Chapter 6
SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE WOMEN DOMESTIC WORK

Women workers in the informal economy consist of the most vulnerable working segments in society. They come from a marginalized population whose legal, economic and political status limit their ability to demand their rights. These women include domestic workers whose social and economic contributions to society are invisible to the public, the law and policies of the country. They face challenges because their work is not considered rural work so that their rights to minimum standards of decent work are continually violated. The unique feature of their work place, which is the home of their employer, makes them vulnerable to abuses and exploitation. This is because the state would always be reluctant to consider home a workplace that they can regulate. The lack of capacity, support and unity as that in organized sector make the challenges they face doubly difficult. The chapter deals with the social implications of the work of women domestic workers of Silchar. It highlights the implications of the work for their self-image perception, health, family, community and national economy at large in the discussion that follows here. Besides, this chapter also presents case studies replete with the socio-economic and work conditions, the domestic work and its implications for them, their family, community and nation at large.

I
THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The social implications of the women’s domestic work in Silchar town may be inferred at the five levels; namely, the self-image perception-related implications, the implications for health, the implications for family, the implications for community and the implications for the national economy. These are discussed here.
1. The Self-image Perception Related Implications

Women domestic workers who come from poor socio-economic background and live in slums are denied of all comforts and modern facilities and are easy victims of exploitation of every sort in the hands of the employer have naturally built up a very poor self image and perceive themselves as destined to live a miserable life. Since they have a very low level self esteem it is difficult for them to think in some newer or innovative of life style. WDWs when come across with some better options they are not ready to avail these opportunities, for example, with the growth of private nursing homes, private schools etc, there is demand for care work of different nature, but these women domestic workers are not ready to accept these better facilities in terms of leave, wage, fewer hours of work or extra wage for overtime work, uniform etc, just because they lack confidence, not ready for certain amount of discipline, and commitment. It is not that they are incapable of discharging these duties or type work they have a certain mind set which they are not ready to change or think that they cannot change. They have grown for years together with a particular mindset that it is very difficult for them to change. As result of which they will have the following impact on themselves;

1. They have certain amount of resentment towards God who created and consider that it is He who has destined them to be what they are, i.e. poor people lacking the basic necessities of life.

2. The women domestic workers assume that they are poor and the poor people have no say, no option except to surrender to the situation they are in.

3. Because of their poor self image they do not allow their giftedness and creative nature to develop i.e. their talents of various kinds, like, music, dance, drawing, designing, etc.

4. Since the parents of these women domestic workers were illiterate they have failed to realize the need and right to education. At present Government has availed free education up to primary level and up to the attainment of 14 years of age, even then these poor WDWs do not give much attention to it or value education. They have a simple reason as to
– what are the educated ones do? So many graduates or educated youth have no job, there is so much of unemployment problem that what guarantee do we have that our children will get government jobs? So what is the use of sending our children to schools? It's better that they earn something for the family than waste time in school.

5. Due to the nature of their work and condition of work that they are exposed and living condition in which they are there is constant apathy and unhappiness, sorrow and misery on their faces. They live a disgruntled life no one can satisfy them unless and until they change their mind set and accept the life situation and give value to their very persons as good human beings without any discrimination on the basis of their wealth or status in the society. Unless and until they raise their confidence level and walk uprightly holding their head held high no one can or able to give them good self–image.

2. The Implications for Health

1. At the time of discussing about the working and living conditions of female domestic workers we have to consider two distinct components: physical conditions at work place and timing of work. The physical conditions of work place would include space, ventilation, illumination, temperature, hygiene and so on. All of which can affect the safety of a worker. The domestic workers of Silchar are almost free from those hazards because most of them are working in the well-furnished apartments/ houses with all types of facilities. But the domestic workers are residing in the slum areas where they have to face poor housing conditions, exposure to excessive heat or cold, diseases, air and water pollution. We also observe lack of proper health education among the domestic workers. Apart from that they face gender discrimination in their own house, which makes those women more vulnerable to various diseases. Due to the huge medical expenditure most of the time they do not go to doctors. So, sometimes, they have to face different types of health hazards mainly due to inferior environment of their residential
places not work places. Hibbard and Pope (1987) say that married working women faced greater health risk than men because of their dual role of work and family responsibility.

2. Women domestic workers cannot avail good medical facilities due to poverty and poor economic condition. Neither can they pay attention to their health due to the work load both at home and in their workplace. They hardly pay any attention to their health and well-being. It is because either they are the bread winners of the family or their husbands are drunkards. Unhygienic surroundings, poverty, food intake being less nutritious, no mental peace at home due to constant arguments, or fights with their partners, too much work load, these and many other factors affect their physical, mental, emotional and psychological health. When they are ill they are unable to take care of the family, particularly the children unless these women enjoy good and sound health it is impossible to carry on their dual responsibility and give support to the members. They are in such a precarious situation that they hardly take any rest even when they give birth to children. They can’t afford to take proper rest and give good care to the new born babies. It is all because they do not have any maternity benefits, paid leave or any other facilities. These lots of women are subjugated by men in the family, by the employers at work place, norms of the society, and laws of the nation. Where will they turn to for the redressing of all their grievances, and their issues? It is a big question that needs an answer. It is very difficult question for authority or power to address.

