

Changing Patterns of Domestic Work

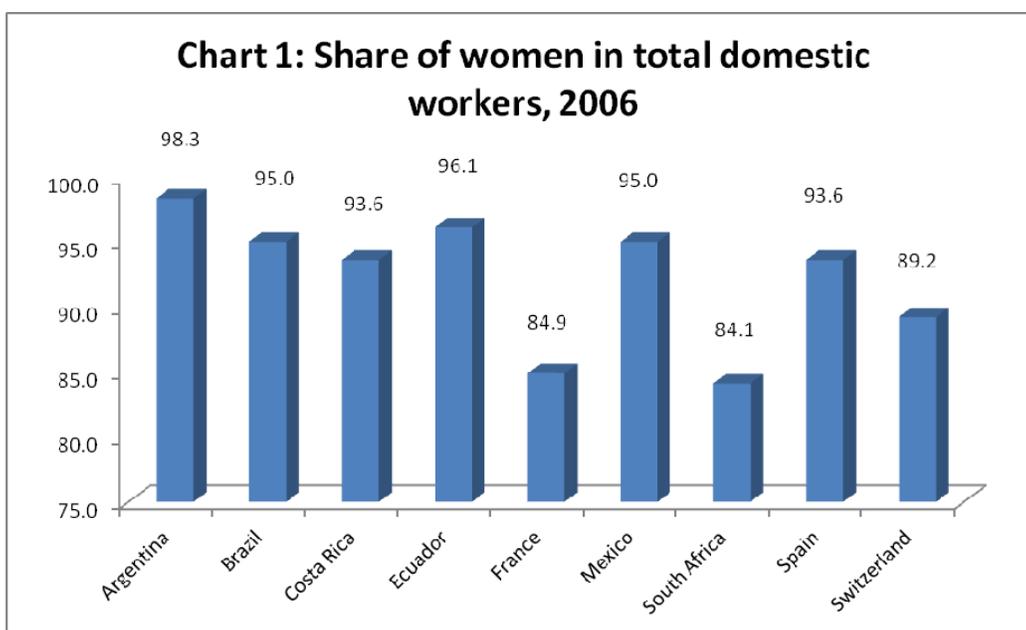
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Paid domestic work is not only one of the oldest occupations, but also one of the “emerging” activities that account for the work of increasing numbers of women workers in many developing and developed countries. To some extent this reflects demographic patterns that place increasing requirements on the “care economy”, as well as patterns of GDP growth and macroeconomic processes that are associated with rising inequalities and do not generate sufficient productive employment opportunities in other activities. Thus, the greater is the income inequality in a country, the greater is the likelihood of the proliferation of paid domestic work. But on a more fundamental level the nature of the expansion of this form of women’s work is determined by the gender construction of societies across the world, whereby women remain responsible for the care economy and social reproduction even when they are engaged in outside work, and so transfer some of this burden of previously unpaid work on to paid workers (usually other women). This has been associated with a globalisation of the care economy, with growing use of migrant workers across and within countries, as well as the growth of part-time domestic work.

Despite its growing importance, domestic work in most countries remains largely unrecognised, generally undervalued, and almost always poorly regulated. Lack of regulation and extension of basic forms of worker protection to domestic work is to a significant extent the result of its very nature, since it is typically performed in individual households by workers without external monitoring of the terms and conditions of employment or easy possibilities for association. Since most domestic workers are women (and often migrant women) they are even less likely to be in a position to organise and demand their rights collectively. It is usually perceived as something less than regular work by both employers and the workers themselves, and contracts are usually determined bilaterally in conditions of unequal bargaining power without strong awareness of either labour market conditions or the legal rights of the workers. The relatively high proportion of child labour in this activity is also a reflection of the sheer difficulties of monitoring and regulation.

For obvious reasons, it is extremely difficult to get accurate and reliable data on the extent of domestic work. Available surveys point to severe under-reporting of such work in official statistics, which is often compounded by the varying definitions used for categorising domestic work and the fact that many official data collection agencies tend to lump such work along with other “social, community and personal services”.

The limited data that are available indicate that domestic work is overwhelmingly feminised. As indicated in Chart 1, in 2006 women accounted for the dominant share of domestic workers, more than 90 per cent in most countries for which data were available.



