

Under the Lockdown Case Study on Domestic workers of Assam

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Abstract:

Background: There are over 75 million domestic workers around the world, most of whom are informally employed. Given to preexisting vulnerabilities, workers in this sector were significantly affected by the covid pandemic. Several quantitative and qualitative studies have been carried out in various regions of the world to examine this impact. In India, there are 2.8 million domestic workers who are women, a number that is deemed an underestimate. Even before the pandemic, these women had to contend with problems related to the economics, the law, gender, and caste. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the consequences that the pandemic-induced lockdown had on them from an intersectional standpoint. This paper is a case study on a small group of domestic workers in Assam that illuminates their battle to survive in the lockdown and the virus.

Materials and Methods: A case study of a small group of domestic workers is presented in this paper. It is an ethnographic study that was conducted over the period of three months in 2021 and 2022 using the interview, survey, and observation methodologies. The women of the community, aged above 18 and below 50 were the principal participants of this study.

Results and Conclusion: It was established that the income of this particular group of domestic workers fell significantly during the lockdown. Due to social circumstances, a lack of legal protection from the government, and their precarious position within society, it caused them to face numerous challenges in their daily lives.

Key Word: Domestic Worker; Pandemic; Lockdown; Inequality; Assam.

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I. THE PANDEMIC, THE LOCKDOWN AND THE DOMESTIC WORKERS

The SARS-CoV-2 virus that caused the infamous pandemic as declared by the World Health Organization in 2020 brought in unequivocal changes in all spheres of life. The speed for virus spread and its intensity led various countries around the world to go under sudden and stringent lockdowns in 2020. India imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world to contain the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. As per the Stringency Index developed by the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, by the 25th of March, 2020, India had already reached the highest possible level of stringency (University of Oxford, 2020). The impact of such a lockdown has been disruptive in the lives of people, changing daily functioning and life routines. This impact however, has not been parallel across all sections of Indian society. The already existing marginalisation of certain communities have made them even more vulnerable and they have had more severe repercussions of the lockdown (Grown & Sanchez Paramo, 2021). In the case of women, the lockdown has expanded the already existing gender inequalities and further limited the already small pool of opportunities. One such community was that of domestic workers. Domestic Work is defined as work performed in or for a household or households, within an employment relationship and on an occupational basis (ILO, 2011). Around the world, there are 75.6 million domestic workers aged 15 years and over. The world's largest employers of domestic workers, in numerical terms, are Asia and the Pacific (50 per cent) and the Americas (23 per cent). Conversely, the Europe and Central Asia region employs the smallest share of all domestic workers worldwide. Domestic work is an important source of employment, representing 2.3 per cent of total employment worldwide (ILO, 2021). When the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) was adopted it was a much celebrated effort but a report by the International Labour Organisation finds that after 10 years, for many domestic workers, decent work is still not a reality. For at least 75.6 million people around the world, their work continues to suffer from poor working conditions, low wages and a lack of social protection. The report finds that their conditions worsened during the pandemic (ILO, 2021). Domestic workers in informal jobs were particularly vulnerable. One of the first COVID-19 deaths in Brazil occurred when a domestic worker acquired the virus from her employer, who had returned from a vacation to Italy infected with it (ILO, 2020). While some domestic workers lost their jobs, others had their working hours reduced; both groups have suffered a significant decrease in the

total amount of wages. The decline in overall wages received by domestic workers was 1.5 to 5 times greater than that experienced by other employees (ILO, 2021).

The times before the virus were not better either. Domestic workers have always been a vulnerable group due to the informal nature of their work. Efforts at the formalisation of domestic work have not been widely successful, resulting in low wages and no legal safeguards. They have no labour contracts, maternity leaves or sick leaves and neither do they receive a pension. Even when there are laws in place, they are difficult to enforce and hence easily dismissed by employers. It is challenging to form collective bargaining agreements with employers because of the nature of the worker-employer relationship. There is no unionisation and representative voice since this sector is fragmented into small isolated groups. In some countries, they are not allowed to join trade unions at all (WIEGO, 2020).

