

# Domestic Work and Economic Marginality: A Study from Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu

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## ABSTRACT

Domestic work forms a significant part of the informal labor sector in India, employing millions of women who contribute to household functioning and the urban economy. Despite their importance, domestic workers often remain marginalized and excluded from formal labor protections. This study examines the socio-economic conditions of domestic women workers in Namakkal District of Tamil Nadu. The research focuses on factors such as educational background, income levels, employment conditions, health status, family structure, and access to welfare schemes. The study adopts a descriptive research design and relies on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected from domestic women workers through structured questionnaires and interviews conducted across selected regions of Namakkal District. The findings reveal that most domestic women workers belong to economically disadvantaged communities and possess low educational qualifications. Their employment conditions are informal and characterized by long working hours, low wages, and lack of social security benefits. Additionally, the study identifies significant challenges such as health problems, gender discrimination, and limited awareness of government welfare schemes. The research highlights the urgent need for policy reforms, legal protection, and welfare initiatives aimed at improving the socio-economic status of domestic workers. The study contributes to the broader discourse on labor rights and gender inequality in the informal sector.

**Keywords:** domestic workers, women labor, informal sector, socio-economic conditions, Tamil Nadu, Namakkal district

## INTRODUCTION

Domestic work represents one of the most significant yet underrecognized forms of labor in contemporary societies. In India, domestic work has historically been associated with gendered roles within households, often perceived as an extension of women's unpaid labor in their own homes. As a result, domestic work performed for wages in other households has frequently been undervalued and classified as unskilled labor. However, domestic workers perform a wide range of essential services including cleaning, cooking, childcare, elderly care, and other household management tasks that contribute significantly to the functioning of urban and semi-urban economies.

Women constitute the overwhelming majority of domestic workers in India. Many of these women come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and possess limited education or vocational skills. Due to poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and social inequalities, domestic work becomes one of the few accessible sources of livelihood. Consequently, domestic workers often belong to marginalized communities including lower-income groups, rural migrants, and socially disadvantaged castes.

The rapid urbanization and socio-economic transformation occurring across India have increased the demand for domestic workers. With the growth of dual-income households and increased participation of women in professional employment, many families rely on domestic workers to manage household responsibilities. Despite the rising demand for domestic services, domestic workers remain part of the informal sector where labor protections and social security measures are limited or absent.

In Tamil Nadu, domestic workers form a significant component of the unorganized workforce. The state has experienced substantial economic development and urban growth in recent decades, leading to increased reliance on domestic workers in urban and semi-urban households. Namakkal District, located in western Tamil Nadu, is known for its agricultural activities, poultry industry, and transport sector. Alongside these industries, domestic work has emerged as an important source of employment for women from economically weaker sections of society.

However, domestic women workers often face numerous socio-economic challenges. Their work is typically informal, lacking written contracts, standardized wages, or employment security. Many workers are paid low wages and must work in multiple households to earn a subsistence income. Additionally, domestic workers frequently experience long working hours, limited rest periods, and absence of paid leave. Health issues arising from physically demanding tasks further complicate their working conditions.

Another significant concern is the lack of awareness regarding labor rights and government welfare schemes. Although certain policies have been introduced to protect workers in the unorganized sector, domestic workers often remain excluded from these benefits due to limited knowledge and bureaucratic barriers.

Understanding the socio-economic conditions of domestic women workers is essential for developing effective policy interventions and social welfare programs. By examining their economic status, educational background, health conditions, and employment patterns, researchers can identify key challenges and propose measures to improve their livelihoods.

