

Working & Living Conditions of Women Domestic Workers: Insights from a Survey

Bino Paul GD, Venkatesha Murthy R & Susanta Datta

Exploring primary data collected from 1510 women domestic workers in Mumbai, this study evidently brings out domestic work as a feminine occupation in a global city like Mumbai. The occupation is an epitome of critical deficits in human development. Based on the findings, the authors argue why it is essential to create a comprehensive social security system for domestic workers in India against the backdrop of working and living conditions of labor belonging to this occupational category. The study covers themes such as work profile of the domestic workers, access to social security, health, habitat and domestic violence.

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Introduction

As per traditions, domestic work was considered to be an 'unpaid work' performed mainly by women in the family. However, of late, in the changing economic conditions, occupations in industries are becoming lucrative (ILO, 2010). As a result, more women, especially from middle-class families (Ellinor, 2006), are participating in the labor market. Therefore, the so-called 'un-paid non-market activity' (domestic work), to an extent, remained out of the purview of occupational options available for educated persons. The new segmentation of domestic work in the form of an outsourced activity has raised the importance of the occupation higher than ever before. Often, migrant workers or economically weaker sections of the society participate in it. Indeed, millions of people participate in this work (ILO, 2010).

It makes domestic work a pivotal occupation in determining the linkage between family and dynamics of the open economy. Across the globe, although this linkage is quite vivid, reflected in ever expanding demand from families for domestic worker's service, provision of en-

entitlements to this occupational category varies across countries. While countries in the Western Europe have systems of social security for domestic workers, transition economies such as India are yet to come up with an appropriate system of entitlements for domestic workers.

In the Indian context, the enormity of informal work is an observable phenomenon. Approximately 93% of the workforce is in paid work, in farming and non-farming activities. Most of them are not entitled to any social security benefits. Moreover, these workers tend to receive relatively lower wages than formal sector workers. As observed, persons with more years of schooling (close to ten years), appear to have higher chances of getting formal work, which makes them eligible for entitlements like social security, while persons with fewer years of schooling may end up in lower echelons of the labor market, earning lower wages and that too without social security (NSSO, 2012). Importantly, the dichotomy of formal-informal work co-exists with glaring low labor force participation of women. Although, across age groups, female work participation rate is much lower than male work participation rate, in some occupations females far exceed males. This is quite evident in the occupational category, domestic work. Domestic work seems to be the destiny of a significantly massive number of women workers in India who seek employment opportunities in the urban sector, often rendering an invisible workforce with low pay. Reflecting on indecent working and living condition of women domestic workers, it is viewed that “Working in the unregulated

domain of a private home, mostly without the protection of national labor legislation, allows for female domestic workers to be maltreated by their employers with impunity. Women are often subjected to long working hours and excessively arduous tasks. They may be strictly confined to their places of work. The domestic workforce is excluded from labor laws that look after important employment-related issues such as conditions of work, wages, social security, provident funds, old age pensions, and maternity leave (NCEUS, 2007: 86).

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India lags behind other nations in extending rights to domestic workers. As shown in ILO (2010), India is yet to provide core entitlements for decent work like maternity benefit. On the other hand, 26 nations, including developed and developing countries provide 12-14 weeks of maternity leave for domestic workers¹. In India, the National Minimum Wages Act 1948 excludes domestic workers from its purview. However, states may fix a minimum wage for domestic workers within their territory². Another defi-

¹These countries include Germany, Switzerland, Sri Lanka, Bolivia, Columbia, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, United Republic of Tanzania, Zimbabwe.

²The states of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Rajasthan have set minimum wage rates for domestic work.

cit is the lack of social security to domestic workers in India, while there have been noteworthy initiatives by other countries to provide different types of social security to domestic workers (examples include occupational safety and health, workers' compensation for employment injuries, general health care, pension and unemployment insurances).

In fact, for women engaged in domestic work, in particular in urban India, even generating subsistence level income entails a complicated process of scheduling of activities as they tend to work with multiple employers, who prefer flexible forms of labor contracts like the part-time engagement of domestic workers. Unfortunately, these workers, faced with the risk of working in indecent conditions, are enmeshed in a system with an excess supply of workers. Often, they offer services to relatively well-off households who are likely to have much better availability of rights and entitlements. Against this backdrop, we discuss fundamental socio-economic aspects of women domestic workers in India, with particular reference to the sprawling urban agglomeration, Mumbai. Using a survey method, we collected data from 1510 domestic workers on various life and work-related characteristics. This paper presents a descriptive statistical view of life and work of domestic workers in a metropolitan city. Based on the findings, we present a conceptual view at the end besides relevant policy implications of the findings.

