

# Negotiating the Boundaries between Active Concern and Conscious Efforts: A Sociological Discourse on the Conditions of Housemaids in Kolkata City and the Corrective Measures Required

## Abstract

Globalization is not merely an economic process, it has far reaching cultural and political consequences, grappling with which has become a serious concern. The cultural and political consequences of globalization have disrupted many established norms and laid the foundations for the creation of new norms. 'Habits of obedience' are challenged on the grounds of modernity. The entry of urban middle class women in paid occupations and the simultaneous take over of unskilled women as housemaids has changed the structure of the society. However, this 'virtual emancipation' of the unskilled workers has not eliminated the vital concern i.e. whether they experience autonomy.

**Keywords:** Dichotomy, Autonomy, Tradition, Modernity, Care-givers

## Introduction

The dichotomy between tradition and modernity has been a contested issue in the discipline of sociology. However, in the present day this dichotomy, has encountered new dimensions which were un-thought of in the past.

The partial exit of middle class women in Urban India to the white colour occupations and their replacement by "professional care-givers" puts a question mark on the autonomy of both the former and the later. Housemaids or domestic workers have become indispensable to the middle class households in India and Kolkata city is no exception.

Domestic help form an integral part of the family set up in Kolkata city. They come from many parts of West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Poverty, destitution, and the hope for a better life compel these women to enter Kolkata city. There is concern for these housemaids in the city but such concern is rarely translated into action.

## Aim of the Study

The paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Who are the modern care givers?
2. What are their family problems?
3. Do the housemaids experience autonomy?
4. What are the challenges of the housemaids in old age?
5. What are the forms of social security nets?
6. What kind of concern exists for housemaids?

Domestic work is one of the largest job enclaves for female migrant workers, partly due to care deficit produced by increased entry of middle class women in India and globally into the labour force. Domestic work is recognized as legitimate work by the Indian state. Recent government reports and judgments on domestic work in India give domestic workers, labourer's rights without attempting to regulate their occupation in a manner that would conflict with their human rights or diminish their sense of entitlements and citizenship status. However unlike sex work, no official record exists for domestic workers.

## Family Problems of the Housemaids

It has been observed during various informal discussions with poor housemaids in Kolkata city that they lack familial support. In most

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instances, the husband of the maid is an alcoholic. He shows disinterestedness in paid employment and regularly abuses his wife. This makes the lives of the housemaids insecure and they suffer from anxiety and depression.

There are few housemaids Union in localities that fight for well being of the maids. There are few NGOs too, that can take care of the rights of the housemaids, although there is an NGO namely 'Institute of Social Work' at Chetla, that works to ameliorate the conditions of housemaids.

#### **Lack of A Security Net**

The question of social security and support system at the old age poses the biggest challenge in the lives of the housemaids. Most of the housemaids in a survey reported that the biggest support in their lives are their children. Most of the housemaids look up to their sons and daughters for help during their old age. Some of the employers recruit the sons and daughters of ex-housemaids to work in various capacities. The autonomy and emancipation that migrant housemaids experience is worth a critical analysis. It is true that the housemaids get a wage hike post their original status. However they do not experience social mobility in its entirety.

House work is stigmatized occupation in many parts of India. Hence the housemaids refrain from divulging their occupational details to their kin group in many contexts. Housemaids feel empowered, having earned their own money. However this always does not translate into action i.e women may not be autonomous. Women may not be in a position to spend the money, she has earned independently. Moreover earning means more expenditure for her family, thus rarely giving her a chance to invest on herself for betterment.

#### **Unorganized Worker's Social Security Act, 2008**

There is no organized union for the housemaids in Kolkata city. However in every locality, these women have fixed their own wages depending on the kind of work they do and resting on the principle of 'implied consensus'. Concern for the housemaids depends to a great extent on the relationship between the domestic worker and her employer. In Kolkata city, the relationship between the domestic worker and the employer, is basically a women-to-women relationship under the garb of patriarchy and capitalism.

Domestic works need to be brought within the purview of the labour laws (Irudaya: 2011) Domestic work in India is largely a female occupation (Government of India 2002: vol II,57). The NCW's recommendation in favour of a ban for women below the age of 30, working as domestic workers in the Middle East is linked to its concern over the sexual exploitation of domestic workers (Irudaya: 2011).

The government submitted that migration for the purpose of domestic work was permissible as long as the worker was not exploited or working in slavery like conditions. The government further submitted that it was enacting a bill for the unorganized sector with the aim of providing comprehensive protection for workers in the unorganized sector including domestic work providing comprehensive protection for workers

in the unorganized sector including domestic work. Thus came into existence, the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act 2008. In India, with the modern development process, there has been an increase in service sector employment and the maximum increase has been in the domestic service. (2011). However domestic service, continues to be stigmatized and the workers, working in this sector, have receded into oblivion. Their plight remains deplorable and their voice unheard. The question of autonomy and their socio-economic development are areas that need immediate assistance.

#### **Efforts by the State Government and Central Government**

Conscious efforts have been generated by the Central and State Governments to help ameliorate the conditions of workers in the unorganized sector that covers the housemaids too. However there are no propagating agencies, that would voice the policies, framed by the Central and State Governments to help domestic maids. It was observed that many housemaids in various colonies of Kolkata city were beneficiaries of a Provident fund, which will give them a pension after the housemaid reaches sixty years of age. Under the National Health Insurance Scheme, they can get a discount up to rupees thirty thousand in private nursing homes and hospitals. As far as medical assistance from Government hospitals are concerned, with the recommendation of the local councilors, the housemaids can get free medical treatment from government funded hospitals.

The state Government issues BPL cards, to the poorest of the poor, thus the housemaid can buy rice and wheat at very low costs. Thus a glance at provisions indicate that there is concern for the poor housemaids at the government level.

#### **Conclusion**

Women have been the 'second sex' (Beauvoir: 1949). Second to whom? Is it to the menfolk, or to the atrocities they face as a result of their race, caste, poor economic status, being disempowered or their conspicuous absence from decision making bodies? The question is whether autonomy follows empowerment or is a by-product of it? Are the poor housemaids 'adequately autonomous' to be in a position to earn, spend and invest according to their own terms and conditions? Here again the phrase adequately autonomous lacks definitional contours.

In the mentioned context, it becomes extremely important for the civil society and the government (both national and state) to spare a thought on these women. Middle class families, especially in Kolkata city is a legacy of the colonial period. Hence directly or indirectly educated women have to depend on the services rendered by the poor housemaids to run their own household smoothly. Their socio-economic development is required for the welfare of the workers in the unorganized sector. However the Governments and the civil society have to work in unison in order to bring about the desired results. Merely cultivating concern is not sufficient, the concern needs to be translated into action.

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