

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN KARACHI

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-economic challenges faced by women employed as domestic help in Karachi, shedding light on a workforce that remains largely invisible yet indispensable to urban households. Despite their critical contributions to the functioning of urban families, these women often navigate a web of systemic inequalities and vulnerabilities. The research delves into key issues, including economic insecurity stemming from low and inconsistent wages, the absence of legal and social protections due to their classification in the informal labor sector, and the precarious working conditions marked by long hours and physical strain. Social stigma further compounds their plight, as domestic work is often undervalued and viewed as "low status" employment. The study also explores the disproportionate impact of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated economic hardships and job insecurity for domestic workers. By highlighting these challenges, the research underscores the urgent need for policy interventions, such as formalizing domestic work through labor laws, ensuring social security measures, and promoting societal change to combat discrimination. Ultimately, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations to improve the livelihoods and dignity of women domestic workers in Karachi, contributing to broader discussions on labor rights and gender equality in Pakistan.

Keywords: Socio-economic Challenges, Women Domestic Workers, Urban Households, Inequalities, Informal Labor Sector, Economic Insecurity, Social Stigma

INTRODUCTION

Domestic work is an essential yet undervalued sector in urban economies worldwide. In Karachi, women constitute a significant proportion of the domestic labor force, performing indispensable tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and caregiving in urban households. Despite their contributions to household management and urban life, these workers remain one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. Their socio-economic challenges, rooted in systemic inequalities and lack of institutional protections, demand urgent attention and action. The global recognition of domestic workers' rights has improved since the adoption of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention (C189) in 2011, which sets labor standards for this sector. However, countries like Pakistan have yet to ratify this convention, leaving millions of domestic workers unprotected by formal labor laws (Paul, 2024). Domestic workers in Karachi, like those in other parts of the country, operate within the informal economy, with no minimum wage guarantees, social security benefits, or job contracts. Economic insecurity is a pervasive challenge faced by these workers. Women in this sector often earn meager and inconsistent wages, insufficient to support themselves and their families. Furthermore, the absence of legal protection makes them vulnerable to exploitation, including extended working hours without compensation and abrupt terminations (Ali and Yilmaz, 2020).

Social stigma surrounding domestic work compounds these challenges. In many societies, including Pakistan, domestic work is perceived as "low status," leading to discrimination against workers based on their gender, class, and ethnic background. This marginalization not only limits their

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opportunities for social and economic mobility but also exposes them to various forms of abuse and exploitation in their workplaces (Hussain, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic many domestic workers in Karachi lost their jobs or faced reduced wages during the lockdowns, plunging them into financial crises without any safety nets. The pandemic underscored the urgent need for formalizing domestic work, ensuring access to social protections, and addressing the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality (Khan and Ahmed, 2021). Women working as domestic help confronts numerous socio-economic challenges; some of these challenges are discussed in detailed as below.

Economic Insecurity: Domestic workers in Karachi frequently earn meager wages, insufficient to cover basic living costs. Gender disparities exacerbate their economic vulnerability, as women are typically paid less than men in similar roles. This financial instability often forces workers to take on multiple jobs to make ends meet, increasing their physical and emotional strain (Saeed and Qureshi, 2024).

Lack of Legal and Social Protections: Although international frameworks, like the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 189, advocate for the rights of domestic workers, Pakistan has yet to ratify key provisions. Consequently, most workers lack access to protections such as minimum wages, social security, and healthcare. The absence of formal employment contracts further exposes them to exploitation and abuse (Paul, 2024).

Risky Working Conditions: As part of the informal economy, domestic work is characterized by irregular hours, undefined job responsibilities, and a lack of workplace safety measures. Workers often perform physically demanding tasks without proper tools or breaks, leading to chronic health problems. Economic pressures compel many to continue working even when unwell (Aminu and Collins, 2024).

Social Stigma and Marginalization: Domestic workers frequently endure discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and class. Society's perception of domestic work as "low status" reinforces their marginalization, limiting their social mobility and access to better opportunities. This stigma also affects how they are treated by employers, often leading to exploitative power dynamics (Wilson et al., 2024).

This study aims to explore the above-mentioned socio-economic challenges in detail, emphasizing the urgent need for policy reforms and societal changes. By examining the lived experiences of women domestic workers in Karachi, the research seeks to contribute to broader discussions on labor rights, gender equality, and the formalization of informal sectors in Karachi - Pakistan. The socio-economic challenges faced by women domestic workers have been the subject of growing academic interest, highlighting the complex interplay between economic systems, societal norms, and policy frameworks (Nwoke et al., 2024). This review explores key themes such as economic vulnerability, legal protections, working conditions, and social stigma, with a focus on the context of Karachi. Studies consistently show that women domestic workers are among the most economically insecure labor groups globally, with South Asia reflecting some of the starkest inequalities. Ali and Yilmaz (2020) highlight that most domestic workers in Pakistan earn wages far below the minimum income threshold required for basic living, with their earnings often irregular and dependent on the whims of employers. This financial precocity leaves many unable to access essential services like healthcare or education for their children.

