

## **Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Domestic Workers in Chennai District**

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### **Abstract**

Women domestic workers constitute a significant segment of the informal workforce in urban India and play a vital role in supporting household activities and the urban economy. Despite their contribution, they continue to face socio-economic challenges such as low wages, lack of job security, inadequate social protection, poor working conditions, and limited access to welfare schemes. The present study examines the socio-economic conditions of women domestic workers in Chennai District, with specific reference to North Chennai, Central Chennai, and South Chennai. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from 150 women domestic workers through a structured interview schedule, of which 148 valid responses were considered for analysis. Secondary data were obtained from books, journals, government reports, and published research studies. The study analyzes the demographic profile, educational status, income levels, working conditions, health status, and major problems faced by women domestic workers. Statistical tools such as percentage analysis and chi-square test were employed to interpret the data. The findings reveal that a majority of the respondents belong to economically weaker sections, possess low educational qualifications, and depend on domestic work as their primary source of livelihood. Low wages, long working hours, health-related issues, and lack of social security benefits emerged as the major challenges faced by the respondents. The study also found a significant relationship between working hours and health problems among women domestic workers. The paper concludes with suggestions for improving the socio-economic status of women domestic workers through minimum wage implementation, social security coverage, skill development initiatives, and effective welfare measures. The study highlights the need for greater policy attention to ensure dignity, protection, and improved living standards for women domestic workers in Chennai District.

**Keywords:** Women Domestic Workers, Socio-Economic Conditions, Informal Sector, Working Conditions, Health Status, Social Security, Chennai District.

### **Introduction**

Domestic work is one of the oldest and most important forms of employment in urban India. Women domestic workers perform a wide range of household activities such as cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, childcare, elder care, and household maintenance. In Chennai District, the rapid growth of middle-class and upper-middle-class households has increased the demand for domestic workers. At the same time, migration from rural areas and economically weaker backgrounds has supplied a large number of women seeking employment in the domestic service sector. Although domestic workers contribute significantly to urban

households, they remain among the most vulnerable workers in the unorganized sector. Their work is often undervalued, poorly paid, and excluded from formal labor protections. Most women domestic workers belong to economically disadvantaged communities and have limited access to education, healthcare, and social security benefits.

## **Review of Literature**

A review of literature provides an understanding of previous studies conducted on the socio-economic conditions of women domestic workers. It helps identify research gaps and provides a foundation for the present study. Sutha and Parvathi (2026) conducted a study on the socio-economic conditions of domestic women workers in Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu. The study found that domestic workers are among the most vulnerable groups in the unorganized sector. Most respondents suffered from low wages, lack of job security, poor social protection, and limited educational opportunities. The authors emphasized the need for minimum wage implementation, social security benefits, and improved working conditions for domestic women workers. Baghya, Brindha, and Devika (2024) conducted a study on female domestic workers in Chennai. Using data collected from 173 respondents across different parts of Chennai, the researchers found that low wages, long working hours, and occupational health problems were the most significant challenges faced by domestic workers. A considerable proportion of workers earned between ₹2,500 and ₹3,000 per month, which was insufficient to meet rising living costs. The study concluded that domestic workers remain economically vulnerable despite their essential contribution to urban households. Sumalatha, Bhat, and Chitra (2024) analyzed the employment status and working conditions of female domestic workers in India using data from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Mizoram. The study reported that domestic work is one of the fastest-growing segments of the informal sector. Gender stereotypes, lack of recognition, irregular employment, and poor working conditions adversely affected the quality of life of women domestic workers. The authors recommended expanding labor rights, social security coverage, and welfare schemes for domestic workers. Fatima (2024) examined the socio-economic conditions of female domestic workers in India and observed that the majority work in the unorganized sector without adequate legal protection or social security benefits. The study noted that domestic workers continue to face exploitation, low earnings, and limited access to welfare schemes. It recommended stronger government intervention and improved implementation of labor welfare policies to enhance the socio-economic status of women domestic workers. Thakkar and Smiley (2024) investigated the socio-economic realities of migrant women domestic workers in urban India. The study found that women domestic workers often function as primary breadwinners while simultaneously facing gender-based violence and social exclusion. Their research highlighted how economic necessity compels women to remain in precarious employment despite unsafe living and working conditions. The authors stressed the importance of recognizing domestic workers as an integral part of the urban economy. Thakkar (2023) explored the lived experiences of women paid domestic workers in India with a focus on exploitation, harassment, and violence. The study revealed that many domestic workers face verbal abuse, workplace discrimination, and unequal power relations with employers. In addition, several respondents experienced domestic violence within their own households, creating a double burden of vulnerability at home and work. The research emphasized the need for stronger legal protections and support mechanisms

