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Invisible Labour, Visible Struggles: The Plight of Domestic Workers in Post-COVID 19 Pandemic India

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Abstract. Although domestic workers are an integral part of India's urban, informal economy; they continue to face marginalisation, stigmatization, and undervaluation of their work. The pandemic aggravated the vulnerability of domestic workers and they struggled to maintain their livelihood. This paper investigates the challenges faced by domestic workers in Goa and West Bengal during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study conducted in-depth interviews with trade union leaders and a survey among domestic workers (n=412) to examine the impact of the COVID pandemic on domestic workers, highlighting the inadequacy of existing legal framework to safeguard their interests during the crisis and explore the collective bargaining capacity of the domestic workers nurtured by the trade union. Primary data analysis revealed job loss, wage reductions, and other forms of exploitation and risks for domestic workers. The study also highlighted the helplessness of trade unions to ensure the basic labour rights of domestic workers during and post-pandemic as well as the lack of collective bargaining power of workers to ensure their basic labour rights. The paper argues for a more effective legal framework to ensure basic labour rights and the inclusion of domestic work as legitimate employment.

Keywords: *Domestic Workers; Trade Unions; Informal Labour; COVID-19; Working Conditions.*

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1. Introduction

The growth of paid domestic work has been a characteristic of contemporary development in most of the economies. The growth of the sector, globally, can be located within the unequal economic development over a period of time. The new approach to this sector has been marked by intensified discussion on regulating the sector. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted the Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189) in 2011. The Convention defined domestic workers as those workers who work “in or for a household or households on an occupational basis”.¹ This was the first international Convention entirely devoted to domestic workers which recognized contribution of the domestic workers to the global economy and as key members of the care economy. This Convention cemented the acceptance of this sector as a sector of employment and gave a call to all governments to come up with legislative interventions. The Convention 189 also highlighted that despite the contribution of the domestic workers towards sustaining the global economy, there is persistent undervaluation of domestic work.

According to an ILO Report (2023), globally there were at least 75.6 million domestic workers, with women accounting for 76.2 per cent. While the ILO Convention of Domestic Workers (No.189) in 2011 recognised domestic workers as key members of the care economy; unfortunately, even today, they constitute a precarious segment of the global labour force.² In 2021, the ILO published a report which highlighted the progress made by all countries in ten years since the Convention (in 2011) on making decent work a reality for the domestic workers. According to the report, domestic work has over the years, become an important source of employment, representing 2.3 percent of employment, worldwide.³ The forecast of the report was that the demand for domestic workers will grow in the light of an ageing population, increase in long term care needs and the trend of outsourcing domestic

¹ International Labour Organisation (ILO), *The Road to Decent Work for Domestic Workers*, 2003, Geneva.

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_protect/@protrav/@travail/documents/publication/wcms_883181.pdf (accessed February 1, 2025).

² ILO, *The road to Decent Work for Domestic Workers*, 2023, Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_protect/@protrav/@travail/documents/publication/wcms_883181.pdf (accessed February 1, 2025).

³ ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers*, 2001, Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_800224.pdf (accessed February 1, 2025)

and care work. In these ten years, the number of digital labour platforms has also risen eightfold from 28 in 2011 to 224 in 2010.⁴

In the last two decades, India has witnessed a massive growth in the demand for domestic work. For instance, the percentage of domestic workers in total female employment in the service sector increased from 11.8 percent in 1999-2000 to 27.1 percent in 2004-05.⁵ As per NSSO 2009-2010, there were 2.52 million domestic workers while ILO estimated that there were over 4 million domestic workers.⁶ Current official estimates state there are 4.7 million domestic workers (out of which 3 million are women) but unofficial estimates claim there are more than 20 million domestic workers. Factors such as availability of disposable income, time poverty among working women, reduction in the state investment on care, changing lifestyle of the middle class and presence of children and geriatric people in the household have led more people to invest in paid care work by employing part-time domestic workers.⁷ Additionally, poor women find it easier to take up job as a domestic worker in their vicinity as sometimes it is the only option available to them to provide for themselves and their family. Although domestic work is one of the largest sectors for employment, yet there is a paucity of official data. Also, it continues to remain an unregulated sector.

Despite the increase in the number of domestic workers in India, the sector remains largely unregulated, and this poses serious concern for women's work, wages, working conditions and their agency. Since domestic work happens in the private sphere of households, it is beyond the ambit of labour laws. Additionally, the intimate setting of domestic work in private households creates unique power dynamics, with

⁴ ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers*, op.cit.

⁵ N. Neetha, *Regulating Domestic Work* in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2008, vol. 43, no. 37, 26–28.

⁶ S. Jain, and U.S. Mishra, *Demand for Domestic Workers in India: Its Characteristics and Correlates* in *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 2018, vol. 61, 659–679.

⁷ N. Neetha, *Making of Female Breadwinners: Migration and Social Networking of Women Domestic in Delhi* in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2004, vol. 39, no. 17, 1681–1688; N. Neetha, *Contours of domestic service: Characteristics, work relations and regulation* in *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 2009, Vol. 52, no. 3, 489–506; R. Ray and S. Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2009; N. Vasanthi, N. *Addressing paid domestic work: A public policy concern* in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2011, 85–93; ILO and IHD, *Persisting Servitude and Gradual Shifts towards Recognition and Dignity of Labour: A study of Employers of Domestic Workers in Delhi and Mumbai*, 2017, https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@sro-new_delhi/documents/publication/wcms_622812.pdf (accessed February 2, 2025).

employers wielding significant influence over workers' lives. The operation of the domestic worker in the private realm of the household has led to their neglect and marginalisation in the public discourse, as well as forced them to navigate exploitative conditions without formal contracts, legal protections and access to social securities.⁸

Following the ILO Convention No.189 (2011), since the last decade, India has included domestic workers in some of their laws, such as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 (through an amendment in 2006), the Unorganised Social Security Act 2008 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013. Trade unions emerged as another means of institutionalising paid domestic work and promoting worker rights. Domestic workers formed trade unions in various states, including Bihar, Delhi, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, but the informality of the sector poses as the biggest barrier towards legal recognition and mobilisation.

In 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerabilities, exposing the continued systemic neglect of domestic workers in the country. Households became sites of heightened health concerns and economic distress; many workers experienced job loss, wage reductions, or increased workloads without corresponding safety measures. Live-in workers providing care services, in particular, were trapped in exploitative conditions and often denied mobility or access to healthcare. In addition, despite the existence of trade unions for domestic workers, in many parts of the country, they were excluded from pandemic relief measures. The pandemic, therefore, has catalysed a renewed focus on the precarious state of domestic workers within the care workforce and the urgent need for systemic reforms to address their structural marginalization.

