



Domestic Workers in India

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01/

Defining Domestic Workers

Fatima cleans five homes every day. She starts at 5 a.m., working at least 9 hours a day. Her work has remained the same, although the households she works for may change from time to time. 63 hours of weekly work brings in only INR 7,500 each month. In addition to this, when her employers mistreat her, she can't help but feel exhausted from all this work for unsatisfactory pay. She has decided she needs to quit doing domestic work.

Domestic workers are a significant yet unrecognised part of urban India's informal workforce. According to the International Labour Organisation, (ILO), 81% of 75.6 million domestic workers globally work informally. Figures estimating their population in India vary widely, with estimates ranging from [20 million to 90 million workers](#). The 2011 Census presents a conservative picture counting only [4.78 million such workers](#). The nature and location of their work has always been a barrier to reaching and identifying domestic workers. In November 2021, the Government of India flagged off the [first nationwide survey](#) to exclusively document domestic workers. In the meantime this report brings you analysis and recommendations on improving welfare access for domestic workers

Domestic work largely fits into the care economy. A domestic worker may be simply defined as someone performing cooking, cleaning, caregiving, gardening, driving, or other work in a private household. However, there are a lot of other factors that affect their vulnerability, including their gender, education access, migration history, caste etc.

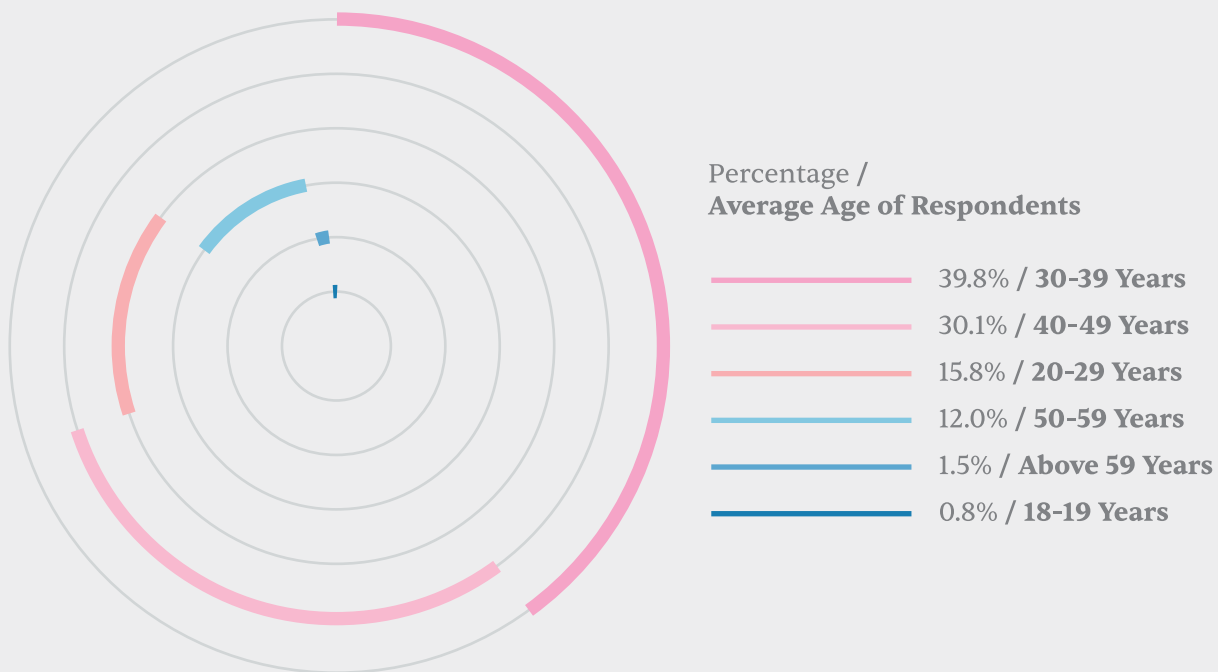
1.1. Cities Surveyed

We surveyed 134 domestic workers from Pune, Mumbai, Thane, Indore, and Delhi — urban cities from three states with varying welfare provisions.