II. THE CASE OF INDIA

The rise in the number of domestic workforce is referred to as “Feminisation of Labour” (Kanji & Menon, 2001). Various factors have led to the increase in domestic workers globally and particularly in India. Poverty, gender discrimination in the labour market and lack of employment opportunities in the rural areas have caused large scale migration to urban centers in search for better livelihood. This has resulted in a large influx of workers willing to perform domestic work in urban localities. Simultaneously, cultural norms, care policies and dependency ratios of the country have also impacted the demand for domestic workers in India. In spite of their significant direct or indirect contribution to the economy and society, they are often invisible and undervalued, receiving one of the lowest wages and are not counted in the National Income. The domestic ‘work’ in India is poorly regulated and often unprotected by labour legislations except for the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 (Mohan, Sekhani & Singh, 2021). Even though under this act domestic workers are eligible to avail government schemes, it was found that most workers are not enrolled to it (Goel et al., 2020). There are no other labour regulations protecting them or defining their working circumstances (Augustine & Singh, 2016). They are prone to violence of physical and sexual nature, especially girl children who are indulged in domestic work. (Hamid, 2006). Due to power dynamics and their fear of discrimination or dismissal, they find it extremely difficult to disclose sexual harassment at work and are thus obliged to keep silent (Gupta & Hajra, 2007). With the large number of people available to work, the workers frequently continue accepting whatever the employers pay them. They live in persistent worry that asking for a raise may result in a loss of job (Irudaya, 2010). They lack access to institutions that offer high-quality care at reasonable costs in their local communities (Jagori, 2004). Owing to their employment in the unorganised sector, domestic employees seldom ever have access to a formal process for collective bargaining (Raghuram, 2001). They are not entitled to freedom of movement. There are many instances where employees are treated extremely well, but it is totally up to the employers' choice (Mehrotra, 2008). An important contributing reason to this invisibility and devaluation of care and unpaid domestic work as well as most of women's work in India is the lack of recognition of the home as a place of employment (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). The case of Domestic Workers is tied to the social and economic devaluation of care and its gendered, class and caste characteristics. (Chandramouli & Kodandarama, 2018).

Currently there are 75.6 million domestic workers aged 15 and above, with women continuing to make up the majority of the sector — 76.2 percent. India alone accounts for 4.8 million domestic workers of which 2.8 million are women. However, this is widely believed to be an underestimate, with the real figure ranging from 20 million to 80 million (Mohan, Sekhani, & Singh, 2021). Studies suggest that the worst affected informal workers during the pandemic were estimated to be around 40 million (Mehta & Kumar 2020). According to a survey, more than 78 percent of the workforce in the informal sector lost their livelihood and access to essential services including food consumption (Ghosh, 2013). In 2020, 260 domestic workers in Delhi, Mumbai, and Kochi participated in a study that found a sharp decline in pay and an increase in workload. In the workplace, stigma and discrimination were experienced by 57 per cent of them. There were reportedly more instances of violence and widespread problems with access to healthcare (Sumalatha, Bhat & Chitra, 2021). A study conducted in May 2020 of nearly 2400 domestic workers in Bengaluru by Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU), Bruhat Bangalore Gruhakarmika Sangha (BBGS), and Manegelasa Kaarmikara Union indicated that 87 per cent of the workers were asked not to come for work and left unsure about their unemployment and 91% of workers lost their salaries for the month of April 2020. The investigation also exposed the duplicity and oppression of employers and resident welfare associations (RWAs). By requiring the revelation of personal information without any security measures in place, RWAs also violated the privacy of domestic employees (Menon, 2020). In the study conducted in the month of June 2020, 5578 domestic workers from 7 districts—Mumbai, Thane, Pune, Sangli, Kolhapur, Ahmednagar, and Nagpur—took part. During the initial lockdown, 24 per cent of domestic workers lost all of their jobs, while 62 per cent of them lost some of them. 49 per cent of the 5578 domestic workers surveyed were the only wage earners in their households. 46 percent workers living

in rented houses were facing difficulty in paying their rent. 66 percent domestic of them were facing problems in supporting their children's education since they were unable to pay the fees required to get them enrolled in the next academic year (Gothoskar, 2020). A survey conducted on 200 Prime Minister Kaushal Vikas Yojna trained and employed workers in Delhi, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Tamil Nadu revealed that 96 per cent of domestic workers did not work during the lockdown and 85 per cent of them stated that their employers failed to pay them during the lockdown period. Only 41.5 per cent of the domestic workers knew about the Government Helplines to use the services provided during the lockdown period (DWSSC, 2020). A study conducted with 250 female domestic workers across Pune, Jhansi, Katni, Lucknow and Bhopal revealed that there was decline in their incomes as well as alteration in their expenditure, consumption and access to medical facilities were made almost inaccessible at the time of the pandemic (Mohan, et al., 2022). The Scroll reported the troubles of domestic workers and migrant workers in availing government benefits via ration cards. It claims that the government fared worse on cash transfers, with only 18 per cent of the workers they served reportedly getting cash transfer from the government. Even though 15 per cent of the participants had a Jan Dhan account, 58.3 per cent of them did not get any cash from the government (Goel et al., 2020). The Wire reported that during the lockdown, many workers were expected to work outside the house and others were sprayed with chemical disinfectants (Saluja, 2022).

