

Domestic Workers

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein

Violence Against Maidservants: The Practice of Sexual Coercion

by Nasreen Huq

The employers of domestic workers (servants?) must be conscious of the fact that those who work for them are in real life human beings. We have to respect their right to free time and privacy. We must also become more neighbourly and be willing to stand up and speak out against injustices.

Violence must rank as one of the top five hazards for servants. In the case of maidservants, sexual violence outstrips all other forms of violence that they experience. Since August 1997, I have been carrying out research into violence against maidservants with a grant from Grameen Trust's Program of Research on Poverty Alleviation. So far 130 incidents have been documented from newspapers. These cases were then pursued by first looking at police records and court records if applicable and discussing with the community when traceable. This experience has taught me in real terms what the criminal justice system means for the poor. It is a criminal system of justice. The system guarantees protections based on graft for the relatively powerful over those who are relatively powerless.

People become domestic workers when all else goes wrong in their lives. In the case of Yasmin (Dinajpur) her father had died and the family could not support her living. Ironically, parents give their young children in servitude to a family thinking that they will at least get two square meals a day. What this experience can do to them emotionally is rarely considered. When people

are hungry, emotional well-being becomes secondary. For the research, we did several interviews of women who are working as servants. One of the questions we asked was what they liked least about their work. The responses centred around two issues - the total unacceptance of human error by the family for whom they work. The behaviour ranges from finding faults with everything. The other was the use of abusive language that does not spare the parents of the worker. When they were asked, what they liked most, all of them were silent. It is not as if there are not momentary pleasures but as work it is not something they like. They are doing the chores for someone else who can afford to hire them. But it is the worker, not the work, who is stripped of dignity. Those who have done research with garment workers have reported that while domestic servants eat better they have no control over their time. All of them prefer the hardships of the garment work compared to the security of two square meals as a servant.

Here I will discuss the issue of sexual coercion that young maidservants face when they work in a house. The discussion is based on the analysis of

twenty cases out of 130, where the pregnancy of the maidservant had been established. These girls and women (aged between 14 to 35 years) were largely coerced into a sexual alliance with the head of the household or his son(s) or a male guest or relative. In all but two cases, the sexual alliance occurred after the promise of marriage. According to the Bangladesh Penal Code this is sex based on deception and is therefore considered "rape". Only in two instances out of 20, were the girls first physically forced to sexual intercourse and then promised marriage. The promise of marriage assures the rapist that he will be able to commit the crime without

much physical exertion. Once the girl or woman discovered the pregnancy, she put pressure for marriage. Only in one case, Sajeda (16) did the girl's guardian demand compensation. She had been physically forced first and then promised marriage. She was raped by the two sons (Samad and Kalam) of the master. Her father went to the village shalish. She received no compensation. Instead she was forced to marry a much-married man by the shalish.

In fifteen cases, the pressures for marriage were rejected. The girls were either sent away or they were taken for an abortion. In four cases the perpetrators agreed to mar-

riage but this turned out to be a sham. They soon found themselves in situations similar to those whose marriage promises were rejected.

Out of the 20 pregnancies, six had abortions. None could be considered safe abortion. They were not taken to a health facility. Rather these were secret abortions. In one instance the girl was taken to a hospital for appearances and then went for a secret abortion provided by the Ayah. Although safe abortion is one of the safest medical procedures today, it is worth pointing out here that out of the six forced into an abortion four died. It is ironic that the criminal justice system came forward on the grounds that forced

abortion is criminal and filed charges against the provider but did not file charges of rape.

Once women were driven away, they found little support in society. They had been sexually violated and once pregnant society treated them like criminals. It is the shalish that women finally turned to for the most part. Six women did go to the police and four went to the court and two went to a human rights group. Unfortunately, the women found that in all of these establishments, people were more sympathetic to the perpetrator than to the victim. In cases where the women had the baby the shalish awarded a lump sum for the care of the baby. In a few instances the

baby was given up for adoption usually to a relative of the perpetrator, with little thought for the feelings of the mother.

In a couple of instances, it was ironic to see that the girl was very young compared to the perpetrator and that his wife had been an accomplice in the crime. It has been a shocking revelation. Unfortunately the perpetrator family has become untraceable, which is usually the case when such an incident is exposed, usually they are rentees and move to another house or flat.

