

Alternatives

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Workers NOT Servants!

From the *Alternatives* Desk

THE range of meanings that one gets in the Webster Third New International Dictionary for the word 'servant' is quite interesting. While the first states that a servant is 'a person bound to do the bidding of a master or a superior,' the sixth meaning simply states 'slave'. In between these (almost) similar categorisations, one finds the term to include 'a government official considered as the servant of his sovereign or of the public.' The latter, however, is always used in combination with other words like 'government,' 'civil' or 'public.' Only in the case of personal or domestic attendant is the word used in the single and is almost trapped in the first meaning, often with implications and a practice bordering on the sixth. The state of derogation or inversely, the power of the master subsumed by the word 'servant' ought to be good enough a reason for abandoning the word in favour of a term more humane and practical for injecting/introducing change in the life and living of a 'servant.' **Domestic worker** could very well be a good replacement.

The transformation from 'servant' to 'worker' holds both promise and a socially defined (albeit protracted) engagement in the workplace with far-reaching consequences. To begin with, it opens up a space for domestic workers to have their own organization or union, set to safeguard their interests and also 'rights' guaranteed to them by the Constitution as 'citizens' of the country. Much of the abuse and sexual coercion on domestic workers could be tackled and contained if collective pressure in the form of 'union' was made to bear upon the households employing the domestic workers. Put differently, if journalists, teachers or even bus drivers could have their own 'professional organization' or union, there is no reason why the domestic workers (preferably in each of the *mahallas*) should not have one of their own. To critics of union or unionization, I have only one thing to say and that is, only the wretched and the powerless in the society are justified to form an union; not the powerful, not even those with some meaningful power!

But then, 'rights' and 'power,' even forming 'union,' are not enough for changing the current dismal fate of the domestic workers. As in the case of the word 'servant,' we have come to accept the state of maltreatment of the domestic workers as natural. Such understanding of things and practices must be rectified not only by enacting 'charter' and 'rules and regulations' (which are no less important) but by creatively remoulding, if not redesigning, the social structure so conditioned to reproduce the state of 'servanthood.' Such remoulding/redesigning ought to include things as diverse as remodeling the 'servant quarter' of a house or an apartment complex to setting aside a day each year as 'Domestic Workers' Day.' A thorough change of mind and an innovative practice are all that is required in getting rid of the stigma the society has borne for centuries!

Life and Living of Domestic Workers

by Sharif Atiqur Rahman

To improve the condition of domestic workers, the first thing that should be done is to give the domestic workers recognition as a separate professional group. The dignity of labour must be established. As the services of these domestic workers are extremely necessary for us, we should try to accommodate them in a sympathetic manner.

DOMESTIC workers now occupy an important position in our socio-economic perspective. They have become an essential part of our lives. Bangladesh may be a poor third world country, but whether in rural or in urban areas, most of the families do have that luxury of domestic workers, which many first world countries do not have.

Domestic workers belong to the lower most level of our labour force struggling to maintain their livelihood. They are giving their service for 12 to 18 hours, doing all the burdensome jobs, having no scope for education or entertainment - but quite contrarily, they are the least paid. Not only that, most of the time they are abused physically and at times even sexually. Very few of these incidents receive public attention through newspapers, while most of them remain untold forever. Surely, there are some exceptions in some of the families domestic workers are not treated as an employee, rather as a member of family, having an almost sound and secured life. But it continues to exist as a rarely visible case of "exception".

Why they become Domestic Workers

Bangladesh is a poverty struck country. Natural calamities like floods, droughts, cyclones, river erosion; sudden death of the only earning member of the family; failure in family lives - all these too contribute to rapid growth of poverty. To earn their livelihood, this unskilled and inexperienced labour force has no other option but to be a domestic worker. A study conducted by the students of the Department of International Relations of University of Dhaka found that 82% of the domestic workers have taken this profession due to poverty. The rest have taken this for secured life and to be self-sufficient. 85% of them did not have any earlier working experience of any sort.

Socio-economic Condition

Most of the domestic workers

belong to two age groups - 7 years to 15 years and 16 years to 35 years. The younger age group of domestic workers are in demand for less salary (sometimes only food is provided, but no salary) and to run on small errands. The relatively older age group i.e. 16 years to 35 years, are in great demand as within this age limit they remain physically strong which is most essential to perform all the burdensome household jobs like washing clothes, sweeping the house, cooking etc. The above mentioned study found that about 29% of the domestic workers belong to the age group of 7 years to 15 years, while 48% belong to 16 years to 35 years. The same study showed that 57% of them are illiterate and 29% of them can only write their names. A smaller portion (10%) of the domestic workers is married, while the rest are unmarried (62%) or divorced (18%) or widowed (10%).

