

Domestic workers in India are ill paid, lack basic rights and protection and this sector has a preponderance of women. The non-existence of any legal rights for the workers in this sector renders it impossible for them to seek redress through labour welfare measures. The poverty of the workers and the ever-present threat of dismissal have prevented them from openly challenging a structure that has perpetuated their exploitation as employees in this profession. The information I share is based on interviews with twenty maids who commute daily from their homes in the rural areas of Canning and Baruipur in South 24 Parganas district to work in the middle class neighbourhoods of Jadavpur and Dhakuria in South Kolkata. This particular group of maids commute from their homes (in the peri-urban areas) to the city and work for long hours serving several households, each of which they visit for a few hours, during the day. Thus, their workday can stretch to ten or twelve hours.

Experiences of Commuting

Improvements in transportation facilities, especially the running of local trains, with greater connectivity between the city and the suburbs, have had remarkable effects on the women's mobility. The experience of commuting has however thrown up new challenges. A monthly ticket has become an issue of contention between commuters and railway authorities, as ticketless traveling is rampant. The maids form a substantial section of these ticket-evading passengers. The railway administration has tried to deal with this challenge by conducting special ticket checking drives. Sometimes a special inspection car called *Chetona* (Awareness) is brought in which takes

Pseudonyms have been used for the names of the maids to maintain the anonymity of the women interviewed.

An 'Outsider' in the Family

Glimpses into the Lives of Domestic Workers in Kolkata

○ Manali Dutta

the ticketless passengers to the lockup maintained by the railway police. As its name suggests, *Chetona* is an attempt on the part of the railway authorities to mobilise opinion against ticketless travel. Despite this, ticketless travel has continues to thrive.

The monthly ticket amount varies with the distance traveled. The monthly ticket for a journey of 43 kilometers was around Rs.120 in 1994. Today it costs approximately Rs.160. Most maids are reluctant to spend a good chunk of their meager income on travel, especially since they can often get away with free travel in government owned railways but definitely have to pay for that part of the journey which they undertake in private forms of transport.



Mopping floors is the most common task assigned to maids

Meagre Incomes

Mitali, who works in ten houses and earns Rs.1800 to support a family of four, says, "I get up at 4.30 in the morning and catch the 5.30 train. I can come to the station by van rickshaw by spending Rs.3. But I generally make the journey on foot. If I spend my money in traveling what will I eat? The employers don't understand our problems. I don't usually buy tickets but when I get to know about on-going checks, I buy one for that journey."

Bithi who works in two houses and earns Rs.800 to support herself and her son after her husband deserted them explains how she oscillates between buying and not buying tickets. "I got caught twice. They took me to a faraway station. I was crying all the way. Then they let me go. After that I returned home with great difficulty. At the time I bought tickets for two months despite my financial hardship but they never checked during that period. So I went back to not buying tickets any more."

The crowded nature of the trains with little room to sit, stand or move comfortably is another excuse used by the maids to avoid buying tickets. Since they travel in groups, they also feel somewhat emboldened to defy the authorities. They are less afraid of the negative consequences, as everyone in the group shares that fate. They know from experience that authorities are less harsh in punishing women as compared to male offenders.

Another reason for avoiding paying for travel is the discontinuation of cheap tickets that were made available for them under a scheme by

the Ministry of Railways to help workers in the unorganized sector. These tickets are now only available for workers with an income of Rs. 400 or below (for population Below the Poverty Line). This categorisation disqualifies the maids despite their being employed in the unorganised sector, since many of them have incomes above Rs. 400 per month. This ridiculously low exemption forces maids to resort to ticketless travel since buying a regular priced ticket would result in parting with substantial parts of their income.

Although there is much embarrassment and discomfort involved in being rounded up by the police, the maids know that eventually they will be spared from being sentenced and sent to jail. In fact many of the maids reported how the ticket checkers themselves take a soft approach towards them and advise them about the easiest way to pay the penalty. For example, if a group is caught, the checkers suggest how four or five of them may pool together enough money to pay for a single penalty for ticketless travel rather than each one being fined separately. The women also tend to resort to crying and pleading to prevent the authorities from taking a sterner stand against them.

Tussles over Workload

Domestic service as an occupation has certain distinctive qualities, which set it apart from other types of work. The location of work is private. The employers are not a homogenous group as they differ in their economic and social standing, their expectations from the maids and responsibilities that they feel towards those they employ also differ. As a result, the relationship between the employer and the domestic maid differs from one situation to the next. The non-standardisation of wages, hours of work, duties to be performed, benefits they are given and other such

variations add to the undefined nature of the job.

