

Original Article

# Domestic work as a job opportunity for economically deprived women: Causes and consequences of being a maidservant

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## Abstract

**Background:** Domestic workers comprise a significant part of the national workforce and serve as the backbone for various families in our society. This community still lives below the poverty line and striving for a better life. This study investigated the factors responsible for women to become domestic workers and identified their problems. Domestic maids' literature is scant, especially in Pakistan; little work is done on the topic, which is an impetus to contribute. It will help in devising some policies for the wellbeing of this economically deprived segment of society.

**Methodology:** This study explores maids' data about demographics, employment, problems, and access to welfare programs. Semi-structured interviews — comprised of closed-ended and open-ended questions — were conducted from 14 domestic maids working in Hyderabad and Jamshoro districts, selected through a convenient sampling technique. The data were analyzed with frequency and crosstabs, and thematic analysis.

**Results:** Old age, extended work experience, lack of education, being married, number of dependents and low income were found the common factor in this occupation. Irresponsible male members, absence of male members, insufficient family income, an accusation of theft, deteriorating health, being overburdened, and non-access to welfare programs were found to be the main problems for housemaids.

**Conclusion:** The elimination of this occupation is not recommended, as they play a very vital role in our society, but a change in attitude and conduct while dealing with maids is suggested. Whereas, there is a need for agencies, which can provide a pool of labour as domestic servants, as both employer and employee rights can be protected.

## Keywords

Maids, Domestic Work, Employment, Problem.

## Introduction

The term Domestic Servants is defined as "those servants who do the cooking, care the children, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cleaning and sweeping the houses in return for the payment of wages"<sup>1</sup>. There are two types of domestic servants; part-time servants and full-time servants. Part-time servants are employed at one or more than one house to perform some definite duties and go away when the assigned work is over; they are not residential helpers. On the other hand, full-time servants are attached to one house only; they are present at the employer's place for the whole day and do whatever work is assigned to them.

It is difficult to gauge the exact number of women in the occupation, as workers in the category have not been enumerated as such by the census. According to International Labor Organization<sup>2</sup>, there are at least 67 million domestic workers worldwide. Though it remains a highly feminized sector, as 80% of all domestic workers are women, one in every 25 women worldwide is a domestic worker. There is a shortage of literature on the topic because of being the informal sector of the economy. Kumar<sup>3</sup> stated that very few studies are conducted about women working in the unorganized sector, and very few are conducted about maidservants. He also identified low wages, insecure jobs and the absence of any law for protecting the interests of maidservants as main drawbacks of domestic workers. Kamalapur<sup>1</sup> identified domestic workers perform domestic chores such as washing, ironing, buying food and drinks, accompanying the household head for grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning the house. For many, their job is taking care of the children, elderly or disabled people, even pets in the household.

Faridi, Chaudhry, and Malik<sup>4</sup> have concluded that there is a short of formal jobs for women in the study area, especially and generally in Pakistan. According to Romero<sup>5</sup>, the general public opined that lack of disciplined work habits and insufficient skills are causes of poor working conditions for domestic workers. Furthermore, they also found that many people claim to treat the maids as

members of their family. Moreover, Sarwar and Abbasi<sup>6</sup> argued that gender inequality is found in employment in Pakistan since men have comparatively promising employment opportunities. In contrast, women have a scant number of vocations they can opt for.

Anderson and Anderson<sup>7</sup> explored differences in employee-employer relation of maid respondents, as some have slave-like conditions, while some don't have any complaint about their employers. Srinivasan and Ilango<sup>8</sup> reported in their study that most of the domestic workers had deteriorated health conditions, while improper housing facility was also a common problem among them. Furthermore, Glenn<sup>9</sup> opined that employers mostly exploit domestic servants. They are discriminated against in terms of age, race, religion, class and language. Cameron<sup>10</sup> reported that many maidservants are immensely frustrated due to abuse and violence at workplaces, even sexual abuse.

According to Constable<sup>11</sup>, domestic maids have no freedom to choose a rest day other than what an employer assigns; hence, they can't plan about their matters and works. Srivastava<sup>12</sup> argued that full-time maids are unable to get rest and leisure. On the other hand, part-time maids are called upon to do some additional work of different nature than that of their own and lured by a pinch of extra benefits. Hence they are hampered in looking after their children and finishing their domestic works. While investigating about female domestic workers of Faisalabad, Nazir<sup>13</sup> found that aged and married domestic workers face more problems as compared to young and unmarried women; whereas monthly income was negatively related to difficulties, which means women who earn more have fewer problems; and education was also identified as to help in the solution of the issues.

