

CHAPTER-5

Bound to Labour: Work-Life Trajectories and Resistance of Domestic Workers

5.1 Introduction

While, the previous chapters have focussed on labour relationship taking the middle-class homes of employers as the ‘contact spaces’ (Nare, 2014) between employer and domestic workers, this chapter analyses the role of ‘paid work’ in the lives of domestic workers- Bihari and Miya women- and vice- versa. In other words, it explores the social world of domestic workers and underscores the context under which domestic workers sustain their everyday lives, by addressing certain questions like: Why do they take up paid domestic work?; What are the reasons for continuing with their paid domestic work?; How do they negotiate the constraints from taking up paid work?; How taking up paid work shapes their lives? Moreover, the chapter also explores their struggles at workplaces, and their subsequent negotiation in sustaining these everyday inequalities at work. Significantly, to understand domestic labour relationship in totality, it is essential to take into account the overall context- domestic’s own private space i.e. home and their workplace- of their precarious positions in society.

On this backdrop, the chapter is penned and divided into four sections. The first section of the chapter explores the choices and constraints of domestic workers in taking up domestic work as an occupation. It highlights how participation in paid domestic work forms a part of intergenerational employment amongst the Bihari women, wherein their choices are further intertwined with their marital status. In this the Miya domestics differed from the Bihari domestics in the sense that, their work trajectories are not determined by intergenerational employment. However, both the groups are united on the grounds of their work trajectories being shaped by a pattern of early marriage, consequently leading them to paid work at a young age. The second section of the chapter discusses the ‘double burden’ of domestic work – paid and unpaid- in the lives of domestic workers, and their subsequent negotiation in striking a balance between the two in the realm of their everyday lives. Moving beyond these challenges that domestic workers negotiate in the spaces of their home, the third section of the chapter examines their struggles of subordination at workplace, and their relative resistance strategies in opposing the employer practices of subordination. Drawing from James Scott (1985;

1990) this section highlights the subtle everyday forms of resistance deployed by the domestic workers in negotiating the inequality with employers. The last section of the chapter focuses on the efforts of domestic workers towards recognising their rights as 'workers', in the form of participation in protest rallies through their association with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Guwahati.

5.2 Domestic Work as an Occupation

Paid domestic work forms a part of intergenerational employment amongst the Bihari women in the present study. Majority of the interviewed women are second generation domestic workers. They said about inheriting the work mostly from their mothers. And, in some cases it is inherited from their mother-in-laws, while some took over from other female relatives in their extended family.

Commonly the domestics, who inherited the work from their mothers, got introduced to the dynamics of the work by accompanying their mothers to workplaces. Some had been as young as ten years old when they started working alongside their mothers. While, the heavy tasks were mostly done by their mothers, they used to assist their mothers with comparatively lighter tasks. As Sumitra, a fifty years old domestic recalls:

I have been working since the age of ten. My father used to pull rickshaw and mother used to do work in people's houses. At that time, there was not much work offers, so she used to work in only one house from morning to evening. I used to accompany her to work, and the work was shared between us. She mostly did the *bhari kaam* (heavy work) of washing utensils, clothes and mopping, and I used to sweep the floor and help the *malik* (employer) in the kitchen with tasks like washing rice and vegetables. I was not paid for the work, but it helped my mother to ease the burden of her work at workplace to a great extent. It was by working alongside her, I learned to do work in people's houses...when I got married at the age of twelve; my younger sister took over my place. But, later after my marriage, when I began to work independently, I started with one of my mother's workplaces, while she took up work in other houses.

Similar sentiments are echoed by several other domestics who inherited the work from their mothers. Before starting to work independently, they mostly served as their mother's helpers in their workplaces. However, the work trajectories of the domestics who are married into the Railway colony *basti*, differs from these women in the sense that, they did not have experience of working in people's houses in their maternal homes.

