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SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF EMPOWERMENT LEVEL OF THE FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS OF THE MUNICIPAL AREAS OF THE COOCH BEHAR DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

Domestic work is one of the most common jobs for rural women in Cooch Behar, yet little is known about how much control these women have over their own lives. This cross-sectional study looks at the socio-economic factors linked to empowerment among 317 female domestic workers who travel from rural areas to work in the district's six municipalities. We interviewed them between February 2019 and January 2020. Socio-economic status was scored using the Revised Udai Pareek scale and empowerment was measured through 14 questions covering mobility, political participation, use of income, and decision-making, and combined into a single score using the TOPSIS method. We analysed the data with chi-square tests and logistic regression. About 80 percent of the surveyed domestic workers belongs to the lower socio-economic class. Many of the study participants had limited empowerment on savings (67%), visiting a bank/an ATM (39%) and spending for essentials such as their children's education (54%) or medicines (59%). Yet most (>80%) could decide what to buy for the household, whether to change employers, and how to spend their own earnings. The analysis based on TOPSIS score suggests that 39 percent surveyed individuals were under 'low empowerment level'. No significant association was observed between marital status and empowerment level. Part-time work and longer experience also raised the odds. Better legal protection, working conditions, and access to financial services could help these women gain more control over their lives.

Keywords: Domestic Workers; Decision Making; Empowerment; Freedom; TOPSIS

Introduction

Domestic workers account for a significant portion of the labour force in the informal sector of Indian society (Kuriakose and Iyer, 2016). A domestic worker, also known as domestic help, performs several household chores such as cleaning utensils, washing

clothes, cooking, and, to some extent, babysitting in exchange for wages or sometimes in kind, depending on the requirements of the employer (ILO, 2018). To alleviate their economic burden, they continue to work tirelessly for prolonged hours in multiple households in return for comparatively meagre wages (Kuriakose and Iyer, 2016; ILO, 2018). Their income does not justify their workload (>8 hours daily), hampers their living standard, and compels them to seek other benefits. Even in their occupation, the domestic workers are not entitled to receive sick leave or paid leave, pension schemes, etc (Bhattacharjee and Goswami, 2020). Hence, the deprived workers always remain at the very bottom level of socio-economic status. However, it is surprising to know that the domestic workers, in both their domestic and occupational spheres, experience far more disastrous situations than economic burden. The list includes not only their extreme physical exertion, poor health, and malnutrition (Kundu, 2008) but also exploitation in the labour market (Majid, 2000), maltreatment from their employers (Neetha, 2008), and discrimination in the workplace. In the absence of appropriate legal and regulatory provisions, all these facts indicate that the domestic workers are in an underprivileged situation, and this call for a deeper understanding of their level of autonomy in both the domestic and occupational spheres and what factors influence them.

The present study takes the opportunity to explore both the aspects, *viz.,* socio-economic status, and level of autonomy of the domestic workers working in the municipal areas of Cooch Behar district. Cooch Behar district is not only located in the northern part of West Bengal but also shares international borders with Bangladesh and Bhutan, as well as state borders with Assam and other districts of West Bengal (Hoque and Kalita, 2021). The economy of the Cooch Behar district is generally governed by agriculture, which is driven by the cultivation of rice, jute, and tobacco, supported by rivers such as the Teesta and Jaldhaka (Meitei, 2021). Despite its fertile land, the district faces recurrent floods that disrupt agriculture, along with poor infrastructure and limited industrialisation. These challenges have led to significant male out- migration to urban centres. These limitations lead the Cooch Behar district to high-poverty regions, with poverty levels exceeding the West Bengal average (Kamal, 2009). An even lower literacy rate among rural females has often been encountered in the district. This combination of poverty, low literacy, and environmental vulnerability underscores the rural crisis in the study area. In this scenario, most of the female workers from rural areas came for household chores in the different municipal areas of the Cooch Behar district (Mahalanabis, 2012). The objectives of the present study are to investigate their socio-economic status and to understand their level of empowerment in various lifestyle aspects, as well as to identify the factors behind the level of their empowerment.

Methodology

Study design

The present cross-sectional study was conducted in six urban municipal areas of the Cooch Behar district over a period of one year, from February 2019 to January 2020,

except during the Monsoon (May-July). The sample constituted only the adult female domestic workers who worked at the households of these urban municipal areas but lived in the adjacent rural parts of the district. The female domestic workers are unable to attend work during the monsoon season due to heavy rainfall. The continuous downpour has created difficult travel conditions, making it unsafe and inconvenient for them to reach their workplace. The survey was conducted by the lead author, who visited the domestic workers either at their homes or at a separate location. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview using standard schedules (in vernacular language, Bengali).