A study by Khan and Ahmed (2021) on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact illustrates how crises exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Many domestic workers in Karachi faced job losses or pay cuts during

lockdowns, further exposing the fragility of their financial situations. The lack of savings and safety nets forced many to seek informal loans or rely on community support networks. The informal nature of domestic work excludes most workers from formal labor protections. The International Labour Organization (ILO) introduced Convention 189 in 2011, advocating for fair wages, social security, and safe working conditions for domestic workers. However, Pakistan has yet to ratify this convention, leaving domestic workers unprotected under national labor laws (Shahid, 2022). Another study conducted by Ali (2018) emphasize that the absence of legal recognition perpetuates their marginalization and denies them access to benefits like health insurance or pension schemes. Comparative research in South Asia reveals those countries with more progressive labor laws for domestic workers i.e., Sri Lanka - demonstrate slightly better outcomes in terms of worker welfare (Hussain, 2018). However, even in such contexts, enforcement remains a critical challenge. Women domestic workers face exhausting working conditions, often characterized by long hours, undefined job responsibilities, and physically demanding tasks. Studies conducted by Hussain (2018) and Zafar (2019) document frequent cases of overwork and underpayment, with many workers experiencing health issues related to their job, such as extensive body pain and respiratory problems due to prolonged exposure to cleaning agents.

The lack of formal contracts aggravates these issues, as workers have no means to contest unfair treatment or demand better conditions (Islam, 2024). Many studies also highlighted the absence of training or safety protocols, further endangering their health and well-being. Domestic work is often denounced as "low status" labor, particularly in patriarchal societies like Pakistan. This stigma not only degrades the labor itself but also subjects' workers to discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity, and class. Studies conducted by Hassan and Shah (2020) reveal that many domestic workers in Karachi belong to marginalized ethnic communities, further intensifying their vulnerability to exploitation. The opinion of domestic work as unskilled labor undermines its professionalization and discourages discussions around fair wages and workers' rights. The inter sectionalists of gender and class-based oppression remains a key theme in the literature, emphasizing the need for broader societal change alongside policy reform (Ali and Yilmaz, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a case study for the vulnerabilities of informal workers. Research by Khan and Ahmed (2021) shows that the pandemic disproportionately affected women domestic workers, with many losing their livelihoods without compensation. The crisis revealed systemic gaps in labor protections and stressed the need for social safety nets tailored to informal workers. In other developing countries, demonstrate the potential of targeted relief programs in mitigating such impacts. For instance, Brazil's emergency cash transfer program during the pandemic significantly reduced economic sufferings for informal workers, offering a model that could be adapted for Pakistan (Shah et al., 2024) and others as well. So in this study, we need to explore the socio-economic challenges of women domestic workers in Karachi, like wages, income regularity, and access to essential services etc.

METHODOLOGY

Detailed methodology was adopted to ensure a quality exploration of gathering information through the following components:

Research Design

The mixed-methods design integrates qualitative insights with quantitative data, facilitating a deeper understanding of complex social issues (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative data captures the lived experiences of workers, while quantitative data measures the scope and prevalence of these challenges.

Sampling Method

The study uses purposive sampling, selecting participants based on age, ethnicity, and employment type to ensure diverse representation (Etikan et al., 2016). This approach captures a wide spectrum of experiences unique to the informal domestic work sector.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, averages) are utilized to examine relationships between demographic factors and specific challenges, as well as to evaluate their statistical significance.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to strict ethical standards, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent (Bryman, 2016). Participants are treated with sensitivity, given the study's focus on potentially vulnerable individuals.

Table 1

Data Illustration

For this study, there were interviewed 125 women domestic workers. Data is categorized into key variables given below.

Variables	Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Economic	Earning below minimum wage	102	81.6%
Vulnerability	Irregular income	95	76.0%
	Lack of access to essential services	110	88.0%
	Financial impact during COVID-19	78	62.4%
Legal and	Lack of formal contracts	113	90.4%
Policy Gaps	No access to social security/pensions	118	94.4%
	No legal grievance redress mechanisms	115	92.0%
Working	Long working hours (>10 hours/day)	87	69.6%
Conditions	Physically demanding tasks causing health issues	82	65.6%
	Unsafe work practices	95	76.0%
Social Stigma	Experienced discrimination (gender, ethnicity)	70	56.0%
	Perception of domestic work as "low status"	92	73.6%
Crisis	No access to emergency relief programs	109	87.2%
Mitigation	Lack of savings for crisis	104	83.2%
	Lack of community support	84	67.2%

Interpretations

The data reveals the following key insights regarding the challenges faced by women domestic workers in Karachi:

- A significant 81.6% earn below the minimum wage, highlighting severe income inadequacy.
- 76.0% experience irregular income, adding to financial instability.
- A staggering 88.0% lack access to essential services like healthcare and education.
- 62.4% faced financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the fragility of their economic situation.
- 90.4% lack formal employment contracts, leaving them unprotected against exploitation.
- 94.4% have no access to social security or pensions, underscoring systemic neglect in policy frameworks.
- 92.0% have no legal grievance redress mechanisms, leaving them without recourse for workplace injustices.
- 69.6% endure long working hours exceeding 10 hours per day, showing poor work-life balance.
- 65.6% suffer from health issues caused by physically demanding tasks.
- 76.0% work in unsafe environments without adequate safety protocols.
- 56.0% have experienced discrimination based on gender or ethnicity.
- 73.6% perceive their work as being stigmatized as "low status," which hinders respect and fair treatment.
- 87.2% had no access to emergency relief programs during crises, exposing a lack of institutional support.
- 83.2% lack savings to handle emergencies, reflecting their precarious financial state.
- 67.2% report insufficient community support, exacerbating their vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

