

Profile and Problems of Women Domestic Workers in Mangochi, Malawi

G.Thiruvassagam, D.Rajasekar, R.Vettriselvan

Abstract: Domestic workers - who sweep, swab, wash, cook, take care of the children and look after the elderly – yet, are invisible. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), "A domestic worker is someone who carries out household work in a private household in return for wages." The poor and marginalized women are now joining the growing force of domestic workers in Malawian towns and villages. In this backdrop, this research work aims at understanding the socioeconomic background of women domestic workers and problems faced by them in Mangochi District in Malawi. This particular region was selected for research as it has a large number of women domestic workers due to seasonal employment in Salt and Fishing sectors. 100 women domestic workers were selected as sample through Purposive Sampling method and the required data were collected from them by using a semi structured interview schedule designed for this purpose. The study results show that the poor economic condition of family drives the women to opt for domestic work and they are exploited by the employers in many forms. They possess a very low status both in the workplace as well as in the society. They work for a paltry sum and are at the mercy of their keepers without any rights. The study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive policy and legislations to control the exploitation of women in unorganized workforce. Domestic Work should be declared as a profession and as such all the rights and privileges as applicable to all other workers are made available to them. Establishing Self help groups in their area and giving training in income generating activities will certainly go a long way to empower them.

Index Terms: Women, Domestic workers, issues

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic workers are addressed by different names-maid, 'mayiee'. Generally, the domestic worker's work includes sweeping, mopping, dusting, cleaning dishes, washing clothes, cooking, clearing the table after meals, hanging up the washing, picking, and dropping children to bus stops, and often more. The term "domestic" also denotes a class of "menials" which includes many types of workers, like mayiee, kitchen helper, cook and sweeper. Therefore the term is restricted to domestic servants as "those servants who do cooking, care the children, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cleaning and sweeper the payment of wages".

Domestic worker is one who works within the employer's

household. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has a clear definition of a domestic worker: "someone who carries

out household work in private households in return for wages". The ILO also estimates that worldwide, domestic work is the largest employment category for girls under the age of 16. Yet despite the extent of this form of labour, there are no international standards to regulate the conditions of work or the wages of domestic workers. The amount of skill, technical know-how, and training required to do all these domestic chores may vary from little to vast.

The work expected from these workers may be either 'part-time' or 'full-time'. Part-time work implies that these workers will perform their duties within a stipulated time-frame and then, after the work is completed, proceed to their homes. The working hours of women domestic workers are not fixed. It varies between three to fifteen hours. The work may be continuous or installments spread over time. The working hours depend on the demands and requirements of the employers. The wages of domestic workers are abysmally low when compared to other categories of workers, even within the informal sector, considering the amount of time, effort, and labor that goes into domestic work. Very often, the wages are added along with food and clothes and of all these together would amount to a value equal to the efforts put by the worker. The mode of payment of domestic workers may be in 'cash' or in 'kind'. Women domestic workers are vulnerable and open to exploitation. Right from being economically exploited by those who mediate and help them get their jobs, to employers, to being socially ostracized, to being physically abused, domestic workers have to take it all in their stride. Domestic service continues to be an important occupation for unskilled women all over the world. In most countries domestic workers are subject to working conditions that can be considered exploitative-involving long hours, low wages, no benefits, a high dependence on the employer for food and housing, limited freedom of movement and restricted access to means of communication. Such conditions prevail irrespective of the migratory status of the women. Because many are married and come from the lower socio-economic strata of the countries of origin, their migration is seen as a strategy to secure needed family income.

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2. CONDITIONS OF DOMESTIC WOMEN WORKERS IN MALAWI

- Nearly 90percent of domestic workers are women, girls or children, ranging from ages 12 to 75 and it is estimated that 25percent are below the age of 14.
- The majority of women domestic workers are illiterate.
- In Malawi, the stigma for domestic work is heightened by the tribe system.
- Domestic workers are highly exploited and denied just and humane wages. Domestic workers are paid well below the minimum wage for unskilled and semi-skilled workers.
- Labour laws do not cover domestic workers. They are not recognized as workers; hence do not enjoy legal protection, rights and dignity.
- Domestic workers are victims of suspicion. If anything is missing in the house, they are the first to be accused with threats, physical violence, police conviction and even dismissal.

Some researchers found that 95 percent of Malawian women are domestic workers, who are believed to number more than 100 thousand though no hard and reliable estimates are available in Mangochi. As in the rest of Malawi vast informal sector, these workers have to cope with job insecurity, a high vulnerability to ill-health, low wages and exploitation (including sexual) in the workplace. New features of domestic work have worsened conditions in the sector. Increasingly, young girls from tribal areas are being brought to cities by placement agencies that not only financially exploit them but place them in homes where they find themselves extremely vulnerable in alien conditions.

