

Understanding the Lives of Domestic Workers

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Abstract: Domestic work in Coimbatore and Erode districts presents a complex landscape shaped by socio-economic factors and cultural norms. This study explores the multifaceted experiences of domestic workers through qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews with 24 participants. The objectives were to examine their quality of life, self-perception of work, reasons for entering the field, types of tasks performed, educational backgrounds, family structures, interactions with employers, working conditions, health challenges, coping mechanisms, and broader societal implications. Findings reveal a diversity of perspectives among workers, highlighting economic necessity as a primary driver for many, despite facing challenges such as irregular working hours, low wages, and health issues exacerbated by job demands. Positive employer-employee relationships and occasional non-monetary benefits contribute to job satisfaction, contrasting with instances of discrimination and inadequate workplace amenities. The research underscores the need for targeted policies to improve working conditions, promote health and well-being, enhance educational opportunities, and foster societal respect for domestic work. By addressing these issues, stakeholders can collectively support the livelihoods and rights of domestic workers in the region.

Keywords: Domestic Worker; Quality of Life; Self-Perception of Work; Employer-Employee Relationship; Working Conditions; Job Opportunities; Domestic Service; Job Satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Domestic work is considered one of the oldest informal occupations. Some women, in the absence of education, economic resources and other opportunities, enter this world of domestic work. Domestic service includes many kinds of work and is done all around us. These works seem to be highly personalized and it remains of high importance in the house of employers. This informal sector provides a livelihood for a number of women. These appear to be unorganized, unrecognized and unrewarding work for many workers. This work includes mental, manual and emotional aspects, and they clean, wash, cook and provide caregiving services [11]. This work is a desirable job for workers who feel that they are not highly skilled and

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might not easily be employed. The work is not always done by low-skilled; many times, the workers are educated, but they get into this sector due to their financial issues [2]. The work is also associated with a social stigma that it is degrading to be employed as a domestic worker [8].

According to the International Labor Organization, domestic work is defined as work performed in or for households or households has also been estimated by ILO that there are over at least 67 million domestic workers (above 15 years of age) all around the world. Among them, 80% are found to be women, and 70% come under migrant domestic workers. 7.4 million Children (under the age of 15) are estimated to be working as domestic workers. These numbers of workers are also steadily growing around the world. There are also many domestic workers unregistered, unrecognized and unknown and due to this the number of domestic workers could be far higher. For legal and policy purposes, a domestic worker is defined by ILO Convention 2011 as “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship”, and a person who performs domestic work only occasionally or sporadically and not on an occupational basis is not a domestic worker.

A domestic worker is any individual, whether employed directly or indirectly, involved in domestic work, including cooking, cleaning, gardening, caretaking of children, elderly or sick persons, driving vehicles, laundry and being a watchman. Domestic work only qualifies the nature of work and does not impose situational limitations, such as household premises [24]. A Domestic worker is a person who is engaged on a part-time or full-time basis in domestic service, and the worker receives remuneration periodically in cash or kind for a fixed period from the employer or employer [11]. Nowadays, these workers are engaged in child care and housework. Most of the domestic workers are considered to be illiterate, poor, and unskilled and come from vulnerable communities and backward areas. These workers are also included in unorganized labour. They face long hours and difficult working conditions with only low wages [11].

Domestic service has been seen to have been conducted through centuries. While everyone in their own homes does domestic work, some consider this service an occupation in which domestic work is done in several or a single household in exchange for something. In the beginning, in countries like ancient Greece, Rome and other early civilizations, domestic service was done by particular persons who were influenced and controlled by the owners without pay. But in medieval Europe, the labour force was provided by a group of people called serfs. They were made to live and work on the land and were sometimes legally part of the land. By the late 19th century, domestic services came to be done by wage earners in the United States and most European countries.

In Victorian England, Domestic Service was an occupation for both males and females. There was a hierarchy of positions in regard to the service provided, and a worker could work their way up from the lower position to the highest. A man can go from a groom to a valet and then to a butler and a steward; likewise, a woman can go from a scullery maid to a cook or then to chambermaid and housekeeper. The well-to-do families in the region had a staff of 6 or more domestic workers. During this time, the number of paid domestic workers increased. In the United States, the middle and upper-class families who could afford household help have employed domestic workers. However, since the 1920s, domestic service as an occupation has been declining in Western and European countries due to the low status of the work and increased job opportunities.

Early in India, when the Varna system was followed, Sudras were a community of people who practised domestic work. With little protection, they were vulnerable and were made to do the services in a domestic household. Many of these domestic works were seen to be done by women, like sweeping, cleaning, washing etc. It can also be seen that almost all the kingdoms, queens, and princesses would have female attendants aiding them in everything. They work for free or for some wages and sometimes for exchange of goods and products. These domestic servants are bound to listen to their employers. With the entry of the Mughal empire, domestic servants were given wages for the work they did as personal attendants, houseguards, drink servers, water men, keepers of wardrobes, cooks, etc. Various duties were assigned to the female workers with monthly paid salary. Some even worked as supervisors of other maids and workers. Along with the salary, some earned privileges, such as getting food from the kitchen and gifts on special occasions. Based on the nature and quality of work, the salaries were paid [26]. Servant hierarchies drawn by the Mughals were then reformed in the colonial period through strict regulations. People with every status had workers working below them, and the ones working has also some help from workers in completing the domestic chores.

