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Inside and Outside the Domain of Home: Violence against Maid Servants in Karimganj Town

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Abstract

The issue of gender based violence is rampant all over the world and in India it is mostly institutionalised. Women working as maids are easy targets of attacks as most of them are unregistered and operate in poorly regulated labour market. The occurrence of violence exist at multiple forms i.e., on the basis of gender, caste and class lines. Lack of legal mechanisms to protect the worker in the informal sector increases the abuse and exploitation of domestic workers.

Key Words: domestic violence, maid servants, domestic workers, caste and class.

The issue of gender based violence is rampant all over the world and in India it is mostly institutionalised. When the biological differentiation put men into an advantageous situation, the patriarchal structure of society make him superior. In a family the male member is believed to be the guardian, the sole protector and the only one who has the decision making power. Naturally, any commitment of violence by him is willingly and purposively accepted. According to World Health Organisation, at her span of life, one in five women, is physically or sexually abused by a male member of her family and South Asia, particularly India is the most sensitive zone in this respect (Singh, 2004). The Thomson Reuters Foundation 2018 survey held India as the most dangerous country for sexual violence against women (Mukherjee, 2018). It is not that the males are always the only perpetrators of violence but violence against men is less frequent as compared to women. According to United Nation Population Fund Report, around two-third of married Indian women are victims of domestic violence out of which 70 per cent between the age of 15 and 49 are victims of beating, rape or forced sex and overall more than 55 percent sufferers are found in the states of Bihar, U.P., M.P. and other northern states (<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com>). Women experience domestic violence for different reasons- the married women are mostly tortured due to her parents' inability to provide dowry to their in laws or due to the addictions of their husbands, the young girls mostly face humiliation due to the expectations of the parents to have a boy child in a family and the widows are prone to violence due to their dependency on their children. What-so-ever,

under all circumstances, the consequences of violence let a woman to lead her life in acute trauma, insecurity and helplessness. Not only in her family, woman face harassment at public place, experience abuse and torture at community level and also is discriminated at her workplace. HER respect, a non-profit organisation working globally (2018) reveals that in Indian factories there are certain factors that drive violence against women. These are- the dominant gender norms reinforcing the unequal relationship between women and men, general acceptance of harassment and violence against women in the workplace and the perception that violence as the most accessible and effective way to achieve production targets (<https://www.forbes.com>). The occurrence of violence exist at multiple forms i.e., on the basis of gender, caste and class lines. The women of lower caste and class mainly perform the low skilled jobs because of their less education, denial of opportunities and to fulfil the basic requirements of their family. Women working as maids are easy targets of attacks as most of them are unregistered and operate in poorly regulated labour market (Manjoo, 2014). They are subjected to various forms of harassment both at their family and also at workplace but due to the fear of social exclusion or due to their respect to patriarchal norms of society, they are reluctant to report most of the cases of violence which indirectly perpetuate violence. Moreover, lack of legal mechanisms to protect the worker in this informal sector increases the abuse and exploitation of domestic workers (<https://feminisminindia.com>). In this connection, the present paper is undertaken to know the intensity of violence against maid servants in Karimganj town both inside and outside the periphery of home along with the suggestions to curb the problem.

Objectives:

- a) To assess the intensity of violence on gender, caste and class lines both inside and outside the home of maid servants in Karimganj town,
- b) To explore the applicability of the laws to stop the exercise of violence against women all over the world, in India and in Karimganj town in particular and
- c) To assess whether any steps adopted by the domestic workers themselves and by the society to stop the exercise of violence against them in Karimganj town.

Methodology: The study is based on primary data which has been collected through Convenience Sampling Method whereby the sample consists of part-time and full-time female domestic workers in households. The total sample is 430 comprising 305 (88.37%) Hindus- 57 (13.25%) General Castes, 305 (70.93) SCs & 18 (4.19%) OBCs- and 50 (11.63%) Muslims. All the female domestic workers in the Karimganj town and some of its adjacent rural areas constituted the universe of the study. Karimganj district is located in Southern Assam and borders Tripura, state of India and Sylhet region of Bangladesh. Its total population is 12, 28,686, out of which 50.93% (6, 25,864) is male population and 49.1% (6, 02,822) is female population. Karimganj town, the administrative headquarters of the district, is the biggest town in the district. Total population of the town in 2011 was recorded 56,854 (males 28,473 and females 28,381). It may cross 100,000, as many parts of the town still come under the jurisdiction of gram panchayats. Out of 20,851(36.67%) total workers in Karimganj (MB), 16,432 (57.71%) are males and 4,419 (15.57%) are females.

