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## **BRAVING COVID AND THE LOCK DOWN: AN IMPACT STUDY ON DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE CITY OF BHUBANESWAR, ODISHA**

### ***Abstract***

*The paper throws light on the plight of those working women who have lost their work due to the outbreak of Corona virus and are forced to stay back home due to lock down. But for them staying home means no food for several continuous days. The unemployment crisis; the hunger for food; the stress resulting in unhealthy family environment; the worries breaking family relations; and the resulting mental health issues are the many challenges of life put before them. In spite of all these, they are still surviving. Life without livelihood is a traumatic situation for this unskilled working community. The present study deals with the plight of domestic workers in the capital city of Bhubaneswar, Odisha in the context of COVID-19 and the lock down.*

**Keywords:** *Unemployment, Unorganised Sector, Gender, Domestic Violence*

### **Introduction**

When Michael Ryan<sup>1</sup> warned the world against trying to predict when the virus would disappear by saying – “This virus may never go away...this virus may become just another endemic virus in our communities; and we have to terms with the virus...”. (Mike Ryan, WHO-2020), signalling us all that everyone knew when the pandemic started but no one knows when it will end. In the wave of corona virus when life and living- both are at risk and we are trying to prevent the infection of corona, the statement given by Ryan make us realise that covid-19 could be around for a long time. In every great pandemic that has affected human society – starting from Flu to small pox, tuberculosis to black death, to the not very old HIV-AIDS, the stigmatising theme and the paranoia has been there as a true constant. In the beginning, lower class people were mostly blamed for this type of pandemic and were never sympathised, rather were very rudely driven out in order to restore peace and harmony and to maintain the decorum of the society. The pattern has now

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shifted. This pandemic reached to each bit of section of the human society irrespective of caste- class- creed which includes foreigners, immigrants, racial minorities and both rich and poor, no matter what is their background. Corona does not see who is to be infected and who is not. Also it has not blanketed richest of the rich, even the care givers and service providers who are the front line warriors in this pandemic are victims of it. To stay safe, people need to stay home, thus lock down was imposed to save lives, livelihood taking a back seat.

A lot is happening during this pandemic and a lot more is not happening, almost halted. A good number of debates, research and work are going on dealing with the poorest section of the society -working class community and their precarious life, but little study has been done so far albeit recent interest has been drawn towards this marginalized group of domestic workers which until recently been an unexplored area. It is necessary to understand the precarious life of domestic workers who are in margins and their contribution to the labour sector which enhances our understanding of structural inequality and discrimination embedded in Indian society.

Women generally earn less, disproportionately had more insecure jobs in informal service with less or no access to social protections. Pandemic Covid-19 has impacted adversely to billions of people across the world, worst being affected are the women in unorganised sector. Unorganised section is characterised by the household manufacturing activities and the small scale industries, low paid jobs which are often irregular and mostly the employers do not have paid leaves, holidays due to sickness and their employment is not secure. Around the world, women informal workers and migrant labourers are the world's poorest and these vulnerable groups are more susceptible to layoffs and job loss. (ICMR, New Delhi). This pandemic could result in prolong dip in women's income and participation as reported by UN Women survey showing that women from Asia and Pacific are losing their livelihoods faster than men and have fewer or no alternatives to generate income. Out of total work force, only 18% belong to the organised sector while the rest 82% are in unorganised sector at the global level. In India 90% of the country's workforce is in informal sector with no minimum wages or any kind of social security. (National Statistical Commission, Government of India). There is aggravated impact of Covid-19 for women already living in margins. 740 million women globally work in the informal sector and women between the ages of 25-34, are more likely than men to live in extreme poverty and are three times more in suffering with regard to poor quality of life (Economic Times July 2020).

Unemployment has devastating effects on psychological, economic and social well being of individuals and communities, which has been studied and proved by Blustein (2019). Two distinct experiences of pandemic have been highlighted by Pinker in his study in USA. One is an experience felt by those with high levels of education with stable jobs where work from home is possible.

