

Overlooked and undervalued Sector: Exploring the Experience of Female Domestic Workers in Burayu and Sebeta Towns, Oromia, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Domestic workers provide crucial household and care services to many families and contribute to the economic development of the country. They relieve their employers of countless responsibilities and help families to manage their day-to-day stresses and demands on their time. The aim of this research was to explore the lived experiences of domestic workers in Burayu and Sebeta towns. The study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive research design. Eight domestic workers were selected by using snowball sampling. Domestic workers reported that lack of family support and early marriage are the major factors that force them to engage in live-in domestic work. The nature of the agreement made between domestic workers and employers was through informal and formal agreements. Supporting their family member and saving money from what they earn to meet their needs considered as the benefits of working in private home as domestic worker. Despite its benefits, working in their employer's home has a major impact on workers' personal autonomy, mobility and decisions about their future. They also subjected to excessive work load without any additional payment which may worsen their life. To overcome the overwhelming and demanding nature of work domestic workers used seeking social support and crying as coping strategies. It was recommended that domestic workers need legal protection just as any other employees. They must enjoy their fundamental rights to form and join a trade union for collective bargain with their employers.

Keywords: Experiences, Domestic Workers, Employers, Challenges, Coping strategies

Introduction

Domestic work is one of the oldest and most important occupations for millions of people around the world. It is rooted in the global history of slavery, colonialism and other forms of servitude, and this made the sector undervalued. In contemporary society, care work at home is vital for the economy outside the household to function (International Labor Organization, 2010). Changes in economic structures have led to a growing workforce of informal, temporary, and subcontracted workers excluded from traditional labor laws Premilla and Tiffany, 2011).

According to ILO (2012), at least 52.6 million women and men above the age of 15 were domestic workers in their main job. However, domestic work is undervalued and

considered as women's work because it is believed that most women have traditionally been considered capable of doing the house work, and the skills they are taught by other women in the home are perceived to be innate (ILO, 2010). Majority of the domestic workers are live-in employee and they also see living in the household for which they work as an advantage, as they would not have to look for housing elsewhere. In some cases, the living conditions they might find in the home of their employer are of better quality than elsewhere. Moreover, many migrant women whether internal or cross-border who find employment as domestic workers find it convenient to live-in on the premises of the householder (ILO, 2013).

Despite the advantage of housing and

convenience for living condition, domestic workers are exposed to abusive treatments, discrimination and receive low wages that in most cases are less than half the minimum daily or monthly wages. These workers were however found to recognize their rights in a number of areas. Long working hours are characteristic of domestic workers, especially those who live in the house of their employers. According to study conducted by ILO (2013) shows that in Namibia domestic workers on average worked 62 hours per week and in Tanzania domestic workers on average worked 63 hours per week.

In Ethiopia one study conducted by Elsa (2011) revealed that the working hours per week are 96 and they worked 14 hrs per day this may worsen the burden of house work. The aforementioned findings more focused on the burden or negative experiences that affect the lives of domestic workers rather than on the positive experiences. Hence, the current study was intended to fill the knowledge gap observed in the field by exploring the lived experiences (negative and positive experiences) of female domestic workers in the course of domestic work. Hence, the aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of female domestic workers in Burayu and Sebata towns.

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive research design. Qualitative research seeks to understand a situation from the inside by investigating the lived experience of research participants. Qualitative research seeks to understand a situation from the inside by investigating the lived experience of research participants (Alston & Bowles, 2003). In the case of life-worlds, researchers focus on naturally emerging languages and the meanings individuals assign to their experience. "Life-worlds include emotions, motivations, symbols and their meanings, empathy, and other selective aspects

associated with naturally evolving lives of individuals and groups" (Berg, 2001, p 9). Non-probability sampling technique namely snow ball sampling method was used to select participants of the study. Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit "hidden populations," that the groups are not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies (Mack et al., 2005). After the researcher selected and interviewed the available participants then asked for a referral of other individuals for interview. Eight participants were selected and interviewed. The number of participants was determined based on theoretical data saturation where there was no new data emerged or similar data came from our respondents.

