

# CHAPTER-6

## Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

This study examined the employer-domestic worker relationship, in the space of middle-class homes, in the context of paid domestic work, in Guwahati. While there are primarily two types of domestic workers, i.e. full-time live-in domestics and part-time live-out domestics that are hired in middle-class homes in contemporary India; the study particularly focused on the work relationship which involved the part-time domestic workers. With the growing significance of part-time domestic workers in other parts of urban India, a similar pattern of increasing recruitment of the particular category of workers has also been observed in Guwahati. This, however, does not reduce the significance of full-time live-in domestic workers, as they continue to prevail with the part-time arrangement of domestic work.

Taking the middle-class homes as ‘contact spaces’ (Nare, 2014), where employers and domestic workers of diverse backgrounds- class, caste, ethnic, religious – comes in close physical proximity, the study examined the intricate details of everyday interactions between the two groups. Significantly, unlike other workplaces, the contact space in paid domestic work sector is also the ‘private space’ of employers, which transform the dynamics of spatiality of power in these relationships. This in turn, determines the nature of work and work conditions of domestic workers based on their intersectional identities of gender, class, caste, ethnic, religion, in these spaces. However, the spatiality of power unfolded in the relationship is not one-dimensional, as the domestic workers perceived as the inferior ‘other’ carve out their own narratives in the form of subtle everyday resistance and hidden transcripts, thereby, re-asserting their dignity at workplace.

Moving beyond the workplace experiences, the study further locates the trajectories of domestic workers, which shapes their everyday personal lives at their own home. Much like their workplace experiences, the study highlights that, the daily lives of domestic workers are influenced by their intersectional positions in their own homes. In this, their gendered location mostly bears similarity with the lives of their employers, as the expectations of domesticity are universal for all women. But, their social location as working-class poor, in addition to their boundaries established on the basis of their caste and religious expectations strikes the imbalance between the two groups of women.

With this backdrop, this concluding chapter discusses the major findings of the study, thus, extending the sociological discourse on paid domestic work, in the context of India.

## 6.2 Between Need and Lifestyle

To begin, the study embarked upon the question as to: how part-time domestic work is organised in Guwahati? The study showed that, part-time domestic tasks are divided into four occupational categories- (1) cleaning work i.e. sweeping and mopping, washing clothes, and washing utensils; (2) cooking;(3) cleaning of toilets and waste removal; and (4) child and elderly care. In this, the cleaning work i.e. sweeping and mopping, washing clothes and, utensils appears to be the most significant tasks for which labour is outsourced by the employers of the study. Part-time domestic work in the study area is further organised around two separate shifts i.e. morning and evening shift. The morning shift comprised of a demanding work schedule, where the domestics are required to perform a set of heavier tasks, resulting in their spending longer duration of time in each house. The evening shift, on the other hand, is comparatively less demanding, as the tasks performed are lighter in nature. The shifts are primarily divided taking into consideration the suitability of both employers and their domestics. With the distribution of part-time domestic work into various occupational categories, employers are therefore, entitled to avail its services as per their needs and economic standing, thus, fulfilling their consumerist aspirations of maintaining clean and ordered home at public display.

Yet, daily struggles within the labour process are manifested in performing tasks like washing utensils, which are abhorred both by employers and workers. While the employers failed to give a comprehensible answer with regard to abhorrence of the particular task, the domestics are particularly critical about certain employer practices like leaving *jootha* (left over), in used plates and dumping of used utensils overnight in the kitchen sink without pouring water, as their reasons of abhorrence. However, unlike employers, they are not in a position to avoid the task, as most employers hired them to perform a combination of domestic tasks together. In this, the most common combination is that of sweeping, mopping and washing utensils.

Furthermore, considering the gendered expectations of domesticity in middle-class households, wherein, the women are primarily responsible for the domestic chores, it typically appeared that these women in general, hired domestics to ease their domestic

