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# **CONDITIONS OF WORK AND RIGHTS OF THE FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS OF KOLKATA\***

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## **CONDITIONS OF WORK AND RIGHTS OF THE FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS OF KOLKATA**

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### **Abstract:**

Domestic workers are hired to work in a private house. Most of those workers are female though the work remained unrecognized as a legitimate form of activity in India. In this paper through micro-level study we want to investigate the conditions of work and rights of the female domestic workers of Kolkata when the sample domestic workers are divided in to two strata, part-time and full-time domestic workers. The division is done on the basis of daily working hour of a domestic worker in a particular home. The paper has shown that young married women coming from distant places with higher number of children with low and uncertain income of other family member prefers part-time domestic work to supplement her family income. Higher number of adult equivalent family members, high regular monthly spending on medical and education, low contribution of other family members in the family and higher hourly wage motivates a part-time domestic worker to work more than one house simultaneously. Through Engel's ratio it was identified that the standard of living of the full-time domestic workers are slightly better than the part-time domestic workers though that is satisfactory. That is because most of the part-time domestic workers are lying below the government recommended adjusted poverty line where as a good proportion of full-time domestic workers are lying above the poverty line. Most of the full-time domestic workers have to work more than eight hours in a day but almost all domestic workers of both types are getting less than the Government recommended minimum wage. Most of them are deprived from overtime pay, public holiday, and timely payment of salaries. Ignoring employment convention, they are also fired without giving a reasonable period of notice as well as informing any valid ground of dismissal. Only positive side is that all part-time workers and regular full-time workers are enjoying three-paid holidays per month. The West Bengal Government also deprives them from getting the benefit of State assisted Scheme of Provident Fund for unorganized workers.

## **CONDITIONS OF WORK AND RIGHTS OF THE FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS OF KOLKATA**

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Unorganized sector always play a vital role in terms of providing employment opportunities to a large segment of the workforce in India. Near about 92% of the total employment in the Indian economy during the period 1999-2000 was accounted for by the unorganized/informal sector (NSSO 55<sup>th</sup> Round 1999-2000). In most states the share of informal workers is approximately the same as the national average. In West Bengal, 89% male workers and 94% female workers were unorganized workers. Following Unni & Rani (1999) due to steady decline in the growth of the formal sector a larger section of the growing labour force is being absorbed in informal sector, resulting in a progressive increase in employment in that sector. Generally, major section of the informal workers are either absorbed in the agricultural sector or in traditional crafts, village and cottage industries or they migrate to cities to do different types of informal jobs like rickshaw puller, weight carrier, waiters in different restaurants, vendors etc. The proportion of women in the country's workforce has increased during the last three decades. In 2001, the workforce participation rate for women in the urban area is 11.55%. Almost 80% of that workforce is working in unorganized sector. A large number of such urban informal labour forces among the women are engaged in domestic work. According to *Domestic Work Link* (Vol-12, No-1, 2003), female domestic workers occupy the largest segment of unorganized female workers in India. International Labour Organization (ILO) broadly defines a domestic worker as 'someone who carries out household work in private households in return for wages'. In comparison, India's Commission of Justice Development and Peace defined domestic workers as 'an individual employed to do household chores on a temporary, permanent, part-time or full-time basis'. The commission further states that this unorganized sector of the society produces materials for consumption in the households, but those commodities are not for profit or sale.

The majority of the domestic workers are women with the world's estimates putting the proportion at 90%. Predominance of women in this type of occupation reflects a traditional attitude that household chores are women's work. Actually in this activity large number of poor illiterate and semi-literate urban women are engaged. Domestic work is still absent in the domain of unorganized work. In this paper we want to discuss the working and living conditions of these female domestic workers of Kolkata. Female domestic workers are chosen because we know that the overwhelming majority of domestic workers are women who are socially and politically constructed to provide wage substitute for the unused labour, which has been traditionally considered as women's work. According to the 1989 *Shramshakti* report there were at that time 16.8 lakh female domestic workers in the country where the presence of male domestic workers were negligible. Same picture is also observed in Kolkata (Banerjee 1985) though no proper study has been done recently on female domestic workers. In our micro level survey all the randomly drawn samples are female domestic workers.

