

An insight into the lives of domestic workers (housemaids) in Pakistan!

By Hina Ansari

Pakistan being a developing country has a large number of poor population due to which people jump up to any opportunity that guarantees money. The profession of domestic workers is one of them. Approximately 8.5 million informal domestic workers, including Men, women and children, even under the age of 14 or 60 above works as personal maids and servants to the privileged class of our society to make both ends meet. However, the wages earned is not enough for their survival in this rapidly increasing inflation.

The majority of domestic workers in Pakistan like other developing countries are from rural areas. The nature of the job is decided by the consent of the hirer and the servant where it is made sure that the remuneration is less than the load of work to be done. Even the duration of work varies according to the need of assistance the hirer requires. Some of the workers work the whole day, while others are paid to work for few hours each day. Some even live with the families and earn bread. Their usual pay scale is from 800 to 4000 rupees per month from which they have to cover their travelling expenses as well. However, some of the hirers provide pick and drop facility to their paid workers but that happens rarely.

Both the hirer and the workers hold the complaint against each other. Hirers usually complaint against their workers for having light fingers; the house owners hold suspicions that their servants steal from them and also sometimes get involved in criminal activities as joining hands with the thieves under the table and assisting them in burglary and kidnapping for ransom.

On the other side servants also complain that they don't have proper conveniences and are never trusted despite of how long they serve their hirers. They always face insulting and discriminatory behavior, and the salary as compared to their responsibilities is always less. Moreover, they are made to work more than usual and not paid in case of a working extra hours for a family gathering, party or other familial occasion.

If the problem is analyzed from the perspective of both the parties, they need to establish a trusted and systematic network that ensures attending the concerns of both hirers and the paid servant, comes up. The need for government to intervene and establish such a system seems significant where the law makers' role stands vital. Currently there are no real penalties for exploiting their rights. Thus, there should be proper legislation for personal servants to protect their rights which must include their minimum wages under the wage ordinance of Pakistan 1961, working hours that must be capped at between eight to ten hours a day, with a minimum of one day's rest per week, health allowance, maternity leaves, assurance of nondiscriminatory behavior, dispute resolutions and provident funds in case of long term services. Admittedly, enforcement of working hour's legislation will be amongst the most difficult to monitor, however the government has to take a serious effort to resolve this issue.

There are many other countries that have made proper laws and guidelines for housemaids and servants to reduce violence against domestic workers and accepted their rights like other labors as in Brazil, domestic workers are hired under a registered contract and have most of the rights of any other workers. In New York a government envoy has also unveiled plans to improve conditions for domestic workers by regulating working hours, insisting on health care coverage and even allocating holiday time there are also many other examples. In July 2011, the UN Convention also recognized domestic workers as workers with the same rights as other working class.

According to the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) there are 47 cases of violence against domestic workers from April 2010 to December 2013 have been filed, in which 16 cases child has been died due to awful violence by the hirers. Moreover, there are many cases of sexual abuses of children and women by the hirers which often remain unreported due to socioeconomic and religious obstacles. According to a survey conducted by the Alliance against Sexual Harassment at Workplaces, in December 2007, 91% female domestic servants admitted that they face violence and exploitation of any kind.

This part of our society is in dire need of attention for being completely deprived of their personal and professional rights. The constitution of Pakistan doesn't have any law that supports their concerns. Not even Social activists pay any special attention in attending their troubles and supporting their voice. Further on, the hirer should also inquire the background of their workers before hiring them as checking their police record, basic health test and also visit or make calls to their old employers. Civil society organizations and formal advocacy organizations need to bring government's attention towards establishing a complete legislation for their basic rights and to lobby for legal protection for domestic workers in Pakistan under the convention (No. 189) of the International Labor Organization (ILO) which not only discourage the violence against domestic workers but also protect their rights.