They got introduced into the work through their mother-in-laws under pressures of familial needs of their new homes. One such domestic is Usha, a forty-five year old domestic, who has been working for more than two decades now:

...they did not tell my parents that my *saas* (mother-in-law) was a *kaamwali* (domestic worker). I got married and came to Guwahati from Bihar. It was only after my marriage I got to know about her work. Initially, in the first few years of marriage, my days used to pass by doing household chores. But, gradually my in-laws pushed me into domestic work in order to support our growing family. As my husband was not earning enough to sustain our family of five, I also thought there is no use of blaming anyone. And, I submitted to my in-laws. I had three kids to look after, and I thought to myself what will happen to them after my mother-in-law's death. Keeping all this into consideration, I started working in one of my mother-in-law's workplace to add up to the family earnings. In my mother's place in Bihar, I used to help my parents in the *khet* (paddy fields), so I thought; it is okay if I could contribute in any way in my new home.

Although, the life-choices of all the Bihari women- older and younger- followed a linear pattern of intergenerational transfer of work, what is particularly significant is that, the domestics with young unmarried daughters strongly opined in not allowing them to work as paid domestics. Unlike the constraints which determined their life-choices, they believed in giving their daughters 'all that they deserved'. Their testimonies are mostly manifestations of awareness of changing times, wherein, they are motivated to educate their daughters. As Lakhi, a thirty-five year old domestic explained: 'Our time was different. Our parents did not have much idea about importance of education, so we are mostly illiterate fools. But, we do not want the same for our daughters. We want them to be educated. Their lives should be better than what we lived. If they are educated enough, they can at least earn a living by doing decent jobs like tutoring young kids at home'. Significantly, these women perceived education as a medium to establish a generational mobility amongst their daughters. This corroborates with the findings of Sen and Sengupta's (2012; 2016) study in Kolkata, where the part-time domestics strongly aspired to educate their daughters, for both better quality jobs and lives. Much like in Kolkata, the domestics in the present study considered education to be socially empowering which had the possibility of opening avenues of better living for their daughters, rather than ending up with domestic work. Even in households with acute financial crisis (mostly comprising of single woman headed households), an effort is seen to educate their

daughters, at least up to matriculation, in order to equip them to cope with the changing world (Sen & Sengupta, 2012; 2016), rather than surviving as mere dependents. Indeed, several domestics reasoned their continuation with paid domestic work, despite their abhorrence because it entailed them to provide for their children (Glenn, 1992).

On the other hand, the Miya women as indicated in the data are the first generation domestic workers in their families. But, most of them reported about working in occupations like rag picking, as cleaners in roadside hotels and as construction site labourers before their induction into paid domestic work in Guwahati. The women mostly cite the 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, while their work trajectories differed from the Bihari women, 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. There are domestics like Hajera, Saniyara, Rubina, Bhanu who said about working in five houses each day, so that they could provide money for private tuitions of their children. In a way, Hajera seemed unusual from the others, as she is seen providing for her daughter's private tuitions with 1000 rupees per month to a teacher in her daughter's school. While, she receives no financial support from her husband, she takes pride in being able to educate her daughter, as she explains:

My daughter always says that the teachers don't take classes properly in school. So, I started her private tuitions to a teacher of her school only. She is in her 8th standard now; she will appear in her matric examination after two years. So, it is very important to support her. We did not have education, but, our children should not see the same fate as ours. I want her to be educated and do a good job. She wants to be a teacher (*smiles*), and this makes me work extra hard to fulfil her dreams. My son is the opposite; he is not interested in studies. But, my daughter pulls her brother to study. She helps him with his studies at home.

Notably, while the narratives of all the domestics –both Bihari and Miya women- reflect the aspirations of generational mobility amongst their daughters, yet, the findings of the study reveal many older girls as school drop outs, particularly after the 8th or 9th standard. This is mostly when they failed to compete with their school curriculum and clear the

examinations. In such cases, the daughters stayed at home helping their mothers with domestic chores, until suitable matches for their marriage is arranged. In most cases, this often resulted in marriages below the legal age (mostly between 17-19 years)¹ with the hope of giving them a life which represent the hegemonic ideals of 'domesticity' persisting since the colonial India². Amongst a few families of the Miya community, the average age of marriage is further found to be lower. However, contrasting to this usual pattern, a few girls from the Bihari community is seen training in skills like tailoring by assisting as a seamstress or by assisting in beauty parlours as helpers. Significantly, such new employment choices by this younger generation have in a way entailed to their breaking away from intergenerational employment of domestic work.

