

# Housing, Homes and Domestic Work

## A Study of Paid Domestic Workers from a Resettlement Colony in Chennai

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Drawing from a study of work and livelihoods in Kannagi Nagar, Chennai's largest resettlement site, this paper reflects on paid domestic work as one among a limited range of occupations available to unskilled women workers in urban areas. It takes a spatial approach to analysing markets for urban domestic work, where issues of location, distance, travel, and timings are found to determine the opportunities for employment. In addition, it looks at domestic work against the background of larger employment markets for low-skilled female workers, and the range of options and preferences that frame it.

Domestic work as an employment category appears to be at the crossroads in Chennai, and arguably across Tamil Nadu – while it is an increasingly important employment option in urban areas, particularly for women, it is also increasingly rejected by the younger generation, even of the lowest castes. The demand for domestic workers, or “maids” – a term that is replacing “servants” in polite urban discourse – in metropolitan cities is perhaps higher than at any previous time. Employers report considerable difficulty in finding them, but domestic workers claim that jobs are harder to find and that there is stiff competition for them. How can this conundrum be explained? This paper adopts two approaches to the study of domestic work in an attempt to offer some answers. The first is a spatial approach to analyse markets for urban domestic labour, where issues of location, distance, travel, and timings are found to determine the opportunities for work. While several studies have commented on shifts in the nature of paid domestic work due to urban transformation in recent decades (Raghuram 2001; Roy 2002; Quayum and Ray 2003; Neetha 2008), few have examined this occupation in terms of the dislocations in lives and livelihoods brought about by evictions and peripheral relocations of workers. Similarly, few have located paid domestic work against other emerging work options for the working classes following such residential dislocation. The second approach widens the lens of enquiry to examine domestic work against the background of larger employment markets for low-skilled female workers, and the range of options and preferences that frame domestic work as an occupation.

Paid domestic work has, over the past two decades, been approached from a range of new angles and perspectives, including ethnographic, spatial, and cultural (Ray 2000; Quayum and Ray 2003; Dickey 2000). They have gone beyond the worker-centred approach of earlier studies and followed the occupation into worksites, the interiors of middle-class homes. These explorations have looked into the workings of paid domestic work as a special kind of social relation, which is shaped by an interplay of intimacy and distance between women employers and women workers, and underpinned by class-inflected ideologies of domesticity. Paid domestic work, in these approaches, plays a fundamental role in reproducing class, caste, ethnicity, and gender via the domains of household and work. Quayum and Ray (2003) go further, analysing paid domestic labour, even in its modern

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market-leaning forms, as an “institution of servitude” that reveals “constitutive continuities” with the feudal past of generational family retainers and servants’ quarters attached to big houses.

The standpoint of our discussion is different, and centred in the domain of workers, particularly of workers forcibly relocated from city slums to ghetto-like settlements on urban peripheries. In this study (and in general, see Neetha 2008), the vast majority of domestic workers worked part-time in multiple homes (sometimes up to a full day). Given this, the comments of workers in our study tended to decentre relations within the worksite, revealing a preoccupation with the logistics of commuting and scheduling, wages and costs, and the struggle to balance paid work with domestic responsibilities.

The differences in standpoints of research result in differences of significance attached to, for instance, aspects of space and movement in the location of this activity. In Dickey’s account of domestic servants in Madurai, rendered from the perspective of employers, “the movement of servants from their own homes into and between employers’ homes” is loaded with threat and danger, deriving from exchanges between social and spatial outsides and insides (2000: 463). In this study, from the viewpoint of the “servants” themselves, these movements are framed primarily by logistical and pragmatic issues – ease of access to and between worksites, scheduling considerations, and the hardship levels of specific jobs. But relations with employers did figure in these calculations, in particular the advantages (pragmatic as well as emotional) of familiarity and long-standing relationships. Conversely, many domestic workers we interviewed asserted that they would drop a job if spoken to harshly or disrespectfully, and especially if caste-related remarks were made.

The exploration of domestic work in this paper is located within, and addressed to, the political economy of contemporary urban transformation in India, in which working-class households are driven out of long-held, if informal, residences in the city to peripheral resettlement sites, even as their labour becomes increasingly crucial to the reproduction and maintenance of urban lifestyles. Against this backdrop, the analysis revisits the experiences of domestic workers as urban informal workers from the angle of their living and working geographies. In situating domestic work within a wider study of employment and livelihood patterns in a large resettlement site (Kannagi Nagar in Chennai), we hope to provide insights that can help explain the persisting centrality of this occupation, as well as illuminate the differential conditions and considerations that determine this occupation for workers across diverse socio-spatial contexts.