Salary and Working Hour

This is the era of human rights - 'slavery system' has become a phenomenon of the past. But the treatment those poor domestic workers receive, reminds us of that brutal system of the past.

All over the world, it is incorporated in labour law that eight hours is the maximum period of labour for all sorts of job. But the domestic workers are giving their labour for 12 to 18 hours. There is no extra payment for the extra working hour, not to speak of about their inadequate, unjust salary. In most of the cases they are receiving Tk.50/- to Tk.300/- per month. Compared to their working hour and to their service, this salary is unbelievable. About 40% of the domestic workers receive salary within the range of Tk.50/- to Tk.100/=. Only 9% of them receive salary within the range of Tk.200 to Tk.250/=. It may be pointed out that labour is very cheap in third world countries, but this is not acceptable by any means.

The Struggle for Living

The educated and the civilised part of our society are employing these domestic workers. We cannot think even of a day without domestic workers, but we are not willing to treat them as human beings, let alone as workers.

Most of the houses do not have any sort of arrangement for their living. Those which have are always less spacious, situated in a place where light, air rarely reaches out. Moreover, the domestic workers are not treated as any professional group. They are not entitled to have any time for education or leisure or entertainment, they do not have any freedom of any sort. They are not served with adequate food or clothing. Domestic workers are treated like untouchables. In many cases, these domestic workers are physically abused even for their simplest faults. There is a common allegation of theft against the domestic workers, while this is true to some extent, but it does not allow anybody to torture them. If necessary one may sack them, or one may hand over them to law enforcing agencies, but civilised law does not allow one to punish them on one's own.

Recognition of Domestic Workers and Incorporation of Labour Law

The main problem that the domestic workers are facing is that they have not yet received any sort of professional recognition. The domestic workers themselves are not taking this as their profession willingly. Poverty and lack of skill or experience lead them towards this profession. This situation makes them unaware, more precisely careless about their rights. They accept whatever treatment they receive as normal. Similarly, the employers of domestic workers feel that they can treat them according to their own sweet will. To improve the condition of domestic workers, the first thing that should be done is to

give the domestic workers recognition as a separate professional group. The dignity of labour must be established. As the services of these domestic workers are extremely necessary for us, we should try to accommodate them in a sympathetic manner. Their profession can be recognised through legislation by incorporating the labour law. This law must clearly define and ensure their justifiable salary; rights for education, entertainment and healthy environment to live in. They may not have a luxurious life, but at least the bare necessities should be fulfilled.