Methodology of Research

We conducted a field survey between September 2009 and March 2010.

Adecco-TISS Labor Market Research Initiative (ATMRI) and Jagrut Ghar Kamgar Sanghathan (JGKS) carried out the fieldwork in collaboration. The core objective of the survey was to collect data on the nature of service, health status, gender profile and other domestic work-related aspects. The JGKS is a membership-based trade union working for the cause of women domestic workers in Mumbai, with a membership base of 12,000.

Following the socio-economic surveys, in particular, the National Sample Survey (NSS), we prepared a schedule of enquiry which contained personal and household profile of the domestic workers, their work profile, access to social security, health, habitat and domestic violence. Initially, we conducted a pilot survey of 30 respondents. Based on the experience during the pilot survey, we brought about minor changes to the schedule of enquiry. Finally, the survey was launched, which took approximately seven months to complete. We covered 1510 respondents who lived in the western suburbs of Mumbai, in areas like *Andheri, Jogeshwari, Bandra, Mahim, Vile Parle, Malad, Borivali, and Goregaon*. Using exploratory statistical tools, we present here the frequency distribution of variables. Each variable is represented in a tabular form, consisting of columns-categories, which form the variable, observed frequency, which includes responses and no responses, percentage distribution of observed frequencies and percentage distribution of frequencies, which is adjusted for no responses (called valid percentage).

Women Domestic Workers' Habitat

As shown in Table 1, 95% of domestic workers, who responded to our questions on habitat, stay in tiny houses with living space ranging between 25 and 100 sq. ft. 96% of respondents have one room

in their tiny houses. 90% of respondents live without toilet facility. They depend on a public toilet. In a city where real estate is increasingly turning out to be more speculative, domestic workers, who earn below subsistence wages, are destined to live in urban slums.

Table 1 Habitat Profile of Domestic Workers

Length & Width of the House (sq. ft.)	Frequency	Valid Percentage
25-100	1398	94.91
101-175	72	4.89
176-250	2	0.14
476-550	1	0.07
No Response	37	-
N	1510	100.0
Number of Rooms	Frequency	Valid Percentage
only one room	1430	96.95
two rooms	44	2.98
three rooms	1	0.07
No Response	35	-
N	1510	100.0
Without toilet facility	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Use public Toilet	1329	89.56 (N=1484)
	1298	88.72(N=1463)

Nature of Domestic Services

We collected information on employment status, the number of houses they work, and the type of domestic services. Almost all of them are employed at present as a domestic worker (Table 2). While one-fourth of them works just in one house, the remaining three-fourth of them work in multiple houses. Three-fifth of them work in 2-3 houses every day and close to one-sixth of them works in more than four houses. This pattern points to the flexibility of labor market for low wage, almost resembling perfectly competitive labor market scenarios where labor is wage taker. As shown by Chen et al. (2006), while informal work (which may be valid for paid

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domestic work as well) offers tremendous flexibility regarding working hours, it co-exists with indirect costs, which emanate from poor working and living conditions. Moreover, “psychological and emotional costs – regarding a worker’s self-esteem and dignity – are associated with many forms of informal work” (Ibid: 2133).

Domestic workers cater to various forms of service requirements that in-

Table 2 Present Employment Status & Coverage of Houses

Domestic workers	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Yes	1476	97.75	99.39
No	9	0.60	0.61
No Response	25	1.66	-
N	1510	100.00	100.0
No of Houses covered	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
1 House	351	23.25	23.70
2 House	561	37.15	37.88
3 House	335	22.19	22.62
4 House	131	8.68	8.85
5 House	78	5.17	5.27
6 House and above	25	1.66	1.69
No Response	29	1.92	-
N	1,510	100.00	100.0

cluded cooking, utensils cleaning, cloth washing, floor cleaning, toilet and bathrooms cleaning, children caring, old age care, marketing activities, gardening, disability caring and animal care (Table 3). More than three-fourths of domestic workers are engaged either in utensils cleaning or cloth washing or floor cleaning, while just two-fifths are employed for cooking services. Close to 30% of them are engaged in cleaning of toilets

and bathrooms. Rest of the services showed lower response rates. Quite interestingly, the organization of domestic work as prevalent in the 1940s in Mumbai, (Khanderia, 1947), appeared like exhaustive basket of tasks in one day schedule as prevalent among live-in male domestic workers, whilst women domestic workers in our sample tend to be engaged in select tasks as prevalent in part-time live out domestic work.

