

Not Work but Work Conditions Need To Be Questioned: The Maid Servants in Karimganj Town of Assam, India

Abstract

In India, a large number of women have entered into informal sector, often exploitative and oppressive, and working in vulnerable conditions in labour market. There are both structural and cultural/ideological factors which weaken the base of the informal sector and women being a larger section therein experience the worst forms of oppression and indignity. Structural factors narrow the base of industrialisation and perpetuate the monopoly capital, on the other hand, the ideological factors prevent women to be independent entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Economic, Informal, Women, Female Domestic Workers, Employment.

Introduction

During the recent decades, owing to the decline in agricultural production and shrinking scope of employment in agricultural sector, many rural women had to migrate to cities in search of job opportunities but increased competition in urban labour market has eroded the space for them. Resultantly, they are engaged either in construction work or semi-skill jobs in general and in domestic service in particular.

Review of Literature

Nirmala Banerjee (1999) informs that in the period 1987-88 and 1993-94 in India more women were employed in tertiary sector in urban areas but most of them in domestic service as maid servants where they could apply their traditional (household) experiences. Besides, introduction of neo-liberal policies opened the doors of many educated urban women as well as changed their changing life style, making it difficult to manage time for their families. This further increased the demand of domestic workers. Today, "domestic workers can be found working for dual earners, middle class families and single people, for double or single parents, for young urban professionals as well as for the elderly and invalid" (Lutz, 2005). Numerous researches in India and abroad explored pitiable conditions of marginalised sections of society. A good number of studies in India have highlighted a conspiracy of silence against the dalits, adivasis or marginalised community (Oommen 2001; Nilsen & Roy 2015; Pandey 2006). The condition of women is far more serious as the women workers in factories or industries also experience oppressions, but they accept it silently, especially in informal sectors. The government deal with their various interests in such a way as to always put them in a situation of constant political negotiation. Sometimes, the government treated their demands as exceptions, allowing for purely political than administrative intent. Moreover, poor urban women are mostly concentrated in unskilled jobs and there were strong pressures towards the domestication of working class women (Lukitaningsih 2017; Chatterjee 2004; Sen 1999). Studies also reveal that women from lower socio-economic classes and of immigrant background dominate these sectors and it has not facilitated their inclusion in the mainstream labour movement; especially the young and the unmarried ones are in majority, placed in low-skill works and paid less than the male workers but some of them have organized themselves in their own ways, achieving remarkable successes (Boris & Parren 2010; Makombe 2011; Lewis 2003). The condition of female domestic workers both in India and abroad is not very much different. They are excluded from mainstream because of being women followed by multiple forms of resistance as they belong to lower caste and class (Bhatt 1975; Breman 1996; Tomar 2015; Ambewadikar 2016). Majority of them work due to economic constraints such as poverty and unemployment (Kumar, 2009)

Aparna Ghosh Das

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of Political Science,
Karimganj College,
Karimganj, Assam

G.Ram

Professor,
Deptt. of Sociology,
Assam University,
Silchar, Assam

have to accept low skilled jobs, low wage and low status (Kumar 2015; Farooqui & Jafri 2016) and no serious attempt by the government or any other organisation is seen to change their present conditions (Mittal 2012; Chakroborty 2008; Kundu 2007). In abroad also, the life experiences of migrant domestic workers are caught between public, formal employment, and private relations, between materialistic and personal forms of power, between contract and dependence. Moving between these makes them vulnerable as it works to the advantage of the employer (Anderson 2006; GFMD 2015; Nilliasca 2011). During the last few years, the number of domestic workers in Karimganj town is increasing at an alarming rate as the males of poor section of society find it hard to run their families with their little earnings. The question is: How and under what circumstances these women work as maid. The paper therefore attempts to highlight the pitiable condition of the female domestic workers in Karimganj town.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the socio- economic background of the female domestic workers in Karimganj town,
2. To study the living and working condition of the female domestic workers of Karimganj town,
3. To assess whether any steps adopted both by the Government, NGOs and the female domestic workers themselves to improve their condition in India in general and Karimganj town in particular.

