

A Sociological Study of Workplace Discrimination and Exploitation Faced by Domestic Women Workers in Mathura City

Prof. Birpal Singh Thenua¹ & Ms. Anjali²

¹Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, Dayal bagh Educational Institute, Agra, Email ID: drthenuan@yahoo.com

²Research Scholar, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, Dayal bagh Educational Institute, Agra, Email ID: anjali.deiphd@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper presents a sociological examination of the workplace discrimination and exploitation experienced by domestic women workers in Mathura City. Mathura, though widely known as a pilgrimage centre, is also a rapidly urbanising town in which women from diverse social backgrounds are increasingly engaged as domestic helpers within private households. Domestic work in India operates largely outside the framework of formal labour regulation, leaving workers without written contracts, fixed wages, or social security, and rendering the employer household a largely unmonitored workplace. Against this backdrop, the study explores the socio-economic profile of domestic women workers and the forms of discrimination and exploitation they encounter in relation to caste, income, and migration status, while situating their experiences within the gendered devaluation of domestic labour.

The research adopts a descriptive design combining a structured questionnaire with semi-structured interviews. Data were obtained from 80 domestic women workers across selected urban and peri-urban localities of Mathura, and were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) alongside thematic analysis of the interview narratives. The findings indicate that domestic work in the city is dominated by women from marginalised caste groups and low-income households, that migrant workers are particularly exposed to wage exploitation and job insecurity, and that the absence of formal protections sustains long hours, irregular pay, and limited dignity at work. The study underlines the need for legal recognition, regulated wages, welfare provisions, and employer sensitisation to advance decent work for this essential but neglected segment of the informal workforce.

Keywords: domestic women workers; workplace discrimination; informal labour; caste; migration; decent work; Mathura; social inequality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic women workers constitute a significant segment of India's informal workforce, particularly in rapidly urbanising cities such as Mathura. They are drawn mostly from poor, rural, marginalised, or migrant backgrounds, where limited education and scarce employment opportunities push domestic work to the fore as a primary livelihood. Their labour — cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare — forms the invisible backbone of urban households and enables

middle-class families to manage their professional and personal responsibilities. Yet, despite their vital economic role, these workers remain undervalued, unprotected, and socially invisible.

Domestic work in India operates within highly informal and personalised arrangements. Unlike formal occupations, it typically involves no written contracts, fixed wages, or access to social security. The employer's household becomes the workplace — a private space where labour laws rarely reach — leaving workers exposed to multiple forms of disadvantage. Factors such as caste, class, and migration status shape everyday interactions between employers and workers, frequently producing exclusionary practices such as separate utensils, restrictions on movement, and disrespectful treatment.

Exploitation is also widespread, including unequal wages, excessive workloads, delayed or non-payment, long hours, denial of leave, and job insecurity. Live-in and migrant workers face heightened risk owing to isolation and limited awareness of their rights. In Mathura, these vulnerabilities are intensified by socio-cultural hierarchies, economic inequality, and the near-absence of local welfare mechanisms. A sociological examination of workplace discrimination and exploitation is therefore essential to understand the lived experiences of these workers, their structural vulnerabilities, and the policy interventions their situation demands.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Domestic women workers remain a critical yet marginalised segment of India's informal workforce, providing essential household services such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare (Chadha, 2021). Despite their contribution to households and the wider economy, they face persistent insecurity, low wages, and limited legal and social protection. The International Labour Organization advanced the rights of these workers through the Domestic Workers Convention (C189), advocating decent work, minimum wages, and social security (ILO, 2011). Although India has not ratified C189, studies across the last decade continue to document significant gaps in protecting domestic workers' rights (ILO, 2019; Gupta, 2024).

Research during this period indicates that domestic workers are predominantly women from low-income, Dalit, and backward communities, often migrating from rural areas in search of work (Chadha, 2021; ILO India, 2019). Limited education and skills restrict alternative livelihoods, making domestic work their primary source of income (Gupta, 2024), while cultural perceptions of such work as “women's work” reinforce its undervaluation (Thakkar, 2024).

Sociological perspectives offer further insight. Conflict theory frames domestic workers' experiences as a product of structural inequality, in which employers' dominance enables economic and social exploitation (Parpiani, 2021). Feminist approaches highlight the gendered character of domestic labour, showing how women bear a double burden of essential household work and social marginalisation (Thakkar, 2024). The sociology of work situates these workers within the unorganised sector, emphasising the absence of formal protection and institutional support (NDWM, 2016; Drishti IAS, 2025).