Table 3 Type of Domestic Services

Domestic services	Domestic Workers Working in Single House	Domestic Workers Working in more than one House	Domestic Workers Working in at least one House	Percentage of domestic workers engaged in services = (column 4/N)* 100, Where N= 1510
Utensils Cleaning	480	832	1312	86.9
Cloth washing	465	752	1217	80.6
Floor Cleaning	435	748	1183	78.3
Cooking	326	266	592	39.2
Toilet & Bathrooms Cleaning	234	208	442	29.3
Children caring	62	3	65	4.3
Old age care	36	3	39	2.6
Marketing activities	19	7	26	1.7
Gardening	17	6	23	1.5
Disability caring	17	0	17	1.1
Animal care	9	0	9	0.6

Wage, Workplace Issues & Social Security

From our survey, domestic work appears to be a regular employment with monthly payments. As shown in Table 4, close to two-thirds of domestic workers, who responded to the question on their wages, do not earn more than Rs. 2000 per month, while just one percent earns more than Rs. 5000 per month. One-tenth of them does not earn even Rs 1000 every month. On an average, they earn Rupees 1964 which is much lower than national minimum wages such as the wage prevalent under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). This points to the enormity of the poor who are entrenched in the trap of low wage equilibrium, which is widely prevalent across the globe³.

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Only one-fourth of them get food to eat at the workplace, while four-fifths work even in holidays (Table 5). Contrary to this, as reported by Khanderia (1947), live-in male domestic workers in Mumbai were provided with food by employers.

³ “The persistence of poverty worldwide is a major challenge of the 21st century. More than one billion people struggle to survive on less than \$1 a day” (Chen et.al, 2006)

Table 4 Wages of Domestic Worker (Frequency Distribution)

Wage interval	frequency	Valid percentage
less than 1000	182	12.47
1000-1500	428	29.34
1501-2000	326	22.34
2001-2500	175	11.99
2501-3000	184	12.61
3001-3500	56	3.84
3501-4000	63	4.32
4001-4500	21	1.44
4501-5000	8	0.55
above 5000	16	1.10
No response	51	
Total	1510	100.00
Average wage	1964	
Standard Deviation	1096	

They were even entitled to benefits such as free housing. The core differences between our data and the patterns shown by Khanderia seem to have been the outcome of structural changes in the form of an urban agglomeration, evolving from a central business district based city to a suburban-based urban sprawl, which brought fundamental changes in commuting within the city and the nature of the division of work at home. For instance, families of salaried spouses who live in cities tend to spend a considerable amount of time for market activities such as jobs and commuting, entailing the domestic chores to be outsourced to women who are pushed to low wage-flexible-part-time work.

Probing if they are susceptible to discriminatory treatment by employers, only 3% of domestic workers in our sample have ever been suspected of theft by the employers. Most of them (90%) never faced sexual harassment

at the workplace⁴. Close to 90% respondents said that they were not engaged in any form of subsidiary activities. Almost all respondents work without a written contract of employment (Table 5). Interestingly, Kantor et al. (2006), investigating employment security of

informal workers in Surat, based on a sample of 86 women workers, reports that 95% of them have no job contract. Similarly, the proportion of the same magnitude never received any notice from the employer before they get terminated.

Table 5 Issues Faced by Domestic Worker at Workplace

	Yes	No
Getting food to eat in the workplace?	374 (25.41)	1,098 (74.59)
Working even on holidays	1209 (82.53)	256 (17.47)
Suspected of theft by the employer	41 (2.8)	1423 (97.2)
Faced sexual harassment at the workplace	31 (2.24)	1,355 (97.76)
Involved in any subsidiary work besides working as a Domestic Worker	182 (12.79)	1241 (87.21)
Have a written contract with any employer	6 (0.41)	1449 (99.59)
Getting any notice period before termination of employment	30 (2.07)	1417 (97.93)
Enjoy fixed weekly holidays	13 (0.89)	1446 (99.11)
Getting overtime payment	193 (13.22)	1267 (86.78)

Note: Figures in the parenthesis give no response adjusted valid percentage where N= 1510

As shown in Table 6, more than three-fourths of domestic workers possess ration cards, and three-fifths have voter ID, while only four percent has life insurance policies. This pattern is quite consistent with the status of social security for other informal workers, and shows the critical

deficit in entitlements which are required for leading a decent life. Based on the data collected from Karnataka, Rao et al. (2006) showed the multi-dimensional vulnerability of informal sector workers including domestic workers and argued the urgency of social security programs, which cater to specific needs of occupations. In fact, this gap has been prevalent for long, spanning over eight decades. As observed by Khanderia (1947:171) there is a dire need for “a social security program, comprising: (a) unemployment insurance, (b) sickness insurance, and (c) old age insurance”.