The survey was conducted for over a period of three months (December - 2006 to March-2007)<sup>1</sup>. Prior to the survey, pilot survey was done. We, in this survey, adopted stratified random sampling methods whereby the sample is divided into two strata – part time female domestic workers and full time female domestic workers. The term 'domestic' denotes a class of 'menials' which includes many types of workers like 'ayah', kitchen helper, cook, sweeper, house cleaner, clothes and utensil cleaner etc. Actually a domestic worker is employed to work in a private home. The strata are formed on the basis of working hour of a sample female domestic worker in the employer's house. If a respondent at one or more than one house performs some definitive duties and goes away daily when the assigned work is over within not more than two and a half working hours from a particular house on monthly salary basis is treated as part-time domestic worker. But a full-time domestic worker is attached to a particular house only in a single day and her working hour is not less than seven hours but within twelve hours in a day. During that period she has to do whatever is assigned to her. She may continue in a particular house through out the month and in return enjoy salary at the end of the month or may work under different employer in a particular month on casual basis. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Few Under Graduate students of our Department carried out the major part of the survey works.

situation they enjoy wage in daily terms. Most of the times they are engaged to look after the children or the aged persons. During the time of drawing sample of full-time domestic workers we did not consider those workers who are attached with a particular house twenty-four hours continuously in the last two reference months i.e. the whole-time domestic workers. Here all the sample domestic workers are female domestic workers because in this occupation more than 95% workers are women in Kolkata.

Though the sample size is not large but at the time of drawing sample we tried to cover all parts of Kolkata district. In our survey work we have surveyed 300 part-time domestic workers and 100 full-time domestic workers. Due to the dominance of part-time domestic workers in Kolkata, their sample size is greater than the full-time domestic workers. Here in order to minimize heterogeneity among the samples, we have chosen mainly middle-class or upper middle-class employers most of who live in residential apartments with flat size not more than 1200 sq. feet (carpet area). All of the employers belong to nuclear families with total number of family members of each employer household never exceeds six. These types of employers are chosen because they constitute the major percentage of households in Kolkata district who employ female domestic workers.

#### Social condition of the part-time as well as full-time domestic workers :

In Kolkata district, we see that out of the sample 300 part-time domestic workers, 90 (30%) belongs to Scheduled Caste category, 38 (12.67%) belongs to Scheduled Tribe category and 172 (57.33%) belong to General category. In case of 100 sample full-time domestic workers the corresponding percentages of the above mentioned categories are 22%, 10% and 68% respectively. Therefore it is observed that more than 50% of the sample respondents of both types of workers belong to General category. If we look at the literacy level of the female domestic workers, 58% part-time workers and 39% full-time workers are totally illiterate. Only 32% part-time workers and 52% full-time workers have gone to primary school while 9.4% part-time workers and 5% full-time workers have gone to junior high school after completing primary education and a merely 6% part-time workers and 4% full-time workers have crossed secondary level of education. So, most of the sample domestic workers of Kolkata are either illiterate or just literate.

Interestingly, we also observe almost absence of child labour in this occupation. Out of 300 part-time domestic workers only 3 (1%) are children, whereas in case of full-time domestic workers the percentage of child labour is only 2%. Almost absence of child domestic part-time and full-time worker is mainly due to shortage of both demand and supply side. Actually nuclear family members are not willing to employ child workers mainly due to their lack of efficiencies in all types of activities at almost same salary. The survey result shows that 13.33% part-time workers and 12% full-time workers are between the age 14 to 25 whereas 79.33% sample part-time domestic workers and 28% full time domestic workers belong to age group 25 to 50. But 58% full-time workers are more than 50 years old where as that percentage for part-time workers is only 6.34. So, we observe predominance of middle-aged women in part-time domestic work whereas aged female members dominate full-time domestic work occupation.

If we look at the marital status of the sample respondents, we observe 69.33% part-time workers and 42% full-time workers are married whereas 16% part-time workers and 38% full-time workers are widows. Only 8.33% part-time domestic workers and 10% full-time domestic workers are unmarried whereas 6.34% part-time workers and 10% full time workers are divorcee.

If we consider the distribution of the sample respondents in terms of years of involvement in the occupation, the survey result shows that 42 (14%) part-time workers are involved in this occupation for less than 5 years whereas 88 (29.33%) respondents are involved for 10 to 15 years and 112 (36%) are involved for more than 15 years as part-time worker in this occupation respectively. But if we look at full-time domestic workers the percentages are 56%, 14%, and 30% respectively which shows a major percentage of full-time domestic workers are involved in this occupation for less than five year. Out of these 56 full-time respondents, 12 have transferred themselves from part-time domestic worker to full-time domestic workers with in last seven years.

An important aspect of the female part-time domestic workers is that they generally have to work in different private households under different employers in a particular day as well as in a particular month regularly. So total daily working hours of a sample respondent depend on her number of employers in that particular reference month as well

as whether she is working only in the morning shift or both morning and afternoon shift.<sup>2</sup> If we look at full time workers then always they are working in a single private house in a particular day but that may vary in the reference month. Actually the part-time workers are always getting salaries from their employers but the full-time workers sometimes get wages on daily basis. This happens mainly for the *ayahs* who are engaged either to look after the children or the aged persons.