This study therefore aims to analyze the socio-economic conditions of domestic women workers in Namakkal District and to explore the broader implications for labor rights and gender equality within the informal sector.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the socio-economic background of domestic women workers in Namakkal District.
2. To analyze the educational and family background of domestic women workers.
3. To evaluate the wage structure and employment conditions of domestic workers.
4. To identify the major socio-economic challenges faced by domestic women workers.
5. To assess the level of awareness regarding government welfare schemes among domestic workers.
6. To suggest policy measures to improve the living and working conditions of domestic workers.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Several scholars have examined the socio-economic conditions of domestic workers in India and other developing countries, consistently highlighting that domestic work remains one of the most undervalued and insecure forms of labour. Domestic workers, particularly women, form a crucial part of urban and semi-urban households, yet their work is rarely recognized as “formal employment.” The literature shows that domestic work is shaped by informality, gendered expectations, low wages, and limited access to social protections, placing workers in a highly vulnerable position within the labour market.

Kabeer (2016) argues that domestic work is often characterized by informality and invisibility, which significantly contributes to the marginalization of domestic workers. Because their labour is performed inside private households, it is frequently excluded from public scrutiny and formal employment regulation. This invisibility has serious consequences: domestic workers often remain outside the coverage of labour laws, minimum wage protections, and institutional grievance mechanisms. As a result, they typically do not receive job security, written contracts, paid leave, or retirement benefits. Kabeer's analysis underlines that the lack of legal and social recognition makes domestic workers more vulnerable to exploitation, wage denial, and arbitrary dismissal, reinforcing their marginal position in the labour economy.

Neetha (2018) further explains that domestic workers in India face multiple layers of vulnerability. Economic insecurity is a major concern, as wages tend to be low and inconsistent, and many workers depend on daily earnings to sustain their households. Gender discrimination also plays a key role because domestic work is socially perceived as an extension of women's "natural" household responsibilities rather than paid labour requiring skill and effort. Neetha notes that this gendered perception weakens workers' bargaining power and justifies poor pay and harsh working conditions. Another significant issue highlighted is the lack of collective bargaining. Since domestic workers are dispersed across individual homes, unionization and collective negotiation remain difficult, leaving workers to negotiate wages and work terms individually, often from a weak position.

Ramesh and Sharmila (2022) focus on domestic workers in urban Tamil Nadu and observe that workers typically earn low wages and are compelled to work for multiple employers to maintain a basic income. Many domestic workers take up several part-time roles in different households, leading to long working hours and high physical strain. The study also shows that domestic workers generally have limited educational qualifications and commonly belong to economically disadvantaged communities. This combination of low education and poverty restricts alternative job opportunities and pushes women into domestic work as a survival strategy, making upward mobility difficult.

Health-related vulnerabilities are highlighted by Sini and Nagalingam (2023) in their study conducted in Coimbatore. They report that domestic workers frequently face occupational health issues due to repetitive physical labour such as sweeping, mopping, lifting water buckets, and prolonged standing. The absence of protective equipment and the lack of health awareness worsen these risks. Workers often continue working despite pain or illness because missing work directly affects income, indicating how economic vulnerability connects with health insecurity.

Overall, these studies collectively emphasize that domestic workers remain among the most vulnerable groups in the informal labour sector. Their socio-economic conditions are shaped by poverty, gender inequality, weak legal protection, and limited institutional support. The literature strongly suggests the need for better policy recognition, stronger labour safeguards, social security inclusion, and mechanisms to improve dignity, wages, and working conditions for domestic women workers.