3. Health is an important issue and a matter of concern to everyone, for it is only the healthy person can be a happy person. To avail good medical facility when one is ill it requires a good amount of money in hand. To the poor and the needy people it is a matter of great worry to be ill. The following table describes the expenditure of women domestic workers on health and medicine in the Silchar town:
Table 6.1
Monthly Expenditure of Women Domestic Workers on Health and Medicine in Silchar Town

(Percentage in Parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health care Expenditure (in Rs)</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General (in Rs)</td>
<td>SCs</td>
<td>OBCs</td>
<td>Total (in Rs)</td>
<td>Muslim (in Rs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>4 (40)</td>
<td>34 (21.66)</td>
<td>5 (62.5)</td>
<td>43 (24.57)</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>3 (30)</td>
<td>51 (32.48)</td>
<td>1 (12.5)</td>
<td>55 (31.43)</td>
<td>3 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>1 (10)</td>
<td>28 (17.83)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>29 (16.57)</td>
<td>2 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>8 (5.1)</td>
<td>1 (12.5)</td>
<td>9 (5.14)</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 and above</td>
<td>2 (20)</td>
<td>7 (4.46)</td>
<td>1 (12.5)</td>
<td>10 (5.72)</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No expenditure</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>29 (18.47)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>29 (16.57)</td>
<td>17 (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10 (100)</td>
<td>157 (100)</td>
<td>8 (100)</td>
<td>175 (100)</td>
<td>25 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey Conducted from July 1st 2011 to 3rd of March 2012

The table tells us that of the families respondents over three fourths (77%) spend money on health care and medicines. Two thirds (66.5%) of the families spend Rs. 100-300 per month on medicines and only 10.5% spend Rs 400-500 per month on medicines.

4. It is noted that when the respondents themselves suffer from simple illness such as headache, cold, cough, stomach upset etc, the employers give them the medicine so that they are able to avail their service to their households. This also indicates the dire need of the services of the house maids to the employers. Though the government hospital gives free medicines, they can’t afford to spend so much time to stand in queues to consult a doctor and collect medicines free of cost. Therefore, they go to the pharmacies and private doctors for medication. The amount spent on medicine is very high as regards their earnings but they can’t help. Therefore, lot of the population always remains poor and their condition does not improve.
5. They are excluded from access to basic leave conditions that are guaranteed to other categories of workers. For example, there are usually no provisions for sick and vacation leave. There are no such provisions as they can get time off, even to deal with medical emergencies for themselves and their families. If they are sick or need time to attend to their personal exigencies, they do not get leave very easily. There is always a threatening that their pay will be cut. If they are injured on the job, there is usually no compensation. In the household, they are often exposed to chemicals, dust and other environmental hazards while cleaning. They get no compensation or assistance in case of any disease that they get inflicted with by exposure to hazards while working in the households over many years. The vast majority of them receive no leave or health benefits from their employers. With no legal entitlement to any paid sick leave, many household workers cannot take time off to deal with illness or medical emergencies. Therefore, domestic work is very physically and emotionally draining.

3. The Implications for Family

1. Women domestic workers keep families of their employers healthy and functioning by cooking food, keeping home clean and preparing family members for school and work. But the precarious nature of their employment keeps their own families in constant social and economic crisis. Their long work hours mean that many of their children are left to take care of themselves. This means many of them are not able to supervise their own children properly, help their homework and give them the support that they need to develop. They are in a helpless situation and feel powerless or inability to do anything to alter this situation of theirs and their family members. It is the sorry state of life that one is unable to help her own children while one is always at the beck and call of the employers and their children. It is not that they do not want to give it to their children but they are not in a position to give
It: It is a great thing that they try to manage their work-life and family-life somewhat in a stable condition.

4. The Implications for Community

1. Due to the nature of their work women domestic workers fail to maintain social relations among their relatives and friends. Since they do not have a day off from their work they fail to attend any social function in faraway place. As a result, they cannot spend some time for fun, leisure and rest which hampers their social bonding and social responsibilities. This also may affect their mental health as they do not enjoy any free time. In the long run, their family ties break in the sense if they do not visit their relatives once in a year, their children may not know who are their relatives and family relations and will not be able to keep contact with them which is also essential to humankind in the society. Therefore, the women domestic workers’ work becomes burdensome to themselves, to the society and to the family in which they live and belong to. So it is obvious that they fail in their duty towards their family and the community in which they live. They are left with no other option in life than to bow down to the situation in which they live a life of poverty, neglect, hunger and so on.

2. Many factors drive predominantly women to take employment as domestic workers. Deepening poverty is a major factor, and government programmes have failed to make an impact on poverty reduction and the adverse impact of globalization has further impoverished the poor. Family problems, rural and male unemployment, disputes, ill-treatment, loss of parents are also factors. The displacement of communities including women, during natural calamities such as earthquake, foods and drought and the resulting poor rehabilitation of victims drive women to seek work in especially urban areas, and typically the work they find is domestic work. Biased religious and cultural practices that go against women and children also push women to look for work outside their
home communities. Ever increasing debt burdens due to failing crops mean that women must seek new types of employment to repay debts. Often domestic workers are single parents, widowed, estranged or with alcohol husbands. They must work for the survival of their children (Satkunaratnam 2011).

5. The Implications for the National Economy

1. Domestic work has emerged as an important sector within the tertiary realm of the Indian economy. Not only is it one of the main employment avenues available to poor uneducated women but it also offers women from more upwardly mobility and endowed socio-economic classes with services that assist, enable and further the work – life balance, and increase their leisure time and market engagement. The services provided by the domestic workers abate the work-life pressures faced by working women, a growing section in the Indian urban landscape.