In NSSO, Sarvekshana (Vol-21, No.2, Oct-Dec 1997), we saw that both rural and urban women already engaged in domestic duties in their own house also want to engage in other work most of which are clearly economic and some beneficial to their own households. In West Bengal, that percentage of urban women is 73.4. But on account of their commitment to domestic duties and various other activities, sometimes they prefer part-time job and sometimes full-time. We know that a major percentage of the urban female informal workers are domestic workers. So before moving to the details discussion about the conditions of work of the urban female domestic workers we have to find out the factors which actually influences an intended domestic worker to take either part-time job or full-time job as domestic worker.

To know the decision-making factors we have to take the help of the following Logit model.

$$L_i = \left( \frac{P_i}{1 - P_i} \right) = \beta_1 + \beta_2 age + \beta_3 cmemb + \beta_4 dis\ tan\ ce + \beta_5 contmem + \beta_6 mstatus + \beta_7 experience + u_i$$

Here  $P_i = 1$  if the respondent is working as a part-time domestic worker

$P_i = 0$  if the respondent is working as a full-time domestic worker

$age \Rightarrow$  The age of the respondent

$cmemb \Rightarrow$  Total number of child members of the respondent's family

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<sup>2</sup> Their day generally starts at 4 am. After doing their own household duties they have to appear at the first employer's house just at 6 a.m. The end of morning shift totally depends on the number of houses she is working. As most of the houses she gets a token tiffin, it is not required for her to spend few extra amount for this purposes. Most of the part-time domestic workers will return home not before 11 a.m. If she is a daily migrant then she can reach their own home not before 12.30 p.m. After returning home she has to cook for her children, husband and for other family members. The daily migrants are not working in the afternoon shift. But few local part-time workers sometimes work even in the afternoon shift. In our sample we have found only 39 part-time workers who are working in both the shifts. Only at that time their daily working hours sometimes exceed 8 hours in a day. In our sample we have only 9 such part-time domestic workers.



*distance*  $\Rightarrow$  The distance between the residential place and 1<sup>st</sup> (only) employer's house. If the approximate distance is more than 10 km then *distance* = 1, otherwise *distance* = 0

*contmem*  $\Rightarrow$  Monthly contribution of the husband (or) and other member(s) of the respondent's household in his respective family.

*mstatus*  $\Rightarrow$  Marital status of the respondent. *married* = 1 & *other* = 0

Here 'other' includes unmarried and divorcee

*experience*  $\Rightarrow$  Total number of years the respondent involved in this occupation.

The above regression result gives

$$\hat{L}_i = 2.683 - 0.034^{**}age + 0.098^{***}cmemb - .00054 * distance + 1.28 * mstatus - 0.041 * contmem + .0312 experience + e_i$$

McFadden  $R^2 = .406205$  & LR Statistics (6 degrees of freedom) = 24.00942.

Prob(LR Statistics) = .000520

\*\*\* $\Rightarrow$  Significant at 10% level, \*\* $\Rightarrow$  significant at 5% level & \* $\Rightarrow$  significant at 1% level

As the '*p*' value of the LR Statistic is very small, we can conclude that the slope coefficients of the above logit model are not equal to zero. The value of the McFadden  $R^2$  is also satisfactory.

So we can explain the above probability model in the following way.

1. At higher age, an intended domestic worker prefers full-time work to part-time work i.e. she wants to work under a single employer in a single house.
2. If the intended domestic worker has higher number of children in her family then she prefers to work as a part-time domestic worker than full-time worker because she knows that this type of work will help her to return home at noon and during that time she can look after her children and prepare food for them.
3. If the distance between the residential home of the respondent and employer's house is larger than 10 km. then the worker prefers part-time job. But if the employer belongs to the same locality or nearby locality then she prefers full-time work though the effect is marginal. So the daily migrant female domestic workers prefer part-time domestic work to full time domestic work.

4. Married women prefer to work as a part-time worker. Due to different types of family responsibilities mainly the young aged married women has to accept this type of employment. Most of the part-time domestic workers have mentioned that apart from doing domestic work in different private houses simultaneously they have to take total responsibility of their own family and only the part-time work allows them to do that.
5. If the contribution of the other family members of the respondent in their respective families in terms of money is high then domestic worker will prefer full-time work. During the time of survey a major percentage of the part-time workers complained that their husbands are not contributing their entire income in their families. Most of them are also involved in different types of casual employment or are self-employed. But the common feature among them is that their monthly income is not stable. Apart from that they generally spend a good percentage of their income for different entertainment purposes including buying lottery tickets. So they contribute a little portion of their income in their respective families. Hence to give financial stability in their respective families the intended workers have to take part-time job as domestic worker. This at least can give little financial stability in their respective families. But if we look at the family of the full-time workers then it is observed that a sizable portion of their husbands have a good source of earnings and they contribute most of their income for maintaining their families. This reflects the fact that vulnerability of the families of the full-time domestic workers is less than that of part-time domestic workers.
6. Experience or total number of years involvement in a particular occupation do not play any significant role of a respondent to decide whether she will do part-time job or full time job.

