

RURAL WOMEN AND DOMESTIC LABOUR: STUDY OF MAID SERVANTS IN DWARBOND VILLAGE

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Female domestic workers are playing a noteworthy role in urbanized rural areas. Despite the great value of domestic work, it is usually held in low esteem and badly paid, even when it is seen as complete humiliating. Domestic service is emerging as the principal section of female employment in India's service sector. Saliency of the female domestic labour is perceptible, even in small urbanized villages like Dwarbond in Cachar district. The study aims to reveal the socio-economic background of the domestic labour in Dwarbond village. It discusses age-group, caste, family, living conditions of the women domestic workers. Domestic work is an important source of employment for poor and illiterate women from socially discriminated communities. Another problem is with the preconception that women are much able than men, to clean, cook, wash and taking care of children (Kanji, 2001). Most of the women domestic workers are from socially discriminated and backward communities. Domestic workers in India usually work seven days a week, 365 days a year. In most cases, leave, if any, they are granted unwillingly and are usually unpaid (Baruah, 2004). Such scenario is prevalent everywhere, without any exception to Dwarbond village. The socio-economic background of the women domestic labour is being discussed under three sections; namely, the socio-economic anchorage, the living conditions and problems.

The study is based on primary data collected from the respondents (maid servants) drawn from the Dwarbond village which constitutes the universe of the study and the domestic workers (50) constitute its units for data collection and analysis. The village has been purposively selected so as to understand the socio-economic condition of the domestic workers (maid servants) in this part of the country. Hence, Dwarbond village appropriately served the purpose of understanding the socio-economic condition of the domestic workers. From the village women domestic workers, (maid servants) who were available, were selected by using a combination of purposive and accidental sampling methods for collection of their oral responses. Therefore, while selecting the respondents even accidentally it was purposively endeavored to represent all communities and castes in the sample.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANCHORAGE

This section comprises caste, age, marital status, type of family, educational level, income etc. These are analysed below.

Caste Category

It is a common knowledge that the growth of village leads to the creation of new human need and job everywhere. The poor, landless, jobless, rural women from different caste group got engage in domestic work for better life. The respondents are from Dwarbond village and its surroundings. Most of the respondents are from Scheduled Castes; they are mostly from *South part of the Dwarbond village and south chotojalenga* and maid servants from other caste group are from surroundings of the village.

Age Structure

Age is an important factor taken into consideration while assigning any work to a worker. Though the women from category can be done domestic work, yet, young and middle aged people are the first choice. The women domestic workers categorized according to their age and caste in Dwarbond village are shown in the following table:

Table 1
Age-composition of Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parenthesis)

Age Group (in years)	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
<14	-	08	02	10 (20)
15-35	03	16	03	22 (44)
36-55	04	09	02	15 (30)
>55	01	02	-	03 (06)
Total	08 (100)	35 (100)	07 (100)	50 (100)
General Castes				08 (16)
SCs				35 (70)
OBCs				07 (14)
Total				50 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The table shows that of 50 women domestic workers over two thirds (44%) belong to the age group of 15 -35 years, around one third each (30%) to the age-groups of 36-55 years, one fifth (20%) to the age of below 14 years and the rest are belonging to the old age group of above 55 years. Of them more than two third (70%) are SCs and the rest are from General Castes (16%) followed by OBCs (14%).

Poverty, illiteracy, lack of interests in study and improper skill development programme has pushed them into the labour market and are happy to earn a meager income to the family. Parents of these child domestic workers are quite happy and satisfied that their children earn and share their burden of looking after family.

Marital Status

Women domestic workers as part of the society are bound by social bonds, customs and traditions. It is also pertinent that they too experience the odd states of marital status like divorce and widowhood which influence their socio-economic conditions. The following table shows the marital status of the women domestic workers.