In the colonial period, there were workers in both the rich native houses and European households. Rarely, some of the workers have also learned to read and write while working in the households of clerks, writers, copyists or language instructors. In the 18th century, there were two professional groups of servants, namely the upper class, which consisted of clerks, firm managers and secretaries and the other of stewards, butlers and head cooks who performed the domestic services [33]. In addition to them, some workers worked as table attendants, bearers, cooks, washermen, horse groomers, sweepers, cleaners, grass cutters, water carriers, gardeners and doorkeepers. In the early 19th century, there were more male domestic workers and very few female workers in European households. At the same time, in the native households there would be usual female workers [33].

In this period, female servants were considered to be marginal or invisible, and as their work was mostly domestic, it was unseen and considered unproductive. Their work was given little or less value. These domestic workers were involved in the housekeeping of the employer's household. The British Empire needed men and women to do manual work in households and

public institutions for an exchange of wages. These workers moved in and out of the house and performed work in offices and households [33].

In India, it has been estimated by ILO that there are at least 4 million domestic workers across the nation. Many domestic workers are unregulated, and the work as an enormous economic activity employs workers with low literacy levels who have turned down or have been turned down in agriculture, manufacturing and other sectors. With no proper reputation, it is considered menial work in exchange for some amount [31]. The services provided by the domestic workers are not recognized as real work and the workers are being defined as “those employed by private households to perform reproductive and nurturant service tasks [1]. With the growing urban middle class, the demand for domestic workers might seem to be increasing [24]. Domestic workers can be mainly classified as:

- Domestic employees
- Live-in domestic employees
- Live-out domestic employees
- Domestic workers employed by service providers
- Domestic service providers employed for profit

Domestic employees: All workers engaged directly as employees of households to provide services mainly for conception by the household members, irrespective of the nature of services provided. **Live in** – The place of work and living will be the same and might be provided by the employer along with accommodation and food. They don't return to their home after work and live in the same premises, close to or next to the employer's house and work full time for the same employer [7]. **Live out** They live outside the premises of the employers, and they provide services and alternate between the place of work and place of residence. One of the two types of live-out domestic workers is that they work for a whole day in a single house and go back to their homes after work. In another type, they work in different houses on the same day, and sometimes they visit the same house twice a day [16].

Domestic workers employed by Service Providers – Employed by the Economic units, the services are provided in a Multi-party employment arrangement in Private households. Domestic service providers employed for profit- They are Independent workers, Dependent contractors or contributing family workers who provide services to Private households. The domestic worker can also be classified as a part-time, full time or live worker; where a person who works for more than one employer for certain hours per day or performs specific tasks every day for multiple employers is known as a part-time domestic worker and the one who works for single employer every day for a specified amount of time and returns home after work is known as a full-time domestic worker. The live-in domestic worker works for a single employer and stays in the same premises as the employer [7].

Women mostly identify the domain of domestic work as females predominate the paid domestic work; at the same time, men can be seen in the live-in paid domestic work [29]. On hold majority of domestic workers a poor health care, pension provisions, no maternity leave, lower wages, and fewer benefits, and only a very few have labour contracts. They also have less legal, social, and security protection. Due to the low formal skills and educational levels, poor bargaining power and vulnerable social status, they are considered to be one of the lowest-paying jobs in the labour market. Husband's alcoholism, irregular work, and low wages encourage some women to seek employment in this field. Some women felt that, this work provides them flexibility to fix their work schedule based on their personal and family commitments rather than personal convenience. They find most of the work in their neighbourhood which is seen as an advantage in comparison to other employments [8].

Though the numbers of domestic workers are increasing, their living conditions are uncertain in urban slums. Low education, economic resources, family financial crises, and certain situations a reasons women have been compelled to become domestic workers and are constantly growing in urban India. They are subjected to a lack of economic security and are urged to continue working in spite of illness injury for the economic needs of their family. With long working hours, lack of proper information on safety and access to it, poor living conditions, and sometimes delayed payment of wages, work-related health like injuries and illness can be observed.

Many workers have irregular working hours, which reduces their self-care of themselves due to disturbed sleeping conditions and food intake [19]. The heavy, restless work done by domestic workers results in severe backache, aching limbs, and skin infections; in cases where domestic workers have inadequate access to drinking water, weather conditions and no provisions by the employers, the health condition is deteriorating with instances of kidney stones, early menopause, irregular menstrual cycles, acute anaemia and acute urinary problems. Along with the physical impacts, the workers also suffer from mental stress, sleeplessness, fear and severe headaches. Excessive supervision by employers also results in stressful and unsatisfied work environments. Domestic workers become vulnerable to the lack of formal skilling and the absence of social protection and sometimes migrate to better places to find work. They face unregulated working hours and working conditions and are underpaid. They are seen with prejudice, and their skills are not recognized. The work is considered unskilled, the work done is undervalued, and the workers are faced with several difficulties [8].

Certain (economic) situations lead domestic workers to engage in their field of work. The reason for this choice of work might be in order to accomplish financial independence. Some domestic workers migrate from their native (rural) to urban and semi-urban areas for this very reason, with the hope of a better future. In spite of that, they are not recognized and paid enough for their hard work. No system ensures minimum wages to workers and uniform wage patterns for them [12]. Subject to maltreatment in the workplace, the self-esteem of domestic workers is impaired, and they are put in a place where they may not have the chance to raise their voices and, as a result, face problems both in their home and work environment [20]. With legal protection and regulated salaries for their work, domestic workers can be helped and empowered, and it has become a necessity to have access to organizations that aid in the betterment of their lives [15]. Having little education and technical skills, domestic workers do not have any other job opportunities and realize the need for additional income apart from the husbands come into this line of work.