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of this case study is a small community of domestic workers in Guwahati, the largest city of the Indian state of Assam. These workers are all housed in three distinct plots in the Christian Basti neighbourhood. The largest plot, Vishwa Patti, is home to around 30 families. These families range from nuclear households with 3–4 members to large joint households with 7-8 members that may include up to three generations living together in tin-sided temporary homes. As soon as one enters this area, there is hardly any room for walking. Clothes is hung everywhere along the walking road, and every dwelling has shared walls. It is difficult to fathom how Vishwa Patti, a region that resembles a slum, has managed to carve out a place for itself in the busy Christian Basti commercial area. This settlement has between 150 and 200 residents overall, including all children.

Nearly 85 per cent of these households migrated to Guwahati from the Barpeta District, which is located roughly 100 km from Assam's capital, Dispur. Additionally, some individuals have relocated from Goalpara, Kokrajhar, and Dhubri. 68.89 percent of the people in Barpeta speak Bengali, according to the 2011 Census. The whole population of this neighbourhood is of Bengali descent and speaks Sylheti. Assam, Tripura, and a portion of Bangladesh are where this language is most commonly used. Others regard it as dialect of Bengali, while others consider it a distinct language. Additionally, the group has learned some broken Assamese and Hindi in an effort to improve their employability in Guwahati. Less than half of them are second generation residents while the remainder are first generation residents who have moved in pursuit of a better livelihood. It's crucial to note that a small number of women from West Bengal have also moved here due to marriage and patrilocal residence. The majority of families continue to maintain financial ties to their previous homes in Barpeta, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, and Dhubri.

In this neighbourhood, more than 90 per cent of women over the age of 18 work as domestic helpers. The able bodied men work as daily wage earners. All the children are sent to government schools, although no one has yet studied beyond 10th standard. The majority of the domestic worker participants in this study are under the age of 50 and are all married. This might be seen as a young population. Few households also engage one to two members of the family—the daughter, the daughter-in-law, and the mother-in-law—as domestic helpers. Over half of the respondents have been employed for more than ten years. With less than 5 years of experience, only 3 of the women are relatively new to the job. All three have migrated to this community owing to marriage.

The women of this community have had very little formal education. No one has studied further than 8th standard. This has profound impacts on their life. They have relatively limited opportunities for employment and are dependent on those with literacy and education, who are frequently their employers, children, or husbands of news and information. They learned about the virus, the pandemic, and the immediate lockdown through secondary sources. Being raised in lower socioeconomic background homes meant that these women were solely groomed for marriage, so education was never an option for them. The high cost of living in the city led them into domestic work when they moved to Guwahati from their hometowns. They lament over their lack of education. It made them vulnerable at work. Nevertheless, they have ensured that their daughters attend local schools. The majority of children in Vishawa Patti are also enrolled in tuition classes because their parents are unable to help them with their academics.

This community's way of life was severely impacted by the abrupt lockdown. Prior to the strict lockdown, these domestic workers worked at 7 houses on average per day, but from March 2020 to May 2020, they had no employment at all. Following lockdown, their recovery was gradual; in the second half of 2021,

they worked on an average of three homes each day. Even their spouses, who worked daily jobs every day of the week, spent the lockdown at home. Employers continued to be sceptical even after the restriction was lifted. However, because these women lived near to the homes of their employers, they gradually resumed their employment while exercising great caution. In this, they had to deal with discrimination, suspicion, and hypocrisy. They were made to wash themselves fully before entering the residences of their employers and made to wear masks and face shields even when employers continued to roam around without any safety precautions. All of them were supplied with masks and sanitizers by their employers. Their employers also took advantage of the opportunity to hire them at a cheaper wage because many of them lost their employment and were no longer in demand. *"First we lose our jobs, they don't even pay us our dues from before the lockdown, and now they try to bargain and reduce our rates. We have no choice but to comply. Getting less money is better than no money at all."*¹, stated one worker.

