

Self Esteem of Paid Women Domestic Workers in Ernakulam District

Titson Devassy and Lizy James

Abstract

Paid domestic work is a growing segment in unorganized sector; where women are employed more compared to their male counterparts. Despite playing an important role in facilitating the participation of skilled and educated women into productive work, paid domestic work is often considered as unproductive and undervalued. The painful experiences and difficult circumstances at workplace make the domestic workers suffer with low self-esteem. The research paper is based on a qualitative study to find the self-esteem of domestic workers. Samples are purposively selected from the Domestic Workers Groups promoted by Ernakulam Social Service Society (ESSS), an NGO based in Ernakulam Revenue District. The researcher collected the data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed on the basis of interpretive analysis. Four major themes- Personal Life, Family Relationship, Social Relationship and Career are emerged to explain self-esteem of paid women domestic workers. The relationship of the self -esteem of the domestic worker with their education and income earned is also studied.

Key Words: Self-esteem, Domestic work, Domestic workers, Employers

Introduction

Domestic work is a growing segment in unorganized sector and is one of the such profession that exists from ancient times in all over the world. The statistics by ILO suggest that the numbers of domestic workers at globally is

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about 52.6 million (ILO, 2011). In India there exist a huge ambiguity in figures related to the number of domestic workers. As per a survey conducted by National Sample Survey Organization in its 61st round between July 2004 to June 2005, the number of domestic workers in India is around 4.2 million. But Palriwala and Neetha (2009) have published an estimate of only 2.5 million domestic workers for India (International Labour Office, 2013). The National Domestic Workers Movement, an organization working 17 states in India suggests that the number of domestic workers may vary from the official 4.2 million to unofficial 50 million (National Domestic Workers Movement, 2017). Even though there is a difference of opinion about the number of domestic workers in India, the different studies are unanimous about fact that the number of workers, especially women engage in domestic work is increasing day by day. It is generally held that the official figures are unreliable and grossly inadequate as domestic work is notoriously under enumerated (John, 2013).

According to ILO convention 189, the domestic worker is any person who engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship and the domestic work may include tasks such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, taking care of children, or elderly or sick members of a family, gardening, guarding the house, driving for the family, even taking care of household pets (International Labour Office, 2011). Domestic workers can also be classified as part time, full time and residential workers (Trivedi, 2009). The persons who are works in multiple homes for 2-3 hours are called part time domestic workers, while full time domestic workers, work in a single home from morning to evening. The domestic workers who are working in a single home by staying with them is called residential workers.

Paid domestic work is one such profession where the participation of women is more. According to ILO statistics 83% of women domestic workers are present worldwide (International Labour Office, 2013). The educational development of women triggered the entry of large number of middle women into the employment sector. These women sought help from others to perform their duties in home and it created abundant opportunity for less educated, unskilled and economically backward women. But due to the patriarchal nature of our society the work done by paid domestic workers are often

held in low position. The domestic work is usually considered as women's profession and as an extension of only what these people are already doing in their own home to somebody else premises, our society often fail to recognize the work of domestic workers (Burnham & Theodore, 2012). Kalpana Goel (2014) pointed out that the domestic workers are overburdened with their work and had limited time to sleep and rest and they feel overwhelmed and exhausted with the work load. According to her, domestic workers suffer from distress, fear, sense of worthlessness, denigration and low self-esteem (Goel, 2014). In this study researcher tried to explore the self-esteem of domestic workers.

Review of Literature

According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem is a positive or negative attitude towards self (Deshpande & Ramanamma, 2015). Joubert (1990), defined self-esteem as a person's judgment of general self-worth that is a product of an implicit evaluation of self-approval or self-disapproval made by the individual (Sadeghi Azar & Vasudeva, 2006). Self-esteem consists of two components- self worth and self image- which affect women's adjustment in various spheres of life (Jan & Ashraf, 2008). The occupational condition of persons like work complexity, control over work, degree of supervision and routinization has an effect on self-esteem (Gecas & Seff, 1989). A study conducted among young men found that conditions of work are more consequential for the self-image than socioeconomic standing (Mortimer & Finch, 1986). This means that people working under difficult and inhuman circumstances may have poor self-evaluation and low self-esteem.