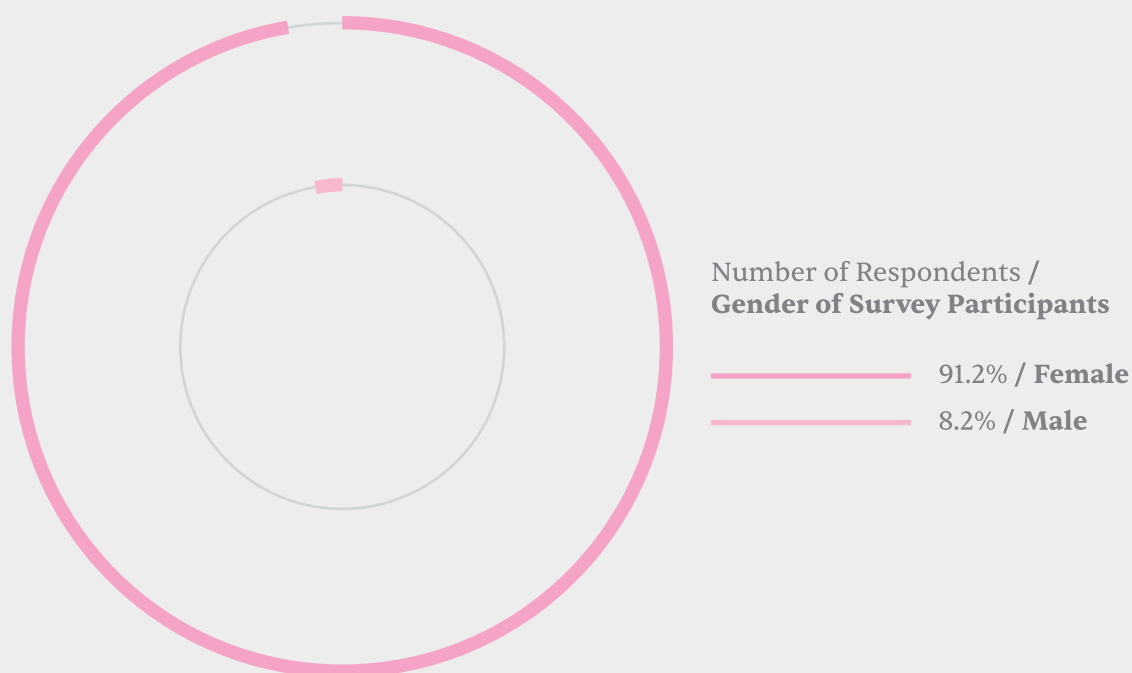
1.2. Average Age of Respondents

Respondents came from a wide range of age brackets. The average age for respondents was 38 years. However, we did not survey domestic workers under the age of 18 as they are not eligible for welfare programs for unorganised sector workers. Globally, the number of underage domestic workers is estimated to be 12.6 million, 86% of whom are girls.



1.3. Gender of Survey Participants

The sample is predominantly made up of female respondents, which is indicative of the gendered nature of domestic work performed within households. Of the 75.6 million domestic workers worldwide, 76.2% are women. According to the National Domestic Workers' Movement, around [90% of India's domestic workers](#) are women or children. This gendered distribution of domestic labour has severe implications on wages, labour protections, and access to workplace and government benefits.

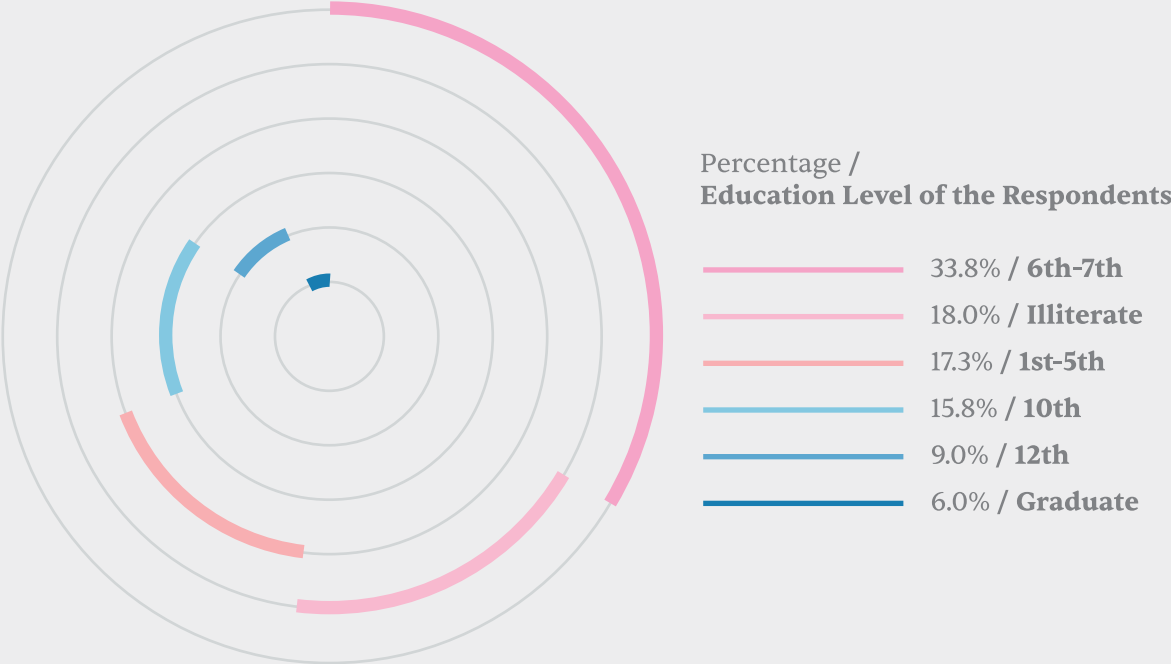


Devaluation of feminised labour is one of the primary reasons behind the continued invisibilisation of domestic labour. India voted in favour of the ILO's Convention 189 that aims to make decent work a reality for domestic workers. However, India has not ratified the convention yet. There have been multiple efforts to pass the legislation to regulate domestic work and strengthen welfare access since 2008. Nonetheless, domestic workers are not included explicitly in a majority of central labour codes, except the Code on Social Security (2020) and the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (PoSH, 2013). Inclusion in other legislations such as the Maternity Benefits Act (2017) would require a redefinition of terms like "place of work," "establishment," "worker/employee" and "employer" to bring them within their purview. States have nonetheless put in minimum wage provisions and welfare boards. However, these are in no way uniform or comprehensive.

Only thirteen states notified minimum wages under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. The impact the Code on Wages 2019 will have on their pay is yet to be seen. The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act (2008) mandated states [create labour welfare boards](#). However only a few states did so, and the benefits offered or channels to access them were not uniform. State-based approaches can make it difficult to generate awareness, especially when a large number of domestic workers are migrant workers.

1.4. Education Level of the Respondents

About two-thirds of respondents had received relatively low levels of or no education. 18% workers surveyed were illiterate, and 17% had received primary level education. A third had been to middle school. We will discuss the implications of this further in our report on social mobility and employment opportunities available to domestic workers.



