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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIAL WELFARE SCHEMES FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Domestic Workers in India face the plight of low wages, insecure employment, exploitation and hostile working conditions. Most of them, being migrant workers, become ineligible to avail benefits of state-specific schemes governed by the labour department. Even otherwise, the social security benefits for domestic workers in India are minimal, both in the public as well as private sector. It becomes necessary to identify the loopholes in existing governance mechanism to direct domestic work towards formalization, similar to the work in construction or transportation sector. Also, standards for minimum wage rate and adequate working conditions must be set for domestic workers to protect them from being at the mercy of the employer.

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Introduction:-

Domestic work includes any kind of work, such as cooking, cleaning, caretaking, etc., performed in or for a household or households. It can be done either part-time or full-time, depending on whether the worker lives in the home of the employer or not (*The Care Economy*, 2011). According to the National Sample Survey (2011-12), the total number of domestic workers in India is around 4.75 million of which 3 million are women. However, this is a case of severe underestimation as certain studies indicate that the number is no less than 20 million (*ILO in India*, 2011).

The plight of domestic labour and the working conditions offered to them is a serious cause of concern, particularly in the Indian context. The result is that domestic workers continue to remain part of the informal sector of the economy with little or no social security, making them vulnerable to unregulated working hours, exploitation and abuse. As per a 2018 survey, 29 per cent of domestic workers surveyed admitted to having faced sexual harassment of which 19 per cent of the women chose to ignore the incident due to the fear of losing work and the ensuing social stigmatization (Srivastava, 2020).

Policy Framework for Domestic Workers in India

In 2011, India became a signatory to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 189, which mandates decent working conditions for domestic workers. The convention was the first of its kind to lay down standards for labour protection across the globe. However, India has not ratified it, thereby evading a formal commitment to implement the measures or report periodically (Goel, 2019). So far, at the central level, no major initiatives have been taken to safeguard the rights of domestic workers. They are not covered under any national law that guarantees decent work conditions. The only laws applicable to them are Unorganized Social Security Act, 2008, Sexual Harassment Law and the Minimum Wages Schedule in certain states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Odisha (Goel, 2019). However, the stipulated minimum wages remain

much below a living wage, lower still than that for construction or factory workers. Apart from this, only three states have been able to set up Welfare Boards for Domestic Workers to access social security benefits. These include Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Registration under these boards makes the domestic workers eligible to benefits such as pension, accident relief, education incentives, marriage assistance, death and funeral allowance, medical assistance, grievance redressal, etc.

The Ministry of Labour & Employment is considering to formulate a National Policy on Domestic Workers which is in the draft stage. The policy shall focus on inclusion of domestic workers in the existing legislations, thereby giving them the right to minimum wages, formation of unions, access to social security and an in-place grievance redressal system (*National Policy on Domestic Workers*, 2019).

Welfare Schemes for Domestic Workers in India

In general, currently, the schemes for domestic workers in most states, operate along the following lines:

1. Immediate assistance to a beneficiary in case of accident.
2. Financial assistance for the education of the children of the beneficiary.
3. Medical expenses for treatment of ailments of a beneficiary or dependent.
4. Maternity benefit to the women beneficiaries.
5. Payment of funeral expenses to the legal heir on the death of the beneficiary.

Every domestic worker who has completed eighteen years of age, but has not attained sixty years of age, and who does any domestic work can be registered as a beneficiary under Domestic/Unorganized Workers Welfare Board Act in states with a well-constituted Domestic Workers' Board. The domestic worker ID, henceforth generated, is required as a proof of being a registered Domestic Worker (under Domestic Workers' Welfare Board) to avail benefits of multiple welfare schemes linked to the card.

Conclusion:-

The Central Government is already implementing Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, to provide social security relating to life and disability cover, health and maternity benefits, old age protection, etc. to unorganized workers, including domestic workers, via schemes such as National Old Age Pension Scheme, National Family Benefit Scheme, Janani Suraksha Yojana, Ayushman Bharat, Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana. But in general, the schemes catering to the needs of domestic workers are minimal, at both central and state level, and more efforts need to be made in the direction of governance and policy making to make domestic work a safe and optimally paid occupation in India.

The risks associated with domestic work are plenty and there have been many cases of exploitation of domestic workers in households as well as informal commercial establishments. Since most of them happen to be women, the cases often go unreported due to lack of awareness, fear of losing the job or lack of formal support from the concerned local-level bodies. Therefore, though formulating appropriate welfare schemes is the first step, but this alone would not be enough. Adequate set-up for implementation at ground level and advertising mechanism to create awareness at the household level, for both employers as well as employees, is required. For this, handholding between public, private and civil society organizations would be essential to make room for a robust governance mechanism to provide social security to domestic workers in India.

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