

Story of the 'help'

For a sector that is so “visible” in urban Delhi, it is hardly been noticed. The invisibility of domestic work also made the maids pliant; they have traditionally accepted lower wages, and physical and mental abuse at work without questioning it. The survey was done with an intention to understand different issues faced by a housemaid both in personal and professional life, while focusing mainly on female live out maids in Rohini. Generally, housemaids work around the clock starting from 7am to 1pm and then another shift of 4 hours from 2pm-6pm. In addition to this, they are expected to care of their families, by attending to their needs during the afternoon break and after 10 pm, which takes it toll both mentally and physically. A typical household owner expects maids to come to work on precise times and work efficiently, without fatigue.

The first and the most peculiar observation about housemaids is that they generally look content. They generally sit in groups outside in some park or corners, sharing their feelings with each other. When asked about the problems that they are facing, they do not look much enthusiastic about discussing them. To get some answers one has to instigate them a lot. Unlike them, the house owners seem much more unsatisfied with the kind of service that they receive and they respond to queries much more promptly. It is important to understand such behavior of both the parties, contrary to common belief.

Maids are thoroughly interrogated about their personal and professional life, through a set of well-researched questions. The working class faces a large number of similar issues. Around 35% of housemaids are without partners because of various reasons. Partners of majority of other do not have permanent jobs and are involved in jobs like rickshaw pulling, wall painting etc. They are hugely disappointed with the kind of response that they get from their husbands. This is because a lot of money that can be spent for better purposes is spent on their husbands' daily alcohol consumption. Some maids also complained about being physically abused by their partners. Because of non-contribution from husband's part, maids become the sole breadwinner of their family. Although, it is also observed that a significant improvement in partner's behavior can be seen with the increase in stability and income from the job.

On an average a maid has around 4-5 houses under her wing. Each house is visited twice a day, morning for cleaning purposes and in evening for cleaning the utensils. Working hours in a day of a common maid are around 6-7 hours. A maid working in an apartment climbs the stairs, approximately 18-20 times, on a normal day. After the completion of their job, the maids go back to their own houses and fully take on the workload there.

A maid earn on an average somewhere around Rs. 3-4000 per month (specific to Rohini). As generally is the case, in absence of additional income, this amount becomes the total income of the whole family. Approximately Rs 1000 from this amount is spent on the rent, which leaves the family with a meager Rs. 2500 to spend. Another Rs. 600 is spent on travelling to and fro from the work place. Thus, as can be seen, the whole family with its need, dreams and desires, fight for survival and basic necessities that they can avail for mere Rs. 2000 per month. Another big issue is that they don't have any social security or old age plans.

Most of the old aged maids showed concern about their deteriorating health conditions and money problem that they will face once they are unable to work.

Behavior of house owners can be classified according to their behavior in two categories – the first category consist of employer who are understanding, sympathetic and kind. They even give food to their maids daily. Second category consists of not so supportive employers. But irrespective of category, almost all the employers emphasize on fixed timing. In result, maids are always in rush, since their livelihood depends on getting to the next job on time, and they know that they will be reprimanded if they are late. In fact, few employers believe they are being benevolent when they employ a maid in household work and give her food and clothing. The maids feel that they do not get the deserving amount as their work is physically very tolling.

The issue of timing is crucial for employers because majority of the employers are women, specially, working women. Women juggling their careers, home and kids. They start running a race at 6 in the morning, and go on till they rap it all up at midnight. Thus time management is the mandatory mantra for them. Packed lunches by 8 and cleaned houses by 9 so that everybody can leave for their respective destination. A maid coming at 9.15am won't exactly be of much help.

The above-mentioned points highlight the day-to-day issues that the employers and employee face. The situation that the employees handle seem much more dire but still they are content with everything they have, unlike the employers who look visibly harassed by these issues.

There is another surprising situation that comes to light that the maids emphasize that it is very easy to acquire work in a new household. But, even if they are harassed in their old working house they mostly don't leave it for a new place. This is astonishing behavior, as one would prefer an easier and more comfortable environment to work in.

An in depth survey of some maids was conducted to find out the reasons for such surprising decisions and behavior. When their past was explored, the reason for their extreme strength came into focus.

Most of the surveyed maids migrated from extremely poor villages of UP and Bihar. They never had full stomach or fully covered body. They were physically and mentally abused. Their thoughts and choices never mattered. After being married off when they were in their early teens, they had their first child by the time they reached the doorstep of adulthood. But even after all this they still came out, winning the fight of survival.

So, it was no more surprising that a cup full of remaining tea or stale *rottis* or even the constant nagging from the employers, did not really shake their world. They are satisfied with their new life that they have created for themselves. They go on living it with a hope for a better future.