2. The middle class and upper middle class family system is heavily dependent on the part time domestic workers so much so that their absence for a day in a house creates a total mess in many families. The part-time domestic workers have proved to be a necessity for non-working housewives also. In urban areas, they commonly engaged domestic workers to keep them in carrying out their household chores, partly due to physical inability and partly due to lack of time. The new middle classes have developed a life style which has increased the demand for domestic workers. Thus, the part time domestic workers employed in household labour are playing a significant role in towns and cities of India. It is difficult to gauge the exact number of women in the occupation, as workers in the category have not been enumerated as such in the Census of India. However, some studies bring about the information regarding the domestic servants in different parts of our country. According to the report on working condition of domestic servants in Delhi by the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, nearly
90 per cent of domestic workers are women. According to the National Survey conducted by the School of Social Work, women constituted 87.09% of Women domestic workers in Karnataka, 82.38% in Ranchi, 75% in Kerala and 90.78% in Andhra Pradesh. The corresponding figures in many of the cities big or small are lacking. Geeta Menon has pointed out that “domestic work is a service industry and as such it doesn’t create GDP by itself, but enables GDP to be made” (Basu, Mitra and Bhattacharya 2009). Domestic workers play a critical economic role globally, helping households manage responsibilities of child care, cooking, and cleaning. They also free up their employers to participate in the workforce themselves and provide care for the industrialized world’s increasingly aging population. Migrant domestic workers send home billions of dollars in remittances to developing countries every year, but despite their economic contributions, the governments have largely ignored protection concerns. Domestic workers, who often make extraordinary personal sacrifices to support their families, have routinely been denied basic protections guaranteed to other workers and are among the most exploited workers in the world. Gaps in legal protections, isolation in private homes, and social norms that have sanctioned exploitation of a “servant” class have given rise to abuses ranging from endemic labor exploitation in which workers toil around the clock for little or no pay, to trafficking into domestic servitude and slavery (Poudyal 2011).

3. In India there is no recognition of the social value of work done by women domestic workers. Manual or physical work is not looked upon with dignity by society at large. Domestic workers are considered as a socially inferior section of people even among the working classes themselves. Among this section of the working classes, we find the poverty syndrome which is characterized by the lack of courage to solve one’s own problems, feeling of being at the mercy of others, fear to assert one’s rights etc. The occupation is characterized by deplorable wages, high level of insecurity, absence of legislative safeguards and
collective strength. Illiteracy, lack of worldly knowledge, lack of skills and confidence in securing productive jobs, large families, insecure and unhygienic living conditions are factors that contribute to the prevalence of social sickness in the lives of the domestic workers.

4. Women’s contribution to the economy by and large remains unrecognized. Yet, their services are valuable. The large segment of India’s unorganized women workers and domestic workers in particular contribute to the national economy by the role that they play in the society and labour market. The upper class and middle class women are free to join the organized sector by unloading their share of household chores to the poor, uneducated women of the society, who work as domestic helpers. Thus, women domestic workers work can never be alienated from the society and there is a close relationship between haves and have-nots. Society will continue to depend on the domestic helpers on one hand, and women domestic workers will depend on the urban population, on the other hand. While the working women are busy attempting to reconcile time and energy between paid work and care work without being able to renegotiate the household division of labour, such dual responsibilities also hampers their career and they access to cheap labour which is easily available to them through these women domestic workers. The services of domestic workers help remedy and ameliorate such concerns, and burdens pertaining to work-life management and career advancement. Even though the working women depend on the women domestic workers, they (working women) are not ready to pay them (women domestic workers) well. When it comes for payment they (working women) are so reluctant to reach out to the one who reaches them out in service and they (working women) treat in an inhuman way. Middle class women who previously were engaged in domestic duties can now afford to pay to the domestic workers and thus they procure more leisure/ recreational time for themselves. Thus, the value of care support provided by domestic workers is very much linked to the amount of leisure and recreational time or remuneration the
employing households can enjoy by substituting their time allocation away from domestic work. The growth of modernization, urbanization, globalization etc. the women in the cities are increasingly keen to take up employment which acts as a key resource for the Indian economy. Women domestic workforce sector has gained greater significance in the lives and careers of the working women from elite and middle-class urban families.

5. In India 20 million women, children and men are in domestic work. The ILO also estimates that worldwide, domestic work is the largest employment category for girls under the age of 16. Yet, there are no international standards to regulate the conditions of work or the wages of domestic workers. Ehrenreich (2001) believes that this “servant culture “in the west is destroying families in the developing world and inculcating racism in the west. This is precisely what is happening in India. This is a complex issue, tied up with questions of employment and surplus labour. But it is also a simple issue –one of attitudes, of how we value another human life. It is a question of recognizing all human beings, regardless of the nature of their work, as precisely that. It is a question of ensuring that we don’t bring up our children with values that perpetuate slavery and servitude (Sharma 2003). Employment without security has become the order of the day rather than the exception. As for women domestic workers they do not get protection in terms of job security, wages, working conditions and welfare due to various factors. These include casual and seasonal employment, scattered places of work, poor working conditions, and lack of a concrete employer – employee relationship, irregular working hours, and a complete lack of legal protection or government support. Problems of women workers revolve around issues such as unequal wages, lack of maternity benefits and childcare facilities and discrimination at the work place.

6. Human Resources Development Report points out some common problems faced by the domestic servants, viz; deplorable wages, high level of insecurity, illiteracy and lack of marketable skills, lack of
confidence in securing other productive jobs, long and unregulated working hours, no paid holidays, no paid sick leave, immense work load, no maternity benefits, health problems and social exploitation, also elements of stigma of degradation is very much there in this occupation. This stigma is the main reason for lack of standardization. Domestic service in our country is individualistic and unorganized to certain extent and gives no norms to the workers who take it up. NGOs have an important role in creating economic organizations for them. SEWA has helped their members to form economic organizations and find a wide variety of organizational forms depending on the area, the activity and the capacity of the members. But, in our country only very few domestic workers come under such organizations (M.Vimala 2000).