Table 2
Marital Status of Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parenthesis)

Marital Status	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
Widow	05	19	05	29 (58)
Unmarried	-	08	02	10 (20)
Married	03	05	--	08 (16)
Divorcee	--	03	--	03 (06)
Total	08 (100)	35 (100)	07 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The table exhibits that about three fifth (58%) are widow, one fifth (20%) are unmarried followed by married (16%) and the rest are divorcee. The marital tendency is almost same among the different caste categories, but, most of the SCs are widow. The widows and divorcees have to shoulder the responsibility of looking after their families single-handed. To earn their living and to look after their children they have joined this sector. So, the economic compulsion is the main reason for taking up the job as domestic worker.

Age -at -Marriage

Age at marriage is a determining factor of social conditions of people in the society. Early marriage is a characteristic of backward social groups as it leads to blockade of one's development in various ways, including education, health etc. So, the following table shows the age-at-marriage among the domestic women workers in Dwarbond village:

Table 3
Age-at-Marriage of Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parenthesis)

Age at Marriage	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
Below 18 years	--	07	02	09 (31.03)
Above 18 years	05	12	03	20 (68.96)
Total	05 (100)	19 (100)	05 (100)	29 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The table shows that of the married women domestic workers, more than three fifth (68.96%) have married after attaining marriageable age (i.e., legally recognized age of 18 years) and the other (31.03%) have married before 18 years. More than half of the SC domestic worker got married before 18 years.

Since this section of the society is uneducated and poor, parents generally give them in marriage at very tender age to get rid of their liability. By the time they reach the legal age of marriage they are already the mothers of one or two children. Therefore, poverty along with illiteracy needs to be addressed.

Besides, widowhood has driven the young mothers into this sector to earn for family members' survival. Due to widowhood the women have to play the dual role of father and mother and take up the family responsibility. Therefore, the following table distributes the widow women domestic workers by their age-at-marriage:

Table 4
Age-at-Marriage of Women Domestic Workers (Widow) by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parenthesis)

Age at Marriage	General Castes	SCs	Total
Below 18 years	01	03	04
Above 18 years	02	02	04
Total	03 (100)	05 (100)	08 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The above table shows that, half of the widow domestic workers got married before 18 years of age and the rest half got married after 18 years. Most of the SC widow got married below 18 years.

Thus, child marriage is still practicing in the rural areas of Barak valley. At a very young age they have become widows and life long live widowhood in the society. In the absence of a male member it becomes very difficult to carry on and live a life. Because of the loss of their life partners they have to head their families and they are the only persons to earn and support their families.

Their life partners died due to negligence of their diseases and some of them used to consume a lot of alcohol and did not take sufficient food. After consuming alcohol they used to beat torture and take away all their (women's) earning for liquor and gambling and this is the root cause of their poor economic condition.

Educational Status

Education can play a pivotal role in empowering women to fight this glaring injustice. Girls' education is still not valued as highly as boys', despite the evidence of huge benefits it brings to individuals and to the communities. Educating women improves their rights in all areas, including property and work. The literacy rate among the domestic workers of Dwarbond village is very low, which is shown in the following table.

Table 5
Educational Status of Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Educational Qualification	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
Illiterate	03	19	04	26 (52)
Primary	01	11	03	15 (30)
Secondary	02	01	--	03 (06)
High School	02	04	--	06 (12)
Total	08 (100)	35 (100)	07 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The table demonstrates that over half (52%) of the domestic workers are illiterate, about one third (30%) primary school passed and very few of them are middle school (06%) and high school (12%) passed. Most of the SC and OBC domestic workers are illiterate and primary school passed, whereas, half of the General Caste domestic workers are secondary and high school passed.

Thus, most of the workers are illiterate and even the literates have very low educational qualification. Illiteracy and poor literacy level compelled them to choose domestic work as a source of income for survival.

Types of Family

The existence of nuclear families is very rare today among the village people, due to poor income and low literacy rate among the villager's nuclear families are growing. The following table speaks of family types among the women domestic workers:

Table 6
Family Types among Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Family Type	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
Nuclear	02	21	--	23 (46)
Joint	06	14	07	27 (54)
Total	08 (100)	35 (100)	07 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The table exhibits that, more than half (54%) of the respondents are having joint families and the rest (46%) are having nuclear families. All the OBCs and general Castes respondents are living in joint family structure, whereas, most of the SCs are living in nuclear family structure. The trend is different among the caste categories because the respondents from General Castes and OBCs are living in the village before 1960s and most of the SCs are migrated.