What does one do? Firstly, it has to be publicised that sexual coercion is a crime just as rape. So if a girl obliges because you have promised marriage, it is still rape by law. Secondly, it has to be made clear, that when the head of the household or his son or guest makes a move towards the maidservant - it is sexual harassment and can become rape if the move goes fur-

ther. She is in a position of lesser power and does not have the position to refuse the demands for sexual favour. In our writing we have to learn to use the word "rape" in situations like this rather than "illicit sex" or "illicit relations." Thirdly we have to create awareness among the maidservants to say that they do not have to accept this as their lot. They must have addresses where they can go to make complaints (not the police). Fourthly, the employers of domestic workers (servants?) must be conscious of the fact that those who work for them are in real life human beings. We have to respect their right to free time and privacy. We must also become more neighbourly and be willing to stand up and speak out against injustices.

[The author is Program Director, Helen Keller and an active member of Naripokkho.]

Domestic Workers: Time to Change Our Attitude

by Ishrat Zakia Sultana

Usually 10/12 years to 40/45 years old men or women become domestic workers in residential areas. It is also observed that the domestic workers are mainly female. Many of these young aged workers are paid nothing at all. The older workers take a minimum salary. In our country, it is seen that 7 or 8 years old child starts working by accompanying his/her mother to the workplace. Others are brought to a particular residence by the mother, sister or some other relatives.

THE afternoons are happy times for Polin while dull moments for Zarina. Because, Polin can go outside to play with her friends, but Zarina has to do the household works at that time. A few months ago, when she came in this house, she did not understand the difference between Polin and herself. Now, she can easily realise that except age, there is no similarity between them. Zarina also understands that Polin lives in this family while she lives with this family. That is why, Polin has the right to express her desires as a family member while Zarina does not have that right.

Rahima, the forty years old widow has been living for three years in Shantinagar as a domestic worker. Today, the housewife of this house did not

give her lunch and dinner as Rahima broke a glass. She became astonished in this inhuman behaviour of the housewife. In spite of this incident, she will have to stay here as she has no other shelter to go or no alternative way to earn her livelihood. After finishing all the tasks at night, she tries to give her consolation that it is a safe shelter. And now days, a safe shelter is very much needed than any other thing for a widow like her. Rahima also reminds herself that a domestic

worker should not hope for anything better than this.

It is a common scene that the relationship between the householders and the domestic workers are not so close or cordial. This master-servant type relationship does not bring satisfaction to both of them.

The householders often forget that the domestic workers are also human beings like them. They also have desires and dreams.

Who are these domestic workers?

Children, teenagers, young or old - all those who are needy and poor, take up this service. Usually 10/12 years to 40/45 years old men or women become domestic workers in residential areas. It is also observed that the domestic workers are mainly female. Many of these young aged workers are paid nothing at all. The older workers take a minimum salary. In our country, it is seen that 7 or 8

years old child starts working by accompanying his/her mother to the workplace. Others are brought to a particular residence by the mother, sister or some other relatives.

The domestic workers are also divided into two categories, i.e. full time or part time. In most cases, women get priority in both parts of work. Besides cooking, washing, laundry, cleaning and also taking care of the crawling baby of that house, the domestic worker looks after all kinds of household tasks. But these domestic workers do not have the right to speak about their desires or wishes. They, in fact, carry out their responsibilities while being occupationally "powerless".

Victim of discrimination

If we take the first case highlighted at the very beginning, it provides us with a vivid picture of discrimination towards domestic workers. While Polin goes to school in the morning, Zarina either helps Polin to get ready or goes on to make breakfast for the family members. But all children have the right to live equally. Like Zarina, there are many other domestic workers, who pass their juvenile or young age in the midst of negligence or helpless atmosphere. They only receive food, clothing or a place to sleep. In many cases, they have to sleep on the floor without any bedding. They have to rise very early in the morning and without any rest they have to do all kinds of work till night. After finishing all the tasks, when more or less all the family members have gone to sleep, the domestic worker goes to sleep with the hope of nothing but another dull morning.

In the life of a domestic worker, verbal abuse in the form of scolding and sharp criticism is a common scene. Physical punishment also may be quite common in the form of slaps, hair pulling and other abuse. Most of the teenage workers are locked up in the house when all the family members go outside for a few hours. But they never think that if there is fire it will be impossible for the domestic worker to escape and save his/her life.

According to ILO, the working time should be limited to eight hours. Do the employers ever think how much time does a domestic worker work? I also know of some houses where domestic workers are given

food of lower standard both in terms of quality and quantity.

The disparity is more acute in case of female domestic workers. Often they are abused sexually by the master of the house. Sometimes these abused female domestic workers commit suicide when they cannot face the social pressures.

Let us change our attitude

It must be admitted that there are also some exceptional cases. There are some householders who are really sympathetic to the domestic workers and treat them like family members. But such cases are not large in number and that is the problem. Most of the household heads forget that the workers have the right to say "yes" and "no". They have the right to education, recreation, etc. Domestic workers should therefore be given some scope to build up their personality. What could be the measures then?