Paid domestic work is often considered as an inferior job. In a patriarchal society man is always associated with income earning productive work while woman is associated with house hold tasks such as cooking, cleaning, looking after children and aged, which are socially reproductive in nature. The wide spread notion is that paid domestic work is only an extension of what women usually do in their own homes. Despite the growing importance of domestic workforce, the domestic workers are perceived as something lower than the standard work of the society by both the employers and the workers themselves (Joshi & Thakkar, 2013). Apart from the unfavourable working condition and negative attitude of employers, the domestic workers are not

included in the framework of an exclusive law and the age-old reluctance of society in acknowledging domestic work as “work” makes the life of millions of domestic workers arduous, and forces them to work in isolation, leaving them with low self-worth (Devassy & James, 2017). Most of the domestic workers suffer from low self-esteem. Certain conditions like lack of privacy, loneliness, and isolation affects domestic workers mental health (Grande & Kerr, 1998). Even though the domestic workers are contributing enormously to the global economy, their work is often unorganized, overworked, underpaid and abused (Tomei & Belser, 2011). The domestic workers often lookout for better jobs, better wages, better working and living conditions and most important of all, a little more respect and social recognition and acceptance of their work (Chaudhari, 2005).

In an ethnographic study (Soumi, 2014) suggests that domestic work is undervalued and the behaviour of employers make the domestic workers feel that they are unskilled and doing a non-prestigious occupation. Most of the domestic workers do not want to bring their daughters into this work. The domestic workers often try to hide the nature of their employment from the society and its does not want their daughters to follow them (Mehrotra, 2010).

Respect and dignity are the two fundamental components to a person’s feeling of self-worth and self-esteem and are vital in defining the relationship with the employers (Stiell & England, 1997). There are cases of good relationship with domestic workers and their employers but in majority of cases the employee - employer relationship is always at stake. The employers refer domestic workers as maids or servants instead of workers, usually provide low status. The employer’s attitude towards a domestic worker make them feel inferior (Soumi, 2014). Most of the domestic workers are exploited by their employers due to their poverty and weak positions (Vanajakshi & Sharadaambi, 2013).

Research Gaps

Even though domestic work is one of the rapidly growing segments in informal sector, different issues related to paid domestic workers are relatively unexplored. In Kerala there is no significant study in this topic. The limited number of studies conducted in the field mainly deals with the nature of work. But while interacting with the domestic workers, researcher could find

that paid domestic workers are facing more serious problems especially related with their working condition, social inclusion into the society, self-worth and self-esteem. Since number of persons engaged in domestic work are increasing day by day, this study has great significance.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find the self-esteem of the domestic workers.
2. To study relationship between education, income earned and the self-esteem of domestic workers.

Methodology

The research paper is based on a qualitative study to explore problems of paid domestic workers in Ernakulam District. Purposive sampling technique is employed in selecting samples from Domestic Workers Groups promoted by Ernakulam Social Service Society, an NGO based in Ernakulam Revenue District. The researcher analyzed the data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions based on interpretive approach. The researcher conducted 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and 8 in-depth interviews, one each in eight regions of Ernakulam Social Service Society. For each FGD, 12 and altogether 96 women domestic workers participated in the study. The researcher prepared FGD and Interview Guide for facilitating data collection. The social demographic details of the domestic workers and their family, income earned by the domestic workers, self-esteem of domestic workers in their personal life, social relations, family relations and career were the major themes of the FGD and Interview Guide. The average time taken for conducting each FGD & In-depth Interview is 2 hours. Apart from exploring the self-esteem of the domestic workers, the researcher also explored the relationship between education, income earned and the self-esteem of domestic workers. The researcher obtained informed consent from the participants and gave freedom to withdraw at any stage. While using verbatim, researcher used fake names to maintain the confidentiality of domestic workers.

Findings of the Study

1. Socio- Demographic Profile of Domestic Workers

The researcher studied type of job, age, marital status, educational qualification, income earned, years of experience in this section. Among the 96

domestic workers who participated in the study, 78 domestic workers are part time domestic workers. This means they are working in multiple homes every day. The remaining 18 domestic workers are full timers, who are working in a single home from morning to evening. There are no residential workers, i.e. there is no domestic worker who is working in a single home, staying with the employer.

In total, 46 domestic workers are in the age group of 40- 60 years, 34 domestic workers are in the age category of 18- 40 years, while the remaining 16 domestic workers are in the category of 60 years and above. This means that a considerable number of elderly women are still going for work. The economic backwardness and family responsibility are the two major reasons for this. Few elderly persons are still going for work because of long association with the employer's family and it is difficult to stop working in such place all of a sudden.

