

# Making of Female Breadwinners

## Migration and Social Networking of Women Domestic in Delhi

*Based on a study of female domestic workers in Delhi, this paper highlights the primary role of women in migration and the survival of family. Women domestics are found assuming vital functions and roles in migration, the settling-down process and in the search for job. Women are seen as central in accessing and mobilising social networks, which not only direct the course of migration, but also the survival of the migrant family in the urban milieu. Women, are thus part of the migration systems and subsystems and take up numerous functions. This calls for a re-examination of the validity of some of the widely accepted male-centric analysis in the literature on migration.*

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Migration of women is largely under-represented in migration studies in south Asian countries and is yet to be understood as part of the mainstream migration research, notwithstanding a few recent efforts towards engendering migration [Schenk-Sanbergen 1989; Sharpe 2001]. In the south Asian context, migration of women has been studied primarily from a male perspective, given the practice of village exogamy. Female migrants are assumed not to have much social or economic impact on their places of origin or destination. The existing theories of migration point to social, cultural and economic factors in explaining migration flows, where the focus has largely been the male migrant. As Thadani and Todaro (1984) point out, "Implicit in the analysis of migration is the assumption that the patterns of female migration are likely to mirror those of male migration. Consequently gender related variations in the causes, consequences and patterns of migration have not been considered significant enough to warrant specific analysis." Due to this male-centric conceptualisation, migration of most of the adult female population remains unexplored as it is seen as more domestic and, hence, private and not related to the sphere of production.

The associational status of women in migration points to the structural imbalances in the analysis of the existing theories of migration. There is a growing awareness on the need to break the analysis of migration along gender lines. This has given rise to some important debates on the engendering of migration studies, which has drawn attention to the fact that female migration has wrongly been treated as secondary and entirely dependent upon the migration of men. Migration cannot be seen as a single discrete event, but as part of a broader strategy of families to cope with economic change. Gendered division of labour and labour markets, culturally patterned family preferences and definitions of appropriate male and female behaviour all influence migration, which necessitates the understanding of sex-differentiated migration patterns.

Female migration cannot be understood without relating to the dynamics of gender relations in the family and labour market. The theoretical approaches and explanations to migration are often found inadequate or insensitive in explaining women's

migration due to the differences in the set of motivational and social factors associated with migration of women. Women are neglected due to their secondary migrant status, which basically emanates from the assumption of a subsidiary income earning position of women. The traditional image of women as tied to home and family is not true for the working masses, who form a majority of the population. Women labour migration is increasingly a means through which asymmetrical, intersecting relations pertaining to gender, caste and class are structured and negotiated. This is particularly important in the context of major economic changes, which have implications for the mobility and structural positions of women. The intensity of female labour migration has generally been accepted to increase over the past few decades especially, with the changes in the economic structure of most countries. It is increasingly being recognised that women are no longer passive movers who followed the household head. The growing magnitude of case-study research and theoretical reflections point to this fact. In the patriarchal system, serious restrictions are imposed on women's mobility and participation in the labour market, which is especially so with unmarried and young girls. Sex-specific cultural constraints combined with practices of employment and wage discrimination all imply differences in the outlook and expectations of women migrants. Due to the gendered labour market, women are also demanded and have the incentives to move in the same way as men. The role of agency and social networks as facilitators in migration has been recognised in the recent literature on migration theory. Though the usefulness of the social network theory is increasingly being realised, its interrelations with gender have hardly been addressed. The gendered labour market is found to have significant influence on the social networking of migrant families, where women do play a significant role in the mobilisation and access of social networks.

The centrality of women in migration is explored in the present essay, based on a case-study of migrant women domestics in Delhi, where female agents are key to the migration and survival of the working class families. The study covered 465 women part-time domestics from three squatter settlements in Delhi, namely, Trilokpuri, Nizamuddin, and Yamuna Pusta. Apart from this, the study also covered 110 residential or full-time women

domestics recruited and placed through organisations/agencies.<sup>1</sup> This forms the comparatively organised or formalised category of domestic services, where wage rates and working conditions are somewhat regularised.

The rest of the essay is organised as follows. Section I gives an overview of domestic work and a profile of domestic workers. Section II examines the migration aspects of women domestics, and Section III examines the centrality of women in the social networking of the family for migration and employment. Section IV analyses the primary breadwinner status of women domestics and the central role of women in survival of the family in the urban setting. Section V concludes the paper.