Data Collection tools

Qualitative data collection methods are time-consuming and consequently data is collected from smaller numbers of people than would usually be the case in quantitative approaches such as questionnaire surveys (Hancock, 1998). Data was collected through interacting with the participants by using in-depth interviews and observation by using a schedule with open-ended questions. In-depth interviews are generating detailed information and knowledge regarding the experiences of domestic workers who are employed in private households. In this regard, the open-ended interview questions were prepared based on the objectives of the study. The interview was conducted based on the informed consent of the research participant.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data was organized, transcribed, sorted and arranged based on the sources of information. A thematic analysis was then used to analyze the data and assign meaning to reoccurring descriptive patterns or emerging phenomenon in relation to the domestic

work.

Results and Discussion

Domestic workers are playing a significant role in the development of Ethiopia economy. They support their family members to meet the basic physiological, psychological and social needs. Moreover, they provide “general household chores” for their employers, so that the employers may feel happiness and successful/productive on their work.

Reasons for Domestic Work

In Ethiopia, domestic work is considered as women and girls work and regarded as underrated activities in which low social and economic status women are engaged. Women who are working in this industry traditionally considered as servitude. Large numbers of the women domestic workers who are employed as live in paid domestic workers are from low level economic status and less educated family.

Lack of Family Support

Families are playing a significant role in supporting their members to meet their basic needs. However, when the families are incapable of supporting their members, children may leave their parents’ home and move to other area to search better job opportunities. Majority of domestic workers migrate from rural area to urban area for search of employment to improve their lives and support their family members they left behind. The main destination areas of domestic workers are Addis Ababa and other major regional towns, which provide migrants with job opportunities. Domestic workers responded that the situations of their families were not supportive and unable to meet their physiological and social needs. As a result, domestic workers are forced to shoulder and share the responsibility of supporting their family

members. They are looking to improve and meet the need of their family members whom they left than improving their quality of life.

Early Marriage

In majority of Ethiopian society, early marriage is believed as a way of protecting girls from loss of virginity, abduction, and unwanted pregnancy. As a result of this, at an age where girls should go to school, they are forced to get married before they are physically and psychologically getting matured and prepared to handle the responsibilities of family. Significant number of respondents reported that their parents forced them to marry someone by denying their education to preserve their good name or high-status in their community. Domestic workers left their family members and migrated from their locality to Addis or regional towns to run off from early marriage which was anticipated by their parents to marry someone whom they don’t know. Specially, female students are discontinuing their education due to forced marriage. Migration is seen as a strategy of escaping from early marriage and looking for other opportunities to resume their education which was denied by their parents.

The nature of agreement of Domestic Workers

The contract must set out the terms and conditions of employment of the domestic worker, as agreed by the employer and the domestic worker. Contracts benefits both employers and employees, since they provide guidelines for each party to the employment relationship. At the onset majority of domestic workers were recruited through informal or oral agreement about the types of work they assigned to carryout and wage payment through their friends and relatives than formal or written contract. A verbal agreement is usually established but these are difficult to monitor and enforce by the two parties. This condition is difficult for

domestic worker to claim for their right if the employers violate their rights.

As they left their parents' home or left from other employers for different reasons, they go to street with their baggage in search of employment. Some of them may have the possibility of getting employed with in one day and others without employment for more than one day and accommodation. On the other hand, domestic workers who made a formal agreement with employers are considering as a protection of their right. Both parties agreed on the type of job they carried out, wage and rest. However, they faced different problems in their work place for instance, arbitrary withdrawal/dismissal from their work, assigning to additional work for their family and denying rest which violates their agreement. They simply take the decisions made by their employers as right because they don't know where they appeal and claim for their right on the ground of their agreement.

The Benefits of Domestic Work

Domestic work sector has social and economic benefits for less educated and less trained people especially, girls and women. Majority of low economic and social status individuals take as an advantage to engaged in the domestic activities. Although, working in private home is challenging and overwhelming activities, majority of domestic worker prefer to stay in private home than working in cafeterias as receptionist or other related activities. Because, most lived in domestic workers see accommodation, food and being free from different abuses as an advantage of working in private home than other activities. This does not mean that working in private home is absolutely free from any abuse but the degree of abuses and violations are minimal when they compare with working in hotel and other business areas. Eventually, some domestic workers return back to private home to take accommodation, food, saving

money, access to education and being free from different abuses as a benefit of working in private home.

