

Women Domestic Workers and Abuse at Workplaces in Shillong, Meghalaya

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Abstract

The present article is based on an empirical study on domestic workers in Meghalaya India. The goal of this paper is to examine the various forms of abuse faced by domestic workers at workplaces. The data for this study was collected from 428 domestic workers who were respondents of the study using purposive sampling technique. The findings in the study highlights the plight of domestic workers in Meghalaya who experienced different forms of abuse while engaging as domestic workers at the households.

Keywords: Domestic workers, Abuse, Workplace

Introduction:

Domestic work can be understood as direct and indirect services provided by individuals to individual households in the society. Individuals who engaged as hired helpers in private households are generally called domestic workers. Their nature of work provided by domestic workers includes cleaning, washing, cooking, baby sitting, and any other household works assigned by their employers. Domestic workers may engage fulltime in one household or part-time on an hourly basis in more than one household. They may live with their employers (live-in domestic workers) or they may live in their own residence (live-out domestic workers). Domestic work is seen as a gender-based economic source of employment that is usually and pre-dominantly undertaken or engaged by female. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2011) has estimated that there are 75.6 million domestic workers across the globe, and interestingly it has also stated that among the population of domestic workers worldwide, quarter of the population are men. In the Indian context, various studies related to domestic work and domestic workers in India are primarily focused on the women work force. Women engaged as domestic workers entirely depend upon the wages that they earn from the households as their basic source of income. There is no uniformity in the wages earned by domestic workers, there is a huge disparity among wages of the domestic workers and it is entirely at the disposal of their employers. In India there is no regulation or policy that regulates the payment of minimum wages for the domestic workers. Individuals particularly the females engaged as domestic workers migrate from rural to urban towns and cities in search of employment and are economically backward and poor. Engaging as domestic workers is not a choice but a compulsion due to poverty and lack of opportunities. In general, domestic workers are socially and economically vulnerable. Despite this, many domestic workers are exposed to other forms of vulnerability such as abuse (physical, verbal, and sexual abuses) that increases the vulnerability context of domestic workers at workplaces. Many a times domestic workers become helpless while encountering such abuses at workplaces and are being taken advantage of due to their vulnerability status.

Review of Literature:

Ullah (2015) conducted a study to examine abuse and violence against migrant domestic workers in Hongkong found that the migrant workers were highly vulnerable to physical, sexual, and psychological abuses by their

employers. It was also found that the migrant domestic workers were sexually victimized by their male employers and psychologically victimized by their female employers. Such forms of abuses and victimization has adversely affected the domestic workers, because of abuse and violence, some domestic workers have quit their job, some were scared and remained silent and unresponsive despite facing such abuses, while others remained undecided of what to do next.

Kulkarni et al. (2022) while examining the response strategies of female domestic workers towards violence, harassments, and abuse incidences at workplace discovered the varying nature of response of the domestic workers towards workplace abuse of domestic workers at workplaces. The response strategies shared by the female domestic workers were; try to solve the problem by themselves, hardly file legal complaint, do not complain at all, and migrant workers and the poor would remain silent. This clearly shows the vulnerability context and helplessness of domestic workers particularly those who are poor.

Prasana et al. (2024), while examining human rights violations of domestic workers in India argued that domestic workers are being violated of their human rights and dignity by their employers imposing certain prohibitions and restriction on the domestic workers. Furthermore, in the Indian context where different forms of social stratification exist, many of the domestic workers are being exploited and discriminated due to their association to different social or economic strata.

Thakkar (2024), captured the lived experiences of female domestic workers who are subjected to the burden of harassment at workplaces and at their households. The study focuses on the challenges faced by domestic workers to adopt coping strategies to cope with domestic violence at home and at the same time exploitation and harassment at work places. The study concluded that endurance capacity of the domestic workers is a major factor that enables them to withstand exploitation and harassment and allowing them to develop coping mechanisms to deal with such challenges in the context of the family and at workplaces.

Shah and Kisana (2021), reiterated that the lack of legal regulations is another factor contributing towards the vulnerability of domestic workers in terms of economic security and stability, and the kind of inhumane treatment they experience at workplaces. As a result, particularly in the Indian context domestic workers are being associated with different forms of social and economic stratification and are considered not worthy of respect and dignity. They suffer and encounter different form of discrimination, exploitation and abuse at workplaces resulting in physical, social, psychological and health impacts on the domestic workers.