for women domestic workers. Yasmeen Sultana and Papori Hazarika (2022) study examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood, employment security, and health conditions of women domestic workers in Puducherry. The researchers observed that domestic workers, who largely belong to the informal sector, were severely affected during the pandemic due to job losses, wage reductions, restricted mobility, and lack of social protection. The study highlighted that many women domestic workers experienced financial hardship, food insecurity, and increased vulnerability during lockdown periods. The study emphasized the need for government intervention, welfare measures, financial assistance, and policies aimed at improving workforce participation and social security coverage for women domestic workers. Mukherjee and Mukhopadhyay (2022) examined the working conditions and job satisfaction of female paid domestic workers in India. Their study found that domestic work remains a highly feminized and undervalued occupation characterized by low wages, job insecurity, and lack of social protection. Despite difficult working conditions, many women reported job satisfaction because domestic work provided a stable source of income and flexibility in managing household responsibilities. The study highlighted the contradiction between workers' economic dependence on domestic work and the poor quality of employment available to them. Anil Kumar (2017) analyzed the socio-economic status of women domestic workers in India. The study found that domestic workers are predominantly employed in the unorganized sector, characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, lack of social security, and gender discrimination. The author observed that domestic work is largely undervalued because it is associated with household activities traditionally performed by women. Dave (2012) explored the status of women workers in the unorganized sector and found that women workers face multiple forms of vulnerability, including wage discrimination, lack of legal protection, and social exclusion. The study recommended stronger policy interventions and awareness programs to improve their socio-economic conditions. Bino Paul, Datta, and Murthy (2011) examined the working and living conditions of women domestic workers. Their findings indicated that domestic workers face long working hours, inadequate wages, occupational health risks, and limited legal protection. The study emphasized the need for labour regulations and welfare measures specifically designed for domestic workers. Bhattacharya (2010) discussed the increasing demand for domestic workers in urban households due to changing lifestyles and rising female workforce participation. The study highlighted how urbanization and the growth of middle-class families have expanded employment opportunities for domestic workers while simultaneously exposing them to exploitation and insecurity. Deshingkar et al. (2008) examined migrant laborers and their expenditure patterns. The study revealed that migrant workers prioritized spending on health and education, indicating their concern for improving family welfare despite economic hardships. The research highlighted the importance of social support systems for vulnerable workers. Arif (2007) examined rural-urban migration and highlighted the dominance of internal migration in India. The study pointed out the lack of in-depth gender-based migration research and emphasized the need for studies focusing specifically on women migrants and their employment conditions. Kundu and Sarangi (2007) analyzed rural-urban migration and poverty among migrant workers. Their findings suggested that migrant laborers often experienced lower poverty levels compared to non-migrant laborers. The study also stressed the need for regularization policies and social security measures to protect migrant workers.

from exploitation and abuse. Patel Urmila (1980) studied changes in the lifestyle of migrant domestic workers in the United Kingdom. The research highlighted the role of trade unions, religious organizations, and migrant support groups in protecting domestic workers from exploitation. The study emphasized the importance of legal recognition and institutional support for domestic workers. The reviewed studies primarily focus on the socio-economic conditions, migration patterns, working conditions, and challenges faced by domestic workers in different regions of India. However, very few studies have specifically examined the socio-economic conditions of women domestic workers in Chennai District. Existing research often concentrates on general issues of domestic work or covers broader geographical areas. Therefore, there is a need for a detailed study focusing on Chennai District to understand the demographic profile, income levels, working conditions, health status, and socio-economic challenges of women domestic workers in the region. Such a study would contribute to policy formulation and welfare measures aimed at improving their living and working conditions.

### Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the socio-economic conditions of women domestic workers in Chennai District. The study was conducted in three major regions of Chennai, namely North Chennai, Central Chennai, and South Chennai, which were selected due to their large concentration of domestic workers and diverse socio-economic characteristics. Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. Primary data were collected directly from women domestic workers through a structured questionnaire and personal interviews. The questionnaire included questions relating to demographic profile, educational status, income, working conditions, health status, savings, indebtedness, and access to welfare schemes. Secondary data were gathered from books, journals, government reports, census publications, research articles, and relevant websites. Since there is no official database of domestic workers in Chennai District, the study employed convenience and snowball sampling techniques to identify and select respondents. A total of 150 women domestic workers were approached for the survey across North Chennai, Central Chennai, and South Chennai. Out of these, 148 respondents provided complete and valid responses, while two questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete information. Therefore, the final sample size for the study consisted of 148 respondents. The data were collected during the period 2025–2026 and were analyzed using statistical tools such as percentage analysis, mean, standard deviation, and chi-square test. The findings of the study are based on the responses obtained from the selected women domestic workers and provide insights into their socio-economic conditions, employment patterns, and challenges faced in their daily lives.

### Data Analysis & Interpretations

**Table 1. Age-wise Distribution of Respondents**

| Age Group (Years) | Number of Respondents | Percentage |
|-------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Below 25          | 18                    | 12.2       |
| 25 – 35           | 42                    | 28.4       |
| 36 – 45           | 51                    | 34.5       |
| 46 – 55           | 25                    | 16.9       |
| Above 55          | 12                    | 8.0        |
| Total             | 148                   | 100.0      |

The table reveals that 34.5 percent of the respondents belong to the age group of 36–45 years, followed by 28.4 percent in the age group of 25–35 years. Only 8.0 percent of the respondents are above 55 years. This indicates that middle-aged women constitute the majority of domestic workers in Chennai District.

**Table 2. Educational Qualification of Respondents**

| <b>Educational Level</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Illiterate               | 29                           | 19.6              |
| Primary School           | 46                           | 31.1              |
| Secondary School         | 39                           | 26.4              |
| Higher Secondary         | 24                           | 16.2              |
| Graduate                 | 10                           | 6.7               |
| Total                    | 148                          | 100.0             |

The table shows that 31.1 percent of the respondents have completed primary education, while 19.6 percent are illiterate. Only 6.7 percent are graduates. This indicates that low educational attainment is one of the major reasons for women entering domestic work.

**Table 3. Monthly Income of Respondents**

| <b>Monthly Income (₹)</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Below 8,000               | 27                           | 18.2              |
| 8,001 – 12,000            | 48                           | 32.4              |
| 12,001 – 16,000           | 41                           | 27.7              |
| 16,001 – 20,000           | 22                           | 14.9              |
| Above 20,000              | 10                           | 6.8               |
| Total                     | 148                          | 100.0             |

The majority (32.4 percent) of respondents earn between ₹8,001 and ₹12,000 per month. Only 6.8 percent earn above ₹20,000. This suggests that most domestic workers receive relatively low incomes, making it difficult to maintain a decent standard of living.

**Table 4. Marital Status of Respondents**

| <b>Marital Status</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Married               | 92                           | 62.2              |
| Unmarried             | 18                           | 12.2              |
| Widow                 | 26                           | 17.6              |
| Divorced/Separated    | 12                           | 8.0               |
| Total                 | 148                          | 100.0             |

The table indicates that 62.2 percent of the respondents are married, while 17.6 percent are widows. This suggests that domestic work serves as an important source of income for women supporting their families.

