

COVID-19 Pandemic and Migrant Women Domestic Workers: The Need for Policy Deliberations

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Abstract

The unprecedented socio-economic scenario induced by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 adversely hit the lives of millions across the globe. When a lockdown was declared in India on March 24, 2020 as a preventive measure to avoid the spread of the pandemic, the migrant workers whose livelihood depended upon daily wages lost their jobs, and among these workers were women who were engaged in domestic work with total dependence on the income from their employment in working at households. This research paper throws light on the plight of women who struggled to secure a decent income during the pandemic and consequently faced difficulties in psycho-social fronts. The study followed a sequential explanatory design sampling 15 migrant women domestic workers employed in Bangalore city during the lockdown phase of the pandemic. The results of the study throw light on how the population under study struggles on the economic front, which in turn adversely affects their mental health and quality of life. A critical evaluation of the policies and programmes expose how the state measures are inadequate in ensuring the bare minimum necessities of migrant women domestic workers, signaling the need for social action through lobbying for more humanitarian legislations that ensure social security of the underprivileged.

Keywords: migrant labourers, domestic workers, COVID-19, social justice, unorganised sector

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Background of the study

Domestic work constitutes one of the elementary services in the unskilled labour market in the Indian context. Maids helping with household chores had been a typical practice in wealthy households in the past. With the increase in women professionals employed in cities, the service of maids or domestic workers became a necessity in modern times. The role of domestic workers has evolved over the years across different nations, and the demand is expanding (Sarti, 2014). The city of Bangalore in India is renowned for the immigration of a huge population due to its industrialisation and progress, mainly in the IT, education, construction, and medical sectors, thus attracting many employment opportunities (Shashidhar, 2003). This large inflow of professionals has not only resulted in a population increase but simultaneously raised the demand for domestic help in households. The burgeoning apartment culture and nuclear family system led to the rise in demand for domestic help in households in cities. Families with both partners working find it challenging to balance household work and office work. Hence they depend on external service to manage their housework, cleaning, cooking, caregiving etc. (Sinha et al., 2020).

For decades, these marginalised women workers have been subjected to exploitation and discrimination at various levels by the employers who engage them for long working hours for meagre wages. They often lack job security and are treated with no dignity. The government policies often ignore the social security and welfare of domestic workers (Armacost et al., 1994). The National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) points out that lack of formal education, early marriage, widowhood/separation from spouse, unemployment and poverty are the significant reasons pushing these women to take up work as domestic maids (Vadageri et al., 2016). One of the most common problems faced by the women working in households is long working hours for low wages and no job security. (Madhumathi, 2013). There have been instances of young women below 18 years who work as domestic workers, facing sexual harassment, rapes and even murder (Parameshwara, 2016). Also, caste & religious discriminations often jeopardise their dignity at the workplace (Sahni et al., 2019). The migrant women domestic workers in Bangalore city, who have migrated from the nearby villages and other states, often face many of

the above-mentioned challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic that crippled the Indian economy (Dev et al., 2020) further aggravated the conditions of the migrant women domestic workers.

As per the census of 2011, among 98,301,342 unorganised migrant workers in our country, women constitute 3.2% of the total migrant population, almost 31,45,643 approximately. It is estimated that around 4 lakh migrant workers are employed in Bangalore city (Parameshwara, 2016). Although the exact number of migrant domestic workers in Bangalore is unknown, approximately 20% are women migrants as per the census 2011. In this percentage of women, many engage as domestic help in households as there is an increasing demand in city households for the same. The domestic workers engage themselves in single or multiple households. Some women work in a single household for a whole day, and some work a few hours in multiple houses, the latter being a common occurrence in urban cities. Their livelihood depends on the income from their employment in working at households, and a majority of the families of these migrant workers are below the poverty line (de Haan, 2011).

When a 21 day National lockdown was announced on March 24 2020, as a preventive measure to avoid the spread of the pandemic, the domestic workers whose livelihood depended on the daily wages earned as domestic household help were affected in many ways. Most of them were either asked to take a break and return after the lockdown period or, in many cases, were asked to quit the job. Thus there was either a loss or significant reduction of income, leading to difficulties in even securing the daily supplies essential for survival (Agarwal, 2021). When faced with the choice to stay in the city or go back to their native place, these women neither had the means to travel back to their native place nor cope with the situation financially. Many struggled to meet their day-to-day expenses and were desperate to get employed to support their family (Azeez et al., 2021). These women were deprived of the state welfare programs and were not included in any state policies, similar to the plight of all the unorganised women migrant workers across India (Azeez et al., 2021). This study aims at understanding the problems faced by the women domestic workers employed in the households of Bangalore city. The focus is to understand the subject matter from the migrant perspective.