Workplace discrimination has been widely recorded, including caste-based exclusion, social distancing within employers' homes, and economic exploitation such as unequal wages, delayed payments, and unpaid overtime (Parpiani, 2021; SPRF, 2021; Drishti IAS, 2025). Estimates of the number of domestic workers in India vary dramatically — from around 4.2 million to as high as 50 million — reflecting the difficulty of framing effective policy in the absence of reliable data (NDWM, 2016; ILO, 2019). Most existing research, however, focuses on national trends or policy frameworks, while localised, city-level studies remain scarce. In a religious and tourism-driven city such as Mathura, understanding how caste, class, and migration intersect with workplace disadvantage requires focused, place-specific research (Chadha, 2021; Parpiani, 2021; Thakkar, 2024). The present study addresses this gap.

3. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Although domestic women workers are central to the functioning of urban households and the local economy, their experiences remain largely undocumented at the city level. Most Indian studies focus on national or regional trends, leaving limited understanding of the socio-economic profile of domestic women workers in specific cities — their age, education, income, family structure, and migration background — and of how caste, class, and migration status combine to shape exploitation and unfair treatment. Mathura, as a religious and tourism-driven city, presents distinct social and cultural dynamics that influence domestic work. This study therefore provides a city-level examination of domestic women workers' socio-economic characteristics and workplace challenges, with a view to informing policies that improve their rights, working conditions, and social inclusion.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the socio-economic profile of domestic women workers in Mathura City.
- To analyse the forms of workplace discrimination and exploitation they experience, with particular reference to caste, income level, and migration status.
- To document the coping strategies adopted by domestic women workers and to suggest measures for improving their working conditions.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In keeping with its descriptive and exploratory design, the study is guided by the following questions rather than by formal hypothesis testing:

- What is the socio-economic profile of domestic women workers engaged in private households in Mathura City?
- How does caste shape the discrimination experienced by domestic women workers within employer households?

- In what ways does income level influence their experience of unfair treatment at the workplace?
- How does migration status (local resident versus rural-to-urban migrant) affect their working conditions and vulnerability to exploitation?

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design that combines quantitative and qualitative evidence to examine workplace discrimination and exploitation among domestic women workers in Mathura City. The target population comprised women aged 18 years and above employed in private households; male workers and those engaged in institutional or commercial domestic service were excluded. Using purposive sampling across selected urban and peri-urban localities, complete responses were obtained and analysed from 80 domestic women workers, ensuring representation across caste, income, and migration backgrounds.

Data were collected over a one-month period using a structured questionnaire, which captured demographic details, work profile, income, and reported experiences of discrimination and exploitation, supplemented by semi-structured interviews that explored perceptions, coping strategies, and challenges in accessing justice. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics — frequencies, percentages, and cumulative distributions — while the interview material was examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and narratives. Given the modest, purposively selected sample, the study is interpreted as an exploratory, context-specific account rather than as a basis for statistical generalisation to the wider population of domestic workers.

7. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF MATHURA

Religious and economic base. Mathura, revered as the birthplace of Lord Krishna, draws millions of devotees and tourists each year. Religious tourism anchors the local economy, supporting hotels, transport, guides, and trade in religious goods, alongside a surrounding rural economy based on agriculture and animal husbandry. The result is a mixed economy in which urban livelihoods centre on tourism and services.

The employer class. A growing number of middle- and upper-middle-class households — many with both partners in employment — increasingly rely on domestic helpers to manage childcare, eldercare, cooking, and cleaning. Domestic workers have thus become integral to the daily functioning of these households.

Migration and livelihoods. A substantial proportion of domestic helpers migrate from nearby rural areas where farm incomes are insufficient, sometimes permanently and sometimes as seasonal or temporary migrants. Monthly earnings are low, typically ranging from ₹3,000 to ₹8,000 depending on the type and volume of work; live-in workers receive somewhat higher wages along with food and lodging but enjoy less autonomy. Many are the sole earners in their families,

and most live in slums or modest rented accommodation with limited access to healthcare, insurance, or social security.

8. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The socio-economic profile of the 80 domestic women workers surveyed is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Socio-economic profile of domestic women workers in Mathura City (n = 80)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	≤ 20 years	7	8.75
	21–30 years	20	25.00
	31–40 years	18	22.50
	41–50 years	25	31.25
	51–60 years	8	10.00
	≥ 61 years	2	2.50
Education	Illiterate	7	8.75
	Primary	18	22.50
	Secondary	22	27.50
	Higher Secondary & above	33	41.25
Caste	Scheduled Caste (SC)	30	37.50
	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	12	15.00
	Other Backward Class (OBC)	15	18.75
	General	23	28.75
Monthly Income (₹)	3,000–5,000	30	37.50
	5,001–8,000	40	50.00
	8,001–12,000 (live-in)	10	12.50
Migration Status	Local resident	42	52.50
	Rural-to-urban migrant	38	47.50
Family Structure	Nuclear	44	55.00
	Joint	36	45.00
Work Experience	≤ 1 year	12	15.00
	2–5 years	10	12.50
	6–10 years	20	25.00
	11–15 years	20	25.00
	Above 15 years	18	22.50

Source: Primary data collected through structured questionnaire.