Association for Domestic Workers

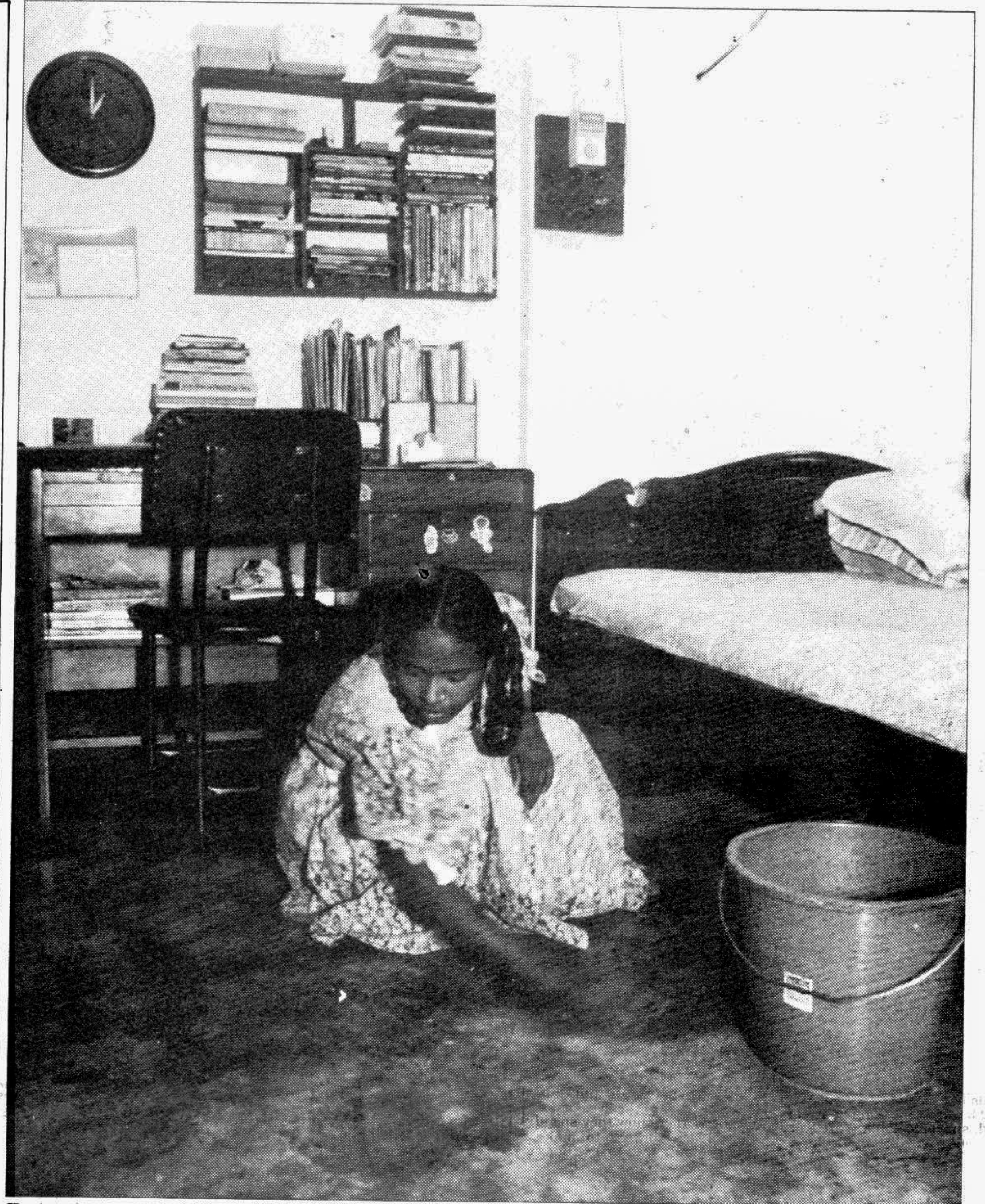
Rickshaw pullers, autorickshaw drivers, hawkers, labours - all of them have some sort of associations. But unfortunately the domestic workers do not have any such association. Once the domestic workers get their recognition as a separate professional group, an association to look after their well being must be formed. This will give them a more vocal platform in safeguarding their professional rights.

Domestic Workers' Day

Today we celebrate women's day, children's day etc. These days are celebrated to give importance and to create awareness about these vulnerable groups of people. Why not there should be a 'Domestic Workers' Day'? This will create awareness about their hardship and will make people more sympathetic and considerate towards them. Nation wide observation of this day will definitely make people aware about these down-trodden people.

We are crying for human rights, we are concerned for civil rights, but have we looked inside our houses where the most awesome form of violation of human rights is taking place? We proclaim ourselves as a civilised nation. Let us act accordingly.

The author is Research Intern, Centre for Alternatives



Hard work throughout the day - no school, no play: Paradox of survival at tender age.

Photo: Zahidul I Khan

Bleeding Hearts and Vanishing Healers

by Nishat Ahmed Chowdhury

The domestic workers come from very poor families, sometimes it is hard for them to remain loyal and faithful and resist the temptation of stealing. As a result the employers find it difficult to keep the domestic worker even after their immoral deed. On the part of the domestic workers, the sense of loyalty and remaining truthful has decreased tremendously. On the whole the employer-employee relationship has become bitter, which was once based on mutual trust and kindness.

SABIHA could see and feel the freedom just beyond the main entrance. She smiled and was about to laugh aloud when suddenly she realized she could not move her right leg. The leg was broken by jumping from the second floor. She could hear her employer and other servants running down the stairs, screaming and giving orders to bring her up. Tears ran down Sabiha's cheek as she felt like a trapped animal but in reality she was neither an animal nor wholly human. She was in fact from the despised class of our society - a 'domestic worker'.

But then, this is not the total picture of our society. There are still people who treat domestic workers especially women and children as human and not as slaves. The sad fact is that their number is very limited. My objective here is to bring to surface the stories of these people. The stories are of human compassion, of love and more importantly of care for others.

