

IMPACT OF COVID -19 ON SKILLED DOMESTIC WORKERS

Dr. Sangeeta Das

Assistant Professor (Sociology),

The Royal Global University,

Guwahati, Assam, India.

E-mail Id- sangeetadas.das762@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has its impact on all aspect of society. Infectious diseases always come with a sociological significance. Similarly this time too the pandemic comes with many changes and alterations in the society. Covid-19 has disrupted the normal practice of the society. Though all of us faced the same situation tackling with the threat from the virus but the experience is different for different section of the people. The pandemic has suddenly shaken the world. Visible changes have been bought to each one of our life. People are forced to lock themselves. The continuous lockdown has changed the very nature of work. With the closer of the work place work from home has now become the new normal for everyone. The continuous lockdown and work from home had made many to lose their jobs. One of the most affected areas is employment.

The present paper will however only focus on the plight of the domestic workers with particular emphasis on female cook. This situation is more true to Indian society. Domestic help forms an important part of the urban middle class lifestyle.

GENDERED NATURE OF HOUSEWORK

The very term ‘housework’ is self explanatory in terms of the gender division of labour. The term itself point towards the division of labour that is existence in the society since ages. When we break down the term we see that ‘house’ which is the domain where women are

supposed to be engaged and ‘work’ is equated with men the bread winner of the family. But when we consider the term in totality than ‘housework’ is always considered to be something that woman can relate to it. The socialization is so deep that both the term housework and women goes hand in hand.

Housework is unpaid domestic labour. And because of the unpaid nature housework is always seen as something that is not worthy of any attention in the academic discourse. Ann Oakley, a renowned sociologist did a first serious sociological work concerning the neglected topic of housework. Ann Oakley in her ground breaking work “The Sociology of Housework” has taken the pain of interviewing urban housewives and she tried to analysis the perception of these women towards housework, their feelings of monotony, the repetitive nature of housework, their attitude towards different household tasks, etc. (Oakley,1947) So we see that until recently, this strict division of labour between house work and outside work is always maintained without questioning it.

Changing for the good what we see today is that there has now bought a fluidity in this division but only partly with more and more women joining the labour market or job outside home. With joining the work force the woman now spend less time at home. As a result what happens is that they had to negotiate with their household chores. But homes still demand work, from cooking to cleaning, to taking care of. To compensate household work people hire domestic help. This is why I tend to call its partly fluid because in most cases one woman’s work is taken over by another woman. Though one can also find a large number of male domestic help but in most cases its women who are employed as domestic workers. Thus, there is a cycle; one’s livelihood is dependent on another’s support. It is because of the help from a section of women that other section can afford to go and work out. Domestic help are now a significant part of the urban middle class. Domestic work has been increasing in India. Growing urbanization, the increased labour force participation rate of women, and the decline of extended families are the primary reasons for the exponential growth of this sector.

DOMESTIC WORKERS: WHO ARE THEY?

A significant part of the global workforce in the informal sector is comprised of the domestic worker/helper. These domestic workers are in a state of highly vulnerable condition. Unlike in the formal sector they are not given fixed wages, nor there any terms of working

condition for them, long working hours, etc. Even though a large no of men are also engaged in domestic work. This is mostly a feminized sector.

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, etc. The place of work of these domestic workers is the house of the employer. These tasks that a domestic worker is engaged in are varied in nature. But some of these works require skill. Thus, the paper will focus on female domestic cook. The word 'cook' is a gender neutral term. But if we look it from a social perspective we find that the word is more attached feminine characteristics and that is the reason why domestic is used because most often cooking is seen as an area of expertise where mostly women are related to. But when we talk about cooking in big restaurant, in public places, in some ceremonial activities those are always again men. So, again what happens is that we see the public/private division between men/women. Most of the households prefer to keep female cook. Cooking is an art and it requires some kind of culinary skills. Most households usually employ two sets of domestic worker. One who looks after the cleaning, washing and all other activities and as such. And another particularly for cooking requirement. With these there comes a hierarchy among the domestic workers. Hierarchy in the sense of the nature of their work. Say for instance, a cook is always considered higher in status or is paid little more in compared to the one who is engaged in cleaning and liked activities. This difference is now because of the skills one acquires. In the hierarchy of domestic service, a cook usually earned the position through training. They require special skill.

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON DOMESTIC WORKER

Covid-19 has it impact on various aspects. The continuous lockdown has to a great extent affected many areas. The employment opportunities of many were being questioned. With Covid-19 there comes the notion of social distancing which has now become the norm of the society. The nature of the virus, the social distancing norm has kept these domestic workers at bay. A large section of low class women support their family as well themselves by working as domestic help. One while talking about the impact of Covid-19 cannot simply avoid the misery of these sections of women. The work from home rule cannot be followed by them.

Newspapers and online websites are flooded with articles and news on the plight of these domestic workers. They urge the citizens not to see them as the carrier of the novel coronavirus. Article published in the Wire titled “*It is Time to Stop Seeing Domestic Workers as Covid-19 Carriers*” (Vishwanah, 2020) and “*India’s Lockdown Is Blind to the Woes of Its Women*” and “*Domestic Workers go Without Salaries, Work during Lockdown*” published in India Today etc, trying to capture the plight of these section of society to the limelight. With nationwide lockdown and social distancing measures these domestic workers are facing a hard times. (Lolwal, 2020)

This temporary suspension of life due to pandemic will get back to normal after some days as unlock has already started what worries at this time is that these skilled domestic workers particularly employed as cook will ever be able to join their work. The worry is particularly for domestic cook because cooking is such an intimate activity done with proper care. This is the reason why kings used to make the cook taste the food prepared in order to ascertain that no one slips anything into king’s food with an intention to kill him. Such precautions were being maintained in relation to preparation of food. Now with the contagious nature of Covid-19, which made wearing of mask, social distancing compulsory will the household who employed cook earlier will ever allow them to come back to work. So, the question remains open about the livelihood of these sections of women.

CONCLUSION

We all hope to see a normalcy in the coming days. Will resume our work someday and most have already joined, many after this pandemic have changed their work. Likewise domestic workers will also can go back to work. But what about these domestic cook particularly the female cooks. Will people allow them to work at their homes again? Cooking directly affects one’s health so people are more cautious about eating out now with the virus all around. If people do not take these cooks into trust and if they are not allowed to work their livelihood will be at stake. The public/private division will not employ them in the public eateries. So, the only option left is that some of these female cooks will opt for change in occupation. They might engage in something which is lower in status to what they were earlier doing. Some of them might engage themselves in cleaning, washing activities. But these will be a demotion for them.

Their skills will not be valued anymore. The future of these skilled domestic labours will be uncertain. Thus, pandemic has affected differently to different section of the society.

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