Barua, Haukanes and Waldrop<sup>14</sup> viewed that the maids who work for multiple employers would have a bargaining position to negotiate with the employer since they would have the security of their other jobs at other houses if fired from that

house. Smet<sup>15</sup> concluded that domestic servants and their earnings are not enumerated. Therefore they constitute a black economy. Since such work is not part of any payroll system, therefore, it will not be considered a contribution to national income. Neetha<sup>16</sup> argued that although domestic work has brought higher incomes to many women and their families, it is still far from decent work being characterized by long working hours, low wages and hardly any social security, while conducting a study of domestic workers in Delhi. Moors<sup>17</sup> stated that the payments to domestic servants worldwide had risen rapidly. Nevertheless, paid domestic work has still not been considered a prestigious job in most nations.

Meagher<sup>18</sup> opined that household work should be regarded as any other job, requiring recognition and professionalization rather than its elimination. This study sought to explore the problems and other domestic maids' problems as they are an integral part of our society, though not considered worthy and significant. Knowing about them would be an essential contribution to drawing attention and devising some policies for their betterment and wellbeing.

## Methodology

This cross-sectional, observational study was conducted from August 2019 to September 2019, with a sample size of 14. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, having seven closed-ended questions and five open-ended questions. The data were collected at maids' homes, as they can respond comfortably and without any influence. The sample of the study included adult, part-time

housemaids working in Hyderabad and Jamshoro districts. Whereas the full-time housemaids were excluded. The interviews were conducted until the saturation point was met. In this study, saturation occurred around 14 participants. A convenient sampling technique was used for sample selection. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 22.0. frequency, percentages, and thematic analysis were used for data presentation.

## Results & Discussion

The seven closed-ended questions were analyzed with frequency and crosstabs, whereas five open-ended questions, along with their leading questions, were analyzed by developing themes. Majority of the women working as domestic maid belongs to the age bracket of 50-60 years, which is consistent with the findings of Makhdoom<sup>19</sup>. Since this age is old age and requires care and rest, the women working in houses for their livelihood denote their compulsion and urge. Whereas most women have work experience of 5-10 years, and a significant number have work experience of 10-15 years. Hence 10 out of 14 women have work experience of 5-15 years. This means most women have given a big part of their lives working in others' homes. The education level was also inquired. A significant majority of 86% of women were uneducated, as researchers have identified education as the leading cause of being involved in the informal sector of the economy and accepting low-paid and sub-standard work as mentioned by Faridi et al.<sup>4</sup>, Makhdoom<sup>19</sup> and Makhdoom, Bhatti and Shah<sup>20</sup>. Only one out of 14 has attained primary education, while one could not complete the primary education.

**Table 1: Age and years in domestic work**

Age (years)	Work experience (years)			
	1-5	5-10	10-15	≥ 15
20-30	1(7)	1(7)	0(0)	0(0)
30-40	0(0)	1(7)	0(0)	0(0)
40-50	0(0)	1(7)	2(14)	0(0)
50-60	1(7)	1(7)	2(14)	1(7)
≥ 60	0(0)	2(14)	0(0)	1(7)

Values are given as n(%)

It was found that the majority of the domestic maids were found to be married, that is 57%. A significant number was found to be widowed or divorced, that is 36%. Whereas only one woman was unmarried. It shows marital status has a powerful effect on the status of being a maidservant. All of them have many dependents since no one is working for herself, and the majority of them have 3-6 dependents, whereas a significant number has more than six dependents. Hence, it can be concluded that several dependents cause them to be a domestic worker.

**Table 2: Marital status and dependents**

Number of dependents	Marital status		
	Married	Unmarried	Widowed/divorced
None	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)
< 3	1(7)	1(7)	1(7)
3-6	4(28)	0(0)	2(14)
> 6	3(21)	0(0)	2(14)

Values are given as n(%)

Only one out of 14 has a monthly payment above Rs. 16000, whereas all others have less than Rs. 16000. The minimum wage rate in Pakistan is Rs. 17500 for 2019 and 2020; hence, they earn less than the minimum wage rate, even working in more than one house. Only one woman has a monthly income of more than Rs. 16000 is working in one place. Whereas all others were working in several houses and working in five houses, working in five houses would be extremely tiring and exhausting. Moreover, there is no link between the number of houses they work in and monthly income; thus, working in more houses does not increase their income. Neetha16 has also concluded that domestic work is low paid.

**Table 3: Approximate Monthly income and the number of houses they work in.**

Monthly income (PKR)	Number of houses they work in				
	1 house	2 houses	3 houses	4 houses	5 houses
≤4000	1(7)	1(7)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)
4000-8000	1(7)	1(7)	1(7)	0(0)	0(0)
8000-12000	1(7)	2(14)	1(7)	0(0)	0(0)
12000-16000	0(0)	1(7)	1(7)	2(14)	0(0)
≥16000	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	1(7)

Values are given as n(%)

Table 4 shows the respondents' frequency following their work nature in the employers' houses. Six of them were doing any single work (laundry, house cleaning or cooking), while the remaining eight perform multiple tasks. Most of the maids, i.e. 86%, were doing house cleaning, while dishwashing and laundry were also done by a large number of maids, which is 50% and 43% respectively. Whereas cooking is done only by 28% of maids. Furthermore, all of them fulfill their need of hunger by performing domestic paid work. Whereas 78% were affording the health facilities from the wages they receive from domestic work, 57% spend on clothing. Out of 14, five women, i.e. 36%, spend on shelter/housing for their family — shelter includes rented house or saving for own house. Four out of 14 women, i.e. 28%, spend on entertainment and celebration. Entertainment includes spending on TV and cable fees and picnics. Their celebration includes weddings, circumcision, Chatti and God Bharai celebrations, religious rituals, and some other rituals that involve the arrangement of dinners and refreshments at shrines and tombs. Unfortunately, only 21% spends on education.