Sampling strategy

Multi-stage sampling was performed to select the study participants. In the first stage, around two-thirds of municipal wards in each municipality were randomly selected. At this stage, a total of 52 wards with 4346 households (Cooch Behar = 14 wards; Dinhata = 10 wards; Mathabhanga = 07 wards; Mekhliganj = 06 wards; Haldibari = 07 wards; Tufanganj = 08 wards) were included in the study. In the next stage of the sampling, around one-tenth of the households (HH) in each ward were randomly selected. Later, a door-to-door survey was done in every household to identify potential study participants (Inclusion criteria: Rural domestic workers working in these urban HHs). Among those, nearly 30 percent of HHs (n=1303) were inaccessible at the time of the survey, 38 percent of HHs (n=1651) had no domestic workers, and 22 percent of HHs (n=956) had domestic workers coming from the nearby urban pockets. At this stage, only 405 HHs were identified where rural female domestic workers were engaged. The interviewer directly approached the domestic workers and informed them about the purpose of the visit. Finally, 317 female domestic workers volunteered to participate in the study. The response rate was high (78.2 percent). To our advantage, most of the households had female domestic workers, working for very low wages. They did not receive any additional support or benefits from the government. As a result, most of the female domestic workers willingly provided information to the researcher according to her requirements, hoping to receive some facilities or benefits from the government in the future. However, informed consent was obtained from the participants before enlisting them for the research and the interview.

Data Collection

Socio-demographic data

Data on the socio-demographic profile were obtained using a pre-designed questionnaire by the lead author. Data such as current age (in years), religion, caste, type of family and household they live in, family size, marital status, experience of domestic work, duration of daily work, and monthly income were collected (See Tables 1 & 3).

Socio-economic status (SES) of the female domestic workers was measured by the ‘Revised Udai-Pareekh SES scale’, designed exclusively for the rural population of India (Wani, 2019). The scale used nine items, viz., caste, occupation, education, land acquisition, social participation, house type, farm power, material possession, and family

size, to assess the SES. Each item in the list had respective categories and scores assigned to it. For example, the 'Caste' variable had six categories. Those are scheduled caste (Score=1), lower caste (Score=2), artisan caste (Score=3), agriculture caste (Score=4), prestige caste (Score=5), and dominant caste (Score=6). Later, all the scores from the nine items were summed up to the final SES score. Finally, the scores were grouped into SES classes (*See* Table 2), following the revised *Udai-Pareekh* scale (Wani, 2019).

Table 1. List of variables used in the study and respective categories

Variables	**Categories**
Age group	[1] >50 years and above [2] 31-50 years [3] ≤30 years
Marital status	[1] Married [2] Divorced or Separated [3] Widowed
Family type	[1] Joint [2] Nuclear
Religion	[1] Hindu [2] Muslim
Experience of domestic work (in years)	Continuous data
Duration of work (in hours/day)	
Monthly income level	[1] Up to ₹ 3000 ($42) [2] ₹ 3000-4000 ($42-55) [3] More than ₹ 4000 ($55)

Empowerment level

Empowerment was measured by the level of freedom in four lifestyle aspects using a pre-designed schedule, which contained 14 items with a 5-point Likert Scale response. The items in the schedule were prepared in vernacular language (in Bengali) for a pilot survey. A pilot survey was conducted on a total of 40 female domestic workers for the reliability and applicability of the questionnaire. The schedule revealed a good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.738$). The items in the questionnaire were the level of freedom of mobility in terms of visiting a bank and ATM, health care centre, and a relative's house, the level of freedom to political participation in terms of participating in rally, campaigning for political parties and volunteering as a cadre, the level of freedom to utilise

money in terms of savings, child's education, buying household essential, buying medicines and spending on occasion/festivals, and the level of freedom to decide terms of product purchase, changing employer, and spending income on self. All the items had five responses: 'Never', 'Rarely', 'Moderately', 'Often', and 'Always' (*See* Table 4).

