

The Plight of Women and Girl Domestic Workers During COVID-19 Pandemic in Meghalaya and Nagaland

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected many livelihoods and the global economy in general. The imposed lockdown started the work-from-home culture which became a solution to curb loss of working hours. However, there were sections of people who were not working from home, which meant losing their jobs and ultimately their livelihood. Among them, were the domestic workers. Their role as domestic workers diminished. Many lost their livelihoods and faced economic challenges such as unemployment, low wages, delayed payment of wages, etc. Domestic workers are usually categorized under unorganised and informal sectors, which are not constitutionally guaranteed. In Meghalaya and Nagaland a major problem faced by the domestic workers is that the nature of their work is not recognised as work by the State. With strict levels of lockdown being imposed, domestic workers were unable to go to work. Because of this reason, many of them were laid off by their employers leaving them with no means to earn their livelihood. These domestic workers are rendered jobless, without financial and social security. The present paper examines the challenges faced by women and girl domestic workers in Nagaland and Meghalaya during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many were kept at a distance by their employers for fear of infection and were laid off. Lack of financial aid from the government during the lockdown had burdened domestic workers with fighting for survival. Relief packages offered by the Governments of Meghalaya and Nagaland failed to reach domestic workers.*

Key Words: *domestic workers, unemployment, low wages, exploitation.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

There has been no crisis that has perhaps made the world stand still and is reeling to recover as the COVID-19 pandemic affected the world for two years in 2020 and 2021. It affected the livelihoods of people. According to ILO estimation, the working hours lost in 2020 compared to pre-pandemic levels were equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs (ILO, 2021). Half of this was attributed to reduced employment and the remaining was due to employment losses. Of these, the most affected are the labourers in the informal economy. The lockdown pushed governments to restrict the movement of people and the work-from-home culture became a solution to curb loss of working hours. However, there were sections of people who were not working from home, which meant losing their jobs and ultimately their livelihood. Among them, were the domestic workers. Based on the statistics of 2019, the ILO reported that there are 75.6 million domestic workers around the world aged 15 years and above (ILO, 2021). For domestic workers staying home from work and loss of employment is as threatening as the virus itself. In developing countries like India, the recovery rate of earnings lost was slow (WEIGO, 2021). According to the Indian government data, there are over 4 million domestic workers in India of which a considerable number are migrants and the majority are women. Because of the informal nature of their work, they are unable to access many basic rights guaranteed under India's Labour Codes. Often faced with exploitive working conditions, sexual harassment, and harassment by their employers, and even by their families, domestic workers often faced such difficulties on their own.

According to Article 1 of Convention No.189 of the International Labor Organization domestic work has been defined as "work performed in or for a household or households" and broadly defined domestic workers as "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship". The broad definition thus covers services such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing, and ironing clothes, taking care of children, or elderly or sick members of a family,

gardening, guarding the house, driving for the family, and even taking care of household pets. Further, it stipulates domestic workers work on an hourly, daily, or monthly basis; can be employed in a single household or multiple households; and may be live-in workers or live-out workers (ILO, 2021). However, their role was diminished during the Pandemic. The stay-and-work-from-home culture resulted in many households assuming the work which was usually left to domestic workers in normal times. This has significantly impacted domestic workers, particularly those in the informal and unorganized sectors. Many lost their livelihoods and faced economic challenges such as unemployment, low wages, delayed payment of wages, etc. Further, they also faced domestic violence and exploitation from employers. The lockdown also led to a mass exodus of migrant workers from urban areas of which domestic workers constitute a large portion. Gender inequalities in families increased due to girls being expected to handle more household duties and working in exploitative and hazardous jobs due to poverty. COVID-19 exposed young girls to risk factors, forcing them to take on more responsibilities for family survival and work longer hours in domestic and caring activities.