Receiving low wages and participating in multifarious activities, domestic workers are faced with problems such as a lack of decent wages, work conditions, no uniform benefits, etc. The household services provided by the domestic workers are not considered real work and are seen as menial [7]. The work done by the domestic workers associated with the social stigma is considered degrading [8]. In certain parts of India, it has become a necessity to hire a domestic worker for middle-class and lower-middle-class families, with the disappearance of the social infrastructure of support in urban nuclear families. With many women in urban areas seeking employment, the chores in the household are passed on to the paid domestic workers. Bhattacharya et al. [8] live and work in a substandard condition, most usually have no maternity leave, health care provision or pension provisions and tend to work longer hours for a meagre pay [7]. In comparison to their male counterparts, the wages of female domestic workers are low, and they rarely gain extra wages for high workloads. Along with the regular day-to-day work, they are given extra heavy work on special occasions.

With a lack of proper holidays, ill-treatment and physical torture, domestic workers have little time to rest and face work-life imbalance, social invisibility and discrimination. With economic backwardness as a major problem, they suffer from poor working conditions and inadequate legal protection. Working in an informal sector, domestic workers are seldom organized and accept the wages they receive without complaint, as there are workers who do the job for the same amount. While the problems faced in the domestic service are many, their income is the lowest among all the informal sector categories. Living a monotonous life, they see the struggle in every aspect of life and have a high possibility of feeling insecure. With increasing working hours, the contribution to their own family and the time spent with them considerably reduces.

In some cases, domestic workers have good relationships and trust with their employers and at those times, they get value for the work they do. Domestic work, when done by anyone, is undervalued, and when performed by a paid worker the value is even lower and results in low remuneration. Bhattacharya et al. [8] provided better and decent working conditions and the domestic workers seemed satisfied with the job. Higher job satisfaction in the domestic service can be seen mostly in the live-in domestic workers than the live out domestic workers [5]. The working hours of the domestic workers are made at their convenience, and elderly workers come to work and arrange their schedule based on their duties and the amount of rest they seek, while younger workers go to work when children are at school and work with multiple employers. Extra remuneration for additional work is gained depending on the employer. On special occasions and festival seasons, certain employers also provide them with bonuses and gifts [8].

In certain cases, it can also be seen that domestic workers do not want their children to come into and have the same occupation as them. They provide their children with education and support them in getting a better standard of living. With little and less awareness about the rights and regulations available to them, the difficulties they face in the workplace are not made better. In 1959 Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill and in 1989 House Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill were passed to regulate the services done by domestic workers. Still, this attempt failed to bring in more considerations and was never enacted [24]. The clauses included in the bill were for maximum hours in work, minimum wages, rest, paid and casual leave, and a register maintained by the local police. Two private member bills were introduced in the years 1972 and 1977 on domestic workers (conditions of service) under the industrial disputes act, but they too were not enacted [27]. The Domestic Work and services excluded from the Payment of Wages Act (1936), Workers Compensation Act (1923), Minimum Wages Act (1948), Contact Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act (1970), and Maternity Benefit Act (1961), there are only a few legislations passed by the government concerning the welfare and interests of domestic workers [7].

The government has prohibited boys and girls under the age of 14 from being employed as domestic workers under the Child Labour Act. The government of India has also added minor domestic workers to the list of hazardous child labour (2006); child workers below the age of 18 have also been rescued to some extent by the Juvenile Justice Act (2000). Domestic work, being an unorganized sector, has not benefited from the labour legislation. In order to provide social security for unorganized workers, including domestic workers, the central government of India enacted the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act in 2008. The act has social security schemes like Life and disability cover, health and maternity benefits and old age protection by the central government of India. Under the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act (2008), the central government of India has mandated the state governments to formulate suitable schemes for domestic workers relating to provident funds, employment injury benefits, housing, and educational schemes for children. Skill development program for domestic workers, financial

assistance and nursing homes.

Even after a decade of enactment of the Social Security Act, domestic workers have not completely benefited from this and the act itself, and the provisions are unknown to many. Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna (RSBY) scheme was established under the act, providing a state-sponsored insurance scheme and medical benefits. Domestic workers have also been included in the harassment of women in the workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013), stating that domestic workers will be protected by the district-level grievance redressal mechanism that provides monetary compensation through the local complaints committee. But despite the efforts, there are many loopholes and inadequate provisions in the act, and those that exist are unknown or unimplemented. The Tamil Nadu Domestic Workers Welfare Board, established by the Tamil Nadu State government in January 2007 by bringing domestic workers under the Tamil Nadu Manual Wages Act, 1982 (Tamil Nadu Act), has separated the administration concerning domestic that avail benefits like education assistance, marriage assistance, delivery assistance, accidental death and pension. However, there was criticism of poor awareness of the board and consequent low registration under the Tamil Nadu Act [24].

According to the Domestic Workers Welfare and Social Security Act 2010, the working conditions along with the wage/payment, duration, and time of the rest of the domestic workers are regulated, and penalties are given in relation to the offences. The ministries of the Indian government have also provided various social security schemes such as National Old Age Pension Scheme and National Family Benefit Scheme by the Ministry of Rural Development, Janani Suraksha Yojana and Ayushman Bharat by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Aam Aadmi Bima Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana by the Ministry of Labor and Employment, and Domestic Workers Sectors Skills Council by Ministry of Skill development. In the aim to safeguard the interest of domestic workers, The Ministry of Labour and Employment (government of India) has introduced a National Policy for Domestic Workers recognizing the importance and problems of domestic workers. The features of the act include registering domestic workers as unorganized workers so that they will facilitate their rights and benefits, giving them the right to form associations/unions, providing them Minimum Wage Rights and the Right to enhance their skills, protecting them from abuse and exploitation, establishing grievance redressal system for domestic workers, Giving the right to have access to courts, tribunals for grievance redressal and establishing private placement agencies for them [7].