The Methodology

The study is based on primary as well as a supplement of secondary data. The main sources of secondary data are the official publications of government agencies of both Central and State governments, like Directorate of Economics and Statistics under Government of India and Government of Assam and Karimganj, the Labour Department specially located at Karimganj district of Barak Valley. The primary data has been collected through Convenience Sampling Method whereby the sample consists of part-time and full-time female domestic workers in households. The total sample is 430 comprising 305 (88.37%) Hindus- 57 (13.25%) General Castes, 305 (70.93) SCs & 18 (4.19%) OBCs- and 50 (11.63%) Muslim. All the female domestic workers in the Karimganj town and some of its adjacent rural areas constituted the universe of the study. Karimganj district is located in Southern Assam and borders Tripura, state of India and Sylhet region of Bangladesh. Its total population is 12, 28,686, out of which 50.93% (6, 25,864) is male population and

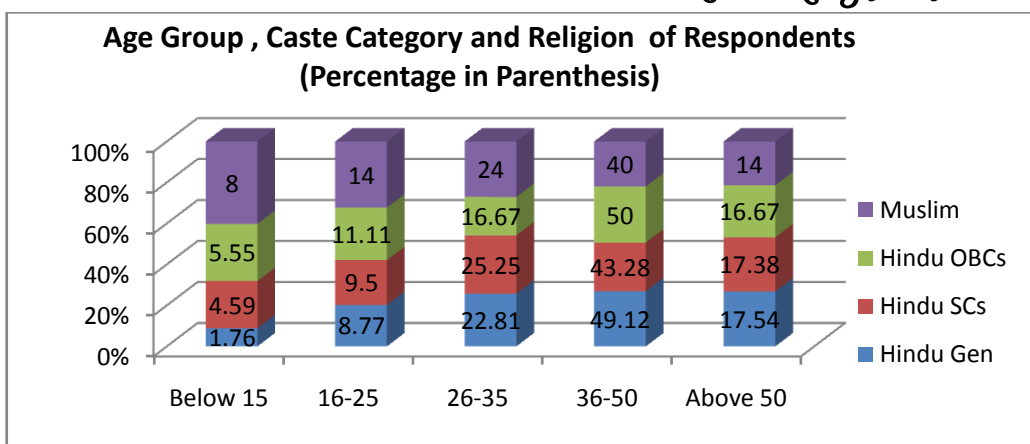
49.1% (6, 02,822) is female population. Karimganj town, the administrative headquarters of the district, is the biggest town in the district. Total population of the town in 2011 was recorded 56,854 (males 28,473 and females 28,381). It might have gone up to 100,000, as many parts of the town still are recorded under the jurisdiction of gram panchayats. Out of 20,851(36.67%) total workers in Karimganj (MB), 16,432(57.71%) are males and 4,419(15.57%) are females. The main and marginal male workers are the largest, that is, 14,779(51.91%) and 1653 (5.81%) as compared with 3,186(11.23%) and 1233 (4.34%) of main and marginal female workers respectively. The number of non-working population is the highest amongst the females that is 23,962(84.43%) as compared with 12,041(42.29%) of males. In Karimganj town, the domestic workers are found in Tilak Chand Road (8.60% of total samples w/n 7), Nilmoni Road (8.60% of total samples, w/n 9), Char Bazar(11.16% of total samples, w/n 23, 21), Housing Complex (4.65% of total sample, w/n 6), Shyamaprasad Road (7.44% of total samples, w/n-24) Banamali Road (4.19% of total samples, 13 and 14), Rail Colony(7.21% of total samples, w/n 24, 27), END Colony (0.47% of total samples, w/n-25), Azad Sagar Road (0.93% of total samples, w/n 3), Thana Road (0.93% of total samples, w/n 12), Settlement Road (2.33% of total samples, w/n 1), Longai Road (1.86% of total samples, w/n 2), Subash Nagar (0.93% of total samples, w/n 15), Batarashi CT (0.93% of total samples, w/n 2) and a good number of them in some panchayat areas for example, Sarisha (11.63% of total samples, w/n 1,3,2,8) Cherakhuri (8.37% of total samples, w/n 6), Keshorkapan 9 (5.81% of total samples, w/n1), Umapati (5.12% of total samples, w/n 9), Chandsrikona (2.09% of total samples, w/n 9) and Banamali Part I (1.16% of total samples, w/n 1,3& 10) Kanisail Pt II (5.58% of total samples, w/n 1). These areas were visited by using contact initially with two women domestic workers and thereafter through them with the rest