Methods and Materials

The cross-sectional research has been made from a pragmatic worldview and hence adopted a sequential explanatory design. A total of 15 migrant women domestic workers from Bangalore city were recruited for the study through purposive sampling. Participation in the study was voluntary and did not involve any monetary benefits. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and participant anonymity was assured. The study had followed the IFSW code of Ethics for Social Workers. Interviews were conducted in person using two sets of tools, viz. a structured questionnaire for the quantitative phase and an interview guide for the qualitative phase. The questionnaire comprised queries on the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, followed by WHOQOL-BREF (World Health Organization, 1996) to capture the Quality of Life of the respondents and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) to measure the respondents' life satisfaction. The data was analysed using SPSS 25 to capture the general living conditions of the respondents. In the qualitative phase, in-depth interviews were conducted among the respondents to capture the living conditions of the respondents during the pandemic period, especially the lockdown period. The aim was to identify how the pandemic aggravated the already miserable life of the respondents. The data was analysed using voyant tools, and also a content analysis was made with the data generated.

Findings from the Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase of the research focused primarily on the general state of affairs of the respondents' life. The focus was on understanding the demographic profile, quality of life and life satisfaction of the respondents in general. The data collected in this phase was analysed using SPSS.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Age Category of the Respondents (n=15)		
Age category	Frequency	Percent

30 and below	5	33.3
31-35	3	20.0
36-40	6	40.0
41 and Above	1	6.7

Marital Status of the Respondents (n=15)

Marital Status	Frequency	Percent
Single	1	6.7
Married	9	60.0
Divorced	2	13.3
Widowed	3	20.0

Number of Households Working in (n=15)

No of Households	Frequency	Percent
Single household	5	33.3
Multiple households	10	66.7

Educational Qualification (n=15)

Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percent
Unable to read and write	5	33.3
Lower than SSLC	9	60.0
SSLC to Plus 2	1	6.7

Insurance Coverage (n=15)

Insurance Coverage	Frequency	Percent
Yes	3	20.0
No	12	80.0

Frequency of visit to native place (n=15)

Frequency of Visit	Frequency	Percent
Once in a year	4	26.7
More than once	6	40.0
Never	5	33.3

Work status in other sectors

Status	Frequency	Percentage
Working in other sectors	3	20.0
Not working in other sectors	12	80.0

Table 1 shows that 40 percent of the respondents were aged between 36 to 40 years and 33.3 percent below 30 years, indicating that most of them were young. Most of them were married (60 percent). Single mothers who were widowed constituted 20 percent and divorced women constituted 13.3 percent. A majority of them worked in multiple households (66.7 percent). Around 60 percent had received education lower than SSLC and 33 percent of them had received no formal education at all. Majority (80 percent) of them had no life insurance or health insurance. Only 40 percent of the respondents visited their native places more than once a year, the rest visited their native places just once a year (26.7 percent) or never at all (33.3 percent). A significant percentage (80 percent) were employed in no other sector other than domestic work.

Table 2: Work-Related Statistics of the Respondents

Work-Related Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experience in domestic work (in years)	8.2667	4.87657
Number of days of work in a week	5.9333	1.27988
Hours of work in a day	3.80	1.65616
Salary per month (in INR)	2766.66	1083.42

The respondents of this study had an average of 8.26(± 4.87) years of experience in domestic work. They work for an average of 5.93(± 1.27) days per week at an average of 3.80 (± 1.65) hours per day. The average salary they earned per month was as low as Rs. 2766.66 (± 1083.42). The statistics indicate the intense work conditions of the respondents and the meagre remuneration they make. There are no standardised pay scales for domestic workers, and hence they are often exploited by employers.

Table 3: ‘Satisfaction with Life’ reported by the respondents

'Satisfaction with Life'	Frequency	Percent	Mean and Standard Deviation	
5-10	5	33.3	Mean	12.3333
11-15	7	46.7		
16-20	3	20.0	Standard Deviation	4.35343
Total	15	100.0		

Life satisfaction of the respondents was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). The lowest possible score on the scale is 5 and the highest is 25. Table 3 shows the life satisfaction scores of the respondents. It was found that the mean score was 12.33 (± 4.35), which is considered low. The majority (80 percent) of the respondents had a score below 15. Only 20 percent had reported a score between 16-20. The low score indicates the poor satisfaction with life of the respondents.