The other is an experience felt by the rest of the working public (community)-those who cannot work from home and thus are putting themselves at risk every day, whose jobs have been either lost or downsized, and who are wondering not only if they will catch the virus but whether they have the means and resources to survive (Joe Pinkers 2020). Work has always been a domain where individuals experience distress and marginalization. However, in the current pandemic and into the unforeseeable future, this will only exponentially increase. This has been proved right by a study in South Africa where domestic violence is prevalent with women mainly who are being abused by their husbands in their own households during lock down .Another study shows that there are reports of increased number of divorce and gender violence and child abuse globally. Blustein (2019) has contributed a set of ideas / situations which reflect the situation faced by these marginalised people with unemployment. This could be very much related to the current situation in the wake of COVID-19. Recently the impact of unemployment on mental health, how harmful it is for the individual and family and how it has equal pernicious impact on communities has been indicated by ILO. The harmful impact of unemployment on mental health has also been discussed vividly by (Paul and Moser 2009, Wanberg 2012). It is seen that paid domestic work as an occupation has historically been disregarded and devalued with arguments there is nothing intrinsically demeaning about domestic labour, but the pervasive structural relations of race, class and gender embedded in the labour relationship gives it low status. Domestic labour relations have been analysed as class relations by Pallavi Mattlia (2011). Anne showed how the building of fences around upper middle class areas, one aspect of a broader differentiation in the urban class structure, was directly related to domestic workers who enter these areas.

### **The Problem**

Globally, domestic workers are at a greater threat to their life with the outbreak of Corona. More .than 90% of the total workers are female who are at utmost risk of losing their jobs and income, find themselves in precarious position leading to both physical and mental health hazard (Internet). In USA this pandemic is placing 2.2 million domestic workers – 91.5% of whom are women in a particularly precarious position (Julia Wolfe 2020). With the stifling of economic activity brought on by the prolonged nationwide lock down, Indian domestic workers too are now being confronted with increased hardships and financial challenges. In India domestic work is a predominantly female-oriented sector that is poorly regulated and often unprotected by labour law. As per a survey carried out by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) in 2009-2010, the total employment in the country was of 46.5 crore workers comprising around 2.8 crore workers in the organised and the remaining 43.7 crore workers in the unorganised sector. Long work hours, poor remuneration little access to social protection are regular issues they are facing. Their isolation and vulnerability is made more complex by their invisibility in private homes and

their dependence on the good will of their employers (Report ILO 2010). This marginalized community in margins is facing exclusion and precarious opportunities as far as their working conditions are concerned. Working class history is tied to its location (Mattila 2011), and the lavation of servants' work, at the homes of others, makes studies on them is really challenging. The pandemic has resulted severe dislocations in the lives of many women workers especially the poor, marginalised and neglected. Discussing how women workers are facing severe unemployment crisis, reduced incomes and adverse conditions of work, Neetha (2021) argues that the crisis of women's work caused by COVID-19 is not a sudden tragic consequence of pandemic, rather an outcome of pre-existing structural and systematic ruptures. Kalpana Viswanathan (2020) discussed the impact of lock down on domestic workers saying that staying well is a common goal. But their struggle for survival should not be ignored. Their struggle is both against the virus and also against poverty.

It is obvious that different scholars have done extensive works on this marginalized community of domestic workers touching issues on their income being low paid, insecurity, ill-treatment, lack of welfare facilities, poor working conditions, inadequate legal protection etc. In addition to all these the major issue these domestic workers facing during the pandemic COVID-19 and Lockdown is the issue of their livelihood and survival. In this context, the present paper tries to find out the impact of lock down on the marginalised community who are working as domestic workers in different households and for whom no going out means no food for several continuous days. How unemployment is creating an intensive level of grief and trauma, insecurity, leading towards hunger and starvation for many of this working class community is the main concern of the present paper. Here domestic workers, who are working as part time maids and cooks, in more than two/ three different households are taken as subjects for the present study. Amidst all, how the women of this working community are looking at the near future, and how bravely they are fighting out is the focus of the present study.

### **Objectives**

It has been identified that the domestic workers are at high risk with fear of wages and loss of jobs during this lock down period. Steep declines in work are leading to devastating loss of income posing life threatening fear. With this background the present paper is an attempt to study with the following two main objectives:

- To know how unemployment is creating an intense level of grief and trauma for these people affecting their economy and family relation;
- To study the impact of unemployment or loss of work on their psychological and mental health and their brave ways of coping to survive.