The main and marginal male workers are the largest, i.e., 14,779 (51.91%) and 1653 (5.81%) as compared with 3,186(11.23%) and 1233 (4.34%) of main and marginal female workers respectively. The number of non-working population is the highest amongst the females i.e., 23,962(84.43%) as compared with 12,041(42.29%) of males. In Karimganj town, the domestic workers live in Tilak Chand Road (8.60% of total samples w/n 7), Nilmoni Road (8.60% of total samples, w/n 9), Char Bazar(11.16% of total samples, w/n 23, 21), Housing Complex (4.65% of total sample , w/n 6), Shyamaprasad Road (7.44% of total samples, w/n-24) Banamali Road (4.19% of total samples, 13 and 14), Rail Colony (7.21% of total samples , w/n 24, 27), END Colony (0.47% of total samples, w/n-25), Azad Sagar Road (0.93% of total samples, w/n 3), Thana Road (0.93% of total samples, w/n 12), Settlement Road (2.33% of total samples, w/n 1), Longai Road (1.86% of total samples, w/n 2), Subash Nagar (0.93% of total samples., w/n 15), Batarashi CT (0.93% of total samples, w/n 2) and a good number of them in some panchayat areas for example, Sarisha (11.63% of total samples, w/n 1,3,2,8) Cherakhuri (8.37% of total samples, w/n 6), Keshorkapan 9 (5.81% of total samples, w/n1), Umapati (5.12% of total samples, w/n 9), Chandsrikona (2.09% of total samples, w/n 9) and Banamali Part I (1.16% of total samples, w/n 1,3& 10) Kanisail Pt II (5.58% of total samples, w/n 1). The secondary data have been collected through official publications.

Operational Definition of Violence: The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993, defines violence against women as “any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”. It encompasses, but is not limited to, physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family but also within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere (<https://www.whoint/gender/violence/v4.pdf>). In the study, the concept violence is also adopted to mean gender, caste and class based violence occurring at both public and private life of maid servants in Karimganj town.

Findings of the Study: The finding of the study is done by data analysis which is again presented relating to the objectives of the study. Let us start with **analysing the social situation of the respondents.**

- i) Regarding the age group of respondents, in the category of Hindu Community , the percentage is more in the age group of 36-50: 49.12% General Castes, 43.28% SCs, 50% OBCs. 40% Muslim also belong to this category. The total 16.98% females were found to work whose age is above 50.
- ii) Regarding the literacy status, in the category of Hindu Community, 71.93% General Caste, 54.75% SC and 55.56% OBC respondents are literates along with 52.56% Muslims. The overall 17.90% respondents could not continue study due to financial crisis and the rest were either married early or due to minimal interest in study both on their part and their parents, they left their study.

- (iii) Regarding the types of house, in the category of Hindu community, the highest 70.18% General, 84.91% SC and 72.22% OBC respondents live in kachcha houses along with 92% Muslim respondents.
- (iv) Regarding the monthly income of respondents, 36.28% respondents are having income ranging Rs. 1000- 2000 and only a few i.e., 1.16% and 0.47% respondents earn within the range of Rs. 5000-6000 and more than Rs. 6000/- respectively. 22% respondents from Muslim community earn below Rs.500/- and 4% are found to do work without any salary.

a) Intensity of Violence Faced By Maid Servants Inside and Outside Home:

- (i) Regarding the status of facing domestic violence, in the category of Hindu Community, 17.54% General Caste, 8.85% SC and 11.11% OBC respondents along with 6% Muslim respondents face physical or oral violence at their home.
- (ii) Regarding the persons committing violence, in the category of Hindu Community, 70% and 30% General Caste respondents are tortured by their husbands and fathers. 92.6%, 3.70% and another 3.70% SC respondents are abused by their husbands, fathers and sons respectively. 2% OBC respondents are tortured by their husbands. In the category of Muslim community, all the respondents are tortured by their husbands.
- (iii) Regarding the ways of committing physical or oral violence on respondents, in the category of Hindu General Castes, 70% are beaten, 20% are slapped and 10% are insulted by bad words. In the category of Hindu SCs, 85.19% are beaten, 7.41% are slapped, 3.70% respondents' body parts are fractured and 3.70% are insulted by bad words. In the category of Hindu OBCs, 50% are beaten and 50% are slapped. In the category of Muslim community, all the respondents are beaten by their husbands.
- (iv) Regarding the alcohol consumption of husbands or sons of respondents, in the category of Hindu community, 42.42% General caste, 40.48% SC and 66.67% OBC respondents along with 22.22% Muslim respondents replied positively.
- (v) Regarding the caste based subjugation in the Hindu community, 28.57% General Caste respondents are not allowed in kitchen of their employers, 43.14% SC respondents are also not allowed in kitchen of their employers along with facing rude behaviour from them. Not single OBC respondents complained of facing any sort of ill treatment.
- (vi) Regarding the class based subjugation, in the category of Hindu community, 14.04% General Caste, 9.84% SC and 11.11% OBC along with 10% Muslim respondents are ill-treated by their employers in the form of harsh words.

