



## Unveiling 'The Help' in India: Understanding the Plight of Domestic Workers Amid Daily Humiliations

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On February 21, more than 300 women domestic workers and their daughters gathered opposite the Labour Commissioner's office in India's national capital, Delhi. The protest was organised by the [National Platform for Domestic Workers](#) (NPDW), which comprises several unions and organisations across India. The demands of the protest include comprehensive legislation for domestic workers, recognising homes as workplaces, ensuring a guaranteed minimum wage, providing guaranteed social security measures, especially Employee State Insurance (ESI) and Provident Fund (PF), implementing an 8-hour working day and/or 48 hours a week with double wages for overtime, securing one weekly off and providing housing facilities for workers in cities.

Concentrated in large cities, an estimated [5 million domestic workers](#), predominantly women, make their living in one of the most poorly regulated sectors of the informal economy. Power inequalities based on gender, caste, class, and ethnicity characterise the relationship between domestic workers, often migrants from rural areas, and their employers. This is manifested in long working hours, physical and verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and dismally low wages. While the Indian government remains a signatory to the [C189](#) labour convention of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), it has not ratified the provisions of decent work for domestic workers. Moreover, the government's new labour codes do not adequately address this section of the workforce. With the [lack of recognition](#) as workers and vague definitions of workplace and employer-employee relationships, these workers have no access to social security, minimum wage or any protection. At the outset, their demands on wages, and recognition of workplace can be read off as *only* bread- butter concerns.

But Seema, a female Dalit domestic worker showed how this obscures the possibility of understanding the protest in relation to its social dynamics and how the humiliation they endure as provisions and everyday indignities is central to the domestic workers' protest. Seema has been working as a domestic worker in Delhi for over 20 years. Yet, even today when she rings the bell, her employers open the door and say "*naukrani aayi hai*" (*the servant has come*). The term "*naukrani*" bothers Seema as she finds it humiliating and questions the very core of her being. Painfully she asks "*Kya humara naam..koi pehchan*

*nahi hai? Kya hume izzat se nahi bula sakte hai?" (Don't we have a name..an identity? Can't we be called respectfully?).*

Lack of legal protections, combined with caste, class or communal biases makes the life of domestic workers extremely precarious. This [gendered undervaluation](#) of domestic work arises from the nature of work performed - value is not ascribed to women's work in their homes, and by extension, paid work in others' home is not given value or regarded as work. Moreover, the largely informal nature of domestic work, combined with individualised relations with employers and workspaces located across numerous [private homes](#), makes domestic workers vulnerable.

Many protesting domestic workers counter discriminatory ideologies by asserting their claims for respect and dignity and voicing how their employers depended on them. Many were clear that *"They (employers) need us more. Hum nahi hote toh vo office kaise jaate? Unka kuda kaun phekta? Unke baache time se school kaise jaate?" (If we weren't there, they wouldn't be able to go to the office. Who would throw their waste? Without us, their kids will not be able to go to school on time).*

'Home' as a space does not have the same meaning for everyone- it can never have that. Rina, a protesting domestic worker, has been washing dishes and cleaning houses in Saket for the last 10 years. She explains, *"When I am cleaning, I have to be very cautious and constantly be careful if there is any money or jewelry lying around. I am always being watched. If anything goes missing, I will be the first person to be questioned. That is why whenever I find something.. even Rs 10, I immediately inform them. If I don't then I ask them to check the dirt I swept for inspection. This is how careful I have to be while working."* The employer's anxiety over domestic workers posing a threat and workers like Rina finding missing items or valuables at home represent the everyday situations in which workers try to negotiate the differences inherent in the [socio-spatial dynamic of caste-class](#).

Gender intersects with caste, not just because domestic work in India is predominantly carried out by poor unlettered women from lower caste groups but also in the way caste-class-based practices inform the [spatial segregation](#) of these workers and hierarchies manifested in modes of address, rules that regulate the physical conduct (body) of the workers, their use of domestic space, as well as [proximity and contact](#) between employers and domestic workers.

Interestingly, the same 'home' in which the domestic worker is perceived as a threat is also where familial expressions like *"didi, bhaiya, chachi"* are used by both the employee and employer to characterise their employment relationship. However, the protesting domestic workers were clear that this analogy reproduces the unequal power relations between employer and worker, diffusing the employee's status as a worker, thereby limiting workers' power to negotiate for better conditions and wages, and facilitating the extraction of unpaid labor. Noting the use of these familial expressions, the protesting domestic workers said, *"They say that we are like family for extracting work. It is for their own needs. But when we take a leave, they will threaten to fire us."* The workers mentioned that in some cases, they used this fictive familial bond to make claims to benefits such as demanding bonuses during festival or asking for money to pay school fees for their children. However, on other occasions, they invoked their status as 'workers' with rights, specifically when negotiating for a weekly day off, wage increments, or paid leave. Nevertheless, the domestic workers participating in the protests pointed out that the use of familial expressions was crucial in their quest to claim a dignified sense of self. Being recognised as a part of the family provided

them with a greater sense of respect, than just being regarded as a servant. This added worth and value to work otherwise considered of low status and low value.

Domestic work was unanimously seen as an undesirable livelihood, more as a survival strategy (*majboori*) that women had to resort to due to poverty, but with clear reservations. The undesirability of domestic work was also expressed by the daughters of domestic workers who were part of the protest, emphasizing their reluctance to pursue this work as adults. An exclusive focus on the formal demands of the protest does not explain the workers' willingness to take radical action and protest multiple times a year for the last 10 years. As we celebrated International Women's Day on March 8 and reflect on the theme of [Inspire Inclusion](#), let us consider that this willingness primarily stems from the workers' assertion of equality and dignity, with the struggle for dignity evident in their key slogan: *Hum kamghar hai, naukhar nahi* (*We are workers, not servants*)!

Notes:

1. 'The 'Help' is a reference to Kathryn Stockett's iconic novel wherein black domestic workers are employed in white households in the United States during the 1960s, which was also adapted into a [movie](#).
2. A [2015 ILO study](#) confirms that domestic workers in India regularly face arbitrary wage deductions and are often denied advance payments of salaries or loans in times of need. Even when they do get such loans, they feel indebted to their employers and are compelled to work with them until they pay off their dues.
3. Diksha Shriyan is a Research Associate at ISST, India where she researches strategies for collectivizing under the theme *Movement Building and Claims-making*.