In Meghalaya and Nagaland, the domestic workers have suffered much due to the negligence and the apathy of the government. Most lost their employment and source of livelihood. In some cases, their employment days were halved and hence their wages were halved too whereas their workload increased. This study is an attempt to add to the gaps in the literature on domestic workers in Meghalaya and Nagaland. The study however also suffers from limitations in that, proper official data are not available and many are unwilling to be interviewed. For this particular reason, we have tried to include the stories of those who were willing to be interviewed.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

The pandemic greatly affected the underprivileged workers of the informal sector and exposed their vulnerabilities. Studies across the world on the impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers have reported on the loss of employment and income apart from the exploitation and harassment they faced. The ILO 2021 report on domestic workers stated a drastic decrease in the number of domestic workers in 2020 as compared to 2019 across the countries reviewed in Europe, the Americas and Europe. The drop ranged from 5 percent to 20 percent across most countries in Europe, to Canada and South Africa. In countries such as Argentina, Chile, Philippines and South Africa where domestic work is informal, the loss of job is more significant. The report also stated that there was a decrease in working hours for employees, however, it was more significant in domestic workers. Therefore, the total amount of wages that domestic workers received was 1.5 times to five times higher than other employees. Other impacts included the lack of access to protective equipment, access to healthcare, intense working hours and workloads, and non-payment of wages. (ILO,2021). A WEIGO longitudinal Study that assessed the multidimensional impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on specific groups of informal workers and their households during the consequent waves of the pandemic and the restrictions across 6 major cities Plevn, Ahmedabad, Delhi, Mexico City, Lima, and Bangkok found that the pandemic had a detrimental impact on domestic workers' capacity to work and make a living, especially at the beginning April 2020. In comparison to live-in domestic workers, the inability to work and recoup earnings was more pronounced in live-out domestic workers. The same study also reported domestic workers increased risks and insecurities due to a lack of bargaining power leading to an increased workload. Furthermore, domestic workers were exposed to precarious health risks and reported mental health strains during the two years of the pandemic. This is exacerbated by the lack and exclusion of relief from the government in terms of cash or food. Only one-third reported receiving any kind of relief from the government (Ismail & Ogando, 2023).

In India, studies have shown that domestic workers were severely affected by the lockdown and the pandemic. A review meeting of the Network for the Rights and Voices of Domestic Workers in Delhi-NCR, of the Martha Ferrell Foundation revealed key challenges faced by Domestic Workers during COVID-19. Domestic Workers were deprived of access to welfare programs and social protection without their formal recognition. The majority of Domestic workers did not have Jan Dhan accounts and ration cards. Despite many employers demanding to get tested for Covid-19, many domestic workers denied having any symptoms at all as the fear of getting tested positive and losing their only chance of earning puts them in a quandary. Domestic workers were tagged as Covid Carriers in the first wave and discriminated against as Covid Super Spreaders in the second wave leaving them humiliated, anxious and fearful. This deeply affected their mental and physical health (Martha Ferrell Foundation, 2021). Domestic workers were also exposed to discrimination and the virus due to a lack of safety measures. One such study done in Guwahati City, India found that around 57% of domestic workers faced stigmatisation and discrimination, while 40% of workers worked without safety measures (Dutta, 2022). In New Delhi, it was reported that women domestic workers also experienced severe anxiety regarding their wages for March and the following months during the lockdown in 2020. They were also worried about payment of rent as their income was affected. Many also had concerns with the lack of protective equipment such as mask, gloves and sanitizers once their domestic work resumed (Ghosh & Bilkhu, 2021).