The Social Situation

The data analysis is done keeping in mind the objectives of the study.

The Socio-Economic Background of the Respondents

Let us first start with the age of the respondents in order to determine how the former is spending the golden period of their life in the profession. The following chart shows this.



Source: Field Survey Conducted from 01.07. 2017 to 05.01.2018

As stated above in Hindu community, out of 380(88.37) respondents, 57 (24.88%) belongs to General Caste, 18 (4.19%) from Other Backward Castes and the rest that is, 305 (70.93%) is from Schedule Caste and 50 (11.63%) are Muslim. The above chart demonstrates that the percentage of respondents is more in the age group of 36-50 i.e., 49.12% General Caste, 43.28% SCs, 50% OBCs and 40% Muslim belong to this category. The saddest part is that the total 16.98% females were found to work whose age is above 50.

Literacy Status of Respondents

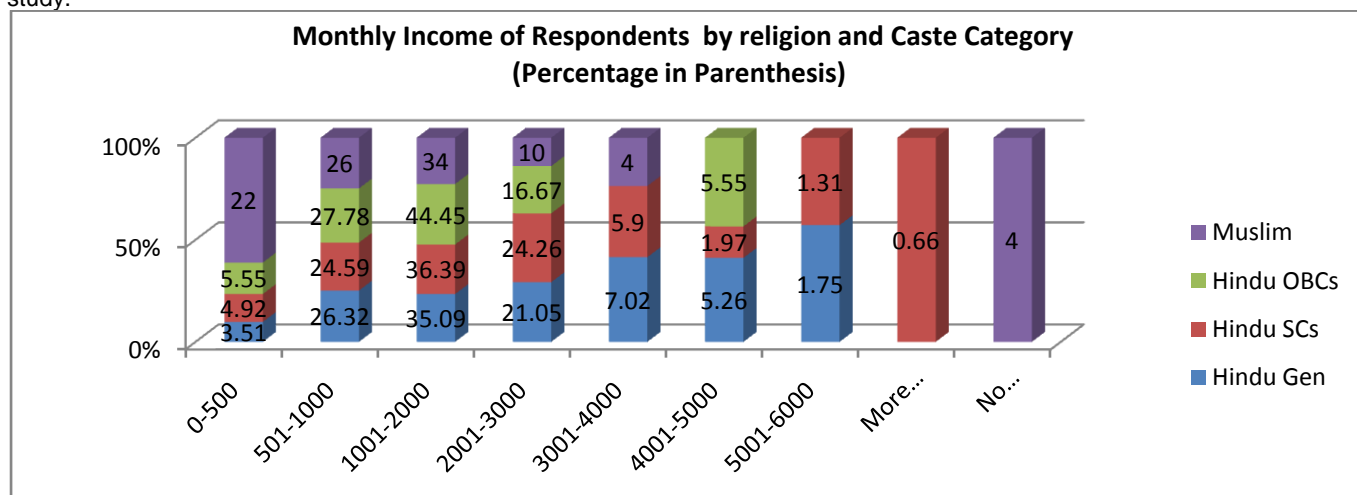
The data analysis shows that in the category of Hindu Community, 71.93% General Caste, 54.75% SC and 55.56% OBC respondents are literates along with 52.56% Muslims. The overall 17.90% respondents mainly held financial crisis responsible for discontinuation of their studies and the rest affirmed either their early marriage or lack of interest both on their part and their parents, for not continue study.