work burden. But, a closer observation reveals that, their hiring of domestics appeared to be guided by a complex set of needs, which is a mix of physical, symbolic and emotional gains. While it is generally inferred that the participation of middle-class women in the labour market entailed towards an increasing recruitment of domestic workers, more specifically part-time domestics in contemporary India; the present study reveals housewives being equally dependent on domestics. In this, the wage-earning women emphasized on the practical gains from hiring a domestic, while the needs of housewives' are a conglomeration of practical and symbolic gains. However, this does not entail one to demarcate both the groups of women – wage-earning and housewives - into watertight compartments. Rather, they are united by the fact that the tasks assigned to the domestics are largely menial and impure. The women employers mostly considered themselves as capable of doing the pure domestic tasks like cooking. Even the wage-earning women, for instance, who portrayed themselves as being totally dependent on domestic workers, are actively involved in meal preparation for their respective families, as they proudly retorted during the interviews: 'cooking is my department!'. Although, cooking constituted one of the most time-consuming domestic tasks (as depicted by the women themselves) amongst the Assamese families in the study, since it involved preparing two to three dishes in each meal, strangely labour for the particular task is not outsourced. The testimonies in a way reflect the contemporary domestic practice of inculcating traditionalism by preserving the task of cooking as the 'ultimate labour of love' (Donner, 2011). This reflects the distinction amongst the domestic tasks performed by employers and those assigned to their workers, which, in a way, accentuate the subordinate status of the workers on a daily basis, thereby, creating a polarized versions of femininity surrounding the middle-class and working-class women. Arguably, such distinction is important for the middle-class women because it entailed them to redefine their gendered selves embodying respectability. As Dickey (2016) observes in case of middle-class people, that, they are in a greater need to constantly perform behaviours that support their class standing, thereby, marking their difference from the poor.

Furthermore, the pattern in which paid domestic work is organized highlight the significance of 'status enhancement' (Romero, 1992) amongst all the middle-class employers. More than just a clean and ordered house, the presence of domestics contributed in amplifying the well-being of the employers. While some achieved this by hiring domestics for insignificant domestic tasks which the employers themselves could

easily perform; some achieved it by hiring domestics for tasks which could be easily visualized by their neighbours.

Furthermore, it is to be noted that, hiring of domestic workers goes beyond practical and symbolic gains, and also includes the emotional gains of employers. This is most commonly achieved by developing a maternalistic relationship in the form of transferring gifts (old or used-material possessions) to their domestics, which they commonly marked as their 'act of charity' or by financially helping the domestics in times of crisis. And, in some cases, this is achieved by contrasting their domestic practices with neighbours, which enabled them in enhancing their self-image as 'benevolent'. Moreover, the validation on the part of domestics towards such employer practices as masked in maternalism further contributes in buttressing their emotional aspirations of being a kind and generous employer. Notably, the maternalistic practices in large part are a peculiar reminiscent of a traditional patron-client order, which has been referred by Ray and Qayum (2010) as 'feudal servitude'. Scholars have argued that, in contemporary times, practices of maternalism are a typical combination of traditional aspects of feudalism and market features of wage labour, which strengthens the employers control over labour process (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011). The findings of the present study corroborate with earlier studies and reveals that relationship embedded in maternalism essentially portrays the domestics as 'needy' beings, wherein employers strategize to manipulate the feelings of their domestics, by perpetuating a sense of deference and dependency in them. Significantly, considering the intimacy of the space where the work is performed, this sense of dependency amongst the domestics further accentuates the class positions of employer to influence the relationship, which moves beyond the classic market-oriented wage relationship. In this light, it can therefore be argued that, part-time domestic work does not necessarily forms the basis of a market economy, rather 'home' as the foundational basis of the relationship actively contributes towards making the employer-domestic relationship an amalgamation of market and feudal features.

Taking forward the argument, employer practices as masked within maternalism can also be inferred in relation to the larger moral aspirations of consumerism, widely prevalent amongst the Indian middle-class since the post-liberalization period (Fernandes, 2006). By transferring old out-of-fashion clothes and other material possessions to their domestics, the employers actively engage in a practice of making room for their new in-

coming material possessions. This, notably, enabled the employers in communicating a public image of their class identities, in addition to validating their sense of moral 'self' as 'benevolent' employers.

Significantly, the hiring of domestics in Guwahati is a complex interplay of practical, symbolic and emotional gains on the part of women employers of the study. The three aspects are however, not ranked in any hierarchical importance from the perspectives of employers. Instead, it seemed that, while, symbolic gains in the form of status reproduction is a crucial element attached to recruitment of domestic workers since colonial times, practical and emotional gains in contemporary times, satiated certain moral and consumerist aspirations of middle-class employers, hence, buttressing their gender and class positions in the realm of everyday lives.

### **6.3 Boundaries of Class Distinction**

Although, domestic tasks are highly segregated, catering to needs of the consumerist minds of middle-class, the employers and workers are bind in an interpersonal relationship. Sen and Sengupta (2016) refers to this as 'pragmatic intimacy', which implies 'the paradox of a relationship that is at once dominating and mutual, distant and intimate, exploitative and caring (Sen & Sengupta, 2016, p. 150). In such a relationship, both the groups extract the maximum benefits suiting to their own needs. Nevertheless, considering the hierarchical class relationship between employers and their domestics, it is comprehensible that employers have considerably greater power to influence this relation. This, therefore, constitutes the foreground of the dialectical relationship between the two groups.