## I Domestic Workers in Delhi: A Profile

Paid domestic service is a necessity in almost every person's life in Delhi. Domestic services are ever-present but invisible. It is one of the informal sector activities, which is most exploitative with long working hours, low wages and absence of social security provision. In the literature on modern domestic service, trends in occupation have always been explained in terms of the processes of industrialisation and modernisation. Industrialisation and urbanisation are said to encourage the growth of domestic service, with a 'servant-employing' middle class and a surplus of unskilled workers. The growth in domestic service is often attributed to increasing inequality both in the rural and urban areas, the shift from an agrarian-based economy to a manufacture and service-based economy and the rise of an urban middle class.<sup>2</sup> The sudden increase in demand for domestic workers can also be related to the emergence of dual careers as a new family norm. Employing domestics is no longer a symbol of wealth and aristocracy and it is now largely a middle class and upper middle class phenomenon.

The nature of the service has undergone major changes over the period. In ancient societies, housework was much beyond the narrow definition of domestic work. It included rearing cattle, poultry, cultivation of vegetables, food processing, stitching and other engagements in household productive activities. Division of labour was based mostly on task assignment and the areas of operation of women were defined. The social value of labour of the domestic servants has taken a different orientation, with the size of the families and of the households becoming small; a large number of women seeking jobs outside; and the comparatively limited capacity of large sections of the middle class population to maintain domestics on their establishments. By employing someone to take care of the household tasks, the double burden on middle class women<sup>3</sup> is reduced without disturbing the traditional patriarchal system. This has also been related to the reduction in the provision of public social services, which has forced families to depend on hiring private agencies to cope with child care and other domestic duties. The middle class draws upon a large group of cheap labour, the supply of which is maintained through a regular flow of migrant workers. The low and menial status, combined with the gendering of the work has reserved domestic work for women, who are absorbed in large numbers, in this occupation.

The term domestic service is difficult to define, as the duties of domestic servants are not well demarcated. In common parlance, a domestic worker is defined as a person who is engaged on a part-time or full-time basis in domestic service for remuneration

payable in cash or kind, for a fixed period. The terms of employment may be expressed or implied. In spite of the importance of domestic work in terms of employment and socio-economic significance, the data on this growing informal sector activity is extremely limited. No comprehensive data on the magnitude of domestic work, gender composition of workers, employment, wages, conditions of work, social and domestic lives of the workers, exist in the Indian context. The male dominance in the occupation during the pre-independence period has often been linked to the large male rural-urban migration. Over time, domestic service has become more feminised. Although no comprehensive data on gender composition exists at the macro level, data from several surveys support this trend and it is a well-accepted fact that females dominate the sector. According to the Shramsakti Report (1988), out of 23 lakh domestic workers, 16.8 lakh are female. This clearly shows the gendering of this growing informal sector activity. As per the 32nd round of NSSO (1977-78) there were 16.8 lakh female domestic workers as against 6.2 lakh male domestic workers. The Labour Bureau survey of full-time domestic workers in Delhi (1981)<sup>4</sup> found that no sex had monopoly over this occupation. Also, the age category of workers was found to be predominantly 30-50 (24 out of 64) and the age category 18-30 and 30-50 occupied (18 out of 64). A study commissioned by the Catholic Bishops' Conference in 1980 estimated that 78 per cent of domestics in 12 cities were female and in Mumbai, 90 per cent was female. The study also pointed out the gender stratification in paid domestic work, with men occupying better-paying jobs such as cooking and driving, and the low-paying jobs of cleaning and caring left to females.

The demographic status of domestic workers has also undergone changes. During the 1970s and 1980s most female domestics were found to be the head of households, in particular widowed, deserted and older women [Banerjee 1982]. As family migration has increased, younger women have come to occupy a larger proportion of domestic workers [Banerjee 1992]. A survey conducted by the Indian Social Institute [ISI 1993] indicated that only 20 per cent of the total men migrated to Delhi are engaged in domestic work. The survey also revealed that employers show a preference for young women, as they are more reliable, obedient and efficient in domestic work, especially in taking care of babies and the elderly.

Domestic service seems to have become a part of the division of labour, with women from certain areas or regions with specific socio-economic background crowding into this activity. This has been thought of as the result of transformations in class relations and developments of new styles and patterns of living and the high mobility of people. As a result of the changed lifestyles of the middle class, demand for domestic workers has also increased. Employment in domestic service appears to be the only promising option for many disadvantaged groups or sections with limited opportunities. A combination of cultural and economic factors is often put forward in explaining the feminisation of domestic service and the corresponding devaluation of domestic work.

Domestic work includes all household tasks such as cleaning of clothes, utensils and the house, cooking, child care, nursing the elderly, and purchase of provisions and vegetables. With the increase in the number of workers and the demand for domestics the occupation has become segregated into a number of differentiated tasks. The main categories of domestic work include, sweeping and mopping houses, cleaning utensils, washing clothes,

cooking, taking care of babies and elderly, marketing and other outside works. There is no uniformity in the level of wages, hours of work and the number of working days.