This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic workers, highlights the inadequacy of the existing legal framework to safeguard their interests during the crisis and examines the collective bargaining capacity of the domestic workers nurtured by the trade union. By drawing on existing literature, participant narratives from trade unions and a survey among domestic workers, the paper situates domestic work within broader labour rights discourses, highlighting both the unique challenges workers face and the opportunities for systemic change.

⁸ N. Neetha, *Misconstrued Notions and Misplaced Interventions: An Assessment of State Policy on Domestic Work in India* in *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 2021, vol.64, 543–564.

2. Literature Review

Domestic work in India is a form of labour that is simultaneously indispensable and yet structurally devalued. Domestic workers are workers whose labour is rendered socially invisible because it is feminised, caste-marked, performed inside private homes, and frequently framed as care, loyalty, or household assistance rather than as formal work.⁹ This review, therefore, examines domestic workers' precarity through four interrelated dimensions: social devaluation, economic insecurity, legal fragmentation, and collective organising.

Social Devaluation: Caste, Gender, and the Private Household

A central thread in the literature is that domestic work is shaped by caste-based and gendered divisions of labour. Joseph et al. (2018)¹⁰ document how caste-based discrimination in Bengaluru relegates lower-caste women to stigmatised forms of labour such as waste picking, cleaning, and domestic work. Thus, the entry point into the occupation of domestic work is not only through poverty or lack of opportunity but also has historical linkages to caste-based ideas of service, bodily labour, cleanliness, and social hierarchy.¹¹ The location of lower-caste women in such work, therefore, reflects the continuing reproduction of caste through urban labour markets.

Gender further compounds this caste-based devaluation. Domestic work is socially treated as an extension of women's unpaid household responsibilities rather than as skilled labour that requires wages, rights, and regulation.¹² Chadha (2020) describes domestic work as marked by a dual invisibility: it is hidden because it takes place inside private homes,

⁹ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles* in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2020, vol. 55, no. 3, 21–27; J. Evans, & M. Nambiar, *Intersectionality and the feminisation of poverty: A case study on domestic workers* in *Journal of Poverty Studies*, 2013, vol. 19, no. 4, 243–259; G. Joseph, S. Mukherjee, & R. Narayan, *Caste and labour markets: Domestic workers in Bengaluru* in *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 2018, vol. 61, no. 1, 47–64; S. Sen, and N. Sengupta, *Domestic Days Women, Work and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016.

¹⁰ Joseph et al., *Caste and labour markets: Domestic workers in Bengaluru*, op.cit.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit; V. A. Zelizer, *The purchase of intimacy in Law & Social Inquiry*, 2000, vol. 25, no.3, 817–848.

and it is further devalued because caregiving and household maintenance are viewed as natural extensions of women's roles. This naturalisation weakens domestic workers' recognition as workers and makes their labour appear ordinary, affective, and feminine rather than skilled, economic, and rights-bearing.¹³

Caste, gender, and class produce layered vulnerabilities, particularly for lower-caste and migrant women, who are often confined to low-wage and socially stigmatised occupations, connecting domestic work to the feminisation of poverty, where women's paid work remains vital for household survival but remains framed as supplementary, low-value, and insecure.¹⁴ The assumption that women are secondary earners further depresses wages and obscures the fact that many domestic workers may be primary earners or part of female-headed households.¹⁵

The private household is central to this devaluation. Sen and Sengupta (2016) argue that domestic work is devalued because it is located in the "private" realm, where the civic contract and formal labour regulation are treated as having limited force. The home is imagined as a familial and emotional space rather than as a workplace, even when it is sustained through paid labour.¹⁶ This allows employers to frame the employment relationship in terms of trust, loyalty, obligation, and fictive kinship rather than wages, contracts, working hours, and enforceable rights.¹⁷

The concept of "pragmatic intimacy" is useful for understanding this contradiction. Domestic workers may be described as "like family," but this intimacy rarely produces equality, protection, or security. Instead, it creates a personalised employment relationship in which the worker is neither fully recognised as a worker nor genuinely accepted as family.¹⁸ This ambiguity has practical consequences: wages, leave, sick support,

¹³ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit.; J. Jones, *Labour of love, labour of sorrow: black women, work and the family, from slavery to the present*, Basic Books, New York, 2010; V. A. Zelizer, *The purchase of intimacy*, op.cit.

¹⁴ J. Evans, & M. Nambiar, *Intersectionality and the feminisation of poverty: A case study on domestic workers*, op.cit.; D.M. Pearce, *The feminization of poverty: Women, work, and welfare in Urban and Social Change Review*, 1978, vol. 11, no. 1, 28–36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ S. Sen, and N. Sengupta, *Domestic Days Women, Work and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata*, op.cit.

¹⁷ A. Ghatak, A., & K. Sarkar, *Economic status of domestic workers and the institutional support for them in India: Evidence from NSS 2014*, Working Paper No.255, 2020; Sen, and N. Sengupta, *Domestic Days Women, Work and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata*, op.cit.

¹⁸ A. Ghatak, A., & K. Sarkar, *Economic status of domestic workers and the institutional support for them in India: Evidence from NSS 2014*, op.cit.

rest, and emergency assistance often depend on employer goodwill rather than on legal entitlement.¹⁹

Economic Precarity: Informality, Labour Surplus, and Low Wages

Domestic work in India is also marked by economic precarity since it is located within the informal sector, where labour regulation is weak, and employment relations are skewed: unwritten, personalised, and insecure.²⁰ Domestic workers commonly work without formal contracts, defined working hours, paid leave, job security, or standardised grievance mechanisms.²¹ This informality exposes workers to arbitrary wage deductions, uncertain support during illness, and dismissal without compensation.²²

Domestic work must also be understood within wider labour-market conditions, particularly the oversupply of unskilled labour. India's structural transformation has remained partial: surplus labour released from agriculture has not been adequately absorbed into secure manufacturing or formal service-sector employment.²³ As a result, a large reserve army of labour survives through precarious informal work in urban spaces, including domestic work.²⁴ This surplus labour condition contributes to low wages because domestic work has relatively low entry barriers, and there is a large pool of workers seeking employment. Thus, domestic work is low-paid because it sits at the intersection of informality, labour surplus, feminised skill devaluation, and caste-class hierarchy.²⁵

¹⁹ Ibid; N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit

²⁰ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit; N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India* in *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 2011, vol. 23, no. 1, 97–120.

²¹ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit; N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit; A. Ghatak, A., & K. Sarkar, *Economic status of domestic workers and the institutional support for them in India: Evidence from NSS 2014*, op.cit.

²² N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit.

²³ R. Abraham, *Structural change and labour productivity growth in India: Role of informal workers*, Working Paper No. 386, Institute for Social and Economic Change, 2017.

²⁴ N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit; K. Sarkar, *Complexity in the determination of minimum wages for the domestic workers in India*, NLI Research Studies Series, No. 137, 2019.

