

# Adjustment Challenges Experienced by Women Domestic Workers

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## ABSTRACT

Women Domestic work is one of the oldest forms of labour across the world. Due to various socio-economic challenges such as drought, declining agricultural opportunities, lack of employment options, land acquisition in the name of development, displacement, caste-based discrimination, and inadequate access to basic amenities like healthcare and clean water, many people are compelled to migrate from rural areas to urban centres. Women who migrate often take up domestic work as a primary source of livelihood. Understanding the living conditions of these women, the problems they encounter both at home and in their workplaces, and particularly their level of marital adjustment, is essential. Such a study can help identify the factors that affect their quality of life and provide insights for improving their living standards. The study explores dimensions such as marital adjustment, job satisfaction, economic challenges, workplace discrimination, domestic violence, workload, and overall quality of life. Findings reveal that most respondents belong to economically vulnerable backgrounds, have low levels of education, and depend entirely on domestic work for livelihood.

**Keywords:** Domestic Workers, Social issues, Vulnerable Groups

## WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS

Domestic work refers to a wide range of household services performed within private homes. A domestic worker—sometimes called a domestic helper, servant, housemaid, or caregiver—is employed to carry out tasks that support the functioning of a household. These may include cleaning, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, childcare, eldercare, gardening, driving, and general housekeeping. Historically, domestic work has existed in all societies, but before the Industrial Revolution, such work was more physically demanding due to the absence of modern labor-saving devices. Domestic service formed a distinct and often rigid hierarchical system, especially in Europe during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Terms like “butler,” “valet,” “lady’s maid,” “chauffeur,” and “housekeeper” reflect the structured nature of large households. Over time, although the formal hierarchies within households declined, the global demand for domestic workers has increased, especially with the rise of middle-class households, dual-income families, and urbanization.

## GLOBAL OVERVIEW OF DOMESTIC WORKERS

Today, domestic work comprises a significant segment of the global informal workforce. Current estimates indicate more than 67 million domestic workers worldwide, not including millions of child domestic workers. The sector is highly feminized—80% of domestic workers are women, reflecting

deep-rooted gender norms that associate household tasks with femininity. Domestic workers may work full-time or part-time, live with employers (live-in) or in their own homes (live-out), and may be nationals or migrants. Migrant domestic workers—common in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe—often face greater vulnerabilities due to weak legal protections, restrictive immigration systems, and employer dependency. Despite their essential contribution to household functioning, child development, eldercare, and national economies, domestic workers remain undervalued, underpaid, and largely invisible.

## **WORKING CONDITIONS AND VULNERABILITIES**

### **a. Isolation in Private Homes**

Domestic workers operate within private households rather than registered enterprises. This contributes to their invisibility, limits access to co-workers or support networks, and makes labor inspection extremely difficult. The home is often romanticized as a “safe space,” but evidence shows that domestic workers regularly face unsafe or hazardous conditions, including exposure to chemicals, long hours, and emotional or physical abuse.

## **B. ABUSE, HARASSMENT, AND VIOLENCE**

Domestic workers worldwide face:

- Verbal harassment and humiliation
- Physical abuse, including beatings
- Sexual harassment or assault
- Restrictions on mobility, including confiscation of passports
- Deprivation of food or adequate living spaces
- Threats, intimidation, and surveillance

Live-in domestic workers are particularly vulnerable as they remain entirely within the employer’s control. Migrant domestic workers face additional risks due to language barriers, limited legal rights, and recruitment malpractices.

## **C. EARNINGS AND WAGE INEQUALITIES**

ILO research shows domestic workers earn among the lowest wages across occupations:

- Domestic workers’ wages may be less than 50% of national averages.
- Women earn significantly less than men in the same sector.
- Many are paid in-kind (food, shelter), reducing financial independence.

## **TYPES AND CATEGORIES OF DOMESTIC WORKERS**

### **A. LIVE-IN DOMESTIC WORKERS**

Live-in workers reside in employers’ homes and provide round-the-clock services. They are heavily dependent on employers for basic needs like food, shelter, and sometimes identity documents. This category includes cooks, nannies, caregivers, and housemaids. Many are migrants, young women, or individuals trafficked from rural to urban regions.

### **B. PART-TIME OR LIVE-OUT DOMESTIC WORKERS**

Live-out workers typically work for multiple employers and return to their own homes. They enjoy more autonomy than live-in workers but still struggle with inconsistent working hours, low pay, and limited social security.