Broadly, two systems of domestic work exist in Delhi. One is the system of part time or live-out domestics, which has become increasingly prominent in recent years. These workers perform specific tasks in various households and return to their own houses. The second category is that of live-in domestics, where accommodation is provided by the employer. The ethnic and demographic characteristics, social networking and recruitment/

placement patterns vary considerably between these forms of domestic servitude, though there are commonalities.

The proportion of migrants was found to be substantial among domestic workers. In the case of live-out domestics, a negligible proportion (0.2 per cent) is local labour; while all the live-in workers are migrants (Table 1).

The table shows that the prominent feeding states of live-out domestics are West Bengal (36.56 per cent), Uttar Pradesh<sup>5</sup> (30.32 per cent), Tamil Nadu (15.70 per cent) and Bihar (11.83 per cent). The prominent feeding states of live-out domestics are West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Bihar. In Uttar Pradesh, the major feeding pockets are the nearby districts of Aligarh, Moradabad, Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Baghpat and Almorah. Murshidabad, Malda, south Dinajpur, and Shahgunj and are the major pockets from where migrants from West Bengal come in. Virudhunagar, Thiruvannamalai, Thirunelveli, Udumalpet, Chingleput are the feeding areas of Tamil Nadu, and Darbhanga, Madhubani, and Muzaffarpur, Rajmahal, and Samastipur are the corresponding districts from Bihar.

Jharkhand has the maximum number of live-in domestics (51.82 per cent). The other prominent feeding states are Orissa (12.73 per cent), Goa (10 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (3.64 per cent), Assam (3.64 per cent) and West Bengal (1.82 per cent). The feeding districts of these domestics are Gumla (79), Ranchi (16) and Palamau (5) in Jharkhand, Jaspur in Madhya Pradesh, Sundergarh in Chhattisgarh, Raigarh in Bihar.

The social and demographic characteristics of these workers show some discernible patterns along the line of age, marital status, religion and caste. Live-out domestics are mainly in the age group of 20-40 (74.2 per cent). Unlike the live-out workers, live-in domestics are mainly unmarried girls (89.2 per cent) belonging mainly to the age category of 15-20 (55 per cent) and 21-25 (30 per cent).<sup>6</sup> The concentration of workers in terms of religion and caste is substantial. In the case of live-outs, 98 per cent of the domestics belonged to the Hindu community while the rest were Muslims. Christians dominate live-in workers, accounting for 88 per cent of the respondents.

Castewise distribution of live-out workers shows that a majority of them belong to the scheduled castes (80.65 per cent), 14.41 per cent are from OBCs and the rest, from scheduled tribes and forward castes. The major castes from Uttar Pradesh are the balmikis and harijan. The castes from Bihar are kawat, malo, telli, nai and harijan. Malo is the prominent caste in the case of workers from West Bengal. Workers from Tamil Nadu are basically from the padayachi and gounder communities. All these castes, except the gounders in Tamil Nadu, are scheduled castes. The castewise distribution of live in domestics shows that they are mainly tribals or aons 55.3 per cent, munda 25.3 per cent and the kharias 12.1 per cent and others 7.3 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

The educational status of live-out domestics shows that a majority of them are illiterate (55.7 per cent), while live-in workers are comparatively better placed with around 47 per cent having education up to middle school.<sup>8</sup> Two conflicting views exist in explaining the participation of women in the labour market. Firstly, the responsibility of child care and domestic work is often argued to decrease the participation of women. Contrary to this, there is also a perception that the participation of women in the labour market increases with growing economic pressure in the family [Sen and Sen 1985]. The first proposition seems to be of little relevance in the case of domestic workers. The average size of the family of live-out workers was found to be

**Table 1: Statewise Distribution of Domestic Workers**

State	Live-out Domestics	Live-in Domestics
Assam	3 (0.65)	4 (3.64)
Bihar	55 (11.83)	18 (16.36)
Delhi	1 (0.22)	—
Goa	1 (0.22)	11 (10.00)
Haryana	1 (0.22)	1 (0.91)
Jharkhand	1 (0.22)	57 (51.82)
Madhya Pradesh	12 (2.58)	4 (3.64)
Orissa	—	14 (12.73)
Punjab	2 (0.43)	—
Rajasthan	3 (0.65)	—
Tamil Nadu	73 (15.70)	—
Uttaranchal	2 (0.43)	—
Uttar Pradesh	141 (30.32)	—
West Bengal	170 (36.56)	2 (1.82)
Total	465 (100.0)	110 (100.0)

*Note:* Figures in parentheses are proportion to total.

*Source:* Survey data, 2002.