Nevertheless, this does not allow one to draw conclusions, as there are also domestics like Gulabi who had to take her eldest daughter studying in fifth standard out of school, in order to earn a living for the family, as a full-time live-in domestic for 3000 rupees monthly. This she says has been necessary to support the family as her husband is no longer capable of earning a living, due to his prolonged illness. Similarly, Neha's case merits our mention in this context, where Neha has been taken out of school to financially support her mother after her father's death. While, initially Neha, who was studying in her eighth standard was helping her mother with the second shift in one of her workplaces after school, with the death of her father she was forced by circumstances to take up domestic work as her occupation. However, considering her lean physical structure, she said about her initial difficulty in convincing employers about her capability to work as a part-time domestic³. But, with her dedication towards hard labour, she succeeded in gaining their confidence. Eventually, this contributed in giving up her education altogether, by transforming her into a part-time paid domestic. This in a way resembles Kapadia's (1995) study amongst Pallar women in Tamil Nadu, where young girls were taken out of school to financially support their families, by engaging in agricultural wage-labour with their mothers. His study shows that these girls despite

¹Nevertheless, this seems to be more than the average age (12-13 years) at which their mothers were married. Although, the upward revision in marriage age did not contribute towards any significant change, the respondents viewed it as a deliberate and positive change, for the well-being of their daughters. However, whether these girls face the same fate like their mothers (as I have discussed in the next section) upon marriage or not, cannot be ascertained within the scope of this study.

²This particularly implied that their daughters would be cherished and taken care of by their husbands, wherein they would not require moving out to do paid work (Ray & Qayum, 2010).

³In full-time domestic work young underage girls are preferred primarily because of their docility. Moreover, as the worker lived in the premises of the employer, it enabled the employer to avail their labour as per their need, at any time of the day. But, in part-time work, employers generally preferred well-built women who could endure the hard labour within a limited time.

being under-age for agricultural labour were deliberately dressed up in half-saris by their mothers in order to convince the employers about their daughters being adults.

5.3 Marriage Shaping Work Trajectories

I was married off at a very early age. I was not aware of anything when I was married. I was still playing around wearing a vest when my marriage was fixed...Ever since my marriage I have been spending a tough life. I had to leave my home in search of work.

The above comment by Rubina on marriage subsequently leading to paid work reflects the sentiments of every Miya domestics interviewed in the study. Married at an early age, the work-life trajectories of these women followed a linear pattern, wherein, they had been forced by circumstances to take up paid work for a living.

Notably, although, the legal age of marriage for girls has increased over the years; with the Prohibition of Child Marriage Amendment Bill of 2021, this is further increased from 18 to 21 years in India⁴. Nevertheless, the all India data reveals that there still prevails a high incidence of underage marriages in India (Sen & Sengupta, 2016). According to the annual report of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) published in 2018, 4.8 million adolescent girls aged between 10 and 19 have been victims of early marriages in India⁵. In North-East India, the 2019 report of UNICEF estimated that Assam contributed the highest number of early marriages, of which almost 33 percent of women got married before attaining 18 years of age⁶. The National Commission for Protection of Childs Rights (NCPCR) findings suggest that these numbers are greater in rural areas with 16.7 percent, which is higher than the national average of 11.9 percent⁷. In this, the lower Assam Muslim majority districts of Barpeta, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Kamrup contributed a significant number⁸. Rafiqul Islam, the Co-ordinator of CHILDLINE Centre of Barpeta district says, 'religion affects the illiterate section the most and when a religious leader considers it right and solemnises a wedding parents do

⁴Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/govt-works-to-raise-legal-age-of-marriage-for-women-to-21/articleshow/88328524.cms>.

⁵Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2020/03/10/bonded-by-prejudice-child-brides-of-assam>.

⁶Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://thelogicalindian.com/northeastindia/child-marriages-in-assam-are-on-the-rise>.

⁷Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://www.firstpost.com/india/child-marriages-flourish-among-muslims-in-assam-with-alleged-collusion-of-court-officials-lawyers-and-ignorant-parents-6940801.html>.