Domestic workers reported that saving money and supporting their family member gives them happiness in their life. Though, their monthly salary was not satisfactory (<800 ETB) they enjoyed with the money they earned from the employers. Majority of domestic workers reported that saving money from what they earn considered as an advantage to satisfy their own needs and the needs of their family members in some instance.

Few domestic workers stated that access to education opportunity is another advantage of working as domestic worker in private home. Some of them have got access to education at night program. Access to education is determined based on the good will of the employers not considered as a right of the domestic workers. However, majority of the domestic workers were denied education opportunity by their employers whereas few domestic workers enjoyed the opportunity of resuming the education which was arranged by their employers.

Challenges Faced by Domestic Workers

The exploitative and customary nature of domestic work is devastating the rights of domestic works. Since, their work place is in the private home which is outside the public view and legal frame work.

Excessive Work Hours

Domestic workers were often expected to be the first member of the household wake up in the morning, and the last one to bed at night. Owing to the nature of work, domestic workers are subjected to long working hours without rest or break. When they accomplished their task, the employers order

so as to work other activities to make them busy. Always, domestic workers are expected on call or stand by to perform any activities while they are assigned by their employers. Significant numbers of domestic workers are working without any weekly, monthly, and even yearly rest. Apparently, domestic workers worked on average 15-18 hours per day without any incentive or additional payment even they do not have sufficient time to sleep. This less hour of sleep has a significant impact on health, including increased risk of head hatch and sometime depression.

Inadequate Living Conditions

Inadequate accommodation is a common complaint of domestic workers. Rooms may be small and poorly ventilated without the possibility of locking them. Many domestic workers are provided substandard, unhealthy and unsafe sleeping quarters with no regard for their dignity, privacy or personal security. Considerable domestic workers revealed that often time they have been sleeping in salon but sometimes they leave the salon for gusts so that they were forced to sleep in kitchen. However, the employers don't permit them to keep their bag in the main home; this owes to fear of personal hygiene/ sanitation of domestic worker for the health of their children. They are forced to sleep in open living areas; as a result, they may easily expose to sexual harassment or assault and other forms of sexual abuse. This finding depicted that salon is a common sleeping place for majority of domestic workers but kitchen for some of domestic workers.

Lack of Freedom of Movement and Contact with Others

Having regular contact with their family and friends may also help to reduce problems of domestic workers regarding exploitation and stress because they share their feeling to their family or friends so that they may get relief

from work place stress. However, domestic workers pinpointed that they are denied the right of movement and visiting their family at least within six months or a year.

As described by domestic workers, they were disconnected from any social network, so that they forced to lead restricted and isolated lives in the course of domestic work. The employers assume that if the domestic workers make relationship with other domestic workers or other friends, they may misinform and change the behavior of their worker. Owing this, employers used to assign different tasks as a strategy to make the domestic workers busy and monitoring their activities every day. Domestic workers reported that domestic work as an activity is demanding and overwhelming than prisoners in remand home, in the sense that prisoners have the chance of communicating with their family and friends than domestic workers.

Seeking Social Support as a Coping Strategy

Creating a social network with their family, friends and neighbors or community helps to share the secret and emotional problems they face in the course of their working in house chore responsibilities. Obtaining psychological and social support from family members and friends was an important coping strategy of domestic workers. In addition to sharing their feeling and emotion to friends and other relatives, they used crying as means of overcoming the bad emotion and stress. When they get bad responses or reactions from their employers, they go to kitchen to be alone and cry to get relief from their terrible situation.

Discussion

Domestic workers play a vital role in the improvement of the well-being of society and economic development of the country directly or indirectly. The sector absorbed

many women and girls who are from low level economic status and less educated and unable to hire in the formal sector. In Ethiopia, there are pull and push factors that force female domestic workers to engage in the domestic work sector. Among the different driving forces, early marriage and lack of family support are the dominant factors pinpointed by the respondents. Majority of the respondents reported that they left their family then migrated from their locality to regional town and Addis Ababa to run off from early marriage which was anticipated by their parents to marry someone whom they don't know and in search of job opportunity to meet their physiological and social needs and the basic need of family members.