Table 4: Quality of Life of the Respondents

Domain	Mean	Std. Deviation
Physical	58.8095	12.13885
Psychological	40.8333	12.71638
Social	38.8889	25.52362
Environmental	42.9167	10.12386
Overall Quality of Life	45.3621	11.72113

The quality of life of the respondents was measured using WHOQOL-BREF (World Health Organization, 1996). The scale has four domains viz. physical, psychological, social and environmental reflecting the quality of life in each of the domains. Each domain is scored in the range of 0-100. An overall quality of life score ranging from 0-100 is also provided by the scale. The findings suggest that the respondents of the study had an average quality of life score of 58.80 (± 12.13) in the physical domain, 40.83 (± 12.71) in the psychological domain, 38.88 (± 25.52) in the social domain and 42.91 (± 10.12) in the environmental domain. The overall quality of life was found to be 45.36 (± 11.72). The findings suggest that the respondents

experience poor quality in general. The situation in the social, psychological and environmental domains are deplorable.

Table 5: Correlation between Quality of Life and Satisfaction with Life of the Respondents

		Quality of Life	Satisfaction with Life
Quality of Life	Pearson Correlation	1	.517*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.048
	N	15	15
Satisfaction with Life	Pearson Correlation	.517*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.048	
	N	15	15

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis results suggest that the satisfaction with life of the respondents significantly correlated with the quality of life of the respondents. There was a significant positive correlation between ‘Satisfaction with Life’ and ‘Quality of Life’ at $r = 0.517$ & $p = 0.048$). The finding suggests that the life satisfaction of the respondents can positively be influenced by improving the quality of life.

Findings from the Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase of the research specifically focused on the difficulties faced by the respondents during the pandemic period. The data collected in this phase through indepth interviews were analysed using voyant tools and contents analysis.

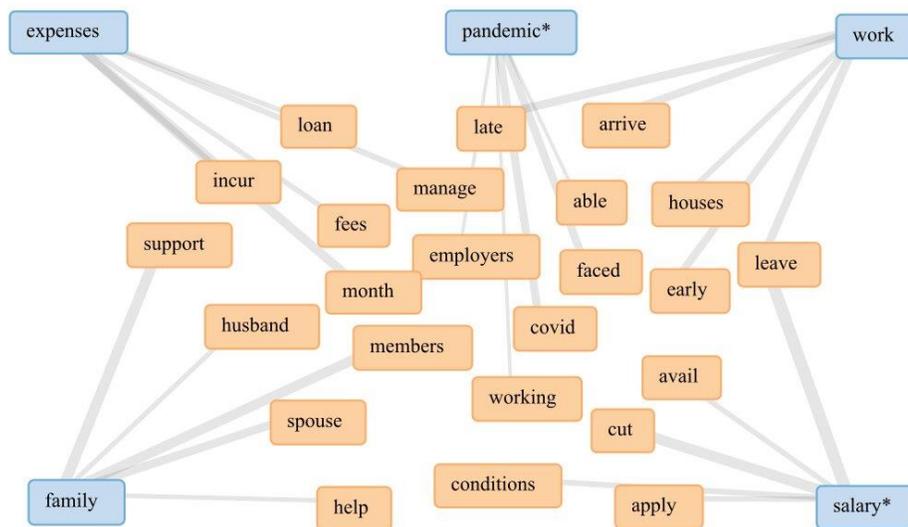
Figure 1: Keyword Analysis of the Interviews*



* Generated using Voyant Tools from the interviews of the respondents

The above diagram depicts the keywords frequently used by the respondents while describing their challenges in life during the pandemic. The keywords with larger size indicate higher frequency of usage of the term. It is noticeable that work, leave and house were the leading aspects, followed by expenses, family and employers. The term ‘work’ indicates their dependency on their wages for sustenance and how the pandemic took a toll on their employment. This had subtly led to a fear of losing their job. Their concern on ‘leave’ indicates the forced leave from job they had to take due to the pandemic, as the employers were concerned. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed them to a condition where many of them were dismissed by their employers during lockdown and were refused to be hired back. Having received merely a month’s salary or in certain cases no income for more than two months and the continued State restrictions on travel and work conditions resulted in further affecting this vulnerable population.