Only 2 of the domestic workers out of the 96 who participated in the study were unmarried, 54 of them are married while 24 domestic workers who participated in the study were widows. Remaining 16 of the domestic workers are either separated or divorced. These figures show that a good number of domestic workers have the burden of family headship on their shoulder. The researcher found that alcoholism, substance abuse, domestic violence and irresponsibility from part of their spouses were major reasons of separation.

In total 12 domestic workers are educated up to higher secondary level. Majority of the domestic workers – 64 are educated up to 10th standard. Only 1 domestic worker is illiterate. The rest of the domestic workers (19) are educated up to 4th standard.

The income earned by the domestic workers are varying from Rs. 3000 to Rs. 20000. The full-time domestic workers are getting less amount compared to part-time domestic workers and the amount is in the range of Rs. 3000 to Rs. 9000. The part time domestic workers usually earns Rs. 100 to 200 per hour and a majority work at 3 to 4 homes. So, they are better paid and earn total monthly income of Rs.5000 to Rs. 20000. The researcher also observed a rural urban divide in the level of income earned. As compared to those working in urban areas, the domestic workers in rural areas get lesser amount (Devassy & James, 2017).

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The experience of the domestic workers in the job is varying from 1 year to more than 30 years. Out of the 96 domestic workers under the study, 21 have 0 – 5 years of experience. A majority, 53 domestic workers have an experience of 5-10 years while the remaining 22 have more than 10 years of experience. In the last category 4 domestic workers have an experience of more than 25 years and according to them, they are working in this job from their young age and do not know the exact years they have been in this job.

2. Self - esteem of Domestic Workers

Self-esteem of domestic workers is explained on the basis of their self-esteem in personal life, family relations, social relations and in career.

2.1. Self-esteem in Personal life

The domestic worker's self-esteem in their personal life is explored on the basis of their (1) ability to appreciate themselves, (2) feeling about their contribution to family and being self-reliant, (3) ability to deal with others, (4) attitude towards life and (5) ability to take up challenges in their life. While discussing about the self appreciation in their job, most of the domestic workers responded in positive way. Even though many of the domestic workers were vocal in appreciating their job, in in-depth interviews and further interaction they shared different opinion and Ms. Lovely is one among them. She responded that "*initially it was difficult to accept my job. But now am accustomed with it. And I know I am deprived and inferior to others. But have to do this to feed my family*". Her words clearly indicate the frustration and disappointment over her job. While discussing about the domestic worker's contributions to their family, a good number of domestic workers responded that because of their job, now they were able to financially contribute to the family and they feel happy about it. This is one such aspect were almost all domestic workers were agreeing with.

Regarding their ability to deal with people, some domestic workers opinioned that they do not have any problem to interact with public and people from higher strata. A few were of the view that their participation and interactions in domestic workers group meetings, helps them to feel at ease in dealing with others. But the researcher observed that in reality, situation is not that simple. The domestic workers are often deprived of their basic rights

in their employer's home. In most cases the employers were not bothered about the domestic workers food or refreshment. Almost every day they have to perform additional tasks or additional time. But usually they are not paid additional money for extra work. Only a very few is exempted from salary deduction for availing leave. Interesting point is that the domestic workers are aware about this kind of injustice towards them than usually, but more often they are scared or reluctant to bargain with their employer's regarding their rights. This helped us to understand the real situation.

When the researcher asked about their attitude towards life, a lot of domestic workers replied in a negative way. Many of them stick to this job is primarily to spare at least their children from this kind of job. Except a few, domestic workers find it hard to take up challenges in their life. But there are examples for successful domestic workers, who not only are taking up the responsibilities of their family, but also find time to help fellow domestic workers in organizing and obtaining various benefits from government and non-government agencies including Ernakulam Social Service Society.