The overarching significance of class in a domestic work relationship has found reflection in the burgeoning scholarship of paid domestic work across the globe. And, the findings of this study, more or less, confirm this extending body of scholarship. With outsourcing of lower-class domestics for the varied menial domestic tasks, essentially transform the spaces of middle-class homes as 'contact spaces' (Nare, 2014), wherein unequal class relationship is reproduced, as well as, challenged in a close physical proximity, in the realm of everyday lives. Consequently, this entailed towards feelings of anxieties amongst the middle-class employers.

Anxieties amongst the employers found expression in light of blurring 'class distinction' with their domestics. Employers' accounts of unease and discomfort are reflected in the

upwardly mobile lifestyles of their part-time domestics in the form of symbolic practices emulating the middle-class. For instance, practices like changing consumerist habits of their domestics are quite often cited by employers. In some instances, this further found emphasis through the ‘*hi-fi*’ sartorial choices of the domestic’s children in contemporary times. Significantly, emerging differences in ‘class habitus’ of the domestics acted as a cause of social and moral anxiety on the part of employers. But, as Leela Fernandes (2006) argues, practice of consumptions is only one side of middle-class formation, in new India. In this light, the study argues that employers anxiety of domestics emulating middle-class culture seemed exaggerated, as they failed to consider the over-all ‘being’ of a domestic which hinders their upward class mobility to match the employers stature. In other words, the domestics’ lacked the combination of capital- economic, cultural and social- which play crucial roles in class mobility for any individual in the society (Bourdieu, 1984). Although, the employers are aware of this essential criterion, they nevertheless felt anxious in the process, which in clear terms indicates the fragility of middle-class formation in India. As scholars like Fernandes (2006) and Dickey (2016) argues middle-class is a contested category, and anyone, even the working-classes has the potential of passing as ‘middle-class’ by emulating symbolic strategies of the upwardly mobile. Moreover, such class anxieties on the part of employers are typical for their part-time domestics. For, in case of live-in domestics, the employers class insecurity and ‘fear of falling’ (Ehrenreich, 1989) is closely monitored by maintaining boundaries through which they controlled the needs of their domestics. But, in the case of part-time domestics this is beyond the capacity of employers, as this category of workers exercised greater autonomy and flexibility towards their personal lives, thus, accentuating employer anxieties. This anxiety is further manifested from the daily physical proximity within the spaces of ‘home’, which entails the employers to maintain boundaries of social distance during the limited time of the domestic’s visit. For instance, by controlling the domestic’s movement within the everyday contact spaces, through varied acts of contempt, ranging from segregation of utensils and micro-politics of hygiene to limiting their use of employer’s space. Moreover, this also found reflection in the shadows of maternalism (Chapter 3), which acted as a symbolic boundary to delimit the domestics’ class position, in the realm of everyday work relations. And, as the study suggests, employers practices embedded in maternalism also moves beyond the contact spaces, and often involved the domestic’s family, more specifically their children (Chapter 5). Such symbolic framework of identity expression not only entailed the

employers in reproducing the relationship of ‘distinction’, but, also reflects their class-consciousness and self-identity as middle-class employers. Arguably, the significance of these classificatory practices enabled the employers to closely guard the permeability of social boundaries of class, which in a way get threatened due to the day-to-day physical proximity with their domestics.

Likewise, employer anxieties are also reflected in the form of ‘domestic threat’ posed by their lower-class domestics. This becomes evident when all employers commonly declared ‘trust is the most important thing in domestic service!’, when the researcher introduced the research topic to them. Opening the intimate private spaces of one’s home to strangers, in general, certainly adds to vulnerabilities for anyone. But, in case of paid domestic work, these strangers i.e. the part-time domestics are in part, the ‘intimate strangers’, as they are entitled to a direct access in to the employer’s lives. This essentially contributed in a great deal of rhetoric amongst the employers in terming their domestics as people enticed with ‘greed’. However, the connotation of the term ‘greed’ is not simply associated with domestics’ temptation of removing material possessions from employers’ houses. But, it also had symbolic implications.