Source: Calculated from ILO (2010) Table 1.1, page 6 (based on separate data for men and women workers).

However, there is no clear indication from this dataset that the degree of feminisation intensified over the previous decade, as there are varying trends in different countries, as indicated in Table 1. These numbers can vary sharply depending upon source, and it is widely recognised that the official estimates (which are those presented in Chart 1 and Table 1) are likely to be underestimates. For various reasons domestic workers are often excluded from labour force surveys. This is more likely when they are underage, as is often found in developing countries. In many countries, irregular migrants also contribute to the provision of domestic work, and they are also prone to be unrecorded.

Table 1: Estimates of women domestic workers in some countries

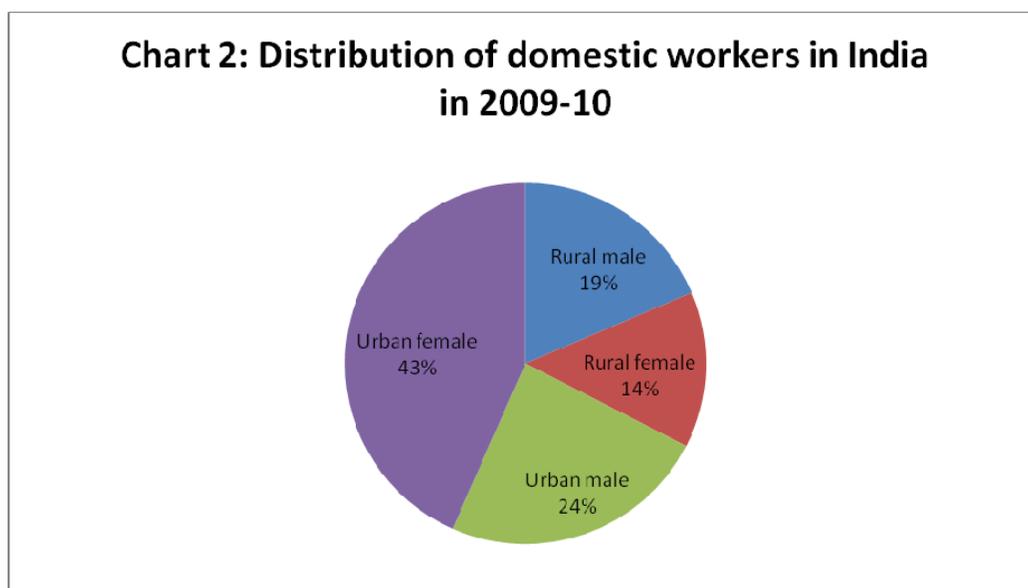
		1995	2000	2006
Argentina	Number of women domestic workers	18.05	18.51	18.31
	Share of women domestic workers	95.3	95.8	98.3
Belize	Number of women domestic workers	10.14	9.8	12.8
	Share of women domestic workers	91.2	91.6	84.8
Brazil	Number of women domestic workers		18.73	17.1
	Share of women domestic workers		95.3	95.0
Costa Rica	Number of women domestic workers	15.5	17.56	17.79
	Share of women domestic workers	91.7	95.0	93.6
El Salvador	Number of women domestic workers	10.3	9.88	10.63
	Share of women domestic workers	96.3	95.3	92.7
Mexico	Number of women domestic workers	9.46	11.55	10.34
	Share of women domestic workers	95.6	93.7	95.0
South Africa	Number of women domestic workers		9.36	8.66
	Share of women domestic workers		85.0	84.1

Spain	Number of women domestic workers	7.11	6.67	8.63
	Share of women domestic workers	92.0	93.2	93.6
Switzerland	Number of women domestic workers	2.87	2.81	2.4
	Share of women domestic workers	98.6	86.7	89.2
Uruguay	Number of women domestic workers		20.12	18.88
	Share of women domestic workers		92.6	93.3

Source: Calculated from ILO (2010) Table 1.1, page 6

In most developing regions, domestic workers are mostly native born rather than migrants as they are in much of the developed world. While this is generally an activity dominated by women, as noted above, there are some regions where male involvement is also significant. For example, in some countries of North Africa like Egypt and Algeria, male domestic workers outnumber females, at 71 per cent and 55 per cent of the total respectively. This cannot be ascribed only to Islamic attitudes towards female employment since in other dominantly Muslim countries of North Africa and West Asia, female involvement in paid domestic work is hugely significant.