All the above items have been described from the supply side. Next, we can look from demand side. We have already mentioned that at the time of drawing sample we have chosen those employers who are mainly living in the middle-sized apartments where total number of family members is not more than six. This type of employers always prefer part-time female domestic worker both for security reason as well as for economic reason. They have to employ full-time domestic worker if both husband and wife are

working and only aged persons or children are living alone in the apartment in their absence. It is also observed during the time of our survey that if the aged or the children can look after themselves, then the sample employer prefers part-time work.

So little demand of full-time domestic worker in the labour market also forces an intended domestic worker to take part-time job. But at the time of taking part-time job the intended worker generally wants to work at more private houses simultaneously. The following model can identify the factors, which influences a part-time worker to work under more than one private house at same reference month simultaneously. To do that we have to consider the following linear regression model.

$$noemp_i = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 fmemb_i + \alpha_3 contmem_i + \alpha_4 med\ exp_i + \alpha_5 hwage_i + \alpha_6 experience_i + u_i$$

Here

$noemp_i \Rightarrow$  Total number of employers of the 'i<sup>th</sup>' part-time worker in the last reference month

$fmemb_i \Rightarrow$  Total number of adult equivalent family members of the 'i<sup>th</sup>' part-time worker.

$contmem_i \Rightarrow$  Average monthly contribution of the other earning member(s) of the family of 'i<sup>th</sup>' part-time worker in her own family.

$med\ exp_i \Rightarrow$  Average regular monthly expenses of the family of the 'i<sup>th</sup>' part-time worker on education and medical purposes.

$hwage_i \Rightarrow$  Hourly wage rate of the respondent.

$experience_i \Rightarrow$  Total number of years a respondent involved in this occupation

Here we assume that  $u_i$  obeys all the necessary assumptions required to estimate the above equation through OLS method (we have already checked and can conclude that the problem of multi-co linearity is totally absent in the above model).

The estimated equation gives

$$noemp_i = 1.65 + 0.64^{**} fmemb_i - .258^{**} contmem_i + 0.73^{***} med\ exp_i + 0.832^{*} hwage_i - .062 experience_i + e_i$$

Here  $R^2 = 0.459$ . & \*  $\Rightarrow$  significant at 1% level. \*\*  $\Rightarrow$  significant at 5% level, and

\*\*\*  $\Rightarrow$  significant at 10% level.

The above result shows few interesting results.

1. If an intended part-time worker comes from a large family then she has to work under more than one employer simultaneously because large family represents large number of family dependents.
2. If the other family members are not contributing much to their respective families then to maintain her own family the intended part-time worker has to work under more employers. Actually the part-time domestic workers have to contribute a lion share of their earnings to the family and larger number of employers or working at larger number of private houses simultaneously means more earnings.
3. If the family of the intended part-time worker has to bear good amount on educational expenses for her child or medical expenses either for herself or for other family members regularly then in order to supplement those extra expenses the intended part-time worker has to work under more employers simultaneously. This is happening because the out of pocket medical expense of the poor urban people of India is quite higher. The field survey shows that most of the domestic workers do not want to bring their children in the same profession. They always encourage their children to go to school. It is true that those children are going to government schools. Still to supplement other educational expenses (mainly to purchase books and other educational equipments and for remuneration of private tutors), the part-time workers have to work under more than one employer simultaneously.
4. Total number of employer of a part-time domestic worker at a certain time period is positively related with hourly wage rate. Actually higher hourly wage can improve the nutritional efficiency of the labourer and that helps the worker to work longer hours under more than one employer's house simultaneously. Here it has to be noticed that the hourly wage in most of the times is a combination of cash and kind. The survey result has shown that most of the part-time domestic workers get few part of her wage payment in form of kind regularly. So following instantaneous consumption-efficiency argument we can claim that kind payment in one house help her to work next house efficiently.

5. Total number of years involvement in this occupation can be treated as her reliability. Generally a part-time domestic worker is always working in a same locality. Higher number years involvement in this occupation in a particular locality may prove her honesty and reliability, but that does not help her to get job in more number of houses simultaneously. But there should be an upper limit of the total number of employers of each domestic workers and the survey result shows that  $1 \leq noemp \leq 7$ .

