

Work without security: An analysis of women domestic workers' conditions, struggles and aspirations

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the structural and lived realities of migrant women domestic workers in the Delhi–NCR region, situating their experiences within the intersecting frameworks of gender, caste, class, migration, and urban informality. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study draws on a quantitative survey of 469 women domestic workers across five districts and qualitative data from focus group discussions with 45 participants. The analysis explores trajectories of migration, labour conditions, access to social protection, experiences of discrimination and violence, and practices of agency and collective mobilisation.

The findings reveal that migration, rather than facilitating socio-economic mobility, often entrenches precarity through informal and unregulated employment arrangements, absence of written contracts, wage insecurity, occupational exploitation, and spatial marginalisation. Women workers face systemic exclusion from state welfare mechanisms, compounded by barriers related to documentation, mobility, and information asymmetries. The convergence of paid domestic labour with intensive unpaid care responsibilities results in significant physical, emotional, and temporal burdens, reinforcing gendered hierarchies within both productive and reproductive spheres. Experiences of everyday discrimination, surveillance, and harassment further underscore the deeply unequal power relations characterising domestic work.

Simultaneously, the study foregrounds women's agency, resilience, and political subjectivities, as reflected in their individual and collective strategies of negotiation, resistance, and organising. These practices not only challenge dominant representations of domestic workers as passive victims but also articulate claims for labour rights, social security, legal recognition, and dignity. By centring workers' voices and lived experiences, the study contributes to feminist and labour

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scholarship on migration and informality, while offering empirically grounded insights for policy interventions aimed at advancing rights-based, inclusive, and gender-responsive frameworks for domestic work in urban India.

INTRODUCTION

Context: Women domestic workers in India

The domestic work sector in India is highly informal, feminised, and structurally marginalised. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), vast majority of domestic workers are women, with estimates suggesting that over 80% of India's domestic workforce is female, many belonging to historically oppressed caste and minority communities (ILO, 2015, 2021). These workers typically lack formal contracts, fixed working hours, or any legal safeguards, making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Agrawal (2023) highlights that domestic work is shaped by both economic compulsion and deep-rooted patriarchy, reinforcing the subjugation of women and undervaluing their labour. Despite the crucial role they play in urban households, their work is undervalued both socially and economically, contributing to what scholars describe as the "feminisation of informal labour" and the broader global trend of the feminisation of care work (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011; Razavi, 2007; Boris & Parreñas, 2010).

Domestic workers in Delhi's informal sector face precarious and exploitative working conditions. Most lack formal contracts, leaving them vulnerable to arbitrary dismissal and wage theft. They endure long, irregular working hours without overtime pay and receive low, often delayed wages. Access to social security benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, and pensions is nearly non-existent. Additionally, they work in unsafe environments, exposed to hazardous chemicals and ergonomic risks without any occupational health protections. The significant power imbalance between employers and workers frequently results in verbal, psychological, and sometimes physical abuse. Furthermore, domestic workers lack collective bargaining power or union representation, severely limiting their ability to improve working conditions. Migrant women, who form a large portion of this workforce, face additional challenges, including social isolation and discrimination, which exacerbates their vulnerability (WIEGO, IDWF & SEWA, 2020).

Safety and harassment are critical concerns, especially given the isolated workspaces in which these women work. Although the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act) technically covers domestic workers,

enforcement remains ineffective. Many workers are unaware of their rights, and local committees are either absent or inaccessible to them. Reports have highlighted widespread impunity in cases of verbal abuse, physical assault, and even sexual harassment, with few survivors able to pursue legal remedies (India Development Review, 2025). Efforts in states like Kerala have begun addressing this gap by establishing sector-specific protections, but these remain exceptional rather than the norm.

The status of migrant domestic workers adds another layer of vulnerability. Women who migrate often from rural or tribal backgrounds face multiple forms of exclusion. In the destination states, they lack identity proofs, ration cards, or access to voting rights, which directly limits their inclusion in public schemes and political representation (UNDP India, 2021). The informal recruitment process and the lack of portability of entitlements often leave them excluded from state-level welfare services. These intersections of their identity as women migrants make them especially susceptible to abuse, both within workplaces and in broader social interactions.

Exploitation through unregulated placement agencies has emerged as a growing threat to women domestic workers, particularly among migrants from tribal regions of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. The ILO (2015) and WIEGO (2022) have documented widespread violations, including confinement, withholding of wages, sexual abuse, and trafficking. One widely cited case, documented in the *Indispensable Yet Unprotected*, an ILO study, involved a tribal adolescent girl from Simdega, Jharkhand, who was placed by an unauthorised agency in three successive households in Delhi, was physically abused, denied wages, and prevented from returning home (ILO, 2015). Commercial agencies often operate in legally grey zones, obscuring employer responsibility and denying workers access to grievance redressal.