Marital Status and Occupation of Husbands' of Respondents

The data analysis presents 53.02% respondents as married followed by 28.60% widow, 10.70% separated and 7.68% unmarried respondents. Again, 53.02% married, 7.68% unmarried, 28.60% widow and 10.70% separated respondents' siblings, brothers and sisters study and we can hope that they continue their study to secure a bright future for them. Regarding the occupation of married respondents' husbands, the data analysis depicts that in the category of Hindu community, the highest 53.32% General Caste, 35.85% SC and 0% OBC husbands of married respondents and 16.67% husbands of Muslim respondents are thresher pullers. Overall percentage of day labourers that is, 16.51% is the second highest.

Monthly Income of Respondents

This is presented through the following chart as it is the vital point that determines the economic status of respondents.



Source: Field Survey Conducted from 01.07. 2017 to 05.01.2018

The above chart reveals that 36.28% respondents are having income ranging Rs. 1000/- to 2000/- and only a few that is, 1.16% and 0.47% respondents earn within the range of Rs. 5000/- to 6000/- and more than Rs. 6000/- respectively. 22% respondents from Muslim community earn below

Rs.500/- and 4% are found to do work without any salary.

The Living Conditions of Respondents

1. Regarding the types of house, in the category of Hindu community, the highest 70.18% General, 84.91% SC and 72.22% OBC respondents live in

- kachcha houses along with 92% Muslim respondents.
- Regarding the location of house, in the category of Hindu community, the highest 61.40% General, 76.07% SC and 77.78% OBC respondents' houses are located on the bank of the river along with 66% Muslim respondents. Overall, 31.16% respondents face flood problem twice in a year.
 - Regarding the electricity facility of respondents, in the category of Hindu community, the highest 22.81% Generals, 46.23% SCs and 66.67% OBCs do not have this facility and 78% Muslim also are deprived of electricity facility. But amongst the household articles, in the category of Hindu community, the highest 68.42% General, 64.92% SC and 55.56% OBC respondents possess mobile phones along with 64.19% Muslims.
 - Regarding the means of cooking food, in the category of Hindu community, only 45.61% General, 42.95% SC and 11.11% OBC respondents use LPG along with 39.53% Muslims. Overall, 18.82% got it under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMRY).
 - Regarding the source of drinking water, in the category of Hindu community, the highest 49.13% General, 60.33% SC and 38.89% OBC respondents do not have the source along with 60.93% Muslims. Overall, only 4.65% respondents boil drinking water.
 - Regarding the types of latrine used, in the category of Hindu community, 35.09% General, 47.86% SC and 61.11% along with 51.16% Muslims respondents use kachcha latrines.

Working Conditions of Respondents

- In the category of Hindu community, the highest 98.25% General, 93.11% SC and 8.89% OBC along with 92.56% Muslim respondents are part time workers and the rest are full time workers.
- Regarding getting salary during leave, in the category of Hindu community, 68.52% General, 55.56% SC and 76.47% OBC along with 76.60% Muslim respondents do not get.
- Regarding resting status of respondents during day time, in the category of Hindu community, 85.96% general, 85.57% SC and 77.78% OBC along with 98% Muslim respondents do not get time to take rest.
- Regarding the status of meals received, in the category of Hindu community, 96.43% General, 97.96% SC and 70% OBC along with 95.24% Muslim respondents are getting meals.
- Regarding the bargaining capacity for remuneration of respondents, in the category of Hindu community, the highest 94.74% General, 90.82% SC and 91.58% OBC do not have this power along with 100% Muslim respondents.