b) Laws Adapted to Stop the Exercise of Violence against Women: Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. There have been three United Nations world conferences on women. One in Mexico in 1975, the second in Copenhagen in 1980, and the third one in Nairobi, wherein strategies were framed to promote gender equality and opportunities for women (Sharma, 2015). The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1993

working at the international, regional and national frameworks is an important step adopted to stop violence against women. India established the National Commission for Women (NCW) in 1992 to examine the provisions protecting women's rights in the Constitution and existing laws (Kethineni, 2017). The Vishaka Guideline (1997) enlists what behaviour will be constituted as misconduct and as inappropriate. The nature of the Guideline says that it might be applicable to all kinds of employability, but the scope of it is very limited to organised and formal workspaces (<https://www.careindia.org>). The Government of India introduced 'Protection from Domestic Violence bill' in 2001 to secure greater rights for women. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 (PWDVA) is another landmark towards curbing domestic violence against women in India. It defines domestic violence as comprehensive and includes all forms of physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and economic violence, and covers both actual acts of such violence and threats of violence. In order to fight for effective implementation of PWDVA provisions, the Lawyers Collective Women's Rights Initiative (LCWRI) trained criminal justice professionals, raised awareness among Indian women, and offered legal aid to those facing domestic violence (Kethineni, 2017). In 2013, the Government of India notified the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act to ensure women's right to workplace (Gandhi, 2015). In addition, there are number of laws passed time to time to safeguard women from harassment, subjugation and violence. "The domestic workers' movement has begun in 27 states in NE India and in Assam, it started in 2007 in Udalguri. Barak Human Rights Protection (2002), The Barak Valley Welfare Development Society (2005) and Bhoomi Women Trust (NGO, 2017) in Silchar is likely to undertake several projects amongst which women's development and empowerment will be given equal importance. Under the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 implemented in Assam on 2009, the Karimganj Labour Department has also taken several steps like issuing of identity cards to the unorganized workers so that they can get preference at their respective places to the benefits of free education to children, free medical facilities and above all inclusion in the National Health Insurance Policies, meant for them. But the condition of marginalised women is still a matter of serious concern as not single domestic workers went to the department to get the benefits. Moreover, most of the laws have their own limitations because of which domestic workers are still in dependent position making it difficult for her to break out of the abusive home or workplace environment.

(C) Steps Adopted by Domestic Workers to Stop the Exercise of Violence:

- (i) Regarding the ways of resistance provided against domestic violence, in the category of Hindu community, 90% General Caste, 51.85% SC and 2% OBC respondents along with 2% Muslim respondents either talked about the matter to their relatives or discussed the issue with the club members of their area. Overall, only 11.90% respondents put legal complaint.
- (ii) Regarding the ways of resistance provided against alcohol consumption of their husbands or sons, in the category of Hindu community, 50% General Caste, 45.59%

SC and 83.33% OBC respondents along with 50% Muslim respondents showed opposition.

- (iii) Regarding the ways of resistance provided against caste based subjugation at workplace, 50% General Caste and 95.45% SC respondents opposed ill-treatment towards them.
- (iv) Regarding the ways of resistance provided against ill-treatment at employers' house, in the category of Hindu community, 66.67% General Caste, 70.82% SC and 77.78% OBC along with 60% Muslim respondents changed their employers' house immediately.

Result and Discussion:

- (i) It is well understood from literacy rate of the respondents that their low level of education stands as a barrier to resist any sort of violence at their home and community level.
- (ii) The respondents are found to work even at the age of 50 or more which again clears the picture that the financial condition of their family is too bad to support them at their old age.
- (iii) 4% Muslim respondents are found to work without salary which again tells us that forced labour still exist in our society in one way or the other.
- (iv) The majority of the respondents are living in kachcha houses which show that they are still struggling to fulfil their basic needs and at this stage they are ready to accept any sort of ill-treatment towards them.
- (v) Some of the respondents who do not oppose their addicted husbands or sons have the view that males obviously drink which again shows the pre-conceived notion of the society that males are allowed to do certain things though these are harmful to them or give a bad signal to society.
- (vi) The respondents prefer to change the houses of employers if get ill-treatment which tells us that they are either reluctant to go for direct confrontation or do not dare to do so as they belong to the bottom of society.
- (vii) The cases of violence at home and workplace are also not widely discussed as some of them feel that it is useless to do so as they are not united.
- (viii) There is no placement agency for domestic workers in Karimganj town as a result of which they are to bargain for remuneration, struggle and survive in their own capacity and most of the time they prefer to remain silent as the support of society towards them is very limited. This means, ultimately a woman is placed in a socially and economically backward position and any sort of intolerance calls for multiple forms of violence against them.

Conclusion: Violence against women can only be stopped by giving them a space in home, public life and politics. In family life, the males should be taught from their childhood to respect women and in public life especially in work place, all forms of class and caste based violence towards women should be strictly dealt with so that women can feel safe and secure. Unless and until women's participation is secured in private and public spheres, no

law can change the position of women. So the vigilance of society is the utmost requirement to provide women a dignified life.

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