This paper brings into focus not only issues of residential location, distance, and travel, but also the basic issue of housing (types, tenure, costs, and amenities) the urban poor. It is these factors that shape the realities of paid domestic work in cities and determine workers’ ability to build a decent working life.<sup>1</sup> If, for resettled workers in Kannagi Nagar (henceforth KN), the relative security of tenure and lower housing costs at the site were offset by distance, for domestic workers residing

in city slums, the struggle is around access to affordable housing, clean water, and sanitation. Both sets of circumstances spell high costs and low returns from the labour of these workers. In addition, this paper points to how dominant patterns of resettlement housing contribute to producing or consolidating emergent forms of domesticity among working-class women (Kapadia 2010; Anandhi 2007). This in turn restricts their ability or willingness to engage in this work, or the time they can or will put into it.

Before presenting our data on domestic workers, we explain the context of resettlement in KN. Forced and mass relocation of slum residents to state-sponsored resettlement sites to make way for city improvement and urban renewal initiatives has, over the past several decades, become the standard pathway to “slum-free cities” in India, and more recently, Tamil Nadu.<sup>2</sup> KN is Chennai’s largest and best-known resettlement site, comprising 15,000 apartments of about 120-150 square feet in two- and three-storey buildings (an additional 8,000 apartments are ready to be occupied in the near future). It is on 100 acres reclaimed from the vast Pallikaranai wetland system on the southern edge of the city. The empirical material in this paper is drawn primarily from a study of work and livelihoods in KN carried out in 2011-12, 10 years after the first groups of slum-dwellers were settled there.<sup>3</sup>

### Resettlement Housing and Employment

KN is located off what is now Chennai’s information technology (IT) corridor, a high-speed toll road that connects the southern part of the city to industrial estates and IT parks in neighbouring Kanchipuram district. On either side of the road are high-end commercial, financial, manufacturing, and IT enterprises, as well as a large number of upscale real-estate developments, with the attendant malls, showrooms, and restaurants. Slum-dwellers evicted from various parts of the city began to be resettled in KN from 2000-01, with a spurt in numbers following the tsunami of December 2004. For several years, the corridor offered very limited employment opportunities to KN’s residents, partly due to their lack of local networks in a labour market that relies heavily on recommendations and contacts, and partly due to the stigma attached to their residential address.<sup>4</sup> Even 10 years later, employment remained precarious in this settlement. There had been considerable occupational dynamism in the intervening years – people had tried different jobs, some had retrained themselves, many had established new networks, and most informants in our study said that jobs were abundantly available in the area. Yet, there is an ongoing demand for work, especially among women, who almost invariably asked us whether we had jobs to offer. Clearly, significant constraints come between the available opportunities and the ability of women to access or retain these jobs.

An important caveat that merits mention here is that resettlement sites of this kind typically become settled not only through state relocation programmes, but also by market pressures. That is, the steep rise in urban housing costs drives large numbers of Chennai’s working-class families to rent or purchase apartments in these peripheral locations. State-engineered

slum resettlement colonies, thus, increasingly function as de facto low-income housing markets for urban workers, filling the gap in direct state or market provision for this segment. Both types of relocation are arguably forced, though through different mechanisms and to different degrees.

The effects of the relocation, 10 years later, were uneven across ages, genders and occupations. Our data revealed that while overall levels of unemployment were high in KN, they were particularly high among women, many of whom had dropped out of the labour force because of relocation. Workers in wage work sectors, mostly women, were hardest hit by the relocation compared to self-employed workers or petty commodity producers. Of all workers, domestic workers in KN had been most severely affected by the move to the urban periphery. Many had abandoned working, and of those who remained in this occupation, the majority continued to travel back across the city to work in their old neighbourhoods. This forced mobility involved high costs, monetary and otherwise, and resulted in frequent job changes and instability.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of women, particularly younger ones, had turned to factory jobs, housekeeping, offices and shops, and other company-based jobs available along the IT corridor. However, as we have discussed elsewhere (see Coelho et al 2012), most of these “company jobs” turned out to be of poor quality, usually casual and insecure, with working conditions and wage levels that were not much better than those in other informal sector occupations, including domestic work. This contributed to a high turnover of jobs among female casual workers in KN.