Yet, considering the employers dependency on their domestics to sustain their everyday domestic chores, they sought strategies to mitigate the potential domestic threat, thereby, building elements of trust in the relationship. They most commonly achieved this by establishing a long-term association with ‘reliable’ domestics through disposition of a kind behaviour; keeping vigilance over the domestics when at work; locking valuables in safe lockers and so forth. It is significant however that, feelings of vulnerability owing to perception of ‘domestic threat’ are not one-sided, as the risk of being projected as potential thieves appeared as a major source of distress to all domestics. This feeling of vulnerability emanated from the same origin, like the employers, i.e. class stratification (Sharma, 2019). Nevertheless, negotiations of such feelings of vulnerability are strikingly different from those adopted by their employers. Owing to their inferior class positions and the lack of social, economic and political resources mostly entailed the domestics to work in an ever-present fear of accusation (ibid).

It is noteworthy that, although, employers’ overtly expressed their concerns of domestic threat, their testimonies are reflection of paradoxical safety concerns, wherein, despite perception of domestics as ‘usual threats’ in their protected spaces, the employers refrained from pursuing any legal recourse. They often mended domestic’s crime of theft

and pilfering by resorting to mechanisms like ‘dismissal’ of such domestics. Significantly, from the vantage of employers, this hints at the process of what Dickey (2016) calls as ‘performing in the middle’. While being in the ‘middle’ is associated with financial security, this at the same time also has negative attributes attached to it. As Dickey (2016) emphasizes that the pressures of performing in the middle-class include the intense scrutiny of behaviour by onlookers, wherein any deviance from the expected behaviour might lead to a perception of downward mobility, in addition to attracting envy and evil eye in situations of upward mobility. In the context of paid domestic work, it can be argued that the questions related to servant crime are delicate, which has the potential to attract unwarranted ridicule from their neighbours and class peers, as well as, to attract envy reflecting their wealth to public eye.

#### **6.4 Intersectional Dimensions and Spatiality of Power**

The intersectional dimensions that structure the everyday work relationship between employers and their domestic workers is seemingly evident from each employer’s narrative in the study. This particularly got reflected through recruitment practices of the employers, wherein they clearly pronounced their preferences and prejudices towards each category – ethnic, religious, and gender– of domestics. The study reveals that the prejudices are particularly influenced by the employer’s preconceived notions of each category of workers. Consequently, this highlights that while ‘class’ is the central hierarchical dimension that influences the everyday work relations in paid domestic work sector, the intersection of the additional social dimensions and hierarchies further accentuates the spatiality of power and shapes the dynamics of the relations.

Ethnic background of the domestics served as an important determinant in employers’ recruitment practices. Considering the ethnic categories of domestics, employers actively engage in practices of constructing their preferences, wherein some women are stereotyped as ‘ideal employees’ and ‘inherently suitable’ over others. Such categorizations are particularly influenced by the social attributes of each category of domestics working in the study area, which perpetuated an ‘ethnic hierarchy’ (Anderson, 2000) amongst domestics. In this, the Assamese women are particularly deemed as least preferable for paid domestic work. Lacking particularly the qualities of subservience, Assamese domestics in general are negatively prejudiced as ‘proud’, ‘arrogant’, ‘demanding’, ‘lazy’ and ‘hard-talking’. Moreover, prejudices against them are also in part shaped by their negotiation of social boundaries of the work. One of the



manifestations of such prejudices was through recruitment of alternative available categories of domestics in the study area. In this, the Miya and Bihari women displaying outward signs of subservience at workplace are considered as attractive domestics. Nevertheless, this does not necessitate one to have an impression that the Miya and Bihari women held a high status amongst domestic workers in Guwahati. Rather, they are also subjected to prejudices. While, the Bihari domestics are perceived as ‘too clever’ for domestic work, considering their association as paid domestics in the study area for several decades; the Miya domestics are subjected to regular prejudices as ‘Bangladeshis’ at workplace. Their positions in the Assamese middle-class homes are in particular, historically specific, wherein widely held as ‘Bangladeshi’ in Assam, they are also perceived as ‘dangerous outsiders’ in employer’s household space. Such persisting negative stereotypes against the particular ethnic group are further reified by the media, which accentuates their vulnerable position in comparison to other ethnic categories of domestics.

Yet, the study reveals Assamese middle-class employers as being heavily dependent on the labour of the Miya women. This is primarily because they entailed employers in maintaining status quo, in terms of unequal power equation in the relationship. They mostly accept their inferior position at workplace, in relation to their employers. In this, the ‘danger’ emanating from the particular group is negotiated by employers through devising mechanisms like taking prior recommendations from previous employers and domestics before hiring them for work, and by maintaining strict vigilance in their presence. The Miya domestics, in turn, aware of society’s perception towards them in general, and employer’s particularly, entailed to a sense of vigilance towards their own actions, whereby, they adapted to the established norm at workplace, and overtly expressed subservience. This can be seen as an act of ‘self-surveillance’ (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011, p. 31), as their responses mostly reflected an internalization of employers’ gaze upon them, thereby, entailing them to conduct appropriate behaviours as ‘good domestic workers’.