²⁵ J. Evans, & M. Nambiar, *Intersectionality and the feminisation of poverty: A case study on domestic workers*, op.cit; N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and*

The association of domestic work with care further weakens bargaining power. Jones (2010) describes such work as the “labour of love,” while Zelizer (2000) shows how care work is often separated from material expectations. In the context of domestic workers, this moral separation is deeply exploitative: the work is paid, but the language around it often treats it as affection, help, duty, or feminine competence rather than as labour requiring fair compensation.²⁶ This is why domestic workers may be expected to show loyalty and flexibility while receiving low wages, limited leave, and no secure employment guarantees.²⁷

Legal Recognition and Policy Fragmentation

The legal history of domestic work in India has been one of repeated recognition without comprehensive protection. The regulation of domestic workers was first attempted in 1959, when the Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill and the All India Domestic Servants Bill were tabled as private member bills in the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, respectively. These bills included clauses on minimum wages, maximum working hours, and registration of domestic workers by local police.²⁸ Further private member bills were introduced in the Lok Sabha in 1972 and 1996, but these efforts did not result in a comprehensive legal framework for domestic workers.²⁹

Certain laws have since been extended to domestic workers in limited ways. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, through an amendment in 2006, addressed child domestic labour. The Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, have also been extended to domestic workers in

economic marginalisation in caregiving roles, op.cit; Joseph et al., *Caste and labour markets: Domestic workers in Bengaluru*, op.cit.

²⁶ J. Jones, *Labour of love, labour of sorrow: black women, work and the family, from slavery to the present*, op. cit; V. A. Zelizer, *The purchase of intimacy*, op.cit.

²⁷ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit; A. Ghatak, & K. Sarkar, *Economic status of domestic workers and the institutional support for them in India: Evidence from NSS 2014*, op.cit.; K. Sarkar, *Complexity in the determination of minimum wages for the domestic workers in India*, op.cit.

²⁸ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit

²⁹ Ibid.

specific respects.³⁰ However, these legal extensions remain fragmented and inadequate because they do not amount to a comprehensive labour regime regulating domestic workers' wages, working hours, occupational safety, leave, social security, and grievance redressal.³¹

State-level welfare mechanisms have also been uneven. Some Indian states have attempted to use welfare boards or specific provisions to extend social security benefits to domestic workers. Central schemes such as the National Old Age Pension Scheme, the National Family Benefit Scheme, and the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana provide some forms of support to informal-sector workers.³² However, these measures do not provide comprehensive coverage. Chadha (2020) argues that existing legal and welfare provisions remain fragmented and inadequate, while SEWA³³ notes that domestic workers' coverage under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana and the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, remains piecemeal.

One important legal intervention has been the inclusion of domestic work within scheduled employment under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, coinciding with the global recognition of domestic workers' rights through ILO Convention 189 in 2011. However, Sarkar (2019) argues that significant concerns remain around defining domestic work, calculating wages, and enforcing minimum wage provisions. This is particularly important because formal inclusion does not necessarily produce protection when work is performed inside dispersed private households and mediated through personalised employment relations.³⁴

The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code introduced in 2020 further illustrates the limits of legal recognition. By excluding private households from the definition of a workplace, the Code leaves domestic workers outside the scope of occupational health, safety, and working condition protections. This exclusion is significant because domestic workers face occupational risks, including physically

³⁰ N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit.

³¹ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit.

³² N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit.

³³ SEWA is an acronym for Self-Employed Women's Association. It is the largest trade union centre for women workers in India's informal economy, formed in 1972. SEWA has its presence in various states of India.

³⁴ Ibid; K. Sarkar, *Complexity in the determination of minimum wages for the domestic workers in India*, op.cit.

demanding labour, long hours, exposure to cleaning substances, verbal abuse, health risks, and sexual harassment, yet the private household is not treated as a workplace requiring regulation.³⁵

The legal problem is therefore not a complete absence but a partial and fragmented recognition. Domestic workers appear within some laws, schemes, and welfare discussions, but they remain excluded from a comprehensive legal framework that treats them as full workers. This produces a contradictory form of recognition: domestic workers are visible enough to be selectively regulated, but not visible enough to receive enforceable and universal labour protections.³⁶

Collective Organising and the Struggle for Worker Hood

Trade unions and worker collectives are central to challenging the invisibility of domestic work, but organising domestic workers is structurally difficult. Domestic workers are employed in private, dispersed, and physically isolated households rather than in a shared workplace.³⁷

Many work part-time for multiple employers, often without formal contracts or a clearly defined employer-employee relationship.³⁸ These conditions hinder traditional trade union models that depend on a common workplace, shared employer, and stable worker identity.³⁹

The personalised nature of domestic work also makes mobilisation difficult. Workers may depend on employers not only for wages but also for housing, references, emergency assistance, or continued access to employment networks. This dependency reinforces paternalistic relationships and discourages workers from challenging exploitative

³⁵ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit.; A. Ghatak, A., & K. Sarkar, *Economic status of domestic workers and the institutional support for them in India: Evidence from NSS 2014*, op.cit.

³⁶ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit.; K. Sarkar, *Complexity in the determination of minimum wages for the domestic workers in India*, op.cit.; S. Sen, and N. Sengupta, *Domestic Days Women, Work and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata*, op.cit.

³⁷ N. Kabeer, K. Milward, & R.M. Sudarshan, *Organising women workers in the informal economy* in *Gender & Development*, 2013, vol. 21, no. 2, 249–263; N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit.

³⁸ N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit.; A. Cornwall, C.M. Oliveira, & T. Goncalves, *If you don't see a light in the darkness, you must light a fire*, in N. Kabeer, R. Sudarshan, & K. Milward (eds.), *Organising women workers in the informal economy: Beyond the weapons of the weak*, Zed Books, 2013, 149–180.

³⁹ N. Kabeer, K. Milward, & R.M. Sudarshan, *Organising women workers in the informal economy*, op.cit; Ibid.

practices.⁴⁰ Because grievances occur inside separate households, workers may initially experience wage cuts, abuse, or overwork as individual problems rather than as shared labour issues.

Hirsch (2015) argues that “framing” is therefore a crucial tool in mobilising domestic workers. Framing creates cognitive and physical spaces for workers to discuss shared concerns, question existing power structures, and move from a “servant” identity to a “worker” identity.⁴¹ This shift is politically significant because it allows domestic workers to reinterpret their experiences as labour exploitation rather than personal misfortune or employer-specific conflict.

Jiang and Korczynski (2016) similarly highlight the importance of “communities of coping,” informal networks through which domestic workers connect, share experiences, and collectively articulate demands. These networks are important because they allow workers to move from isolation toward solidarity, especially when linked to formal advocacy platforms.⁴² Joseph et al. (2018) show a similar shift in Bengaluru, where domestic workers moved from accepting symbolic gestures, such as festive gifts, to demanding material benefits, such as bonuses. This shift reflects the emergence of collective consciousness and a stronger claim to domestic work as labour deserving economic recognition.⁴³

In India, the mobilisation of domestic workers can be traced to the National Domestic Workers’ Movement, which began in 1985 in Mumbai and Chennai. The movement emerged to address the indignity and abuse faced by domestic workers in their workplaces and has since grown into collectives across several Indian cities. Its work focuses on capacity building, social security, lobbying for domestic workers’ rights, and addressing trafficking and unsafe migration.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit.; A. Ghatak, & K. Sarkar, *Economic status of domestic workers and the institutional support for them in India: Evidence from NSS 2014*, op.cit.