### **C. SPECIALIZED DOMESTIC STAFF**

Some roles require specialized expertise, including:

- Butlers
- Estate managers
- Chauffeurs
- Chefs
- Security personnel
- Yacht crew
- Personal assistants
- Maternity nurses
- Gardeners

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY DOMESTIC WORKERS**

### **A. LACK OF LEGAL PROTECTIONS**

Domestic work traditionally falls outside formal labor regulations. Even where laws exist, enforcement is weak due to the private nature of workplaces. Many countries exclude domestic workers from:

- Minimum wage laws
- Social security schemes
- Health insurance
- Limits on working hours
- Paid leave

Migrant and undocumented domestic workers face additional hurdles, including fear of deportation.

### **B. OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH HAZARDS**

Domestic workers face:

- Respiratory issues from dust and chemicals
- Musculoskeletal pain from heavy lifting
- Skin problems due to detergents
- Stress and burnout from excessive workloads

### **C. SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES**

Workers often experience:

- Isolation from family
- Stigma associated with “low-status” work
- Harassment and sexual exploitation
- Caste or class-based discrimination (notably in South Asia)

Women, especially, balance paid work with unpaid domestic responsibilities in their own homes.

## **STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS: INVISIBILITY, CASTE & GENDER INEQUALITY**

Domestic work is devalued because it is seen as natural women’s labor and not real economic activity. In countries like India, caste-based discrimination persists—upper-caste workers may be hired for cooking while lower-caste workers handle cleaning or sanitation work. Invisibility also affects policy decisions: domestic workers’ contributions to national economies are not reflected in GDP, leading to fewer welfare programs or government interventions.

**Tripti Lahiri (2014)** in *Maid in India*: Highlights the paradox of the 120 percent rise in demand for domestic workers in post-liberalization India versus the continued failure to secure their basic rights. She attributes this to the perception that domestic work is "not real work," leading to underpayment and a gender-based pay gap. **Paul G D Bino, Datta Susanta, Murthy R Venkatesha 2011** conducted a study on *Working and Living Conditions of Mumbai Women Domestic Workers*. Here primary data was collected from 1510 female domestic workers in Mumbai. Based on the findings, the need to create a comprehensive social security system for domestic workers in India, against the backdrop of working and living conditions of labour belonging to this occupational category was highlighted. The study covered themes such as basic demographic features, nature of services, work profile of the domestic workers, access to social security, consumption of edible items, consumption under PDS system, health, union awareness, time use, household assets and liability, habitat, attitude of domestic workers towards gender and domestic violence.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Women domestic workers face multiple challenges in both their personal and work environments. At home, they may experience a lack of emotional support, strained family relationships, and domestic violence. Many of these women contribute their entire earnings to family expenses, yet they often lack decision-making power in major household matters. Additionally, issues such as alcoholism among husbands place greater financial and emotional burdens on them, leaving them with little social or economic security. At the workplace, domestic workers often encounter discrimination, job insecurity, low wages, long working hours, and an absence of legal or social protection. Taking leave—even for valid reasons—can result in job loss. Many workers are employed in multiple households, which affects their health and leads to physical exhaustion. Their family lives are further affected by poverty, debt, and frequent conflicts. This study aims to examine these issues comprehensively and bring attention to the hardships faced by women domestic workers.

### OBJECTIVES

- To study the socio-demographic details of the respondents.
- To analyse the problems faced by the respondents within their families and at their workplaces.
- To understand the level of marital adjustment among the respondents.
- To suggest suitable measures to help respondents overcome problems related to family life and occupational challenges.
- To recommend strategies for enhancing and maintaining work–life balance among women domestic workers.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study is based on a survey that includes variables such as age group, educational qualification, nature of work, and income of the respondents. A descriptive research design has been used for this study. The primary purpose of adopting this design is to analyse the marital adjustment problems faced by women domestic workers and to gain a clearer understanding of the extent and nature of these issues. Descriptive research is suitable for providing an accurate portrayal of characteristics and conditions in the population, and therefore it was selected as the most appropriate design for the present study.

**UNIVERSE AND SAMPLING**

The universe of the study comprises women domestic workers residing in Tiruchirappalli City. A significant number of women in and around the BHEL Township area are engaged in domestic work. Due to the indefinite and scattered nature of this population, it was difficult for the researcher to identify and list all respondents. Therefore, the snowball sampling technique was adopted for data collection. This method enabled the researcher to reach respondents through referrals from initial participants, making it suitable for studying a population that is not easily identifiable through conventional sampling methods.