Several sociologists have conducted studies on the issue of migration. Migration is intrinsically correlated with the issue of women domestic workers migrating to places outside their homes in order to make a living. The study on ‘Women and Seasonal Labour Migration in Rural’, conducted by Sardamoni, Rensji, and Menon (1990), reflects the sexual and economic exploitation, lack of childcare and education, and increase in workload as part of the enormous economic and socio psychological costs of migration. Nayak (1984) in his study on women domestic workers found that only 27 percent employed women were paid salary. The socio-economic conditions of these workers indicate their helplessness. Most of the families of the women had incurred heavy debts. Accordingly, alcohol abuse and domestic violence were the common practices in many families. Miranda and Mahadevan(1988) on socio-economic and health conditions of women. The major findings of study show that more than 50 percent of the employed women were part time domestic workers and most of them were employed in more than two houses, stomach ailments menstrual problems, anemia and general weakness were the women problems reported by the women domestic servants

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Malawi, a large majority of domestic workers are women. Work implies that these workers will perform their duties within a stipulated time-frame and then, after the work is completed, proceed for their homes. So, this study to explore why women involved in domestic work in Malawi, focusing specifically on factors that influence

decision-making at the household level. This Study also looks beyond poverty to explore the range of social and cultural factors in household decision-making about domestic working women, and attempts to trace their working conditions, family adjustment, migratory status of women domestic workers, family indebtedness, reasons for joining as domestic worker, type of work undertaken by women domestic workers, employer-employee relationships, problems at work place, reasons for job dissatisfaction and expectations of domestic workers in continuity of job. Based on these, the study had obtained the following objectives:

4. OBJECTIVES

- To examines the socio-economic background of women domestic workers
- To highlights the work life pattern and problems that women domestic worker’s experience at work place

5. METHODS AND ANALYSIS RESULTS

The data for the paper is drawn from a larger study on the status of women domestic workers in Mangochi region in Malawi. A descriptive design has been made to analyze the above said objectives. Women domestic workers in the age group 20-60+ years who work within the household were chosen as respondents. Of the 300 respondents selected through purposive sampling method and semi-structured interview schedule was designed to collect information purpose. The collected data were analyzed with the help of simple statistical tools.

age	monthly income				Total
	below 30K	30K-60K	60K-90K	above 90K	
20-30	0	3	33	6	42
30-40	0	18	57	9	84
40-50	9	21	51	33	38
50-60	18	12	0	6	36
Above 60	3	12	3	6	24
Total	30	66	144	60	300

From the above table shows that majority (38percent) of the respondents belongs to the age group of 40-50years in which 17per cent of them earns the income group category of 60000-90000 Malawian Kwacha the rest of them comes under the income group of more than 90000, 30000-60000 Kwacha and less than 30000 respectively. This table shows that the majority of the income category groups are middle of the experience in the domestic work. Furthermore, this age group containing the widows, separated from their family and they crossed their reproductive age. Since, they are married, they could look after the domestic work well and hence they would have been preferred by their employer’s. Unfortunately widowed women, who had lost their life partner as well as the earning head of the family, did not have



any alternative but to join the work force as domestic worker. At the maximum they are getting around \$90USD and minimum \$20USD as a monthly salary to survive their life.

education Vs monthly Income					
Education	Monthly Income				Total
	below 10K	10K-20K	20K-30K	above 30K	
Illiterate	3	21	3	9	36
can sign only	12	3	21	18	54
can read only	3	18	21	18	60
primary	12	21	60	12	105
secondary	0	3	39	3	45
Total	30	66	144	60	300

6. FINDINGS

Since the study area, Mangochi has been dominated by Muslim families except a few, the majority of women domestic workers belong to Muslim families. Among all, the number of them belongs to the age group between 40-50 years and the age group of the women respondents more than 70 percent fall between 20-50 years. This clearly indicates that the practice of domestic work is more common among women in the age group up to 50 years. From the analysis of native place of the respondents, it is clear that more than half (61percent) of the women domestic workers hail from rural areas. It indicates the fact that most of the women domestic workers are of Backward tribes who are all speaking chichewa and it reflects the low social position that the domestic work is accorded traditionally. In other words, the occupation and tribal status appears to be closely interrelated. An in-depth inquiry reveals that upper tribal families prefer only domestic servants of their own or similar status for various reasons.

Surprisingly, more than 70 percent of the women domestic workers were married and another group of about 18 percent is either a widow, divorced or separated who lived without their spouses. This clearly shows that the majority of married women were found in the domestic work and they have to shoulder the dual responsibilities of taking care of both their masters as well as their own families. Since, they are married, they could look after the domestic work well and hence they would have been preferred by their employer's. Unfortunately widowed women, who had lost their life partner as well as the earning head of the family, did not have any alternative but to join the work force as a domestic worker.

Accordingly, unmarried women domestic workers living with their parents were being forced by the family poverty, thus it shows that the economic necessity and compulsion by the family either due to loss of the earning of the husband, or unemployment and underemployment of husband is the dominant reason for women to choose domestic work. In considering the educational qualification of the respondents, exactly half (50 percent) of the respondents were either illiterate or having only functional knowledge. This

educational level suggests that majority of rural respondents have low counterparts in the urban areas. More than half (62 percent) of the women domestic workers have migrated to the area of study due to marriage, for getting job and for husband's service. This is because of the increasing dependency in the nuclear families and thereby this economic compulsion is a reason for women thinks to work. The overall educational background of the respondents and their husbands indicate their poor social status and reasons of holding low paid jobs.