2. Literature Review

Beri [7] elaborated on the roles and importance of domestic workers in India; this research talks about public policy in helping domestic workers. Some articles have briefly explained the conditions and issues of the domestic workers in their workplace, personal life, and family life and also in the society. Here some articles we acknowledged are reviewed as follows. Beri [7] studied the socio-economic conditions of female domestic workers and explored their problems and issues of them. Sharmila [32] presented case studies of domestic workers revealing the living conditions and the problems at their workplace and home. Another study on migrant domestic workers by Anjara et al. [3] focused on stress, health and quality of life of migrant domestic workers and concluded that migrant domestic workers have an overall good quality of life. Anjara et al. [3] are satisfied with their health. Sharmila [32] states that 35% of domestic workers undergo moderate-level stress. More than 10% were severely stressed, whereas migrant domestic workers have fairly low stress, have better living, and were also well adapted to the situation compared to non-migrant domestic workers.

Another study by Madhumati [18] investigates female domestic workers and their working situation with conditions like low pay, long working hours and absence of job security. In a study to identify “the Impact of Work-Life of women domestic workers on their Family-Life”, it was found that unfixed work time and wages affect the family life and personal life of domestic workers [38]. In addition to the above-mentioned problems of domestic workers, the role of caste of domestic workers was also found to play a role in the determination of labour and task division for them [8]. Based on several studies on the working/living conditions of domestic workers, researchers suggested arrangements to improve the social status and better living environment. Thilaka [31] suggested educational training programs and general health camps to promote the standard of living of domestic workers. An initiative could be taken by central welfare boards, national commissions and state commissions for their upliftment.

Similar to the studies mentioned earlier, Augustine & Singh [4] highlight the need for recognition of domestic work in society and the importance of implementing the Minimum Wages Act, the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act and the protection of human rights to improve the conditions of female domestic workers. Research that explored domestic workers' working pattern and their knowledge of domestic workers about the government's special scheme suggested that the Government and non-governmental organizations educate domestic workers so that their economic status of poor can be changed in the future. Studies found that the workplace conditions and exploitation were due to the poor economic and education conditions of domestic workers [34].

Few studies that explained the employer-employee relationships and inequalities faced by domestic workers suggested governmental initiatives to resolve it [14]; [30]. Contrasting to the above articles, Lazar [17] reported that conditions of domestic

work were better compared to other districts in India and also highlighted that domestic workers in Thrissur district are paid high and are treated well. It traces multiple aspects of women's domestic workers' occupation, location from home and other laws for domestic workers.

Parallel to the above articles, Bhattacharya et al. [8] gave a detailed explanation of the benefits and difficulties in organization for domestic workers in their report. Some studies have also explored the coping strategies of domestic workers. For instance, Bosmans et al. [10] and Barua et al. [6] studied the negotiation strategies used by domestic workers to challenge the boundaries and distinctions set between them and their employers. They concluded that negotiations of domestic workers were mostly hidden transcripts, and some situations for them resulted in open confrontations with their employers.

A study exploring the physical, psychological, cognitive, linguistic, and emotional development among the children of domestic workers suggested providing formal education and vocational course training to both the domestic workers and their children [35]. While there exist numerous studies focused on domestic workers' lives, the present work will study the various aspects of domestic workers' lives like their everyday living, work, challenges and the impact of their work on their daily lives. Overall, these studies collectively shed light on the multifaceted challenges and contexts of domestic workers' lives, advocating for improved social support, legal protections, and educational opportunities to enhance their well-being and societal recognition.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to understand and explore the daily lives of domestic workers, including their everyday living conditions, work, and the impact of these activities on their daily lives. The specific objective is to uncover the often unnoticed aspects of the lives of women domestic workers and to explore various dimensions of their experiences.

3.2. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing the semi-structured interview method.

3.3. Methodology: Qualitative Inquiry Approach

The qualitative interview approach provides in-depth insight into the everyday lives of domestic workers. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to elicit rich, detailed information that cannot be obtained through structured interviews. This method allows for the exploration of various aspects of domestic workers' lives, providing a depth of understanding unique to qualitative research. Both face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted to gather data. Face-to-face interviews optimize communication by incorporating both verbal and non-verbal cues, while telephone interviews ensure accessibility for elderly participants and those living in geographically remote areas [21].

3.4. Selection of Research Subjects/Samples

A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for this study, which typically involves smaller sample sizes compared to quantitative research. An inductive process was used to gather data, enabling the construction of various theories. The sample size for this study comprised 24 participants from Erode and Coimbatore. The sample selection was guided by convenience and specific study goals, employing the snowball technique. This sample size was considered appropriate for the research. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via telephone in the participants' localities or workplaces (Figure 1).

