

# Technology Vs Human Labour: Exploring the Domestic Workspace of Kerala

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## ABSTRACT

Ever since the discussions of technology and manual labour came to place it is believed that technology replaces labour significantly. Studies have shown that domestic technology has revolutionized the kitchen space of families all over the world. Domestic technology is intended to make household chores easier, even though unskilled and uneducated common domestic workers may struggle to use such technology. It is observed that the Covid season has witnessed a tremendous increase in the buying of these domestic technologies as employers were forced to keep their domestic workers out of their space due to the fear of coronavirus spread. But after coming back to the new normal it was noticed that the need for domestic workers has not decreased rather it shows an increase. The use of home appliances is increasing in Kerala society, especially in families of all strata. This paper aims to look at the effect of domestic technology on the domestic worker and also how far the power relation and the hierarchy are maintained in the most private workspace, 'family' through the access given to the worker to these technologies by the employer. The data was gathered through a qualitative approach based on extensive interviews with women domestic workers in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Domestic Technology, domestic work, domestic worker, power-relation, hierarchy

## INTRODUCTION

Male-dominated society considers the responsibility of household work to be vested in women. And it remains unchanged. Taking care of children and elders, washing dishes and clothes, cleaning the house and cooking are all things that society instils in a woman from a young age. Even though educated and skilled working women, they are forced to do household work. The advent of domestic technology, termed feminine technology, has brought about revolutionary changes in the kitchen space of the family, but the responsibility of women to do household chores has not diminished. Household appliances have not eliminated time or effort spent on domestic chores, but they have helped dramatically raise the general standard of household comfort and convenience (encyclopedia.com, 2023).

Women who cannot balance unpaid housework and paid work require assistance from others. Women domestic workers are employed for domestic work in such cereal packet families consisting of a father, mother and children. "Hired domestic workers lighten the load of a single household by performing household duties in exchange for payment" (UNO,2014). The demand for domestic workers has increased due to this reason. When a women domestic worker is hired to do household chores, a common question arises whether they are working with the help of domestic technology or whether the domestic worker is

replacing domestic technology. Therefore, it is necessary to study the effects of domestic technology on domestic workers and whether it is available to a paid domestic worker.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“Housework” (Glazer-Malbin, 1976) is the interpretation of the findings of different studies related to housework. It mainly focused on the division of labour at home, the monetary value of housework, the inevitability of domesticity, the social roles of housewives, housework and the political economy.

“Housework is transformed by technological developments. Large appliances and small electrical gadgets helped to reduce manual household work. New technologies changed life and work at home by saving effort and making housework more efficient. Household technology does not give freedom to women by providing machines to do work. The net effects are fewer servants and fewer services”. (encyclopedia.com, 2023)

(Hardyment, 1989) “addressed the women's place in the servant-less household and domestic machinery. Feminist theory was mainly ignored by Hardyment in her account. By supporting a largely private form of housekeeping and homemaking rather than one of cooperation and labour specialization, the introduction of small electric motors into household equipment in the 1920s provided a solution to the servant dilemma. She makes the case that the rise of home appliances is responsible for the cultural representation of the traditional housewife that is historically specific to the years between 1920 and 1970. Hardyment frequently challenges the manufacturers' and advertising' glib claims that machines significantly lower household labour. She even suggests that domestic appliances might not be the ideal approach to reduce labour and time requirements in the home, but that they should continue to hold the monopoly because there is no other option.”

(Macquiston, 1989) “highlighted the liberating positive effects of women controlling the machinery, and their excitement for the mechanization of the home has left the presumption that women should be in charge of household duties unchallenged. This post risks propagating the patriarchal stereotype that women lack competitiveness and the capacity for self-promotion.”

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative methodology to understand the effects of domestic technology on women domestic workers and the access given to them to these technologies by the employer. A descriptive research design is used to describe this study. The data was collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews. The interview guide is used as a qualitative tool.

The data was gathered through both primary and secondary methods. The primary data was collected from women domestic workers in the Thiruvananthapuram district. The secondary source of data was collected from previous studies, books, journals, newspapers and narrations captured through voice recorders from the prior consent of the participants. The researcher purposively selected a sample of 10 women domestic workers in Thiruvananthapuram District. The participants were selected based on age categories, Five from 20-40 and 5 from 41-60 age groups.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the effects of domestic technology on women domestic workers?
- How much domestic technology is available to women domestic workers?

## DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

### Domestic Technology

“Domestic technology is the incorporation of applied science into the home. There are multiple aspects of domestic technology. On one level, there are home appliances, home automation, and other devices commonly used in the home, such as clothes dryers and washing machines, etc. On another level, domestic technology recognizes the use of applied science to construct homes to achieve a particular goal, such as energy efficiency or self-sufficiency” (Wikipedia,2023).