There is urgent need devising social protection mechanisms for domestic workers in India. The reasons for this are several. First, domestic service is the largest sector for female employment in urban India. Around 3.05 million women in urban India are employed by private households. Thus, the working conditions and social protection needs in this form of work, with respect to women’s work and welfare, are of concern. Second, informality is a dominant feature of domestic work. Practically 99.9 percent of workers engaged in private households are informal workers and, thus with, very little social protection. Thirdly, it is a fast growing sector – the number of women engaged by the sector has increased by 222 percent since 1999-2000. Growing urbanization, feminization of labour and increasing numbers of nuclear families are some of the primary reasons for the exponential growth of this sector. Fourth, women form the dominant share of workers in the sector. This is a result of a long-standing perception that domestic work is ‘woman’s work’, requiring no skills or training and is, thus, severely undervalued. And, finally, most domestic workers are from ‘backward’ communities, carrying the combined burden of caste, class and gender hierarchies (Sinha 2010).
7. There are many groups of workers in the unorganized sector or informal economy, like migrant workers in agriculture, building and road construction, brick kilns, sugar factories and others, for whom decent work is a very distant goal. There are no strong trade unions of migrant workers in the unorganized sector. The bargaining power of these migrant workers is thus weaker than workers in the organized sector. After Independence, India has adopted various labour policies in order to improve working conditions of the workers in the unorganized sector. There are also various labour laws for these workers. In fact, its implementation is mostly ineffective. Therefore, migrant workers and workers in the unorganized sector are struggling for their labour rights and to implement the provisions of various labour laws as per international labour standards. Therefore, the Government of India should ratify all the relevant international covenants that respect the dignity of labour, especially important ILO Conventions No.87- the freedom of association and protection of the right to organize convention, and the ILO convention 98- the right to organize and collective bargaining convention. Workers whether industrial workers or employed with the government should have an inalienable right resort to strike. Uniform labour standards in the context of unorganized sector workers like migrant workers should be implemented in rural and urban areas of India. It is necessary to protect migrant and other workers in the unorganized sector by International labour standards (Salve 1990).

8. The lack of social protection deprives the domestic workers of the security that ‘decent work’ requires. A large number of countries explicitly exclude domestic workers from the scope of laws granting maternity protection to women workers. Employers avoid contributions to medical benefits or pension schemes by not regularizing employment relationships. Particularly for migrant women workers, situations such as sickness, injury or pregnancy are common grounds for immediate dismissal. Pregnancy and HIV tests are almost always required before entering the country and may be renewed periodically. If these are
positive, the worker is in most cases immediately deported. Besides, a large proportion of domestic work is undeclared thus precluding contributions to social security and health coverage (D’Souza 2010).

9. In India, the domestic workers are not legally recognized as workers and thus have no rights. They are almost salves – utterly dependent on the benevolence of their employers. It is necessary to ensure that all domestic workers are registered with an appropriate authority and are provided with benefits like wages at standard rates, weekly holidays, etc. There must be watchdog committees to ensure proper implementation of legal provisions for these workers. The DWM is helping these workers in the unorganized sector and now the workers are becoming more assertive and conscious about their rights and dignity (Sundaram 2000). Domestic workers often provide care services to households by sacrificing quality care in their own homes. There is a need to recognize their contribution to the economy and bring value to their work so that it is not merely written off as something that women do in the homes of others to help out. Domestic work is also often not considered to be real work and domestic workers are not real workers. They are considered to be one in the family. There is need to provide social protection and legal rights that treat workers at par with other wage workers. There is need for policy to acknowledge that domestic work is carried out in conditions similar to wage work but within the confines of the private household. Domestic work is often undervalued and poorly regulated and, thus, domestic workers remain overworked, underpaid and unprotected. The multiple employers, the informal nature of work arrangements and wage fixation, and lack of grievance-redressal mechanisms pose acute problems. Besides, security of work and income, women domestic workers need grievance-redressal mechanisms, skill upgradation, old age pension and child care facilities, at the least (Shalini Sinha 2011). Because they lack protection, rights and representation, they remain trapped in poverty. With approximately 90 percent of the world labour force unorganised, and union density declining as the informal economy keeps growing,
organizing the workers in the informal economy everywhere has now become a crucial issue for the labour movement (Basu, Mitra and Bhattacharya 2009).

II
CASE STUDIES RELATED TO THE WOMEN’S DOMESTIC WORK AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

A few responses of the women domestic workers in Silchar town are given in the cases narrated below which show the dimensions of their work, difficulties and its implications.

Case I

‘I work as a cook in one house and in, other two houses. I just help the mistress in cooking and washing utensils. I am mostly given kitchen work which I do enjoy. Though I work for three families my income is only Rs.1000/- per month. I took up domestic work only after the death of my husband. He was ill for quite some time and due to negligence his condition worsened and by the time a doctor was consulted it was too late to do anything. We hadn’t enough money to take him to private hospital and, therefore, he was admitted in Silchar Medical College and Hospital. After a week he died. On the one hand, it was a shock for me to have lost my husband at a young age while, on the other hand, there happened tension as to how to bring up the children. For the past 21 years I am working .Now, I am old and my health does not permit me to go for work. On and off I absent myself. So, the employer gets upset. What shall I do? I find it very hard to survive, .if I stop working. Who will look after me? My children are married and they have their own families to look after. And my son has all bad habits and he does not stick on to any work. I have no one to go for help. I wonder why the gods destined this to me that He took away my husband at a very young age. I struggled very hard to bring up the children. Now, I have no energy, no good health and I do not wish to burden any one. Every day my fears mount
high at the end of the day; I just think and wish that on the day that follows I may not see the dawn so as not to burden any one’ (Malinibeel Slum Pocket, domestic worker).