### **Area and Methods of Study**

In India, as per government estimates, there are approximately 40,00,000 domestic workers as per NSSO data, out of which around 2.6 million workers are females. Coming to **Odisha**, the study area, it is a regret to see that domestic workers who are coming from the most vulnerable section of the society are mostly female workers and are working in urban areas, there is no record of them as workers and there is no registered union working for their security and protection. After lockdown is partially lifted and when few number of domestic workers started coming to their work places (many being refused work and sent back), and the lockdown impact was clearly visible, only a total number of 80 domestic workers are selected on random basis for the present purpose. They are the part time domestic workers in a huge residential apartment called Cosmopolis near Khandagiri, in the capital city of Bhubaneswar. The Cosmopolis apartment has 521 registered domestic workers of whom 371 are maids and the rest 150 are cooks working within the apartment premises. There are also women working as domestic workers inside the apartment as full time workers, but they are not taken into consideration for the present purpose. After the declaration of first lock down, no one was allowed to enter into the complex which continued till the third lockdown is over. There was no work for all of them. With the onset of fourth lock down few maids started coming into the complex following all guide lines. Of them eighty domestic workers were interviewed randomly to get into their problem and to know the reality of their life during lock down and also to know issues related to their family, economy and health. The apartment/ residential building is providing all sanitary practices at the entrance gate to all domestic workers to minimise the spread of infection among the residents.

General information were collected mainly through news bulletins, paper cuttings, internet surfing and through phone calls. Intensive case studies were taken through face to face interviews directly from the domestic workers inside the residential complex itself, when they get themselves free from work. All 80 domestic workers (includes both maids and cooks) have been interviewed for the purpose. Social distancing, masking and sanitization were strictly followed at the time of interviews. Individual interviews are mostly done to know each case in detail, not allowing any respondent getting biased by the other respondent. Interviews were done only when respondents were available and comfortable in providing information which is both sensitive and personal. Case studies helped identifying the severity of the situation and making the study complete, in depth and far reaching. All conversations were done at personal level in the local language Odia- the mother tongue of both interviewees and the interviewer. There was no compulsion or pressure on the sample respondents to provide information and they were allowed to discontinue at any point of time they felt discomfort or they wanted to discontinue. Real names are changed and no identification of any respondent

was revealed. All records are kept confidential.

It is hoped that the study will help in exploring the role and loss of trauma during this covid-19 crisis and it is expected to help social workers, social scientists, psychological, and vocational intervention as well as for policy guidance to support the marginalised communities especially the affected domestic workers who are in reality the worst suffers. As these domestic workers have started re- entering into our life, making us realize how inevitable they are for we people, especially for middle class and upper class families, more and more studies need to be done on their plight with an attempt to provide them a better quality of life which they really deserve.

### ***The Reality***

Worldwide, two billion people work in informal sector, mostly in emerging and developing countries and are particularly at risk. Describing COVID-19 as the worst global crisis since World War-II, more than four out of five (81%) in the global workforce are currently affected by full or partial work place closures. 1.25 billion workers employed in the informal sector are identified as being at high risk of drastic and devastation, increases in layoffs and reduction in wages and working hours. Many are in low-paid, low skilled jobs, where a sudden loss of income is devastating (The ILO- Monitor second edition). Coming to India, in many parts of the country, domestic workers are not considered as workers because they are not registered and they don't have trade unions like other workers in informal sector. Even they don't have association/society to protect them, to hear their grievance which place their life at higher risk.

The fact is that these domestic workers come out of the house to work, and to feed their children. When they are stopped to come out, which means they are forced to stop feeding their children. Information on their husbands' sources of income was also asked to all the sample of 80 domestic workers. It is learnt that husbands of domestic workers are in miscellaneous works. Some are auto rickshaw drivers (40%), while few are daily labours (30%), mansion workers and electricians, gardeners, watchman etc (30%) who get money on daily basis only after work. For them, no work means any money. When lock down is imposed, there is forced imposition on these families to starve as both parents don't have any other source to earn. How, then do these marginalized women, the domestic workers, negotiate the fear and panic surroundings of corona virus, and struggling but never got to know which one is at greater risk -the risk of infecting covid-19 or hunger?