From a poor child to a wealthy man

It was 1950. From the age of 10 Wahab started working as a domestic worker in Samsul Haq's house in Rajshahi. Haq was a government official. Wahab worked in his house for seven years at length. Samsul Haq had five sons and two daughters. Wahab was taught Bangla by the sons at night. He started as a scribe boy and then at the age of 15 he was given the official position of the 'fan puller'. With financial help from the family he bought a rickshaw.

After two years he left the job of domestic working and started his business by buying more rickshaws from the money he saved from commercial use of the first one. Then he opened a stationary shop. The business expanded and with shrewd business sense Wahab invested his money. There was no stopping for him. Sky was his limit. Today Wahab is a well-known businessman in the town of Rajshahi. He has several shops, a house and a family. He employs almost a hundred people himself.

The helping embrace

Ali took up the job of a domestic worker at a very young

age in Abdul Karim's house. His job was to play with the children. Karim and his wife always showed kindness and affection towards Ali. Mrs. Karim taught Bangla not only to her son but also to Ali at home. That is how he became literate. At the age of 13 he was given the job of a mess-waiter which he lost due to negligence. Again Abdul Karim gave him a job as a clerk in a government office. Ali is still working there and bought a house and some land in his village.

In the arms of loving strangers

Zulekha was brought to the city at the age of 8 years by one of her relatives, a distant uncle. As her mother and father both had passed away she did not have anywhere else to go. So as a domestic worker she took up employment in various houses in the city. Around the age of 35 she came to work as a domestic worker in Syed Kashim's residence. From then on she is living with them. The children of the Kashims have grown up and married.

Today Zulekha is almost 60 years old. She does not do any household work, but only supervises other domestic workers to make sure they are working properly. The Kashims now treat her as one of their family member and their grand children call her 'Nani'. Zulekha is not worried about her future for she knows the Kashims will take good care of her until her death.

The warm glow of love

Everybody calls her 'Shaheeda's ma,' nobody remembers her actual name, Noorjahan, any more. 15 years' back she came to live in Saleh Ahmed's house as a baby sitter and domestic worker, popularly known as 'Aaya'. The Salehs went to Malaysia for a while and she also accompanied them. They lived there for four years and later returned to Bangladesh. All these years they provided her medical help and financial support. She was given money to buy land and built a house in the village. She looked after Saleh Ahmed's mother for a long time. Her son was also given money to buy a small shop in Dhaka. Now she is in her mid 50s, no longer capable of working. She lives in

the village with her son's family and once a while comes to the city to visit her ex-employer and his family, whom she thinks of as her own.

The cycle of life

When Alauddin Chowdhury and his family were allotted a flat in one of the government colonies in Eskaton Road they had Jharna and her mother as their domestic workers. Jharna's family lived in the servant quarters of the same colony. It was 1984. Jharna was then a girl of 10 years. Until 1995 she stayed with the Chowdhury family. The family failed to teach her Bangla, as she was not at all keen to learn reading and writing. But Mrs. Chowdhury gave her some religious lessons. For example she now knows how to pray. At the age of 21 her family got her married in the village. The Chowdhury family gave her financial help. Her brother was also given a job in one of the gas companies of the country. As she had lived in the city for 10 years she is now given special value by her in-laws and lives a respectable life in the village.

The blessings of people

Radha was a poor Brahmin girl. At the age of 10 she was brought to Dhaka to work as a domestic worker. As her father was a poor farmer in Myrmensingh and had two more daughters and two sons, it was hard for him to feed so many people and so he decided that it would be far better for Radha to work and live in the city. She was the oldest of all his children. This would remove some burden from his shoulder.

Debobroto Chatterjee and his family were happy to have Radha work for them. They had three sons. At that time their eldest son was studying in the college, the second was in class eight and the youngest was only 3 years old. The whole family was very kind towards Radha. At first she used to miss her village a lot and cried all the time. But with time she adjusted in the new surroundings. Her sincerity and loyalty towards the employer's family charmed the Chatterjees. Her sweet nature touched their hearts. She lived with them for 10 years. In these long 10 years she occasionally went home, but she always returned to her working place.

She and her employer's family became so attached that when her father came to take her home for the last time because he had settled her marriage in the village it broke her heart to leave the Chatterjees.