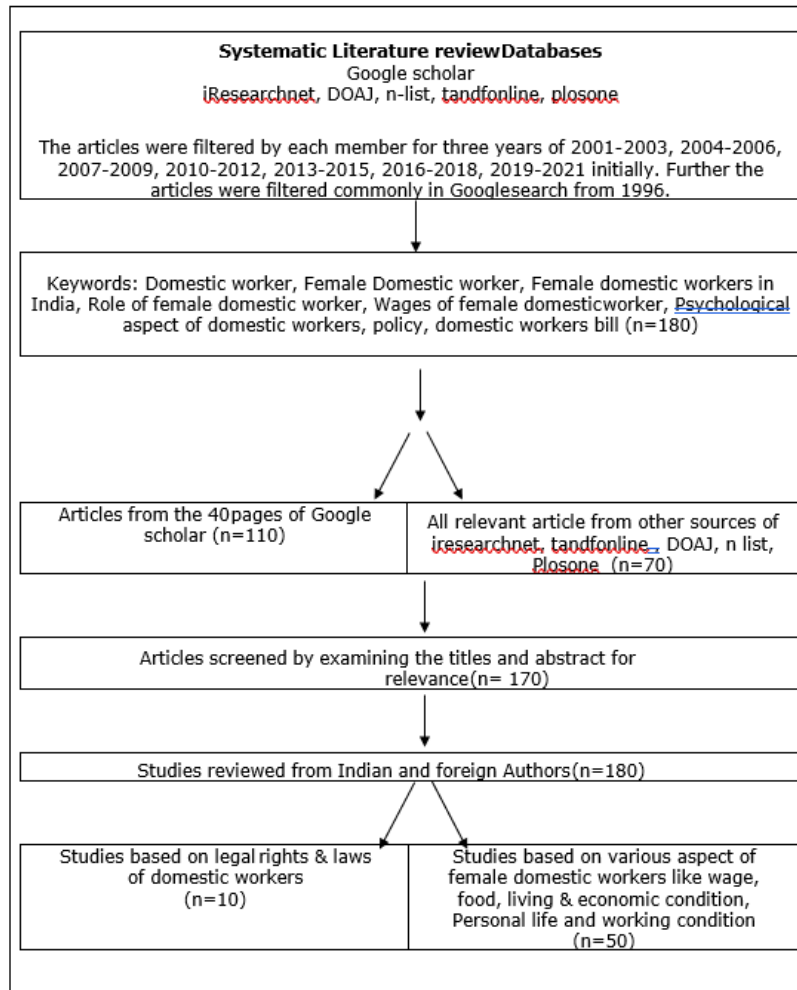


Figure 1: Literature Review –Flowchart

3.5. Sampling Technique

The sampling techniques used were purposive, convenient, and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria for the sample were women domestic workers with at least one year of work experience, aged 18 years and above, and willing to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were female domestic workers below 18 years of age and those with less than one year of work experience (Table 1).

Table 1: The Variables of The Particles

Social Variables	Category	Number Of Participants
Age	20-30	6
	31-40	3
	41-50	6
	51-60	4
	61-70	5
Education	No education	9
	Lower primary education	6
	Upper primary education	5
	Secondary education	3

	Higher secondary school	2
Marital Status	Married	15
	Widow	8
	Separated	1
Family Type	Nuclear family	9
	Joint family	10
	Lives alone	5
Number Of Households The Participants Work	1	8
	2	9
	3	1
	4	1
	6	4
	7	1
Job Experience	1-5 years	5
	6-10 years	7
	11-15 years	2
	16-20 years	2
	20-25 years	4
	25-30 years	1
	30-35 years	1
	35-40 years	1
Salary	1000-2000	5
	2001-3000	3
	3001-4000	2
	4001-5000	3
	5001-6000	3
	6001-7000	2
	7001-8000	2
	8001-9000	1
	9001-10,000	2
	11,000-12,000	1

4. Procedure

Participants were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring the representation of women domestic workers in Erode and Coimbatore districts. Each participant was informed about the research purpose, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Initial contact was made either directly or via phone. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit detailed responses, providing insights into various dimensions of domestic workers' lives. Individual interviews, conducted in a semi-structured format resembling conversations rather than rigid questioning, lasted, on average, between 60 to 150 minutes. This approach encouraged participants to share multiple perspectives and engage actively, allowing for both verbal and non-verbal communication cues to be observed (Figure 2).

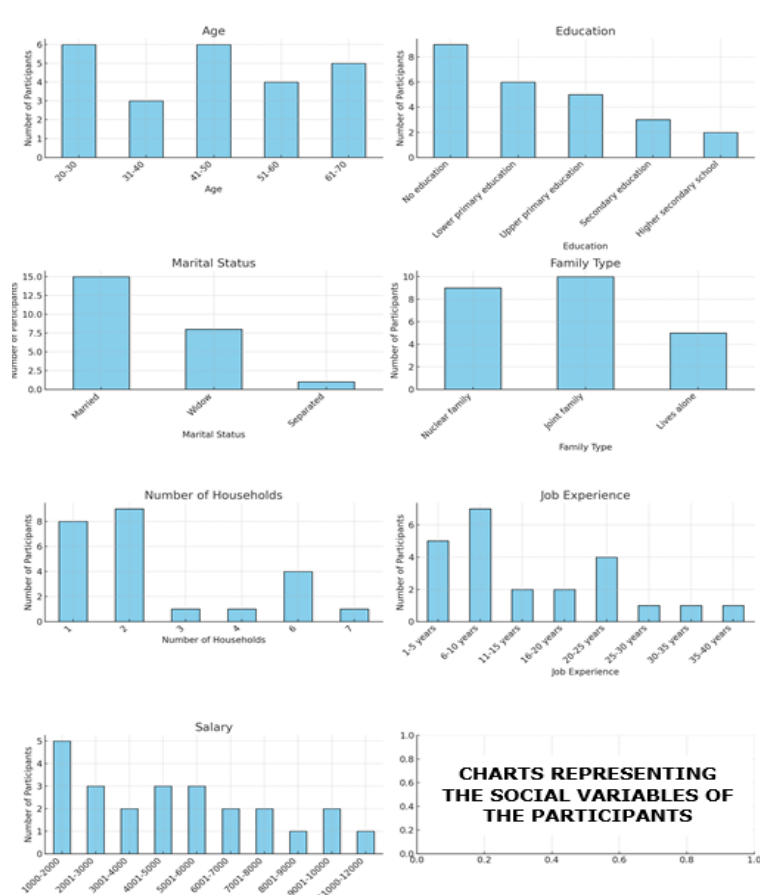


Figure 2: The social variables of the participants

Data collection sessions varied: most participants completed interviews in a single session, while one participant required two sessions and another four sessions, combining face-to-face and phone interviews. Four participants were interviewed solely via phone, while the rest were interviewed in person. Follow-up contacts were made as necessary to clarify information. The semi-structured open-ended questions covered the following dimensions:

Childhood	Sleep schedule	Hobbies
Family	Health	Motivation
Education	Well-being	Aspirations
Nativity	Type of Work	Daily routine
Children's lives	Perception of Work	Living conditions
Reasons for working	Employee's nature	Economic situation
Working conditions	Employer-employee relationships	Earnings
Transportation	Problems encountered	Loans/debts and finances
Time management	Benefits received	Job satisfaction
Vacation and leave	Work-life balance	Available support systems
Food habits		

5. Result and Discussion

Domestic work represents a significant yet often marginalized sector of the labour force, characterized by diverse challenges and varying perceptions among workers. This study aims to provide insights into the lives of domestic workers in the Coimbatore and Erode districts, exploring their experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations.

5.1. Quality of Life

The lives of domestic workers vary significantly from childhood to the present. For some, domestic work has been a lifelong occupation due to family circumstances, while others entered the field later in life out of necessity. Despite facing numerous

challenges, domestic workers manage their responsibilities at work and home, balancing economic needs with personal well-being. The responses gathered through semi-structured interviews provide diverse perspectives on their roles and shed light on various aspects of their lives.

5.2. Self-Perception Of Work

Domestic work, characterized by irregular hours, varied salaries, diverse workloads across households, and complex employer-employee dynamics, is perceived differently among workers. According to the interviews, 10 (42%) participants viewed domestic work as a necessity for survival, driven by financial constraints and limited job opportunities. Conversely, 3 (13%) participants expressed satisfaction with their occupation, finding fulfilment in their roles. Those who entered domestic work willingly often cited the opportunity for additional income and a sense of purpose [17]. Despite societal stigma, many long-term workers do not view their occupation as undignified. Responses also reflected resignation to their circumstances, with statements like "...There is no other work available to us" (5, 21%) and "...Every honest job is equally respectable" (3, 13%).

5.3. Reason For Work

Participants cited various reasons for entering domestic work, including financial support for family needs, children's education, personal independence, and as an alternative to loneliness or unemployment. Economic necessity was a primary driver for 6 (25%) participants, who felt they had no other viable options [13]. The nature of domestic work, accommodating to those with minimal education and offering a steady income, appealed to many [31]. Previous occupations included agricultural labour, cattle rearing, and various industrial jobs, reflecting diverse pre-domestic work experiences among participants.

5.4. Types of Works

Domestic work encompasses a wide range of tasks, from cooking and cleaning to childcare and eldercare. While 12 (50%) participants indicated no preference for specific tasks, others expressed enjoyment in activities like cooking and interacting with children [17]. Many participants had prior experience in agricultural or industrial sectors before transitioning to domestic work, often balancing multiple jobs concurrently. The perceived simplicity and low value associated with domestic tasks often overlook the physical and emotional labour involved, impacting worker recognition and societal perception.

5.5. Childhood

Childhood experiences varied among participants, with 16 (67%) recalling happy and carefree times, while others began working early due to familial responsibilities or financial need. Of those who worked since childhood, opinions were divided, with some feeling a sense of duty and others expressing hardship [9]. Childhood memories included playing traditional games and assisting with household chores or family businesses, shaping their early perceptions of work and responsibility.

5.6. Education And Skills

The education levels among the participants varied significantly, reflecting socioeconomic constraints. Only 2 (8%) respondents completed higher secondary education, while 3 (13%) completed secondary education. A majority of 9 (38%) participants had no formal education, and 11 (46%) had received only primary education. Economic factors and family situations were cited as primary reasons for limited education, which sometimes influenced their entry into domestic work [25]. Participants displayed a range of talents and skills, including cooking, cleanliness, garland-making, oration, dancing, drawing, ironing, paper art, origami, fruit carving, stitching, and mental calculations. There was evident enthusiasm and pride when discussing these talents. Some expressed aspirations beyond domestic work, such as teaching, tailoring, embroidery, agricultural work, and running a hand cart shop. A notable 13% expressed satisfaction with their current work, while 29% desired to be homemakers. Others had not yet decided on their future aspirations.

5.7. Family Life

Regarding family structure, 9 (38%) participants lived in nuclear families, while 10 (42%) lived in joint families. Four participants (17%) lived alone, and one (4%) worked as a live-in domestic worker at their employer's residence, often due to being widowed. Despite living alone, these participants actively engaged with their families, visiting children and grandchildren during free time and participating in family celebrations. 10 (42%) participants reported daily interactions with grandchildren, while 8 (33%) expressed difficulty in finding time due to their own and their family members' busy schedules. Several participants (25%) lamented the lack of leisure time, citing exhaustion from work. However, many managed to spend time with family daily, engaging in activities like cooking together or conversing in the evenings. Domestic tasks were often shared

among family members, especially children, who helped with chores like fetching water and washing dishes. Support from family members varied, with some experiencing respect and assistance, while others faced challenges due to disapproval from spouses or conflicts arising from work commitments.