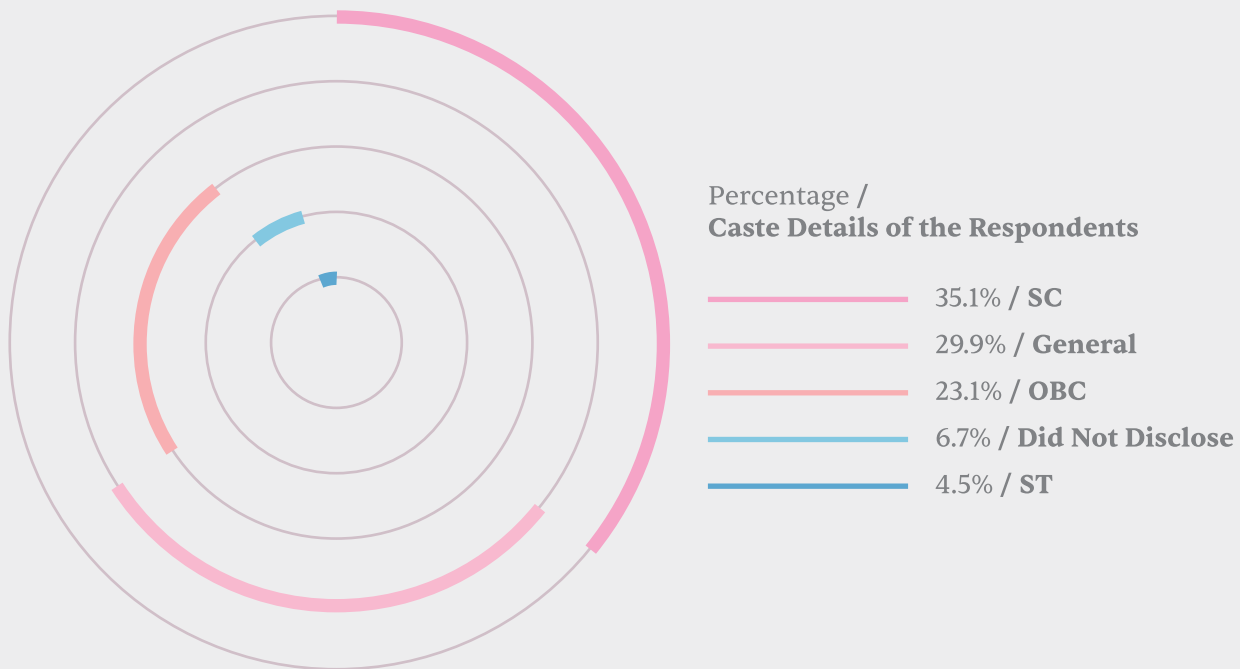


02/

Domestic Worker Households

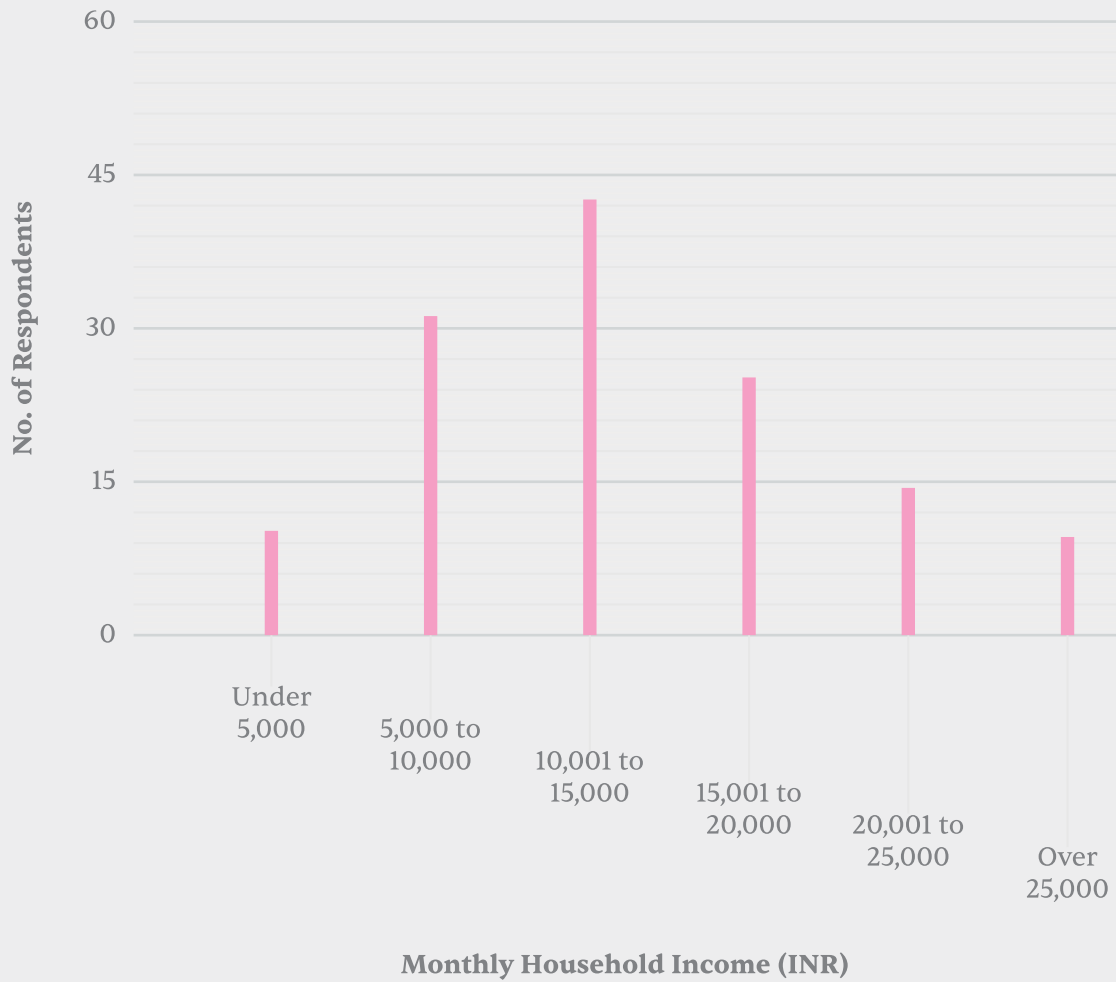
2.1. Caste Details of the Respondents

Workers in the sample came from diverse caste backgrounds.