Contracts are a crucial tool for protecting workers' rights since they provide a written record of the scope of work, as well as agreement about payment, types work, and work schedule. These documents are an important step towards increasing the transparency of the employment relationship, and when workplace disputes do arise, they can be helpful in resolving the disputes. However, at the beginning of the employment, majority of domestic workers were recruited through informal or oral agreement about the types of work they are assigned to carryout and wage payment through their friends and relatives than formal or written contract. On the other hand, domestic workers who made a formal written agreement with their employers believe to be safe guarded for their rights. In the same way, American National Domestic Workers Alliance (2012) stated that when the private home is also a workplace, formal, written employment contracts are crucial. Because contracts benefit both employers and employees, since they provide guidelines for each party.

In spite of, the agreement made they faced with different psychological and social problems in their work place. Domestic

workers who are employed through informal agreement are more likely suffering from sexual, physical, psychological abuses and other forms of human rights when compared with domestic workers who are employed through formal procedure. Similarly, ILO (2013) shown that lack of concrete agreements and tools with regards to working time frequently leads to tensions and disputes among domestic workers and employers regarding what work was really performed, when the work was performed, and how it should be remunerated.

Despite, live-in domestic work is overwhelming and burdensome activities, domestic workers are benefiting from the sector. Some domestic workers save money from what they have earned and gift gained from employers to satisfy their own psychological and social needs and the needs of their family members in some instance. On the other hand, few live-in domestic workers have got access to resume their education which is allowed and arranged by their employers. Some employers used offering education opportunity for domestic worker as a mechanism of retaining good domestic workers not to go elsewhere.

Since the work place of domestic workers is private home, they are highly susceptible to different psychological and human right abuses. Because the nature of work they are engaged is operated in closed doors which is invisible to the outside world and with no legal coverage in our country. Owing to these, domestic workers faced different challenges in journey of domestic work includes: - excessive work hours without rest, exclusion from social network, inadequate living condition/ in appropriate accommodation and absence of rest are problems that may adversely affect the life of domestic workers. The finding of this study is congruent with the finding of ILO (2012) shown that workload prevented domestic workers from getting at least five hours of uninterrupted sleep in their work place and

resulting in various health problems as well as accidents on the job. The research found that men employers are more likely sympathetic and understand the burden of domestic workers than women employers. Domestic workers used social support to share their emotion to their friends or relatives whom they trust and crying in hidden place as strategies of overcoming the stress.

Domestic workers need legal protection just as any other wage earner. They must enjoy their fundamental rights to form and join a trade union and to bargain in a collective way. This would allow them to benefit from national legislation on minimum wage and social protection, including access to health care, and maternity, sick and pension provisions.

Conclusion

Domestic works play a pivotal role in the socio-economic development of countries. They contribute for the economic development of many countries as a means of income generating activities for less educated people. However, their importance in labor market and economic development, domestic workers are undervalued and marginalized socially, economically as well as legally. The sector embraces majority of women who engaged in the activities of domestic work as live in and live out in private home. Majority of low economic and social status girls and women are benefited from domestic work sector by earning wage to meet their needs and the needs of their family.

Despite, domestic workers are subjected to different social, economic and human right abuses in the trajectory of domestic work. Especially, live in domestic workers are subjected to long work hours without rest which may adversely affect the health of domestic workers. Participants revealed that they faced labor right violation in the work place like, physical and psychological abuse, restriction of movement of domestic workers and poor or in adequate accommodation or living condition.

Recommendations

Government should play an important role in raising awareness to address the inequality and human rights abuses faced by domestic workers in our country. Domestic workers are excluded from Ethiopian labor law and other legal frame work which protect their rights. Indeed, domestic workers need legal protection just as any other employees. They must enjoy their fundamental rights to form and join a trade union and to bargain in a collective way. This would allow them to benefit from national legislation on minimum wage and social protection, including access to health care, and maternity, sick and pension provisions. Social workers should advocate addressing the multifaceted problems that affect the lives of domestic workers. The government should work to empower women domestic workers so as to generate their own income by facilitating credit. This enables them to boost their socio-economic power in the community.

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