5.8. Employer-Employee Relationship

In the workplace, 14 (58%) participants felt integrated as family members by their employers, enhancing job satisfaction. However, 10 (42%) reported discriminatory treatment and disrespect, reflecting societal attitudes that devalue domestic work [23]. Some participants (25%) faced undue scrutiny and restrictions at work, such as exclusion from religious ceremonies or using separate utensils. A positive relationship with employers significantly influenced participants' job satisfaction and work quality. Clear communication and mutual respect were pivotal for maintaining a harmonious work environment. Instances of unfair treatment or excessive demands led to dissatisfaction and strained relationships, often mitigated through indirect communication strategies [6]. The terms of address used within households reflected hierarchical dynamics: employers typically addressed workers by name, "amma," or "akka" (older sister), while workers addressed employers as "amma," "aiya" (sir), or by adding "amma" to the employer's daughter's name. Children in the households used respectful terms like "aunty," "paati" (grandmother), or "aatha" (mother). However, in some contexts, the term "maid" was used pejoratively when referring to domestic workers in external conversations.

5.9. Working Conditions

The working conditions of domestic workers in Erode and Coimbatore districts vary significantly, reflecting both positive and challenging aspects of their employment. Nearly 38% of participants noted that the households they work in are generally neat and clean. However, an equal proportion (38%) reported encountering unclean environments that required their cleaning efforts. Moreover, only 58% of participants mentioned having access to toilet facilities at their workplaces. This disparity highlights the varied nature of the working environments these workers encounter. Transportation to work predominantly involves walking for 75% of the participants, while others use employer-provided transport, public transportation, cycles or are dropped off by their husbands. One participant mentioned reliance on an office boy provided by the employer for transport, illustrating the diverse methods used to commute [21]. Obstacles faced by domestic workers include managing heavy workloads both at home and in the workplace, societal undervaluation of their work, challenges in childcare management, health issues, familial concerns, and occasional salary reductions due to employer bargaining. Some participants also cited delays caused by neighbours requesting errands en route to work, adding to their time management challenges [23]. Discrimination, lack of respect for their work, strict supervision, and additional unpaid tasks were common grievances expressed by participants. These issues contribute to a stressful work environment where workers feel undervalued and unfairly treated [28].

Despite these challenges, approximately 38% of participants expressed satisfaction with their workplaces, where they are treated as part of the family. This positive relationship mitigates some of the hardships faced, indicating that interpersonal dynamics play a crucial role in job satisfaction among domestic workers. During festival seasons, workloads increase significantly for 54% of respondents, accompanied by longer working hours. While some households provide additional compensation or gifts during festivals, others do not, highlighting inconsistencies in employer practices [30].

Food and Sleep: Participants' food habits vary widely based on their work schedules. Many reported consuming meals at regular intervals, either preparing food provided by employers or eating at home between tasks. Some noted skipping meals during busy periods, underscoring the irregularity imposed by their job demands. Sleep patterns also varied among participants, with most averaging about 7 hours of sleep per day. However, the quality and timing of sleep were influenced by the workload and personal circumstances. Some participants mentioned sleeping immediately after work due to exhaustion, while others struggled to find time for adequate rest amidst their responsibilities [4].

Health issue: Domestic workers in Coimbatore and Erode districts face various health challenges predominantly related to their work conditions. The most common issues reported include body pain (42%), fatigue, back pain, knee aches, headaches (all 42%), and respiratory problems exacerbated by dust exposure. Additionally, 17% of participants have diabetes, 13% from low blood pressure, and smaller percentages from asthma, skin problems, and hearing loss. The prevalence of asthma (8%) among participants may be linked to prolonged exposure to cleaning products containing bleach and ammonia [22]. Psychologically, domestic workers experience stress, fatigue, feelings of detachment, loneliness, and stress-related behaviours such as aggressive outbursts. Some express profound existential concerns, reflecting on the emotional toll and dependency on work for their identity and survival. These issues underscore the complex interplay between work demands, physical health, and mental well-being among domestic workers [17].

Coping Mechanisms: Participants employ various coping strategies to manage workplace and personal challenges. These include reliance on faith for emotional support and resilience, seeking solace through prayer, crying as a release mechanism, and maintaining a positive outlook despite adversity [36]; [37].

Benefits Received: Despite the challenges, some domestic workers receive non-monetary benefits from employers, including clothing, food, educational support for children, and occasional medical assistance. These gestures foster a sense of belonging and support among workers, although such benefits vary greatly across households [23].

Motivation and Goals: Motivations for continuing in domestic work often revolve around economic independence, supporting children's education, and achieving financial stability. Participants express aspirations such as homeownership, securing their children's future, and overcoming financial debts. However, there is a generational reluctance to encourage offspring to enter the same profession, highlighting broader societal perceptions of domestic work.

Economic Conditions: Financially, domestic workers face irregular and inadequately compensated wages, often dictated by the variability of tasks and employers' economic status. Many express dissatisfaction with low wages and the lack of standardized pay structures. Economic pressures compel them to manage household expenses meticulously, often without savings for emergencies or retirement [13]; [30].

Debts and Financial Management: To meet immediate needs, participants resort to loans from informal sources like moneylenders, friends, or employers. However, debt repayment poses a significant challenge, affecting their financial stability and perpetuating cycles of financial dependence [23].