⁸Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2020/03/10/bonded-by-prejudice-child-brides-of-assam>.

not give it a second thought'⁹. Consequently, early marriages have led to an increased percentage of teenage pregnancy in the state, where according to NCPCR (2017) 27.3 percent married teenage girls are mothers to one child, while 4.2 percent had two or more children¹⁰. Given the available data, it is not surprising to find a strong pattern of young mothers of at least two or more children amongst the Miya respondents in the present study.

However, this does not entail one to believe that communities residing in urban areas are spared from early marriages, as Guwahati recorded an increase in such cases from 16 in 2018 to 26 in 2019¹¹. Experts believe that the trend of early marriages in Guwahati has remained stagnant over the years, in which most cases are under-reported¹². According to CHILDLINE Co-ordinator of Guwahati, these marriages are mostly due to elopement, while in some cases it is due to social stigma or after being influenced by community people¹³. Amongst the middle-aged and older Bihari women in this study, who have been residing in Guwahati since several decades now, the common age of marriage has been between 11-13 years. And, amongst a few younger Bihari domestics in the study, the age of marriage has been in between 15-17 years. In this, the narratives of Bihari domestics corroborated with the statement of CHILDLINE co-ordinator in Guwahati, wherein, elopement, fear of social stigma due to love affairs has been the potent reasons for an early marriage. Moreover, in some cases, social customs of the Bihari community of marrying off their daughters at an early age are cited as additional reasons.

It is in this backdrop, the study examines the question as to: how do marriage shape work trajectories for the domestic workers in Guwahati? In this, the responses of the Miya women are overwhelmingly similar when they narrated stories of their circumstances which led them to seek paid work in Guwahati. For instance, Shahina, a twenty-five year old domestic who is already a mother of three at the time of interview explained it as: 'When your husband cannot manage to provide for the family, we women are bound to

⁹Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2020/03/10/bonded-by-prejudice-child-brides-of-assam>.

¹⁰Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <http://www.eastmojo.com/news/2019/03/11/why-northeast-witnesses-highest-rates-of-child-marriages-in-india>

¹¹Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2020/03/10/bonded-by-prejudice-child-brides-of-assam>.

¹²Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2020/03/10/bonded-by-prejudice-child-brides-of-assam>.

¹³Retrieved on 18-05-2022 from <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2020/03/10/bonded-by-prejudice-child-brides-of-assam>.

take up work to earn a living'. Married at a tender age of 14 years, she was initially staying with her in-laws in Barpeta district of Assam, while her husband worked as a daily wage labourer in Guwahati. However, with things turning sour between her husband and his brothers she was compelled to move to Guwahati with her children. Left on their own in the city with her husband's meagre income, she was bound to take up paid work in order to sustain their family of five. Moreover, while some others like Amina, Noorbhanu, Ambia, Nooreja said about seeking work when their respective husbands left them for other women; whereas, some like Hajera and Mojiron reasons their taking up paid work with the irregular income of their husband. There are a few who left their marital homes in order to escape their abusive husbands. One such domestic is Khulufa who moved to Guwahati with the support of Hajera. Married to Hajera's husband's elder brother who was twenty years older than her, she says about being beaten up severely by her husband in the past. In one such instance she says about getting eight stitches in her forehead. This triggered her to move to Guwahati by leaving her three young children under the care of her mother, while she sent regular remittances for them.

While, 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 one hand to 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. This aptly draws parallel to what Ray and Qayum has termed as 'failure of patriarchy', which represented 'not only the involuntary or voluntary dereliction of fatherly or husbandly duty in terms of financial support and family security, but also lack of consideration and neglect' (Ray & Qayum 2010, p. 127).