⁴ On this issue, we probed activists who work for the cause of domestic workers. They were of the view that this figure lacks credibility. Moreover, ILO (2010) observes “Sexual harassment and abuse also appear to be prevalent and this, like all abuse, can have serious long-term repercussions of the domestic workers’ health, especially when the victims are young girls”.

Although, 60% have ration cards, barring a few exceptions, rest of the ration cards are above-poverty-line ones. Surprisingly, below poverty line ration card remains a mirage for a vast majority of domestic workers in Mumbai. On this issue, we probed further on why low wage occupational categories like domestic workers are identified above poverty line by interacting with activists and office bearers of trade union who pointed out that the apathetic attitude of state, amply reflected in lackadaisical approach towards efficient enforcements as a prime factor accounting for injustice of denying below-poverty-line status to domestic workers.

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Table 6 Types of Social Securities

	Frequency	Percentage
Life Insurance	65	4.3
Ration card	1,192	78.94
Voter ID	922	61.06
Elderly Card	44	2.91
Saving Account	179	11.85
Photo Pass	115	7.62
Other Forms of Social security	13	0.86
N	1,510	100

Health Considerations

Four-fifths of respondents access health services from government or municipal hospitals, while one-sixth of them avail them from private clinics (Appendix 1). As shown in Table 7, most of the

people –two-thirds to four fifths- access health facilities required for illnesses such as headache, giddiness, body pain, cough & cold and back pain, while one-sixth of people visits health facilities because of diarrhea.

Table 7 Reasons (illnesses) for Seeking Healthcare

	Frequency	Percentage out of N=1510
Headache	1,238	81.99
Giddiness	980	64.90
Body pain	1,236	81.85
Cough & Cold	1,007	66.69
Diarrhea	264	17.48
Back Pain	1,214	80.40
Pregnancy-related issues	19	1.26
Children health	180	11.92
Sexual life-related issues	2	0.13
TB	5	0.33
Authorities	52	3.44
Cataract	27	1.79
Others	15	0.99
		100.00

Responding to our question “Do you have any serious diseases?” 47% of respondents said that they do not know whether they suffer from any diseases. One-fourth of them said that they suffer from blood pressure (BP) and other cardiac diseases, while responses in respect of other diseases show much lower frequencies (Appendix 2).

Apart from diseases reported here, as shown by Zechter et al. (1987), domestic workers are prone to occupational hazards, which emanate from sources like pests, flammable trash piles, non-electrical safety hazards, garbage and

Domestic workers are prone to occupational hazards, which emanate from sources like pests, flammable trash piles, non-electrical safety hazards, garbage and frayed electrical cords.

frayed electrical cords. Further, work-related injuries and back pain are commonly noticed among women domestic workers. It is important to note that headache and giddiness are two categories of illnesses, instead of being the actual dis-

eases, may be proxy for the pain which emanates from internal discomforts due to more severe diseases.

Domestic Violence

Table 8 presents an overall picture of domestic violence within the families of domestic workers. Most women faced one or the other form of domestic violence. 50% of the respondents had sought police protection when they faced domestic violence. However, police response appears to be quite weak.

Table 8 Types of Domestic Violence, Circumstances & Safeguards(%)

	Yes	No	N
Verbal abuse	63.97	36.03	1149
Fight with husband	65.28	34.72	985
Does your husband drink alcohol?	51.40	48.60	1107
Does your husband behave differently when he drinks	36.05	63.95	1057
Do you think intoxication of drink is a reason for abuse and quarrel	59.51	40.49	1062
Do you have to give money for his drink?	27.51	72.49	1047
Are you ever Physically Abused by your Husband	49.30	50.70	1079
Ever Had Sex with your Husband without your Consent?	31.08	68.92	1004
Ever Sexually Abused by other Family Member	10.53	89.47	912
Ever sent back to your Parents' Home	36.84	63.16	1018
Did you seek police protection, in case of domestic violence?	49.54	50.46	1084
Did police respond to you well?	31.56	68.44	1109

As shown in Table 9, husband appears to be the principal source of do-

Table 9 Source of Abuse

	Frequency	Percentage out of N=1510
Husband	643	42.58
Father-in-law	83	5.50
Mother-in-law	104	6.89
Son	61	4.04
Daughter	10	0.66
Sister-in-law	11	0.73
Brother-in-law	2	0.13
Others	31	2.05

mestic violence. As viewed by our respondents, most of them tend to tolerate these hardships by adopting to coping strategies such as 'keep quiet', 'no attention', 'leave house' and 'cry' (Appendix 3). Insufficient earning by domestic workers, often, caused abuse by their husbands (Appendix 4).