**Working Conditions of the female domestic workers:**

The above two regression results have shown the different factors which influence an intended domestic worker to take decision about choosing either part-time job or full-time job and if choosing part-time job then at how many private houses simultaneously? At the time of initiating the discussion about the working conditions of the female domestic workers, we have to know initially the daily working hour of both types of labourers and the distribution is narrated in Table-1.

TABLE-1: Working Hours of the Female Domestic Workers of Kolkata

Working Hours	Part-time	Full-Time
1-3	33(11%)	0
3-5	62(20.67%)	0
5-7	155 (51.67%)	0
7-8	41(13.66%)	0
8-9	9(3%)	69 (69%)
9-12	0	31(31%)
Total	300 (100%)	100 (100%)

Source: Field survey

The above table shows that more than 50% of the sample part-time domestic workers are working 5 to 7 hours in a day whereas 20.67% of the sample respondents are working between 3 to 5 hours. We have found only 3% part-time domestic workers who are working more than 8 hours in a day. But if we look at full-time domestic workers then it is observed that 69% are working between 8 to 9 hours in a day whereas 31% are working between 9 to 12 hours. Part-time domestic workers, working more than 7 hours in a day are working both in the morning as well as in the afternoon shift. But the full-

time domestic workers have to stay at the employer's house without any proper break. So following the conditions of a '*decent work*', we can claim that the full-time workers of Kolkata are deprived from that characteristic of labour standard.

In order to calculate the hourly wage rate of both types of domestic workers, initially we have to calculate, the aggregate monthly income of the respondents from a particular private house. After adding the imputed values of kind payment (mainly in food) with the monthly salary we can get the aggregate monthly income of the part-time respondent. At the time of calculating that for full time workers we have to know initially whether the respondent is enjoying monthly salary or wage on daily basis. Here also salary or wage is the sum total of cash and imputed value of kind payment. We consider that imputed value of only tea and biscuits as Rs.2, roti with vegetables as Rs.6 and full lunch or dinner (only for full time workers) as Rs.12 respectively. Again both part-time as well as full time domestic salaried workers are enjoying at least 3 working days as paid holidays in Kolkata. So at the time of calculating the monthly working hour of each respondent we have to multiply the daily working hour with 28. During the time of survey we have considered previous two months as reference months. As the part-time domestic workers are working at more than one private house simultaneously to calculate her earned hourly wage rate, we have to make calculate her aggregate monthly salary and aggregate monthly working hour of each respondent initially and then dividing her aggregate monthly salary by aggregate monthly working hour we can get her hourly wage rate. Sometimes, the hourly wage rate of the casual full-time workers can be calculated after dividing her daily wage by daily working hours. These types of workers are always engaged in same types of activities and their daily wage as well as working hour is also same. In our survey we have only 22 respondents who are working as this type of casual full-time domestic workers. Table-2 shows the distribution of hourly wage rate of both types of domestic workers of Kolkata.

Table-2: Distribution of the female domestic workers of Kolkata by hourly wage rate

Hourly Wage (Rs.)	Part-time workers	Full-Time workers
2-3.99	53 (17.66%)	0
4-5.99	103 (34.33%)	46 (46%)
6-8	140 (46.67%)	50 (50%)
8 & above	04 (1.34%)	04 (4%)
Total	300 (100%)	100 (100%)

Source: Calculated from primary data got from field survey.

We know that government recommended minimum wage in West Bengal is Rs.64.22 (Ministry of Labour and Employment, March-29, 2007). Considering 8 working hours in a day the daily hourly minimum wage rate in West Bengal should be Rs.8. Table-2 shows that 99% part-time workers and 96% full-time domestic workers are earning less than minimum wage in Kolkata but near about 50% of the total respondents are getting just below the minimum wage.

#### **Living Conditions of the female domestic workers of Kolkata:**

The majorities of the urban informal workers live in poor areas and suffer substandard housing, over crowding and adverse environmental conditions. Among the informal workers, the distinction between working and living conditions often becomes blurred and both related to broader problem of poverty. To investigate about the living conditions of the domestic workers, initially we have to consider the housing condition of the sample respondents. The sample survey shows that out of 300 part-time domestic workers, 70 (23.33%) have own house (here own house indicates the house in which either the respondent or any other family member of the respondent has legal ownership), 122 (40.67%) reside in the rented house and 108 (36%) live in temporary shelters (mainly in shanties). In case of full-time workers the respective percentages are 47%, 42% and 11%. So near about 50% of the fulltime domestic workers of our sample are living at their own house where as major sample part-time domestic workers are living either in the rented house or in temporary accommodation in Kolkata. Temporary accommodations are situated in the encroached land mainly of the government and it is obvious that all the respondents living in the temporary houses always live in fear of eviction. If we look at the types of wall of the houses of 300 sample respondents the