**Case II**

‘I work for a couple in Chamda Godam of Silchar for the past 25 years. I started working at the age of 10. At that time I was taking care of three small children. Since, both, Madam and Sir, are busy as they are working outside, I used to go early in the morning and return home as soon as madam returned from the office. I used to give them food, play with them and spend time with them. I had to do work but I never felt it was too much because there were other maids who used to wash the clothes of madam and sir, cook food and sweep and mop the house. As their children grew up and started going to school there was shift in my work. Until they returned I was asked to press the clothes, help the other maid in cooking and give a helping hand for sweeping, washing, mopping the floor etc. I do full time work and the other maid for few hours she comes. So I have to do all the odd jobs. And on holidays in school as well as madam’s office the work load is too much in both the kitchen and outside like cleaning, washing etc. On the one side I feel so tired after the day’s work on the other hand I completely neglect my children who were born outside the wedlock. My parents used to take care of both the children but now they are no more (died this year 2011) I just leave them with the neighbours. My sister and two brothers do not help me in any way. I was cheated by the children’s father as he promised me to marry but he didn’t. He deserted me with child and before the birth of second one. In every side I am weak, broken, and lonely and there is none to turn to for any help. Though I am given good food and children too are fed well I am unable to provide them good care. Now, as they are growing up a good education is a distant dream I have for them. Now, they have started enquiring the whereabouts of their father, I have no answer to give. When they grow up will they be happy
to know the facts of life are another worry I have. So, being a woman I am suppressed /oppressed in every side. This life situation kills me both emotionally and mentally. I don’t complain about the payment or other treatment given to me. I am quite happy about it; apart from my salary I am given money and required help for self and for my children’ (Madurbond Water Works Road domestic worker).

Case III

‘I have been working as a domestic worker for the last 15 years. And I got married 10 years ago and have got three children. Now, I have lots of problem both at home and work place. Every day we (husband & wife) fight with each other because he has brought the second wife who has two children. I came to know only when he brought her to our house. We both the women came to learn about the fact that this guy cheated both of us (wives). There is no peace in the house. Children are neglected by us and we quarrel for no issues and no reason, except this fact. After learning this truth I feel more exhausted, tired, tensed and worried. As a result, in the work place I commit blunders. My mind does not work. Now, the mistress has threatened me to turn me off from the job. She too is surprised at my behaviour. I am ashamed to tell her the real story. She will be shocked if she hears me because she had helped me a lot to purchase a cycle rickshaw for him. I am under shock what will happen to me and to my children? Husband has increased the quantity of alcohol. As both of us do not offer food to him, he might be eating outside. My children are going to school. What will they do when they grow up? How will I take care of them if I move out of this place? I do not wish to stay in the same house. Moving out to another house entails too much expense. I have not so far told anything to my parents. They too will be worried if they learn this fact’ (Malini Beel Slum Pocket domestic worker).
Case IV

‘At a very young age I joined my mother to work in a house. I was only nine years; since then I have been working as a domestic worker (now 23 years). I always had a wish that after my marriage I will care for my children, send them to school and look after them as my mistress looks after her children. But all this remained as a mere dream. My husband does not care for me and my children. What he wants is hard earned money of mine and when I refuse to give, then, there is always fight between us. Whenever I see other children in the town going to school I feel sad as I am unable to send my children to a good school. Though my children go to nearby school, no teaching is done in that school. I find no time to help them, even though I know how to read. I’m working without any off day or bonus. I feel very sad and at times it worries me about my three children and their future. What will they do? How will they manage life? My husband has no concern for any of us. This ill fate and my pains and struggle I share with my mother. She too has her own sorrows. So, we think that it is due to some curse that we are women. Since my mother was also a domestic worker. I curse my fate for having born of a domestic worker. Out of desperation I hit my children and do not bestow love and care which I ought to.’ (Kalibari Char Slum Pocket domestic worker).

Case V

‘I have been working as a domestic worker for the past 12 years. I work from 8.00am to 8.00pm in six houses to earn Rs.2500/- a month. I leave my children at the mercy of my neighbours. Now, they are a bit grown up i.e., eldest son is 9 years, second son is 8 years and third one is daughter, 6 years. They have been admitted into a local school. When they return home I am not in the house. I am not in a position to help them in their studies or give them proper care. Sometimes, I am too exhausted to have left with any energy, even to cook for my children. I can never turn to my husband for any help. He is a drunkard. If I ask
him to help me in the household works like fetching water or buying provisions he goes mad and starts beating me and the children. I feel ashamed of being chased away from my house. Many times he pushed me and children out of the house and threw away the cooked food and other belongings. Whenever he asks for money and if I refused to give him, he simply tortures me, using all sorts of abusive words. So I am compelled to give him money which he spends on liquor. I have no one to help me. I wish my children especially my sons do not imitate their father’s reckless life to behave badly. Even in the work place I have no peace of mind; I am always in tension to finish the work and return home. Though I work in six houses I feel that I am working in 8 houses it is because in two of these houses I have to go two times, morning and evening. So I have no proper meal. Very rarely I am given rice and curry. Most of the time, in all the houses, I am offered tea and biscuits or chapatti and some left over things of the previous day’ (Chengkuri Road Slum Pocket domestic worker).