Despite their crucial contribution to households and the economy, domestic workers, particularly migrant women, remain excluded from formal welfare schemes and social security benefits in India. It has been noted that the informal and often unregulated nature of domestic work, coupled with its private household setting, results in minimal state intervention. Many domestic workers lack access to schemes such as health insurance, maternity benefits, provident fund, and pension, which are available to workers in the formal sector. This exclusion is compounded for migrant workers, who often face difficulties in accessing government programmes due to documentation barriers and a lack of awareness (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011).

Several studies have documented the poor living conditions of migrant domestic workers. Many live in cramped, unhygienic spaces either within their employer's homes or in segregated quarters, with inadequate sanitation and restricted freedom. These conditions adversely affect their physical and mental health, with little recourse to medical care or social support networks. Living arrangements are often overcrowded and lack privacy, further exacerbating vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. ((Bino Paul, Murthy, & Datta, 2018).

Additionally, the lack of formal contracts and irregular payment schedules mean many domestic workers suffer financial insecurity and job instability. Migration further isolates them from familial support systems, intensifying emotional and economic stress. Welfare schemes designed specifically for domestic workers remain limited, poorly implemented, or inaccessible to migrants, underscoring a significant policy gap that leaves this workforce unprotected and vulnerable (ILO, 2015).

A major area of deprivation is the lack of access to social security and government welfare schemes. India's legislative journey towards regulating domestic work has been limited and inconsistent. The **Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill, 1959**, was one of the earliest efforts but failed to gain traction. Subsequent attempts, including the **Domestic Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2008**, and the **Domestic Workers (Regulation of Work and Social Security) Bill, 2017**, were either poorly implemented or never enacted at the national level. Although the **Code on Social Security, 2020**, seeks to include informal workers within its scope, it lacks clear mechanisms for enforcement, particularly in the case of domestic workers. As a result, domestic work continues to be excluded from the ambit of formal labour regulation in India (Coelho, K., Venkat, T., & Chandrika, R. (2013).

The absence of strong policy measures and effective legal frameworks further exacerbates these vulnerabilities. India has not ratified ILO Convention 189 on "Decent Work for Domestic Workers," despite acknowledging its importance. This fragmented legislative history has led to the systemic exclusion of women domestic workers from labour protections and social security. Since their work is carried out within private households, domestic workers are not recognised under conventional labour laws designed for formal workplaces. The absence of a comprehensive national framework means that these women who often come from marginalised social and economic backgrounds, lack access to rights such as minimum wages, regulated working hours, maternity benefits, and safe working conditions. Their labour remains undervalued, invisible, and largely unprotected.

In a significant development, the Supreme Court of India delivered its verdict on 29 January 2025 in *Ajay Malik v. State of Uttarakhand & Anr.* (2025 INSC 118), a case involving allegations of trafficking and confinement of a tribal woman domestic worker placed by a Delhi-based agency. While the Court ultimately quashed the criminal charges due to a lack of conclusive evidence, it acknowledged the legal vacuum and systemic nature of exploitation in the domestic work sector. The bench directed the central government to constitute an expert committee within six months to draft comprehensive legislation regulating placement agencies, establishing minimum working conditions, grievance redressal, and social security for domestic workers (Supreme Court of India, 2025; The Hindu, 2025). This judgment is widely regarded as a turning point in the recognition of domestic workers' rights at the national level.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to explore the multifaceted challenges faced by women domestic workers in the context of migration. It seeks to understand the difficulties they encounter both in their workplaces and in the communities where they settle after migrating. Particular attention is given to how various layers of intersectionality, such as being sole earners, experiencing the double burden of paid and unpaid work, and lacking access to accurate information, legal awareness, and essential services, further increase their vulnerability.

As both women and workers, they are frequently subjected to systemic exploitation, which is intensified by inadequate policy frameworks, ineffective support systems, and limited governmental attention. The study will also examine the specific needs and demands of migrant women domestic workers, with the aim of making their contributions visible and acknowledged within the labour force.

By bringing their voices to the forefront, this study seeks to contribute meaningfully to the existing discourse on the need for comprehensive legislation and policy measures that protect and empower women domestic workers, particularly in urban areas.

Study design and methodology

Study approach

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Data was collected using two primary tools: structured surveys and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Quantitative component

The survey was conducted with 469 women domestic workers across 12 locations, covering five districts in the Delhi-NCR region—South Delhi, South-East Delhi, North Delhi, South-West Delhi, and Gurgaon. All participants in the survey were migrants who had been residing in Delhi-NCR for several years. The data collection took place between May and July 2025. Trained field officers carried out door-to-door visits, engaged directly with the participants, and collected responses using Google Forms.

