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VOICES THAT REVERBERATE WITHIN THE WALLS:
DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE GATED ESTATES OF
KOLKATA



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ABSTRACT

Gated estates burgeoned in the bosom of Kolkata owing to the growth in the real estate sector emboldened by generous flow of funds by the multinational developmental banks and private capital. It was further heightened by return of the NRI to their roots, buying power of the residents induced by a globalized economy and transformation in the traditional family structure. A 'Gated Community' can be defined as a form of a residential complex with high walls and fences. It is like a miniature township comprising of facilities like clubs, libraries, swimming pools, shopping complexes, restaurants, gym, parks and playgrounds. It is generally the abode of the middle and the upper classes. What marks these gated communities is the presence of a strict surveillance system in the form of private security guards and screening of entrants who are not part of these 'gated communities'. In the light of the overt presence of gated estates, I was inquisitive to delve into the lives of the domestic workers who are concomitant with these gated estates and document the nature and experiences of work, changes in the nature of profession of domestic service, experience of working in these luxury condominiums, their perspectives towards the web of rules and regulations, relationship with the employers and their family, security guards and fellow domestic workers, family and lifestyle, and their awareness regarding the domestic worker's bill that is being formulated by the State and role of NGOs in purveyoring awareness. Hence, this research project became an endeavour to retrieve the voices of these domestic workers and nullify the injustice committed by Sociological scholarship by not focusing specifically on them. In addition, the project also looked at the experiences of grassroots level activists who work for the welfare of the domestic workers to gain a deeper insight into the plight of the domestic workers.

KEYWORDS: Gated Community Trivializes Females, Labelling Theory, Exchange Offers.



INTRODUCTION

The nature, texture and temperament of the dissertation steered its wheel towards the adoption of feminist methodology. It is because feminist methodology becomes a point of departure from the traditional epistemologies that proposes alternative theories of knowledge that legitimate women as knowers. According to Reinharz feminist methodology records the lives and activities of women from their perspective and militates against the proclivity that 'trivializes females' activities and thoughts, or interprets from the standpoint of men in the society or the male researcher. She further asserts that this assuages the exploitative relationship between the researcher and the participants. In the feminist methodology an enquirer places himself/ herself in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter. Hence, the researcher is not an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests. This further allowed me to weave in the methods of overt and covert ethnography, qualitative interviewing, personal narratives and focus groups depending on the demand of the situation.

DISCUSSION

Poverty and illiteracy are the twin evils that have pushed these women into paid domestic service. They largely belong to lower caste group and those who use cycle to their workplace are deemed as better-off among the cohorts. Often the domestic workers prefer to migrate without their children citing issues of education, child rearing in the absence of the parents and lack of safety in their location. Filial networks or personal contacts with the established domestic workers in the gated estates play a determining role in securing paid domestic service at the gated communities. Part-timers feel that their status assures them

autonomy, flexibility and mobility unlike their live-in counterparts. The differential wage structure of the domestic workers for the same amount of work can be attributed to their lack of negotiating capability. Another reason can be traced back to the filial bonds they develop with their employers due to the latter's compassionate attitude at the same time prolonged period of association with their employers.

They prefer to work in the gated estates as it allows them to work in multiple households without distance posing a constraint. Domestic workers have found that the difference between working in the house with that of the flats is that they can wash utensils in the kitchen in the flats. However, in the houses that had to perform this task in the tap located outside the house. Apart from that gated estates allows them to earn more in a single-shift which they could not achieve in a double-shift in the house. The issue of extra money for extra work remains a convention but not a compulsion. However, most of the employers provide some amount of token for extra labour. In case they don't, the domestic workers feel that it is beyond their dignity to demand extra money from the employer. Cooking is a prestigious activity as it entails skills and time. There is rivalry among domestic workers regarding salary, gifts and working environment. The relationship between the live-in servants or between the two domestic workers working for the same employer is defined by undercurrents of tension. Domestic workers who have worked with the domestic service agencies have ambivalent feelings. They complain of lack of autonomy in deciding on their salary but are complacent when it comes to recruitment. They are unaware of the phenomenon of domestic worker's websites disseminating jobs.