Case VI

‘I have been in the work as maid for the last 30 years. I never thought that I will have to suffer so much in life. Have I done something wrong that the God punishes me in this manner? This unanswered question haunts me all the time I enter and work at the employer’s house who owns a big house with all the comforts of life, owns two cars, two -story building and big spacious rooms with self contained toilets and bathrooms. When I clean the house and bathrooms I just can’t imagine how the gods can be so cruel to me. My living room is smaller than the bathroom of my employer. I sweep, mop, dust and wash the clothes and do all the cleaning and rush to another house. Again I am triggered with the same question why my living condition is poor as I am unable to have healthy and hygienic place to live. My house is in such a bad shape as at any time it may collapse. I have my aged mother, 80 years or so. My family suffers so much during monsoon. My son works in a hotel and my daughter too earns Rs.1000 by
working for a family. In a way the gods have blessed me with good children who feel for me and support me monetarily and morally. But I am unable to repair my house since all our earning is taken forcefully by my husband who drinks, smokes and tortures me and the children. Sometimes, I am unable to bear with the torture and abusive language my husband uses. In the work place too I feel uncomfortable and feel sorry for the state of my family life. I am drained off my energy. No more physical strength and mental peace to pull on’ (Tarapur Slum Pocket domestic worker).

Case VII

‘I have been in the work for my employer for about 10 years, get up early and prepare food for my kids and rush out of the house. Though I reach my work place on time my mistress has to say daily something unpleasant to me. Many times I thought of leaving the present job and looking for it somewhere else. I continue to be here just because it is close to my living place and some kind of attachment towards the child whom I reared up by taking care and looking after at his initial stage. He is very fond of me who does not treat me like a servant but his family member. This bond will hold me on how long I do not know. I keep rushing from one house to another to complete my work. Washing clothes, cleaning utensils, sweeping and mopping the house. I am given a meal in one of the houses. Morning breakfast depends on the mood of my mistress. Sometimes, she offers chapatti and tea, other times, tea with two biscuits. My employer’s children are very sincere. I am a widow. I have to take care of my children and aged mother who is not able to do much at home. I am happy to have my mother with me .She takes care of my children, serve food and send them to school. When they return she is there to receive them. It is a great joy and relief to me when I think of mother’s sacrifice as to be with me in the slum. Brother who lives in Karimganj calls her, for his living standard is much better than me. Since he is
a carpenter he earns good money and lives a decent life unlike the dirty surrounding in which I live. My husband died of accident. He was a rickshaw puller and was a good human being. He was unlike other men of the locality. Sometimes I wonder why the gods took away the good people. My two sons are good at studies. Both of them stand first in the classes. I get some financial support from my brother. Hence I want to educate my sons. I’m not happy about the behaviour of my employers. I have to work in three houses from 7.00 am to 3.00 pm. I’m earning Rs.2500/- per month’ (Malini Beel Slum Pocket domestic worker).

Case VIII

‘I have been working as a domestic worker for the past 8 years in the same house. I never worked before marriage. My parents were not so poor as to send me for work. Since my father was a carpenter he earned good money, and my brothers are working in Pune. A month after the marriage, in-laws asked me and my husband to move out to a new place. So, from Kalibari Char I had to come to Saratpally. I had no idea that my husband was a drunkard and gambler. It was only after shifting to the new place I realized that he had no money at the end of the day to buy provisions. For a few days neighbours gave me something to eat. But how long any one could look after me? Meanwhile I was expecting and was helpless. So I went to my mother’s home and remained there for one year. After I gave birth to my first child my husband came and promised care of me and the child. I came back to Saratpally. Ever since I took up the work as a domestic worker, I earn Rs 1000 a month. It is great help to me that I can buy some medicine and clothes to my child. I have only one child. He is now studying in a private school in Kanakpur. Sometimes, I find it hard to cope with my own household work and the work in the employer’s house. How long I have to struggle with this man (husband). I should not have come back at all. Day by day
he increases the quantity of liquor. So far he has not taken my money but every
day we fight. And, sometimes, in anger I lock him up and go to my mother at
night. I find it difficult to live with him. There is no peace and when the mind is
disturbed I feel physically weak and no interest in life. Now my employer too
takes advantage of my precarious condition and demands more time and more
work. I failed in class 8. So I had discontinued schooling. I regret for it. I regret
for marrying this man. And I also regret for having come back to live with him.
So, my life is full of regrets and helplessness’ (Saratpally Slum Pocket domestic
worker).

Case IX

‘I work as a domestic worker in the town. My day begins at 6.30 a.m. and
in the afternoon i.e., around 1.00 clock I go back home for lunch and to be with
my family for some time. I work for four houses. I do washing, sweeping and
mopping. Many a time I catch cold since my work is always in the water. In
winter it is too difficult for me to do washing and mopping due to cold water. I
have got joint pain and back pain. Though, I work in four houses, my monthly
income is just Rs.2, 000/- And my husband too has been ill for five to six years.
He has a hand cart but now he cannot go for work. I find it very difficult to
manage with the little money that I earn. My great worry is how to take care of
him. Sometimes, he goes out without anyone’s knowledge. I have no time to look
after him. What can I do? Earn for the family, look after him or take care of the
children? I too am not enjoying good health. My children are too young to take
up the family’s responsibility. Elder son ran away from the house because people
accused him of theft. No trace of him. It happened five years ago. Had he been
there he would have worked and earned to support the family. My elder daughter
has been married off; she was earning a bit. The younger daughter is now 10
years. Next year I will discontinue her studies so that she may start earning little.
So much of money goes for medicines. It is very hard for me to shoulder the burden of the family life and work load. When will this misery be over? No one is there to support me even emotionally. I am broken, worn out, left with no energy to get along, no desire to live. But, what to do? The thought of future kills me. I simply do not wish to see the same thing happening to my kith and kin. No one on earth should have such suffering and pain in life’ (Malinibil Slum Pocket domestic worker).