It is important to argue that there is a dire need for capacity building and appropriate interventions towards safeguarding fundamental rights and freedom

of women domestic workers through institutional arrangements like collectives such as trade union, which can be the catalyst to transformational processes for attaining the critical mass of entitlements by honouring the dignity and autonomy of identities. ILO (2010), citing select cases from different countries, emphasised the importance of institutional initiatives, combining state and society to combat violence against women, generate awareness about rights and empowerment, and occupation-related skill development.

Conclusion

Domestic workers in urban agglomerations are likely to emerge from lower echelons of society characterised by lower educational attainment and social backwardness. In the case of India, it is more often rural to urban migration that forms a large chunk of domestic workers in cities like Mumbai. A comparison of views before independence (Khanderia, 1947) and today reveals that there is no discernable change in trends which were present then and today (McGovern, 2003).

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The domestic work produced racial, gender and class discriminations in society (ILO, 2010; Anderson, 2007). ILO (2010) report compares the domestic work

to more of “master-servant” relationship that takes our thinking and imaginations back to many centuries (McGovern, 2003; Mantouvalou, 2006). It is apparent from this expression that employee-employer relationship suffers many deficiencies, especially contractual nature of the work, the migrant status of the employee, and formal nature of interactions do not allow a healthy relationship to develop between employer and employee (Chan, 2005). Domestic workers are seen as a threat to the class status of the employer because of their frequent in-out mobility, and work in multiple households make employers feel that there is a possibility of leakages of information from one household to other, in turn, this may cause damage to their class and social image. As Chan (2005) observes “this means that interactions within the family are no longer restricted to family members, but have extended to that between employers and employees, which necessarily constitute asymmetry in power and status between these two parties”. Also, domestic workers who come from the lower strata of the society are viewed as a contrast to the “ideal cleanliness, order, and hygiene” of the class-conscious society (Sara, 2000). Domestic work remains a “fragmented nature of work with different tasks and multiplicity of employers” (Neetha, 2008). The sector’s precariousness continues in the form of no state intervention in providing “regular and fair wages, holidays, safe (working) conditions, pension and other (social security) benefits” (Areeba, 2006).

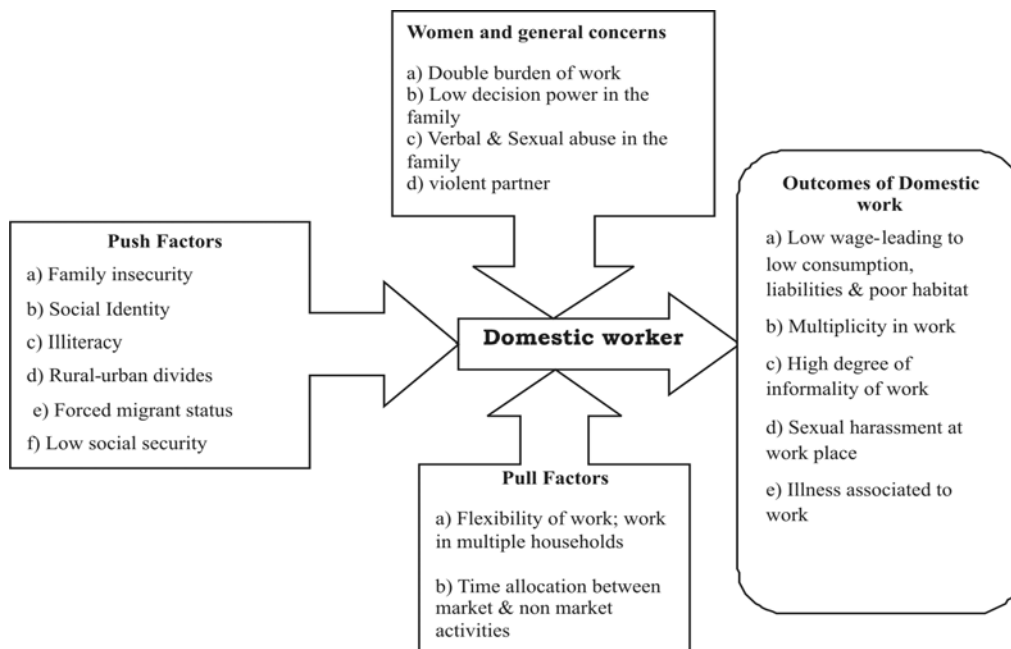
In the recent literature and policy debates, domestic work appears to be a “different” (Elin, 2007) form of work.