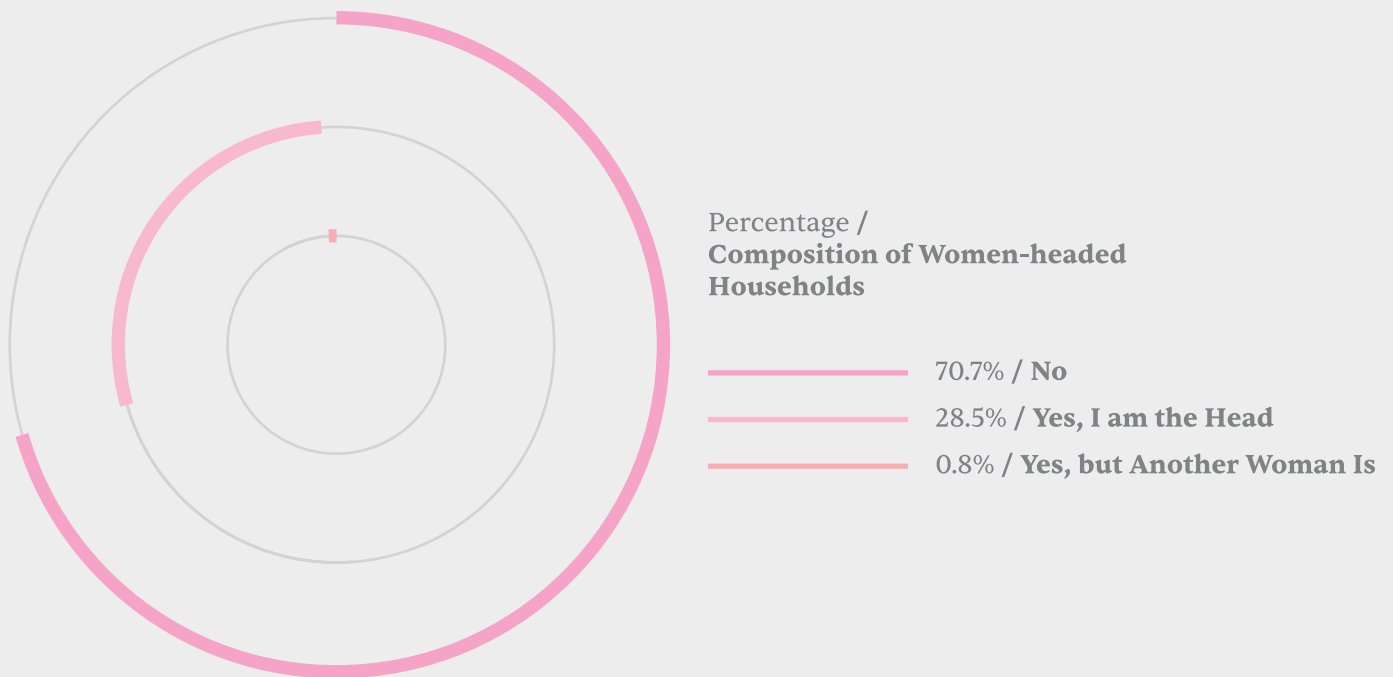
2.2. Monthly Income of the Respondents

On average household incomes were INR 14916.



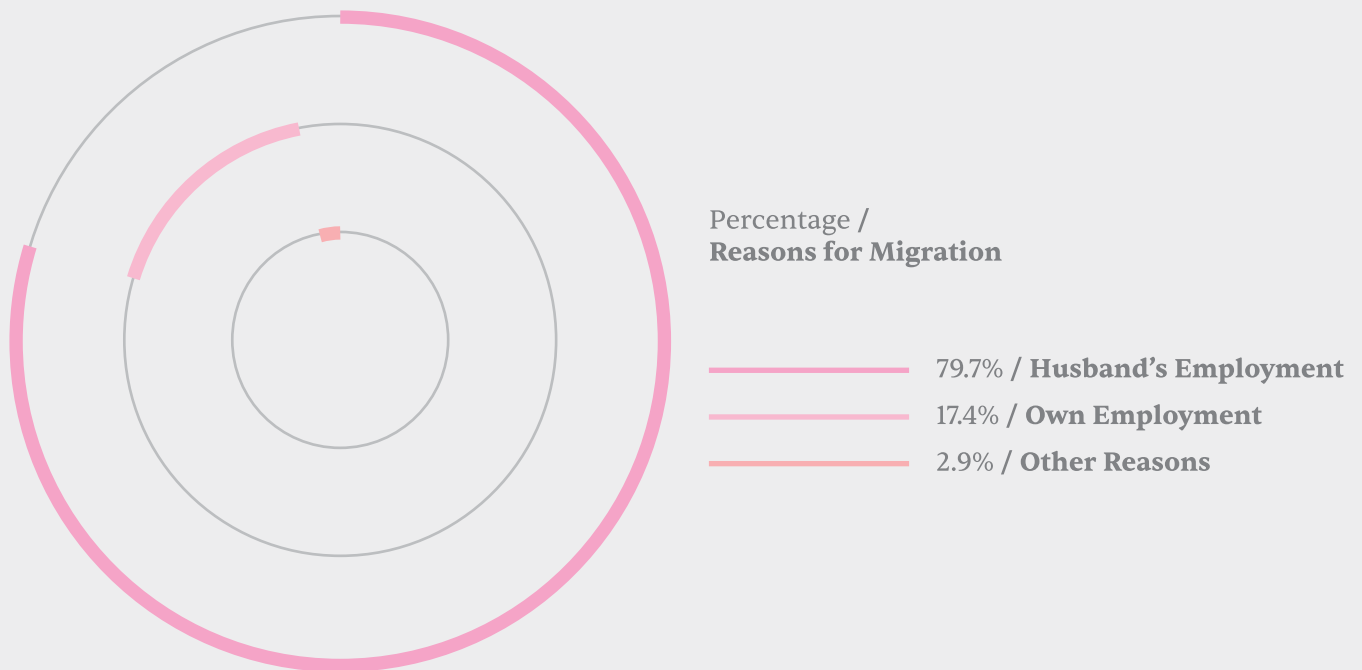
2.3. Composition of Women-headed Households