Domestic workers, especially women, have been severely impacted by the epidemic which has resulted in decreased pay and increasing workload (Sumalatha, et. al.,2021). Numerous domestic employees' salaries and earnings

have decreased, according to primary surveys conducted in locations like Delhi (Chakravarthy & Nayak, 2022) Cuttack (Sharma, et. al.,2021), and Guwahati (Dutta, 2022). The Covid-19 lockdown significantly impacted informal workers, particularly domestic workers, who were often undervalued and under-protected by legal services and government agencies. During the pandemic, both women and men also experienced unemployment, with women experiencing shorter unemployment periods (Chakravarty & Nayak, 2022). Before the lockdown, domestic workers worked on average four houses per day, but after the pandemic, they lost jobs and worked two houses per day. Employers were more likely to retain live-in domestic workers, resulting in a decline in household income and impacting their survival (Sharma et. al, 2021). A survey by Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgaar and the Indian Institute for Human Settlements found that income from domestic work affected family budgets, with 87% of workers discontinuing jobs after the lockdown announcement. Domestic workers also faced discrimination, stigma, domestic violence, increased work burden, and limited access to healthcare (Sumalatha et.al, 2021). A survey by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) found that nearly 60% of 795 domestic workers surveyed did not receive payment during the lockdown.

With the entry of a large number of urban educated women into the workforce the dependence on domestic workers has grown. This growing dependence has increased the bargaining power of domestic worker albeit in a limited way due to the unorganised nature of their work. It is mostly observed that most domestic workers are women and children, mostly girl children. The majority are often migrants and work as live-in domestic help isolating them from their families. This leaves them vulnerable. Mander (2015) observed that the greatest shame of middle-class India is employing underage children as domestic workers. In India, reliable estimates on domestic child workers are not available. Their invisibility and powerlessness have resulted in underreporting their true numbers. The official study by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) estimates that 20 percent of all domestic workers are under the age of fourteen years of age. The NSSO 66th Round report estimated 4.9 million children between the ages 5-14 were economically active in 2009-10 and the 2011 Census which is the latest Census reported 4.3 million children employed as child labourers. However, these statistics do not give specific estimates on child domestic labourers. Any statistics done is merely an estimation.

3. OBJECTIVE :

The paper aims to bring to light the struggles and challenges of domestic workers in Meghalaya and Nagaland before and during COVID-19 and their ongoing struggles for better working conditions.

4. METHODOLOGY:

The paper employs qualitative techniques. For the primary sources, telephonic interviews and personal one-on-one interactions and conversations were conducted. Questions were asked concerning the impact on their livelihood before and after COVID-19. Apart from the interviews, many observations were made during the process of data collection. An extensive review of news articles and documents is also used as secondary sources. A total of eight participants were interviewed working in Shillong and Nongstoin, Meghalaya, and in Dimapur and Kohima, Nagaland. For the sake of the privacy of the participants, their real names have not been used instead aliases have been used. In the case of Meghalaya, the prefix 'Kong' has been used which is a common term used to address a Khasi female in Meghalaya.

4.1 DOMESTIC WORKERS IN MEGHALAYA

Domestic workers in Meghalaya have largely been ignored in academic research. Their plight has been out of the limelight of the media and the government legislation. As such, cases of exploitation and unfair treatment are rampant among domestic workers. To address these instances of unfair treatment, the Congregation of Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC), Shillong Province started The North Eastern Regional Domestic Workers' Movement (NERDWM) in 2003 in Meghalaya. Domestic workers in Meghalaya now fly under the banner of All Meghalaya Domestic Workers Union which has 6500 registered domestic workers, and some are over 65 years old. However, many are outside the purview of the union.

The latest notification by the Labour Department of the Government of Meghalaya dated 21st October 2022 gave the revised rates for unskilled labour as 300/- with a revised VDA of 81/-. However, in the absence of proper legislative measures and implementation, the domestic union had to come up with a Wage Card for its registered members to avail uniform wages per the rate set by the union. According to the Wage Card, a domestic worker will receive Rs 2000 per month for each daily hour of labor, Rs 5000 per month for live-in domestic workers, and Rs 8000 per month for live-out domestic workers working from dawn to evening (Meghalayan Bureau, 2022). However, from the primary study, those outside the Union are still paid below the minimum wage usually at the rate of 200/- per day. One of the demands of the Union is demanding the Government to provide a law containing regulations on employment, and conditions of work and provide social protection which includes fixation of wages and other conditions of work,

provision of social security through welfare boards, and training and skill formulation. Further, the union of domestic workers in Meghalaya also wants a tripartite board that has their selected representatives for representation. According to their advocate, Evangeline Shangpliang, the board could take upregistration of workers, regulations of working conditions, register employers and their contribution to social security, monitor payment of minimum wages, and support domesticworkers in forming their cooperatives (Meghalayan Bureau, 2023). Covid-19 placed a heavier economic burden on poor families who lost earning members of thefamily. The impact of the loss pushed many of the children to take up employment and girls usually take up domestic work to help support the family.