Monthly Income

Monthly income is an indicator to measure the standard of living, because they include only disposable income and acknowledge people sharing accommodation benefit from pooling at least some of their living costs. The following table shows the family income of the women domestic workers:

Table 7
Monthly Incomes among Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Monthly Income (Rupees)	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
>1000	02	06	02	10 (20)
1001-2000	05	11	--	16 (32)
2001-3000	01	13	04	18 (36)
3001 & above	--	05	01	06 (12)
Total	08 (100)	35 (100)	07 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

This table demonstrates that, around one third of the respondents' monthly income is within the income bracket of Rs 1001/- to Rs 3000/-. Most of the domestic worker from SCs and OBCs are belong to the income bracket of Rs 1001/- to Rs 3000/-. Most of the domestic workers from General Caste category earn Rs 1001/- to Rs 2000.

THE LIVING CONDITIONS

This section comprises the type of house, sanitary conditions, drinking water source, electricity connection etc. These are as follows:

House Types

Types of house they live in can indicate the economic and living standard of the women domestic workers. The following table therefore shows the housing types of women domestic workers:

Table 8
House Types among Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Type of House	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
Half brick, half bamboo wall mud plaster& tin roof	03	20	01	24 (48)
Bamboo and mud walls with tin roof	04	13	05	22 (44)
Brick wall with tin roof	01	02	01	04 (08)
Total	08 (100)	35 (100)	07 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The table reveals that, about half (48%) of the respondents are living in half brick, half bamboo wall mud plaster& tin roof houses followed by over two fifth (44%) of the respondents are living in bamboo and mud walls with tin roof houses and a negligible portion of them are living in brick houses with tin roof.

Thus, most of the women domestic workers live in half brick, half bamboo walls mud plaster& tin roof houses for reason of low cost. The housing condition is so poor due to the low economic condition they are not in position to build or repair the existing house and avail better facilities. While discussing about their housing condition there is so much distress and bitterness among the respondents which can only be seen and felt while gathering information. They were sounding bitter about the condition in which they are living and the type of houses they daily clean, sweep and do the household work. It will remain as a mere dream to improve the condition of their house, living rooms, drainage and environment as a whole.

Sources of Drinking Water

Water is a key component in determining the qualities of our lives. Today people are concerned about the quality of the water they drink. Yet, our society continues to contaminate this precious tap; it comes into contact with many different substances, including organic and inorganic matters, chemicals, and other contaminants. Today, drinking water treatment at the point of use is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity. Clean, pure and good drinking water is essential for healthy living. The following table shows the sources of drinking water among women domestic workers:

Table 9
Sources of Drinking Water among Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Sources of Water	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
P.H.E Supply	04	16	03	23 (46)
Pond	01	13	02	16 (32)
Well	03	06	02	11 (22)
Total	08 (100)	35 (100)	07 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July2015.

This table reveals that, about half (46%) of the respondents depend on Public Health Engineering followed by (32%) who are depending on pond and the rest are depending on well as a source of their drinking water. Most of the cases they suffer from contagious diseases because of poor drinking water facilities.

Sanitation Condition

The word 'sanitation' also refers to the maintenance of hygienic conditions, through services such as garbage collection and wastewater disposal. Inadequate sanitation is the root cause to contagious disease world-wide and improving sanitation is known to have a significant beneficial impact on health both in households and across communities. So, the following table gives the sanitation conditions of the women domestic workers in workers in Dwarbond village:

Table 10
Sanitation Conditions among Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Type of Latrine	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
Pacca Latrine	01	02	01	04 (08)
Kachcha Latrine	07	24	02	33 (66)
Open Defecation	--	09	05	14 (28)
Total	08 (100)	35 (100)	07 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July2015.

This table demonstrates that, two third (66%) of the respondents have kachcha latrine, of which most of the General Castes and SCs are using kachcha latrine. Whereas, most of the OBCs and a few SCs prefer, open defecation. A negligible portion are using pacca latrine. Thus, most of the families have kachcha latrines and more than one fourth use open place for defecation.