Almost a third of respondents belonged to women-headed households, with a majority heading their own households. 42% of these women were also from scheduled castes. Being in a woman-headed household meant lower monthly income levels, higher debt burdens, inability to save, and lower spending power for food and education. Women-headed households earned INR 10,677 on average per month, while non-women-headed households earned INR 16,466. We will discuss their unique challenges further in our upcoming reports



2.4. Reasons for Migration

51.49% respondents came from migrant households, with husband's employment being the primary cause for initial migration. Only 17.4% said their own employment was the primary driver for migration. All men who had migrated did so for their own employment, and accounted for over 58% of such migrants. Nonetheless, research suggests that the **availability of domestic work** for women is a key factor in families' decision to migrate. They contribute a substantial chunk to the families' total income. Not having the necessary documentation is one of the biggest challenges for migrant domestic workers when it comes to accessing government welfare.



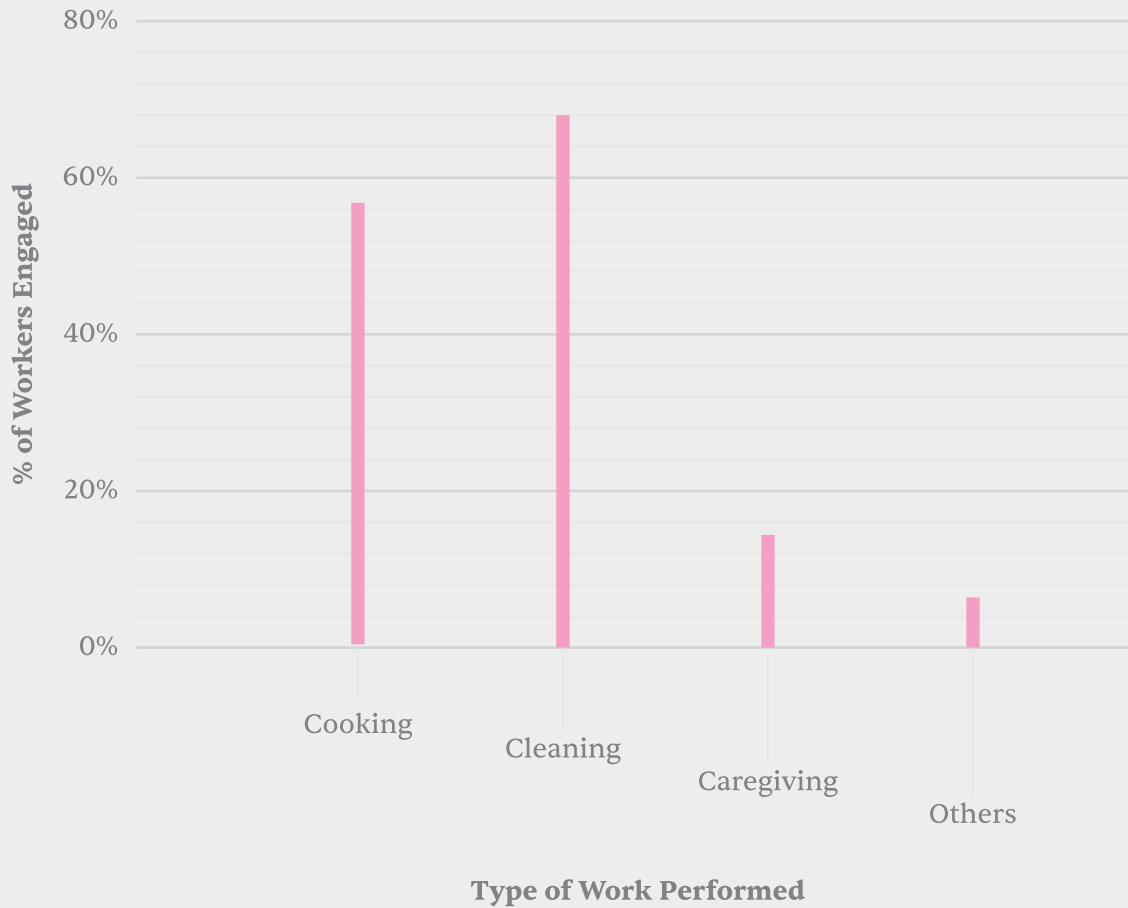


03/

Types of Domestic Work

3.1. Types of Domestic Work

Domestic workers are employed in private households and perform domestic chores such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing, gardening, taking care of the children or elderly, driving, and other domestic tasks. Workers were often engaged in more than one form of work in the same household. About 65% of those who engaged in caregiving worked with children, and the rest worked with the elderly, sick, and disabled.