Case X

‘I have been working as a domestic helper for the past 10 years. I work for a family. The owner’s house is not close by. I need at least fifteen minutes to walk, to reach my work place. My four kids are small and they are left with the father-in-law. My husband is a casual worker. He does not go for work daily. It all depends on his mood to work or not to work. He is a chain smoker and consumes alcohol too. Sometime, he drinks so much that he cannot get up in the morning to go for work. If I enquire whether he will go for work he gets very angry and picks up quarrel. So I just shut my mouth and go on doing whatever I can .But it is too hard to feed seven mouths out of the little money I earn. As of now the children are small but when they grow up, it will be very difficult to meet all their needs. Once they are admitted to school, there will be extra expenses. My father-in-law is sick. I have to purchase medicines for him. At the work place too I face lots of odd situation which make me sad and upset. Even though I have been working for 10 years, one of the employers considers me as a fresh employee and he does not want to increase my salary. Who is there to fight for justice to me? Poor people have no one to help them in their need and we have to bear with all the oppression, abuse, and ill treatment. We can never voice out our struggles, our worries. No one will come to our rescue and shackles of
poverty and oppression will ever keep us in its embrace’ (Bhakatpur Slum Pocket domestic worker).

Case XI

‘I have worked as a domestic worker for many years since my childhood. I had lost my parents at very early age and my grandparents and uncles did not like to keep me in their house. I had no one to care for me. So I was sent with other women domestic workers to work in other people’s house. I did not understand anything at that time. I was happy even if I was given little food. I had no idea whether I was given any money because the money was taken by my aunt. When returned home I used to feel so much loneliness as I have no one to play with. I can say that I did not have good and sweet childhood memories. Till the time my grandparents were alive I felt they were caring for me a bit. They are no more, now and my uncle and aunt also are old. Their children do not treat me well. Only consolation is that I have a place to live but I have no desire to live. The employer and their children treat me well, but they know that I am helpless and no one is there to defend me. Therefore, they pay me R.1000 a month, even though I work sincerely and do the entire household work. I have been working for more than 30-35 years. The only worry I have is of my future. In my old age where to go? Who will care for me’? (Chingkuri Road Slum Pocket, domestic worker).

Case XII

‘I have been working as a domestic worker for the past 12 years. My day begins at 6.00a.m. And I do the household work like, cooking the morning meal for my husband. By 7.00.a.m. he has to leave the house for work. He works under a wholesale vegetable seller. Early morning he begins to load and to unload vegetables. And during the day he is employed by the shop keepers to carry load from one place to another or from one shop to another. So the whole day he does
not come home. By 8.00 a.m. I go for work. Before the marriage, i.e 8 years ago, I was working only for a family. But now after the marriage I work for three families. My job is only to wash clothes and clean utensils. Around 1.00 p.m. I return home to feed the baby and for lunch. My in-laws take care of all four children. Children are very small. The eldest one is four years old. The gap between them is just a year. Since all the four are girl children there is so much of ill-treatment and mental torture from mother-in-law. My husband was very good, he hadn’t any bad habits, and he did not want me to work. He was confident of providing three meals a day, but my mother-in-law compelled me to work. It was very hard and troublesome to carry on my work during pregnancy but I was left with no option but to work. No one understood my difficulties neither the mother-in-law nor the employer. I hardly took any rest during the pregnancy period or after the delivery. I had to join my work out of fear of the mother-in-law. She is really a terror in the house, and my husband is a puppet in her hand. Whatever she dictates to him he blindly does. When she tells him to beat me, he beats. She told him to throw me out of the house because I have not borne him any male child and he has pushed me out of the house several times. Since there is lot of tension in the house my husband has recently started to consume liquor and to smoke. I am unable to bear the mental and physical torture. At work place I am happy but I feel so very weak and sick that I find it difficult to do my work. I have no choice other than to work. But how long? As long as mother-in-law is alive. No guarantee at any time I might die before she dies. I curse the day I was born. I see myself and all women as victims of womanhood & oppression. Just because we are women, do we have to bear all sorts of abuses from men folk? If I die who will take care of my children? I find no way out. I simply and blindly have to trust in the providence of God, that God may take care of my children. I have no energy to work and bear this mental and physical torture from my husband and my mother-in-law. Sometimes I feel like
running away from the house, other times I feel like committing suicide. I have no desire to live. It is only for the sake of my children I live and work (Kalibari Char Slum Pocket domestic worker).

Case XIII

‘I have been working as a domestic helper for many years. I am unable to tell my age. I am very old but still daily I go to the employer’s house. I have worked in his house for many years. I have looked after his children. Now his children are married and I have taken care of his grand children. The eldest grandson studies in class X and grand daughter is in class V. I do not do any work. I just guard the house. I accompany the children to the school and to the tuition place. Since I have worked for so many years and spent my youthful energy working in their house, now they take care of me. I go every day to their house and I feel that they treat me well as if I am one of their family members. I am allowed to go about anywhere in the house. They never suspect me or scold me. This is the reward for my honest service. I am given food. I do not need much food. I am provided with medicine, clothing etc. I have no children and my husband died very early. I had no one to look after me. After my parents death, my brother and his family was living with me. But a few years ago they have moved to a village in Hailakandi. They requested me to go along with them but I refused to go because at that time I was energetic to work. But now I feel weak, tired, and lonely. There is no one, of my age. I do not have any health problem; just cough, cold, fever. I have no social security. I have seen people dying young and old. I am worried about my death i.e. When I die who will cremate me? Even though employer’s son has assured me that he will perform the last rites, who will inform him of my death? I live here (Bhakatpur Slum) and the employer’s son lives in Das colony. I am not afraid of death, but my worry is, how the people will come to know when I am dead? When the neighbours do not
see me for a day they may come and have a look otherwise no one will know. At night I ask the neighbours child to sleep in my house and keep the door open, so that if I am sick or anything happens someone can help me to go to the hospital. I do have little money which is sufficient to perform the last rites’ (Bhaktapur Slum Pocket, domestic worker).