The lack of clear-cut job requirements create a situation of endless tussles. At the beginning of the service, the employer drives a hard bargain and start with very low wages, minimal extra benefits and few holidays. The employee has to resort to covert means of resistance in order to protect her rights in a labour market where the spectre of unemployment looms large over them. The following narratives demonstrate the multiple hostile encounters that domestic maids face at the site of work and how they try to resist the erosion of their rights.

Sushila is a 45 year old maid who works in four houses and claims she earns Rs. 1000 per month. "I mop the floor, wash the utensils, fetch water and wash the clothes in each of the houses that I visit. I visit the houses twice or sometimes three times a week and the workload is heavy while the pay is very poor, about Rs. 350 or 250 per house...When I started working in Choton's house about seven years back, my salary was Rs. 150. Now it has increased to Rs.200. So in seven years the salary has increased only by Rs. 50."

Thirty-five-year old Sonali, who earns Rs. 900 per month by working in three houses, describes her unhappiness with the work conditions she endures everyday. "When I first started work, they talked of certain duties but afterwards they gave additional work without additional payments. I continue because I feared that otherwise I would lose my job. In one house I have been working for 15 years now. Only when they added a room and a balcony did they increase my salary by Rs 100, but stopped giving me the food that they gave before. They tell me that the salary has increased but they do not see that the work has increased as well. Instead, they offered me a cup of tea and biscuits.

But I refused. What would I do with a cup of tea? So now I buy snacks from the road."

She describes the treatment she received from another employer after she was forced to extend her holidays by a few days due to circumstances not entirely in her control. "I take five days of holidays in a normal month. Once because I had taken more leaves than I told them I would, they replaced me with another maid before I returned. At that time I had asked them for three days leave, as there was a festival in my house. During these days I had to work hard cooking meals for the guests. So I took two extra days of leave. On my return they told me that they no longer required my services. And to top that they asked me to work for them for one more month during the festivities in their house. I said 'Yes', but I knew that I would not return."

Kanak is 45 years of age, works in five houses and earns Rs. 800 per month. She narrates her frustrations for the little recognition she receives for her efforts. "Sometimes when they ask me to do extra work, I do it. I get paid at times and I don't demand anything. During the festivities they may give me a *saree*. At that time I tell them that they should give me a good *saree* since they have given me nothing during the year. Sometimes when I need more money, I do not take a *saree* and instead take the money. I feel sad because they humiliate me before they give me what I want. I tell my employers, 'You are closer to us than our family (because we spend more time in your homes) and we can only ask you for certain things that we cannot get for ourselves. We try to do all the things that you ask us to do.' If I ask for an increase in wages after working for a year, they may increase it by Rs. 5-10 or they may ask me to discontinue as they will replace me with another maid who will work for lower wages."

Mina, who is 25 years of age and earns Rs. 1800 per month by working in seven houses, describes here how she copes with angry employers when she returns from taking sudden leave from work. "Sometimes I may not have been able to get up in time and therefore could not come to work. You cannot tell the truth to your employer, otherwise you receive a good scolding. They start with, 'Why is it you who always fall ill?' So I have to make up a story to save myself. Employers who are more lenient, I tell the truth."

The priorities of the employers and the maids are in direct conflict. While the employers can use punitive measures including dismissal, the maids have to use their discretion and mask their opposition in more acceptable forms of behaviour because they lack viable options and bargaining clout. Conflicts frequently break out over questions of extra work, holiday salary and other benefits.

'Choice' of Saying No

While employers vehemently deny that they impose the burden of extra work on their maids especially when they are part-time, the maids allege that not only do the employers breach the agreement entered into at the beginning of the service, but they also refuse to pay extra money. The lack of a proper and well-specified contract can lead to the exploitation of the worker, although both the parties are well aware of the specifics of the unwritten contract. This is evident from the fact that they both stick to the initial agreement in the early stages of the service. With the passage of time, as employers attempt to increase the load, the maids try various means to protect themselves from added burden. One common method adopted under such circumstances includes deliberately delaying and postponing the additional work. Often the inability of

the employer to wait for the deferred service leads them to complete it without help from the maid. The maid therefore escapes having to directly confront the employer on the issue. Sometimes they also deliberately mishandle the task so as to frustrate further attempts on the part of the employer to impose extra work.

The maids generally consider that a leave of four to five days a month is a legitimate compensation for their labour. However the employers do not accept this position and grudgingly allow a couple of days as adequate time off. The employers also demand that they should be given the notice of leave beforehand as they would have to prepare for the absence. The maids therefore inform the employers of their intention to take leave for one or two days per month. If they take leave on additional days they do so without prior intimation. They contend that if the employers know that they are going on leave, then they will increase the workload to compensate for the time taken off. The maids feel cheated as in effect they have to do the work that they want to escape from on those days. The meaning of the holiday is thereby diluted in their minds. However as threats of wage reduction and the termination of service are painful realities, the maids use this strategy sparingly.