The household's men were compelled to rely on their wives and daughters for sustenance because they had no other form of job. The disparity in the social structure of the family was strikingly visible at this time. Despite staying at home throughout the lockdown, none of the men offered assistance to the women with household tasks or child care. *"My husband wouldn't even lift a glass of water."*, said a participant. *"Even if they stayed at home, household duties belong to us women. They would never do this work."* As a result, these women had increased domestic duties in addition to covid anxiety and the fear of permanently losing their careers. All of the participants also claim to have seen or heard of domestic violence in their community and report that it increased during the lockdown, creating unpleasant situations at homes.

The income of this community's households had inevitably fallen significantly. They were devastated by the economic stagnation and survived the lockdown on what little savings they had. The workers claimed that neither governmental organisations nor non-governmental organisations provided them with any assistance. They claim that while their family members in the villages had received COVID relief from the Gram Panchayat, they had never received any such assistance in the city. They were forced to take a number of actions to adjust to their families' abrupt economic upheavals. Few families withdrew their children from school. During the lockdown, many of the men started working as grocery vendors. They also revealed that 8 families had to leave the city since they couldn't afford the city anymore and had returned to their home villages. After the lockdown, many domestic workers who were unable to work at their houses opened tea stalls and pan shops throughout the neighbourhood. These workers were ignored by the homes where they had been devotedly employed for years. Most employers avoided assistance and remained confined to their own homes. Despite the Prime Minister of India's repeated requests and public pronouncements, most people refused to pay the workers' salary, not even a minimal sum. Other than one or two families, no one gave these workers any extra money, groceries or food items during the stringent lockdown days. *"We had nothing at home. We are poor people. We don't have a surplus of food grains in our kitchens. We have spent hungry nights during the lockdown."*, a participant stated. Even when the shops opened for limited hours of time, many of them hardly got sufficient amount of food to buy due to high demand and low supply. They waited hours in line, getting nothing at the end. One participant mentioned, *"I was 7 months pregnant then, my husband had gone to the village and was stuck there as there was a travel ban. I waited in line for 2 hours in the heat and got no food. I had to go to bed hungry that day."*

Besides income, rent was one of their main problems. The community resides in a big plot of land owned by one single landlord. They pay Rs.2000-Rs.4500 a month for single roomed temporary houses that stand clumped together in a small area of land, congested, barely receiving any light and without proper sanitation. Not a single rupee of rent was waived by their landlord for any of the families during the lockdown. *"When we begged our landlord to reduce our rent as we had no income, she asked us to pay after the lockdown ends. She has kept a record of how much we all owe to her during the lockdown."*, stated one of the workers. The collective dislike for their landlord was prominent, another participant said, *"Our landlady is not a good person. She has no mercy."*

All the domestic workers in the community have been vaccinated. Most of which have been facilitated by their employers. They mention having doubt about the vaccine at first but their employers convinced them to get vaccinated. One of the other primary reasons to get vaccinated was to get back to work. *"I was hesitant to take the vaccine, someone had told me I could die but without the vaccine I would die of hunger anyway so I got the vaccine. I had a fever but I am alive."*, a participant stated.

¹ All quotes have been translated by the author.

When asked about the future, they said they were scared of another lockdown. Since, after Durga Puja (of 2021), Covid cases in Guwahati were on a rise and they were scared of a potential lockdown and the possibility of losing their jobs again. Another fear that they have is of getting displaced. Their landlady is building a permanent structure just beside where they now reside. “*We see this building being built everyday, soon I think we will be asked to leave so that tall buildings can be built on this land too.*”

IV. CONCLUSION

When the entire nation was given 4 hours to prepare for a total economic and social lockdown it did not fare well. The Covid lockdown expanded disparities in a nation like India, which is already rife with numerous social inequalities in every nook and corner. Gender and economic minorities, like as the Domestic Workers of Christian Basti, have undoubtedly faced the worst of it all. Despite how insignificant it may seem to the national economy, the income of domestic employees has enormous importance and the power to alter family structures. These people continue to be among the most economically disadvantaged workers. This is due to the informal and private nature of their labour, the absence of legal protections, and the general perception of domestic work in society. In the Indian society, caste and gender intermingle with this and produce particularly destructive results. Women are made even more vulnerable by ideas of impurity and pollution, as well as the discrimination of domestic labour as a gendered duty. Post lockdown, while evaluating the devastation in numbers and statistics, we have lost the voices of the people and their stories. Through this case study of a small group of people, it is critical to comprehend the role of intersectionality in formation identities and influencing experiences. Social circumstance cannot be changed in a fast pace but legal safeguards and policy changes can pave a way.

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