⁴¹ E.L. Hirsch, *Sacrifice for the cause: Group processes, recruitment, and commitment in a student social movement*, in A. D. Morris & C. McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory*, Yale University Press, 2015, 101–113.

⁴² M. Korczynski, *Communities of Coping: Collective Emotional Labour in Service Work, Organization*, 2003, vol. 10, 55 – 79; Z. Jiang, & M. Korczynski, *When the ‘Unorganizable’ Organize: The Collective Mobilisation of Migrant Domestic Workers in London*, *Human Relations*, 2016, vol. 69, no. 3, 813 –838.

⁴³ G. Joseph, S. Mukherjee, & R. Narayan, *Caste and labour markets: Domestic workers in Bengaluru*, op.cit.

⁴⁴ N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit.

SEWA has also played a significant role in organising, training, and placing domestic workers. Since the late 1990s, SEWA has trained domestic workers and placed them in jobs, beginning in Trivandrum and later extending to Kerala, Delhi, and Bihar. The nature of training has changed over time in response to market demands, with increasing emphasis on professionalism, punctuality, personal hygiene, integrity, and honesty. However, the placement of trained domestic workers at suitable wages has remained a persistent challenge.⁴⁵

SEWA's model is important because it combines skills training, legal awareness, and collective bargaining. Evans and Nambiar (2013) argue that unionisation and collective action are necessary for empowering domestic workers to challenge exploitative norms and negotiate better conditions. Banerjee (2021) similarly argues that neighbourhood-based organising by NGOs creates shared spaces where domestic workers can connect, access skills training, build legal awareness, and advocate for their rights. These organising strategies matter because domestic workers' isolation is not only physical but political; collective spaces allow workers to become visible as a labouring constituency.⁴⁶

The rise of commercial placement agencies creates a different set of concerns. In the last decade, several commercial placement agencies have emerged in urban areas to train domestic workers and place them in households.⁴⁷ However, there is no definite data on the number of such agencies in India, and the absence of adequate studies makes it difficult to assess their impact on workers' placement, wages, and bargaining capacity.⁴⁸ In the absence of regulation, placement agencies may become sites of trafficking, sexual exploitation, and economic abuse. Even when workers are skilled, a lack of legal protection prevents them from bargaining for higher wages, allowing employers to access trained domestic workers while continuing to pay low wages.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ J. Evans, & M. Nambiar, *Intersectionality and the feminisation of poverty: A case study on domestic workers*, op.cit; A. Banerjee, *Neighbourhood-based organizing: Empowering domestic workers through shared spaces*, *Journal of Labour Studies*, 2021, vol. 13, no. 2, 45–62.

⁴⁷ N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit.

⁴⁸ ILO, *Indispensable yet Unprotected: Working Conditions of Indian Domestic Workers at Home and Abroad*, 2015, Geneva.

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40declaration/documents/publication/wcms_378058.pdf (accessed on February 10, 2025)

⁴⁹ N. Neetha, & R. Palriwala, *The absence of state law: Domestic workers in India*, op.cit.; N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving*

This distinction between worker-based organisations and commercial placement agencies is important. Worker-based organisations such as NDWM and SEWA seek to build collective power, rights awareness, and worker identity. Commercial placement agencies, unless regulated, may reproduce market-based exploitation by supplying trained labour without transforming wages, rights, or working conditions. The literature therefore suggests that decent work for domestic workers depends not merely on training or placement, but on collectivisation, regulation, and cultural revaluation of domestic labour.⁵⁰

Achieving decent work for domestic workers, therefore, requires more than piecemeal welfare schemes or partial legal inclusion. It requires comprehensive labour regulation, enforceable minimum wages, occupational safety protections, social security, protection from harassment, and accessible grievance mechanisms.⁵¹ It also requires cultural revaluation: domestic work must be recognised as skilled, necessary, and economically valuable labour rather than as a natural feminine duty, caste-marked service, or familial assistance.⁵²

COVID-19 and the Intensification of Existing Vulnerabilities

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the vulnerabilities already embedded in domestic work. According to the International Labour Organization, more than 75% of informal domestic workers globally experienced significant job losses or wage cuts during the pandemic.⁵³ For domestic workers, the crisis translated into sudden unemployment, wage

roles, op.cit; K. Sarkar, *Complexity in the determination of minimum wages for the domestic workers in India*, op.cit;

⁵⁰ J. Evans, & M. Nambiar, *Intersectionality and the feminisation of poverty: A case study on domestic workers*, op.cit; A. Banerjee, *Neighbourhood-based organizing: Empowering domestic workers through shared spaces*, op.cit.; K. Sarkar, *Complexity in the determination of minimum wages for the domestic workers in India*, op.cit.

⁵¹ S. Sen, and N. Sengupta, *Domestic Days Women, Work and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata*, op.cit.

⁵² Ibid.; J. Jones, *Labour of love, labour of sorrow: black women, work and the family, from slavery to the present*, op. cit; V. A. Zelizer, *The purchase of intimacy*, op cit.

⁵³ ILO, *The impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers: Preliminary Assessment*, 2020, Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/publications/WCMS_748368/lang-en/index.htm (accessed on February 15, 2025).

reduction, unpaid leave, increased work demands, and intensified dependence on employer discretion.⁵⁴

Workers who retained employment did not necessarily experience security. Many faced increased workloads without proportional wage adjustments, particularly as cleaning, sanitisation, and care responsibilities expanded during the pandemic⁵⁵. Those who continued entering employer households were exposed to heightened health risks, often without access to basic personal protective equipment such as masks or gloves⁵⁶. The pandemic, therefore, intensified the contradiction of domestic work: employers depended on workers to maintain household hygiene and care, but workers' own health and safety were weakly protected.⁵⁷

Live-in workers were especially vulnerable because employer-imposed restrictions on movement could produce conditions of surveillance and confinement.⁵⁸ Under the justification of infection control, workers' mobility, access to healthcare, rest, and autonomy could be controlled by employers.⁵⁹ The household thus became both a workplace and a space of restriction, deepening the worker's dependency and blurring the boundary between employment and confinement.