No Collective Bargaining

In view of the numerous disadvantages suffered by the domestic workers in entering into individual contracts with the employers, one can expect them to gradually move towards forming collective organised bodies, which can deal in a more effective manner on their behalf with respect to these issues. However several factors have acted as a hindrance against such a move in Kolkata and other parts of the country. First the maids find very little time since they are burdened with

enormous responsibilities at home and work. Always on the run, between houses, on roads, to catch trains, they lack time to organise themselves into an effective collective. Secondly, they fear the hostile attitude of the employers against any such move. Thirdly, the maids have individual work contracts, which are decided on a one-to-one basis with the employers. The nature of the exchange and the relationship that follows from these contracts shows a wide variation. While some of the domestic workers are satisfied with their arrangements others are not, creating different degrees of needs to organise among them. Lastly, the lack of any history or experience of organising among the workers of this sector has also acted as a deterrent to the growth of such a movement. Political parties, even those sympathetic to workers' interests, have remained largely aloof.

Limited Alternatives

The depressed economy of the region has resulted in severely restricting the employment options for these women. While reforms in agriculture are projected as one of the triumphant achievements of the Left Front Government's rule in West Bengal, due to the absence of further innovation, the growth rate in agriculture has started to decline. As a consequence, the landless agricultural labourers have been the hardest hit, with women facing the maximum brunt.

Even while agriculture still remains the single largest sector providing employment to women, there has been a gradual decline of the number of women employed in this sector. While agriculture provided employment to 90 percent of rural women in 1961, this proportion had fallen to 86 percent in 1994. Many of the maids (seven in the sample size of twenty) reported that they were engaged in different agricultural activities as labourers and

market gardeners in the past. The main reasons, which forced them to discontinue, were the non-availability and seasonality of work and irregular pay.

This is what Sonali had to say, "There is work in the fields and in the orchards. But it is better to work in the city. If you work in the fields the pay is very low and you frequently do not get paid. They may pay you after a week but what will my family and I eat during the week? Also the work is very irregular as you work for two days and then sit for seven days without work. When I work as a maid, I get a steady income. I have a fixed grocery shop from where I get my whole month's grocery for my family. I pay off the accumulated amount when I get my salary."

The need for a stable income for these women is a major consideration for opting for city based employment. Mitali says: "There is some work available in the village which is done on a piece-rate basis. But the pay is not enough. Like one thousand pieces may fetch you only Rs. 3-4. Also when you stay at home you do not find enough time to do all the housework. In this job you get out of the house early in the morning and can only do the housework during the evening when you go back home." Through their everyday life experiences, these women have realised that their role as mothers, wives or daughters impinge on their role as workers if the sphere of work and home coincide. The approach adopted by them has therefore been to segment the work hours of the day into different sorts of work even if it means undertaking a long journey to work.

Hello at Home

Yamuna, a 45 year old married woman and mother of four, works as a part time maid in four houses. Here she describes the housework that she has to cope with when she returns

home. "I return home at 6.30-7.00 in the evening. I go home and sweep the floors, fetch the water, go to the market, clean and prepare the vegetables and then start cooking. By the time we finish dinner, it is almost 10.30-11.00 in the night. Sometimes my sons help with marketing. My daughters used to help but they are now married. My husband (a van rickshaw driver) helps me sometimes. But most times he does not find time as he says he has to carry passengers. You know in the village the men get habitually drunk. When they are drunk they will not help you a bit."

Sathi, a 70 year old widow with 40 years of service behind her when asked about any assistance she received at home in housework, had this to say, "My husband never used to help me. But my son and daughter-in-law and my grandchildren who are also grown up now, help me out and get worried when I am late in going back home." She adds, "Earlier I used to cook after coming back home. My husband didn't do any housework. In my absence my elder son used to take care of the housework and his younger siblings. I had two daughters whom I got married off. However the year my son got married, he started living separately from us. So finding no alternative, I married off my younger son as well. That solved my problem."

Malati is a 30 year old woman who had been working since childhood. She supports her family by working in six houses without any help from her husband. This is how she described her activities on returning home. "My mother-in-law cooks the midday meal while I take care of the dinner when I come back. When my sons return from their tuition classes, I serve them food and then I have my own food. If I miss the train and am late in returning, my husband will question me about where I have been. He is a drunkard and is suspicious of my behaviour."