## METHODOLOGY

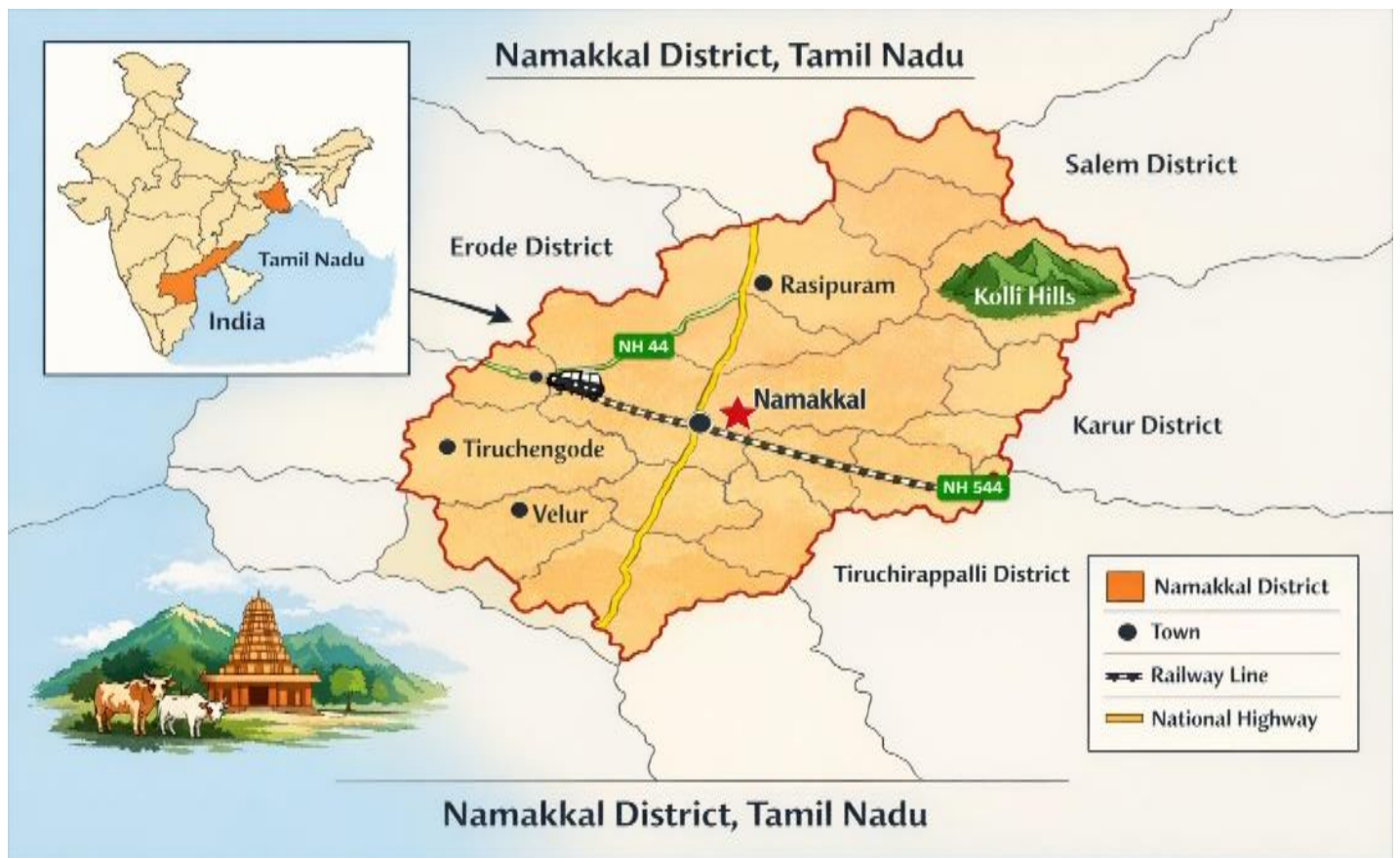
The present study is descriptive in nature and seeks to document the socio-economic conditions of domestic women workers in Namakkal District. A descriptive research design was considered appropriate because the study focuses on examining the existing realities of respondents without any experimental intervention.

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from 120 domestic women workers through structured questionnaires, personal interviews, and field observation. The field survey was conducted in selected areas of Namakkal District, namely Namakkal, Tiruchengode, Rasipuram, and Paramathi Velur. Since domestic workers are part of an unorganized sector and no comprehensive sampling frame was available, convenience sampling was adopted. Respondents were selected based on accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate in the study.