Table 2. Items and categories of Revised Udai-Pareekh SES Scale

Revised Udai-Pareekh SES Scale		
Item	Categories (Score)	SES Scale
Caste	Scheduled caste (1); Lower caste (2); Artisan caste (3); Agriculture caste (4); Prestige caste (5); Dominant caste (6)	Upper Class (>43) Upper-middleclass (33-42) Middle (24-32) Lower middle (13-23) Lower (≤13)
Occupation	None (0); Labourer (1); Caste occupation (2); Business (3); Independent service (4); Cultivation (5); Service (6)	
Education	Illiterate (0); Can read only (1); Read and write (2); Primary (3); Middle (4); Highschool (5); Graduate (6); Above (7)	
Land	No land (0); <one acre (1); 1-5 acre (2); 5-10acre (3); 10-15 acre (4); 15-20 acre (5); ≥20 acre (6)	
Social participation	None (0); In one organisation (1); In multiple organisations (2); Officeholder (3); Wide public leader (4)	
House	No house (0); Hut (1); Kutcha House (2); Mixed house (3); Pucca house (4); Mansion (5)	
Number of draught animals	None (1); 1-2 animals (2); 3-4 animals (4); 5-6 animals (6)	
Material possession	None/Animal-carried cart (0); Cycle (1); Radio (2); Chairs (3); Mobile phone (4); Television (5); Refrigerator (6)	
Family member	Up to 5 (2); >5(1)	

The level of overall empowerment was calculated through the TOPSIS (technique for order preference by similarity to an ideal solution) method using the 14 items of level of empowerment together (Opricovic and Tzeng, 2004). The method primarily assumes that every attribute increases or decreases in a monotonic function. Hence, the order of alternatives is generated through comparing the Euclidean distances. The basic principle of the TOPSIS method is that two hypothetical values based on the 14 items are created, known as the 'ideal solution' and 'negative solution'. Now, for each participant, a corresponding value (C^*) is generated, which falls between the ideal and negative solutions. Hence, the closer a C^* value is to the ideal solution (farther from the negative solution), the higher the empowerment level. The steps of the TOPSIS method are documented in detail elsewhere (Raju et al., 2020). In the present study, the median value (0.50) obtained from the C^* was used as the cut-off of empowerment level for the convenience of statistical analysis (See Table 5).

Analysis

Analysis was performed using SPSS version 21 (Babinec et al, 2017). Descriptive statistics of the study sample were measured by (a) mean and standard deviation (SD) for continuous variables, and (b) percentage distribution for categorical variables. Association between empowerment level and socio-demographic variables was measured by (c) Chi-square test (with p-value <0.10).

To identify the predictors of empowerment level, (d) the stepwise logistic regression was done. The dependent variable 'Empowerment level' had two categories - viz., Low (C^*<0.50), which was the experiment category, and High (C^*≥0.50), which was considered the reference category. The backward method was preferred to prevent the 'over-fitting' of the model and identify only significant contributors in the model. Coefficients (β) of predictor variables, their statistical significance (Wald), and the odds ratio (e^B) with a 95 percent confidence interval were measured. Assessment of overall model goodness-of-fit was done by the -2 log-likelihood statistics and Nagelkerke pseudo-R Square.

Table 3. Socio-demographic profile of the female domestic workers in the study (n=317)

Socio-demographic profile		
Variables		n (%)
Age groups	>50 years and above	56 (17.7)
	31-50 years	143 (45.1)
	≤30 years	118 (37.2)
Marital status	Married	168 (53.0)
	Divorced or Separated	62 (19.6)
	Widowed	87 (27.4)
Family type	Joint	106 (33.4)
	Nuclear	211 (66.6)
Religion	Hindu	255 (80.4)
	Muslim	62 (19.6)
Monthly income level	Up to ₹ 3000 ($42)	182 (57.4)
	₹ 3000-400 ($42-55)	93 (29.3)
	More than ₹ 4000 ($55)	42 (13.2)
SES	Lower middle class	63 (19.9)
	Lower class	254 (80.1)
Experience of work	14.28 years (SD=0.56)	
Duration of work	9.23 hours/per day (SD=0.10)	

Results and Discussion

The present section provides the analysis and description of the results of the present study based on the objectives. Table 3 shows the socio-demographic profile of the

317 female domestic workers presently studied. The majority of them belonged to the age group of 31-50 years (45.1 percent), were married (53.0 percent), belonged to a nuclear family (66.6 percent), and were Hindus (80.4 percent). A total of 254 participants (80.1 percent) belonged to the lower socio-economic class, while the rest of the participants (19.9 percent) belonged to the lower-middle socio-economic class. It was found that the mean duration of working experience of domestic work among the study participants was 14.28 years (SD=0.56), and the mean duration of daily working hours among them was 9.23 hours/day (SD=0.10).