**Table 2: Profile of Domestic Workers**

	Live-out Domestics	Live-in Domestics
Age		
5-14	1 (0.22)	3 (2.73)
15-20	62 (13.33)	60 (54.55)
21-25	69 (14.84)	33 (30.00)
26-30	142 (30.54)	7 (6.36)
31-40	134 (28.82)	6 (5.45)
41-50	43 (9.25)	—
Above 50	14 (3.01)	1 (0.91)
Total	465 (100.00)	110 (100.00)
Religion		
Hindu	457 (98.28)	9 (8.18)
Christian	8 (1.7)	98 (89.09)
Muslim	—	1 (0.91)
Others	—	2 (1.82)
Total	465 (100.00)	110 (100.00)
Caste category		
Forward caste	10 (2.15)	—
Backward caste	67 (14.41)	2 (1.82)
ST	13 (2.8)	102 (92.73)
SC	375 (80.65)	6 (5.45)
Total	465 (100.00)	110 (100.00)
Marital status		
Single	60 (12.90)	98 (89.09)
Married	385 (82.8)	12 (10.91)
Divorced/	6 (1.21)	—
Abandoned widow	14 (3.01)	—
Total	465 (100.00)	110 (100.00)
Educational status		
Illiterate	259 (55.70)	25 (22.73)
Primary incomplete	147 (31.61)	18 (17.27)
Primary complete	49 (10.54)	13 (12.73)
Middle school	10 (2.15)	38 (34.55)
Secondary	—	14 (12.73)
Total	465 (100.00)	110 (100.00)

*Note:* Figures in parentheses are proportions to total.

*Source:* Survey data, 2002.

much higher (seven members) than that of normal urban households. The workers themselves were found responsible for child care and other domestic duties. This seems to be because of the fact that as demand is for young workers, joining the labour market after stabilising child care and family responsibilities does not arise in the case of domestics. The average size of the family among the live-in domestics was also found to be high (six members).

## II Migration and Women Domestics

Migration and domestic work in cities is closely related, owing to the ease with which migrants can enter this occupation, and its gendered nature. Migration for domestic work, with deep historical roots, has been reinvented in the past two decades. Changes in the gender balance of the migratory stream, the migration of families as kinship units, have influenced the nature of domestic work. Domestic service has been the commonest and also the normally the first occupation of women in almost all countries in the world, though the period varies across countries. Entry restrictions are almost zero in the case of domestic service, as the occupation does not demand any capital or skill. As has been discussed in the previous section, domestic service is influenced by the social and cultural notions on the appropriateness of the type of workers for a particular work, pushing socially backward migrants into domestic service.

The nature of the migrant unit is influenced by the causes of migration and the social and cultural norms of the rural area from where the migrants are originally from. The primary unit of migration among live-out workers is often found to be the family or the household. Of these, only 4.2 per cent of the workers migrated as individuals while the rest migrated along with the family. About 90 per cent of the women interviewed had come to Delhi directly from their place of origin. Intermediate moves to regional cities such as Kolkata, Patna, Chennai, Jamshedpur were made by a few women before coming to Delhi. The decision to migrate was taken mostly in the context of the household, as, for many, it is part of the family survival strategies. Poverty, lack of food and scarce job opportunities at the place of origin were found (about 98 per cent) to be the most important reasons for migration to Delhi (Table 3).

In the absence of employment opportunities for male members, women are forced to migrate to support the family and children. Domestic work is also seen as an occupation, which enables the urban working class family to survive – an important component of the aggregation of individual means of survival in the urban informal sector. Women migrating for employment are aware of the availability of domestic jobs in the city, higher wages (compared with rural areas) and the conditions of work. Single women (abandoned, separated or divorced) with children to support also migrate and take up domestic work; 4 per cent of the workers covered belonged to this category. The oft-discussed reasons for female migration as a quest for personal freedom, modernisation and the rejection of gender roles are found inapplicable in the case of these workers.

Women are found to have a substantial role in the decision to migrate, in the case of both live-in and live-out domestics. In 48.4 per cent cases of live-out workers, the decision to migrate was taken by the spouse (Table 4). However, women were found to be central in the migration of these families as the calculations

of the survival of the family in the city were largely based upon the employment opportunities for women. Domestic work for women is found to be the immediate resort for family survival, after migration. Availability of employment for women was found not only central to the family's decision to migrate but also gave women considerable role in the decisions.

Women are found to be the primary decision-makers as far as migration of the family is concerned, among 33.2 per cent of the live-out domestics. In some cases, it is even seen that male migration is subsequent and subsidiary to that of the woman. The enhanced role of women in migration decisions is against the commonly accepted pattern of the male as the sole agent and decision-maker in the migration of the family. Conformingly, almost all the women domestics (94 per cent) had some prior knowledge of the possibility of employment as domestics before migrating to Delhi. Domestic work is also no longer seen as a bridging occupation permitting entry to a place with greater potential or social and economic mobility.