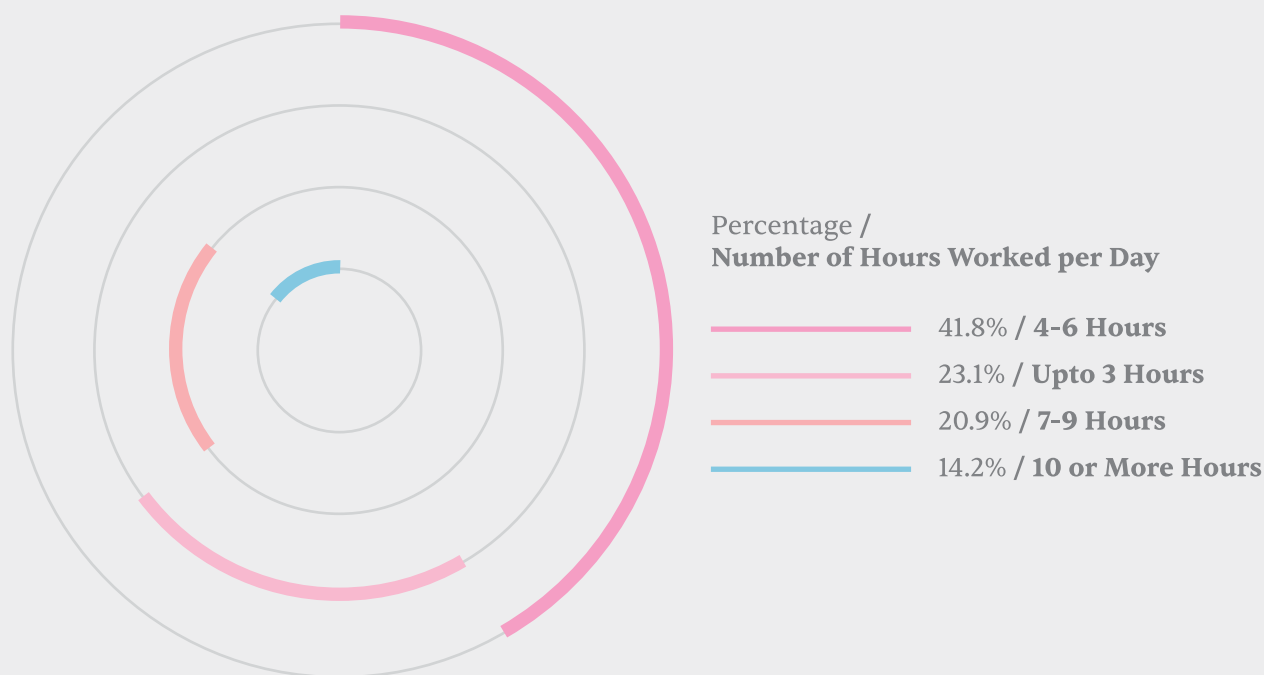


3.2. Number of Hours Worked per Day

Domestic workers may work part-time or full-time for single or multiple households. Live-in workers, who stay within their employer's household, are more likely to work full-time for a single employer. Around 75% worked in multiple households (which were three households on an average) throughout the day. In our survey, 41.79% respondents worked between 4 and 6 hours every day and 14.18% worked for 10 or more hours daily.

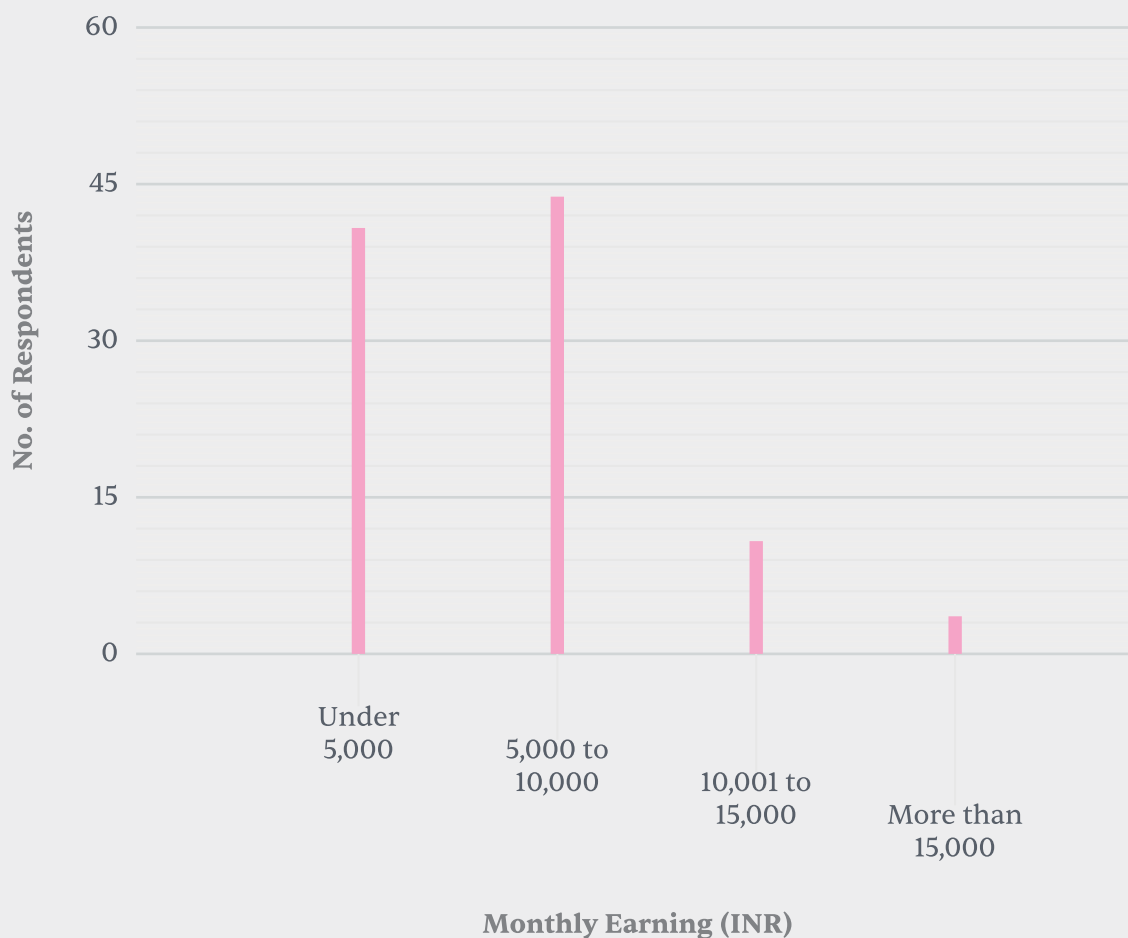
A majority of respondents worked under 40 hours per week. Many workers are experiencing reduced availability of work since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sujata Gaikwad from Mumbai's Chembur neighbourhood also lost multiple jobs during the COVID-19 lockdowns. "My income from this work has continually decreased since the first lockdown. Many people I worked for moved back to their native homes. Now I just work in two houses, and the income is not enough." She currently earns just INR 4,000 monthly.