In India, data on the extent of paid domestic services comes mostly from the employment surveys of the National Sample Survey Organisation. Recent data for indicate that women dominate in this activity, and also that it has become increasingly important as an employer, especially for urban women. Chart 2 describes the distribution of domestic workers (defined as those who are engaged in this as their usual activity as either principal or subsidiary work) across area and gender.

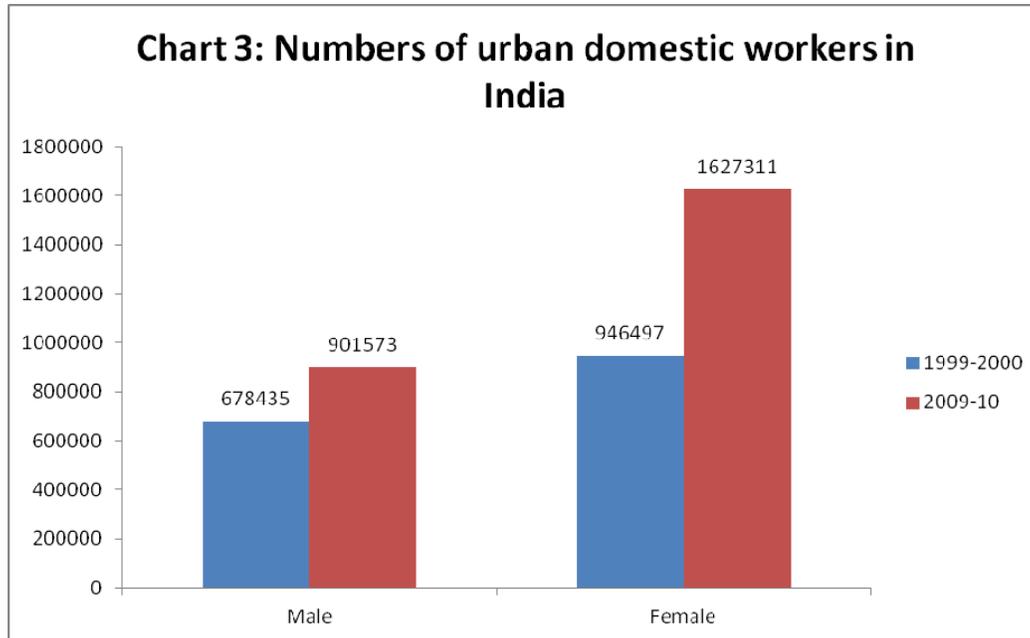


Source: NSSO Report No 537 on Employment and Unemployment in India, 2009-10

It is evident from Chart 2 that of total domestic workers in the country in 2009-10, more than two-thirds lived in urban India and 57 per cent of them were women. This is a lower rate of female involvement in this type of employment than in many other countries, and reflects the combination of several forces: the long history in India of

the affluent employing domestic servants, which created aspirations of such hiring patterns also among the newly affluent; low employment generation in other activities as well as uncertain household income generation prospects that have increased the supply of such workers; and changes in income distribution and GDP growth patterns that have created a new middle class that is able to afford to demand such workers.

However, while overall female share of such work is not as high as in some other countries, Chart 3 suggests that the rate of feminisation of such work has been increasing, especially in urban India. Over the decade of the 2000s, 75 per cent of the increase in the total number of domestic workers was accounted for by women.