### ***Impact on Family Relation and Economy***

The feeling of insecurity is inevitably occurring at the prospect of being uprooted from their livelihood. With uncertainty and despair, with no knowledge

on when the lock down will be lifting, they had to face the economic crisis which resulted in unhealthy family relations and in many cases mental health issues. Their plight seemed to be never ending. Though domestic workers in this city of Bhubaneswar, are mostly not registered for which it is not possible to get their exact number active in the city, Cosmopolis, the big residential apartment under study, in Khandagiri, Bhubaneswar, has been maintaining all details of its workers who are working in the complex as part-time workers. Masking, sanitizing, social distancing are strictly followed for every single domestic worker entering into the complex. Even employers provide sanitizers to their employees during entry and exit of work at their respective places keeping watch on their life and livelihood who are struggling to have both ends meet. This is a healthy sign of people's conscious effort to control the spreading of corona virus in best possible ways.

As Domestic workers work in multiple households, they are considered as carriers of the virus which is one major reason that they are not allowed to resume work even after lockdown is lifted. But it should be understood that they are also vulnerable because they are moving from house to house for work while they have children and older people at home. So closure of going out to work led to forced starvation due to lockdown which ultimately led to unhealthy family relation and mental health issues with most workers. During second phase of lockdown government provided 5 kgs of rice and 1 kg of Dal per member in each household who are Ration Card holders. There was also PDS provision for three months under Prime Minister Garib Kayan Yojana. In addition, a sum of Rs. 1000/ was given as cash support and Rs. 500/ was transferred to accounts of people with zero balance. But many people could not avail these supports because they do not have Ration Card. Card holders at their natives also suffered as all means of communications were stopped. They were not in any position to reach villages and avail the benefits. Cases are there where there is occupational mobility of husbands of workers who started selling vegetables shifting from auto-rickshaw driving, mansion work, gardening etc and were struggling to live life with minimum requirements.

**Case Study 1:** MA, a domestic worker from Cosmopolis building said –"I was working as a part time cook in six families in the morning and three families in the evening and I am the only bread winner in our family. My husband, an electrician, was hardly getting Rs. 5000/ PM, doesn't go for any work even before lock down as he has to take care of his old parents, of whom my mother-in-law is paralytic. Every day I get up at 4 AM in early morning. After finishing all my household chores and cooking food for my family, I used to leave for work around 7 AM in the morning and was coming back to home around 1PM. Then again I was going for cooking dinner in three households at 4.30 PM and was coming back by 7.30 PM. On an average I was earning 12000-13000 per month. I have two daughters, both are in school. My older daughter helps me in cooking and other household chores. My six member

family depend upon me as there is no other earning member to run the family.” She was sounding tired.

“Now, I have been without work for last 60 days. My employers told me not to come down during lock down and now they refuse to pay salary for the month of April as I have not rendered service in that month. How will I manage?” She asked.

“We are in a rented house and I have to pay also the rent. Otherwise the landlord threatened to drive us out of the house.” I tried to remind her that house rent should be exempted as PM has made special request to all the landlords separately during one of his national addresses to our country men. She retaliated - “Who is listening to Prime minister’s request? I was desperately waiting to come back to work. Otherwise we will be on road soon.” She took a deep breath. But her pain was clearly visible all over her face. “There is increased violence in our family only because of money. It is beyond my tolerance to fight with the irritations, abuses of my husband and in-law members without any fault of mine.” She was trying to have a weep to release her tension.

Another maid KV said - “My employer said not to come to work if I fall sick. But I am not communicated if they will consider this as paid leaves and if I will be paid for this leave after lock down is lifted, because lock down did not allow us to enter into buildings where we work.”

After taking a pause, she said - “I don’t understand what is work from home, how to work from home?” She was looking more innocent with her ignorance. “You know *didi*, for me no work means no food for my children.” She was trying to make me realise her pain.

**Case Study 2:** KU, a young widow with two children is a domestic worker. She has been working in this residential complex for more than five years. Her children are totally dependent on her for all necessities of life. She confessed that she is getting too irritated unnecessarily for small, trivial matters at home and her children are suffering for that. Her pain and guilt both was reflecting on her face.