Another reason for this is women workers' need to balance their household responsibilities with wage employment.



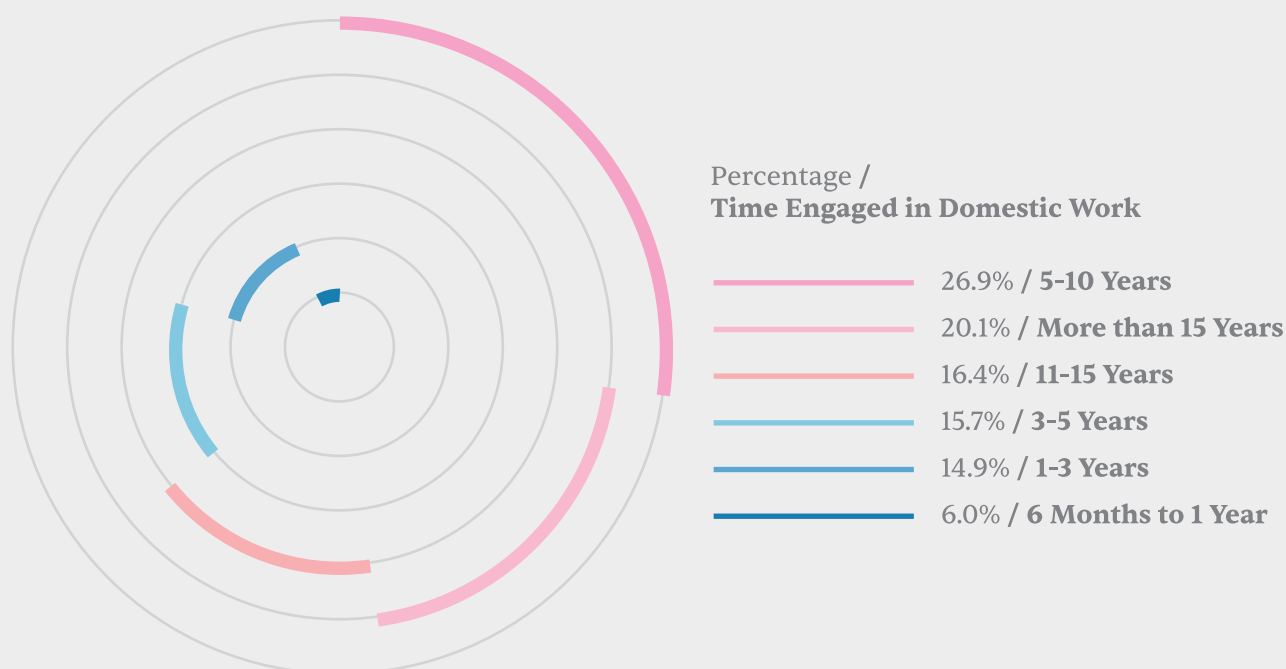
3.3. Monthly Income from Domestic Work

44.78% of respondents earned between INR 5,000 and INR 10,000 per month. More significantly, 41.79% earned less than INR 5000 per month. While there is no national minimum wage mandated for domestic workers, these workers are earning less than the minimum INR 176 per day mandated by the Wage Code. The lack of regulations for paid leave and weekly days of rest means that domestic workers often work every single day of the month. Their actual daily wage is effectively lower than other workers in the informal sector.



While 18% of male respondents reported earning over INR 15,000, under 1% of female respondents received this level of pay.

3.4. Time Engaged in Domestic Work



We observed a trend of long-term engagement with domestic work among respondents. A majority, 94.03% of respondents, had been working as domestic workers for at least a year. Of these, 36.57% had been in this occupation for more than 10 years.