Steps Adopted to Improve the Condition of Female Domestic Workers

In the 100th session, International Labour Organisation's annual Conference in Geneva adopted the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and it's supplementing Recommendation (No. 201). It

is indeed the first attempt to formulate international labour standards, mainly directed to the benefit of domestic workers in the form of weekly days off, limits to hours of work, minimum wage coverage, overtime compensation, social security, and clear information on the terms and conditions of employment (Rullo & Varia, 2013). In India, the inclusion of domestic work in the Child Law (Prohibition and Regulation Act) 1986 (through an amendment in 2006), the Unorganised Social Security Act 2008 which was introduced to regulate payment and working conditions and check exploitation and trafficking of women and other young household workers and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 have been landmark moments in the regulation of domestic work in India. "The domestic workers' movement has begun in 27 states in NE India and in Assam, it started in 2007 in Udalguri. Barak Human Rights Protection (2002), The Barak Valley Welfare Development Society (2005) and Bhoomi Women Trust (NGO, 2017) in Silchar is likely to undertake several projects amongst which women's development and empowerment will be given equal importance. Under the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008, implemented in Assam on 2009, the Karimganj Labour Department has also taken several steps like issuing of identity cards to the unorganized workers so that they can get preference at their respective places to the benefits of free education to children, free medical facilities and above all inclusion in the National Health Insurance Policies, meant for them. Accordingly, 89 workers like rickshaw pullers have enrolled their names but unfortunately all are males and not a single female domestic worker came to the department for registering her name. The then Labour Inspector mainly held the unawareness of the female workers responsible for it. Further, he said that there is none to recognize their voice as they do not have any union to fight for them (Labour and Employment Office, Karimganj 2013). After that, no serious attempt is seen to protect the marginalised section of society in Karimganj town.

Results and Discussion

- The maximum number of respondents in the age group 36-50 is due to the fact that the responsibility of whole family under this age comes to the shoulder of females though their male counterpart bears some.
- More than three tenth (37.21%) respondents are drop outs and this clears that unless and until the economic condition of a people is improved, there is little chance of increasing the literacy rates in particular and educational level in general.
- The low level of income of the respondents stands as a barrier in fulfilling the basic needs of them. The working of less than one tenth of Muslim respondents without any salary is a clear picture of bonded labour existing in the town. The occupation of married respondents' husbands further shows the causal nature of work prevalent amongst them.
- The condition of house of respondents is below standard and the Muslim respondents are having

the lowest standard of life as 92% live in kachcha houses. Their location of houses is on the river side but due to the disposal of kachcha latrines on the river water, they are exposed to various ailments. The female domestic workers are found to work with severe diseases like asthma, nerve disorder and even cancer.

5. Under the present circumstances when the Government is trying to provide electricity to every nook and corner of the country, the respondents (47.67%) are deprived of it but due to the growing need for mobile phones, 64.19% respondents have it.
6. The young girls initially are found to work in one house on full time basis to manage their basic needs, gradually turn up to a part time maid so as to earn more money to manage the needs of their family members. The situation of widow and the deserted maid are no less critical. All of them work seven days in a week and any absence on their part either calls for reduction of salary or no salary at all. Near seven tenth of the respondents change the house immediately if face any ill-treatment. To avoid such circumstances, the maids ignore their children and family in general or their health in particular. As there is no placement agency in the town, the female domestic workers work and bargain in their own capacity. They are also not united and integrated as a result of which the terms and conditions of their work can be easily manipulated.

Conclusion

The female domestic workers are thus oppressed, they still remain confined to their job and are unable to understand that any sort of positive changes require mass level consciousness. Moreover, as told before, they have no common platform through which they can unitedly express their grievances. Under such circumstances, there is a need to highlight the subaltern consciousness of these women and to suggest a way out so that they can develop their potentialities and maintain a distinct identity of their own which will liberate them from any kind of patriarchal norms or the so-called elite ideologies by which bhadrak' (the respected folk 'mockingly') make all the propaganda about the subalterns and the tactics of their subordination (Agrahari 2017). Their situation in Barak Valley especially in Karimganj is more pathetic. The technological development in other parts of the country has given somewhat a scope of employment of women though in informal sector in a large scale but in Karimganj, the poor women are not getting any chance to absorb in any work but domestic work. The poor women are doing all categories of work in employers' house depending on the demand of the latter and capacity of the former but the wages received by them are not according to their expectations though more than half of them receive meals at their workplace. They also deny about any experience of sexual abuse and any serious ill-treatment at workplace. But the problem lies with the dismantle wage structure, the long duration of work, assigning of innumerable duties and sudden dismissal