Domestic work has been analysed as a highly “despised” and low-status occupation, marked by low wages, exploitative working hours and conditions, the absence of social security provisions, and social stigma (Kapadia 2010; Neetha 2004; Roy 2002; Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2007). Kapadia (2010) argues that in the transformed economic and cultural context of contemporary south India, working conditions for low-income women, particularly dalits in occupations like domestic work, deepen the caste and gender subjugation of women workers. She argues that dalit women workers in urban areas lack autonomy and control over their work, wages, and time, and that work under these conditions diminishes their well being instead of empowering them.

Our exploration of domestic work in KN yielded a more complex picture. Against the background of the larger landscape of work opportunities for low-skilled women in KN, domestic work figured as a preferred alternative for a large cohort, especially those who could not meet the stringent conditions of work in factories and shops, and required flexibility in timings and work hours to accommodate household responsibilities. What counted among the advantages of domestic work was the access to non-wage benefits such as emergency loans and other kinds of assistance from employers. Issues of status and stigma tended to push younger dalit workers out of this occupation. Yet, several women who had moved to housekeeping and factory jobs (partly due to the relocation) claimed that they would move back to domestic work if they could find accessible jobs.

This displaces the dominant representation of paid domestic work as exceptional in terms of wages and working conditions, and favours seeing it as a part of the wider reality of casual, ill-paid, and informal labour found even in formal sector establishments in metropolitan economies (see Coelho et al 2012). Such a view would serve in recognising the increasing importance of domestic work as an employment option for sections of working women in urban areas, and help in building strategies for regulating and rendering such work “decent”.

Methodologically, the study comprised two components. The first was a survey of working members in 726 randomly sampled households (roughly 5% of the 15,000-odd tenements) in KN. The survey followed a “before/after relocation” framework in examining occupational shifts, unemployment, travel and associated costs, and difficulties in finding or keeping work. This was followed by a qualitative component, where a sub-sample of workers from specific occupations (17 from the sample of domestic workers) was selected for longer, open-ended interviews. These looked into arrangements, contracts, and working conditions in different occupations, routes for advancement and mobility, workers’ preferences among available jobs, and the implications of KN residence for each kind of job.<sup>5</sup> To obtain a broader picture to contextualise our findings on domestic work in KN, we supplemented our data with focus group discussions and individual interviews with domestic workers (20 in all) in two other slums located in central parts of the city (Mylapore and Choolaimedu). We also interviewed leaders or activists from unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with domestic workers.

### Occupational Distribution

The discussion that follows reveals the gendered distribution of occupations in KN, with women concentrated in low-skilled jobs, predominantly domestic work. However, given the absence of disaggregated data on occupational patterns of the urban poor in slums, it is difficult to analyse this distribution as something specific to resettlement areas. In the 726 households, 1,086 employed persons were surveyed, of which men were more than twice the number of women (784 versus 302). Interestingly, single female-headed households were the exception, contrasting with accounts of increasing female breadwinners in urban contexts in general (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2007), and Tamil Nadu in particular (Kapadia 2010). More than half the households we sampled (407, or 56%) had only one wage-earning member, and they were males in 346, which meant women singly supported only 61 households in our sample.<sup>6</sup> Seen in tandem with our data on work patterns in KN, these numbers point to a relatively low level of female work participation and the challenges that women face in seeking, finding, and retaining work.

Aside from the issue of location, the features of resettlement housing also seem to contribute to this phenomenon. The small tenement-style apartments suit nuclear family households, allowing little scope for the spillover accommodation that often extends households in urban slums. They undermine the neighbourly or extended family support systems for

childcare and household maintenance that tend to form in urban slums. Simultaneously, as the low cost of housing in κN has made it possible for many women to not work, pressures to keep them out of the workforce have intensified. Numerous unemployed women that we interviewed told us that although they wished to find a job, their husbands were opposed to it. The resettlement has brought about a domestication of working-class women, both through the practical difficulties they face in going out to work from κN, and through the establishment of modern patriarchal nuclear family households. The latter echoes the observations of Kapadia (2010) and Anandhi (2007), who note a strengthening of patriarchal norms of female seclusion and subordination among the lower castes in urban areas of Tamil Nadu (largely in imitation of the wealthier conservative castes), even as larger numbers of poor women become primary breadwinners for their families.

The profile of occupations in κN (Table 1) shows a preponderance of manual, unskilled, and semi-skilled jobs, although 28% of the workers in our sample had secondary or higher levels of education. More than 75% of the sampled workers were Hindu, 15% Christian and 6% Muslim. Scheduled castes (scs) formed the largest single category in the sample (55%). scs, scheduled tribes (sts) and most backward classes (MBCs) together accounted for more than 70% of the sample. Non-backward castes accounted for less than 2%, offering further evidence of the overlap between caste and class in urban settlements, and caste segmentation in the spatial arrangement of cities.