According to the National Domestic Workers Association (NDWA) in a Survey made post-2020 lockdown, in Meghalaya 55 lost their jobs and only 9 rejoined their job. NDWA played a huge role in providing relief by reaching out to their members and providing masks, dry rations, sanitizers, and gloves to the most affected families. In Meghalaya, there were 2000 beneficiaries. However, in cases of those who are outside the purview of the domestic workers union, relief packages were not delivered to them during the Pandemic.

At the outset of the virus, both live-in and live-out domestic workers employed in families infected with the virus were also infected. For fear of being exposed to the risk of infection, many live-out domestic workers lost their jobs. To be able to continue working they needed to vaccinate themselves. The All Meghalaya Domestic Workers Union (AMDWU) came forward to fight for prioritizing vaccination of domestic workers by writing to the PrimeMinister seeking vaccination on a priority base. Domestic workers are the most vulnerable population and are the population at risk. By prioritizing their vaccination they may continue to work without fear and harassment.

The majority of domestic workers are women and also single mothers. The work not only provides them with livelihood yet they have neither recognition nor protection as workers. During the pandemic, they suffered as employers kept them at a distance for fear of the virus. Many of them lost their wages. Those that were allowed to work, were paid less and had to spend more money to get to work as there was no public transport for many weeks. Besides living in poor-conditioned houses, they had to continue to pay rent and repay loans despite not being able to get employed. Many domestic workers were compelled to go to work while some had lost their jobs due to the ongoing lockdown. Despite the strict lockdown, domestic workers who were facing a threat to their survival were forced to perform their regular duties at their employers despite the strict lockdown issued by the Government.

When the lockdown began in 2020, the Government of Meghalaya (GoM) promised one-time financial assistance of Rs 5000 to workers who registered themselves with Meghalaya Building and other Construction Workers Welfare Board (MBOCWFB) and Rs 2100 to dailywage earners and unorganised workers including domestic workers, hawkers, construction labourers under the Chief Minister's Relief Against Wage Loss (CMRAWL). An RTI filed by activist Angela Rangad the leader of Tham U Rangli-Juki (TUR) led the government to release the list of beneficiaries. An overwhelming number of them came forward stating that they never received the financial support or that they got partial payment. Many who registeredthemselves and fulfilled the criteria for financial benefit and had applied were not on the list ofbeneficiary names. According to the promise made by the Government of Meghalaya, the amount was to be released during the first wave of the Pandemic however, a year later too the govt did not rectify it (Pisharoty, 2021). This shows the apathy of the administration towards domestic workers.

Case 1:

Hailing from a small village Khung, Ri Bhoi District, Kong Kong, 20 years old, is the eldest of thefour siblings. During the first wave of COVID-19, she was still in her village helping her parents infarming and going to her neighbor's house to help with washing clothes and other domestic work as a way of helping her family's financial constraints. However, with the passing away of her mother due to COVID-19 in 2020 a heavier burden fell on her to help her father in supporting her younger siblings. So, in 2021 she came to Shillong to work as a domestic worker and also continue her education. She is currently studying in Class 12. As a live-out domestic worker, she works in two houses. In one of the houses, she goes every day, and in the other house, it's either once or twice a week depending on when the employer calls her. Her first employer pays her a monthly remuneration of 5000/- while her other employer pays her 200/- per day. Kong Kong said that she felt the pay of Rs 200/- per day is too low for the amount of workload she does. Apart from washing heavier clothes such as blankets, she is also expected to clean and scrub the concrete yard, clean the windows of the house, and other heavier workloads. Even though her earnings are low, she sends a portion of what is left after her expenditure as remittances home regularly. She reported that during the COVID-19, despite the many difficulties they faced her family had benefitted from the government aid in terms of food grains. It was the tragedy of her mother passing away that placed the entire family in further misery and pushed her towards supporting her family.