The web of rules and regulations of the gated communities perpetuates the dominant ideology of Labelling Theory against the domestic workers. For some domestic workers it is humiliating, for some it is indispensable to keep a tab on unfaithful cohorts whereas others argue that it insulates them from false allegations of theft and dereliction. The prohibition of the domestic workers into certain sites within the condominiums is strived at maintaining social enclosure. The bureaucratic structure testifies the increasing rationalization of society. Fixed leaves are steadily penetrating into the discourse of paid domestic service. The bestowal of gifts is contingent upon the nature of the employer. There is erosion in the culture of gifting due to the rising influence of 'exchange offers' at the shopping malls located in the vicinity of these gated estates.

The employer-employee relationship is defined by both balanced and negative reciprocity. However, unlike the houses, spatial boundaries are limited within the employer's residence. If food is provided to the domestic worker it is neutralized by the wage structure. Domestic workers share a special bond with their employers who embrace their children with open arms. Female domestic workers trope of interaction pertains to the female employer and interaction that transcends the boundaries of 'work-related conversation' with the male employer is deemed as improper and a possible blot on the 'character' of the domestic worker. It becomes a transgression of the moral code of conduct.

Domestic workers who solely works within the gated estate gives the reason that it is proximity of the households that minimizes the distance of travelling from one house to another making these condominium complexes a favourable workplace for them. Female domestic workers trope of interaction pertains

to the female employer and interaction that transcends the boundaries of 'work-related conversation' with the male employer is deemed as improper and a possible blot on the 'character' of the domestic worker. It becomes a transgression of the moral code of conduct. Hence, the paid domestic service and non-paid housework both remain feminized territories despite the neo-liberal ideologies of feminism. Both the female employer and her female employee are entrapped in a gendered employer-employee relationship that is governed by patriarchy. So, the authority and superordination that the female employers enjoy in relation to her female domestic worker is neutralized by repositioning her traditional role-play in the private sphere. Like the female employer who has to manage both the public and the private sphere, the female domestic worker also juggles both 'home' and 'work'. The security guards may enjoy ephemeral power over the domestic workers. However, they have become slave to 'bureaucratic ritualism'.

Better salary doesn't guarantee greater autonomy as husbands continue to take the ultimate decision even about their occupation. The salary earned is often used for paying hefty amount of rent than for personal consumption. Single-parenting is common among the domestic workers. The domestic workers do not want their children to follow in their footsteps due to the boon of education. Their close proximity with 'high culture' has made them acquainted with the upper-class living standards which are sometimes manifested through their sartorial choice. The space of work and leisure overlaps owing to the blight of double-day work. Gossip remains a space for strengthening social ties for some whereas most of them desist to the idea of gossip.

The domestic workers lack awareness about the domestic worker's Bill. However, the intervention of NGO, Parichiti is steering way for change through awareness and unionization of the domestic workers. In situations of crisis many of them can rely on their employers.

CONCLUSION

As a young bourgeois middle-class representative I have been part of discussions regarding the comparison of who has the most insincere domestic worker, how often they resort to leaves and the lump sum amount that they receive. But this research has been a lesson, silencing my middle-class privileged perspectives where a comfortable life defines my being and the anathema of double-day labour seems a far-fetched idea. It was also a cathartic experience when women belonging to different age brackets shared their inner pain with unadulterated emotions, infusing their emotions in me, leaving me teary-eyed with their excruciating pain at the same making me jump in joy in instances when they emerged victorious. I have learnt to empathise with them, my relationship with the domestic workers who are at our house have taken a new dimension of amiability and most importantly as a woman I have realized the magnitude of strength when one woman is there for another woman. It cross-cuts age, class, caste and language and allows for a communitarian feeling which is invisibilized by the collusion of patriarchal ethos.

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