More than half of the respondent's household size consists of 4-8 members. About nearly half of the women domestic worker's household size is less than 6 members. The trend of being away from small family norms and practices of keeping large family size in the respondent's families indicates the family economic pressure which has forced them to undertake this job. The economic conditions of women domestic workers further shows that more than half (58 percent) of them do not have their own house to live in. Hence, they have to depend on rented houses which were indeed a difficult task in their small earning. Further, it is found that whatever type of houses they have occupied, in about 62 percent respondents houses, there is just one room where they have to carry on all the activities with both adult and young members of the family, the over-crowded living style, no doubt, would increase the possibility of developing the behavior such as smoking and drinking among the young children.

The family monthly income of the women domestic workers shows that 46 percent of the family's monthly income comes only up to 30000- 50000 Kwacha, whereas the rest of the family income goes below 30000 Kwacha in these days, it is really difficult to meet the overall economic demand of the family. Because of this, they are further forced to take depth either by the money lender or employers or the relatives. Responses obtained show that as high as 41 percent of the respondents are indebted and another 59 percent of them are free from it. By and large said, when they fail to meet family necessity of different kinds, it forces them to go on borrowing loan. More than three-fifth of women domestic workers have accepted that family poverty and bad behavior of their husband have been the main factors in undertaking the present work. Another important factor for their backwardness and low economy shows that about half of the respondent's husbands are drunkards and others were chain smokers. So far as the treatment of employers of the domestic workers is concerned, nearly half, that is, 47 percent of the domestic workers have reported that they get verbal abuse from their employers and rest observed normal treatment. Similarly, on being late or absent to job, 70 percent of the women domestic workers treated badly while being late and rest experienced normal treatment by their employers. This shows comparatively that on being late, employers take it more seriously than being absent. This may be mainly due to the fact that because of this, the problem in managing time and whole days' work gets disturbed out of it.

Suggestions

- The study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive policy and legislations to control the exploitation of this unorganized workforce.
- Domestic work should be declared as a profession and as such all the rights and privileges as applicable to all other workers should be made available to them.
- Income-generation opportunities should be provided in order to bring them out from the vicious circle of poverty.
- Establishing self-help groups in their area and giving training in income generating activities will certainly go a long way to empower them.
- Unlike workers, working in the organized sector and enjoying better conditions of work, the women domestic workers in the area of study are far behind from it they get neither satisfactory wage nor job security.

Government and non-government should collaboratively for the awareness programmer among women domestic workers, especially widows and divorcees about the welfare schemes.

7. CONCLUSION

The important reason behind women workers being late for the job are the illness, work fatigue, young child care responsibility, arrival of guests, and bad weather, etc., During the health illness or nonappearance they send their substitute, especially their children or co-workers. Nearly half of the domestic women do not send their substitutes, whereas the rest of them sends other domestic worker or other family members as their substitute. It means those workers, who have made this kind of adjustment with other domestic workers and do not wish to get their salary deducted, thus send their substitute. The important reasons for worker`s dissatisfaction are low wage, heavy workload, bad treatment by their employer and long distance between the workplace and their homes however, 35 percent of them are dissatisfied with present job mainly due to the low wage and bad treatment by their employer. Hence, this study opens the new avenues to the future researchers to conduct more studies in this field to profile the issues and challenges faced by the women in the entire sector including an organized employment market too.

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9. AUTHORS PROFILE

Col.Dr.G.Thiruvasagam brings with him his dynamic



of

experience of four and half decades, his keen sense of justice and his generous spirit fraternity all of which served him well in a career spanning 44 years as Professor of Commerce and Management,

Principal and Member of the Syndicate of Madurai Kamaraj University. Nominated as Vice Chancellor of two eminent universities in Tamil Nadu namely Bharathiar University, Coimbatore and University of Madras. Presently, serving as the Vice-Chancellor of Academy of Maritime Education and Training (AMET) deemed to be University, Chennai, since 2012. He has authored 12 textbooks and around 51 publications published in National and International Journals. He is serving as a Member in various committees like Planning and Academic Committees, UGC, NAAC and Tamil Nadu State Council for Higher Education. He was invited to serve on the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), for making recommendations to the MHRD on all aspects of Higher Education. That 60 MoUs have been signed with major industries and leading universities of the world. He had held several notable positions and received awards including the National Award for Social Service from the then President of India, Dr.A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.





Dr. D. Rajasekar, Professor at AMET Business School, AMET deemed to be University has 4 years of industrial experience and 15 years of teaching experience. He has presented more than 60 Papers in National and International conferences and has published around 100 Papers in International Journals and also published 21 textbooks. He is a Gold medalist in MBA (Finance and Marketing) from Tamilnadu Open University and received the same from Hon'ble Ex-Tamil nadu, Governor Shri. Surjit Singh Barnala. He is a rank holder at Madras University. He has received the awards "Outstanding Scientist in Commerce", "Best Faculty Award", "Best Research Advisor Award" "Highest Book Publication Award" and Dr.Radhakrishnan Gold Medal Award in the year 2017.



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