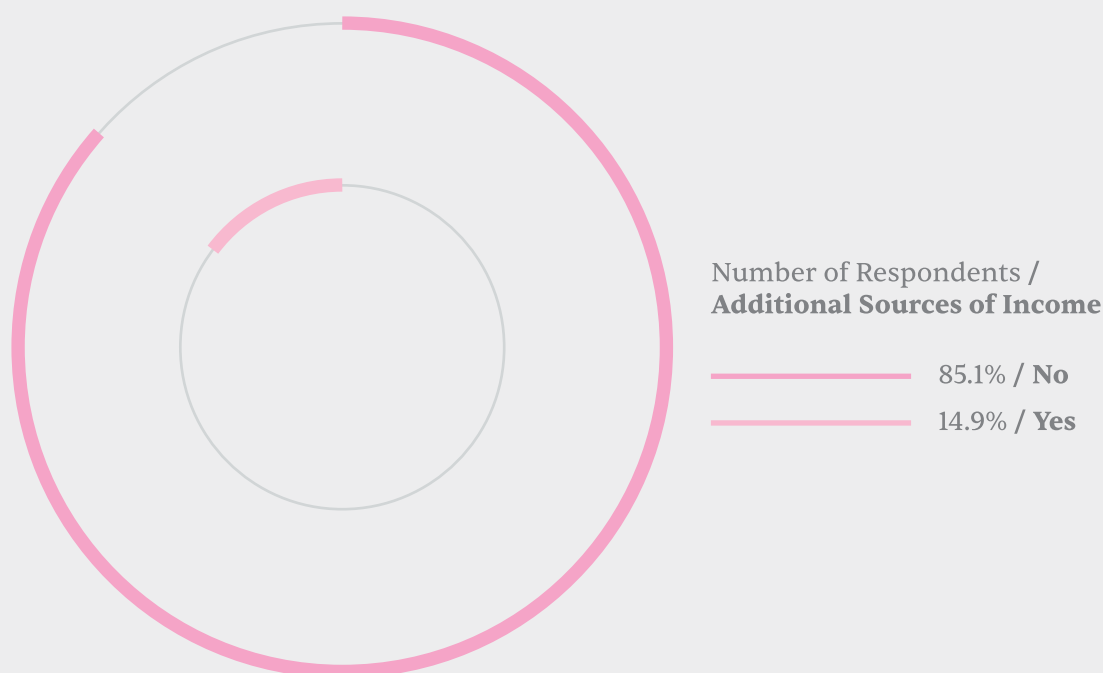
Manisha Shinde has been a domestic worker in Mumbai for 12 years. She is the only breadwinner and earns INR 6,000 for cooking and cleaning. Even though her salary is difficult to live on, especially in Mumbai, she fears asking for a raise now. Without alternative work opportunities, she bites her tongue, *“Majburi mein karna padta hai. Paise badhane ke liye bolte hain toh dusra dhoond lenge bolte hai. Toh padhai likhai bhi nahi ki hai maine utna. Ab yehi kaam karna hota hai, kam paiso mein.”*

Low levels of remuneration are a topic of concern for domestic workers. Most feel unable to switch to another type of work because of their educational qualifications or capital needed for self-employment and nano-enterprises. Minimum wage regulations can help here. Improved access to training programmes can help workers upskill themselves, and low to no interest loans are also the need of the hour. This can ensure workers do not feel trapped and can move into alternative forms of income generation.

While there were some intercity variations in earning levels, the lowest income (INR 1,000) and highest income (INR 25,000) reported were both from Mumbai. Respondents from Madhya Pradesh did not report earning over INR 10,000. Workers from Mumbai and Thane were more likely to earn above INR 10,000 than workers in Pune and Delhi. Kavita Patidar from Indore has been working 12-hour days in the same household for 16 years. They finally increased her salary to INR 10,000 this year. She says, “*Jab tak haanth paanv chalte hain toh yahi kaam karungi. Baad mein kabhi jab nahin kar paungi toh tuition lene ka socha hai,*” indicating this is the best paid work available to her.

Along with the lack of wage regulations, low levels of membership in trade unions and worker associations also contribute to their lack of bargaining power. Only **3.73%** workers we surveyed were part of a trade union or worker’s association (5 out of 134).

3.5. Additional Sources of Income



In the face of job losses and stagnated pay, many domestic workers look for additional sources of income they can earn without venturing too far from their homes. **85.07%** did not have any additional source of income. Those who did were predominantly engaged in home based piece work like sewing and embroidery. Some gave tuitions or did street-vending. Twenty respondents with additional sources of income, earned INR 3,835 per month on average.

For most domestic workers the lack of paid leave means their jobs are not as flexible as they seem. Kiran, who cleans homes in Delhi, knows she will only be paid for the days she works. Not only does she face discrimination from her employers, her children also feel ashamed of her work. She has been trying to earn through sewing at piece rates, but this only brings in INR 300 each month at INR 20 per piece. Having done domestic work for over five years, she feels she has had to give up her freedom.

Taking time off from work can also lead to losing their jobs entirely. A few respondents shared the difficult circumstances that forced them to leave their jobs. For some, it was their pregnancy and for others, care for family members undergoing extensive medical treatments. In most cases, workers were unable to return to their jobs. Moreover, they could not expect any paid leave to attend to these important and sometimes unexpected life occurrences. Frequent experiences of income shock is one short term adverse effects of not having a provision for paid leave. In the long term they may face difficulty finding new work again, since much of this happens through informal networks. In worse cases borrowing for catastrophic events or simply to smooth expenses can lead to crippling debt which they will be repaying for years to come.

Finding work again is not always easy. Laxmi, a 48-year old domestic worker from Delhi, lost her husband to a stroke around Diwali in 2021. She had been working in 10 houses. As her husband's illness progressed Laxmi found it difficult to get away from work for frequent hospital visits. So, she stopped working. It has been 6 months since then, and she is yet to find enough work to sustain herself.



04/

Conclusion

Domestic Workers in India have fewer labour protection laws and welfare programmes targeting their needs compared to other unorganised sector workers. They do not have standardised minimum wages, employment benefits, maternity leaves, general paid leaves, or workplace protection measures. This makes their households vulnerable to income shocks. Comprehensive labour regulations for domestic work have been in the works for over a decade. Implementing measures for enforcement simultaneously is essential to ensure their benefits reach workers, since homes have remained unregulated as workplaces. In the meantime, designing accessible welfare programmes through state-level welfare boards can also help domestic workers manage the educational, healthcare, and financial security needs of their families.



Ensuring that existing programmes are able to reach domestic workers through **increased awareness** and **accessible delivery** is also important. The next report in this series looks at efforts by **state labour welfare boards** and the **e-Shram portal** to include domestic workers in the social security net.

हक़दर्शक
Haqdarshak

**Haqdarshak
Empowerment Solutions
Pvt. Ltd.**

No.149, Ground Floor, 12th Cross
J.P. Nagar 2nd Phase, Bangalore — 560078, KA

contactus@haqdarshak.com