Awareness of Support Organizations: Despite the existence of support organizations and government schemes aimed at assisting domestic workers, the majority of participants are unaware of these resources. Limited awareness reflects barriers such as perceived high workload in joining organizations, misinformation about salary distribution, and concerns over loss of autonomy [4] (Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of the Key Findings

Category	Findings
Quality of Life	Domestic workers' lives vary from childhood to the present; Work is often a lifelong occupation. Challenges include balancing economic needs with personal well-being.
Self-Perception of Work	42% see it as a necessity for survival; 13% find fulfilment in work; 21% feel resigned to their circumstances; 13% believe every honest job is respectable.
Reasons for Work	25% driven by economic necessity; Work is suitable for those with minimal education.
Types of Work	50% have no task preference; Some enjoy cooking and childcare. Previous experience in agricultural or industrial sectors; Previous jobs included agricultural labour, cattle rearing, and industrial work
Childhood	67% recall happy childhoods; Some worked from childhood out of necessity. Childhood involved traditional games and assisting with household chores.
Education and Skills	8% completed higher secondary education, 13% completed secondary education, 46% had primary education, and 38% had no formal education. Skills include cooking, dancing, stitching, etc.
Family Life	38% live in nuclear families, 42% live in joint families, 17% live alone, 42% engage with grandchildren daily. Family support varies, with some facing disapproval from spouses.
Employer-Employee Relationship	58% feel integrated as family members; 42% experience discriminatory treatment; Positive relationships enhance job satisfaction; Hierarchical terms of address reflect societal dynamics.
Working Conditions	38% work in neat environments, 38% in unclean ones, 58% have access to toilet facilities, 75% walk to Work, Face heavy workloads, undervaluation, and societal stigma.
Food and Sleep	Meal patterns vary with work schedules; Most get around 7 hours of sleep. Quality of sleep is affected by workload and personal circumstances.
Health Issues	Common issues: body pain, fatigue, back pain, knee ache, headaches, respiratory problems. 17% have diabetes; Psychological stress is common.

Category	Findings
Coping Mechanisms	Faith, prayer, crying, and a positive outlook are common coping strategies.
Benefits Received	Some receive clothing, food, educational support, and medical assistance from employers.
Motivation and Goals	Motivations include economic independence and supporting children's education. Goals include homeownership and financial stability. Reluctance to encourage offspring to enter domestic work.
Economic Conditions	Wages are irregular and inadequately compensated. Many lack savings for emergencies or retirement.
Debts and Financial Management	Loans from informal sources are common. Debt repayment is a significant challenge, affecting financial stability.
Awareness of Support Organizations	Limited awareness of support organizations and government schemes. Barriers include high workload, misinformation, and concerns over loss of autonomy.

6. Findings and Conclusion

The study explores the multifaceted lives of domestic workers in the Coimbatore and Erode districts, providing insights into their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared diverse perspectives on their work, revealing nuanced insights into their quality of life, self-perception of work, reasons for entering the profession, types of tasks performed, childhood experiences, educational backgrounds, family dynamics, and interactions with employers. The findings underscored the economic necessity that often drives individuals to domestic work despite varying levels of satisfaction and societal stigma associated with the profession. Participants demonstrated a range of talents and aspirations beyond their current roles, yet many faced health issues and workplace challenges, including discrimination and irregular working conditions. Despite these adversities, positive relationships with employers and occasional non-monetary benefits were highlighted as sources of satisfaction. However, systemic issues such as inadequate wages, limited access to support organizations, and financial vulnerabilities persistently impact their lives. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of domestic workers' realities, emphasizing the need for improved labour conditions, societal recognition, and targeted support mechanisms.

6.1. Research Implications

- **Policy and Advocacy:** The study underscores the need for tailored policies that recognize the unique challenges faced by domestic workers. Policies should focus on improving working conditions, ensuring fair wages, and addressing discrimination in the workplace. Advocacy efforts should aim to destigmatize domestic work and promote societal respect for these occupations.
- **Health and Well-being:** Given the prevalent health issues reported among domestic workers, including physical ailments and stress-related conditions, there is a critical need for health interventions. Initiatives could include occupational health programs, access to healthcare facilities, and education on preventive health measures to mitigate the impact of job-related health risks.
- **Education and Skill Development:** With a significant portion of participants having limited formal education, there is a call for educational programs tailored to adult learners. Skill development initiatives can empower workers to diversify their skills beyond domestic tasks, potentially opening avenues for career advancement or alternative employment opportunities.
- **Employer-Employee Relations:** Promoting positive employer-employee relationships is crucial for enhancing job satisfaction and productivity among domestic workers. Training programs for employers on fair labour practices, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication can foster respectful workplace environments.
- **Social Support and Community Engagement:** Many participants expressed limited awareness of support organizations and government schemes. Efforts should focus on improving access to information about available resources, facilitating community support networks, and empowering workers to seek assistance without fear of repercussions.
- **Gender and Social Equality:** Addressing gender dynamics within domestic work is essential, particularly concerning wage disparities, job security, and recognition of unpaid care work. Policies should aim to promote gender equality within households and workplaces, challenging traditional norms that undervalue women's labour.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Enhancing economic opportunities for domestic workers through fair wages, financial literacy programs, and access to microfinance initiatives can contribute to their financial stability and independence. Efforts should also focus on reducing dependency on informal loans and improving financial management skills.

- **Cultural and Social Perception:** Changing societal perceptions of domestic work from menial to dignified labour requires targeted educational campaigns and media representation. Highlighting the contributions of domestic workers to households and communities can challenge stereotypes and promote respect for their vital role in society.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Continual research and data collection are necessary to monitor changes in the conditions of domestic workers, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and advocate for evidence-based policies. Longitudinal studies can track improvements or setbacks in their socio-economic status over time.
- **International Comparisons and Best Practices:** Drawing lessons from international best practices in supporting domestic workers can inform local policy developments. Comparative studies can highlight successful interventions and innovative approaches to addressing similar challenges in different contexts.

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