This recurrent framing of domestic work as ‘different’, in fact, legitimises while pointing at precarious working conditions, as a lineage from the colonialism, and servitude approach of the society. Domestic work remained the most devalued sector with precarious working. In this context, low wage scenario in domestic work segment is very well understood, owing to the reason that domestic work was traditionally considered to be an unpaid activity, mainly performed by women members of the family. This gender relation in the context of domestic work, as ILO defines “gendered” family responsibilities in private homes (ILO, 2010), offers a convincing argument for low wage offered in this labor segment.

Mumbai are an epitome of critical deficits in human development, a vicious situation of lack of core entitlements, which are required to enjoy freedom guaranteed by the democratic society and the necessity of appropriate alternatives to bring a positive social change, impacting lives of hapless domestic workers and their families. We have illustrated the complexity and embeddedness of interrelated phenomena in Fig. 1 by bringing push and pull factors, women and general concerns and outcomes together. As illustrated, the outcomes result from participating in domestic work by a woman through the process instituted by push and pull factors and general concerns. Solutions for the items listed in the outcome are deeply entrenched in vicious structural forces which have generated more profound inequalities for centuries.

Based on the primary data, we conclude that women domestic workers in

Fig.1 Domestic Work: Push and Pull Factors, General Concerns & Outcomes



Policy Implications

Taking cues from the content presented in Fig 1, we present a normative model of institutional arrangement, which can work towards sustained provisioning of core entitlements to women domestic workers in India. For this process, we use insights from Khanderia (1947), ILO (2010) and sources, which are relevant to the present context. Viewing that a significant proportion of women domestic workers are invisible, whose work tends to be muted in increasing labor market flexibility due to competition in urban agglomeration, it is crucial to generate capacity building for fostering collectives for them, to organise them to combat against oppression and shield their rights. Once collectives such as trade unions are installed, these workers tend to be organized with apparent identities. Meanwhile, the state in collaboration with workers' collectives should engage in institution building process which will transform this occupation into more visible and decent. Further, this can lead to processes of initiating dialogue between collectives of workers and the state to set up resource base for critical provisioning entitlements like social security, essential supply of goods, support to family welfare, and health insurance in a sustained manner. Going by the received view, as applicable to many white-collar occupations, one policy option which may come up is to go for contributory entitlement schemes which require domestic workers to contribute on a periodical basis for their social security. However, this option may add further burden to this hapless group.

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Appendix 1 Available Health Facilities to Domestic Workers

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Government/municipal hospital	1,204	79.74	80.64
NGO/trust hospital	25	1.66	1.67
Private clinic	240	15.89	16.08
Mobile clinic	13	0.86	0.87
Medical store	11	0.73	0.74
No Response	17	1.13	-
N	1,510	100.00	100.0
Sum	1,493		

Appendix 2 Types of Diseases Frequencies

	Frequency	Percentage out of N=1510
Cancer	39	2.58
Blood Pressure (BP) and another cardiac disease	381	25.23
Diabetes	102	6.75
Asthma	114	7.55
Tuberculosis (TB)	26	1.72
Gynaec Problems	36	2.38
Physical or Mental Disability	26	1.72
Others disease	20	1.32
Do not Know	706	46.75
		100.0

Appendix 3 Domestic Workers' Reactions to Harassment by Husband & Relatives

	Reaction to Husband	Percentage out of N=1510	Reaction to Relatives	Percentage out of N=1510
Answer back	276	18.28	194	12.85
Keep Quite	399	26.42	338	22.38
No attention	284	18.81	288	19.07
Leave house	128	8.48	166	10.99
Cry	235	15.56	198	13.11
Seek neighbors help	22	1.46	56	3.71
Seek police help	14	0.93	63	4.17
Hit him	3	0.20	1	0.07
Take family help	20	1.32	73	4.83

Appendix 4 Husband Abuse Reasons

	Frequency	Percentage out of N=1510
Dowry	158	10.46
Less income	580	38.41
Do not give money to husband	292	19.34
Bad health	117	7.75
Parents	29	1.92
Others	133	8.81