Case 2:

Kong Deng (21 years) is a migrant domestic worker from Mawroh who was sent by her poor parents at the age

of 10 to work as a domestic help in her relative's house in Shillong in exchange for their feeding, housing, and sending her to school. Even though they were relatives, Kong Deng confessed to having felt she was never treated as equally as her cousins. She was expected to cover most of the domestic work. She left her relative's place in 2019 and started to live alone while also looking for work to support her schooling. In the first Wave of COVID-19, she was forced to go back to her village due to unemployment and only went back to Shillong for work once the Lockdown was lifted. Whereas, in the second wave, she stayed in Shillong to continue her employment despite it being more irregular than before. Even though she had qualms about taking the vaccine, she was mandated by her employers to vaccinate to be able to continue working in their houses. Since she is not a member of any Union and is not a permanent resident in her locality, she could not avail of any of the aids provided through PDS nor did she receive any other aid from other organisations. Kong Deng is currently pursuing Class 12 at a morning school run by the Church and for the rest of the day she goes to her work. She works in two houses for an hour three times a week in each of the houses. Her wage is hourly but she gets paid at the end of the month. She gets paid 1000/- rupees and 1200/- rupees per month which she complains is too low compared to the workload she does.

Case 3:

Kong Duh is a 56-year-old single mother of 4 who currently lives with her mother and two of her children. She works as a domestic worker in Nongstoin. Kong Duh juggles between being a mid-day meal helper-cum-cook for which she earns an honorarium of 1000/- per month and as a Domestic Worker. She was employed in at least five houses where she charged 250/- per day for her services if she worked from 9 to 5 or at half the rate if she went to work at noon after she returned from her mid-day meal job. However, despite working in multiple houses Kong Duh confesses to having seasons of unemployment. Her employment depends on when her employers demand her services which can come at irregular intervals. The work that awaits her at her employer's place is usually a heavy workload demanding much of her physical strength. The range of work she does ranges from laundry, working in gardens, pulling out weeds, cleaning windows, scrubbing the concrete yards, and part-timing as a helper in events such as birthdays and weddings. Kong Duh has been working for her regular employer since 2010 when the Lockdown started. The Lockdown cut her off from her source of employment though her payment was made to her later when she rejoined her work. In the initial stages of the lockdown, the family was scared of emptying their savings. She had registered herself to claim the benefits of the one-time financial help from the government but she did not receive the financial aid. However, aid through the PDS, the local MLA, the Seng Longkmie (a Non-Profit group of the locality consisting of women), and the locality in terms of Rice, oil, and dal helped sustain the family. When the second wave hit and the vaccine was available to the public, she had no qualms about taking the vaccine despite many people being reluctant to take it as she realized that some of her previous employers may not continue her employment if she was not vaccinated. Kong Duh who already had a history of joint pains, was in winter 2021 also inflicted with a severe case of gastric accompanied by other health issues which she believed were the consequences of hard and heavy work since she was a child. Since then, she has cut down on working as a domestic worker and resorted to helping her aging mother who is a tailor to work from home and earn a living. She still does part-time domestic work if the workload is light and now declines any heavy work due to her joint pain.