Women domestic workers in Pakistan face significant socio-economic challenges that underscore their vulnerability and marginalization. Economically, they earn irregular and insufficient wages, often below the minimum threshold, leaving them unable to access essential services like healthcare and education. Legally, the informal nature of domestic work leaves these workers unprotected, as Pakistan has not ratified the International Labor Organization's Convention 189, which advocates fair wages and social security. Without legal recognition, domestic workers are excluded from benefits such as health insurance and pensions. Working conditions are equally concerning, with long hours, undefined roles, and physically demanding tasks leading to health issues like chronic pain and respiratory problems. The absence of formal contracts and safety protocols exacerbates their vulnerability to exploitation. Additionally, social stigma labels domestic work as "low status," fostering systemic discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and class, particularly for workers from marginalized communities. Detailed findings are discussed below.

1. Economic Vulnerability

- Women domestic workers are among the most economically insecure, earning far below minimum income thresholds.
- Irregular wages leave them unable to access essential services like healthcare or education for their children.
- The financial precocity worsens during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to job losses, pay cuts, and reliance on informal loans or community networks.

2. Lack of Legal Protections

- Domestic work remains largely informal and unregulated in Pakistan, leaving workers unprotected by labor laws.

- Pakistan has not ratified ILO Convention 189, which advocates for fair wages, social security, and safe working conditions for domestic workers.
- The absence of legal recognition perpetuates marginalization and denies access to benefits like health insurance and pension schemes.

3. Poor Working Conditions

- Workers often face long hours, undefined job roles, and physically demanding tasks.
- Issues like overwork, underpayment, and job-related health problems are widespread.
- The absence of formal contracts and safety protocols exacerbates exploitation and endangers workers' health.

4. Social Stigma and Discrimination

- Domestic work is stigmatized as "low status" labor, leading to gender, ethnic, and class-based discrimination.
- The perception of domestic work as unskilled undermines discussions on fair wages and worker rights.
- Many domestic workers in Karachi belong to marginalized ethnic communities, increasing their vulnerability.

5. Lessons from Comparative Contexts

- Countries with progressive labor laws for domestic workers (e.g., Sri Lanka) report better welfare outcomes, though enforcement remains challenging.
- Brazil's emergency cash transfer program during the COVID-19 pandemic reduced economic suffering for informal workers, offering a potential model for Pakistan.

Recommendations

Addressing challenges for women domestic workers requires ratifying ILO Convention 189, enforcing minimum wage standards, and ensuring access to social security, healthcare, and pensions. Formal contracts, safety training, and health checkups are essential for better working conditions. Social safety nets, such as emergency cash transfers and savings schemes, can provide economic resilience. Advocacy campaigns should reduce stigma and promote professionalization, while inclusive policies must support marginalized communities and foster worker support networks. Detailed recommendations are discussed below.

1. Policy and Legal Reforms

- Implement ILO Convention 189 to ensure legal protections for domestic workers.
- Develop policies for formal recognition of domestic workers, including access to social security, healthcare, and pensions.
- Enforce minimum wage standards and create mechanisms for redressal of grievances.

2. Improved Working Conditions

- Mandate formal contracts that define job roles, working hours, and wage structures.
- Introduce occupational safety protocols and provide training to domestic workers.
- Ensure regular health checkups and awareness programs on safe work practices.

3. Social Safety Nets and Crisis Mitigation

- Design targeted relief programs for informal workers, such as emergency cash transfers during crises.
- Establish savings schemes and micro insurance tailored to the needs of domestic workers.

4. Awareness and Advocacy

- Launch campaigns to reduce the stigma associated with domestic work and promote its professionalization.
 - Encourage public discourse around fair wages, rights, and the value of domestic work.
- 5. Focus on Marginalized Groups**
- Develop inclusive policies addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalized ethnic communities.
 - Implement community-based initiatives to build support networks for domestic workers.

Women domestic workers in Pakistan face profound socio-economic challenges rooted in economic vulnerability, legal gaps, poor working conditions, and societal stigma. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including legal reforms to protect workers' rights, improved working conditions, and targeted social safety nets to ensure financial resilience. Advocacy campaigns and inclusive policies are crucial to reduce stigma and support marginalized communities. Drawing on successful international models, Pakistan has the opportunity to create a more equitable framework that uplifts domestic workers, ensuring dignity, fair treatment, and access to essential services.

Limitations

1. **Sampling and Scope:** Non-random sampling and a focus on Karachi may limit the representation and generalizability of findings.
2. **Data Challenges:** Language barriers, illiteracy, and social stigma may affect data quality and participant openness.

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