The profile reveals a workforce concentrated in the middle and later working years, with the largest groups aged 41–50 (31.25%) and 21–30 (25%). Educational attainment is limited, though a notable share report secondary or higher secondary schooling. Marginalised caste groups predominate: Scheduled Castes account for 37.5% of respondents and, taken together with Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, comprise just over 71% of the sample. Incomes are low, clustering in the ₹5,001–8,000 band (50%), and the workforce is split almost evenly between local residents (52.5%) and rural-to-urban migrants (47.5%). A majority belong to nuclear families, and many bring substantial work experience, with close to half having worked for more than ten years.

9. FORMS OF WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION AND EXPLOITATION

9.1 Caste-based discrimination. The composition of the workforce is itself revealing: with marginalised caste groups forming over 71% of respondents, caste emerged repeatedly in the interviews as a structuring feature of everyday work. Respondents described practices consistent with social distancing — the use of separate utensils, restrictions on entering certain areas of the home, and limited social interaction — that mark them as outsiders within the households they serve. These accounts indicate that caste continues to shape relations of respect and exclusion in domestic work, reinforcing the disadvantage already imposed by low income and informal employment.

9.2 Class and income-based disadvantage. Perceptions of income-linked discrimination were strong among respondents, as shown in Table 2. A clear majority — 62.5% — agreed or strongly agreed that lower-income workers are treated less fairly, while only around 19% disagreed. This perception aligns with the wider finding that financial dependency weakens workers’ bargaining power, leaving them to accept low wages, heavy workloads, and irregular payment for fear of losing work.

Table 2

Perception that income level affects workplace discrimination (n = 80)

Perception: income level affects discrimination	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative %
Strongly agree	30	37.50	37.50
Agree	20	25.00	62.50
Undecided	15	18.75	81.25
Disagree	10	12.50	93.75
Strongly disagree	5	6.25	100.00
Total	80	100.00	

Source: Primary data collected through structured questionnaire.

9.3 Migration status and vulnerability. The sample was almost evenly divided between local residents (52.5%) and rural-to-urban migrants (47.5%), confirming that urban households in Mathura depend heavily on both groups. Migrant workers, however, described greater exposure to

wage exploitation, heavier workloads, and job insecurity than local residents. Lacking established social networks and familiarity with local norms and grievance channels, migrants are less able to negotiate terms or seek redress, which heightens their dependence on individual employers.

9.4 The gendered devaluation of domestic labour. Because domestic work is overwhelmingly performed by women and is culturally cast as an extension of unpaid household duty, it is systematically undervalued. Respondents were frequently expected to remain available, deferential, and uncomplaining, and their labour was treated as low-status rather than as skilled work deserving fair remuneration. This gendered framing compounds caste and class disadvantage, intensifying the emotional and economic pressures the workers face.

10. KEY FINDINGS

- Domestic work in Mathura is concentrated among women from marginalised caste groups, who form over 71% of the workforce surveyed, and caste-based social distancing remains a visible feature of the workplace.
- Low and irregular incomes, combined with financial dependency, weaken workers' bargaining power and sustain the acceptance of exploitative conditions.
- Migrant women are more exposed than local residents to wage exploitation, excessive workloads, and job insecurity, owing to weaker social networks and limited awareness of their rights.
- Working conditions are largely unregulated, with an absence of written contracts, fixed wages, paid leave, or social security, leading to long hours and recurrent exploitation.
- Constant monitoring, disrespect, and the gendered devaluation of domestic work generate emotional and psychological strain, undermining workers' dignity and confidence.

11. SUGGESTIONS

- Extend formal legal protection to domestic workers, including written contracts, standard minimum wages, paid leave, and accessible grievance mechanisms.
- Establish a Domestic Workers' Welfare Board for registration and for access to social security benefits such as health insurance, pensions, and emergency support.
- Implement employer-sensitisation programmes addressing caste prejudice, fair treatment, and the dignity of domestic labour.
- Promote skill development and training to help workers negotiate better wages and access more secure employment.
- Support community-based collectives that give workers a platform to voice concerns, seek help during exploitation, and bargain collectively for improved conditions.

12. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that domestic women workers in Mathura City experience discrimination and exploitation shaped by the interlocking forces of caste hierarchy, economic vulnerability, and the gendered undervaluation of domestic labour. Workers from marginalised caste groups face social distancing and disrespect within employer households, while low and irregular incomes erode their bargaining power and oblige them to accept poor conditions in the absence of contracts or legal protection. Migrant women, lacking established social support, are especially exposed to wage exploitation and insecurity. Together, these pressures produce emotional strain, job insecurity, and limited avenues for justice. Improving the situation of this essential but neglected workforce calls for legal recognition, regulated wages, social security provision, employer sensitisation, and supportive community networks — in short, both policy reform and a wider social shift toward dignity and fairness in domestic work.

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