Unlike, the Miya domestics, the Bihari domestics are comparatively older in age at the time of fieldwork, with the oldest woman being 57 years. Nevertheless, both the groups are united by the fact that, they had similar work trajectories, where early marriage and failure of husbands to provide for them consequently led them into paid work at a young

age¹⁴. Although, the older Bihari women had experiences of working as domestic workers even in their pre-marriage years, albeit as helpers of their mothers (as discussed earlier), the findings suggest them quitting work after marriage due to the cultural ideas related to a married woman's paid work outside the home. However, caught in a web of financial distress, these women are seen re-joining work as paid domestic after a few years of marriage, particularly after childbirth¹⁵. Even those women who came as brides into the colony end up as paid domestics by taking up work from their mother-in-laws (as already outlined previously). Meena a fifty-year-old Bihari domestic recounted her experience of entering into the profession after marriage as:

I was married off at the age of twelve, immediately after attaining my puberty. During the initial years of my marriage, I really had a tough time in adjusting with my husband who was much older to me. I used to frequently run away to my natal place. He used to pull rickshaws then, and whatever little he used to earn he used to give it to his mother. But, gradually I and my husband came closer, and, as our family extended, he started giving his earning to me. This was not supported by my mother-in-law, and we had to move out from my in-laws's house. I relocated to this *basti* (which is near my mother's house) with my husband and four children. With the increasing number of stomachs to feed and just two earning hands, things were very difficult for us, initially. Moreover, my husband's casual attitude towards work irked me a lot. He used to work some days, and some days he used to gamble around with men in the *basti*. So, I started working in people's houses, initially against my husband's permission. My mother helped me in finding work. During the initial days of work, I used to leave home after my husband left and used to quickly work in two houses and come back. Back then, I used to feel ashamed to work in people's houses, so I used to hide from my husband. Later, when he came to know about my work, there were regular fights, but, eventually he agreed when other ladies of the *basti* started working and the shame subsided.

¹⁴This exists in stark contrast to their middle-class employers as mentioned in Chapter 3, which is also verified by Nair and Hofman's (2022) observation, where middle-class women in India despite rise in education level, often discontinue paid work after marriage, and more particularly after child birth.

¹⁵Studies elsewhere in India also shows a similar pattern of women domestic workers participating in labour market most commonly after their marriage and childbirth (Mattila, 2011; Sengupta & Sen, 2013; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). In this, the employer networks that were developed by the domestics in the present study, by working alongside their mothers before their marriages are used by them, while seeking independent work as paid domestics.

As it is observed, in addition to echoing similar sentiments like the young Miya domestics, wherein marriage failed to guarantee security, Meena's testimony focuses on several other complexities embedded in the lives of married women taking up paid domestic work. In this, the primary concern 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 the society, thus, being a cause of shame for the woman, and her family. It is in this context, several older Bihari domestics like Meena recounted past experiences of shame in performing domestic work in other's houses, wherein they said about negotiating the reality of their paid work in their initial years by hiding it from their husbands and extended family members in villages. Another paid domestic, Sumitra echoed about negotiating the shame inherent in the work during her younger days, by not working in houses which were adjacent to the *basti*. As people used to predominantly live in single-pattern houses then, it entailed to her sweeping courtyards of employers in full visibility of passers-by, and this she says was an embarrassment:

When I was young, I used to feel ashamed to work nearby. So, in those days I used to work in houses considerably farther from the *basti*. The fear of being noticed was always there, when you took up work near the *basti*.

Moreover, in earlier times the shame embodied with the work status of women was also related to the failure of their husbands in public eye to provide for the family. Meena, for example in the later part of the discussion explains: 'earlier, in the *basti*, women were prohibited from working outside. People used to laugh at the men when their wives went out to work. This mostly led the men to oppose their wives from working outside, and we also used to hide it from people'. This gets further accentuated when young domestics like Malti, Chanda, Lakhi, Pooja, Phulua shared stories about the enduring shame their mothers had to incur, as people in the *basti* would commonly taunt women working in people's houses as: '*babu k ghar kaam karti hai*'. However, they strongly expressed, in present times, the situation has reversed as in each household of the *basti* at least one woman works as a paid domestic to earn a living. The 'ideology of a housewife' (Mattila, 2011) strongly persisting in the earlier times, therefore, appears to be loosening amongst the domestics, wherein they work more freely, without hiding their reality of work. In

this context, the women mostly credited the ‘anonymity and freedom’ (Sharma, 2016b) that Guwahati as an expanding city has provided to them in working as paid domestics, despite it entailing shame. As several domestics- both older and younger women- are unanimously heard commenting in agreement:

Now, with people mostly living in flats, there is much freedom to work, and worries of being noticed have faded. Quietly, you can work and come out. Nobody really cares about it in present times. Now, men-women; boys-girls, everyone works. It is free now.