The survey data was analysed to identify patterns and correlations, with particular attention to the intersections between migration, livelihood, gender, and labour rights. Linkages between the responses were examined to understand how overlapping identities and experiences influenced the vulnerabilities and needs of the participants.

Qualitative component

In-depth FGDs were held in four locations: Kailash Colony (South Delhi), Haji Colony (South-East Delhi), Timarpur (North Delhi), and Jasola (South Delhi), involving 45 women domestic workers. Like the survey respondents, all FGD participants were also migrants who had been living in Delhi-NCR for many years. Those who participated in the FGDs were more aware and informed about the systemic issues surrounding domestic work, due to their active involvement in unions or civil society organisations (CSOs). They had a deeper understanding of the policy gaps, lack of recognition for their labour, and the inadequacies in existing support systems.

The FGDs explored participants' personal narratives, including their migration journeys, everyday challenges, aspirations, and collective demands. To foster a more open and expressive discussion, art-based tools were used. Participants mapped out their migration stories and experiences through drawings and visual storytelling. These discussions were then transcribed, and selected narratives were woven into the broader survey findings to provide a humanised and in-depth perspective.

The qualitative data highlighted not only the hardships faced by women domestic workers but also their strength, resilience, and the importance of collectivism. Participants shared how peer support, shared knowledge, and locally-driven solutions have been essential in navigating urban life and sustaining their livelihoods.

Ethical considerations

Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and only individuals who provided informed consent were included. All participants were over the age of 18. They were informed of the study's purpose, their rights as participants,

and how their data, stories, images, or quotes might be used. Names were anonymised wherever requested to ensure privacy.

The study followed a feminist, participatory, and participant-centric approach. It was designed to ensure that the voices of women domestic workers were respectfully represented and that the research process was inclusive, ethical, and grounded in care. Every effort was made to maintain sensitivity to issues of power, safety, confidentiality, and dignity, in line with ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Demographic profile of the participants

All participants in both the survey and the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were migrant women domestic workers who have been residing in Delhi-NCR for several years. Some migrated as early as 1984, while others relocated more recently, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, driven by the need for livelihood in the wake of economic distress in their native regions.

Among the 469 women surveyed, the largest age group was between 36 and 40 years, comprising 25.4% of the total participants. This was followed by women aged 41 to 45 (21.1%) and those aged 31 to 35 (14.3%). Smaller but notable proportions were found in the 26 to 30 age group (9.4%) and 46 to 50 (11.3%). A smaller number of women were under 25 or over 55, with the 20 to 25 age group representing 6.5%, and women over 60 making up 2.6% of the total.

Participants had migrated from several states across India. A significant proportion came from Bihar (198 women), followed by Uttar Pradesh (87), West Bengal (66), and Jharkhand (36). Others hailed from Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. These migratory patterns reflect long-established routes of rural-to-urban female labour migration into the domestic work sector in Delhi-NCR.

In terms of the nature of work, 76.1% of participants (357 women) identified cleaning as their primary task, while 30.2% (142 women) were primarily engaged in cooking. A smaller percentage, 9.4% (44 women), were involved in care work, including caring for children or the elderly, and 18.5% (87 women) primarily did washing of clothes. Many women performed more than one of these roles, often across multiple households.

Out of the 469 surveyed, 114 women, approximately 24.3%, reported being the sole breadwinners in their families. This highlights their critical economic role and the level of responsibility they carry, often under precarious working conditions. In terms of education, 34.3% (161 women)

reported being literate, while 27.5% (129) were illiterate. A significant portion, 38.4% (180 women), were semi-literate, able to read and sign their names for documentation purposes but with limited literacy beyond that.

In the FGDs, a total of 45 women participated across four locations: Kailash Colony (11 participants), Haji Colony (15), Timarpur (9), and Jasola (10). Most participants were between the ages of 25 and 50, originally from Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha. Many had been living in Delhi-NCR for over two decades, having migrated in the early 2000s, while others arrived more recently following the pandemic.

In terms of literacy, approximately 30% of the FGD participants were able to both read and write, while the remaining women were able to read but had limited or no writing skills. Like the survey participants, the women in the FGDs were primarily engaged in household tasks such as cleaning and cooking across multiple employers.

Study findings

Theme 1. Migration as displacement and disconnection

In this study, migration has been understood less as a voluntary movement and more as a form of forced uprooting, driven by limited job opportunities, poor living conditions, inadequate quality of education, and the absence of basic infrastructure. Although women migrated in search of better opportunities, their movement to the city often doubled their vulnerabilities. Not only did they fail to find what they had hoped for, but the loss of identity and belonging further compounded their struggles.