2.2. Self -esteem in Family Relations

Domestic workers self-esteem in their family relations is discussed under two major themes - appreciation from their spouse and other family members and decision-making power in family. Family support and appreciation are the key factors in determining the self esteem of a person. But the study found that most of domestic workers were not getting any appreciation from their family members. Ms. Silvy a domestic worker is of the opinion that *"I am not getting any support from my family. My husband creates problems for my job by accompanying me into my place of employment as he is skeptical"*. In quite a lot of incidence, children of domestic workers were reluctant to accept the job of their mothers. Such attitude especially from their spouse and children also creates mental agony for domestic workers. But there are instances of good support from family members also. Ms. Deepa a domestic worker is of the opinion that *"I am working in 4 different families in a day from morning to evening for providing a better life for my family members. My husband and children are very much supportive"*. But such support is very less in many instances and there always someone like Ms. Prabha to counter this claim. She said that

"In my house it's me who financially contribute more. But I can't take a decision without permission of my husband. Even this meeting am attending is with his permission". Even though domestic workers are earning and contributing to the family a good number of domestic workers are unable to take their own decisions. Only the domestic workers with the responsibility of family headship have such freedom.

2.3. Self-esteem in Social Relations

Any appreciation received for domestic workers from their friends, neighbours and others, having membership in community-based organizations or in any religious organizations, having leadership roles in any of the social forums, value for their opinions in social groups and the perceived rejection/ exclusion from community were the major themes discussed under the self-esteem in social relations. Most of the time the domestic workers are not getting any appreciation from their friends and neighbours. The competition existing in this sector plays an important part in it. Many times, fellow domestic workers try to take advantage of their situation instead of being supportive. Ms. Ambika a domestic worker in her forties opined that *"It is better to share my feelings and personal problems to my employer rather than my fellow group members, otherwise it may backfire to me at some other stage"*. Such lack of confidence and mistrust exist between the domestic worker's group members.

Even though they are part of domestic workers group and some other community-based organizations like self-help group, most of them are reluctant to take up leadership roles and other responsibilities in these groups. Many of them believe that, they do not have such leadership skills. Sometimes the domestic workers feel like rejected from the community. *"I am not doing any illegal job. But still many at my workplace and community try to keep a distance from me"* Ms. Ajitha's words portrays the picture of domestic workers that exist in many places. Such instances make domestic workers feel inferior.

However, the domestic workers who are comparatively with high exposure to domestic workers group and many programmes of ESSS exhibited a better picture than the rest. Words of Ms. Sreekala a widow and leader of domestic workers forum, who is into this profession for last 15 years has of great importance in this context. She expressed that *"I have been into this profession for*

last 15 years. I brought up my two children by this income. Now both are well educated and employed. They are still not against me in continuing with this job. As I am also a leader of domestic workers in my area, I always try to support my fellow workers in need. My association with ESSS helped me to believe that domestic work is also a decent profession as any other”. Even though the people like Sreekala are representing a minority, such stories are always motivating and encouraging.

2.4. Self – esteem in Career

Researcher studied the self esteem of domestic workers in relation to career based on their recognition in employer’s home, domestic worker’s ability to bargain their salary and rights, and their acceptance of job. The domestic worker’s main source of low self-esteem is their bitter experiences from the part of employers. Most of the domestic workers get differential treatments from their employers. Sometimes domestic workers were not allowed to share their toilets or dining space with their employers. Food and refreshments were not offered to them. Even if they get it may be old or inedible. In most of the places employers do not allow them to use washing machine. Even the domestic workers do not have freedom to decide the sequential order of the tasks they have to perform. A person’s autonomy at work has a significant impact on self-esteem (Mortimer & Finch, 1986). This kind of situation is more common to part time domestic workers rather than full time domestic workers.

Only a very few number of domestic workers were negotiate with their employers regarding their work and wages. The part-time domestic workers fared better in this aspect. But still a good number of domestic workers were not able to negotiate benefits like their leave, contribution to welfare fund, extra payment for extra work other than their salary. When the researcher asked about their feelings regarding their job, most of them responded in positive. But when the researcher asked about recommending this profession to their dear ones, except one, all of them responded in negative. *“With all the difficulties we are working in this profession with the sole intention for a better life of our children. Then how can we direct our children to this profession. I will never suggest anybody to this profession”.* Ms. Mini’s words show exact depiction of their situation in employer’s home.

Sometimes the domestic workers have strained relationship with their employers and it adversely affects their self-esteem. The study found that domestic workers demand for wage hike and leave, reluctance to do additional and over time work, employer's negative attitude and verbal abuse towards domestic workers, less or absence of autonomy for domestic workers in their work contributes tensions in employer- employee relationship. Those who are working for long time in a house expressed a better relationship with their employers but such category is comparatively less in numbers.