In the case of live-in domestics, the primary unit of migration is the individual. Decisions to migrate are largely taken by the domestics themselves (64 per cent), who had some prior information regarding the possibility and prospects of occupation. Single migration or peer group migration is found to be the prominent pattern of migration among workers placed through organisations. Around 19 per cent were found to have made intermediate moves to regional towns. The reasons for migration were also found different. In most of the cases, entry into domestic service was partly due to their own will and partly due to their circumstances. Though poverty and unemployment (89.1 per cent) were the most important reasons for migration it was not found as strong as in the case of live-out workers.

Apart from unemployment and poverty, for the live-in workers migration also meant a rite of passage that provided status, independence, training and savings for marriage on their return. Further, the search for personal freedom and the accompanying rejection of traditional gender roles were also found important. Living in cities is also seen as a step forward in social mobility and status. A few girls also admitted that the visits of domestics from Delhi tempt the aspirants. Some of them were tempted by

**Table 3: Reasons for Migration of Domestic Workers**

Reason for Migration	Live-out Domestics	Live-in Domestics
Poverty	428 (92.04)	2 (1.82)
Unemployment	30 (6.45)	96 (87.27)
Natural calamity	1 (0.91)	–
Family disturbances	13 (2.80)	11 (10.00)
Others	4 (0.86)	–
Total	465 (100.0)	110 (100.0)

*Note:* Figures in parentheses are proportion to total.

*Source:* Survey Data, 2002.

**Table 4: Migration Decisions among Domestic Workers**

Agent of Migration	Live-out Domestics	Live-in Domestics
Own	164 (33.2)	71 (64.0)
Spouse	219 (48.4)	1 (0.9)
Parents	69 (15.8)	36 (33.3)
Others	13 (2.6)	2 (1.8)
Total	465 (100.0)	110 (100.0)

*Note:* Figures in parentheses are proportion to total.

*Source:* Survey data, 2002.

these predecessors in migration, who visit the village well-dressed, well-fed, dignified and could also support the family. This is reflected in the increased flow of new migrants who have followed the early migrants.

### III

## Social Networking and Women Domestic

Migration for domestic service in the study areas is found to be largely a female-driven phenomenon, based on personal and social relationships. Social networking, which is largely female centred, is found to influence the migration decision, the process of migration and also the day-to-day life of the migrants. Movement of female domestics to cities represents a classic case of migration and employment facilitated through social networks. The migration process is strategised by the active negotiation of social networks to establish the route of migration and the entry of migrants into urban employment, which are mostly women-centric. The network also defines the social arena and helps in creating identity and social dignity in the lives of domestic workers. These women centric agency and social networks are becoming prominent factors that facilitate migration and employment of women domestic workers. Agencies and networks assist migration by providing income support, information about the destination, first residence and access to jobs. Social networks and agencies based on regional, religious, caste and kinship identities are found to be central in the transplantation of these workers' lives from rural to urban settings.

Social networks play a vital role in the process of migration of live-out women domestics. Support is extended to the migrant family either by kith and kin or even by people from the same village, which results in the chain migration of workers from rural to urban areas. Relatives and friends who migrated to Delhi are the major source of networking among live-out domestics. The flow of families from Bengal, Orissa and UP is mostly after the Diwali season, when some of the members of the households already settled in Delhi go back to the village. In about 82 per cent of the cases, relatives and friends living in Delhi provided the basic information and employment opportunities available.

Women domestics, during their visits to native places, spread the information on the possibility of migration and employment opportunities among relatives and friends. At times, job aspirants accompany these workers on their return. Before coming to Delhi, a small proportion (15.8 per cent) visited their kin/relatives/friends living in Delhi to find out about the possibility of migration and employment. Family ties are found to be the most important source of networking among domestic workers, especially when the migration was single. This reinforces the fact that assistance provided by extended family ties is especially important for women, as there is reluctance among them to form close friendships with those who are not related by ties of kinship or marriage. Of the 465 live-outs, 342 were found to have utilised social networks to enter the city and occupation. The support given by the network broadly includes information about the area, boarding and lodging on arrival in the city, help in finding jobs and loans to cover the initial expenditure.

On migration, accommodation for the fresh migrant is arranged mostly with the relative/friend who has facilitated the migration. Around 90 per cent of the workers were found to have stayed with the facilitator on arrival. Most of the workers, though they had information about employment, did not have job waiting on

arrival. About 94 per cent of the workers found their job after migration. The waiting period ranged from a few days to more than a year. In most cases (58.9 per cent), the waiting period was found to be less than three months.