The survey findings reveal that **59% of respondents struggled to find employment even after living in Delhi-NCR** for more than a year, surviving only through temporary, daily wage-based work. Their difficulties were compounded by uncertainty about whom to approach and how to navigate the urban job market. In contrast, **41% were able to secure employment within two to three months**, largely because they had relatives with city contacts who could connect them to job opportunities. For most, arrival in the city did not bring stability; instead, it created an immediate gap in income and heightened their vulnerability to not just caste or class-based exploitation but also towards the exploitation faced at the expense of their employers.

Migrant domestic workers reported significant challenges in accessing government services. The primary reason was a lack of awareness about entitlements as migrants and as workers. **While 12% reported experiencing direct difficulties in accessing government services, more than 60% were entirely unaware of the schemes or benefits**

available to them as migrants. Without critical documentation such as local ration cards, voter IDs, or proof of residence, many women experienced total exclusion from state support mechanisms.

This statistical picture mirrors the emotional rupture that women described in the FGDs. In Haji Colony, one participant said, *“When I left the village, it felt strange. I was anxious and in shock.”* Another linked migration to bereavement and survival: *“My husband had passed away. Over time, I gathered strength and moved in with my brother in the city after leaving my in-laws’ home.”* In Kailash Colony, Anita captured compulsion over choice: *“I did not want to come to Delhi, but had to for work.”* Nirmala recalled the disorientation: *“When I first came, even stepping outside was difficult, where to buy things and how to manage everything was confusing.”*

An older worker traced her earliest entry into domestic work: *“When I was young, I wandered around. An aunty called me and paid me thirty rupees per month in 1993. I used to call her ‘mother’ because I was away from my family and I was very young. I was scared to live in Delhi, so I called more people from Bihar.”* She added, *“Now more women from Bihar come to work in Haji Colony.”*

Migration severed social protection in the village without creating belonging in the city. The identity of a migrant woman domestic worker placed them outside the boundaries of both protection and recognition. Women said the first months and years were marked by confusion, loneliness and a constant sense of being unprepared for urban life. As another Kailash Colony participant put it, *“If I return to my village, madams hire other workers and refuse to keep me.”* The lack of formal arrangements was equally stark: *“If they keep us on work, it should be recorded on paper.”* The survey confirms this invisibility, with none of the women having appointment letters or written terms of employment.

Theme 2. Living conditions, rent, risk, and informality

The survey shows that 67% of respondents live in rented homes, while 33% have managed, over many years, to build their own one-room dwellings. Yet even those who own homes live with insecurity, as the land itself is not guaranteed and demolitions can take place at the discretion of government authorities.

Among tenants, 52% pay between ₹2,000 and ₹4,000 per month, 36% pay between ₹5,000 and ₹7,000, and 12% pay between ₹8,000 and ₹10,000. These amounts weigh heavily on already fragile incomes. In terms of earnings, 32% earn between ₹1,000 and ₹5,000 per month, 44% of women domestic workers earn between ₹6,000 and ₹10,000 per month, 22% earn between ₹11,000 and ₹15,000, and just 2% reach between ₹15,000 and

₹20,000. For many households, rent consumes nearly all disposable income, leaving little to almost nothing for food, healthcare, education, or savings. The strain is most severe for sole earners, who make up 24.3% of the sample.

Basic amenities remain far from adequate. For sanitation, 38% share a single toilet with other 5–6 households, 22% have individual access, 34% rely on community toilets that operate only for limited hours and often require payment, and 6% continue to practice open defecation. Water access is no more stable: 53% depend on community taps that run only at set hours, 38% purchase water in cans, 6% carry bottles filled from employers' homes, and 3% rely on tanker supply.

These numbers reflect the everyday reality described in focus group discussions (FGDs). Women spoke of how migration had forced them into smaller spaces, reduced services, and constant uncertainty. In Haji Colony, one participant said, *"We now live in a small room. Life in the village was different from the city; it has been very difficult to adjust."* In Timarpur, the shortage of infrastructure was especially stark: *"There are only 10 toilets for 21 families, and water is so scarce that sometimes there is none at all."*

Women also described the risks they face. "The toilets get locked early in the evening, and as women, it is unsafe to go out after that." The unpredictability of basic services compounds their hardship: *"We never know when we will get to use the bathroom; sometimes we do not get the chance at all."* Access to water is equally fraught: *"For water, we have to stand in long lines but still do not get enough."*