The questionnaire included items relating to age, marital status, family size, educational level, monthly

income, type of domestic work, working hours, health conditions, and awareness of welfare schemes. Personal interviews were used to obtain deeper insight into respondents' lived experiences, workplace issues, and welfare access. Observation also helped in understanding their working environments and broader socio-economic conditions.

Secondary data were collected from books, academic journals, labour studies, policy documents, and government publications relating to domestic work, women's labour, and the informal economy. The collected data were organized and analysed using descriptive statistical tools such as frequency distribution and percentage analysis.



### Limitations of the Study

The present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small, as the study is based on 120 domestic women workers from selected areas of Namakkal District. While this provides useful insight into their socio-economic conditions, the findings cannot be generalized to all domestic workers in Tamil Nadu or India. Second, the study adopted convenience sampling because domestic workers belong to an unorganized and largely undocumented sector, making it difficult to obtain a formal sampling frame. As a result, the sample may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within this occupational group. Third, the analysis is primarily descriptive and relies on percentage and frequency distribution. Although this approach is appropriate for documenting the basic profile and problems of respondents, the inclusion of inferential statistical techniques would have strengthened the analytical depth of the study and enabled broader interpretation of relationships between variables such as education, income, working hours, health status, and welfare awareness.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In addition to the descriptive patterns identified, the lived experiences narrated by respondents reveal the emotional and material strain associated with domestic work, especially with regard to low wages, health burdens, and lack of welfare access.

### Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

The socio-economic background of the respondents indicates that domestic work is largely performed by women from financially vulnerable households. A considerable proportion of workers fall within the 30–50 age group, suggesting that domestic work is commonly taken up during the middle stage of adulthood when women face increased household responsibilities such as childcare, educational expenses, debt repayment, and support for dependent family members. This pattern reflects the role of domestic work as a survival-oriented livelihood strategy rather than a choice driven by skill specialization or career progression.

Educational attainment among the respondents is generally low. The study found that 38% of respondents had completed primary education, 32% had studied up to middle school, 18% were illiterate, and only 12% had completed secondary education. This low level of education limits access to formal employment and compels many women to enter domestic work, which does not require formal qualifications. It also reduces their ability to negotiate fair wages, understand official procedures, and access welfare benefits independently. In this context, educational disadvantage not only shapes employment opportunities but also acts as a structural barrier to institutional inclusion, particularly in accessing state-supported welfare mechanisms.

Marital status reveals another important dimension of economic vulnerability. The study found that 67% of respondents were married, 18% were widowed, 10% were separated, and 5% were unmarried. Married women often engage in domestic work to supplement household income, whereas widowed and separated women frequently depend on it as a primary source of livelihood. Most respondents belonged to nuclear families, which increases financial pressure on women and reinforces the need for regular income. The absence of stable secondary income sources within such family structures further intensifies their dependence on informal and insecure employment. This financial pressure is reflected in the words of one respondent, who explained, “My earnings are not enough to manage food expenses, school fees, and house rent. Every month it becomes difficult to balance everything.” Such lived experiences make clear that domestic work is not merely a supplementary occupation for many women but an essential means of household survival under conditions of persistent economic insecurity.

**Table 1: Summary of Key Socio-Economic Characteristics of Domestic Women Workers in Namakkal District**

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
<b>Age Group</b>	Below 30 years	—
	30–50 years	Majority
	Above 50 years	—
<b>Education Level</b>	Illiterate	18%
	Primary Education	38%
	Middle School	32%
	Secondary Education	12%
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	67%
	Widowed	18%
	Separated	10%
	Unmarried	5%
<b>Family Type</b>	Nuclear Family	Majority
	Joint Family	—
<b>Nature of Employment</b>	Informal Domestic Work	Predominant
<b>Income Stability</b>	Regular	Low
	Irregular	High

The table consolidates key demographic and economic characteristics, highlighting the predominance of middle-aged, low-educated women engaged in informal and economically unstable domestic work.