2.5. Self - esteem and Education

As we discussed above most of the domestic workers have problems with their self-worth and self-esteem. The researcher found that domestic workers who are better educated and those who are participating in training programmes organized by Ernakulam Social Service Society(ESSS) for domestic workers possess comparatively high sense of self-esteem than others. They were more aware about their rights and it make them to feel good and bargain with their employers. Ms. Elsy was of the opinion that, *"I have been into this job for very long. Initially I was very less motivated and I faced difficulties in dealing with different persons. But I was one among the hundreds of domestic workers who came to ESSS in 2004. Since then I attended a lot of training programmes. Now am part of Domestic Workers Group and one among the seven central leaders of this group. Its services and guidance made me believe in my strengths"*. Even though its minority, there are many domestic workers who are sharing this opinion.

3. Self -esteem and Income Earned

Domestic workers who have comparatively low self-esteem are hesitant in negotiating their demands with their employers. It naturally reflects on the benefits they receive from the employers. But those who have comparatively high self-esteem earns a much better than their counterparts. The researcher found that such persons are able to at least present their demands before the employer in advance. If they are not satisfied with what the employer has offered, these domestic workers have no hesitation in leaving that place.

Discussion

Domestic workers constitute an important segment of our labour force and their service is indispensable and imperative both in social and economic front. Their presence allows more and more educated women to enter into productive work and vice versa. Despite domestic workers demands a bigger attention from society and government in their problems, several issues faced by them are still unresolved. Lack of education, burden of family headship and economic backwardness force many domestic workers to enter in to this profession. Many domestic workers are into this profession from very young age and some are continuing this job even in their sixties due to the financial backwardness of their family. There is no uniformity in the income received. The income earned by domestic workers is varying depending on the type of their job (whether they are full-timers or part-timers), location of employment (rural or urban) and education.

In spite of this, many domestic workers claim personal satisfaction and a positive feeling towards their own self due to their increased ability to contribute financially to their family, a detailed enquiry reveals that if they have a better option, a vast majority of domestic workers will look for some other job which give them more respect and dignity. The domestic workers were still experiencing difficulty in dealing with their employers especially in negotiating their demands. It is quite evident that majority of domestic workers have negative attitude towards their life and all this suggest that most of them possess low self-esteem in their personal life.

Even though they are contributing financially, domestic workers are less involved in decision making process within the family. Only a few domestic workers get enough support from their family and friends. Many of the domestic workers have membership in one or the other community-based organization, but still the majority do not have the courage and confidence to take up responsibilities in their group. This negatively affects their self-esteem in family and social relationships. Less autonomy in work and undesirable experiences from the part of employers, in addition to poor working condition make the domestic workers feel more vulnerable and a person with lesser self-esteem.

The study revealed that formal educational status of domestic worker as well as the skill and knowledge acquired through the trainings organized by ESSS has positively influenced their self-esteem. The study also found that self-esteem of domestic workers influences their bargaining power. This means that a systematic training as well as capacity building programmes aimed at domestic workers can help them to build their self-worth and self-esteem and it can also enhance their ability to deal with their employers. It reveals that helping the domestic workers to enhance their self-esteem is extremely important while working for the empowerment of domestic workers.

The study reveals that there is an ample opportunity for social work intervention with the domestic workers. Social workers can practice both the primary and secondary methods to bring effective changes in the life of domestic workers (Eshaghi & Ghasemabadi, 2013).

Conclusion

The domestic workers in the current scenario face a lot of challenges and problems ranging from the nature of work, working environment, absence of job security, poor financial leverage, inadequate social support, low self-esteem and so on. The domestic workers suffer more due to exploitation of their social, economic and sometimes even the emotional disadvantages by employers. Eventually that will create tension in relationship between domestic workers and their employers. Concrete efforts are needed from the government in ensuring decent work condition for domestic workers and formulating a law exclusively for domestic workers by keeping the spirit of ILO convention 189 and recommendation 201 will have a great impact on mainstreaming the domestic workers. Organizing the domestic workers with paying due attention in their capacity building can multiple impact on the development of domestic workers. All these circumstances compel a proactive social work intervention especially in initiating advocacy for protecting the dignity, worth and basic rights of domestic workers and in creating support systems to help domestic workers in dealing with their personal and professional problems.

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