Even where new housing has been provided, security is not assured. As one woman reflected, *"Though the new houses are better built, many of us, especially women, feel less safe than before."* Economic pressures also weigh heavily. One participant said, *"If I rest for a day, the next day's work doubles; there is so much pressure at home."* Poverty leaves little room for choice, pushing children into labour: *"Children as young as 10 or 12 are forced to work because of poverty."*

Amidst these struggles, the memory of the village remains a source of hope and longing. Several women spoke of their wish to return home in old age. As one expressed simply, *"When we grow old, we want to go back to our village and live peacefully."*

Theme 3. Working conditions, labour without recognition and the double burden of care

The survey reveals a stark extent of informality in domestic work, where employment rests entirely on employer's discretion. None of the workers reported having written contracts, leaving terms of work unwritten and insecure. While 92% hold bank accounts, 90% continue to be paid in cash.

Women explained that, although they have accounts, many are unfamiliar with ATMs, and some fear losing control of their money to husbands or sons. As one worker put it, *“Even if the bank account is mine, I cannot always decide how to use it.”*

Wages reflect the same arbitrariness. Although 73% of workers receive wages on time, 27% face delays. Increments are irregular: 61% had not received any raise in the past five years, 14% reported yearly increments, 17% every two years, while 8% said increases depend entirely on the employer’s mood. A woman from Jasola Vihar described this uncertainty with quiet resignation: *“I told her to increase the salary. She said she will, but has not done it yet. At least she did not say no.”*

Working hours demand flexibility but offer little predictability. At a single household, 52% spend at least two hours daily, 26% spend one hour, 11% spend three to five hours, and 10% spend six to ten hours. When combined across all employers, 46% work three to five hours per day, 28% work five to seven hours, 15% eight to ten hours, 8% two hours, and 2% more than ten hours. Yet the day does not end there. At home, 59% spend an additional three to five hours on unpaid housework, 32% spend six to eight hours, and 9% report only minimal chores. As one woman shared, *“I get up at five in the morning, finish all the housework, go to work, then return home and cook. I sleep by twelve at night.”*

Leave entitlements are inconsistent. While 4% receive one paid leave per month, 69% of workers receive two paid leaves per month and 8% receive three leaves per month, 8% receive four leaves per month, 11% receive none at all. Payment for extra work is similarly uneven: 54% are not paid, 38% are paid, and 8% said it depends on the employer. Some women described negotiating leave with tact. One explained, *“I asked for two days off every month and extra leave when needed. She allows it. I can take leave.”* Another recalled being granted leave for Domestic Workers Day without losing wages: *“She did not refuse. She gave the leave. She did not deduct pay.”*

Exploitation often hides in daily routines. Women in Haji Colony spoke of double standards: *“If we take leave, they cut our wages, but when they go on vacation, we are still expected to work.”* Menstruation and rest are disregarded: *“Even during our periods, we are made to work, and even going to the bathroom is difficult.”* The toll is borne by their health: *“A woman’s blood just drains out every day. I used to get low BP and headaches. I would just take a Disprin and keep going.”*

Agents and middlemen add another layer of vulnerability. In Kailash Colony, women explained how work is often arranged through intermediaries: *“Some agents take money but do not pay us.”* Employers,

meanwhile, distance themselves: *"They tell us to talk to the agent."* Asking for leave can invite retaliation, from dismissal and replacement to pay cuts or additional unpaid work. One woman recalled earning only ₹1,500 a month for cleaning and cooking in a four-storey house. Another explained, *"If I return to my village, I lose the job because they quickly hire someone else."*

Yet, even within such constraints, there are moments of quiet resistance. In Jasola Vihar, one woman remembered, *"Earlier, I used to get only twenty rupees for extra work. I said Madam, take this twenty rupees back from me. That day she gave me one hundred rupees, and after that every month I started getting five hundred rupees for extra work."* Another described challenging a toilet ban: *"You use it all day and it does not get dirty, but if we use it once, it will get dirty, what kind of logic is that?"* Their protest worked, and eventually, they were allowed to use the toilet.