Case 4:

Interviewing Kong Rit was much more difficult as she is a live-in domestic worker and was reluctant to say anything against her employers. However, one of the authors was fortunate enough to stay as a guest in her employer's house in early 2021 and September 2021. So, the case of Kong Rit is based mostly on the author's observations and conversations with her over these two periods of time. Kong Rit comes from a poor farming family from Sohiong, East Khasi Hills. She was 14 years old when her mother decided to send her to Shillong to work as a domestic worker. A distant relative of the family was the intermediary between the employer and her mother. It was agreed verbally that in exchange for funding her education, Kong Rit would work as a domestic worker. Kong Rit nor her mother received any form of compensation for her service. Apart from the expectation to do well in her studies, she handles the household chores for her employers. On normal days, her schedule starts from 6 in the morning where she prepares breakfast for her employer's family and sweeps the house before she goes to school. Over the two years i.e. 2020-2021 when the world was affected by COVID-19, she was not sent home. The author observed during the stay with the family that despite the seemingly kind and caring employers, there was clear discrimination between the children and Kong Rit. Kong Rit was expected to help with all the household chores as well as study. However, the children were exempted from most of the household chores. She is not allowed to go out and meet her friends without the permission of her employers. She also rarely goes home and spends the holidays with her employers.

4.2 DOMESTIC WORKER IN NAGALAND

During the pandemic, women and girl domestic workers were seen as primary candidates who had fallen through the cracks, facing huge financial losses, and having virtually no protection to fall back upon. Domestic workers in Nagaland were most adversely affected by the pandemic as they were locked out of their workplaces and cut off from their sources of income. These groups of employees are marginalized and excluded from the rest of the workforce. Domestic workers had to endure great suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic, including stigmatization and exploitation. 250 domestic workers in Nagaland lost their jobs, according to a 2020 poll by the National Domestic Worker's Movement. It was also reported that during the lockdown, 15% of the registered domestic employees lost their jobs; the majority of them were older than 60. The majority of the employees were either not paid or had their salary deducted, which is even below the Minimum Wage requirements. As a result of the lockdown, more instances of domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and mental trauma were reported, further compounding their problems.

The domestic workers were provided relief during the pandemic in the form of food rations through the PDS under the initiative of the All Nagaland Domestic Workers Union (ANDWU), Panchayats from respective colonies, and church organizations. A few registered members received Rs. 500 on offer through the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana. A major challenge faced by the NGOs in reaching out to domestic workers during the pandemic is the uncertainty of the number of domestic workers, either women or girls, as many of them have not registered themselves with the NDWA – Nagaland Region. There are about 2250 registered domestic workers, but the number of domestic workers in the state would be many times more and many are not registered mostly due to the lack of knowledge about the union and the movement.

Most domestic workers in Nagaland are women and girls. The female domestic workers come under the age group of 6-20 years who are usually live-in domestic workers, 35- 59 years, and 60 and above who are usually live-out domestic workers. The girl domestic workers are either indigenous migrants, migrants from Myanmar, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, UP, and Bihar whereas, the women domestic helpers are local residents, migrants from Assam, Manipur, Tripura, UP, Bihar, West Bengal, and Nepal. Most live-in girl domestic workers do not get paid but are guaranteed food, lodging, and education. Most of the registered domestic workers are usually live-out workers. For live-in domestic workers, it is difficult to identify and register them owing to a lack of recognition and due to the absence of specific laws. Thus, they remain invisible to the outside society.

The domestic workers have been demanding recognition as workers by the state government since the early 2000s but their demands intensified post-lockdown. The lockdown shed light on their struggles – making them realize their rights, dignity, respect and the need to be recognized for their economic and social contribution.

On the occasion of International Domestic Workers Day on June 16, 2023, the domestic workers submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Nagaland requesting to be included in the Schedule Employment list of the Minimum Wages Act 1948. The domestic workers were represented by the Centre for Development Initiatives (CDI) and Ferrando Domestic Workers' Alliance (FDWA), Kohima. Other organizations demanding recognition on behalf of the domestic workers are the National Domestic Workers Movement-Nagaland region, the ASSISI Centre for Integrated Development (ACID), and the All Nagaland Domestic Workers Union. Their inclusion in the Schedule of Employment will entitle them to minimum wages, protection against all types of harassment, social security and access to benefits and employers provide contracts for domestic workers. They also demanded the Government of India to ratify ILO's convention No. 189, to recognize domestic work as real work and ensure domestic workers enjoy these new rights in practice.