Arguably, this reflects that, the main crux of employers’ ethnic preferences is influenced by their ability to exert control over the domestics. This unveils that, the intersection of ethnic differences with the already pertaining class differences significantly contributed in buttressing the superior position of employers in the relation. Moreover, several Miya

domestics also displayed subservience by undertaking any tasks assigned to them, even toilet-cleaning, which they essentially considered as a low task.

Furthermore, in the case of Miya domestics, their class and ethnic selves intersects with their religious background. As Muslim domestic in Hindu employer's household, they are particularly perceived as 'polluted beings' for their cultural practices of beef consumption. However, considering employers' sense of dependency on them, the employers actively negotiate the polluted status of these beings by deploying certain overt practices of distinction, in the form of maintaining rigid division of domestic tasks, division of household space, and by administering fictive Hindu names to them. Significantly, while these symbolic practices are added to the employer's satisfaction of segregating the 'polluted' from the 'pure', it nevertheless reflects cultivation of a relationship, in which stereotypes and its relative process of 'othering' against certain religious groups are reproduced in the society. Additionally, this also add to our understanding of the dichotomy between *ghar or bahir* and pure or polluted, as ensuing from religious 'othering' in everyday lives. Moreover, the connotation of 'pollution' in relation to the Miya domestics is diverse, and is not limited to their cultural practice of beef-eating. This particularly gets reflected when the Miya women narrated stories of their negotiation in removing certain employer's perception of 'dirt' or 'pollution' towards them. Their testimonies revealed that the expression of employer's perception of 'dirty' towards them goes beyond their 'ritually impure status', and, is further influenced by several other external factors like their clothing, living conditions and maintenance of daily hygiene.

This, in totality, adds to our understanding of 'intersectional subordination' (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1249) to be stark in case of the Miya domestics. The dimensions of disempowerment experienced by this category of domestics stands in contrast to other available categories – Assamese Hindu or Bihari Hindu - of domestic workers, which explain that their relationship to subordination in context of paid domestic work is influenced by a complex multitude of intersectional dimensions- class, ethnicity and religion. Moreover, their social location in the context of Assam is historically specific, which also contributes to their subordination as paid domestics in the spaces of middle-class homes in Guwahati. Relegated to a marginal status in Assam historically, which is further reified by media and the political economy of the state in contemporary times, the Miya domestics are specifically held by middle-class employers as 'dangerous' outsiders

in their homes (as mentioned earlier). As Ozyegin notes, ‘...margins are the most vulnerable point in any social structure’ (Ozyegin, 2001, p. 11). The centre strengthens itself by policing the margins (ibid). And, viewed from this vantage point, the Miya domestics as ‘marginal’ in Assam are perceived to be ‘danger’ and carriers of ‘dirt’ or ‘disorder’ in the ‘clean’ or ‘ordered’ domestic space of the employer.

Furthermore, the dimensions and hierarchies of ethnicity and religion intersect with gender and are actively played out by employers in their recruitment practices. For most employers in the study, there appeared a thin line between live-in and part-time domestic workers when they expressed their gender preferences, which are a reflection of the re-negotiation of gendered division of labour. This is primarily because most of them had experiences of hiring live-in domestics - male and female - in the past. Moreover, the reflections of these past domestic work relationships also served as a significant criterion in most employers’ narratives, in determining their shift to part-time domestic workers in present times.

The gender preferences of employers are specified through dichotomy of masculine and feminine domestic tasks, in which, the women domestics are considered efficient for tasks which involved care-giving instinct. Such categorization of domestic tasks can primarily be comprehended in the light of gender socialization of women employers themselves. This naturally entails them to associate qualities of ‘docility’, ‘gentle’, and ‘timid’ with the female domestics, in contrast to the qualities of ‘aggressiveness’ and ‘unruly’ for the male domestics. Significantly, this gives an impression of the naturalization of division of domestic task, whereby, in the Indian society girls are trained to be attached to the private domestic space and boys to a space which required them to undertake the ‘manly’ domestic tasks of the public sphere. Furthermore, the gendered preferences in paid domestic work are equally influenced by employers’ fear of possible misconduct by domestics. In case of male domestics this is particularly related to the safety concerns of young unmarried daughters at employer’s home; while in case of women domestics, particularly involving the unmarried live-ins, it is typically associated with the possible transgression of boundaries by these young girls. In this, most employers explicitly shared stories of unmarried live-in girl domestics falling in love, and of elopement in the past, which bore consequences for them. Such past experiences contributed to employers preferences of part-time women domestics in

present times, which enabled them to manage their time schedule with the visit of their domestics.