Theme 4. Social exclusion, everyday discrimination, and safety at work

Domestic workers navigate discrimination both where they live and where they work. At their residences, 15% reported being looked down upon simply because they are domestic workers, perceived as doing "dirty" work. Another 12% spoke of caste-based discrimination, while 7% said they were mocked for their accents and broken Hindi, as many speak Bangla, Maithili, Oriya or Tamil at home. One woman reflected with quiet frustration: *"People look at us as if we are less, just because of the work we do."*

The picture at workplaces is harsher. 33% reported being given separate utensils or denied the dignity of sitting on chairs, 4% experienced caste discrimination, 10% were ridiculed for language, 7% felt judged for their clothes and 2% were discriminated because of the state they are originally from. . A worker from Jasola Vihar explained, *"We cannot drink water in the glass; they drink water, I carry my own water bottle."* Another added: *"I have worked in a bungalow for fifteen years, but not once have they asked me if I have had breakfast."*

Toilets are a recurring site of indignity. 37% of women said they are not allowed to use employers' toilets, and 30% are told to use separate "servant" toilets in the basement or outside the building. Only 15% are permitted to use household toilets freely, while 13% rely on community toilets during work hours, and 5% never ask, fearing refusal or humiliation. As one worker put it: *"If someone removes us from work just for asking to use the toilet, that is not even human."* Another remembered how change came only after protest: *"She did not allow me to use the toilet. When I spoke up,*

they said there was one in the basement. Only then was I allowed.”

Discrimination often blends with silence and fear. In Jasola Vihar, women described retaliation when they tried to meet collectively: *“When a woman goes to a meeting, sometimes the employer fires her. Then the WhatsApp group of the society posts that this woman goes to meetings, so she should not be hired. The whole society boycotts her. Because of this, to go to a meeting, women have to lie to their employers.”*

For many, exclusion is woven into everyday gestures. Some employers offer a cup of tea or a snack, but others restrict workers to a single glass of water for the entire day. As one woman explained: *“They consider domestic work inferior, so they ask us to sit on the floor.”*

In Mukherjee Nagar, the denial of dignity takes a sharper form. Women expressed being denied access to toilets, and when they dared to even ask why, they were sometimes insulted or dismissed as “mentally unstable.” For them, safety is not an abstract concern but a daily demand. As one participant put it with urgency: *“Security is the first thing we need. Rape is happening everywhere.”* Their words reflect the 20% of survey respondents who said they feel unsafe at their workplaces—an everyday anxiety that shadows even the most routine tasks.

The lack of rest compounds this vulnerability. Breaks are rarely allowed; women spoke of working continuously from early morning until late evening, without pause. One worker said simply: *“No, we do not get breaks, not even at the end of the day.”* Behind this stark statement lies a cycle of exhaustion that begins at dawn with unpaid housework, stretches through hours of paid labour across multiple homes, and continues into the night with cooking, cleaning, and caring for their own families. As another woman reflected: *“Employers now are not as good as they used to be. There is less respect, less care, only more and more work.”*

Theme 5. Access to welfare and the illusion of inclusion

For domestic workers, the promise of inclusion often feels like a mirage. On paper, many appear to be covered by government schemes. The survey shows that 62% are registered on the e-Shram portal, yet behind this statistic lies another reality: almost half of them, 49%, had to pay someone to complete the registration. Even in the digital age, the marginalised remain dependent on middlemen, paying for a service that was supposed to empower them.

Insurance, a basic safety net for those working in precarious and physically demanding jobs, is almost absent. An overwhelming 81% reported having no access to any government insurance scheme. Illness or injury pushes families into debt, with women carrying both the burden of

care and the cost.

Food security for migrant women remains fragile. The One Nation One Ration Card scheme, launched in August 2019, was intended to make the Public Distribution System more accessible by allowing families to collect their rations from any fair price shop in the country, regardless of where their ration card was registered.

In practice, many women are still unable to benefit. About 73% of those we spoke to could not access the scheme. Of these, 45% had ration cards registered in Delhi, while 28% had them in their home villages. A further 23% had no ration card at all, and around 4% had applied but received no response. These figures suggest that while the scheme offers an important framework, women's experiences of mobility, documentation, and access continue to shape how far it reaches them in reality.

Healthcare tells a story of both class and geography. Government hospitals are the choice for 35%, not because they are trusted but because they are the only affordable option. Another 30% turn to private doctors, often borrowing money to cover the expense. One in five women depend on local, informal providers who may or may not be trained. Mohalla clinics once provided a lifeline, but with many now shut, the 45% who relied on them are left with few options. The cost of private consultations, between ₹1,000 and ₹1,500, is devastating for women who earn less than ₹10,000 a month. Choosing between medicine and food is not unusual.