The pandemic also exposed the consequences of domestic workers' exclusion from formal labour laws and social protection schemes. Evans and Nambiar (2013) argue that domestic workers' location in informal labour leaves them without reliable access to unemployment benefits, health insurance, or emergency relief. During COVID-19, this lack of social safety nets became especially visible, as workers had to absorb job loss, wage cuts, health risks, and mobility restrictions without adequate institutional support.⁶⁰

Moreover, the pandemic made it evident that a one-size-fits-all approach towards addressing the needs and problems faced by domestic workers will not be effective. It is important to note that the challenges faced by

⁵⁴ Ibid; N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit.

⁵⁵ N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ J. Evans, & M. Nambiar, *Intersectionality and the feminisation of poverty: A case study on domestic workers*, op.cit; N. Chadha, *The dual invisibility of domestic workers: Gendered and economic marginalisation in caregiving roles*, op.cit.; International Labour Organization, *The impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers: Preliminary Assessment*, op cit.

domestic workers are shaped by multiple axes of identity, which govern their relationship with the trade union and their capacity to bargain with their employers. Only through an intersectional⁶¹ approach is it possible to understand the interaction between gender, caste, class and other categories of social difference that create multiple forms of oppression and marginalisation for domestic workers. Therefore, for a nuanced understanding of the vulnerabilities of domestic workers in India, an intersectional perspective is essential.

Additionally, the pandemic highlighted without rights-based mobilisation, domestic workers may continue to remain visible as helpers but invisible as workers.

3. Methodology

Study Design

The study investigated the lived experiences of domestic workers, focusing on their work, working conditions, and their collectivisation in trade unions against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to document the impact of the pandemic on their work experiences and to examine the extent to which unionisation has mitigated these negative effects. The study was conducted in Kolkata and Goa from March to December 2022. Kolkata and Goa as the site of study were selected for their significance in the domestic worker movement. Kolkata is notable as the home of the first trade union for domestic workers, established in 2015. Goa, on the other hand, is characterized by a diverse domestic worker population, comprising both locals and migrants from other states.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative tools to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issues. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and surveys (n=412). IDIs were conducted with trade union leaders, NGO/CBO officials, and the labour

⁶¹ The term “intersectionality” was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Intersectionality focuses on uncovering and understanding the experiences and challenges faced by individuals who occupy multiple and intersecting group identities. Intersectional approach provides an analytical framework to understand and analyse the intersecting and cumulative forms of discrimination faced by women in their daily lives. The central ideas of intersectionality have long historic roots – black activists and feminists, as well as post-colonial, queer and other scholars have all produced work that reveals the interdependent complex social norms and systems that shape human lives.

commissioner to understand trade union activities, the role of NGOs, and the benefits provided to domestic workers. FGDs were held with domestic workers registered with trade unions or collectives to gather insights on their work conditions, challenges, and experiences, which also informed the survey design. Finally, surveys were administered to domestic workers registered with trade unions to collect data on employment terms, social security, and challenges faced during the pandemic.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How has the collectivisation of domestic workers changed their working conditions, bargaining power with employers, and their ability to address their long-term unmet practical needs?
2. How did COVID-19 pandemic affect domestic workers' employment, working conditions, and their capacity to deal with challenges?
3. In what ways did unionisation help domestic workers navigate and reduce the pandemic-related challenges?

Sampling

A survey questionnaire was developed based on the study's objectives, an extensive literature review, and the findings from FGDs. It covered themes such as basic worker profiles, working conditions, awareness and access to social security, perceptions of domestic work, the role of collectivization, skilling and occupational health, and challenges during the pandemic, including employment status, health, and social security access. Participants were identified using a snowball sampling method in both cities. Inclusion criteria for the sample were: a) domestic workers registered with a trade union; b) those who have lived in the vicinity of their workplaces for generations; c) those who commute daily; and d) those who migrated from other villages within the past ten years. In total, 412 domestic workers were surveyed, with 211 participants from Goa and 201 from Kolkata.

Table 1: Participant Profile

Participant Characteristics	Goa	Kolkata
Sample Size	211	201
Marital Status		
- Married	78.5%	70.3%
- Divorced	0.45%	0.5%
- Separated	0.45%	5.9%
- Unmarried	8.5%	8.4%
- Widowed	12.1%	14.9%
Social Group		
- Genera	54.7%	63.86%
- OBC	9.9%	0%
- SC	28.2%	34.2%
- ST	7.2%	1.9%
Educational Qualification		
- Illiterate (unable to sign)	12.6%	4.5%
- Illiterate (able to sign)	1.8%	9.9%
- Less than 5th Standard	27.3%	47.0%
- Completed 5th Standard	8.5%	12.9%
- Completed 8th Standard	11.6%	18.8%
- Completed 10th Standard	24.2%	4.5%
- Completed 12th Standard	13.9%	2%
Household Headship		
- Female-headed households	60%	40%
Housing		
- Own House	66.8%	61.9%
- Rented House	33.2%	38.1%
Economic Indicators		
- Average Monthly Salary (INR)	₹11,505.38	₹5,942.08
- Average Expenditure (INR)	₹9,521.08	₹6,000

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical research practices to ensure the dignity, autonomy, and confidentiality of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before administering research instruments, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's objectives and their role in it.

4. Findings

Valuation of Paid and Unpaid Domestic Work

Domestic workers are uniquely positioned to experience “double domesticity” where their gendered role of “caregiver” leads to them taking care of their own home’s unpaid domestic and care work before going for paid domestic and care work that in turn remains “unpaid” or “invisible” institutionally. Respondents mentioned cooking for family members and preparing their children ready for school before their work. More than 80% of respondents from Goa reported receiving no support in household responsibilities. In comparison, 45% of workers from Kolkata receive some form of support – but mostly from other female household members. Half of the respondents belong to female-headed households. Another form of “double burden” experienced by domestic workers is in the case of their husbands being incapacitated – either due to mobility issues, alcoholism, loss of job etc. In these situations, they are expected to adapt to the role of “primary caregiver” in the household and the “primary breadwinner” outside the household. Domestic worker burdens are also affected by their migratory status. Post covid, workers in Kolkata can run their households on their salary while workers from Goa largely faced challenges in managing the cost of living in Goa alongside sending money to their natal homes.

Dignity of the Domestic Worker

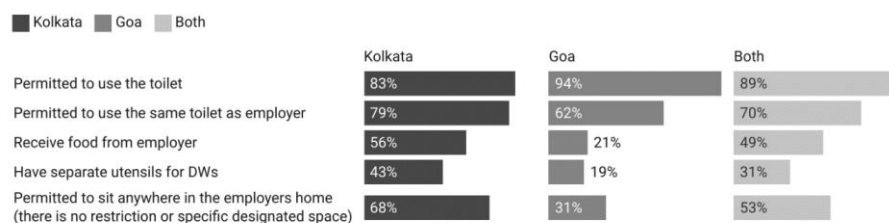
The interplay between paid domestic work and unpaid household labour underscores the systemic undervaluation of women’s labour. A key insight into the lived experiences of domestic workers indicates that their labour both paid and unpaid, has been framed as “natural” to women, thus denying its professional legitimacy. The ‘domestic helper’ through providing a paid service occupies a “domestic positionality” where domestic work is framed as a “labour of love” blending caregiving and services in ways that evade any formal valuation or regulation. This paradigm becomes the foundation for employee-employer relationships where employers frame wages as a ‘charitable act’ rather than a fair contract of professional services.