Table 4. Female domestic workers' level of empowerment of freedom pertaining to several lifestyle aspects (n=317)

Level of empowerment in lifestyle aspects					
Variables	Never	Rarely	Moderately	Often	Always
	n (%)				
Freedom of mobility in terms of					
visiting a bank and an ATM	124 (39.1)	67 (21.1)	14 (4.4)	94 (29.7)	18 (5.7)
visiting a health care centre	84 (26.5)	116 (36.6)	22 (6.9)	72 (22.7)	23 (7.3)
visiting a relative's house	65 (20.5)	84 (26.5)	32 (10.1)	88 (27.8)	48 (15.1)
Freedom to participate					
in political rallies	133 (42.0)	1 (0.3)	57 (18.0)	28 (8.8)	98 (30.9)
in campaigns for political parties	148 (46.7)	4 (1.3)	69 (21.8)	30 (9.5)	66 (20.8)
in volunteering as cadres	118 (37.2)	4 (1.3)	67 (21.1)	34 (10.7)	94 (29.7)
Freedom to utilize income					
on future savings	212 (66.9)	37 (11.7)	62 (19.6)	3 (0.9)	3 (0.9)
on child's education	172 (54.3)	40 (12.6)	86 (27.1)	11 (3.5)	8 (2.5)
on household essentials	151 (47.6)	41 (12.9)	92 (29.0)	20 (6.3)	13 (4.1)
on medicine	186 (58.7)	48 (15.1)	73 (23.0)	3 (0.9)	7 (2.2)
on occasions/festivals	214 (67.5)	22 (6.9)	68 (21.5)	9 (2.8)	4 (1.3)
Free do make decisions on					
Household product purchase	1 (0.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)	35 (11.0)	280 (88.3)
Work-related issues	17 (5.4)	2 (0.6)	3 (0.9)	34 (10.7)	261 (82.3)
Spending money for self	8 (2.5)	4 (1.3)	1 (0.3)	29 (9.1)	275 (86.8)

Table 4 demonstrates the female domestic workers' level of empowerment in terms of pertaining to several lifestyle aspects. Around 39 percent of the study participants had no freedom of mobility to visit a bank and ATM alone. Out of all the study participants, approximately 27 percent had no freedom to visit a health care centre alone, and around 37 percent rarely had freedom to do so. Only 20.5 percent of the study participants never had the freedom to visit any relative's house alone.

The table further revealed that 42 percent of the study participants had no freedom to participate in any political rally. Moreover, around 46 percent had no freedom to participate in any campaign that was focused on promoting any political leader. A total of 118 participants (37.2 percent) had no freedom to volunteer as cadres. When asked if they had any freedom to utilise their earnings for some life aspects, 212 study participants (66.9 percent) reported that they had absolutely no freedom to save their earnings for the future. Around 54 percent of the participants reported that they had no freedom to spend it on their child's education. Moreover, 47.6 percent of them never had any freedom to utilise it for buying household essentials. It was revealed that either to buy medicines or spend on occasions/festivals, the majority of the study participants had absolutely no freedom.

However, on the contrary, most of the participants reported that they had complete freedom to decide about what products would be purchased for household needs (88.3 percent). Around 82 percent of the study participants reported that they could totally decide either to quit their work from any household or to work more. The majority of the participants had complete freedom to spend their earnings on themselves (86.8 percent).

Table 5 shows the classification of the level of empowerment among the domestic workers based on the TOPSIS score. Individuals with the TOPSIS score <0.50 were considered to have a 'Low empowerment level'. The sample size in this category was 122 (38.5 percent). Individuals with the TOPSIS score ≥0.50 were considered to have a 'High empowerment level'. The sample size in this category was 195 (61.5 percent).