Sentiments of ‘freedom’ in the city are also reflected in the narratives of several Miya domestics in the present study. Their sense of freedom is mostly derived from their ‘paid work’ status in Guwahati. On the one hand, their participation in paid work provided them with independent money, and, on the other hand, it entailed to their greater bargaining power at home than they had in their native villages. In their native villages, these women in general are prohibited from taking up paid work and stayed under a patriarch, wherein their free movements were restricted. And, in situations when they were required to move out of their house, they were mostly accompanied by their men folks. This as many says ‘curtailed their freedom’. But, in the city, their work demanded them to daily move to and fro from their rented rooms to their employers’ households, which in a way contribute to their free mobility in comparison to the villages. However, this does not entail one to believe that these women did not face resistance from the adult male members in their decision to participate in paid work, as a domestic explains: ‘I had to repeatedly convince my husband to seek permission to work’. Moreover, in two extreme cases, the women had been boycotted by their extended family members residing in the village. Fear of being boycotted most commonly led several women to manoeuvre 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. In this, much like the Bihari domestics, the Miya domestics echoed similar sentiments in crediting the expanding city for providing greater scope of ‘anonymity’ in their nature of paid work: ‘quietly, you can work and come out’. This in a way, contributed to their sense of having more room for manoeuvre in expanding city spaces like Guwahati.

5.4 Between Home and Paid Work: Balancing the ‘Double Burden’

5.4.1 Routine Acts of Domesticity

Just like their middle-class counterparts, as discussed in Chapter 3, the gendered expectations of domesticity run through the households of domestic workers. However, unlike their middle-class employers, the poor domestics could not afford the luxury of outsourcing domestic labour from market. They perform the domestic tasks of their households single-handedly, with the men (specifically husbands) not providing any significant assistance in performance of these tasks. This is what Hochschild and Machung (2012) has termed as ‘second shift’ in the lives of working women, wherein despite the growing participation of women in paid work outside the household, the men in the household has failed to adapt to the changes in women, thereby, making domestic work at home her second shift of work¹⁶. Furthermore, despite the extended family members of most domestics lived in the same settlement, mostly in adjacent rooms; each household is nuclear with a separate kitchen. Consequently, this reduces interdependence amongst the extended family members for daily sustenance of domestic chores, leaving the burden of routine acts of domesticity almost entirely on the domestics.

Significantly, unlike other wage-workers, the part-time paid domestics are required to manage domestic work in two different houses- her own as well as her middle-class employers. They are therefore, expected to carve their daily lives by striking a balance between their paid work and unpaid domestic work at home. Nevertheless, the domestics counted their work as paid domestics a major advantage because it entailed them a flexible time schedule, which did not require them to compromise their daily domestic chores at home. Indeed, most domestics cited this ‘flexibility’ as one of the prime reasons for taking up paid domestic work, albeit the shame in performing the work, as discussed in the previous section. Significantly, this is primarily because domesticity is a marker of their respectable femininity too, like their middle-class counterparts.

A typical domestic in the present study, therefore, wakes up by 6 in the morning, before other family members of the house. Immediately, on her waking up she walks to the nearby well to fetch water to be used by her family after waking up. It takes her half-an-

¹⁶While the term ‘second shift’ was coined by Hochschild and Machung (2012) to describes the situations of double burden in the lives of middle-class women, for the purpose of the present study the term significantly describes the situation of poor domestics, as the pressures of gendered division of labour in these households is intertwined with their class positions, wherein, unlike their middle-class counterparts, they are not privileged to outsource the burden of domestic tasks.

hour to forty minutes (depending on the rush near the well), on an average to fill the buckets with water. This, therefore, marked the beginning of a regular day in the life of a domestic worker.