Respondent narratives also indicate that the COVID pandemic has heightened economic and emotional exploitation of their labour where the private and familial nature of their workplace created “pragmatic intimacy” – between their employers and them. They were often treated

as extensions of the family, relied on for errands, chores and care labour without prior discussion or agreement (it was seen as a natural extension of the domestic services they offered) and also received ‘gifts of care’ in form of hand-me-downs and items their employers chose to ‘give away’. The experience of pragmatic intimacy is further convoluted by the act of “advance dependency” – where most domestic workers especially migrant workers find themselves isolated and lonely in an unfamiliar city without any support. Due to the uncertainty and polarisation of the pandemic, financial emergencies, fees for children, sending money back to their families etc became impertinent causing them to enter agreements with their employers for large lump sums, payments on their behalf or other flexible modes of payments. Findings from the study indicate a significant reduction in their bargaining power and reinforce economic and social dependency. This intimate framing of paid domestic work extracts not only emotional labour but also perpetuates asymmetrical power dynamics, where ‘emotional dependency’ is leveraged to justify economic exploitation. A respondent corroborated this with *“I work in five households; no one gives me food/tea or water. I work there for so many years.”* And another stated, *“Many families give us the food that they can’t have. If we refuse to eat they question us.”*

There also exists a lack of dignity attached to domestic workers where they are privy to intimate details of their employer’s households yet most often denied basic human decency. Employee behaviours around water and food consumption, bathroom usage and giving things to their domestic help are embedded in classist and casteist undertones. These socio-economic indicators were further compounded with health-related paranoia during the pandemic, leading to hypervigilance and a shift in the treatment of domestic workers. One participant shared *“Yes, we can’t use their toilet. I can clean it but I can’t use it. Sometimes when we ask for a glass of water they tell us why we don’t carry our own bottle.”*

Table 1: Indicators of Dignity of Labour in Domestic Work



Source: Authors survey calculations

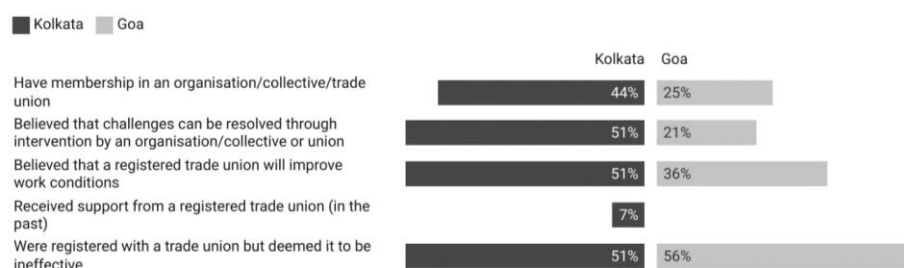
Trade Unions as Support Systems

Collective action and unionisation play a critical role in advocating for the rights of domestic workers. Regional variations in union membership and the reliance on NGO interventions underscore the structural barriers to organising domestic workers. In both our sites of enquiry, Goa and Kolkata – domestic workers' trade unions were registered under the Trade Union Act 1926 during 2017 and 2018 (pre-pandemic). Both unions were initiated by civil society organisations/NGOs who had been mobilizing these women domestic workers as part of their various socio-economic interventions. This initial intervention was critical in consciousness-raising where domestic workers learnt about their basic rights as citizens and workers.

Union membership was significantly higher in Kolkata (44%) compared to Goa (26%), reflecting a longer history of collectivisation efforts in Kolkata. Respondents reported receiving awareness-building sessions, celebrating labour rights days and building a support system. However, retention and utilising the information remained challenges leading to the absence of follow-ups and affirmative action. A large number of respondents who had union membership found unions to be inadequate in addressing their needs or bringing about tangible change in their working conditions but acknowledged their importance in providing support and safety as a collectivised entity.

In both Kolkata and Goa, formation of trade unions was initiated and supported by civil society organizations (CSOs). In Kolkata, a number of CSOs worked among the domestic workers during the last 2-3 decades and they have mobilized these workers and made them aware about the labour rights and other human rights as citizens of the country. These CSOs are visible and quite accessible to the domestic workers in Kolkata. In Goa too, domestic workers were mobilized by NGOs and helped them actively to form and register a trade union. In both Kolkata and Goa, domestic workers' trade unions are not politically affiliated and have their independent existence.

Table 2: Trade Union Membership and Support



Source: Authors survey calculations

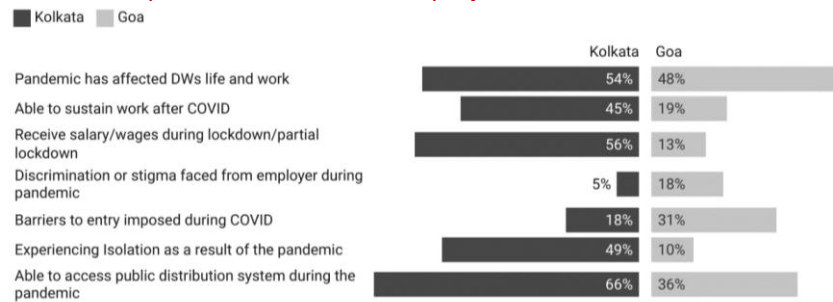
Both the state's trade unions remain constrained in terms of wider mobilisation owing to conflicts of interest. In Kolkata, the domestic workers' trade union's activities and membership overlapped with that of the civil society organization that helped its formation. This led to the organization actively opposing its members enrolling as trade union members and blaming trade union leaders for enticing and poaching its members, causing more friction than fruition. In Goa, despite no explicit conflicts, the trade union remains an extension of the missionary movement from which it originated.

Employment & Income Disparities

Given that the domestic space is characterised as "private" it has led to a repeated absence of standardised wages, fixed work hours, and safety considerations. Additionally, post-COVID, many employers opted to handle domestic work themselves rather than re-hiring workers. This trend exacerbated unemployment and reinforced the expendability of domestic workers, further eroding their bargaining power on remuneration or the nature of work. Many respondents indicated mistreatment, *"Sometimes employees fire us from our work without prior notice, sometimes they deny to pay our salary. Many people blame us for theft; they even slap/hit us."* The employers continue to decide wage rates usually against the number of tasks, disregarding the time taken or the size of the family. This has led to severe wage Disparities. Respondents in Goa earned an average of ₹11,505/month, nearly double the ₹5,942/month reported by workers in Kolkata. Workers from Goa work 1-2 houses while those from Kolkata work a minimum of 3-4 houses daily to reach the same salary owing to the employer's spending capacity and cost of living between the two cities. The Out-of-Pocket Expenditures on food and healthcare

constituted significant portions of workers' incomes, with 87% of respondents in Goa and 72% in Kolkata relying on private healthcare services. This lacuna highlights that the respondents despite being in trade unions are not fully aware of government healthcare schemes or do not have easy access to government healthcare schemes.

