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Understanding Women Domestic Workers: A Multi-Theoretical Sociological Examination

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Received-02.07.2026,

Revised-09.07.2026,

Accepted-15.07.2026,

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Abstract: *With the advent of globalisation and shift in urban economic systems, the participation of women domestic workers is steadily expanding in the economy. They constitute the most essential yet invisible and undervalued labour force of the economy. Women Domestic Workers form a part of India's informal sector which is the backbone of its economy as 90 percent of all the workers are employed under informal arrangements nationally according to the WIEGO statistical data (August 2020). The informal sector accounted for nearly 45 percent of India's total GDP in the financial year 2022-2023 as per the National Accounts Statistics Data released by Press Information Bureau on January 30, 2025. Informal Sector as a concept was emerged in 1970s by Keith Hart. Women Domestic Workers are individuals employed in the informal sector, primarily serving as household helpers. They perform a variety of household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, child care, elderly care and overall household maintenance which help families to sustain and facilitate family members especially women to participate in the formal sector of the economy. This research paper aims to critically understand and analyse the women domestic workers through multiple theoretical lenses of sociology in the rapidly changing contemporary society.*

Key words: *Women Domestic Workers, globalization, urban economic systems, WIEGO, child care, elderly care.*

Introduction- Women domestic workers refer to individuals who perform various household chores in the private realm of the employer in return for monetary compensation. These household tasks are regular routine jobs essential to maintain the well-being of the members of household. These household chores include cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare and caregiving for the elderly. Historically, the organisation of labour reflected societal beliefs that men and women were naturally suited to different kinds of work. American Sociologist Talcott Parsons in his book *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* (1955), discusses key gender roles in the nuclear family setting, required to maintain social order in the society. He mentions specialized gender-specific roles which are complimentary to each other i.e. Instrumental and Expressive roles. He asserts that "The father role is relative to the others high both on power and on instrumentality, hence low on expressiveness. The mother role is high on power & on expressiveness, thus low in instrumentality". Talcott Parsons further states that "The Instrumental-expressive distinction we interpret as essentially the differentiation of function and hence of relative influence in terms of 'external' v/s 'internal' functions of the system. The area of instrumental function concern relations of the system to its situation outside the system, to meeting the adaptive conditions of its maintenance of equilibrium and 'instrumentality' establishing the desired relation to external goal-objects. The expressive area concerns the 'internal' affairs of the system, the maintenance if integrative relations between the members and regulation of the patterns and tension levels of its component units". Therefore, Instrumental roles are performed by male members of the family, focused on employment and earning income to provide financial stability to the family. On the other hand, expressive roles are performed by female members of the family, focused on emotional support, nurturing children and managing the household. Therefore, domestic work was predominantly performed by women within their households and was treated as a part of their familial responsibilities. However, in the transitioning global economic scenario, Paid Domestic Work and Capitalism are closely linked to each other. The term Capitalism was coined in the mid-nineteenth century by Louis Blanc and Pierre Joseph Proudhon. Louis Blanc, in his book, *The Organization of Labour* (1839) endorse that Capitalism led to disproportionate allocation of resources and wealth which lead to joblessness and pay disparity and asserts that state should intertwine through workshops to eliminate social oppression and discrimination. Pierre Joseph Proudhon's book, *What is Property* (1840) quotes that "Property is Theft" denotes that the ownership of resources utilised to exploit other's labour for making profit and he was not against property in general, he was particularly condemned the illegitimate profiting from other's sweat. In addition to this, Karl Marx, in his *Das Kapital* (1867) undertaken a rigorous analysis of capitalist mode of production, examining the interplay between labour, value and capital. Capitalism has transformed household chores and care-related activities into market-based services. With the emergence of capitalist economies, urbanisation, industrialisation and increasing female labour force participation, the tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare and elder-care which were once performed within the private residential space by predominantly women is now commodified and outsourced to paid women domestic workers. As per the Press Information Bureau press release of Ministry of Women and Child Development, the female labour