These socio-economic characteristics have direct implications for policy access and effectiveness. The findings suggest that although multiple welfare provisions exist for unorganized women workers in Tamil Nadu, their actual utilization remains limited. Domestic women workers may potentially benefit from schemes linked to the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Welfare Board, the e-Shram portal, public distribution support, health insurance programmes, maternity assistance, old-age pension, and self-help group-based financial inclusion initiatives. However, access to such benefits remains constrained in practice. Procedural barriers such as lack of identity documents, difficulty in obtaining residence or income proof, limited digital literacy, irregular registration processes, inadequate awareness, and absence of institutional guidance prevent many workers from availing themselves of these schemes.

The consequences of this exclusion are not only administrative but deeply personal. When health issues arise, many workers remain trapped between the need for treatment and the fear of wage loss. As one respondent noted, “Even when I am unwell, I continue to work because if I take leave, I will not get paid.” This statement reflects the precarious nature of domestic work, where the absence of paid leave and social protection forces women to prioritize immediate income over their own health and well-being. It also highlights how welfare inaccessibility and insecure employment together intensify the vulnerability of domestic women workers.

Thus, the issue is not merely the availability of welfare policies but the gap between policy design and ground-level accessibility. The socio-economic vulnerability identified in this study—particularly low education, unstable income, and limited institutional awareness—directly contributes to this disconnect. Therefore, policy effectiveness depends not only on the existence of welfare provisions but also on simplifying enrolment procedures, strengthening last-mile delivery systems, and implementing targeted awareness programmes tailored specifically for domestic workers in semi-urban and district-level contexts such as Namakkal

### **Economic Conditions**

The economic condition of domestic women workers is characterized by low and unstable earnings. Their wages are usually determined informally between worker and employer and vary depending on the number of households served, the nature of the tasks performed, and daily working hours. Workers serving one or two households generally earn between ₹3000 and ₹5000 per month, while those working in multiple households may earn between ₹6000 and ₹9000 per month.

These income levels are inadequate in relation to rising household expenses. Food, rent, children’s education, healthcare, and utility costs consume most of their earnings, leaving little scope for savings. In several households, the women’s income functions as supplementary support where the spouse’s earnings are uncertain or insufficient. In the case of widowed or separated women, domestic work often serves as the primary means of survival.

Savings among respondents are generally low and irregular. In times of emergency, many women depend on self-help groups, microfinance institutions, or local moneylenders. Although self-help groups provide access to credit and encourage small savings, loan repayment becomes difficult when incomes are unstable. This reveals that the economic life of domestic women workers is shaped by subsistence-level earnings and constant financial insecurity.

### **Working Conditions**

Domestic women workers perform a wide range of physically demanding household tasks, including sweeping, mopping, cooking, washing clothes and utensils, and caregiving. Many respondents reported working between six and ten hours a day, often across multiple households. Their workday typically begins early in the morning and extends into the evening, with commuting between households adding to physical strain and time pressure.

A major issue highlighted by the study is the absence of job security. Domestic workers usually do not have written contracts or formal agreements defining wages, leave, duties, or termination conditions. Employment is based on informal verbal understanding and remains subject to employer preference. Workers may lose

employment without notice if employers relocate, reduce expenses, or discontinue their services. This lack of security places workers in a highly vulnerable position, especially because most of them depend on monthly income for basic household survival.

The absence of employment benefits further worsens their condition. Paid leave, maternity support, medical insurance, and pension benefits are almost entirely unavailable. Illness often results in wage loss, forcing workers to continue working despite health problems. Such conditions reflect the exclusion of domestic women workers from the protections generally associated with formal labour.

### **Health Conditions**

The physically demanding nature of domestic work directly affects workers' health. Many respondents reported suffering from back pain, joint pain, anemia, chronic fatigue, and headaches. These problems arise from repetitive movements, prolonged standing, bending, lifting, and insufficient rest. Nutritional deficiency and inadequate recovery time also contribute to poor health.