Godley and Ghosh (2020), while examining the relationship between the domestic workers and the employers discovered three thematical areas that expresses the nature of relationship between domestic workers and the employers. Firstly, it is found that the relationship is very formal and the nature of interaction between the worker and the employee is determined by their status and absence of affection. Secondly, it uncovered that the relationship between the worker and the employee is unsocial and is characterized by workplace abuses. Lastly, it was found that there are domestic workers who have a healthy relationship with their employers. The study concluded emphasizing and recommending the importance of legislative and regulatory measures from the authority to ensure social protection of domestic workers.

Soumi (2014), conducted a study on domestic workers and identified the multiple roles of domestic workers while engaging in domestic households. It was also found that majority of the domestic workers in the study did not have proper education and are characterized by poor social and economic background. The major finding of the study revealed that the domestic workers who are already socially and economically vulnerable are made more vulnerable by their employers through violence, humiliation, abuse, and exploitation by taking advantage of their vulnerabilities.

Methodology

The present study is cross-sectional in nature and adopted a quantitative approach to examine the incidence of abuse experience by domestic workers at workplaces in Shillong, Meghalaya. Samples were selected using

probability sampling purposive sampling technique. The universe of the study comprised of the female domestic workers in Shillong. A total of 480 female domestic workers were selected as samples for the study. The primary data from the respondents was collected using self-administered questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using simple averages.

Statement of the Problem

Generally, individuals mostly women engaged as domestic workers at private households are those from poor socio-economic background. Most of domestic workers do not have proper education and are migrants from distant and rural areas come to towns and cities in search of menial works to cater their basic needs. Some live in with their employers while others engage as part time or on an hourly basis depending upon their agreement. With the minimum wage they earn from domestic work, yet they play a very essential role through their services for the households. However, many a times no matter the effort and outcome of their services provided by the domestic workers it is always challenging to satisfy their employers. As a result, many of the domestic workers face and experience various forms of abuse by their employers. Furthermore, such abuses are not always related to the service satisfaction of the employers but they are being taken advantaged of their helplessness and dependency on the employers. This increases and expose the vulnerability of the domestic workers to various forms of workplace abuse such as; discrimination, exploitation, and physical and sexual abuses.

Objective of the Study

- i. To explore upon the issues of workplace abuse faced by domestic workers in Meghalaya.

Analysis:

Table 1: Abuse the respondents faced upon committing mistake during work

Items	Frequency	Percent
Curse	86	17.9
Name calling such as stupid or crazy	41	8.5
Mocking	44	9.2
Silence	48	10.0
Insult	36	7.5
Any Other	172	35.8
None of the above	53	11.0
Total	480	100.0

The above table 1 clearly shows us the various forms of abuse that the respondents faced due to the mistakes they committed while at work. The data portrays 18% of the respondents experience verbal abuse in the form of cursing whenever they commit any mistake. 8.5% of the respondents are demeaned and insulted by being called stupid or crazy if they commit mistakes. While 9.2% of the respondents are being mocked if they make mistake while working, 10% of the employers remained silent. It is also seen that 7.5% of the respondents are being insulted by their employers for committing mistakes in their work, in 35.8% of the respondents faced other types of insult like sulking and grumbling of the employer, whereas in 11% of the respondents 11% of domestic workers reported not experiencing any of the listed types of abuse.

Table 2: The insult the respondents faced

Items	Frequency	Percent
Exclusion	30	6.25
Stereotyping	26	5.4
Ingratitude	9	1.9
Scapegoating	4	.8

Rudeness	21	4.3
Humiliation	23	4.8
None of the above	367	76.5
Total	480	100.0

The data provided in Table 2 represents the types of humiliation faced by domestic workers from their employers 6.25% of the respondents experienced exclusion from the employers, stereotyping constitutes 5.4%, 1.9% of the employers they show ingratitude towards the respondents, in .8% the respondents are being scapegoating, while 4.3% of the respondent’s experienced rudeness of the employers, in 4.8% the respondent’s faced humiliation and 76.5% of the respondents did not face any type of insult.