**Case XIV**

‘I have been working as a domestic worker for the past 15 years in the same house. I started to work after my marriage. My parents did not want me to work. So, they sent me for tailoring class but I did not take any interest to learn and one fine day, I ran away from my house with this man (husband). Now I regret for having hurt my parents, and for having committed such a big mistake in my life. I am not at all happy because he does not understand me; he is 15 years older than me. He has his first wife and children. People say that man is a cheat. He has spoiled the future of many girls. Though I have not divorced him I do not live with him. He lives with the third wife. I live alone with my two kids. My daughter is in class IX and son is in class V and they help me in the household work. I want my children to study well and take up government jobs. I do not want them to be like me or like their father taking up mean jobs. I would not have become a domestic worker if I were with my parents. They would have seen to my good future. Initially, when I took up the job I did not know to cook or to do any household work, because at home I had not done any work and in the employers house I had to use the electronic gadgets which I have not even seen before, like vacuum cleaner, electric Owen, electric cooker, iron box etc. Now I am used to work. I work the whole day; no specific work, I am asked to do all the work like, washing clothes, sweeping and mopping, cleaning bathroom & toilets, ironing, helping in the kitchen etc. I am given tea and snacks in the morning and evening and in the noon lunch and they do not serve and give I am allowed to
take and have my lunch. They pay me just Rs.1000/- . It is not sufficient to look after my children and to provide them with food, clothing house rent etc. I had gone to see my parents with my children, my father was happy to see me and my children and now he helps me with money and other provisions. I have lots of tension and worries about my children and their future. My husband threatens me of taking away the children; he is capable of harming my children. After the days heavy work I do not enjoy peace of mind. And sometimes, I am so tired that I do not feel like doing any work at home. Since I have a grown up daughter she does the cooking when I am sick’ (Tarapur Slum pocket, domestic worker).

Case XV

‘I work as a domestic helper for the last 5 years. After failing in metric exam I joined my mother to work as a domestic helper. Initially I used to work with my mother and help her to finish the work in three houses. I was not given any wage but still I was feeling good to go to big houses and do the work and have some food which I have never even tasted earlier due to poor economic situation. But I never thought that I had to shoulder the family responsibility at such young age. I lost my mother last year (2011). She got a sudden stroke and fell and she died on the spot. She was not treated for any illness; she was fit and quite healthy. After that my father is paralyzed. My elder brother and self, look after our younger ones. We are six children. My brother is a sumo a driver and he has joined the catering job. So round the year he gets the order for cooking and serving. So we too get good food (remaining). He earns for the family. I work in all the three houses. The employers are considerate towards me and my brothers and sisters. My younger brothers and sisters go to school. They help in the household work like fetching water, cutting vegetables etc. Since I have to look after my father and brothers and sisters I do not want to marry. I feel sorry for not continuing my schooling. If I had studied, I too would have got a teaching job in
government schools like my companions. They too were not good at studies. Because of TET they got good jobs with good salary. Besides teaching in the school they earn through private tuitions. They have status as people call them as ‘Masternie’. They live a dignified life in the society. People treat them well, they command respect in the society. They are valued and given preference in social gatherings. I am ashamed of myself. I am responsible to the state of life I am in today. I spoiled my future. It is doomed, due to my own negligence. If I had written the exam, I too would have had a better future, holding a government job. I repent and regret. It is my fate that I should be a domestic worker and remain single and look after the siblings. What good or bad days are ahead of me I do not know? It is my wish as well as dream that my brother keeps supporting all of us, even after he gets married. If he doesn’t, then it will be too hard for me to look after every one and earn for the family. Nowadays I am too much worried about the future of my family and am tensed and upset about foolish decision of mine. So, whenever I have some time to relax, I cannot relax I become upset and restless. I hope I will be able to cope with life situation in an amicable way’.

In sum, the emerging economic and social changes in Indian society will push greater number of women from upper and middle classes into organized labour, 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. Therefore, the socio-economic phenomena of women domestic labour and its social implications will continue to draw the attention of the researchers to study their life and problems and that of the policy makers, government, NGOs and social workers as it is a growing segment of workers with pitiable life and work security. The process of mobilizing domestic workers is complex and long term. To begin with, this would involve empowering domestic workers. This is possible only when the right to form collectives is granted. The understanding of collective bargaining power can bring about this change as there has to be a sense
of solidarity among them to challenge ill-treatment or unfair wages. The collectives in the form of unions or organizations will, in turn, work towards demanding and implementing legislations. The onus thus lies on the state to protect domestic workers by law and enable them to join and form associations and unions. These rights must be publicized and supported by the state by ensuring that employers are aware of their workers’ rights. In conclusion, the rules and laws that recognize domestic workers as workers in homes and that regulate their working conditions and pay as well as the agents who mediate the worker-employer relationship could have a fundamental impact on the conditions of work across the informal sector and the nature of social policy in India as well as on the valuation of women’s work and the gendered divisions in work, marriage and the family. But none of the agencies- trade unions, government, NGOs, social workers and even media has made any systematic, sustained and effective effort to take up the cause of the women domestic workers or even to render them help in solving their problems. Some of the missionary organizations and individuals have raised voice for their cause but these efforts are too small to get hold of a phenomenon of such an extent. Mass media can mainstream their cause which so remains among the marginal issues. Unfortunately, even mass media has not taken any considerable interest in their cause. Therefore, the organizations and individuals have to change their strategies to involve these various agencies concerned with the fate of the women domestic workers. Especially they have to use mass media in a sustained manner to awaken other agencies and to draw their cooperation in this regard.
REFERENCES


Sharma, Kalpana. 2003. ‘In the name of servitude’. www.infochangeindia.org