Apart from their stay, the expenses on food and clothing during the waiting period are also at times borne by the host, though in most cases (74.8 per cent) the migrant carried money with them on arrival. Thus, it could be inferred that the conventional definition of the household as a unit that lives together, eats together and shares resources together does not fit in the case of these households. In many cases, the support provided to the migrant families extended beyond the provision of first residence. At times, the stay is extended to more than a year. The assistance from the host family continues until the migrated family or individual adjusts to the new environment.

Women migrants also show a tendency to live closer, and to maintain a high level of interaction with each other. People from the same area, village, and caste prefer to stay in the same area in close proximity. Since the host family is the prime agent in arranging the accommodation, in most of these cases the stay of the migrant is arranged in close proximity to that of the host. This leads to the concentration of kith and kin in certain pockets.

Personal and social networking is not only found important in the migration process, but also in the employment of migrants as domestics. Personal networking is the most important way of access to employment opportunities. Entry to work for a fresh migrant is difficult as the selection of a domestic servant is based on informal considerations. Honesty, discipline and submissiveness are the three considerations that often come into play in the selection of workers. These attributes are based on recommendations. New entrants to domestic service mostly require the introduction of either an experienced worker whose personal traits are verified as per social norms, or a person known to the family who is considered reliable. The identity as an efficient and disciplined domestic help is often created through social networking.

Almost all the domestic workers surveyed have received help from others in getting their job. The role of relatives and friends was found central in the employment of domestics, accounting for 88.7 per cent of the surveyed workers. Within this, female networks accounted for about 94 per cent of the cases. As women largely dominate domestic service, they have more contact with middle-class residential areas and are found further sharpening the sexual division of labour in domestic service.

Apart from job seeking, relatives and friends are found to be the most important source in introducing the new domestic to employers. Mostly, the host, who herself is a domestic help, introduces the migrant women to employers. This introduction is of utmost importance for entry into the occupation due to security concerns of the employers and also because of the language barrier of the new entrant. Personal contacts are the preferred method of locating domestic worker as such introductions serve as references, helping the employer to assess the domestic worker as a person. Further, as the domestics usually stay outside the residential areas of the employers this is the only method through which employers get in touch with new entrants. Often, the host facilitates the entry of fresh migrants to the occupation, by entrusting the fresh worker with the charge of one or two houses where the host works.

Networking is not only important in entering into domestic work, but also in looking out for future jobs. New job opportunities

are often spread through the network. The survey data shows that friends and relatives are again the major source of information on future jobs. Women, due to their influence over the access to entry to work, dominate the networking among domestic workers. The gender-specific demand for domestics has furthered subsequent migration movements, based on social and kinship networking. Once the pattern of migration is established through the network of kin, these workers encourage future migrants, and thus reinforce the pattern of channelising and supporting other migrants from their home community.<sup>9</sup> The concentration of domestics from certain pockets or villages has largely been on account of this chain migration.

Social networking is found to have resulted not only in the gendering of domestic work, but also in creating strong segmentation and identity formation among domestic workers. Through networking the domestics construct and maintain their cultural and social identities, which otherwise are lost in urban living. Community creation allows these workers to gain social identity in their private life beyond their invisible contribution and demeaning social status outside. Further, this brings in peer feelings and scope for mutual support. Relationships are not maintained through the males as in other cases, but through the females of the households. Aunts are found to give assistance to the women extended by female relatives. The relationship in most cases is female-centred, in spite of the overriding patriarchal ideology. Women's ties with their kin are maintained and extended beyond what might normally be expected to occur in the village. The persistence of such networks in urban and industrial areas has been documented in other regions as well.

Kith and kin relationships do provide domestic workers the most critical basis of interaction among individuals. Since leave is limited and travel is expensive, such support is very important for domestic workers living in squatter settlements. Leave is not normally sanctioned and absence is punished by scolding and threat of dismissal from work and employment. Slums/squatter settlements are normally places of regular conflict between the dwellers, police, and urban development authorities. There is no safety for money and assets, and in many cases, threat comes from male members who are unemployed. The network of relatives and friends often acts as the most reliable custodian of valuables. Child care and sharing of household responsibilities are also important functions of these networks. In the absence of any social care and support these women help each other with housework and child care responsibilities. Informal gatherings and joint cultural/ethnic celebrations are also noticed among these women. The system of common monthly leave found among some groups of domestic workers to provide for regular meeting of the workers also points to the collectivity of these domestics.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike live-out workers, apart from personal and informal networking, which is highly women centred, the role of agency networks are found to be important in the process of migration and entry to work for live-in domestics. The informal movement of workers is organised through agency systems and networks. The organisations and agencies act as employment agency to the fresh migrants, find jobs through seeking out families who require domestics, and thus act as the central agency between the employer and domestic workers. Girls from tribal areas mostly migrate to Delhi during January to March. The peak period of migration is between mid-January and February-end. This is associated with the Christmas holidays, when most of the tribal domestics visit