After fetching water, she mostly washes the dishes from the previous night and prepares breakfast for the family- mostly boiled rice and potato. Those with school going children, rushes them off to school after feeding them breakfast. In some cases, women domestics with small kids set off together from home. While, the mother goes to her workplace, she drops her children to school. The women, who start off late for their paid work, usually included other domestic chores in the morning like tidying up their small room, storing more water for the day, preparing lunch.

In between 1.30 to 2.30 in the afternoon, mostly all the women are back to home after completing their first shift at work. Mothers with small kids are seen returning after picking them up from school, while those with grown up children returned home alone. On their return, after taking a quick bath the women served lunch to their children. During this time, most of the husbands also returned home for lunch. After lunch, the women did the other usual domestic chores like washing dirty utensils, clothes, taking care of younger children and fetching more water for the day. However, in some cases, women are seen taking rest if there is no other housework, albeit an unusual sight, while some gathers with other women on the front steps of their respective houses and chat.

It is mostly by 4 pm, the women leave for their evening shift at work. Nevertheless, this is not a uniform time for all the women, as some women are also seen leaving early. On return to home from their evening shift, the women said about buying vegetable/fish/meat on their way to be cooked for the dinner. Dinner is the only meal of the day which is seen to be prepared elaborately in these households, as a domestic remarked: 'the entire day passes in a hassle; I hardly get time to cook a good meal for lunch. So, I cook the dinner well in full satisfaction'. After preparing the dinner, and eating it together with their family (it is also the only meal which the women eat along with other members of family), most women go to bed in between 10.00 pm to 10.30 pm. Nevertheless, for some women the bedtime extended beyond 11pm.

These routine acts of domesticity performed by the domestics on a regular basis give the impression of the hierarchical relationship that they shared with their family members. While, this in most instances draw parallel to their workplace experiences, however,

unlike the hierarchies in workplaces, the norms prescribed by the institutional structures of gender, age, kinship within their own households had an immediate effect on lives of the domestics (Wadhawan, 2019). This in turn, altogether determined the responsibilities of daily domestic chores in the households of each domestic, as has been discussed further in the following section.



Image 8: *At the home of a domestic worker, where she is performing her domestic chores, while her mother-in-law is seated on the bed.*

5.4.2 Kin Based Support Networks

The present study reveals that the support extended from family members; particularly a daughter is crucial in the lives of domestic workers in balancing between unpaid domestic work at home and paid domestic work. Notably, the women domestics, who have daughters, count themselves ‘lucky’, as this entailed them to do their paid work freely without compromising on their work at home. In the Bihari households, the unmarried daughters who are school drop-outs essentially played the role of ‘surrogate mothers’ (Kapadia, 1995) to their younger siblings, while their mothers are at work. Additionally, they also played crucial roles in helping their mothers with other regular

domestic chores like washing clothes and dishes, tidying their home and in cooking. Moreover, in terms of the older daughters who are enrolled in school, it is a common sight to see them helping their mothers with housework in the afternoons after school. In some rare cases, these young girls are also seen cooking lunch when their mothers are late from work. Like their working mothers, the lives of these young school-going girls are also of a double burden, wherein they balanced between school and housework (ibid). In this, the housework arrangement of Bihari and Miya domestics are similar, as the daughters in most houses are below 14 years and are enrolled in regular schools. Even in terms of households of some young deserted and widowed mother both the groups- Bihari and Miya- are similar, where daughters as young as 10 years are found to be drawn into housework. This in the process contributed towards transformation of these young girls into an 'adult' woman caring for their families at a tender age.

In some households where the mother-in-law stayed together, the domestics are seen relying on them, particularly with child care. Moreover, in a few rare cases, domestics received help from their own mothers. One such domestic is Hajera, whose mother stayed with her and her two children; while her husband who worked as a labourer in a tent house mostly stayed at his workplace. His workplace being on the same street where the *basti* is located, he visited home every noon to have his lunch. And, on rare occasions, he stayed overnight. Given the situation of her husband's lack of attendance towards the family, Hajera considered her mother a 'great support'. During the interview she made repeated mentions of her mother's contribution towards her and her children. In this, she explicitly acknowledged her mother as the reason behind her being able to work in five households each day and provide for her children:

I would not have been able to sustain work in five households, if my mother did not stay with me. Running from one house to another I get tired, but, at least I can return home without worrying much about the domestic chores of my own house. Although, she cannot do heavy work because of her back pain, but, whatever little she does is sufficient for me...most importantly, she looks after all the needs of my children. She cooks, feeds them and put them to sleep after they return from school.

