said that if wanted to work I could only work few hours a day.

Q: From experience, what would you suggest the young women who want to look after their family as well as continue work?

A: First of all, a wife should take husband in her confidence and then try to convince him that it is necessary for her to work for the betterment of their family and she can do it.

Q: In your opinion what is your social status in the society where you are living?

A: I am very proud of my family, and myself. You know we are the first who bought TV in our locality and now also some of our neighbours come to watch movies. My husband does not drink, so we have peaceful atmosphere at home and every body respect us. And both of my sons are very good in study and none of the children in our locality are as good as Avishek and Anubhav. When somebody needs money specially when they are ill, they come to us and we always try to help them.

### **Case No. 2: A Story of Two Sisters**

Sujata and Supria are two sisters who work as maid servants in Acharya Nagar Colony. Five years ago they lost their father and remain behind only by mother who is also a domestic maid.

We meet Sujata on Friday evening for the first time. We went with our general interview schedule as usual. We find something unusual with her way of responding, her way of behaviour, a high hope and inspiration, which made us attracted to know more about her. So we request them whether they could spend few more time any other day. With a prior permission we asked to meet them on Sunday. On that day itself we came to know that she has a younger sister who works in the same house and both of them are student studying in class X and IX.

When we meet them next time on Sunday, we got a chance to meet Supria, the younger sister who was much different then her elder sister. She is more active and readily willing

to talk. When we asked for the reason of working they replied that after their father's death, their mother was no longer in a position to provide the money for further studies. So it was their hope and inspiration to continue their studies as both of them are good students. The summary of the talk is as follows:

1. Both Sujata and Supria works in the same house only as part time workers from morning 8.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. They are regular in their school which begins at 1.30 p.m.

2. Besides their regular studies in the evening they help their mother at home when ever possible.

3. They want to earn enough money that they need for paying school fee and other necessities for their education. They are very happy that they could even help their mother by giving Rs.500 a month to run their house.

4. The only entertainment for them is TV for which they go to one of their class friend's house. Though they earn money they don't find it rational to go to movie.

5. The employer, a retired couple has no one to take care of them as their sons are at service and so they love Sujata and Supria very much. And help them in time of need.

6. When asked about their work, for how long they are going to work in that house. They replied that as long as possible because it helps them to have an atmosphere to continue their education.

7. The hope and inspiration that in these school going made servants are very strong. And when we asked what they want to be in future, the younger at once replied to be a doctor. But at the same time she said that whether it is going to fulfil or not it does not matter. But the elder said that we would not allow our schooling to go waste. Hope it will help us at least to stand on our own feet. And we will be able to provide our mother a better life than present.

### **Case No. 3: Story of Sitara**

Sitara, the mother of tow teenage girls, Sanjana and Ranjana works in the Nilgiri Apartments of BARC. She is working for the last 10 years after the tragic death of her first husband in a road accident. When Sanjana was at the age of 5 she married Raghu, working as a dhobi in BARC. In the initial years they had a normal life. But after 1 year

she realised that her husband had a relation with another lady. She insisted him not to spend money for that lady on the name of helping her family, because Ranjana also started going school and Sanjana was suffering from polio. But he was still continuing the relation. Sitara wants to continue her married life as she thinks that married women have security in society than widowed and divorced and presence of father (even how worse he may be) is necessary for the future of her daughters. She knows the suffering of a widow from her own experiences. She feels that a woman without man either as father or husband is very unsafe. She needs her husband neither for economic support nor for mental satisfaction but for social status and a safe life.

## **CONCLUSION**

After doing analysis of the survey data we can say that the socio economic condition of the respondents is not good. Their life histories also reveal that they experienced the same condition at their young age. They face problems both at home and at work place. At home they do not get the pleasant atmosphere what they want. At work place they have a very work load with less remuneration. They want to make their children educated but an increasing cost is a great concern. Migration is big concern from our point of view as studies show (UNFPA, 1996) that many of the urban dwellers, in unorganized sectors particularly women and their children will become the poorest people in the world. However, concentrating on their interest, they are working very hard for a better future.

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DEONAR MUMBAI 400 088

1999

**TOPIC: WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS: THEIR LIFE, PROBLEM AND DREAM**

**IDENTIFICATION:**

**1.NAME OF THE AREA**

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ TIME: \_\_\_\_\_

**2.INTERVIEWED AT:**

i) PLACE OF WORK: \_\_\_\_\_

ii) PLACE OF RESIDENCE: \_\_\_\_\_

**3.RESPONDENTS NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**4.AGE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**5.ADDRESS:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**6. LIFE STORY:**

a) BIRTH

PLACE

DATE

ORDER OF BIRTH

NO OF BRO & SIS

B) CHILDHOOD

PLACE

TYPE OF FAMILY

OCCUPATION OF PARENTS

ANY PAID WORK OUT SIDE HOME

C) EDUCATION YES / NO

YEAR OF SCHOOLING

REASON FOR DROPOUT

D) ADOLESCENCE  
ANY PAID WORK  
MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION  
E) MARRIAGE  
AGE AT MARRIAGE  
AGE OF SPOUSE  
OTHER INFORMATION  
F) GETTING CHILDREN  
NO. OF CHILDREN  
DETAILS ABOUT CHILDREN  
G) MIGRATION DETAILS  
WHEN  
FROM WHERE  
NO OF STEPS  
HOW (REASON)  
H) PRESENT WORK PROFILE  
WHEN STARTED WORK IN MUMBAI  
KIND OF JOB (S)  
HOW BECAME DOMESTIC MAID  
I) PROBLEMS  
TO FIND THE JOB  
AT WORK PLACE  
AT HOME  
J) SUPPORT FROM FAMILY  
HUSBAND  
INLAWS  
OTHERS  
K) PERCEPTION ABOUT CHILDREN  
EDUCATION  
WORK  
MARRIAGE

**7.DAILY LIFE (A WOMAN'S DAY):**

RISES \_\_\_\_\_

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**8.ECONOMIC PROFILE:**

NO. OF EARNING PERSONS:

RELATIONS	KIND OF WORK	INCOME	CONTRIBUTION

**9. EXPENDITURE ON**

FOOD, CLOTHING, RECREATION:

CHILDREN EDUCATION:

HEALTH:

MAINTENANCE COST OF HOUSE:

**10. DISTANCE COVERED FROM RESIDENCE TO WORK PLACE**

TIME REQUIRED

MODE OF TRANSPORTATION

**11. BEHAVIOR OF EMPLOYER (S)**

WAGES

TIME/WORK

GIVING FOOD ETC.

WHETHER GETS HOLIDAYS

**12. WHETHER SHE IS SATISFIED WITH THE JOB:**

**13. SPECIAL REMARKS:**