### **6.5 Social World of Domestic Workers: Trajectories of Socio-economic Precarity**

Although, the occupational struggles of Bihari and Miya women are different based on their intersectional social location of ethnicity and religion; they nevertheless shared similar patterns of class origins and patriarchal subjugation within their own households. The study analyses the social world of domestic workers- Bihari Paswan and Miya Muslim women- in order to underscore the context under which they sustain their everyday lives. By addressing certain pertinent questions related to their work and life choices, the study underlines the precarious positions of the women domestics in society which transcends beyond their workplaces, into their own homes.

While it is notable that, there is ample literature focussing on occupational lives of the domestic workers, their lives within the private spaces of their own homes has not received much scholarly attention, in India (except Mattila, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016; Wadhawan, 2019). The present study intended to address this, in order to have a nuanced understanding of the everyday lived experiences and personal struggles that the domestics encounter. In this, a close observation reveals that their personal lives are peculiarly shaped by a complex inter-linkage with their work lives and vice-versa.

For the Bihari women paid domestic work forms a part of intergenerational employment. Majority of the interviewed women are second generation domestic workers, inheriting the work either from their mothers or their mother-in-laws. The Miya women, on the other hand, are the first generation domestic workers in their families. Nevertheless, most of them had prior experiences in occupations like waste picking, as cleaners in roadside hotels and as construction site labourers before their induction into paid domestic work in Guwahati. These women mostly cited about irregularity of income, unprotected and stigmatised nature of these occupations as some of the reasons for choosing domestic work as an alternative occupation. This in a way suggest the comparative respectability of domestic work as an occupation over other manual labour, at least for the women of this community. Significantly, although, the work trajectories of both the categories of women differed, their responses are almost unanimously in agreement when they stated their reasons for continuing with paid domestic work, primarily to support their children's education. Unlike the constraints which determined their life-choices, their

testimonies are mostly manifestations of awareness of changing times, wherein, they are motivated to educate their daughters. These women, in significant ways, perceived education as a medium to establish a generational mobility amongst their daughters. This, therefore, served as a crucial interlink between their private lives and their work lives, wherein their aspirations of mobility for their daughters is typically structured by their personal experiences of earning a living as paid domestics in the society.

Another notable intersectional link between their work and private lives is influenced by the institution of marriage. Although, marriage is perceived to provide life-long protection to women, wherein they are expected to be financially cared by their husbands (Sharma, 2016b), the stories of these domestics reveal them being deprived of the basic minimum care from their husbands. This necessitated on the one hand their crossing of the social boundaries of marriage and family, and, on the other hand, it entailed to their crossing of material boundaries of home (ibid). Bound by circumstances, these women, therefore, take up paid work at an early age upon their marriage, which aptly draws parallel to what Ray and Qayum (2010) has termed as 'failure of patriarchy'.

The study further draws attention to several other complexities which are embedded in the lives of a married woman taking up paid domestic work as a medium of living. In this, the primary concern for these women is related to the nature of their paid work i.e. domestic work. As domestic work embodies the hegemonic ideals of femininity, it is in general epitomized as 'respectable' when performed in one's own home (Ray, 2000). But, significance of the same work reduces when performed in other's home for money. In such situations it is largely frowned upon by society, thus, being a cause of shame for the woman associated with such work. It is in this context, several older Bihari Paswan domestics recounted past experiences of shame entangled with their caste practices, which prohibited married women from performing paid work outside one's home. In this, they subsequently, negotiated the reality of their paid work in their initial years of marriage by hiding it from their husbands and extended family members in villages. However, they say in present times, the situation has reversed, as in each household of the Uzanbazar *basti* at least one woman works as a paid domestic to earn a living.

But, for the Miya Muslim domestics, the fear of being boycotted from extended family members in native villages strongly persisted in present times. They opined that as per the religious traditions of Islam, women are strictly not allowed to work outside their homes. The patriarchal opposition to women's paid work is deeply entrenched with fear

of threat to women's modesty, which might cause harm to men's honour and their family members. The women conscious of such religious perception consequently manoeuvred strategies, wherein women from same village or families participating in paid domestic work, collectively take decisions to keep their work reality a secret from extended family members in village.