**Table 1: Types of Occupations by Gender**

	Occupations	Total (%)	Male	Female
Low skilled	Domestic work	125 (11.3)	4 (0.5)	121 (39.16)
	Housekeeping	46 (4.1)	11 (1.4)	35 (11.33)
	Unskilled manual and construction	131 (12.1)	115 (14.7)	16 (5.3)
	Painting	118 (10.6)	117 (14.9)	1 (0.3)
	Cleaners/helpers	97 (8.9)	62 (7.9)	35 (11.6)
Mixed/semi-skilled	Security	52 (4.7)	51 (6.5)	1 (0.3)
	Petty services	36 (3.2)	31 (3.9)	5 (1.6)
	Factory work	66 (6.0)	41 (5.2)	25 (8.1)
Vocational skills	Vending	41 (3.7)	22 (2.8)	19 (6.2)
	Driving	118 (10.6)	118 (15.0)	0
Soft skills	Skilled construction and technical trades	91 (8.3)	90 (11.5)	1 (0.3)
	Office or sales assistance	68 (6.3)	43 (5.5)	25 (8.3)
	Business, trading	39 (3.5)	32 (4.1)	7 (2.3)
	White-collar salaried	51 (4.7)	40 (5.1)	11 (3.6)
	Others	7 (0.6)	7 (0.9)	0
Total		1,086 (100)	784 (100)	302 (100)

Source: Survey data, 2011-12.

As Table 1 reveals, women workers in κN were concentrated at the unskilled end of the occupational spectrum, in jobs like domestic work, housekeeping, and cleaning/helping (62%). Even the 8% employed in factory work were predominantly in casual unskilled positions (Coelho et al 2012). While the two occupations accounting for the largest proportions of men were unskilled construction and painting (15% each), with security and cleaning absorbing another 15%, more than 40% of men were in more skilled occupations such as driving, skilled construction, and technical trades, or in office or white-collar jobs. In addition, the 5% of men in factory jobs were

mostly employed in skilled segments of production. Thus, not only were more men working than women in κN, but also in better jobs.

In terms of domestic work, our data reflects two findings of studies on informal work in globalising urban economies. First, it points to the importance of domestic work as a source of livelihood for women. In κN, domestic work was the predominant occupational choice of close to 40% of the women workers in our sample. Second, Table 1 shows the feminised character of this occupation (see Neetha 2004; Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2007 for nationwide trends), in contrast to earlier periods (pre-Independence and early post-Independence) when, across the country, large proportions of domestic workers were male (Quayum and Ray 2003; Roy 2002; Neetha 2004). Of the four male domestic workers in our sample, one worked as a cook (a relatively specialised segment of domestic work). The proportion of cooks among women in our sample was very low.<sup>7</sup>

There were few domestic workers in the younger age groups in κN. Of the 125 domestic workers in our sample, only 10 (8%) were under 25 years, and of all the women workers under 25 years, less than 20% opted for this work, compared to 43% and 49% in two older age groups. More than 70% of the domestic workers in the sample had low levels of education (primary or nil). It should be noted, however, that 35 women and two men who had secondary education or school-leaving certificates were also in this occupation.

Domestic work thus remained a preference of middle-aged women with little education. This finding reflected two trends in occupational choice among low-skilled working women, representing both pull and push factors. First, in terms of push, young unmarried women tended to opt for company-based jobs (housekeeping, factory, or sales/office assistance) as they were relatively free to take on full-time jobs with fixed timings. A second push factor was generational mobility. Many working class families in κN, including those of domestic workers, had invested in educating their children, and preferred that they move into white-collar jobs, or at least into formal sector jobs such as housekeeping or company work. To some extent, status considerations played a part in this – while the majority of domestic workers we interviewed did not consider their occupations demeaning, they did not wish to see their children in it. Younger workers with little education also preferred to take up housekeeping – similar work in an official or formal setting – at least partly because of its more professional ethos. One middle-aged woman in the sample had quit domestic work because her children did not want her to continue in it. In terms of pull factors, domestic work seemed to offer an opportunity for women to work after marriage and childbirth, providing flexible working hours that allowed them to balance household responsibilities with the need of an income.