The domestic workers in Nagaland are not included in the Schedule of Employment and the Minimum Wage Act 1948 has not been enforced in the state. In North East India, only Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura have fixed minimum wages. Due to a lack of strong legislation and a poor economy, domestic workers continue to be marginalised, unrecognised, and unorganised. One reason for the non-implementation of central laws in Nagaland is because Nagaland is granted special status under Article 371 A of the Constitution which means the laws that govern the rest of the country are weakened against the customary laws that govern the people of Nagaland. Another reason is that the government fails to contribute its share in the Centrally Sponsored Schemes which is shared between the Centre and the State Government at the ratio of 90:10 respectively due to the depressed economic situation, corruption, and inefficiency of the government. As a result, the majority of central programs and schemes continue to have minimal coverage. This makes policy advancement challenging, and hence, domestic workers continue to be excluded from the schedule of employment, meaning that there is no specified minimum wage. There are also no welfare boards to avail any social security benefits in Nagaland. This is another reason why wages differ from employer to employer.

Case 1:

Ms. A is a migrant worker from Nepal who lives in a rented house in Dimapur, Nagaland. She is in her mid-thirties and makes 6000 a month working in three different houses for 2 hours in each house for 6 days a week. She is the sole breadwinner of her family. She provides for her three children as well as her drunken and unemployed husband. She not only works in these families, but she also has to work at home, which is incredibly exhausting because her spouse doesn't assist her with housework. If given the chance, she would prefer to work for just one employer as long as they pay her well, but finding work that pays well is difficult. Although she laments missing out on spending time with her kids, there are times when she would rather be somewhere else where she won't have to deal with her spouse. Before the pandemic, she was working for a single family making 5000 per month, but during the pandemic, she was forbidden to work inside the house and was asked to clean the outside instead. Since she needed the money to support her family, she worked every day for four hours outside for a month receiving only Rs. 2000 in pay, before being told to stop coming. Lockdown was very hard on her because she had no source of income and had to put up with her husband's domestic abuse. Her family had to rely on the various NGOs that occasionally donated rations. Due to the need to support her family during the lockdown, pay rent, and the need to pay off the debt her husband amassed from drinking; she fell into debt during that time. So, to pay off the lockdown debts and simultaneously maintain her family, she had to take employment in three different families.

Case 2:

Ms. B is an indigenous migrant from Eastern Nagaland who lives in Kohima, Nagaland. She is a single parent in her forties. She works 7-8 hours every day, seven days a week, to take care of her employer's home and property, earning 6,000 per month. She has been employed by her current employer for the last 6 years. She lives in a rented room with her son. Like all the other domestic workers, she had her share of struggles during the pandemic. She did not lose her job during the lockdown, but because she was required to report to work on alternate days, she only received half of her regular pay. She was not able to support herself and her son on the salary she received during the lockdown. She once received assistance from her church in the form of money and rations, for which she expressed her gratitude. Her son's education, who is currently in higher secondary, is her top priority, and despite her struggles to earn more money, she chooses to send him to a private school. Along with paying rent and school fees, her biggest issue during the lockdown was getting her kid a smartphone with schools moving online. She had to accept an advance from her employer, which created a new issue because she was forced to work for three months after the lockdown without being paid. She consequently had to borrow money from another source to make ends meet. She bemoaned the fact that she had still not repaid the bills she had incurred at the time.

Case 3:

Miss C is a 9-year-old indigenous migrant worker who has lived with her employer in Kohima, for the past 4 years. Her parents couldn't afford to care for her and her siblings, so they sent her to work. She is the sixth of nine siblings. Her sisters are domestic workers as well. She claimed that she had not gone home even once. Being farmers, her parents find it challenging to support their 9 children, especially in the wake of the pandemic. Her brothers reside with their parents and attend school, while she and her sisters were sent out to work as domestic workers. Under the excuse that her employer is paying for her school expenses, she is not compensated. She puts in 0 to 7 hours of work per day. She babysits the children, washes clothes, fetches water, cleans the house, and does the dishes every day. She claimed that she hardly ever had time to study and that she frequently had to miss school to work. Her workload increased during lockdown because the family was confined to their home. She is presently enrolled in class 1 at a government school.