survey result shows that 40.14% of the walls are made by mud and bricks make 59.86% where as in case of full time workers the percentages are 30.16 and 69.39 respectively. Again if we look at the types of roof, then the survey result shows that houses of 11.56% part-time workers have concrete roofs, where as 31.97% have asbestos roof, 14.97% have tin, 39.46% have tiles and 2.04% have straws in their roofs. Besides that, if we look at the types of roof of the full-time domestic workers then it is observed from survey that 18% are sleeping at nights under concrete roof whereas 38% under asbestos roof, 20% under tin roofs and 24% under tin roofs respectively. So if we want to make a comparative study about the housing conditions of both the part-time and full-time workers then it is observed that the housing condition of full-time domestic workers are slightly better than part-time domestic workers. Apart from those only 90 (30%) houses of part-time domestic workers and 67 (67%) houses of full-time domestic workers have proper sanitation facilities where as both types of domestic workers of remaining residence fail to access any proper sanitation facilities. If we look at the sources of drinking water of the respondents the survey result has shown that major percentage of the respondents is collecting that either from public tap or from tube well. Besides that 55.78% houses of the part-time domestic workers and 78% houses of full-time domestic workers have electric connections (few of those are illegal connections). So we can claim that the domestic workers of Kolkata mainly the part-time workers are not living in a very healthy environment. Apart from that, they are not always enjoying the benefit of public goods like electricity, gas, water supply and health service at their living place. Here it has to be mentioned that all the sample domestic workers are not residing in Kolkata. 58.39% part-time and 38% full-time domestic workers are coming from the periphery of Kolkata. All are coming by train and they prefer to work in those areas of Kolkata, which is connected with their native village by train.

The standard of living of the sample respondents can be expressed in a better way by their Engel's ratio, which is the percentage of total consumption expenditure on food item. We know that it lies between zero and one and smaller the ratio indicates higher standard of living and vice-versa. In order to calculate the Engel's ratio of the female domestic workers of Kolkata, we initially have taken previous two months as the reference months. To know the average total monthly expenditure of a respondent



household we initially have to know the monthly income of that sample household which is the sum total of the monthly income of all the earning members of that family. If the respondent is the sole earning member of her family then, her monthly income can be considered as her total family income. Here aggregate family income is actually the mean income of the respondent family after considering previous two months as the reference months. We have to subtract the mean savings done by the respondent family in the previous two months and any amount paid for loan repayment from aggregate monthly income to get total monthly consumption expenditure of a respondent household. The survey result has shown that almost 49.31% situations of the part-time domestic workers and 29.71% situations of the full time domestic workers the total earnings of the respondent household became total consumption expenditure. From total monthly consumption expenditure we have to subtract average monthly expenditure of the respondent households on education for their children, health, fuel expenses including electricity and average monthly expenses on entertainments to get total monthly expenditure on food items. Those items have to be considered because the survey result shows that 31.97% part-time domestic workers and 48.78% full-time domestic workers are viewing televisions at their own house (few have cable connections also) where as 47.82% part-time domestic workers and 69.73% full-time domestic workers are using LPG gas during the time of cooking. Apart from that most of the children of the sample domestic workers are schools going. Though they always go in government aided schools still some amounts have to be spent for their educational purposes. Besides that most of the respondent households have to bear few amounts of out-of pocket medical expenses like doctor's fees and for medicines for their children, aged people of the house and sometimes for themselves also regularly.

The ratio of the total expenditure on food items and total consumption expenditure gives the Engel's ratio. Table-3 shows the distribution of the sample respondents by Engel's ratio. The table shows that near about 79% respondent households of the part-time domestic workers and 67% respondent households of the full-time domestic workers belong to the families whose Engel's ratio is more 0.6 i.e. more than 60% of their total expenditure is spent for food items. This shows that the major percentage of the part-time domestic worker of Kolkata cannot maintain good standard of living. The following table

also shows that the standard of living of the average full-time domestic workers is slightly better than that of part-time domestic workers.