**One way Analysis of Variance among Hours of working of the respondents and Overall level of Adjustment**

S. No	Source	SS	Df	MS	$\bar{x}$		Statistical Inference
	Between Groups	846.016	3	282.005	G1=	143.7500	F= 5.312 P<0.01 Significant
	Within Groups	20848.677	97	214.935	G2=	134.9091	
					G3=	134.7500	
					G4=	137.5500	

G1= 1-2 hours, G2= 3-4 hours, G3= 5-8 hours, G4= Above 8 hours

**Interpretation:**

The ANOVA results indicate a significant difference in the overall level of adjustment problems among respondents based on their working hours. The F-value (5.312) is significant at the 1% level (P < 0.01), showing that hours of work have a measurable impact on adjustment levels.

**Hypothesis:**

Research Hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>): There is a significant difference between the marital status of the respondents and their perception of overall adjustment problems.

Null Hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>): There is no significant difference between the marital status of the respondents and their perception of overall adjustment problems.

**Finding:**

The analysis confirms that the calculated F-value is significant (P < 0.01). Therefore, the research hypothesis is accepted, and the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that marital status significantly influences respondents’ perception of overall adjustment problems.

**MAJOR FINDINGS**

The study reveals significant socio-demographic and occupational patterns among women domestic workers. More than half of the respondents’ (52.5%) fall within the middle-age category of 35 to 50 years, indicating that domestic work is predominantly carried out by women in their economically productive years. Educational attainment is noticeably low, with 40.6% being illiterate, reflecting the socio-economic barriers that limit access to formal education.

- A large majority of the respondents (79.2%) were married, which suggests that domestic work serves as a crucial source of income for supporting families. Most respondents (80.2%) live in nuclear families, and 63.3% have one to two children, indicating moderate family size and responsibilities that influence their economic needs.
- Regarding occupation, 77.2% of the respondents are engaged in domestic work as their primary job. Monthly income levels are low, with 53.5% earning between Rs. 2000–3000, highlighting financial insecurity and the need for better wage standards. Additionally, 69.3% reported entering domestic work voluntarily, often due to lack of alternative employment opportunities. A majority (67.4%) have been working for more than five years, showing long-term dependence on this occupation.
- In terms of personal challenges, 41.6% reported having overcome physical violence, indicating previous experiences of domestic abuse. Work-related difficulties include heavy workload, as stated by 29.7% of respondents. Despite these hardships, 69.3% expressed satisfaction with the quality of their life, and an overwhelming 99% expressed interest in continuing their work, suggesting a mix of economic necessity and adaptation to job conditions.
- Family relationships show moderate stability, with 56.4% reporting a good relationship with their husbands. However, substance abuse remains a concern, as 62.4% stated that their husbands have drinking habits. Educational aspirations for children are moderately high, with 53.4% wanting to provide better education for their children. Finally, 53.5% of the respondents reported having a moderate level of overall adjustment, reflecting mixed experiences across personal, familial, and occupational domains.

### MAJOR FINDING ON RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The study proposes a series of hypotheses examining associations and differences between socio-demographic factors, occupational characteristics, and the overall level of adjustment among women domestic workers.

- The hypotheses explore whether marital status, type of family, age, family size, monthly income, years of working experience, and other personal or job-related factors significantly influence adjustment levels. Some hypotheses propose significant relationships—for instance, between family size, income, type of problems faced, workplace recognition, job satisfaction, and overall adjustment—suggesting that both family dynamics and workplace conditions may strongly affect how women adjust to their circumstances.
- Other hypotheses predict no significant associations, such as between type of family, age, nature of house, problem-solving support, husband's drinking habits, and some aspects of family planning or debt. These assumptions suggest that certain factors may not directly influence the respondents' adjustment levels.
- Several hypotheses involve one-way ANOVA tests to determine whether differences in adjustment occur across categories such as educational qualification, number of family members, occupation, hours of work, and reasons for dissatisfaction. These comparisons help identify which socio-economic or occupational variables contribute significantly to variations in adjustment.

### SUGGESTIONS

- The government should promote associations and self-help groups for women domestic workers.
- Basic requirements and facilities for domestic workers should be ensured in every household.

- Medical care and educational opportunities should be provided to women domestic workers and their families.
- Affordable housing and low-interest loans should be made accessible to domestic workers.
- Skill development programs should be organized by government and NGOs to enhance employment opportunities.
- Domestic work should be recognized as a dignified profession by society.
- The Minimum Wages Act should be effectively implemented to prevent exploitation.
- Central and State Commissions for Women, along with welfare boards, should take initiatives to improve working and living conditions.

## CONCLUSION

The study highlights that most women domestic workers are economically disadvantaged and unaware of government support. Improving access to education, healthcare, and skill development can enhance their quality of life and reduce social vulnerabilities. With targeted interventions, these women and their families can achieve better economic security, social recognition, and overall well-being.

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