The caste profile of domestic workers in our sample was mixed, in contrast to studies by Kapadia (2010) and others, which find that this occupation is mainly pursued by dalit women. While 59% of the domestic workers in our sample

were scs, the rest were from MBCs and backward classes (BCs). In our qualitative interviews, several women from these latter categories, who had long been working as domestic workers, expressed a strong preference for it over other possible occupations. They also said that caste did not play a marked role in structuring access to work or working conditions, although a few mentioned barriers to low-caste women working as cooks or entering kitchens, particularly in brahmin homes. There were also suggestions (though not explicitly stated) that some sc women preferred shifting to housekeeping or other work to escape the discrimination that they sometimes experienced in domestic work. What we were unable to ascertain is the extent to which caste networks played a role in structuring access to jobs in particular niche markets within the occupation, and, more importantly, the extent to which the participation of higher caste (bc) women had served to reduce its low-status image.

**Spatial Dynamics of Domestic Work**

This section explores the effects of spatial dislocation on domestic workers based in KN, drawing on comparative insights from interviews with domestic workers in core parts of the city. It highlights spatial variations in markets for domestic work, which account for the continuing long-distance commute of most old-time domestic workers from KN. It also highlights the finding that flexibility of timings, a key factor in the preference for domestic work, was significantly compromised by the relocation. As women constituted 97% of domestic workers in our sample, the discussion here focuses on female domestic workers.

**Table 2: Domestic Women Workers in KN, Past and Present**

Domestic workers presently employed	121
Domestic workers before and after relocation	74
New entrants to domestic work since relocation	47
Domestic workers who moved to other occupations after relocation	30
Domestic workers who quit working after relocation	69

Source: Survey data.

The figure of 121 current domestic workers in KN represents only a small static slice in time (Table 2). Large numbers of women moved out of or to this occupation following the move to KN. Most significantly, 99 women had left this occupation after the relocation, of which 69 had quit working altogether and 30 had moved to other occupations. The effect of relocation on domestic workers in KN could be seen in the high rate of job turnover, and the high rate of unemployment among domestic workers. The following discussion helps to explain the reasons for the insecurity of job tenure among domestic workers from KN.

**Forced Mobility**

As Table 2 points out, 74 women remained in this occupation after the move, and 47 were new entrants. For most of the old-timers, the relocation meant that they were forced to travel daily to their old neighbourhoods to work, over distances ranging from 5 km to 25 km. As Table 3 shows, 53 (or two-thirds) of the 74 who continued in domestic work went back to

work in their old locations, even if they left their old jobs. The costs involved in this commute, in terms of time and bus fare, were significant, even for those travelling to close neighbourhoods (such as Adyar or Santhome), and bordered on the prohibitive for areas further away (like Kilpauk). For example, the cheapest return bus fare to Adyar was Rs 18 per day, with a travel time of 30-40 minutes each way; to Santhome it was Rs 22-27 with a travel time of 45 minutes, and to Kilpauk it was Rs 50 a day, with a travel time of 1.5 to 2 hours. Entire cohorts of women from different areas of KN (resettled en masse from different parts of the city) made daily trips back and forth for a few hours of work. Why did they do this?

**Table 3: Work Location of KN's Domestic Workers**

Job Locations	Domestic Workers before and after Relocation	New Domestic Workers	Total
Closer to KN	17	27	44
Closer to previous location	53	16	69
No response	4	4	8
Total	74	47	121

Source: Survey data.

Part of the explanation lies in the differentiated nature of markets for domestic work across the city, with various sets of advantages and disadvantages in different locational segments. Many neighbourhoods in central parts of the city, such as Adyar, Mylapore and Kilpauk (from where large numbers of families were evicted before being resettled in KN), offered better wages and working conditions than the newer, smaller apartments found in the residential complexes on the IT corridor.<sup>8</sup> Domestic workers who returned to the city earned around Rs 1,500 to Rs 5,000 (or an average of about Rs 2,200) per month, depending on the number of hours and/or houses they worked. This was about Rs 500 more than that earned by those working in the new areas close to KN.

Yet, a good part of the gain was offset by the cost of travel (which increased significantly after the hike in public transport fares in late 2010) and the reduced number of working hours. Essentially, the major explanation for women travelling to the city for work was the difficulties of entry to domestic work markets, and the importance of using and maintaining existing relationships and networks.

**Difficulties of Entry**

A crucial feature of markets for domestic work, across many city neighbourhoods, is difficulty in accessing jobs. Domestic work is commonly portrayed as work that entails almost no entry conditions (Neetha 2004; Roy 2002) because it requires few skills beyond those that women routinely use in their own homes. This, however, does not mean that these jobs are easy to get. In all areas of the city where we interviewed domestic workers, they reported great difficulty in obtaining work, particularly in older settled neighbourhoods where there was a saturation of workers, in some areas due to intra-state migration, often temporary.<sup>9</sup> Workers also said that employers were reluctant to hire unless candidates were recommended by somebody they knew and trusted. Strong recommendations, a good reputation, and active networks were needed to access the jobs that became available.