Recently, different government and non-government organisations are taking different kinds of initiatives to improve the conditions of the domestic workers. To make this group aware about their rights and duties, to provide them the light of education, weekly or monthly meetings can be organized through various organisations. Besides, both the workers and the householders can be made aware by door to door campaign. No measure will be implemented if the householders are not conscious about their workers. As the householders are the temporary guardians so they must think about the welfare of the domestic workers. It is the responsibility of the householders to provide them education, recreation facilities, medical support, etc.

Importance should also be given to the opinions of the domestic workers. The matter of giving domestic workers physical punishment must be made a punishable offense. If the domestic worker does not follow the employer's orders then he/she may be asked to discontinue the work. Under no circumstances the domestic worker may be beaten up or punished cruelly. Domestic workers also have the right to security and protection from harm, opportunity to develop their condition and to participate in decision-making programmes regarding their interests. Change will unfold once the society starts treating the domestic workers respectfully and professionally. Let us all participate in this endeavour by changing our attitude towards the domestic workers.

The Author is Departmental Editor, Shikha Bichitra.

Bleeding Hearts and Vanishing Healers

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He believes in deeds instead of words. He has always treated Jalil as his own son. It has been eight years and he is proud to see Jalil is educated, knows driving and is at present studying B.A. Roy knows that he will always be there for Jalil in whatever he decides to do.

Nirupoma Roy: When Jalil came to work in the Roy household, Nirupoma was only 6 years old. She has never seen either of her parents treating him badly let alone hitting him. This has made her see Jalil as a big brother. She and her 4 years old sister Malobika are very attached to Jalil, who looks after them as his sisters.

All these real life incidents seem like tales from a distant land. The question that comes to the mind is why today we do not hear these kind of real life stories occurring in our homes anymore. Although life today has become fast paced, people have become self centred and joint families have become nuclear families, the domestic workers are still an integral part of our household. The employers today are too selfish to spend their "precious" time and money for their need. It is also true that amount of wealth in present urban areas has increased. 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.

To protect our society from this moral degradation what can we do?

Ways to improve the situation

1. The media could play an important role. The newspaper dailies, weekly and quarterly magazines could publish short stories and features showing that by helping the domestic workers we are actually helping ourselves. TV serials and dramas could show the lives of domestic workers how they spend their lives working to make wealthy people's lives more comfortable.

2. The social workers could give lectures to the school children as to how to treat their domestic workers and make the former conscious about the misfortunes of the latter.

3. Stories of domestic workers could be included in the textbook of primary education.

4. The urban families should go to their village homes more often because by doing so they would realise that how poverty compels people to work in the houses of other people.

5. The housewives of the neighbourhood could teach Bangla to the Children of the domestic workers by rotation. This would make the latter feel less threatened by the employers and they would feel indebted towards them.

Through these positive steps we can make our society a better place to live in.

The author is Research Intern, Centre for Alternatives.

The Other Side of the Story

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comes an acute problem for those who are aged, as they are often unable to manage new jobs. They do not get any reward after investing so much energy and time, even when they are in acute need at the last stage of their life.

Solutions

Four could easily be identified and all of them somewhat manageable:

1. **Consciousness Raising**
After having worked in cities for many years the domestic workers now feel that there should be some agency/agencies that would make the employees conscious of their rights. They opined that posters and television advertisement should be put up in this context.

2. **Association**
As it is the occupation of a large number of people, most of the respondents felt that there ought to be an association for their welfare. Such an association would ensure their basic rights like, wages, medical support, residential facilities, fund for emergency monetary assistance, etc. Such an association would also ensure the employee that the employer will take all the responsibilities in case of accidents or mishaps during their work period.

3. Pension

Some of the respondents also demanded that they have the right to get pension after retirement, especially for those who are old or not physically capable to work. The initiative in this regard can be taken by the government or a system can be developed by which the employers would donate a fixed amount of money for each of the domestic workers in their houses. Such a system may also reduce government burden. Many of the domestic workers suggested that they should have some savings for their emergency and other personal problems. An agency can be developed where the domestic worker or even the employer can deposit a minimum amount from the monthly wage of the domestic worker.

4. Work Contract

Some of the employees suggested that there should be an agreement between the employee and the employer, especially for the children and the teenagers. The agreement must ensure that they will have access to basic education and technical knowledge by the employers, so that their future life will not remain insecure.

The authors are students of the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.



In the confine of domestic responsibility for others - no let out in the freedom outside for self.

Photo: Zahidul I Khan

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The topic of our next issue is: **Refugees in South Asia**. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Center For Alternatives, Room No. 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net