Electricity Facility

Electricity is the modern facility availed even in the remotest villages. But it is a sad state of the people living in the Dwarbond village. They are denied of these modern facilities very

few of the domestic workers have electricity facility in their houses. When we look at use pattern of electricity in their houses it further throws light on their poor social conditions. The following table is showing the electricity uses of the domestic workers:

Table 11
Electric Uses among Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Use patterns	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
Only Light	--	09	--	09 (37.5)
Light and Fan	02	08	01	11 (45.83)
Others	01	03	--	04 (16.66)
Total	03 (100)	20 (100)	01 (100)	24 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The data show that out of 24 electric connection holders' about half (45.83%) are using light and fan followed by over one third (37.5%) are using only light and the rest are using other electrical equipments like fan, TV, CD player etc. Thus, less than half of them have electricity facility and they also cannot afford to use it for more than light or/and fan.

Access to ICTs

ICT plays a pivotal role in the life of the people. Use of mobile phone gives social recognition to the users and it has become universally essential among all individuals. Possession of the modern electronic gadgets reveals the socioeconomic status of the women domestic workers. Television set is one amongst them. The following table shows the access to ICTs among women domestic workers of Dwarbond:

Table 12
Access to ICTs among Women Domestic Workers by Caste Category
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Access to ICTs	General Castes	SCs	OBCs	Total
TV+ Mobile	01	03	--	04 (10.52)
Radio + Mobile	02	13	02	17 (44.73)
Only Mobile	04	12	01	17 (44.73)
Total	07 (100)	28 (100)	03 (100)	38 (100)

Source: Field Survey Conducted from 1st July 2015 to 13th July 2015.

The above table shows that, over two fifth (44.73%) of the women domestic workers have access to (Radio+ Mobile) and (only Mobile) respectively and the rest have access to TV and Mobile.

The respondents said that the mobile is mostly used by their children and they used it to listen songs, play games and seldom used to talk to their relatives and friends. They said that

they make use of it to inform their employers when they were unable to go in time for work due to some emergent situation or to inform their employers of their absence from work on a particular day. What is most surprising is that even though they are illiterate who do not know to read and write, yet, they are experts in handling mobile which shows that they have mobile education enough and they know to use it better than many educated people. Those who own the T.V. set said that it is a means of recreation at the end of the day's heavy work. They just relax and are happy to watch TV serials. Besides, they generally use Radio to listen songs and they listen *Chaandi* on the very particular day of Mahalaya.

PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS AT HOME

Problems including societal practices and male unemployment, disputes at home, ill treatment and loss of parents have compelled them to work as domestic worker. It is also not unusual to find domestic workers who are single parents, widowed or separated from their husbands or those with alcoholic husbands who are compelled to work for the survival. Urbanization and the disintegration of traditional joint family system, increased demand of domestic workers from middle-class women, who are taking up jobs outside the home and the students of Assam University, who are living in rented houses, also attract them to domestic work. The lack of access to education, especially among young girls, and false image of security and a stable environment at the employer's home are factors that attract them to domestic work. In Dwarbond village, most of these women have suffered due to the violent attitude of their husbands. As a result, family responsibility rests upon these women. They give birth to the children, rear them up feed them and provide them all the necessities of life. They earn by working as domestic workers. The process of mobilizing domestic workers is complex and long term. To begin with, this would involve empowering domestic workers. The collectives in the form of unions or organizations will, in turn, work towards demanding and implementing legislations. Thus, emerging socio-economic changes in societies will push greater number of women from upper class and middle class to organized labour and as a result of which there will be a greater demand for women domestic workers to look after the elderly, household chores, child care etc. Thus the socio-economic phenomena of women domestic workers and its social implications will continue to draw the attention.

To sum up, it can be said that the socio-economic condition of women domestic workers of Dwarbond Village is substandard. Their social and economic condition in such a bad shape needs immediate attention to be paid so as to undertake certain developmental activities like supply water, teaching on health and hygiene, use of latrine, importance of school and professional education. Therefore, care should be taken to address their issues. They are indeed an invisible workforce, and live an invisible, silent, voiceless life both at the work place and in their own homes.

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