Living in KN posed special challenges. Many workers said that this tended to put employers off. The stigma attached to workers from KN was affirmed by the heads and staff of an NGO that ran a placement agency for domestic workers, and reiterated by several KN workers in other occupations (Coelho et al 2012). Maintaining contacts with local workers (including watchmen/security guards or ironing men/women) and good relationships with employers, and sticking to known areas and networks was therefore very important for workers from KN.

The same factor explains why more than half the new entrants to this sector, as Table 3 shows, took jobs in the vicinity of KN. New entrants did not possess the recommendations and relationships required to access established markets in the city, and struggled to access emerging markets closer to the resettlement site. The lower wage rates in these areas were compensated by the lower commute time and cost and the greater flexibility of timings. Over time, there appears to be a shift in KN towards giving up long-distance jobs and settling for jobs in local markets, which have the advantage of flexibility of timings.

**Compromised Flexibility**

Flexibility of timings emerged as the single most important consideration that favoured domestic work as an option against other possible occupations for unskilled women. In all the areas, the popularity of domestic work lay in that it allowed unskilled working-class women to earn an income, however small, while continuing to fulfil their (largely unchanged) role as primary caretakers of their children and household. This flexibility represented an “agreement”, or a settlement (however asymmetrical in power terms) between employers – middle- or upper-class women – and workers over the shared exigencies of household reproductive roles. This also explained the rising popularity of part-time jobs in this sector, and the demographic character of its workforce – married women with young children, or middle-aged women with significant household responsibilities. Many of these women had, before marriage, worked full-time jobs in factories, shops, tailoring units, or export houses, but moved to domestic work after marriage.

This framework was somewhat altered in KN, where the conditions of commute compromised the crucial feature of flexibility, forcing a large number of women to give up domestic work after marriage and childbirth. The flexibility of timings that typically allow domestic workers to service multiple homes and work multiple shifts was significantly reduced, as workers were unable to return to their worksites for a second shift or missed out on jobs that required early morning or late evening shifts. However, many factors apart from commute also contributed to their reduced flexibility. Conditions of living in KN for several years after the resettlement made childcare and household maintenance particularly challenging, owing to factors such as irregular water supply, lack of local schools, and the lack of local networks for childcare. Also, for several years, the character of KN as described by women (marked by drunkenness, fights, and “rowdyism”)

made them reluctant to leave their children unattended in the area. In addition, there was a hardening of norms of female domesticity, prioritising household maintenance and children’s education over outside employment.

**Alternative Occupations**

All of the above factors help to explain the frequent changes in jobs as well as the high rates of unemployment seen among domestic workers in KN. Thirty domestic workers moved to other occupations after moving to KN, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Occupational Shifts of Domestic Workers after Relocation**

New Occupations	Number of Domestic Workers
Housekeeping	13
Factory and office workers	5
Unskilled construction	7
Vending	3
No response	2
Total	30

Source: Survey data.

The majority of domestic workers who changed occupation after the relocation moved into housekeeping, and factory and office work. These jobs not only offered an avenue for young unskilled female workers to escape from low-status domestic work, but also an alternative for older women who lacked the networks and contacts to obtain domestic work. However, as we have discussed elsewhere (Coelho et al 2012), these jobs, although relatively easy to obtain locally, turned out to be of very poor quality – casual and highly insecure, long and inflexible working hours, hard working conditions, scant provisions for leave, and wage rates that were (on an hourly basis) not much higher than those obtained in domestic work.

Housekeeping is a term denoting janitorial services provided to companies. Despite its similarity to domestic work, some key features, in particular the organisation of workers into teams and that tasks are carried out in non-domestic spaces, change the character and meaning of such work. It also mitigates some of the negative aspects associated with domestic work, among them the issue of status. Yet, housekeeping jobs were almost universally reported to be physically taxing, and offered limited opportunities for occupational mobility. The highest position a worker (with educational qualifications) could attain was that of supervisor. In general, housekeeping jobs, as described by the workers, were marked by insecure and tenuous contracts, working conditions that permitted only able-bodied workers to remain for long durations, and high costs in terms of workers’ household obligations. Wages ranged from Rs 1,000 for part-time work to Rs 7,000 for full-time work, or an average of Rs 3,330. Unsurprisingly, several of the housekeeping workers said that they preferred domestic work and would readily shift if they could find jobs in that sector.