The testimonies of struggles of the women domestics – Bihari and Miya – significantly bears close resemblances with their workplaces, wherein their personal lives are also closely shaped by the intersectional institutional structures of class, caste, religion, and patriarchy, much like their workplace experiences. Besides, in their personal lives they are required to negotiate the structure of family and kinship ties, which acts as an additional constraint in their everyday lives as paid domestics. It is significant to note that, while family or kinship ties are not always detrimental to the domestics, as in cities they most commonly relied on such relations in finding work. And, in some cases this also added to their advantage in balancing paid domestic work with their unpaid care work at home. However, such cases are in rarity.

Moreover, to add to their struggles at home is also their gendered position of being a woman. Much like their middle-class counterparts, the normative rule of patriarchal ideologies of associating housework with woman has been deeply entrenched in their households since generations. However, unlike their middle-class employers, they are not entitled to outsource external help, owing to their lower-class positions in the society. They most commonly performed their domestic chores single-handedly, while those with young unmarried daughters and school-going daughters are seen turning to them for domestic help. In this, the young sons are never drawn into housework. The findings reveal them being socialised into a gendered world from a very young age, wherein domestic work is seen as a woman's work. Moreover, any possible deviation from this established norm is looked down upon by onlookers, wherein the man doing domestic chores is slyly labelled as 'lady-like'. This, therefore, entails the domestics to limit their dependency on their young daughters for housework, thereby, inculcating the behavior of acceptance in them about 'domestic work' as a common-sense and unproblematised aspect of their lives. However, it can be argued that, such a perception, in turn, intensifies the struggles of invisibilization of domestic work both as an unpaid work as well as a paid work, which inevitably contributes to the invisibility of the domestics both at home and their workplaces. Moreover, the conceptualization of domestic work as women's

work comes down so naturally on these women that, in the process their contribution to the economy are also invisibilized by the state, thus, making this category of workers as ‘triply invisible’.

Besides, adding to the struggles is their induction into the position of ‘breadwinner’ from their participation into paid work. With their non-contributing men into familial expenses, they are required to bear all the expenses for day-to-day sustenance, thereby, leaving little room for them to spend on themselves. Additionally, with their breadwinner position, they are also required to face the brunt of their husbands in the form of physical or verbal abuse. And, in some cases the women are also subjected to heartless character assassination by their husband. Arguably, such instances give an impression of the feeling of uselessness on the part of men, which strips them off their male-ego for failing to be a ‘breadwinner’, in addition to highlighting the precariousness of the women. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, these setbacks on the lives of domestics do not entail us to entirely dismiss the agency that they derived from their breadwinner position. This most commonly gets reflected when they take pride in their economic independence and their abilities to take decision on matters, particularly involving their children. Their position as breadwinners, therefore, contributed in significant ways to improve the life-chances of their families and their children. On the whole, it can be concluded that, while men of the households exercised greater power in establishing their dominance at structural levels, the women, nevertheless, achieved a significant participation in a range of household decisions.

### **6.6 Negotiating Inequality at Work: Resisting Subordinates**

Drawing from Scott’s idea of everyday resistance the study provides insights into how part-time domestics in Guwahati negotiate employers’ practices of inequality and daily subordination at workplace. Although, the domestics are entangled in unequal power equation with their employers, the study argues that the domestics are not passive victims. Rather, they are active subjects who consciously manipulate the power equations with employers as part of their everyday resistance. In the process, the domestics construct a selfhood which affirms their dignity and moral superiority, in contrast to the employers’ perception of them as ‘inferior beings’. However, it is significant, considering their awareness of precarity in the face of power, their assertion of dignity makes way through a balancing act of deference in their interaction with employers and hidden transcripts that they maintain away from the employer’s gaze.

Significantly, although, the deferential performance gives an impression of the domestics' passive acquiescence to structural inequalities, the study reveals that it serves as a part of their conscious contestation, in order to seek both material benefits and to dampen the injuries that the institutional structures of class, caste, ethnicity and religion inflicts upon them. The hidden transcripts, on the other hand, find reflection in their *basti* settlement with fellow domestics, particularly those with whom they share daily experiences of workplace. It is in such exchanges about workplace experiences, the domestics reveal their true feelings about their employers without any inhibition. Consequently, they articulate criticisms of their employers which reflect the outburst of their anger that they suppress as part of public transcript. Such shared experiences aids to their devising of informal strategies which help them contest particular employer practices of subordination as embedded in maternalism; job expansion; wage and leave negotiation; everyday practices of segregation and perception of 'threat'. Notably, while most of the strategies, as the study shows are indirect; nevertheless, it is the researcher's contention that such strategies entailed the domestics to implicitly challenge unequal power dynamics in which they are embedded, thus, contributing to reclaiming of their moral selves as superior to their employers. Furthermore, in situations which served as an attack to their inner-self or involved their children, the domestics engaged in a rather open confrontation with their employers (see also Barua, et. al, 2016). However, it is noteworthy that, this primarily involved domestics who have been in the occupation since several years, and, through years of experience in multiple households, have therefore, better equipped themselves to confront employer authority, albeit sporadically. This significantly hints at the contradiction of subjectivities within the social class of domestics depending on their varied intersectional social location. But, nevertheless, the study acknowledge that the forms of resistance – open and indirect - as part of their individual struggle as well as their collective class consciousness reflected through hidden transcripts empower the domestics to question the authority of their employers.