Table 3: Humiliation the respondents faced

Items	Frequency	Percent
Makes a belittling remark in front of other people	33	6.9
Abandoned	13	2.7
Spreads negative rumours behind your back	16	3.3
Rejection	29	6.0
Betrayal	7	1.5
None of the above	382	79.6
Total	480	100.0

Table 3 depicts the various forms of humiliation that the respondents experienced at the work places. Out of the total number of the respondents 6.9% of domestic workers reported being publicly belittled by their employers, 2.7% of the respondents, experienced abandonment, where they are left alone or neglected, 3.3% of the respondents have negative rumours spread about them, 6.0% of workers faced rejection, 1.5% of workers reported experiencing betrayal. A significant majority, 79.6%, do not experience the specific types of humiliation listed.

Table 4: Types of Physical and Sexual abuse faced by domestic workers

Items		Frequency	Percent
Pinch	Yes	27	5.6
	No	453	94.4
	Total	480	100.0
Punch	Yes	5	1.0
	No	475	99.0
	Total	480	100.0
Beaten	Yes	9	1.9
	No	471	98.1
	Total	480	100.0
Hit by hands or object	Yes	3	.6
	No	477	99.4
	Total	480	100.0
Hair Pulling	Yes	6	1.2
	No	474	98.8
	Total	480	100.0
Being shouted or yelled at	Yes	30	6.2
	No	450	93.8
	Total	480	100.0

Calling names	Yes	56	11.7
	No	424	88.3
	Total	480	100.0
Groping	Yes	5	1.0
	No	475	99.0
	Total	480	100.0
Fondle	Yes	48	10.0
	No	432	90.0
	Total	480	100.0
Touch inappropriately	Yes	7	1.5
	No	473	98.5
	Total	480	100.0
Kissing	Yes	9	1.9
	No	471	98.1
	Total	480	100.0
Tell with dirty jokes	Yes	10	2.1
	No	470	97.9
	Total	480	100.0
Being whistled	Yes	12	2.5
	No	468	97.5
	Total	480	100.0
Sexual Comment on Appearance	Yes	13	2.7
	No	467	97.3
	Total	480	100.0
Patting inappropriately	Yes	12	2.5
	No	468	97.5
	Total	480	100.0

Table 4 portrays the various forms of physical and sexual harassments that were encountered by the domestic workers at their workplace. Out of 480 respondents 5.6% responded that they were being pinch by the employer, whereas 94.4% did not faced any pinching. Though 1.0% of the respondent, report being punched it is seen 99.0% of the respondent have never gone through such experience. 1.9% of the respondents reported being beaten whereas 98.1% have never been beaten by the employers. It can also be seen that 0.6% of the respondent’s report being hit, either by hand or with an object whereas 99.4% did not experienced this type of physical harassment. 1.2% report having their hair pulled and 98.8% were not being harass in this manner. Further in Table 4 it is shown that 6.2% report being shouted or yelled whereas those who did not have to go through all the shouting and yelling constituted 93.8% of the respondents. 11.7% report being called names whereas 88.3% of the respondents did not go through such kind of harassment.

It can be seen that 1.0% of the respondents faced groping by the employer and 99.0% did not experienced it. 10.0% of the respondents were being fondle by male employer and majority of 90% did not faced it. It is further shown in the table above that those respondents who were being touched inappropriately by the employer constituted 1.5% and 98.5% of the respondents did not face it such harassment. 1.9% report being kissed against their will and 98.1% of the respondents reported no such incident in their workplace. Moreover, it is seen that 2.1% of the respondents were told with dirty jokes and 97.9% did not did not have to listen to dirty jokes. 2.5%

report being whistled at whereas 97.5% were not being whistled. 2.7% of the respondent’s report receiving sexual comments about their appearance whereas 97.3% have never heard any sexual comment from the employers. 2.5% report inappropriate patting, and 97.5% have never experience any of that.