Table 5. Level of empowerment based on the TOPSIS score

Variable	Score	Level of empowerment	Sample size
TOPSIS Score	<0.50	Low	122 (38.5%)
	>0.50	High	195 (61.5%)

Table 6 shows the distribution of the study participants based on their level of empowerment. In the younger group (≤30 years), around 60 percent had low empowerment. However, in the subsequent group, almost 72 percent of the participants had a low empowerment level (31-50 years). More than 85 percent of the participants in the older age group (>50 years) had low empowerment. Significant association was observed between age group and empowerment level ($\chi 2$ = 12.913). In the present study, approximately 65 percent of the married participants had low empowerment. Comparatively, among the divorced or separated and widowed participants, 74.2 and 73.6 percent had low empowerment, respectively. But no significant association was observed between marital status and empowerment level ($\chi 2$ = 2.599).

Table 6. Empowerment level of the female domestic workers by socio-demographic profile (n=317)

Variables		Level of empowerment		
		n (%)		Chi-square test for association
		Low	High	
Age group	>50 years and above	48 (85.7)	8 (14.3)	χ^2=12.913* *df*=2 (*p*<0.01)
	31-50 years	102 (71.3)	41 (28.7)	
	≤30 years	70 (59.3)	48 (40.7)	
Marital status	Married	110 (65.5)	58 (34.5)	χ^2=2.599 *df*=2 (*p*=0.273)
	Divorced and Separated	46 (74.2)	16 (25.8)	
	Widowed	64 (73.6)	23 (26.4)	
Family type	Joint	74 (69.8)	32 (30.2)	χ^2=0.013 *df*=1 (*p*= 0.509)
	Nuclear	146 (69.2)	65 (30.8)	
Religion	Hindu	174 (68.2)	81 (31.8)	χ^2=0.834 *df*=1 (*p*= 0.361)
	Muslim	46 (74.2)	16 (25.8)	
Monthly income level	Up to ₹3000 ($42)	136 (74.7)	46 (25.3)	χ^2=8.486* *df*=2 (*p*<0.014)
	₹3000-4000 ($42-55)	62 (66.7)	31 (33.3)	
	More than ₹4000 ($55)	22 (52.4)	20 (47.6)	
SES	Lower middle class	39 (61.9)	24 (38.1)	χ^2=2.080 *df*=1 (*p*= 0.149)
	Lower class	181 (71.3)	73 (28.7)	

*Significant at 0.05 level

Around 69 percent of the study participants who were either from a nuclear family or a joint family had low empowerment. The majority of the participants among the Hindus (68.2 percent) had low empowerment. Among the Muslim participants, the percentage was comparatively high (74.2 percent). However, the empowerment level was not significantly associated with family (χ2 = 0.013) and religion (χ2 = 0.834). In the present study, around

53 percent of the 'highest income level group' participants had low empowerment, followed by 66.7 percent of the participants in the 'middle income level group'. The participants of the 'lowest income group' reported around 75 percent of cases with low empowerment. The study observed a significant association between monthly income level and empowerment level ($\chi 2 = 8.486$). Around 62 and 71 percent of the participants from the lower middle class and lower class had low empowerment levels. No significant association was found between SES and empowerment level ($\chi 2 = 2.080$).

Table 7 showed the significant predictors of the level of employment of female domestic workers (dependent variable). The statistical model was a good fit (-2 log likelihood=50.913) and correctly predicted 87.2 percent of the dependent variable. The study findings indicated that female domestic workers who come from a nuclear family had a significantly higher chance of having a low empowerment level than the domestic workers coming from a joint family (OR=2.820, p<0.01). Domestic workers having higher levels of income had an increased chance of having a low empowerment level. The possibility of a part-time domestic worker having a low empowerment level increased 13-fold compared to full-time domestic workers. However, in the present study, the more experienced a female domestic worker was, the more she had the chance to have a low empowerment level (OR=2.071, p<0.01).

Table 7. Binary logistic regression showing the factors behind low empowerment level

Stepwise logistic regression (Forward LR)$^{\lambda}$					
Variables		B	Wald	e^B	95% CI
Family type	Joint	Reference category			
	Nuclear	1.037	1.574**	2.820	1.558-14.240
Monthly income level	Up to ₹ 3000 (Up to $42)	Reference category			
	₹ 3000-4000 ($42-55)	0.809	1.321**	2.247	1.047-4.819
	More than ₹ 4000 ($55)	0.344	0.692	1.411	0.627-3.177
Work type	Full timer	Reference category			
	Part timer	2.592	4.344**	13.358	1.167-152.885
Experience of domestic work (in years)		0.728	5.610**	2.071	1.134-3.784
-2 log likelihood					50.913
Nagelkerke R^2					0.765
Overall correct classification percentage					87.2%

Abbreviation: β = Coefficient value; e^B= Odds ratio.
Note: **Significant at 0.01 level; $^{\lambda}$Only significant predictors are presented.