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Theme 6. Agency, voice, and collective change

The data show widespread informality and exclusion, but the FGDs remind us that women are not silent. Agency is already visible in small but significant acts of resistance. Speaking up has changed outcomes. One woman explained, *"It was only after someone spoke up that things changed."* Stories about negotiating toilet access or securing payment for extra work demonstrate how individual voices can make employers shift their behaviour. Yet these stories also reveal the limits of negotiating case by case. Without contracts, fair wages, paid leaves, fixed working hours, and legal protection against harassment or sudden dismissal, gains remain fragile. As one participant put it, *"We need to know about our rights. We need training and awareness."* For many, the demand is not only for fairness but for dignity, *"Respect is more important than the work itself."*

Women also spoke about the emotional and physical toll of invisible care work. Breaks are routinely interrupted by sudden demands, *"Sometimes we do not even get a break. They call us for surprise chores."* Even when leave is granted, it does not translate into rest. *"Yes, I get leave, but I cannot do anything for myself because time goes into household work. I have been here from past 24 years but have not seen Delhi properly."* Financial pressures swallow what little free time they have. As one participant explained, *"We get two days off, but because of financial constraints, we cannot enjoy them."*

Years of service have not brought security. One woman reflected on three decades of labour, *"It has been 30 to 35 years, working like this. Our situation has not changed. We still do not have a proper roof, our children could not be raised properly, and we have not managed to save anything."* Wage stagnation was a recurring theme. Another explained, *"I have been*

earning 50 to 100 rupees a day for 20 years. Wages have not increased despite everything.” These accounts highlight the paradox: domestic work sustains households across the city, yet leaves the workers’ own lives precarious.

Despite these hardships, women stressed that collective spaces give them courage and hope. *“When we speak together, our voice becomes stronger. Joining hands gives us strength. Alone, we hesitate to speak.”* Meetings are not only about sharing grievances but also about creating solidarity, reminding them that they are not alone in their struggles. As one participant said simply, *“I hope we keep having these kinds of meetings.”*

Analysis

This study brings into focus the entrenched vulnerabilities of women domestic workers in Delhi, particularly those who migrate in search of employment, and situates their experiences within wider structures of informality, patriarchy, caste, and systemic neglect. Domestic work sustains urban households and is a critical pillar of the care economy, yet it continues to be rendered invisible in law, policy, and social recognition. This invisibility is not accidental. It is actively produced and reproduced through intersecting hierarchies of gender, caste, class, and migration, which assign domestic work a low status while simultaneously making it indispensable.

The foundations of workers’ lives are shaped by low and irregular wages, often below statutory minimum rates. Such limited income constrains every choice compromises in food, health care, housing, and children’s education are constant realities. Poor nutrition undermines health, and untreated illness forces women to continue working even when unwell. Children are frequently withdrawn from school due to costs, perpetuating cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. As one woman observed, *“Doctor ke paas le jaana toh sapne jaisa lagta hai, hum toh bas dawaai khareed lete hain jo chemist kehta hai”* (*Going to a doctor feels like a dream, we only buy whatever medicine the chemist suggests*). Daily compromises such as these tighten the cycle of poverty and foreclose future opportunities, not just for the women but for their families.

Economic precarity translates directly into powerlessness at the workplace. Fear of job loss or instant replacement discourages women from demanding higher wages or fair treatment. Migrant workers, in particular, are silenced by their lack of local support networks. Many “swallow insults” or tolerate abuse because survival takes precedence over dignity. Placement agencies, largely unregulated, further entrench this precarity. They withhold wages, charge exploitative fees, or place women in unsafe working arrangements, thereby normalising exploitation as the price of

entry into urban labour markets.

Domestic work is devalued “naturally” as women’s labour and therefore undeserving of proper pay or protection. Caste hierarchies intensify indignities, with women frequently subjected to discriminatory practices, being given separate utensils, barred from sitting on furniture, or spoken to with contempt. Migrant women face an additional layer of exclusion—language barriers, social isolation, and systemic denial of welfare due to the absence of documents such as ration cards or voter identification. As one participant recalled, “*Kabhi kabhi din bhar kaam karne ke baad bhi toilet poochhna padta hai, aur mana kar dete hain*” (*Sometimes even after working all day, we have to ask to use the toilet, and they refuse*). These repeated humiliations strip away dignity in intimate, everyday ways and underscore how deeply caste and gender shape the terms of labour.

Although the POSH Act nominally includes domestic workers, in practice it offers little protection. Most workers are unaware of its provisions, and institutional mechanisms such as Local Committees at the district-level are inaccessible. The intimacy of the home as a workplace makes violations invisible and unreportable. For migrant women, losing a job is not merely about individual income but about the collapse of their family’s survival strategy, intensifying their fear and silence. Thus, workplace harassment, abuse, or unsafe conditions remain hidden, unchallenged, and unpunished.

Women domestic workers also carry the double burden of labour, managing the demands of employers while simultaneously shouldering unpaid carework responsibilities within their own households. Many begin their day before dawn, cooking, cleaning, and preparing their own families before setting out to multiple employers. By evening, they return to face further housework, often with little or no rest. This relentless cycle exacerbates exhaustion, reinforces invisibility, and erases the line between productive and reproductive labour.