Table 5: Persons who abused the domestic workers and the duration of abuse

Items		Frequency	Percent
(A) Abuse	Male Employer	24	5.0
	Female Employer	37	7.7
	Both	34	7.1
	Employer's Children	333	69.4
	Employer's Relatives	31	6.5
	None of the above	11	2.3
	Any Other	10	2.1
	Total	480	100.0
(B) Duration	Less than a year	41	8.5
	One Year	25	5.2
	More than a year	13	2.7
	None of the above	363	75.6
	Any Other	28	5.8
	Can't say	10	2.1
	Total	480	100.0

Table 5 is divided into two sections A and B. The first section of the table displays the data related to the individuals who are abusing the respondents, and the second section displays the data related to the duration of abuse experienced by the respondents. The data in the first section shows that 5.0% of the abuser were male employer, 7.7% of the respondent’s report abuse by their female employers and 7.1% of the respondent’s report abuse by both male and female employer. A significant majority, 69.4%, of the respondent’s report being abused by their employer's children, whereas 6.5% of the respondents the abusers are the employers’ relatives. The 2.3% of the respondents are those who did not faced any kind of abuse from the list of abusers mentioned and 2.1% report abuse from other unspecified sources.

The data in the second section of the table displays the duration of the harassment and abused that some unfortunate respondents have endured while engaging as domestic workers at the households. Among the respondents who have unfortunately experienced harassment and abuse at workplace, data shows that 8.5% of domestic workers have experienced abuse for less than a year, 5.2% have experienced abuse for about one year and 2.7% of the respondents have been abused for more than a year. A majority of 75.6% do not fall into the specified durations, possibly indicating unspecified durations. It is seen that 5.8% of the respondents opted for ‘any other’ and report that the duration of the abuse is less than one or two months and 2.1% of the respondents are unsure of the duration.

Findings

The findings revealed inhumane and unempathetic nature of the employers that the domestic workers experience in their daily life while engaging as domestic workers. The domestic workers are seen as objects or victims of abuse and harassment by their employers. The worth, dignity, and respect of the respondents as human is irrelevant and undeserved in the eyes of the employers. Domestic workers are being perceived as subjects for oppression and harassment by their employers without considering the values of dignity and respect of the domestic workers as individuals and human being. It widens the vulnerability context of domestic workers who are already socially and economically vulnerable. Such experiences affect the morale and psycho-social well-

being and mental health status of the respondents as well as others who are associated with them. The incidences of physical or sexual harassment at workplace encountered by the domestic workers have added more dimensions to the vulnerability context of domestic workers. They are being taken undue advantage of the socio-economic vulnerability and some unfortunate individuals become victims of exploitation, abuse, and harassment at the hands of their employers. It creates an uncomfortable and unsafe working environment for the respondents. This is a clear indication of human rights violation of the employers. One can imagine the mental and physical torture that has been occupying in the victim’s head while at their respective workplace. Such experiences and encounters would have physical and mental implications on the domestic workers that may affect them in their perception of oneself. It affects their dignity, morale, and esteem of the domestic workers because of continuous exposure and vulnerability of workplace harassment. Their workplace has become a platform for oppression and are being subjected to violations of human rights.

Recommendations

Workplace abuse of domestic workers is a matter of grave concern that violates the human rights and dignity of women and domestic workers. It is important to have some form of regulations to assure and promote safe and healthy working environment for the domestic workers. It is important to empower the domestic workers through education and other forms of capacity building to enable them understand their rights and the process of seeking social or legal assistance in times of need. There is a need to develop support system through NGOs, civil societies to network with legal authorities to help with legal aid to domestic workers facing abuse at workplaces. There is also a need for the larger society to join hands to and support authorities and civil societies in combating workplace abuse of domestic workers.

Conclusion

Workplace abuse is a universal issue faced by women domestic workers across the globe. Domestic workers encounter harassment, exploitation, physical and verbal abuse in their daily engagements at the households. Their poor socio-economic background is being taken advantaged by the employers by abusing them in multiple ways. Domestic workers are not seen as humans but are objects of abuse and exploitation in the eyes of their employers. They made immense personal and social sacrifices through their services but their efforts are in vain and considered unworthy of respect due to their socio-economic status and the job they undertake. The frequent experience and encounter of workplace abuse by the domestic workers would adversely affect the psychological, mental, and physical wellbeing of the domestic workers and their family members.

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