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INFORMAL SECTOR

Early Experiences of Work

This is the first of a 12-part series on the labour market in Bangladesh

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"Mariam, get up!" comes a scream from the other side of the room. Mariam's eyes open and she is forced back to reality. The sweet smell of her mother's roti and vegetable evaporates leaving the odour of old curtains unwashed for years.

The open fields of her village fade away; she is in a cramped room with no windows. Mariam steps out of the confined space and goes into the kitchen. It's five thirty in the morning. Mariam peeps out the window and sees an empty street; hardly a person around. The silence inside and outside is disturbed only by chirping birds. Mariam enters a small washroom and readies herself for a long hectic day of non-stop work.

Mariam is a typical 11-year-old girl. She is an early morning person. She has to be. She is the first person to rise and the last person to sleep. In the household, she is a domestic worker. There are seven people including her. She is the most important person in the house but her work has no

value.

Mariam left Khulna for Dhaka in 2016. Her father had sent her into domestic work to provide for her family back in the village. She was only 10 years old when she arrived in the capital. It's a common age for child domestic workers in Bangladesh. Mariam had to leave school when she was in class five. Her father fell ill and couldn't earn a living.

For her family, Mariam is the bread winner now.

THE LIFE OF A DOMESTIC WORKER

Mariam is a fictional character but her story is real. Her experiences are typical of women, mostly, and men employed informally as domestic workers.

LONG HOURS; LITTLE REST

A domestic worker's routine involves a long day of continuous work. Her day starts from the kitchen and ends in the kitchen. When she wakes up, most working people are still sleeping. A domestic worker typically prepares three meals a day and has to serve them on time. Usually, she has her meals

once everybody else is done with theirs.

Cleaning, dusting, and doing laundry are all typical tasks. She rarely uses modern equipment; everything is done by hand and cleaning usually finds the domestic worker on her hands and knees.

NO POWER TO NEGOTIATE PAY AND CONDITIONS

Large households have several domestic workers, while others only have one. Full-time workers work more than part-time workers. But, the pay of the part-time worker is usually high compared to the full-timer. Some employers don't want to hire a second worker with the extra expense. As a result, the workload has to be borne by one person alone. Domestic workers often have little power to negotiate with their employers. They have to do extra work without additional compensation.

HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING

Household work involves hard physical labour and continuous exposure to heat in

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