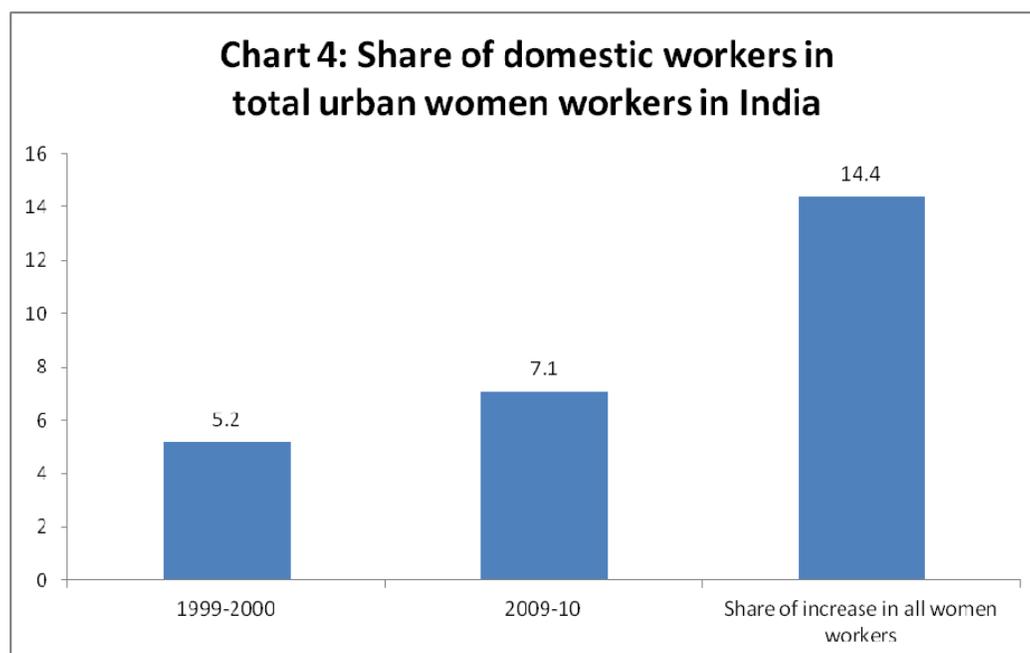


Source: Estimated from NSSO Report No 537 on Employment and Unemployment in India, 2009-10 and population figures from Census of India

Not only is this activity becoming more feminised, but it is becoming more important in the total employment of women, especially in urban India. The NSSO Survey of 2004-05 showed a dramatic increase in the number of women engaged in domestic service, but several other anomalies in the data from that report suggest that some of the features suggested in that report were more in the nature of outliers. However, even if the comparison is made only between 1999-2000 and 2009-10, (indicated in Chart 4) it is clear that especially in urban India, domestic work accounts for a growing and increasingly significant share of the total employment of women. (The shares are much higher if only principal status activities are considered and if self-employed workers are removed from the analysis.)

Further, of the total increase in the number of women workers in the entire decade, a whopping 14.4 per cent was accounted for by domestic work. This suggests that more remunerative and desirable work is simply not available even for women who wish to enter the labour force, and they are forced to seek this employment as the only alternative. The continuing perception, that such work especially when performed by women, essentially adds to family incomes rather than is the main source, further

operates to reduce the reservation for women workers and reduce the potential for increased wages and better working conditions.



Source: Estimated from NSSO Report No 537 on Employment and Unemployment in India, 2009-10 and population figures from Census of India

The growing significance of domestic work in paid employment in India makes it all the more imperative to ensure that such work is given dignity and occurs under decent conditions with adequate pay. At the moment, because of the personalised nature of such work, the informality of most contracts and the difficulty of monitoring conditions, as well as the generally adverse labour market conditions, most such work takes place under extremely difficult and oppressive conditions, with low pay, little or no limits on working hours, lack of autonomy and respect of the workers, and almost nothing in the form of worker protection or social security.

It is unfortunately the case that as long as overall productive employment generation remains so sluggish, there will be continuing pressures on both male and female workers that can force them to accept working conditions that are poor and even sometimes degrading. However, both public policy and labour mobilisation can play roles in improving such conditions even when the overall employment scenario is bleak.

In this context, certain recent government moves must be welcomed, such as the Minimum Wage Act for Domestic Workers, which has been notified by the state governments of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan while a separate act has come into force in Karnataka. Obviously implementation remains a problem, but this is aided by the attempts at unionisation of such workers and related collective action, as have occurred in Kerala, Mumbai and elsewhere. What is required is professionalising the relations between employer and employee, which can only be done through a combination of organisation, legislation and institution-building.

This makes it imperative for the Government of India to ratify the ILO Convention on Domestic Work, which was passed by the International Labour Congress in 2010. This Convention clearly outlines the basic rights of domestic workers, and provides guidelines on terms and conditions of employment, wages, working hours, occupational safety and health, social security and the avoidance of child labour. Ratification is obviously just a first step in a longer process, but it will prove to be an important step in ensuring the dignity of all workers in the country.

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