Case 4:

Miss D is an Assamese migrant worker who is 14 years old. She resides in Dimapur with her employer. She is an orphan who, together with her younger sister, has lived with her employer since she was 5 years old. She claims that they are not compensated because their employer provides them with food and clothing. Every day at five in the morning, she gets up and spends the entire day caring for the elderly, cooking, and cleaning the house. She never went to school. She claimed that because she had to carry on with her regular work, the lockdown had little impact on her. Miss D's employer assigned her to work at two separate households following the lockdown, and they took the pay she earned from those jobs. This is an interesting detail about her. She thus works in two different homes throughout the day in addition to her employer's home. She claimed that because she had nowhere else to go, she had no plans to leave her employer's home.

in the near future.

5. CONCLUSION:

The struggles of Domestic workers are universal however, in comparison their circumstances vary between Nagaland and Meghalaya. While the domestic workers of Meghalaya are included in the employment schedule of the Minimum Wages Act of the state, in Nagaland they are not included and their fight is still going on. However, due to improper implementation and lacunae in the enforcement, the minimum wages for domestic workers in Meghalaya are not in effect. As seen are the case studies, some are paid 200/- or 250/- per day which is below the minimum wage. Whereas, in Nagaland, the daily wage ranges between 150/- and 200/- per day. In Nagaland, since there are no morning schools, girl domestic workers are sent to government schools. Due to the pressure from their work, they cannot cope with their studies and hence high incidence of dropouts. In Meghalaya, though girl domestic workers are often sent to morning schools, and as long as they continue to work for their employer, they can continue their education. Many girl domestic workers in Nagaland were sent home during COVID-19 and thus many dropped out of school. In both states, girl domestic workers are from financially backward families

During the Covid-19, the state governments of both Meghalaya and Nagaland provided relief packages for all through the Public Distribution System of which many domestic workers benefitted. However, in both states, some were denied this benefit as they didn't have their ration card. In terms, of financial aid, in Nagaland unorganised workers including domestic workers were given a one-time aid of Rs 500/- through the Pradhan Mantri Jandhan Yojna. In Meghalaya, the State government announced financial aid of Rs 2100/- through the CMRAWL scheme for all informal sector workers including domestic workers. However, upon an RTI inquiry by the activist group TUR, many reported not receiving the promised amount.

The Global Pandemic 2020-2021 exposed the vulnerabilities of domestic workers, highlighting their economic, social, cultural, and political disparities. Women domestic workers in Meghalaya and Nagaland face job termination, salary cuts, non-payment of wages, health risks, increased workload, domestic violence, and apathy from legislators. Despite unions lobbying for their rights, many are unaware of their rights, leading to exploitation and a lack of voice. Proper legislation is needed to protect their rights and dignity. Their inclusion in the Schedule of Employment under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 in respective state governments is the first step to the recognition of their Work. Recognition is not enough, the inclusion of their elected representatives in the minimum wage board to ensure the proper implementation of the Minimum Wages Code for domestic workers is needed. There is a lack of implementation of the minimum wages in the states. It must be noted too that the Central Government has included domestic workers in the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008, and accordingly, all states were to set up welfare boards, but Meghalaya and Nagaland were yet to set up one.

Young girls and boys from poor families are often sent to relatives or acquaintances to fund their education in exchange for domestic work. Education is a child's right, but middle-class families often fund it in exchange for domestic work. Domestic workers often face discrimination and household chores are left for them to complete. The culture of childhood training and isolation from family negatively impacts children's well-being, leading to low academic performance. Despite proper legislation, loopholes in implementation and poverty contribute to child labor.

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