Table-3: Distribution of the Domestic Workers by Engel's Ratio

Engel's Ratio	Part-Time Workers	Full-Time Workers
0.2-0.6	62 (20.67%)	33 (33%)
0.61-0.8	213 (71%)	55 (55%)
0.81-	25 (8.33%)	12 (12%)
Total	300 (100%)	100 (100%)

Source: Calculated from field survey

Acuteness of poverty among the female domestic workers of Kolkata:

Now we have to investigate whether the domestic work truly helps the poor women to escape from poverty. The standard of living of a household is very much related with poverty. The poor household has to spend the major portion of their income for food consumption and very few amounts are left for other purposes, which are ultimately reflected in his Engel's ratio. In India there exists a government recommended urban poverty line for each state. Following Himanshu (EPW, Feb-10, 2007) the official updated urban poverty line in West Bengal for 2004-2005 is Rs.446 per capita per month consumption expenditure. To investigate whether a respondent lies below the poverty line or not we have to convert the total consumption expenditure on food to adult equivalent per capita consumption expenditure. Here, if a member of the respondent household (either boy or girl) is between 2 to 6 years then he (she) was treated as  $\frac{1}{4}$ th of an adult member of the family and if a member of the respondent household is between 6 to 12 years old then he (she) was treated as  $\frac{1}{2}$  of adult member of the family. Now dividing total average monthly consumption expenditure of a family by its adult equivalent number, we got per-capita per month adult equivalent consumption expenditure. If that calculated value was less than Rs.446 then we have to say that the respondent household is lying below the poverty line. Here we divide the persons lying below the poverty line into two groups. The respondent who belongs to a family whose per-capita adult equivalent consumption expenditure is less than Rs.250 can be called *ultra-poor* and the respondent whose per-capita adult equivalent consumption expenditure is between Rs.250 and

Rs.445 can be called poor. Table-4 shows a comparative profile of the acuteness of poverty of both types of domestic workers.

Table-4: Distribution of the respondents by per-capita adult equivalent monthly consumption expenditure on food.

Rs.	Part-time workers	Full-time workers
1-250	46 (15.34%)	9 (9%)
251-445	175 (58.33%)	44 (44%)
446 & above	79 (26.33%)	47 (47%)
Total	300 (100%)	100 (100%)

Source: Calculated from survey data.

The above table shows that the acuteness of poverty is still very prominent among the female domestic part-time workers. Near about 74% of the sample part-time domestic workers and 53% full-time domestic workers are lying below the adjusted official urban poverty line of West Bengal. So 47% full-time female domestic workers and only 26.33% part-time female domestic workers are lying above the poverty line. The above table also shows that ultra-poverty is comparatively higher among the part-time workers. Comparing Table-3 and Table-4, we can conclude that acuteness of poverty prevents mainly the part-time domestic workers to maintain a good standard of living. The last four tables also show that the economic and social conditions the full-time domestic workers are slightly better off than the part-time domestic workers.

#### **Right to work of the female domestic workers:**

We have already mentioned that in most of the states of India the domestic work is still unrecognized. So the domestic workers are deprived from the state law in the form of regular and fair wage, holidays, and safe conditions of work, pension and other benefits. They were totally unuttered in the Unorganized Sectors Social Security Bill 2005. The only few exceptions are Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. Karnataka became the first state to fix minimum living wage for domestic workers in 2004. It was fixed at Rs.1600 per month for an eight-hour day of domestic work. But that cannot be called living wage. In Tamil Nadu, domestic workers are recognized as part of the unorganized sector and also can form work union. In Maharastra, after intense lobbying, the State Labour Board issued guidelines for regularizing the services of domestic workers. The service rule includes paid leave, travel allowance, fairer wages etc. But that is criticized on the ground that the guidelines fail to tackle the problem of absenteeism. But in West Bengal no proper guideline is framed for the female domestic workers.

At the time of discussing about the working and living conditions of female domestic workers we have to consider two distinct components: physical conditions at work place and timing of work. The physical conditions of work place would include space, ventilation, illumination, temperature, hygiene and so on. All of which can affect the safety of a worker. The domestic workers of Kolkata are almost free from those hazards because most of them are working in the furnished apartments with all types of facilities. But most of the local domestic workers are residing in the slum areas where they have to face poor housing conditions, exposure to excessive heat or cold, diseases, air and sometime water pollution. We also observe lack of proper health education among the domestic workers. Apart from that they face gender discrimination in their own house, which makes those women more vulnerable to various diseases. High out of pocket medical expenditure most of the time prevent them to go to doctors. So sometimes they have to face different types of health hazard mainly due to inferior environment of their residential places not work places.

The employment status of a domestic worker is always insecure. There is no legal contract between the employer and the employee, though at the time of taking decision about the monthly salary, it is decided through bargaining between the employer and the employee. It always happens prior to joining the job when the bargaining power of the employee and the employer is not same. This totally depends on the supply of domestic workers in that locality. For example, due to huge supply of domestic workers from nearby South 24 parganas district in the southern part of Kolkata, the bargaining power of the employer is much higher than the northern part of Kolkata where the supply of domestic worker is comparatively less. This is reflected through the salary and nature of work in those two regions of Kolkata. The monthly salary of a part-time domestic worker is around Rs.250 in South Calcutta where as in North Calcutta that is around Rs.300. Still intra region migration is not prominent among the domestic workers; rather they prefer to work in a particular locality.

