

India's Domestic Workers

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India's Domestic Workers: A Call for Protection and Fair Wages

Context

Domestic workers play a vital role in managing households across India, yet they remain **one of the most vulnerable groups in the workforce**. Despite their significant contribution, they face **low wages, job insecurity, lack of legal protection, and frequent exploitation**.

- India has over **50 million domestic workers**, the majority of whom are women.
- They work in **private households**, performing essential services such as **cleaning, cooking, childcare, and elderly care**.
- Unlike other labor sectors, **domestic work remains unrecognized under many labor laws**, leading to **informal and unregulated employment**.
- Many domestic workers **migrate from rural areas** to urban centers, often ending up in **poor living conditions with no social security**.

The lack of legal recognition and formal employment conditions keeps domestic workers in a **cycle of poverty and vulnerability**, making them **prone to exploitation, abuse, and job insecurity**.

Who are Domestic Workers?

The **International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 189** defines domestic workers as individuals employed to perform tasks within or for a household. Their responsibilities include:

- **Household chores**: Cleaning, washing, ironing, and maintaining the house.
- **Cooking and food preparation**.
- **Childcare and elderly care**, including assistance to sick individuals.
- **Gardening and pet care**.
- **Driving for the family**.

They can be:

- **Live-in workers** (residing in their employer's household).
- **Live-out workers** (commuting daily from their own homes).
- **Part-time or full-time workers** depending on the household's needs.

Key Issues Affecting Domestic Workers

1. Lack of Legal Protection

- Domestic workers **are not covered** under major labor laws like:
 - **Minimum Wages Act** – No guaranteed fair wages.
 - **Equal Remuneration Act** – No gender-based wage protection.
- No **formal employment contracts**, leading to **job insecurity and arbitrary dismissals**.

2. Low Wages and No Social Security

- Most workers earn **less than the minimum wage**, with **no overtime pay**.
- No access to **Employees' Provident Fund (EPF)** or **Employees' State Insurance (ESI)**.
- No **maternity leave**, **health insurance**, or **pension benefits**.

3. Exploitation and Harassment

- **Frequent cases of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse**.
- Unregulated **placement agencies** exploit workers by charging **high recruitment fees** and withholding wages.
- Many workers **hesitate to report abuse** due to fear of losing their job.

4. Migrant Workers and Poor Living Conditions

- Many **domestic workers migrate** from rural areas to cities, facing:
 - **Unsafe, overcrowded housing**.
 - **Lack of basic facilities like water, sanitation, and electricity**.
 - **Discrimination based on caste and social background**.

5. Lack of Recognition and Social Stigma

- Domestic work is often seen as **unskilled labor**, despite requiring **significant expertise and effort**.
- **Gender bias** results in lower wages and **lack of dignity** in employment.

Measures to Address These Challenges

1. Legal Reforms and Formalization of Work

- **Enact a Domestic Workers' Protection Law** to:
 - Ensure **minimum wages, fixed working hours, and overtime pay**.
 - Provide **written contracts** for job security.
 - Mandate **registration of domestic workers and placement agencies**.
- **Example:** South Africa's **Domestic Workers Protection Law** guarantees legal protection and fair wages.

2. Social Security and Welfare Benefits

- Extend **Employees' State Insurance (ESI)** and **Employees' Provident Fund (EPF)** to

include domestic workers.

- Expand the **Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act (2008)** to offer:
 - **Maternity benefits.**
 - **Health insurance.**
 - **Pension schemes.**
- **Example:** Kerala's **Domestic Workers Welfare Board** provides medical aid and pension schemes.

3. Regulation of Placement Agencies

- **Strict laws to regulate recruitment agencies**, ensuring transparency.
- **Mandatory government registration** of placement agencies to prevent trafficking.
- **Example:** Delhi's **Draft Policy for Domestic Workers** proposes **worker registration and legal contracts.**

4. Awareness and Skill Development

- **Educate domestic workers** about their legal rights through:
 - **NGOs and government campaigns.**
 - **Skill India Mission programs** to enhance employability.
- **Example:** The **National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)** offers training programs for domestic workers.

5. Strengthening Grievance Redressal Mechanisms

- Establish **district and state-level complaint centers** for:
 - **Wage disputes.**
 - **Cases of abuse and harassment.**
- **Example:** The **State Domestic Workers Welfare Board in Delhi** handles worker grievances but requires **better implementation.**

6. Promoting Unionization and Collective Bargaining

- Encourage the **formation of domestic worker unions** to advocate for their rights.
- **Example:** The **National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM)** actively fights for policy changes.

7. Leveraging Technology for Transparency

- Develop **digital platforms** to:
 - Register domestic workers.
 - Monitor employment contracts and wage payments.
- **Example:** **Helper4U** connects **verified domestic workers with employers**, ensuring fair employment practices.

8. Ratifying ILO Convention 189

- India should **ratify the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 189**, which provides **global labor standards** for domestic workers.
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Examples of Progressive Models

- **Kerala's Domestic Workers Welfare Board** - Provides financial aid, medical benefits, and pensions.
 - **Delhi's Draft Policy for Domestic Workers** - Proposes mandatory registration, contracts, and social security benefits.
 - **South Africa's Domestic Workers Act** - Recognizes domestic work as formal employment, ensuring minimum wages and worker rights.
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Conclusion

Domestic workers are a **crucial but often overlooked segment of India's workforce**. Their lack of protection under labor laws reflects a **broader issue of neglect and inequality**. However, with **strong legal reforms, better social security, and public awareness**, India can ensure **fair wages, dignity, and security** for domestic workers.

A dedicated **Domestic Workers Protection Law**, combined with **government initiatives, legal recognition, and social inclusion**, will lead to a **more just and equitable society** where domestic workers receive the respect and rights they deserve.



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