**Table 5. Working Hours per Day**

| <b>Working Hours</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Less than 4 Hours    | 15                           | 10.1              |
| 4 – 6 Hours          | 46                           | 31.1              |
| 6 – 8 Hours          | 52                           | 35.1              |
| More than 8 Hours    | 35                           | 23.7              |



|       |     |       |
|-------|-----|-------|
| Total | 148 | 100.0 |
|-------|-----|-------|

The majority of respondents (35.1 percent) work between 6 and 8 hours daily, while 23.7 percent work for more than 8 hours. This indicates that domestic workers spend long hours at work despite receiving relatively low wages.

**Table 6. Major Problems Faced by Respondents**

| Problems                | Number of Respondents | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Low Wages               | 55                    | 37.2       |
| Long Working Hours      | 32                    | 21.6       |
| Lack of Social Security | 28                    | 18.9       |
| Health Problems         | 21                    | 14.2       |
| Job Insecurity          | 12                    | 8.1        |
| Total                   | 148                   | 100.0      |

The table reveals that low wages are the most significant problem faced by women domestic workers (37.2 percent), followed by long working hours (21.6 percent). Lack of social security and health issues are also major concerns. This indicates the need for wage protection and welfare measures for domestic workers.

### **Socio-economic status of Women Domestic Workers in Chennai**

The analysis shows that the majority of women domestic workers in Chennai District are middle-aged, possess low levels of education, earn modest incomes, and work long hours. Most respondents depend on domestic work as their primary source of livelihood. Low wages, lack of social security benefits, job insecurity, and health-related issues remain the major socio-economic challenges faced by women domestic workers. These findings highlight the need for policy interventions, social protection measures, and improved working conditions to enhance their quality of life. Most women domestic workers in Chennai belong to low-income families residing in slum settlements, resettlement colonies, and peri-urban areas. A significant proportion are migrants from rural districts of Tamil Nadu and neighboring states. Many are widows, separated women, or primary earners in their households. The educational status of domestic workers is generally low. A considerable number have only primary education or are illiterate. Limited educational qualifications restrict their opportunities for formal employment and force them into low-skilled occupations such as domestic work. The age group of domestic workers generally ranges from 25 to 55 years. Many begin working at a young age due to poverty, family responsibilities, and financial necessity.

### **Employment and Working Conditions**

Women domestic workers in Chennai are mainly employed as:

1. Part-time domestic workers serving multiple households.
2. Full-time domestic workers employed by a single household.
3. Live-in domestic workers residing in employers' homes.
4. Caregivers for children, elderly persons, or patients.

Most domestic workers work between 8 and 12 hours daily. Part-time workers often travel between several households to increase their earnings. Despite long working hours, they frequently lack written contracts, paid leave, overtime compensation, and job security.

Employment relationships are largely informal and depend on personal trust between employers and workers. As a result, workers can lose employment without notice or compensation.

### **Income and Economic Conditions**

Income levels among domestic workers vary according to the number of households served, type of work performed, and locality. However, earnings are generally low when compared with the rising cost of living in Chennai.

The majority of women domestic workers spend a substantial portion of their income on:

- Food and household expenses
- Children's education
- Housing rent
- Healthcare costs
- Debt repayment

Many workers have little or no savings. Financial emergencies often force them to borrow money from informal lenders, leading to indebtedness. The absence of regular income and social security further increases economic vulnerability.

### **Health and Social Issues**

Domestic workers face several occupational health risks. Continuous physical labor such as sweeping, mopping, washing clothes, and lifting heavy objects often results in:

- Back pain
- Joint pain
- Muscle strain
- Fatigue
- Respiratory problems caused by cleaning chemicals

Access to healthcare remains limited due to low income and lack of health insurance coverage. Many workers continue working even during illness because absence from work leads to wage loss.

Socially, domestic workers often experience discrimination based on class, caste, and economic status. Some workers report verbal abuse, lack of respect, and unequal treatment at workplaces. Cases of harassment and exploitation are also reported in certain situations.