their native place. The recruitment and placement organisations are based on these flows of girls. Workers who are placed through the organisations are encouraged to bring selected new entries to the organisation. Some organisations restrict the number of people to be brought with a view to manage the food, accommodation and training of the new entrants. Entries to these organisations are restricted and hence networks of kinfolk are important. Of the 110 workers surveyed, 80 per cent got the information through old or current domestics employed through the organisation, who were relatives. For recruiting fresh workers, the link or network is through old workers either currently employed or those who had left the organisation. About 34 per cent of the workers were reported to have recommended or brought girls from their locality to their organisation. Information about other agencies and availability of jobs is also disseminated by old workers and current workers. The personal networking among live-in domestics and the working of the agencies, voluntary as well as private is increasingly leading to the construction of regional identities as far as live-in domestics are concerned. The ways in which placement agencies match suitable employees to jobs reinforces stereotypes pertaining to the natural qualities of women of different regions. Regional identities are seen as signifying a group's proclivity to domestic work as well as the quality of care they are able to provide. The survey has found that employers show a preference for young tribal girls, because they seem to be more reliable, obedient and efficient in domestic work. Further, these women also stick to the jobs for longer periods, agree to work for lower wages and can be controlled more easily. Security considerations of the household, with increased incidences of male domestics involvement in crimes, is also found to play a major role in the gendering of live-in domestics.

Yet another important form of migration for domestic work from the tribal pockets is the group migration of tribal girls. Girls organise themselves into groups which have as their leader one person who has either worked in Delhi as a domestic worker or is known to someone working as domestic worker or has some information about the city and its employment opportunities. Tribal girls come to Delhi in large numbers by train during January-March looking for employment. Most of these workers migrate under the influence of old workers who have visited their native place during Christmas and other tribal festivals. Added to the money income, the charm of the city also attracts many workers, who are the main source of workers for private agencies. About 12,000 girls migrate to Delhi every year as groups.<sup>11</sup>

#### **IV Female Breadwinners**

The centrality of women characterises household survival even after migration. The contribution of domestics to the total family income is found to be substantial. In case of live out domestics, the entire burden of familial expenditure is borne by women in a large number of households (42 per cent). The day-to-day expenditure on food, clothing, education and health care is met largely by them. Even the dwellings are mostly leased in by women domestics themselves.

The occupational pattern of the husbands of female domestics further substantiates the prime breadwinner status of women in these households. The husbands of a large number of domestics are found to be unemployed (42.3 per cent). The share of family income from female workers is substantial even in cases where

husbands were employed, as they are mostly engaged in the informal sector with high wage/income insecurity. The occupational distribution of the male household heads of live-out domestics shows that a majority of them are engaged as casual wage labour (66 per cent) or in informal sector activities such as hawkers (17 per cent), rickshaw pullers (19 per cent), factory workers (9 per cent) fish vendors (5 per cent), petty trade (7 per cent), and other activities (9 per cent). As a considerable share of the income of men is spent on their own expenses, alcohol and intoxicants, the share of women's contribution to the actual family income is much higher. The average contribution of women live-out domestics to the total family income is a strikingly high of 72 per cent, which makes them the primary breadwinner. Women migrants also play a decisive role in the community-building process. The organisation and celebration of cultural events and festivals through the community also brings in some sense of solidarity and collectivity among these workers.

Despite women's considerable contribution to family income and survival, social control is found largely to rest with the male. Patriarchal relations are visible in terms of violence against women such as wife-beating, even in cases where husbands are unemployed. Nevertheless, migration is also a terrain where gender relations are renegotiated. The before-and-after experience of women domestics, the shift from old world values, customs, habits and traditions and the demands of the new place redefine and reposition their status within home and in the community. Women have some control over household expenses and allocation on various heads, especially when the contribution to family income is higher compared with the male members. The dynamics of gender relations and its social acceptance could be traced from the leasehold status of the women domestics. The strong preference of house owners to rent out houses to female domestics indicates the social recognition of women as household heads and the changing gender equations within the household.

In the case of live-in domestics also, a considerable proportion (and in many cases even the full amount) of their earnings is sent to support the family in the rural areas. This income, apart from meeting the daily expenses of the family, is mostly used to settle debts or for the education of the siblings. Though most families of the domestics owned land (80.67 per cent) and also had other supporting resources such as livestock (46.89 per cent), the family income was reported to be below subsistence level due to low productivity of agricultural land. This has led to large-scale borrowing to finance daily expenses as well as contingencies. Borrowings to meet expenses related to festivals such as Christmas are also common. The expansion of education among the households has also meant increased demand on family income for education, which involved additional resources. Taking up domestic work is seen as a necessity by the respondents to support their parents in the context of increased financial requirements and rising debts. Single migration of women to take up full time domestic work is thus central to the survival of these families in the tribal areas.