from work and these things will never change unless and until there is vigilance from the part of society and the domestic workers themselves. Because of the dearth of opportunities, in one hand their number is increasing day by day with little chance of improvement in their standard of living. The literature on women's work in India has sidelined the contribution of these women to national economy mainly because of their existence in the remotest parts of the country.

References

1. Agrahari, J.2017. 'Making of the subaltern in India', Issue 71, ISSN_0975_1815.
2. Ambewadikar, Jayasree. 2016. 'Writing caste/ writing gender perspective of Sharmila Rege'. In *Journal of Social Science. Continuous issue-22 | June – July*.
3. Anderson, B.2006. 'A very private business: migration and domestic work'. Centre on Migration, Policy and Society .Working Paper No. 28.London: Oxford University Press.
4. Banerjee, N. 1999. 'Women in emerging labour market'. In *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 42 (4).
5. Berman, J.1996. *Footloose labour: working in India's informal economy*. England: Cambridge University Press.
6. Census of India. 2011. *District Census Handbook Karimganj- Village and Town Directory. Series 19, Part XII-A*. (www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/DCHB.../1818-PART-A/DCHB.KARIMGANJ.pdf).
7. Census of India. 2011. *District Census Handbook Karimganj- Village and Town Directory. Series 19, Part XII- B*. (www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/DCHB.../1818-PART-B/DCHB.KARIMGANJ.pdf).
8. International Labour Organisation, 2015. 'Indispensable yet unprotected: working conditions of Indian domestic workers at home and abroad'. International Labour Office, *Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS)* Geneva. ISBN: 978-92-2-129839-7
9. Kundu, A .2007. 'Conditions of work and rights of female domestic workers of Kolkata'. In *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 50 (4).
10. Lukitaningsih .2017. 'The oppression of female workers in industrial sector from Gayatri Spivak perspective'. In *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 22 (5).
11. Lutz. 2005. 'Frality! Thy name is not women'. *Employment Newspaper*.
12. Makombe, R.2011. 'Breaking silences: voicing subaltern consciousness'. In *Mtutuzeli Nyoka's I speak to the silent*. Retrieved from www.otherness.dk) Otherness_2.2_new accessed on 04-03-2017.
13. Mittal, Neha. 2012. 'Women workers in unorganised sector: socio-economic perspective'. In *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research*, 1 (3).

14. Neetha N.2009. "Contours of domestic service: characteristics, work relations and regulation". In *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 52 (3).
15. Nilliasca, Terri. 2011. "Some women's work: Domestic work, class, race, heteropatriarchy, and the limits of legal reform". In *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, 16 (2).
16. Oommen, T.K. 2001. *Understanding Indian society: the perspective from below*. Pune: Pune University Press.
17. Rullo M, Varia N. 2013. 'Claiming rights: domestic workers' movements and global advances for labour reform'. A joint report by Human Rights Watch, The International Trade Union Confederation, and The International Domestic Workers' Network. New York: Human Rights Watch.
18. Tomar, Ruchi. 2015. 'Challenging caste and gender disparity in Urmila Pawar's the weave of my life'. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 6(11).
19. Karimganj district- Wikipedia. (<http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karimganj>) Population and Demography(Karimganj District)- Karimganj NIC karimganj.nic.in demo
20. District Report Karimganj- icssr. (www.icssr.org)
21. *Domestic Work Link* (2003) 12 (1).
22. www.indiangolist.com/..barak-valley-welfare-development-society-in-silchar-assam. accessed on 15th April 2017.
23. <https://ngodarpan.gov.in/index.php/home/statewis-e-ngo/1221/18/2> accessed on 10th April 2017.