### **Challenges Faced by Women Domestic Workers**

The major challenges faced by women domestic workers in Chennai include:

- **Low Wages:** Most workers receive wages that are insufficient to meet the increasing cost of urban living.
- **Lack of Job Security:** Employment can be terminated at any time without compensation or formal procedures.
- **Absence of Social Security:** Many workers do not receive benefits such as pension, health insurance, maternity benefits, or provident fund coverage.

- **Long Working Hours:** Domestic workers frequently work beyond standard working hours without overtime payment.
- **Limited Legal Protection:** The informal nature of domestic work makes enforcement of labor rights difficult.
- **Gender-Based Vulnerability:** Women workers face risks of harassment, exploitation, and discrimination both at work and within society.

## Testing of Hypothesis

### Hypothesis - 1

Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ): There is no significant relationship between educational qualification and monthly income of women domestic workers.

Alternative Hypothesis ( $H_1$ ): There is a significant relationship between educational qualification and monthly income of women domestic workers.

**Table 7. Chi-Square Test Result**

| Particulars                 | Value  |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| Chi-Square Calculated Value | 16.842 |
| Degrees of Freedom          | 12     |
| Table Value (5% level)      | 21.026 |
| Significance Level          | 0.05   |

Since the calculated Chi-Square value (16.842) is less than the table value (21.026), the null hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, there is no significant relationship between educational qualification and monthly income of women domestic workers in Chennai District. This indicates that even workers with higher educational qualifications continue to earn relatively low incomes because domestic work is largely an unorganized occupation with limited wage differentiation. Educational attainment does not significantly influence the income levels of women domestic workers.

### Hypothesis 2

Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ): There is no significant relationship between working hours and health problems among women domestic workers.

Alternative Hypothesis ( $H_1$ ): There is a significant relationship between working hours and health problems among women domestic workers.

**Table 8. Chi-Square Test Result**

| Particulars                 | Value  |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| Chi-Square Calculated Value | 24.357 |
| Degrees of Freedom          | 9      |
| Table Value (5% level)      | 16.919 |
| Significance Level          | 0.05   |

Since the calculated Chi-Square value (24.357) is greater than the table value (16.919), the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between working hours and health problems among women domestic workers. Women who work longer hours are more likely to experience health issues such as



back pain, joint pain, fatigue, and stress. Long working hours adversely affect the health status of women domestic workers. The study reveals that educational qualification does not have a significant impact on the income of women domestic workers because wages are generally determined by the nature of domestic work rather than educational credentials. However, working hours have a significant effect on the health conditions of respondents, indicating that excessive workloads contribute to physical and mental health problems. These findings highlight the need for better working conditions, regulated working hours, and health protection measures for women domestic workers in Chennai District.

### **Government Initiatives and Welfare Measures**

The Government of Tamil Nadu and the Government of India have introduced several welfare measures for unorganized workers. Domestic workers may benefit from:

- Registration under welfare boards for unorganized workers.
- Health insurance schemes.
- Pension schemes for informal workers.
- Skill development and literacy programs.
- Financial inclusion initiatives through bank accounts and self-help groups.

### **Suggestions**

To improve the socio-economic conditions of women domestic workers in Chennai, the following measures are recommended:

1. Ensure minimum wages and regular wage revisions.
2. Extend social security coverage, including health insurance and pension schemes.
3. Introduce paid leave, maternity benefits, and weekly holidays.
4. Strengthen legal mechanisms to address workplace harassment and exploitation.
5. Promote adult education and skill development programs.
6. Increase awareness regarding labor rights and government welfare schemes.
7. Encourage the formation of domestic workers' associations and unions.

### **Conclusion**

Women domestic workers play a crucial role in sustaining urban households and supporting the economic participation of working families in Chennai District. Despite their valuable contribution, they continue to face economic insecurity, inadequate wages, poor working conditions, and social discrimination. Improving their socio-economic status requires coordinated efforts from government agencies, employers, civil society organizations, and labour institutions. Ensuring dignity, fair wages, social protection, and legal recognition for domestic workers is essential for achieving inclusive and equitable urban development.

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