Access to healthcare remains limited. Many workers postpone treatment due to financial constraints, fear of wage loss, and lack of health insurance. As a result, minor ailments often become chronic conditions. The study thus shows that occupational strain and economic insecurity are closely interconnected in the lives of domestic women workers.

### **Social Issues and Welfare Awareness**

Domestic women workers also face broader social inequalities linked to gender, class, and caste. Because domestic work is seen as ordinary women's work rather than skilled labour, it is often treated as low-status employment. Some workers reported disrespectful treatment, lack of dignity, and social stigma in their workplaces. In some cases, class and caste-based distinctions subtly shaped the way workers were treated within households.

The study also found limited awareness of government welfare schemes. Although measures exist for workers in the unorganized sector, many domestic women workers are unaware of these provisions or unable to access them due to documentation requirements, procedural barriers, and lack of guidance. This gap between policy availability and policy access remains one of the major concerns identified by the study.

### **Major Findings**

The study found that domestic women workers in Namakkal District largely belong to economically disadvantaged backgrounds and possess low educational qualifications. Their wages are low and often insufficient to meet household needs. Employment conditions are informal and insecure, with no written contracts or social security protections. Occupational health problems are widespread, especially musculoskeletal pain and fatigue. Awareness of welfare schemes is limited, and access to benefits remains weak. Overall, domestic women workers continue to experience the combined effects of poverty, gender inequality, occupational invisibility, and inadequate policy support.

### **Suggestions**

Improving the socio-economic status of domestic women workers requires both policy and social intervention. Domestic work should be formally recognized as labour deserving legal protection. Minimum wage standards and basic employment guidelines should be framed and implemented. Domestic workers should be included more effectively within social security systems through health insurance, pension support, paid leave, and maternity assistance. Awareness programmes should be conducted to improve knowledge of government schemes and labour rights. Skill development, adult education, and worker collectivization can also help strengthen bargaining power and improve working conditions.

## CONCLUSION

Domestic work remains a crucial yet systematically undervalued component of the informal economy, particularly in regions such as Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu. This study demonstrates that domestic women workers occupy a position marked by economic marginality, social invisibility, and institutional neglect. Despite their indispensable role in sustaining households and enabling broader economic productivity, their labour continues to be unrecognized as formal work.

The findings reveal that domestic women workers are largely drawn from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, characterized by low levels of education, unstable incomes, and limited access to alternative employment opportunities. Their working conditions are predominantly informal, lacking written contracts, job security, and basic labour protections. The absence of social security measures—such as health insurance, paid leave, and pension benefits—further intensifies their vulnerability. Additionally, the physically demanding nature of domestic work contributes to persistent health issues, which are often left untreated due to financial constraints and lack of awareness.

The study also highlights the intersection of gender, class, and social hierarchy in shaping the lived experiences of domestic women workers. Their work is frequently perceived as an extension of traditional gender roles rather than as skilled labour, reinforcing low wages and diminished social status. Limited awareness and accessibility of government welfare schemes further deepen their marginalization, reflecting a significant gap between policy provisions and actual implementation.

In this context, addressing the economic marginality of domestic women workers requires a multi-dimensional approach. Formal recognition of domestic work as legitimate labour is essential, along with the establishment of minimum wage standards, legal safeguards, and inclusion within social security frameworks. Equally important are initiatives aimed at improving awareness, facilitating access to welfare schemes, and promoting skill development and collective organization among workers.

Ultimately, transforming the conditions of domestic women workers is not merely a matter of economic reform but also of social justice. Recognizing their labour, ensuring their rights, and enhancing their dignity are critical steps toward building a more inclusive and equitable society.

Future studies may adopt larger and more representative samples and apply inferential statistical methods to generate deeper insights into the structural determinants of economic marginality among domestic women workers.

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