Table 3: Impact of COVID on employment and income

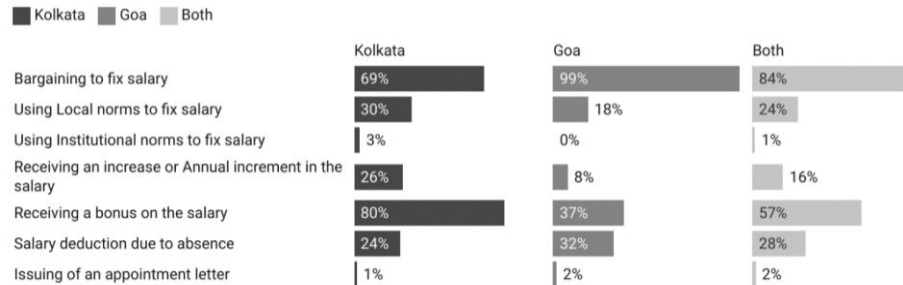


Source: Authors survey calculations

Contracts & Salary

Insights from Goa and Kolkata reveal a significant internalisation of the exploitation faced by domestic workers (DWs) with regard to contract and salary. Although worker expressed, *“Weekly leave and increment in salary will make our condition better”*; they do not bargain for it for fear of losing job. This internalisation of exploitation also stems from long-standing power imbalances and a lack of awareness about their rights. Worker unions - Samithis’ have been instrumental in helping workers understand basic entitlements, such as demanding leaves and protesting salary deductions. However, trade unions have yet to translate these efforts into actual power or enforceable protections. With no alternative avenues for protection or redressal, domestic workers remain vulnerable. As one worker admitted, *“I never knew that four days off in a month is my right.”*

Table 4: Contract and Salary Structures



Source: Authors survey calculations

Trade Unions have emerged as a stop-gap for mistreatment where respondents from both cities convene to discuss negotiation and problem-solving strategies on salary issues and employer misconduct and even show up to workplaces to de-escalate situations and show solidarity. A respondent shared that she told her employers if they want to remove her from work then they have to inform her one month earlier, otherwise they have to give her three months' salary. Another respondent shared that earlier they were afraid of taking leaves, but now they demand four monthly leaves. A powerful outcome has been that of holding space and addressing gender-based violence. A respondent stated, *"We have made it very clear that if our husband tortures us we will beat them back."*

Work and Health Conditions

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly reshaped the domestic work sector, creating a paradoxical market dynamic. While forced migration, poverty, and health concerns have swelled the supply of domestic workers, demand has significantly reduced. Agriculture is no longer the dominant labour occupation due to reduced landholdings and erratic income caused by climate change, pushing many, especially women, into domestic work. This has led to a reserve army of labour comprising the most vulnerable, including wives of construction and bonded workers, who are compelled to accept exploitative conditions in the domestic work sector.

Table 5: Working conditions of domestic workers post-COVID

Category	Percentage of Domestic Workers Affected (%)
No access to lunch breaks	33
No access to toilets	24
No access to food and water at the workplace	18
Prohibited from using the same utensils as employers	26
Prohibited from using the same furniture as employers	40
Prohibited from wearing footwear	22
No access to leave for illness	13

Source: Authors survey calculations

While the unions have not resulted in direct championing for better working conditions, it has created a safe space for the women to find a solution, and ‘show up’ for each other (both socio-emotionally and physically). A respondent shared an abhorrent case the union tackled: *“One of our friend’s employer once denied her pay. When she protested they locked her in the house. When she did not return all of us went there but the security guard did not allow us to enter. We conveyed everything to the guard and the girl was unlocked after that.”*

Health and safety are critical aspects of domestic work but remain severely neglected due to the privatized and informal nature of the sector. The pandemic narratives further highlighted these vulnerabilities, revealing systemic inequities and exploitative practices. In Goa, 78% of respondents reported no employer-provided health measures, while this figure was 81% in Kolkata. Domestic workers were often expected to self-fund COVID-19 tests, continue working despite infected family members, and were rarely provided with protective gear. Moreover, they were stigmatized as “carriers” of the virus, with many losing their jobs abruptly at the mere suspicion of illness. This termination, devoid of relief packages or alternative work opportunities, underscores the precariousness and lack of social protections in the sector.

Table 6: COVID protocols and working conditions

	Kolkata	Goa
Discontinuation of work due to perceived Covid like symptoms	72.28	50.67
Pressure from employer to get tested	14.85	24.66
Informed upon employer family members testing positive	65.84	43.05
Forced to work despite employer/family members' positive status	8.42	28.7
Equipped with sanitisers/mask/hand-wash etc or given money to procure safety gear	55.94	21.08
Labelled by employers as a potential virus carrier	21.29	15.25

Source: Authors survey calculations

Despite being in trade unions respondents were unable to quantify and advocate for health risks and organisational hazards. Most of the workers from both cities cited discomfort due to bending (63%), standing for prolonged hours (53.2%), and working for long hours without food (32%). Respondents reported back pain, swelling, skin infections or burning incidents when cooking, hand pain and heat strokes during the summer. A respondent shared about her health ordeal, *“Sometimes I have to wait for 5-6 hours, so I avoid drinking water in the morning. I have developed a problem in my kidney due to this. I leave for work at 7 am and return at 2 pm. I get the chance to go to the toilet after returning from work so I also have urinary tract infections frequently”*. A lack of health protocols for the DWs was only amplified by a lack of empathy and accountability by employers. Respondents shared that upon articulating their health concerns they were met with statements such as, *“If you have so much pain in your body then leave the work”*, or *“Why do you expect special treatment? This is part and parcel of this kind of work”*.

4. Conclusion

The fact remains that domestic work remains at the fringes of the urban informal economy in India; although the number of workers are growing in Indian cities and they are conspicuous in urban work space. It's a case of visible work but invisible workers. As domestic space is still not recognized as workspace, labour rights like minimum wage, paid leave, pension, provident fund, medical facilities, occupational safety health, collective bargaining are still elusive for domestic workers. Trade unions of domestic workers have come up certain states, including Kolkata and Goa, but those TUs could not make much headway into ensuring basic labour entitlements.