Figure 2: Analysis of Keyterm-Linkages*



* Generated using Voyant Tools from the interviews of the respondents

The significant challenges faced by the migrant women domestic workers during the pandemic included expenses, family, work and lack of salary during the lockdown. The above diagram demonstrates that these five aspects are intertwined with several other factors such as types of expenses incurred, problems in marital life, number of dependents in the family and other factors of similar nature. The workplace conditions and their relationship with their employers is depicted in the diagram. The general expenses which they incur and their relationship with their spouse is also depicted. House expenses and especially the loan on the house were a major concern for many of the domestic workers who toil just for the repayment of these loans. The chart indicates clearly how the pandemic situation is connected with the other aspects forming a vicious cycle, starting from adversely affecting the employment of the domestic workers where they either lost their jobs or had their work suspended without payment of salary, eventually increasing their family burden, which once again pushes them to look for other menial jobs during the pandemic. There were respondents who, having lost their jobs as domestic maids, took up housekeeping and garbage cleaning in apartments.

Perceived Difficulties of the Migrant Women Domestic Workers during the Pandemic

- a. Pandemic Induced Financial Constraints:** The initial quantitative enquiry showed that the respondents had to work an average of 5.93 (± 1.27) days per week at an average of 3.80 (± 1.65) hours per day. The average salary they earned per month was as low as Rs. 2766.66 (± 1083.42). The salary earned by the respondents was meagre compared to the hours of work they were involved in. The pandemic made the situation even difficult for the respondents. Many of them lost their jobs; at least temporarily, putting them under financial distress. Some of the responses in this regard are quoted below:

Respondent 3: My employers asked me not to come for work due to covid-19. I didn't work for five months and they did not pay me the salary for those months. I had to struggle to meet my ends during the pandemic and was not able to pay the house rent.

Respondent 5: I was unable to pay the house rent and it is still pending. Now I am repaying slowly. I am still in the village and I am waiting for my employers to call me. Once the situation is better, I am planning to come back to Bangalore and either ask to rejoin in the same house or find some other workplace.

Respondent 6: I could not repay the loan of my house and no one helped me. Now the loan repayment is due and I don't know how I am going to manage.

The narratives show how the pandemic worsened the financial problems of the respondents. They were unable to engage in work to make ends meet. The situation throws light on the financial inequality in our society and how the pandemic widened the gap between the rich and the poor. While the employers could afford the pandemic, the workers were in no position to afford the pandemic induced financial crisis. The financial inequality needs to be addressed at policy level; especially by introducing social security measures to the unorganised sector workers.

b. Pandemic Induced Discrimination

Domestic labourers are a category of people who undergo discrimination in their day to day lives (Palriwala, & Neetha, 2010). They undergo discrimination, low social status and stereotyping from the community. Migrant women domestic workers constitute an intersectional group, i.e. they are at the receiving end of discrimination at multiple levels.

They are migrants, women and domestic workers at the same time, implying the levels of discrimination they undergo on a regular basis. The pandemic context worsened the status of this group to an unprecedented degree. They were barred from working by their employers even after the lockdown in many cases as they were considered ‘unsanitary’ and ‘potential virus carriers’. They were isolated from the neighbourhoods and even shopkeepers discriminated against them as they were labelled as potential virus carriers. Some of the narratives on this aspect are given below:

Respondent 1: I had been working for them for the past four years and they dismissed me without even asking me how I would survive. I called them after the lockdown to ask if I could work again. They rejected, telling me that it is risky to have me at their house.

Respondent 9: Bangalore is not our native place. We struggled during the initial days of lockdown a lot. We had no one to help us. Even shopkeepers were not allowing us to enter the shop when there were other customers.

Respondent 14: My husband and I had lost our jobs during the lockdown. We had no income and had to take care of the children. We tried to get a job at many places. None of them took us in as they thought we were not clean enough.

- c. **Inadequate Social Security:** The lack of proper legislation and social welfare measures create a condition of poor social security for domestic workers. They don’t mostly receive government aid since it is still in the unorganised sector. The pandemic situation had put the social service mechanisms of the state to the test, and the measures in place proved inadequate for the domestic workers. They were deprived of the basic needs and the system could not do much in this regard. Some of the narratives in this regard are given below:

Respondent 13: The government did not do anything for us. We were starving and they did not care. We were not even able to go back to our native place. They had banned travelling.

Respondent 4: We were struggling for survival and we expected the government to help us. Instead, they ignored us; did not even let us go to our village

Respondent 11: There had been no financial assistance from the government side. Health workers came to tell us not to go to work during the pandemic. Other than that no officials turned up.