Mitali is a 40 year old married maid who supports her family of four from her income as her husband could not continue working after injuring himself in an accident. "Before I come out of the house in the morning, I clean the house, wash the utensils and make arrangements for the cooking. The men in the family then take care of the midday meal. In the evenings I reach home at around 8.30 if the trains are running on time. If there are some delays then I reach home around 9.00 pm. Earlier when my daughter was around, I did not have to do anything after going home as she took care of everything. Now I have to do the cooking and everything else. My sons do the shopping and fetch the water. By the time I go to bed it is almost 11.30 in the night."

Childcare Provisions

The fact that the maid's income often supports a family means that while she is taking care of other peoples' families her own is neglected. These women have reported incidents of children being bitten by dogs or drowning in the absence of adult supervision. Being a working woman is necessary for women of low-income households, yet for the mothers of young children, each day is fraught with the thought of calamities that may befall on their children. Due to their long working hours and tiresome journeys, the children have to be left behind at home.

Jaya is a 45 year old with four children. She started working as a maid about ten years ago. This is what she recalls of coping with her childcare responsibilities. "When I had started working, we already had two children. Then I took a break when my other two children were born. I joined work only when they were a bit grown. My aunt-in-law and my grandmother-in-law looked after my children when I was away. They both died about four to five years back.

Once my children started to walk, they looked after themselves as there was no regular person in our family to look after them.”

Rita is 35-year-old mother of four. Her husband works occasionally and she is the main breadwinner of her family. She has been working for three years now and says, “Their father is now at home because he is ill. Otherwise he does not stay at home. My two elder daughters and I take turns to come to work. While one of us stays at home, the other two come out to work. The one who stays at home sends the younger ones to school. They go to school because of the midday meal provided in primary schools. Even then they do not go everyday. Sometimes they remember to go while at other times they go off to play. I have two sons. One is five while the other is six years old.”

Sometimes their kin step in to provide relief, or sometimes the maid has no alternative but to hurry through the convalescence period after giving birth.

The most common arrangement that is resorted to, however, is where the older children are given the responsibility of looking after the younger siblings. Often these elder children, mostly girls, are obliged to skip their own studies because of the overwhelming responsibilities that they bear, blocking out avenues of upward mobility for themselves.

Politics of Money Control

The participation of women in outside employment is often considered to be beneficial to the enhancement of their status as it provides them with some degree of autonomy in pecuniary terms. However, the following narratives serve to disclose the subtle politics that comes into play over finances and through them over power, within the household.

Malati relates her reasons for spending her salary the way she does. Her husband is an alcoholic and



Peeling and cutting vegetables to assist the housewife in cooking

occasionally works as a casual agricultural labourer. “Out of my entire salary I give Rs. 600 to my husband for family expenses. Of the rest of the money I deposit savings in the post office. I also need to spend money to pay for the tuition of my two sons. I know that I need to save for the future of my sons and myself. If I am ill, I know that my husband will not look after me as he is a drunkard and never gives me any money. I will also need to eat when I will not be able to work anymore. With the money that I give him he sometimes spends it for the family’s needs, otherwise he uses it to buy a drink for himself. At those times we have to make do with rice and nothing else. But whatever he does, I have to hand over that Rs. 600 to him after receiving the salary. So if I pay him off with that amount, I can be at peace and spend the rest of my money however I want to. She discusses what happens when her salary increases after working for sometime. “I don’t tell my husband about these increases. I also sometimes earn some extra money, doing extra work but I never let him know about it. I spend that money for my family but from my own hands. I do it since my husband is not a responsible person.”

Sushila is the sole earning member of her family. She has four daughters and a son. She started working after the marriage of her second daughter, when her family was plunged into debt. Later her husband, who worked as a construction worker, developed heart problems and could no longer perform heavy duties. He remains unemployed for the most part. “I give part of my salary to my husband which he uses for family expenditures. The rest of my salary, I put away for saving. My husband was not willing for this but I knew I had to save to get my daughters married off.” On this issue she is defiant and belligerent as she, like Malati, feels that she is being a responsible mother in fighting for the sake of her children. Though she admits submitting her income to her husband, her submission is in a way symbolic as she closely monitors its disposal.

Kanak’s son and her husband are co-earners in the family though she contributes the largest amount to the household. However her work takes her away to the city where she has to spend long hours while her male relatives, as van rickshaw drivers, stay in the vicinity of the village. Both these factors have contributed to a role reversal in her family and the men feel threatened by her growing independence. She realizes it and tries to dissipate the tensions by using a portion of her salary to maintain peace. She has kept her savings under her exclusive control and is determined to build on that kitty.

These accounts clearly show that even when women earn paltry incomes, the power balance in the household begins to shift in favour of women, especially when within their community women with independent incomes constitute a critical mass. □

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