Domestic workers' trade unions in Goa and Kolkata face significant challenges in addressing the systemic neglect of domestic work. A major

issue is their exclusion from the tripartite framework of labour administration, which comprises state officials, employers, and union representatives. This framework is critical for policy decisions such as fixing minimum wages and workplace protections. However, domestic workers' trade unions remain too small to represent the sector effectively and are unable to gain access to this structure. The absence of recognition for domestic work as scheduled employment further compounds their exclusion, as decisions on minimum wages are made by tripartite entities like the State Minimum Wages Advisory Board. Without representation in these forums, domestic workers' needs remain unaddressed in broader labour policy negotiations.

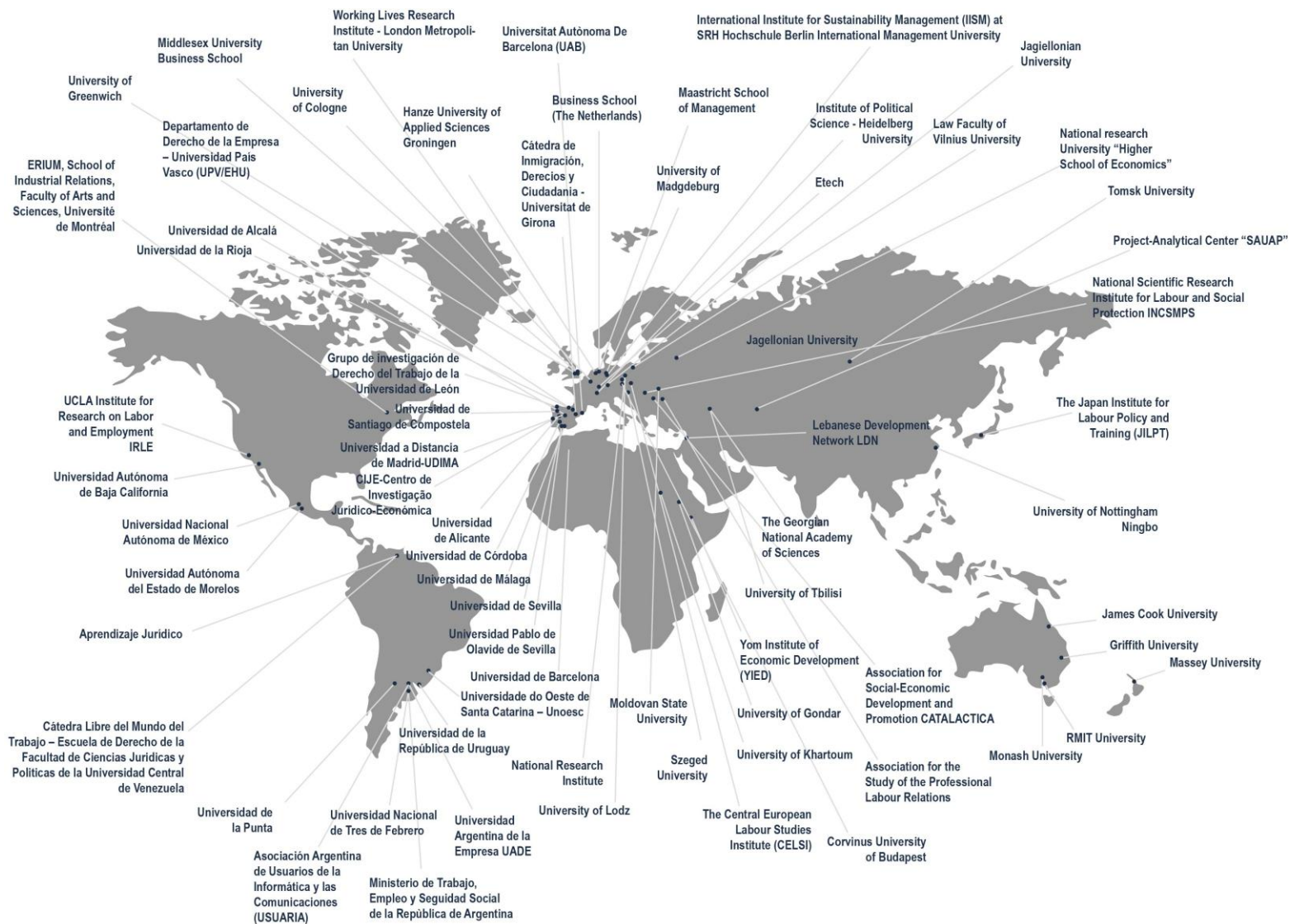
These exclusions from the tripartite decision-making bodies are because that most of the TUs in domestic work space are independent trade unions and outside the mainstream trade union ecosystem. Historically, trade union formation and growth are attached to political parties in India. All major trade unions in today's India, are attached to existing political parties with an exception of SEWA which is mobilizing women in unorganized sectors. Trade unions are given recognition as Central Trade Unions (CTU) based on membership figures. Mainstream politically affiliated trade unions get the recognition based on membership figures. First 12 CTUs get recognition as CTUs from the government (by, default also by the employers) and can participate in tripartite consultation and social dialogue. TUs in domestic work are small and not part of major mainstream TUs and thus get excluded from the decision-making process. Resource inadequacy and leadership constraints further limit the capacity of domestic workers' trade unions. These unions often lack financial resources due to their small membership sizes and their inability to affiliate with politically supported mainstream trade unions. In Kolkata, union leaders have expressed concerns over insufficient funds to support mobilization efforts. Members have also pointed to the antagonistic attitude of parent NGOs, which hinders progress and leaves unions dependent on civil society interventions. This dependency has prevented unions from transitioning into independent entities capable of effectively advocating for basic labour rights.

The fragmented, casual, and invisible nature of domestic work adds to the difficulties of organizing workers under traditional trade union models. While NGOs provide initial guidance, they often lack the technical expertise and long-term resources required to sustain unions, leaving them isolated and under-resourced. Many domestic workers' trade unions resort to symbolic actions, such as organizing events for International Domestic

Workers' Day, which are valuable for visibility and solidarity but insufficient to address systemic issues.

The absence of representation in tripartite systems underscores the need for trade unions to evolve in their structure and approach. Integrating financial support systems, technical guidance, and targeted policy advocacy tailored to the unique challenges of domestic workers is essential. For instance, structural reforms that create viable employment opportunities outside the domestic work sector can reduce reliance on this form of labour, while strengthening unions' capacity to address systemic issues.

ADAPT International Network



ADAPT is a non-profit organisation founded in 2000 by Prof. Marco Biagi with the aim of promoting studies and research in the field of labour law and industrial relations from an international and comparative perspective. Our purpose is to encourage and implement a new approach to academic research, by establishing ongoing relationships with other universities and advanced studies institutes, and promoting academic and scientific exchange programmes with enterprises, institutions, foundations and associations. In collaboration with the Centre for International and Comparative Studies on Law, Economics, Environment and Work, (DEAL) the Marco Biagi Department of Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, ADAPT set up the International School of Higher Education in Labour and Industrial Relations, a centre of excellence which is accredited at an international level for research, study and postgraduate programmes in the area of industrial and labour relations. Further information at www.adapt.it.

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