

Seminar on Working Condition, Coping Strategy and the Legal Status of the Migrant and Displaced Women Domestic Workers in Delhi

Background

It is disheartening to note that domestic workers as a part of unorganised work force remain the most exploited ones even after five decades of independence. There are many evidences to indicate that over a period of time domestic work has become more “feminised”. Occupational segregation based on gender has been a global phenomenon. In the past few years gender based segregation has been a commonly shared concern among researchers and social activists. As far as Indian scenario is concerned, women workers constitute only one third of the total workforce in India. The census of 1991 shows that the number of women workers in India is 91 million out of a total workforce of about 315 million. Majority of these women are engaged in the unorganised sectors such as agriculture, cotton and tea plucking, pottery, handloom, construction and domestic services. Domestic services, especially in big cities like Delhi, have been one of the fastest growing sectors employing an increasing number of women. These women workers belong to the lowest stratum of the society and are often considered as cheap labour.

The non-availability of jobs in rural or tribal areas and the increasing demand of domestic workers in cities like Delhi have played a major role in migration of women from far flung rural or tribal areas. Most of the women who migrate to Delhi are from poor families and are illiterate. Their lack of education and skill make their choice for employment very limited. When these women come to big cities such as Delhi in search of employment, they have to face a number of problems, and they become easy victims of exploitation because of their inexperience and lack of skill.



The existing problems of domestic workers have been studied by many researchers, social activists and voluntary organizations at different levels. But they have not succeeded in providing a feasible solution to their problems. Perhaps lack of a common perspective in this area is a major reason behind it. Since the problems of women domestic workers are multifaceted, it needs to be studied holistically covering economic, legal, social, physical and psychological aspects. Keeping this in view, Deshkal Society in partnership with FES, New Delhi organised a one-day seminar on “Working conditions, coping strategy and legal status of female domestic workers” in Delhi on 12th October, 2002.

The Proceedings

The seminar was participated by a number of researchers, Civil Society Organisations, social activists, and women domestic workers from Delhi. The various presentations in the seminar provided valuable insights and inputs on different issues and problems related to women domestic workers, and generated lively discussions among the participants. Leela Kasturi in her paper discussed the issue of migration related to female domestic workers of Delhi. She argued that migration among the poor domestic workers was a ‘coping strategy’ for the survival of the families. The paper also discussed about the mental trauma faced by migrant women, and highlighted the social, economic and psychological aspects of the problem in a detailed and effective manner.

Pravin Sinha in his paper meticulously described total employment scenario of women in India. He mentioned many reasons behind urban migrations, the most important being the mass poverty and high levels of illiteracy. He also suggested empowerment of domestic women workers and their skill development as two important remedial measures to deal with the problem.

Alex Ekka’s paper focused mainly on the migration of tribal women to the urban centres. The paper discussed various problems faced by these women in Delhi, and also suggested ameliorative measures for protecting the rights and interests of domestic workers.



Neetha N's paper talked about two important aspects of migration – 'social networking' and 'identity formation'. Social networking takes place both before and after migration. After the migration, social networking plays a major role in overcoming the social and psychological insecurities and low socio-economic status of the migrants.

Two other papers by Smita Snehi and representatives of ANKUR various problems being faced by women domestic workers who were shifted/displaced by the government to the new resettlement colonies of Delhi. The real life experiences of some women domestic workers quoted in these two papers made it easier for the participants to understand their lives and comprehend their difficulties.

During discussions a consensus emerged among the participants that a major hurdle in providing a solution to the problems faced by women domestic workers was the absence of a legal protection system. Seema Durrani's paper was very useful in providing an overview of the legal rights available to the women domestic workers.

The key Suggestions for Intervention

Based on the discussions on various aspects of the problems faced by women domestic workers, and the possible ways of intervention to improve their condition, the participants came up with the following major suggestions.

- A systematic mobilisation is needed to help women domestic workers to form their own associations and unions so that they can share some solidarity and build their own leadership. There is a need to create public opinion on behalf of domestic workers to grant them the status of workers and dignified working conditions. A proper mutual dialogue may be useful in developing a suitable legislative mechanism.



- The problems of women domestic workers have still not received adequate attention by researchers, members of voluntary organisations and other social activists as yet. A collaboration, frequent interaction and wider networking with the people and organisations working on similar issue is required to intensify the efforts for improving the overall condition of domestic workers.
- There is also an urgent need to sensitise the wider society regarding their attitude towards 'Servant-Master' relationship and change it into a respectable 'Employee – Employer' relationship. Therefore, it is extremely important to create an environment where the women domestic workers may enjoy their rights, duties and interests like other segments of the society.