Most of the maids were hired for house cleaning, and a few were for cooking, which shows people prefer to hire maids for house cleaning but not for cooking, which itself denotes its nature to be substandard. Besides, most of them work to fulfill hunger and healthcare, and very few have concerns about education. Hence it shows nonfulfillment of their basic needs, and the women work to fulfill their basic needs. But spending on entertainment and celebration is also one of their priority.

**Table 4: Demonstrating the work-related characteristics among the housemaids.**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>n(%)</b>	
<b>Nature of Work</b>	Dishwashing	7(50)
	Laundry	6(43)
	House cleaning	12(86)
	Cooking	4(28)
<b>Necessity fulfilled from the work</b>	Food	14(100)
	Clothing	8(57)
	Shelter	5(36)
	Health facilities	11(78)
	Education	3(21)
<b>Reasons for being a housemaid</b>	Entertainment & celebrations	4(28)
	Irresponsible male family members	5((36)
	Absence of a male(adult) family member	3(21)
	Insufficient family income	3(21)
	For being independent	1(7)
	The incurable disease of a family member	1(7)
	Tradition of community	1(7)
<b>Problems faced</b>	Accused of theft (directly or indirectly)	8(57)
	Delays in receiving wages	3(21)
	Difficulty in commuting	3(21)
	The spoilt image in society	1(7)
	Overburdened	5(36)
	Harassment during work	4(28)
	Disrespect by employers	4(28)
	Deteriorating health	5(36)
	Low wages	2(14)
	Temporary work	4(28)

Around 36% attributed their occupation to an irresponsible male family member, and 21% attributed the absence of male members as a reason for their occupation. The other 21% mentioned insufficient family income as the main cause of their work. One out of 14 women stated that she works because her son is a Thalassemia patient, and she has to bear the medical expenses for him and her husband. While one out of 14 opted for this occupation as it is a tradition of their community by saying, "because everyone is a maid in our community." Whereas one out of 14 is working for being independent and does not want to burden family members. A big number, i.e. 57% of domestic maids, has been accused of theft. Five of them were directly accused of insult and action by the employers. Consequently, they were fired, and two of them were lodged with FIR and arrested. Three of them were indirectly accused, followed by investigation and suspicious behaviour of the employers.

More than 36% of maids were overburdened and hardly have time to rest and take care of their families. The same problem was identified in the literature by Constable<sup>11</sup> and Srivastava<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, deteriorating health conditions held a big problem to perform the duties and to commute. Srinivasan and Ilango<sup>8</sup> have also mentioned deteriorated health conditions as a problem for domestic maids.

Out of 14, four respondents, i.e. 28%, stated that the disrespect by the employer was humiliating. Cameron<sup>10</sup> mentioned that abuse and violence at workplaces adversely affect the maids. Anderson and Anderson<sup>7</sup> also determined slave-like treatment of maids in houses as a problem of domestic work. Furthermore, 28% of women complained about harassment during work by the member of employers' family. Temporary work was mentioned as a problem by 28% of the respondents. Kumar<sup>3</sup> mentioned insecure jobs as a drawback of domestic work, while Barua et al.<sup>14</sup> opined working in several houses increases the bargaining power of maids and makes their earning less temporary.

Late payment of their wages was termed a problem by 21% of the respondents, whereas low wages were labelled as a problem by 14% of the respondents. Kumar<sup>3</sup> and Neetha<sup>16</sup> mentioned low wages as a drawback of domestic work. Difficulty in commuting was identified as a problem by 21% of the respondents. On the other hand, only one respondent opined that a maidservant's bad image is a problematic factor for the maids. Hence, Moors<sup>17</sup> has also mentioned that domestic work is not considered a prestigious job in his study. Respondents were also asked about their access to welfare programs and their satisfaction. Most of the domestic maids had never been beneficiaries of any welfare program or were unaware of them. Only six out of 14 respondents had been beneficiaries of the welfare program, and only two of them showed their satisfaction towards them.

## Conclusion

There should be the establishment of agencies, which provide a pool of labour as domestic

servants, as prevailing in developed countries. If agencies are involved in job contracts, both employer and employee's rights will be safeguarded, and both parties will be escaped from harm. Causes for opting for this occupation are inevitable, as almost all of them work for severe needs. But the consequences of being a maid are miserable, and one needs to pay heed towards this significant occupation for the betterment of the economically deprived segment of society.

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