force participation has improved significantly from 32.8% in 2021-2022 to 37% in 2022-2023. Women obtaining high levels of education, become a part of formal sector of the economy contribute to economic growth as well as household income. This reflects gradual change in gender norms and increasing demand of skilled labour in the formal sector irrespective of gender. Additionally, women's participation in formal employment has significantly reshaped the gender roles within the household. Traditionally, women who were expected to perform unpaid domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare and elderly care are now exhibiting greater involvement in income generating activities. Dr. Prasanna Kumari K (2019) concluded that traditional norms and society's expectations have continued to restrict women's equality at par with men. Furthermore, Dr. Prasanna Kumari K (2019) cited that globalization and modernization together with women's education and labour force participation play a significant role in changing gender roles in India. Therefore, the time available for these daily routing household chores has been notably constrained. To bridge this gap, household depend on the services of women domestic workers to perform a variety of household and caregiving activities. The role of women domestic workers enables working women who are engaged in formal sector to sustain their participation in labour market. Thus, in the dual-income families where both men and women are engaged in formal sector, women domestic workers play an extremely crucial role in supporting the everyday functioning of the households. Dr. Jayanta Parida (2025) conducted his study in Bhubaneswar Municipal Area on 75 marries dual earner couples through Random Sampling using closed ended questionnaire. His study identified that the greatest challenge was to balance paid employment with household responsibilities and women encountered double burden of paid and unpaid work. He further stated that traditional gender norms reinforced greater expectations from women to fulfil household responsibilities. However, the transformation of gender roles has led to growing dependence on domestic workers to manage household responsibilities. Moreover, the family structures are transitioning from nuclear to joint family setup due to migration to urban areas for better job opportunities, enhanced educational prospects and aspirations for a higher quality of life. Dr. Ankit Singh (2024) asserted that the trend and reasons of migration in Eastern Uttar Pradesh on the basis of secondary data retrieved from Census of India 2011. The finding of the study states migration from Eastern Uttar Pradesh is caused due to marriage, employment, education and family-related reasons. Marriage is the primary reason for migration particularly among women. On the contrary, educational migration and employment related migration are prominent among people of Eastern Uttar Pradesh to advanced regional hubs. In joint family setup, multiple generations live together under a common roof and share responsibilities related to household chores, childcare and elderly care. This shared collective responsibility reduces the dependence on paid domestic workers as various household responsibilities are shared among the family members. In urban areas, the increasing prevalence of nuclear family households is often influenced by constraints such as limited housing space and high rental costs. As a result, only the economically active members of the family, including both men and women, may relocate to cities in search of employment and educational opportunities, while other family members, particularly older adults, remain in their hometowns within an intergenerational family arrangement. The separation of family members reduces the availability of unpaid support traditionally provided by relatives for household management and caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, urban households frequently rely on paid domestic workers to assist with tasks such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, and eldercare.

This research paper attempts to examine the key sociological frameworks including functionalist, conflict and intersectionality perspective where each theoretical framework attempts to sociologically understand the domestic workers within the contemporary society.

Functionalist Perspective- Functionalist Perspective views society as a complex macro-level system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability in the society. It basically focuses on the social structures and social institutions that shape a particular society. It examines how each of these social structures and social institutions carryout specific functions in the society. An English Philosopher and Psychologist Herbert Spencer developed the concept of organic analogy in which the different organs of a biological organism have been equated with the various social structures and institutions of the society. He further explains that a biological organism is composed of interconnected organs in the body and they work together to ensure the survival and functioning of the organism. Similarly, the society is an organized system of inter-related structures and institutions such as family, marriage, kinship and each one of them is integral which works together to form a stable society as a whole. One of the classical sociologists Emile Durkheim stated that society is *Sui Generis* which means society has an entity in itself with its own structures, norms, values and institutions. However, at the same time, society in the form of these societal units exert coercive