Following the criterion of decent work the working hour of a full-time worker should be 40 hours per week, with provision for overtime (Blackett, 1996). Considering 8 hour as the standard working hour in a particular day with five working days in a week, we observed from our field survey that most of the full-time domestic workers are working

more than eight hours in a day with sometimes even seven days in a week. So they are not enjoying the initial criterion of 'labour standard'. Most of the part-time workers in Kolkata are working altogether less than eight hours in a day but they are doing that according to their choice.

The condition of labour law (recommended by ILO in 1996) is violated even among the employment pattern of both the part-time and full-time domestic workers. Following Blackell (1996) minimum wage fixing is necessary because domestic workers are typically unorganized or are associated in a union that is not legally recognized, therefore are usually unable to bargain collectively. In West Bengal the government recommended minimum wage of a unorganized worker should be at least Rs.64 per day or Rs. 8 per hour. But we have already shown through Table-2 that 99% sample part-time domestic workers and 96% sample full-time domestic workers are earning less than the government recommended minimum hourly wage in Kolkata. But both the part-time domestic workers and salaried full-time domestic workers enjoy the benefit of leave periods. According to modern and comprehensive international labour standard, an annual leave or holidays with pay convention (1970, no.32); workers are entitled to an annual paid holidays for a specified minimum three working weeks for one year of service. In Kolkata both part-time domestic workers and salaried full-time domestic workers are generally enjoying at least three paid holidays in each month. This contract is done both by the employer and the employee prior to joining the job though all the contracts are verbal. So in this context a condition of International Labour Standard is partially maintained.

Following the termination of Employment Convention (1982), which applies, to domestic workers stipulates that the employer should give a reasonable period of notice as well as valid grounds for dismissal. But our sample observations indicate that the employers do not follow this law. The domestic workers here complained that most of the employers terminate their job instantly or just after paying monthly salaries. Large supply of domestic workers encourages the employers to do that. This actually keeps the domestic workers in a very vulnerable position. Apart from that, sometimes the domestic workers left their job for higher salaried jobs without informing their employers. They are also doing that instantly. So the employers cannot only be blamed for violence of labour law.

Actually the domestic workers of Kolkata are not satisfied with their present salaries or wages. They often express their grievances for imposing extra work burden by the employers and for delayed payment. According to them few employers have tendency to deduct wages for absence of work. They also reported that they have to face different types of verbal abuses from their employers. The kind of payment is also not up to the mark and they most of times are unpaid even doing extra work. Lack of alternative employment opportunities, fear of deportation and financial obligations to her family and their very much dependence on her income forces her to accept the salary and working conditions which is ultimately decided where actually the employer always enjoys higher bargaining power than the employee. Actually the domestic workers are vulnerable. Limited access to human and physical capital acts as a major constraint to access to jobs or growth of self-employed activities. So their opportunity cost in most of times almost zero. The West Bengal Government introduced a State-assisted Scheme of Provident Fund for Unorganized workers under the Labour Department 2001. The workers who belong to a family with average family income not more than Rs.3500/- per month are eligible to be covered by the scheme on a voluntary basis. Here each subscriber-worker contributes Rs.20 per month with a matching amount contributed by the State Government. But government excluded female domestic workers in this scheme. So the female domestic workers of Kolkata fail to enjoy any type of social security from the state government.

**Conclusions:**

Government of India is going to implement few regulations related with better working and living conditions of the unorganized workers both in the urban and rural areas. But surprisingly the domestic workers are not included in the domain of the unorganized workers. The domestic workers of Kolkata are deprived from getting minimum wage, overtime pay, public holidays, timely payment of salaries, standard daily working hours etc. They initially should be included in the domain of unorganized workers. Apart from that fixing of daily wage (salaries) for both types of workers are necessary and a full-time domestic worker should not be allowed to work more than eight hours daily. The domestic worker should also be encouraged to form formal domestic worker's union who can look after their interest. Apart from those safety regulations, provision of paid leave,

provision of housing and medical facilities is necessary for the upliftment of their working and living conditions. Micro-credit programme should be developed among those domestic workers, which can help them to earn few extra amounts through investing credit in any income augmenting activity after taking that from her respective group. This may help a domestic worker to keep herself away from any type of exploitation, which she is now facing at the time of doing work as domestic worker. But the most important fact is that they should be included under state assisted scheme of Provident Fund of unorganized workers. All those types of social practice can only improve the economic and working conditions of the female domestic workers of Kolkata.

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