Yet, the study also highlights resilience and agency. Women find ways to navigate multiple jobs, send remittances, negotiate with landlords, and keep families afloat. In collective spaces, their aspirations are clear and concrete: written contracts, fair wages, access to social security, recognition of their labour, and above all, dignity. One woman expressed it poignantly, “*Respect is more important than the work itself.*” Their resilience, however, should not be mistaken for acceptance. It is survival against the odds, born of necessity rather than choice.

The findings reveal a profound contradiction: domestic workers’ labour is indispensable, yet treated as disposable. Urban households depend on their work, but society denies them recognition, dignity, and protection. Employers exercise disproportionate power, while the state remains absent

or indifferent. This contradiction is not merely a labour market issue but a moral one. It challenges the very foundations of social and economic relations in cities.

The recent Supreme Court judgment in 2025, which acknowledged the systemic exploitation of domestic workers and called for a national regulatory framework, provides a significant opening. Yet recognition on paper is insufficient. Translating this moment into meaningful change will require sustained political will, inclusive policymaking, and robust accountability mechanisms. Crucially, domestic workers' voices must be central to this process—not appended as an afterthought, but shaping the policies that directly affect their lives. Without structural reform that addresses both material conditions and entrenched social hierarchies, women will remain trapped in a cycle where their labour sustains others' lives but their own rights remain unrecognised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the study, domestic workers voiced their demands with clarity and urgency. What they consistently asked for was recognition of their labour, fair wages, dignity at work, and protection from exploitation. Many said that without formal contracts, they were constantly at the mercy of employers, who could deny them leave, reduce wages, or dismiss them without notice. Workers expressed the need for a written agreement that clearly spells out wages, working hours, and entitlements. Although the Code on Wages, 2019 has done away with Schedules of Employment, there continues to be ambiguity regarding the inclusion of women domestic workers under its ambit, as the code ties the definition of employees and workers to an understanding of “establishment,” which excludes houses as workplaces. This gap reinforces the study's findings, showing how the absence of legal recognition leaves workers vulnerable and invisible. Therefore, a strong recommendation emerging from the study is the formal regulation of domestic work through enforceable contracts, minimum wage laws, social protection, and safety measures.

Workers also spoke of the crushing burden of insecurity, where illness, accidents, or pregnancy could push them deeper into poverty. Several women shared how they delayed medical care or discontinued their children's schooling because they simply could not afford the expense. Their demand for health insurance, maternity benefits, and pensions reflects a deep awareness of the structural risks they face. On the basis of these testimonies and survey evidence, the study recommends the extension of social security schemes as a fundamental and a human right as recommended by the Second National Commission on Labour, 2003 and welfare boards to cover domestic workers, ensuring portability of benefits

for those who migrate in search of work.

Another demand that came up repeatedly in the FGDs was dignity and respect in the household. Workers narrated experiences of being asked to use separate utensils, denied access to toilets, or treated with suspicion and hostility. They made it clear that they are not asking for charity but for basic human respect. These voices underline the recommendation that employers must be sensitised and made accountable for ensuring safe and non-discriminatory workplaces. Legal and community mechanisms must be strengthened and effectively enforced to address harassment, discrimination, and caste-based practices that undermine the dignity of workers, including existing laws such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, provisions under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 and Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 addressing discrimination, and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 targeting caste-based atrocities.

Domestic workers also demanded better opportunities for their children. They said that their low incomes force them into impossible trade-offs between food, healthcare, and education, which keeps their families trapped in cycles of poverty. The study findings confirm these compromises and highlight the need for targeted interventions, including educational scholarships, affordable healthcare, and skill development programmes that strengthen both workers and their families.

Finally, workers themselves highlighted the importance of unity and collective strength. Many recognised that as individuals they lacked bargaining power, but as part of groups or unions, they could demand better employment conditions. Although the Code on Industrial Relations, 2020 is technically applicable to informal workers, it does not sufficiently recognise the difficulties they face in registering unions. This gap reinforces the study's findings and translates into a clear recommendation to support domestic worker collectives, unions, and associations, ensuring that their voices are effectively included in policy-making processes.

In short, the demands of domestic workers form the foundation of the recommendations presented here. They are asking not for extraordinary privileges, but for the recognition of their labour, protection of their rights, and respect for their dignity. The study reinforces these demands with evidence and calls for immediate action—legal recognition, social security, safe working conditions, access to welfare, and collective voice. The recent Supreme Court judgment offers a historic opportunity to make these demands a reality. What remains is the political and societal will to ensure that domestic workers, who sustain households and cities, can finally live and work with dignity and agency

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