Proximity to the IT corridor and the industrial belt of Thoraipakkam/Perungudi had also made available a range of factory jobs, which were, again, predominantly casual. Several female factory workers had worked in casual jobs for more than 15 years in the same company, and reported a ceiling on upward mobility for women, with permanent positions reserved for male workers. Working conditions were taxing here too. One KN worker said, “We had hourly targets to meet, and

we could only achieve that by standing” (interviewed on 24 June 2012). Workers were often paid on the basis of daily attendance, with wages cut for each day of leave taken. Full-time wages for casual workers in factory jobs ranged from about Rs 3,000 to Rs 7,200. Benefits were absent in these jobs, except for the provident fund (PF) and employees’ state insurance (ESI) schemes. The rate of movement in and out of these jobs testified partly to the insecurity of contracts, and partly to unsustainable conditions of labour. Many women we interviewed had left their factory jobs due to the hardships involved and effects on their health.

From the perspective of working women, domestic work had several advantages over housekeeping and factory work, primary among them being the flexibility of working hours. Another important advantage that several women mentioned was the access it gave them to emergency loans from employers, and assistance in the form of, for example, school fees for children. Domestic workers evaluated their overall experiences of work in this sector in a positive light, notwithstanding low wages and other challenges. They were also almost unanimous in that they were not ashamed of this work and did not consider it demeaning, as it gave them an income and allowed them to educate their children. The vast majority of women interviewed claimed to have control over their earnings.

**Resilience of Domestic Work**

Overall unemployment was high in KN, yielding a ratio of 17% unemployed to employed people in the sample (Coelho et al 2012). Of 181 unemployed people (120 women, 60 men, and one transgender person who identified herself as a woman) actively seeking employment, 122 had been previously employed and 58 were looking for their first job. In addition, 165 people (125 women and 40 men) had worked before but did not intend to work anymore. Together, 287 people who had worked before had either lost employment or abandoned working (122 plus 165). Of these, 207 were women (82 plus 125). Domestic constraints, cited by almost half the respondents, were the primary reason for workers dropping out of the labour market. As mentioned, although relocation to KN was not directly cited by many, the locational, logistical, and social features of resettlement played a strong role in making domestic circumstances unfavourable to outside employment. Women were more vulnerable, which is evident from their disproportionate share in the unemployed category. Health and age also played a big role in constraining employment possibilities in KN – in many cases, even relatively minor ailments (dizziness, blood pressure, or a small injury) made it difficult for workers to negotiate crowded buses and long commutes to and from the settlement. All this pointed to underemployment in a very real sense.

Sixty-nine (or 35%) of the women who had lost or left work were previously domestic workers. Close to half the unemployed (52%) cited locational issues and domestic responsibilities as reasons for unemployment, and 38% cited illness, injury, or old age. Of those currently employed, 48 had undergone periods of unemployment since the relocation,

ranging from a few months to five years. Again, this was mainly ascribed to the location of KN. Most of these periods of unemployment occurred in the early years after the move, when the dislocation of networks and difficulties of travel were most acute.

**Previous Occupations**

The category of work in which the most number of unemployed people had been previously engaged was domestic work (24%), followed by factory work, and office assistance (Table 5). In all three, women predominated (of the 49 erstwhile factory workers that reported unemployment, 40 were women). Occupations in which very few or none reported unemployment were painting, autorickshaw driving, trading, vending, skilled construction work, and skilled technical trades, all dominated by men.

**Table 5: Previous Occupations of Unemployed Workers in KN**

Occupations	No	%
Domestic work	70	24.3
Housekeeping	12	4.2
Unskilled manual and construction work	20	6.9
Painting	1	0.3
Cleaners/helpers/peons	25	8.7
Security	12	4.2
Factory work	49	17.0
Vending	6	2.1
Car driving	6	2.1
Skilled construction work and technical trades	11	3.8
Office assistant/sales	32	11.1
Business/trading/contracting	2	0.7
White-collar work	21	7.3
Other	18	6.2
Total	287	100

Source: Survey data.

Aside from (but overlapping with) the gender dimension, this pointed to a distinction between wage work and self-employed occupations, with workers in the former clearly more vulnerable to losing employment than petty commodity producers, and independent and self-employed workers. Occupations in fixed establishments (houses, factories and offices) were also more vulnerable to disruption following relocation than jobs that changed location (auto driving, construction, or painting). For these and other reasons, male workers appeared to have weathered the shift better than women.

Yet, an analysis of the jobs sought by unemployed workers in KN revealed that domestic work was still the single most wanted work, even among those seeking to enter the labour force. It was sought by about 27% of unemployed women in general, and about a third of first-time job seekers. As mentioned, these largely represented older women in the sample.