The present study explored the domestic workers' empowerment level in terms of mobility freedom pertaining to some selected lifestyle aspects. The overall findings

highlighted that the majority had low empowerment related to mobility freedom. In our study, some of them reported that they had to take another family member (preferably male) to visit any place, such as a bank, ATM, or a health care centre. (Acharya et al., 2012) found in their study that women had limited mobility in their social circle, regardless of their socio-economic status. This finding strongly corroborates previous literature (Choudhry et al., 2019), which found that domestic employees have poor mobility-related empowerment. The possible reason for prevalent restricted mobility among the domestic workers may be poor education and job opportunities (Parmar, 2022), patriarchal control in the family and household or existing socio-cultural norms in the society (Uteng, 2012).

In India, women's participation in political issues and their freedom of expression in political matters have always been comparatively low. Our attempt was to know whether domestic workers, being able to earn through their work, have any freedom to participate in political issues. In the current study, the majority of workers had little involvement in local political issues and did not have the liberty to attend political activities or rallies. Moreover, a notable number of cases in our study revealed that the domestic workers had engaged neither in volunteering as cadres nor in campaigning for any specific political party. As Moghadam (2010) also suggested, the political empowerment in terms of either participating in political rallies or joining politics is influenced by the notions of masculinity and femininity in different spheres of society, like in family, labour market, and the polity, which explains that rural women had a very limited personal autonomy and a lack of knowledge or understanding of politics (Moghadam, 2010).

The domestic Ghatak and Sarkar (2022) workers were further asked whether they utilised their money for future savings, on children's education, to buy household essentials or medicine, or to spend it on occasions/festivals. Surprisingly, they had low empowerment for utilising money and no freedom to spend their money on household necessities, the education of children, the purchase of medicine, or even on occasions. This finding is strongly supported by another previous literature and the study of Bhattacharjee and Goswami (2020), who observed that female domestic workers have less authority over the household economy. The work of Agrawal (2023) explains that the decision-making tendencies related to utilising the money among the domestic workers often depend on the decisions of the husband or the elderly in the family.

Domestic workers' decision-making authority on household product purchase, occupational matters, and spending income on themselves was further explored. It was also found that women have low decision-making authority in household and other lifestyle matters, which was not the case for domestic workers in the present study. On the contrary, the majority of the participants reported that they had complete liberty to determine where and when to work, whether to continue working or leave, and how much money to earn. Moreover, they had complete freedom to spend their earnings for themselves and also the freedom to make household purchases. Interestingly, this finding contradicts the few earlier works that pointed out major factors such as low authority in the household, weak bargaining power, and overdependence on the spouse as some of the reasons behind low

freedom of deciding for household purchase (Bhattacharya and Goswami, 2020; Goel Chakravarty, 2023).

Overall, the findings strongly suggest that the domestic workers' understudy had a very low level of empowerment. Because domestic employees had access to and control over their earnings even after meeting family demands, their income level had a substantial influence on their empowerment. Age and marital status also had a great impact. The findings of the study are in line with previous studies by Gaye and Jha (2011). In the present study, most of the younger domestic workers (under 30 years) had a high empowerment level compared to the older age groups. It is probably due to the level of education among the younger workers, while most of the older workers either had no formal education or had a very low level of education (Bhattacharya and Goswami, 2020). The study further suggests that the majority of the workers, who were in wedlock, were more empowered. It was most likely due to the level of support they received from their husbands to continue their job or to decide on some household matters, like product purchase. Basak and Gupta (2018) emphasise that sustainable development requires ensuring women's autonomy in both domestic and social spheres. Although India's Ministry of Labour and Employment has proposed a National Domestic Workers Policy, it has not yet been enacted (Beri, 2020). The case study highlights the urgent need for empowerment initiatives to strengthen workers' rights and decision-making power.

Conclusion

A comprehensive policy for domestic workers empowerment must function across three dimensions: structural protection (laws, fair wages, social security), economic empowerment (income control, financial inclusion), and social–gender empowerment (decision-making, dignity, bargaining power). Findings from Cooch Behar highlight the urgent need for legal protection, improved working conditions, and empowerment initiatives to reduce wage inequality and strengthen domestic workers' rights and decision-making power.

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