**Case Study 3:** RE, a cook said— “My employer refused to give me salary for April, but paid me for the month of March saying that she is giving money for seven days salary extra which I have not worked.” “Have I ever denied to come for work?” She asked. “Both me and my husband work inside this building only. When we both are restricted to enter due to lock down, who will feed my children?? Where will we get work?” She was looking defeated. “Only God save us during difficult time.” Tears were in her eyes. But she was trying to look brave.

The case studies and the data show that almost all domestic workers (86%) complained of regular beating and abuses from their partners during



lock down due to economic crisis. After interviewing eighty domestic workers on their plight, majority expressed their distress is due to loss of work. When either or both parents earn on daily basis without any job security, lock down pushed them both to the worst. Violence became a regular practice at home during lock down. Abusing children for no reason was also came out as a result of lock down. Hunger, irritation, beating is regular practices for most (86%) while only a few (14%) denied of domestic violence.

### **Noxious Impact on Mental Health**

When the measures to slow down transmission of infection of virus are found relevant, what has been a greater threat to these so called marginalized communities like domestic workers, daily labourers, auto-rickshaw drivers, etc who do not have regular salary, no enough space at home to stay indoors are found to have greater risks of hunger, health hazards, domestic violence or eviction. Coming out is the only way to have food on daily basis and imposing staying indoor means only denial of food to them. The present study corroborates this fact.

These domestic workers, started coming to work after almost two months trying to live life again with new hope and aspiration, were brave enough to share their bitter experiences and sufferings. Of the many studies, the effect of unemployment on mental health which leads to symptoms of distress, depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms has been shown by Paul (2009). Out of eighty sample respondents, sixty four (78%) reported having mental disturbances of their husbands during lock down due to loss of work and no engagement and the result being violence on women and children in families. Children are the worst sufferers as they fall victim to the anger and frustration of both parents, and of course without any fault of their own. A good number of husbands (62%) were found getting mad for not having alcohol. They were the regular drinkers and sitting idle caused mental imbalance to many of them. Ninety per cent mothers tried to manage both husbands and children in the best possible way as there was no choice left, but to move ahead with minimum resources and maximum courage.

**Case Study 4:** A lady said, “She (SN) entered into my house after two months, with her face half covered, socket eyes and I found her usual large red *bindi* on her forehead, looking small and diminishing with a reduced and sick body. After sanitizing herself, she started doing her regular chores of mopping and dish cleaning in my house.” I know SN, my maid for the last three years and I have, in my knowledge a complete picture of her family.

SN is the woman with golden heart. She never complained against anyone, even when she is in the worst situation. She has a big family with nine members- five daughters, one son. Older daughter being married, (she has a two year old son) also mostly stays with her to avoid violence of her

husband who was a drunkard. SN's husband was a mansion worker (DWL) and was only getting work for 15/20 days a month as told by her earlier. SN used to work in five families in the same apartment as part time worker while her son was appointed as a watch man in a residential building adjacent to this apartment only a month prior to lock down. Looking at her broken health, I asked-"All good SN?"

She gave me a mild look and said –"Yes Didi" and started concentrating on her work.

Next day I asked again- SN! Your health is reduced a lot. What happened ? How were you managing these days during lock down?"

With teary eyes and a choked voice, she replied- "Didi, you know I have a big family. After two years, my oldest daughter went to her husband's place in January this year. But came to attend a" Yagyan" in our community with her son and husband just before lock down and couldn't return, so stayed back." She got silent for few seconds and started again –

"Didi – I have a big family you know, nine members. Where to bring food, how to feed all- it was so difficult to manage." She was sobbing.

"But these two months are paid leaves for you. You have already taken your salary for March and will give you for April. Don't worry." I tried to calm her down.

What I observed during these two days, is SN didn't ask for her salary for the month of April as she has not rendered service for a single day throughout this month during lock down. She had no moral courage to ask for.

"But you know didi, two of my employers have left for their villages just before lock down and one employer paid me for March and refused to pay for April following 'No work no pay.' One employer paid me till lock down and terminated me from work saying that she doesn't need any more maid as she got used to domestic chores."

"Then, how did you manage"-I asked?

"Rice was there. We had to bring daal (pulses) on credit from the local grocery shop. All along we were managing with rice and daal only. Rarely with potatoes. Never we have bought green vegetables these days." She was not complaining.