Despite the difficulties outlined, domestic work clearly continues to attract significant numbers of women workers. What this finding suggests is that ultimately domestic work is less a matter of choice than of a lack of choice. This study highlights that for unskilled women (primarily of the lowest

castes and disadvantaged communities) needing to earn an income while fulfilling their household responsibilities, domestic work remains among the few available avenues, no matter where they live or the conditions under which they have to work.

### Conclusions

The persisting or increasing centrality of domestic work in the spectrum of employment options for working-class women, even in a spatial context where other options are available, makes it important to recognise and address it as part of the larger problematic of informal sector employment in Indian cities, rather than as a pathological manifestation of persisting feudal, class, or caste relations. Caste and gender continue to structure the occupational landscape, more sharply in the ghettoised spaces in India's globalising cities. Yet, our discussions with domestic workers across the city highlighted the pull factors that made domestic work an important option for low-skilled working women within the larger realities

of informal labour and the largely unchanged division of labour within households. This framework of analysis strengthens the argument for recognition and regulation of domestic work as a category of labour that has to be turned into "decent work".

This study has also drawn attention to the fact that domestic work is not monolithic. Its profile, markets, and mechanics vary significantly across different parts of even a single city. Wage levels, demand and supply dynamics, working conditions, and the negotiating power of domestic workers are determined by a range of factors arising from the economic and social geography of a city. This includes, among other things, the relative affluence and class character of neighbourhoods, the alternative options locally available for unskilled women workers, and the demographics of working-class settlements in the area. Finally, the study highlights the critical importance of affordable, accessible, and adequately serviced housing in facilitating viable and dignified livelihoods for domestic workers.

### NOTES

- 1 Despite their observation on the continuity of feudal forms and ethos in the contemporary landscape of domestic work, Quayum and Ray (2003) acknowledge the definitive transformations possible through workers achieving residential autonomy, or a home of their own.
- 2 For a history of slum clearance policies in Chennai, see Raman (2011), Coelho and Raman (2010), Pugh (1991).
- 3 The study was carried out by the Madras Institute of Development Studies, in collaboration with Transparent Chennai, a programme of the Centre for Development Finance, Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR). It explored the impact of the forced relocation on the livelihoods of the urban working poor, the resulting ruptures and/or continuities in their work patterns, networks, skill development and career mobility, the opportunities and challenges provided by the new settlement, and how these dynamics affected groups of relocated people differently. See Coelho et al (2012) for a fuller discussion of the findings.
- 4 For several years, KN was known (in press reports as well in public discourse) as a den of crime, drunkenness, and violence. But that the situation improved with the establishment of a police station in the settlement.
- 5 As these were one-off interviews rather than sustained ethnographic relationships, they suffer from the biases and limitations inherent in research conducted across class/caste lines, which was only partly offset by our long period of contact with the settlement and the large sample covered through both qualitative and survey interviews.
- 6 An important caveat here is the high rate of alcoholism reported among men. Several men who had been formally recorded as employed hardly went to work, and women were supporting their families with their earnings. In the light of this, our data probably underestimates the number of de facto female-supported households in our sample.
- 7 The survey did not yield uniform data on specialisations within domestic work, but of the 17 female domestic workers we interviewed in our qualitative round, only one worked as a cook.
- 8 A significant part of these apartments on the IT corridor comprised group rentals, where

several working men, usually bachelors, lived together. These employers were more transient than established single-family households, and also less likely to extend the kind of non-wage assistance that domestic workers counted on.

9 Interviews with paid domestic workers from central city areas of Mylapore and Choolaimedu revealed that conditions in these areas were as challenging as that of KN, for different but overlapping reasons. Of the 20 women interviewed in these pockets, the majority undertook only two tasks each, for a total of three or four hours, earning Rs 2,500 to Rs 3,500. Most asserted that they would like to work more, but could not find jobs. Markets for paid domestic work in these areas appeared to be strongly supply-driven. Women from Choolaimedu said that there are many women available for domestic work in their areas, including recent settlers, intra-state migrants, and even temporary visitors from rural areas. One woman said, "If I hear there is a job available, within the five minutes that it takes me to go home and tell my friends or family about it, it will be taken". In Mylapore, women said that in the past employers would come to their settlements looking for workers, but now workers were constantly on the lookout for jobs. This partly explains the long work tenures of domestic workers (most had been working for the same employers for between eight to 18 years, or more) in these two areas, in contrast to the high turnover of KN workers.

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