The economic dependence of the family on the domestics, has meant increased decision-making role for these women. The decision on the extent and nature of education to be imparted to the siblings is mostly taken either by women domestics themselves or in consultation with parents and other siblings. Even in decisions related to family borrowings and marriages of siblings, migrant domestics assume key roles. Since the income of

the domestics is the major form of cash for the family, borrowings by the family were mostly repaid from the salary of the domestics, which necessitates the concurrence of these women. Financial details of marriages are also seen fixed in consultation with the domestics. Dates of marriages in rural areas were found in many cases fixed according to the possibility of the domestic obtaining leave. Unlike other tribal girls, the worker status also ensures these women have decision-making power regarding their own marriages. The main source of dowry being their savings from domestic work guarantee domestics some control over decisions related to marriage. Increased decision-making power with regard to age at marriage and selection of bridegroom was reported by most of the respondents, which reflects the changing power relations in these households.

## V Conclusion

The case of women domestics is a classic example of the centrality of women in the migration process and in the endurance of the family in migrant destinations. Women domestics are found to assume vital functions and have specific roles in the migration process. Women-centred social and kinship networking based on gender has not only furthered subsequent migration of women, but is also central to the employment and survival of migrant families. They assist migration by providing income support, information about the destination, first residence and access to jobs. Thus it is argued that networking through kith and kin enables women's labour mobility from rural areas to the metropolis. These developments were found to lead not only to the gendering of domestic work, but also in creating strong segmentation and identity formation among domestic workers.

The centrality of women domestics in the migration process and systems points to the need to re-examine the validity of some of the widely accepted male-centric explanations in migration literature. There is a need to rethink and reconceptualise the migration process in general and its agent, the male migrant. Women migrants also need to be seen as part of the migration systems and subsystems, with numerous roles and functions. Female migrants are powerful agents in building and maintaining social and personal structures pertaining to migration and in the decision-making for the family. This largely redefines their familial roles, social and economic status, and give women domestics the status of household-head and the prime breadwinner. Migration for domestic service is largely a female-driven phenomenon, based on personal and social relationships. Social networking, which is largely female centred, is found to influence the migration decision, the process of migration and also the day-to-day life of the migrants. Thus, migration of women domestics needs to be understood as a collective endeavour that represents the experience within a set of family relationships, as opposed to the commonly perceived notion of male migration, which is autonomous and individualistic. [E]

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## Notes

[This paper is based on the research project conducted by the author at the V V Giri National Labour Institute, Noida. The findings of the study have been presented at two conferences. I have benefited from the discussions

## References

- in these conferences. I am thankful to Premananda Prusty for field-level support, Sudha Deshpande, Indrani Mazumdar, Prabhu Mohapatra, and Babu P Remesh for comments. Usual disclaimers apply.]
- 1 The three organisations covered in the study are Yuvati Seva Sadan, Nirmala Niketan and Yuvati Niwas.
  - 2 It is possible to draw some similarities between the growth of domestic servants in England in the 18th and 19th centuries and that of modern India.
  - 3 In India, although technological changes have changed the middle class family household tasks, these changes have not been so much to replace the services of domestics. Also, the cost of new household gadgets are beyond the capacity of many in the Indian middle class, and is found costly compared with employing domestics.
  - 4 Labour Bureau has surveyed 64 full-time workers of the Gharelu Karamchari Association in Delhi (1981).
  - 5 This includes workers from the newly formed state of Uttaranchal.
  - 6 This is in contrast to the findings of the Labour Bureau study, where most of the full time workers were in the age group of 30-60; 65.5 per cent [Labour Bureau 1981].
  - 7 The ISI survey showed the caste composition as Oraons, (59.5), Munda (21.6), the Kharias (16.2) and others (2.7).
  - 8 The higher education level among tribal live-in workers could be attributed to the spread of educational institutions run by missionaries in the source areas.
  - 9 A survey in 1977 estimated that there were 20,000 people from Tamil Nadu living in Delhi slums, which could be attributed to social networking [Majumdar 1977].
  - 10 The employer on request does not normally grant leave, though informally one day's leave in a month is allowed. A cut in wages was found in case of more than two days' leave. The workers normally independently decide the days of leave and after availing it inform the employers. The oft-cited reason by workers is ill health – their own or that of other family members.
  - 11 This is an estimate based on the information given by voluntary organisations surveyed during the study.
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