influence over its individuals as well. His foundational work “The Division of Labour in Society” published in 1893 states a core idea that different parts of the society perform its specialised functions which creates social cohesion through interdependence. He further mentions that these specialised functions are desirable and inevitable for the society to move towards greater solidarity and autonomy. With the help of Durkheim’s functional framework, it can be inferred that women domestic workers constitute a distinct and specialised occupational role in the modern society. According to M Francis Abraham (1982), in his book *Modern Sociological Theory*, he stated that “A system is more than sum of its parts, it is also the relationship among its parts, their primary interest is in the contribution of the elements to the maintenance of the system”. Likewise, women domestic workers are an indispensable component that contributes to the overall functioning of the society. Domestic workers perform a variety of functions notably kitchen work, cleaning, elderly care, child care and other miscellaneous work necessary to sustain the household. Domestic workers are crucial particularly in the urban nuclear family setup as they ensure that the basic needs of the dependent family members in the household are fulfilled where other family members especially women are unable to perform all necessary domestic tasks due to paid employment, age or prolonged illness.

Conflict Perspective- On the other hand, conflict perspective is diametrically opposite of functionalist perspective which indicates that society is in a constant state of conflict and competition for limited resources. This framework particularly helps to understand the influence of power-structure, economic inequality and gender oppression on employer-employee relationships. With the help of this perspective, it can be perceived that the private realm of the employer i.e. his residential unit can be a site of exploitation, domination and resistance. One of the conflict perspective thinker Karl Marx developed the theory of class struggle which is based on the mode of production (land, labour, capital, technology etc) and the relations of production (ownership and control). A class is defined by its relationship with the means of production which states who owns, who controls and who works. Karl Marx further identifies 2 classes in a capitalist society. Bourgeoise (Capitalist Class) who owns the means of production i.e. factory, land, labour, machine etc. Another is Proletariat (Working Class) who doesn’t own the means of production and labour power is the only asset which they sell to survive. Marx critically examines these two classes in the capitalist society and states that capitalist class create profit/wealth through surplus value extracted from working class. The sole interest of capitalist class is profit-maximisation which lead to exploitation of working class through overwork and low wages. Therefore, domestic work can be examined through the lens of class conflict where employer can be viewed as bourgeoisie and domestic can be viewed as proletariat. Both occupy different positions in the class structure with distinct vested interests. Dr. Shashikala T’s (2023) research indicates that women engaged in domestic work constitute a severely neglected segment within India’s unorganised sector. Lacking formal protection and recognition, they endure discrimination, exploitation and violence in their workplaces. Commonly from lower castes and classes, they experience challenges such as illiteracy heavy physical labour and meagre pay without job security. Dr. Anuja Agrawal (2008) in her research highlights the exploitative character of domestic work marked by the absence of job security, minimal bargaining power regarding wages, lack of regulation over working hours and no entitlement to paid leave. Aditi Katara and Dr. Pragya Sharma’s (2023) study showed the in-depth insight of the women domestic workers in metropolitan India. More women are turning to domestic work to sustain their families amidst economic challenges. However, employers often demand high productivity from these workers while offering minimal support. They further stated that domestic work remains disorganised, poorly remunerated and undervalued. While serving as a crucial livelihood for many uneducated and unskilled urban women, the living conditions of domestic workers require urgent attention. Women in domestic work face heightened vulnerability due to patriarchal violence, social disparities and power imbalances intensifying their socio-political marginalization. On the whole, conflict perspective deep delves into the critical experiences of women domestic workers with respect to power relations, inequality and social structure. This perspective laid a foundation for necessary social change which leads to improvement in the rights of domestic workers, their dignity and fair treatment.