The advent of modern technology brought about changes in domestic work in the first half of the 20th century. Household technology was available only in wealthy nations, gradually spreading to all countries with the emergence of globalization. “Even though many of the household chores that were performed at the outset of the 20th century would be recognized one hundred years later, they were carried out very differently. Nearly all domestic tasks required manual labour before 1900. Wealthy households used maids to help with cooking, cleaning, and other work; other tasks, like laundry, were occasionally done outside the home. However, the number of home staff drastically decreased in the first half of the 20th century, leaving upper-class women to shoulder the burden of doing the onerous household chores themselves. This paved the way for the development of new automated kitchen and home equipment. However, as power became more accessible and appliance prices decreased, poorer women who had traditionally done all of the housework were also able to welcome both large and small equipment into their homes”. (encyclopedia.com, 2023)

### Types of Domestic Technology

**Cleaning Equipment** (Vacuum cleaner, dishwasher, car washer, washing machine, clothes dryer, etc.)

**Cooking Appliances** (bread maker, blender, coffee machine, food processor, microwave oven, mixer, etc.)

**Food Storage and Preservation** (food storage container, canning, refrigerator, etc.)

**Home Maintenance** (ground-keeping equipment, garden tools, etc.)

**Air Conditioning** (Air conditioner, central heating unit, fan, etc.)

### Effect of domestic technology on domestic workers

New technology is needed to survive times with speed. Domestic technology does not reduce time and effort but makes it easier to do certain tasks. Domestic technologies such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and dishwashers, mixers could be expected to have a direct effect on domestic workers.

Even though, there are two questions related to it;

One is; Need domestic workers in a home with domestic technology? Another is that when there are domestic workers, do they have access to domestic technology?

Based on this, a few narratives can be described;

**CASE A** replied, “I am going to work in four houses, which have all kinds of facilities, but until today, I have not used those appliances. I don’t even know how to use it. I do not have any of this in my own house”

**CASE D** said, “I go to work in three houses. At six o'clock in the morning, I will go to a house and cook. There is a mixy and a grinder, but everyone there likes to grind on stone, so I don't use any mixy. But I have Mixy in my house. After cooking and cleaning there, I will go to another house and not cook there.

But I have to clean the floor and wash the clothes. The employer says that the cleaning should be made by hand and the clothes should be washed on the stone even if there is a washing machine.”

**CASE J** answered, “I have been a domestic worker for the last 25 years. Now I am working at five different houses. When I first started working, I used to cook. But now I do not cook in any house as I consume a lot of time while cooking. All these houses are having washing machines and mixer which are not permitted to be used. Everyone is looking out for their profit and not trying to reduce the burden of the domestic workers.”

It is evident from the words of the domestic workers that, domestic technology is used to make household chores easier. Such workload reduction tools are not of help for domestic workers when it comes to an employer-employee relationship. The power structure is evident in this relationship. But a variant opinion came from one among 10 workers. i.e.

**CASE G** answered “I have been a domestic worker for the last five years, serving in four different houses, engaged only in cleaning and washing. The mop is used for cleaning, and the washing is done in the automatic machine.”

She is the only one who is getting accessibility to modern domestic technology while working in an employer’s home. When using such technology for the first time, they do not know how to use them. Most domestic workers do not have modern domestic technology in their own homes. Therefore, it is natural for them to feel scared when using it for the first time. There may be accidents due to such fear but only with the support of employers, they will understand how to use such new technology.

The presence of domestic workers is found very common in households in Kerala. Especially there are only a few middle-income houses that are devoid of domestic workers even part-time ones. Many millions of families in India employ domestic workers on a part-time basis, where the worker lives elsewhere and travels to different homes, often four or five, on a regular basis. It’s a working system that has been the norm for decades.

When it is back to the old system of domestic work, caste and other demographic characteristics were considered for the selection of domestic workers. Workers from lower castes were not allowed to enter the house of the employer. They were primarily tasked with performing cleaning duties outside of the home. Workers from upper castes were eligible to enter the employer’s home and were specially assigned to cooking. All these works have been done manually when there was no technology. Nowadays, advancement of the domestic technology has captured the kitchen space of almost every household in Kerala society, especially in urban areas. Possessing these gadgets would definitely be a matter of status for them. Even though the households in Kerala are equipped with modern household technologies the intensity of using them for the purposes it serves is a matter of question. “The main impact of modernization and new technology thus falls on the women who become dispensable. An important question is to be considered replacing women by men or machine.” (Lindberg, 2001).

Women employers are doing their household chores with the help of domestic technology. But if the domestic worker is employed in that house, they will not get access to domestic technology. Is it for saving money or energy the reason for not giving access to technology to the domestic worker? Or is it a new form of supremacy inherited from the old caste system? However, both involve a class aspect.

## CONCLUSION

Domestic workers play an essential role in keeping families healthy and productive. They provide assistance to the employer with domestic responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, washing, caring for

children and the elderly, etc. Erstwhile, people used to do all the household chores without the help of machines. But later it was found that it is possible to finish the same activities much more quickly by using machines today than it was in the past to perform household chores by hand. Domestic workers face tough times as home appliances and smart cleaning gadgets replace them. The regular usage of these machines in the household is not done to its full efficiency because of the lack of practical experience in the usage of these machines among women domestic workers. Domestic technology we see now is partially automated. The situation may change if it is fully automated. There is a chance to reduce the demand for paid domestic workers while increasing the demand for more advanced technologies like robotics and AI in the domestic field. Shopping apps and websites already entered the domestic sphere. Now everything is available at the doorstep and we can hire experts for cleaning and laundry at minimum time and cost with a money-back guarantee.

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