The Chatterjees too did not want to let her go as they considered her as their family member and not as servant any more. So Mrs. Chatterjee decided her nephew would marry Radha. Now, she lives in Dhanmondi with her husband and two children and maintains good relation with her in-laws in Dhaka and her parents who live in the village.

Victory of humanity

Jalil: Jalil has come along way. The transition from a servant to a somebody who has authority in the household has not been easy. The fact that it has happened says a lot. When Jalil came from the village of Gaibandha he was 12 years old. His worries about starting the life of domestic worker slowly went away when he observed that the Roy household is very kind towards him. He remembered the caution of his friends when he started working in a Hindu household. His friends said that Hindus are very sensitive about their customs.

But when he started working in the Roy family he observed everyone start treating Dipankar Roy to his youngest daughter Nirupoma treated him very fairly. They paid him well, gave him food, clothing and allowed him to go home whenever necessary. They even enrolled him in a school so that he can study in their afternoons. But the most surprising moment in his life arrived when he was invited to dine with the Roys in the same table.

Dipankar Roy: Dipankar Roy is a Journalist. His profession takes him to different parts of Bangladesh which enables him to see the sufferings of poor people very closely. At the end of the day the thing that pains him is the fact that after living together for centuries, there is still so much misunderstanding between Hindus and Muslims. So when he decided to bring Jalil to Dhaka to work in his house, all his relatives were horrified. Roy has never believed in giving lip service to the notion of secular society.

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The Other Side of the Story

by Novera Zaman and Lazina Sharmin

Apart from the sufferings of the domestic workers in general, Sultana (19) focused on a very sensitive issue. She pointed out that in most of the houses, the female domestic workers are not well accommodated. They do not get a proper place to sleep or a hygienic toilet to use. Sometimes they even have to share such private spaces with male domestic workers who are often indecent and are maltreated by them.

TO inquire about the actual life and living of the domestic workers we conducted interviews of 25 domestic workers, both male and female, in the Dhaka City. Some of them work in rich families while the others in middle class families. The workers talked of their grievances and suggested some solutions.

Work without reward

Most of the respondents ventilated their frustration against mistreatment and misbehaviour they receive from their masters. Besides mistreatment, the members of their master's family also dishonor them. They are often accused of different sorts of crimes about which they know nothing. Mamtaz, a middle aged female domestic worker told us that though she has been working at her master's house with all the dedication and honesty, the members of the house could never place their trust on her. Rather she was frequently

charged of pilfering. 7/8 domestic workers informed us that they are physically tortured, no matter how old they are. Especially the younger ones seemed to be the principal victims of such tortures. Even sometimes they do not get any meal as a kind of punishment for minor crimes like breaking a glass or paying less attention to work.

Work without recreation

12/13 domestic workers informed about this problem. Aziz, a 12-year-old boy informed us that he has not seen his parents for two years, as his employers refused to give him any leave. He does not know what is weekly holiday and cannot think of having 10 or 15 days of vacation even on special occasions like Eid. Moreover, he added that none of his relatives are allowed to visit him. The story is even more painful for Selina. Once her master locked her in a bathroom the whole night as she

went to the neighborhood to watch a 'Cinema' on TV without taking permission from her employers.

Underpayment

18/19 workers complained that they do not receive enough wages and as a result they cannot support their families. Added to this, some even do not receive the meager amount regularly, not even in times of emergency. Rahima, a 20-year-old domestic worker, narrated a mishap in her life. She lost her son who was three years old. She was not given wage for two months and therefore could not buy medicine for her son who was suffering from pneumonia. Lack of proper medicine caused the death of her little boy. It was also observed that some people prefer to have domestic workers younger in age, so that less wage can be paid. But then, such people do not take proper care of these domestic workers. In many cases they are compelled to take up risky works. 9/10

domestic workers pointed out that they do not get any money as bonus from their employers.

The right of privacy

Apart from the sufferings of the domestic workers in general, Sultana (19) focused on a very sensitive issue. She pointed out that in most of the houses, the female domestic workers are not well accommodated. They do not get a proper place to sleep or a hygienic toilet to use. Sometimes they even have to share such private spaces with male domestic workers who are often indecent and are maltreated by them.

Insecurity

Finally comes the question of security. When the domestic workers are physically strong they can take heavy workloads. But when they grow old or become physically unfit or weak they are usually dispensed with. And as they do not get handsome salary, they do not have any kind of savings. This be-

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