Intersectionality- Sociological Perspective- Domestic workers when studied through the sociological lens of intersectionality shifts the focus of study to understand how interconnected social categories such as gender, class, race and sexuality collectively influence individual’s lived experiences and contribute to unique forms of discrimination and privilege. It can further help to understand how these factors influence the experiences, opportunities and vulnerabilities for domestic workers within the society. The concept of intersectionality was introduced by American legal scholar and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. It highlights how different social identities and categories—such as race, caste,

gender, class, ethnicity, culture, and religion—interact with one another to shape an individual's experiences of privilege and discrimination. Rather than viewing forms of inequality in isolation, intersectionality emphasizes that multiple dimensions of identity often overlap and create unique patterns of disadvantage. A. Gurtoo's (2016) study which is based on the questionnaire survey of 487 workers in Karnataka reveals that feminization of the nature of the work of female women domestic workers together with employer-employee relationship shapes the workplace experiences of these workers. Innate caring and nurturing qualities of women result in the feminization of their nature of work. Intimate residential unit of the employer is the workplace of women domestic workers often lead to precarious, exploitative and abusive nature of their work. Therefore, both these intersecting factors affect the economic well-being of these women domestic workers. The author concludes by discussing the importance of effective implementation of various legislations and policies made for these women household helpers. Additionally, Aishwarya Arora (2023) in her study reveals the lived experiences of Dalit women domestic workers in India. It brings out the various forms of discrimination created due to intersecting social categories of caste and gender. She further mentions that these Dalit women domestic workers are hired for performing polluting tasks such as cleaning toilets, sweeping floors etc. On the other hand, entry into the kitchen is reserved for upper-caste workers. Therefore, these workers experience physical exclusion as they are considered impure and unhygienic due to their lower-caste. Additionally, they also experience social-exclusion on the basis of caste-based discrimination and lead to reduced access to domestic work opportunities. On the whole, an intersectional perspective demonstrates that the difficulties of women domestic workers are not only a result of discrimination based on gender. The complex interplay of elements like caste, class, race, religion, migrant status and other social identities shape their life. These interlinked types of inequality often place people in vulnerable positions in both labour markets and society. Furthermore, it draws attention to the need to restructure labour laws and social welfare programs that respond to the realities of overlapping kinds of disadvantage.

Research Methodology- This study is based on the secondary data which include research papers, research articles, internet sources and various theories given by popular theorists on informal sector, women domestic workers and gendered nature of work. Functionalist, conflict, and intersectionality frameworks serve as a few meaningful theoretical sociological lenses inculcated to understand the role, position, and challenges of domestic workers in contemporary society. By examining domestic work through these diverse sociological lenses, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social structures, power relations, and inequalities that shape the everyday realities of domestic workers.

Objectives-

1. To study the roles and experiences of women domestic help from a functionalist viewpoint.
2. To investigate the socio-economic realities of women domestic workers from a conflict-theoretical perspective.
3. To explore how intersecting social identities shape the experiences of women domestic workers.

Analysis- In the rapidly changing economic structure, women domestic workers are absolutely essential for the households especially in urban areas and urban fringes. But still their contribution remains invisible, undervalued and marginalised in the economy. Study of women domestic workers through the theoretical frameworks of functionalism, conflict and intersectionality put forth the need for effective laws and policy implementation to ensure fair wages, legal protection, social security and recognition of their valuable contribution in the society. Perceiving women domestic workers with dignity and respect is essential for promoting social justice and building a more equitable and inclusive society.

Conclusion- In conclusion, women domestic workers are a vital but frequently neglected sector of the workforce, particularly in the context of rising urbanisation and changing economic structures. Their work is critical to supporting households and allowing other family members to participate in the formal economy. However, even with their necessary contribution, domestic work still tends to be invisible, lacks social respect and remains marginalised.

The application of functionalist, conflict and intersectionality frameworks is useful in understanding the realities of women domestic workers. Functionalism emphasises their importance in the smooth running of households and society but the conflict viewpoint reveals the inequities, power imbalances and exploitative labour relations of domestic employment. The intersectionality framework also highlights how gender, class, caste and other social identities shape the experiences of domestic workers and create unique forms of privilege and discrimination. The recognition of women domestic workers' rights, dignity, and contributions



is vital for fostering social justice and strengthening an inclusive social order which can be achievable through effective implementation of legislations and policies.

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