Discussion

Domestic work is a growing employment option in a fast-growing city like Bangalore. The advantages include choosing to take up single or multiple households, growing demand for domestic help in families with working women and establishing a network at familiar localities. However, the disadvantages weigh down the scale, as there is no job security for these women and no specific job description. They perform duties ranging from cleaning, washing, cooking to taking care of kids and older people. With no proper job specifications, they are exploited by extraction of more work for fewer wages.

Several laws have been enacted (GOI, 1991) to improve the working and living conditions of the working class. For example, The Trade Union Act 1926, The Minimum Wages Act 1948, Employees State Insurance Act 1948, Industrial Disputes Act 1949, Industrial Disputes Decision Act 1955, Payment of Bonus Act 1955, Personal Injuries, (compensation insurance) Act 1963, Maternity Benefits Act 1967, Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970, Bonded labour Systems (Abolition) Act 1976, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Interstate Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment) Conditions of Service Act 1979, The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 etc. But as a matter of fact, these laws apply only to the organised sector of workers and do not include the unorganised workers. Although the Domestic Workers (conditions of services) Bill was brought forward to the Rajya Sabha thrice, first in 1958, second in 1972 and third during 1977. They were all disregarded by then governments (Neetha et al., 2011).

The covid-19 lockdown intensified the grief of the labour class (formal and informal sector). The State policies which were implemented to solve the economic and social crisis, on the contrary, only resulted in widening the inequalities (Miyamura, 2021). All the women who responded during the study expressed their insecurities of losing their jobs during the pandemic and how they feel more vulnerable than ever. Although a few employers paid their full salary for one month, many dismissed their domestic maids or asked them to rejoin after the lockdown;

approximately two months later with no pay for the period. These women were treated as second-class citizens by the state, and no laws were in place to safeguard them (Neetha et al., 2011).

These women bore the brunt of the nationwide lockdown, as one out of four women in India employed in the informal sectors lost their jobs (Chakraborty, 2020). Many of the respondents were single mothers, either divorcees or widows, and many others told that they had an abusive spouse. They were forced to look for employment to support their families, but since most of them were uneducated, they were left with no other choice than to become an unorganised worker- majorly as domestic maids. The ones who had lost their jobs during the pandemic lockdown expressed their inability to pay the monthly house rent and medical emergencies, forcing them to borrow vast amounts of money from money-lenders and banks, eventually struggling to repay the amount with interest. Despite the burden of repaying loans, which they had borrowed to meet their daily expenses, these women expressed their desire to educate their children in good schools in contradiction to themselves who received little or no education. Many of them had to take up menial jobs such as garbage clearing in apartments which were in demand even during the lockdown to meet the expenses. Those who wanted to return to their native places felt stranded and with no choice due to the travel ban during the lockdown (Narayan et al., 2021).

The women domestic workers of the study revealed that apart from a ration card (BPL card) which enables them to buy the basic provisions at subsidised prices, they do not benefit from any other Government subsidies as there are none for unorganised migrant domestic workers. The pandemic exposed the inadequacy of the current system to address the basic needs and welfare of domestic workers. The situation mandates a revamping of our state policies that must reassess the domestic workers' neglected concerns like the working hours, standardised wages, maternity leave for women, safe, just and humane working conditions (Armacost et al., 1994).

Conclusion

The starting point of the research was the challenges faced by women domestic workers who have migrated to Bangalore city from rural areas. The primary quantitative enquiry revealed the poor standard of living the respondents were undergoing. Their quality of life and consequently

the satisfaction with life are below par. To aggravate the already difficult situation, the pandemic-induced financial and social constraints took a toll on their daily lives. The state was indifferent to the plight of this section of the society to the extent that they had to struggle to meet the basic needs. Financial crisis, unemployment, lack of family support, job insecurity, travel-ban that prevented them from returning to their villages, and medical emergencies were the significant challenges the respondents recalled. It was evident that these women were battling both the pandemic and their personal lives simultaneously.

The migrant women domestic workers constitute a group that one of the most exploited in terms of the work-pay ratio and labour extraction. Despite their contribution to the local community and economy, they are often deprived of social security and job security by the local community and the state. The pandemic situation exposed the mounting inequalities and marginalisation of the people at the bottom of the economic ladder. The state of affairs must be subject to social change through proper legislation to ensure social security and job security for the people in the unorganised sector like the migrant women domestic workers.

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