### **6.7 The Way Forward**

In order to make the lives of domestic workers 'dignified' and to give due recognition to their work at a larger level, the present study proposes the following way forward:

1. As domestic workers are inseparable part of modern everyday life, it is pertinent for government to regulate the domestic work sector in Guwahati. Government need to bring in laws which safeguard the rights of domestic workers. For



instance, considering the primary issues of wage and leave on the part of domestic workers, a law should be implemented which specifies a minimum wage increment after being engaged at a certain place of work for a definite interval of time. Additionally, a specific way of availing leave from work need to be brought in by law, as unlike the formal sectors, the domestic workers as part of informal sector mostly work seven days a week. And, in this, the negotiations of leave with employers are mostly followed with unwarranted wrath from employers, thus, reiterating the exploitation integral to the work.

2. A general awareness need to be generated amongst the domestic workers, as most of them are not aware regarding their legitimate rights. In this, the NGOs and civil society members closely associated with the rights of domestic workers at a broader level should adopt a rigorous approach in generating awareness amongst this group of workers at the grass root level.
3. The general populace needs to be sensitized about the deplorable condition of the domestic workers as a whole, along with necessary awareness to treat them as 'humans', so that they too lead a life of dignity and respect, much like their employers. In this, media can be an effective medium to generate awareness amongst the masses, as it is because of the labour of domestic workers; the wealthy classes are privileged to mark their class positions in society.
4. Government should take necessary steps to bring domestic workers under the organized sector or formal economy, as they are significant contributors to the growth of economy in the region. In the absence of their labour, the economy will collapse because their labour entails the rich and middle-class to actively participate in their respective work, which contributes to the growth of the overall economy, in significant ways.

### **6.8 Future Research**

Reflecting on the findings of the study and experiences from fieldwork, there are a few potential ideas for future research. For instance, the present study focused on the work relationship between part-time domestics and employers. It would be interesting to know how the dynamics of the relationship is shaped between a live-in domestic and their employers. Considering both the groups sharing the same living space, the nuances that shape the everyday work relationship in such cases is worth studying. Moreover, during the course of the researcher's fieldwork, she encountered several households which hired

young female Adivasi live-in domestics. And, it was learned that such recruitments are followed through a particular pattern, which involved a middle-man operating as the main connecting link between the employer and the workers family in the village. While this would have served as an interesting case study, the study being beyond the scope of the present research, the said subject was not inquired further.

Another interesting research area is the trend of formalisation of paid domestic work in Guwahati through placement agencies. While the phenomenon of recruitment through placement agency has been widely prevalent in bigger metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai, it is a trend which is comparatively of a recent origin in Guwahati. It will be interesting to know how such agencies affect the paid domestic work sector, more specifically how it contributes towards adding diversification to the domestic work relationship in the region.

Furthermore, as the present research particularly focused on the everyday spatial dynamics of employer-domestic relationship, focusing on the aspects of migration or social networks used by the domestics, in seeking a place to live and earn a livelihood was beyond the scope of the study. While, such issues are well documented in the study of Neetha (2004) in Delhi, the topic nevertheless deserves further exploration in cities like Guwahati, which is a hub of migrant workers in North-Eastern region.

Besides, areas worth for further study include the caste dimensions intrinsic to paid domestic work. While the present study touched upon the aspect, it is more of an indirect attempt. Moreover, the present study mainly focuses on upper-caste middle-class employers and their domestic practices. Considering Uzanbazar as a multi-caste residential locality, in which there is a considerable number of scheduled caste families, it would be interesting to know the everyday domestic practices of these families in relation to scheduled caste Bihari domestics and the Miya Muslim domestics.

In addition to the above, a significant area of study includes the implementation of state-level regulation on domestic work.

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