And your two year old grand son? I interrupted.

Only potato. Even milk was not affordable." She was sounding helpless.

I had always been taking interest in her family, her husband, children and what she cooked for lunch and what she had in the morning. That was part of our regular conversations. And what I knew about her husband was that he was a calm person, never loses his temper and hardly drinks. Rather

extends his helping hand when he is home and not having mansion work or outside engagements.

“How is NR (her husband)? I asked.

“My family is ruined *Didi*. She started crying. Never ever he raised hands on me. But this lock down made him a completely different person. His irritation, anger, frustration went to such an extent that he started beating me in front of my grown-up children. She went on saying- “My son-in-law was a heavy drunkard. Not getting drinks during these days, he was also losing all control and was beating my daughter black and blue.” This made SN cry more. Tears rolled down from her eyes. I too, felt very bad for her.

May be, expecting a concrete answer, she asked me- “When this disease will go *didi*?”

When the whole world is trying to get an answer to this question, I felt like defeated before her innocence and her question made me completely speechless. I was feeling like saluting SN— where she gets the strength and spirit to fight hunger ?

The eventual question is - **Which is at greater risk ?? The pandemic covid-19 or the starvation ??**

### **Promise, Hope and Possibilities**

Domestic workers in India have historically struggled for visibility and formal recognition of their service category. While the challenges they face are long standing, the COVID-19 related lockdown has brought these into sharper focus (Khullar 2020). It is regret to see that this marginalized community who are mostly slum dwellers and belong to Scheduled Caste community do not have any uniformity in their wage structure which is very low and not regular. They do not have definite leaves either monthly or annually, absenteeism for any reason get them cut their salary which largely depends on the mercy of the employer. Their contribution is not visible because they are in unorganized sector, and are not considered as wage labour and are deprived of any benefit. But there is always a silver lining in the darkest cloud. Lock down is partially lifted. People have started coming to work. There are many relaxations .Slowly but steadily life is returning to normalcy. But all will not be same as it was before. People have started living again with a new hope and positivity. To address the uncertain situations of these marginalised workers in the best possible way is the call of the hour. When darkness enclosed them, when they need us most, we should not fence them out. This is high time to consider their contribution to the society and enrol them as wage labourers. They are yet to draw attention of policy makers to look at them, their plight and for a safe survival. This pandemic situation made us realized to prepare for future so that no one will strive for hunger especially this section

of marginalized community who are badly in need of social protection.

Considering the plight of domestic workers, what is most important is the formation of trade unions and registration of these workers providing them identity cards under the Unorganized Social Security Act-2008. This will be of immense help during this type of extra ordinary crisis. Trade unions can also fight legal battles for getting them justice, in providing them better condition in work places and can organise these workers as and when required for their betterment and becoming as encompassing as possible. The issue of domestic workers or maids, may be taken to government to take this matter with utmost urgency. Effective permanent legislation will help creating the identities of domestic workers, maintaining dignity in work places, leading to their true emancipation in coming days.

As social distancing is likely to continue, and is going to be the new normal, the Indian govt should consider bringing in new legislations to protect the right of these domestic workers. An integrated policy measures need to be framed to support workers, by protecting their income and employment and to make them free from chronic anxiety and stress. The precarious work experience leading to mental health issues with increasing abuse and violence in family relations may also be addressed through these measures. Middle class India needs to rebuild relationships with domestic helps, pay their salaries, stop social ostracising and work towards ensuring health for all as collective goal. Along with instituting a govt backed social support system, we should all come forward to shoulder this responsibility together without politicising the issue. Let us show our humanity, our sympathy and empathy for theses marginalized communities, stand by them and extend our support in helping them to come out of the distress soon. Apart from assisting these workers, their families for whom she is the sole earner, need to be considered also. Prime minister in one of his national addresses, asked each citizen to help the poor during lockdown. This firmly puts his belief on the citizens' strength to bear the responsibility and to do the needful. With COVID-19, we got to realize how class, gender and privilege have shaped each individual experiencing the pandemic. Apart from doing surveys about peoples experiences and providing them incentives for the time being, let us connect with them, and hear their voices. It is time to work for them where participants receive tangible benefits to improve both their work and lives.

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