While, Hajera's testimony reflects the dependency on her mother to tide over her regular housework, this gets accentuated when her mother (who was present in almost all the conversations between Hajera and the researcher) further added: 'whenever I need to go

to village for some work, she gets upset. I hardly get to stay for long, as she keeps calling me repeatedly over phone. She finds it difficult to manage everything alone, here’.

However, not all women domestics in the study are as fortunate as Hajera, particularly with regard to child care. A few Miya domestics like Amina, Rubina and others said about leaving their small children in the *basti*, in the hope of being taken care by their neighbours hailing from their own community. In the absence of any related kin in the *basti*, these domestics believed that such arrangements entailed towards the safety of their children, in times of any immediate danger¹⁷.

In this, the arrangement of housework of each domestic replicated a similar pattern, where the scene of men (husband and sons) is almost minuscule. At the most, the men helped the women in fetching water from the well, thus, being absolute non-contributors to other household chores. As Hajera can be heard lamenting about her husband, in the later part of the discussion:

When my mother goes to village, he does not even bother to look after my children until the time I reach home from work. In such days I always make sure to finish my work as soon as possible, and try to reach home before my children return. But, still he finds it difficult to spare a few minutes and wait till the time I come back. He does not even bother to feed them when they return from school. I cook the food in the morning and keep it for them, but he does not care to heat it and serve them. He will have his share and leave. In the past; there have been days when my children were hungry for hours after school. There was only rice cooked in the home and they wanted to have something extra with it. He was there at home, but as a father he did not even feel like buying two eggs and make an omelette out of it or purchase *ghuguni* (peas curry) worth 10 rupees from the shop in the *basti*. What other domestic help will I expect from him, if he cannot look after his own children?

Similar sentiment of insignificant co-operation from husbands in both child care and housework has been echoed by all other domestics – Bihari as well as Miya women. This naturally entailed the mothers to turn to their young daughters for domestic help, as they did not prefer to draw their young sons into these tasks. The narratives reveal the sons being socialised into a gendered world from a very young age that, doing domestic chores is ‘un-manly’. In this sense, it is not surprising to see reluctance of the domestic’s

¹⁷This appears to be strikingly different from the arrangement of middle-class families who combined wage-work with child care either by hiring a generic full-time live-in domestic or by hiring part-time domestic for their specialised needs.

husband in assisting them with household chores. The normative rule of patriarchal ideologies of associating housework with woman has been deeply entrenched in these households since generations. Moreover, it is because of such ideologies running through generations within these households that the power of a male patriarch appears to reconfigure with each passing generation (Wadhawan, 2019), thereby, delineating the daily lives of their wives.

Nevertheless, in Preeti's house (the only case) an alternative pattern is observed, where she is seen relying on her 16-year-old son for her daily domestic chores. Working as a part-time domestic for almost two decades, she has four children- three sons and a daughter. While, her daughter is married (also a domestic worker) who lived with her three small children and husband in the same *basti*; Preeti's eldest son helped his father in beating iron in their shop and the youngest son studied in class 6. It is her second son, a drop-out from school after his eighth standard, who stayed at home doing most of the housework, while Preeti is at work. Additionally, he also looked after his sister's children during her time at work. This being a deviation to the usual pattern, Preeti says about the disapproval of her husband in their son performing housework. Even the neighbours mocked him by calling '*maiki*' (lady-like or unmanly). Although, this is mostly in the form of gossip and not on her face, Preeti appeared to be undeterred and is frequently heard praising her son: 'There is no harm in helping a mother with her housework...unlike other men in this house he understands my pain'.



Image 9: Daughter of a domestic worker doing the domestic chores of her home after school, while her mother is at work.

5.4.3 Position of a Breadwinner

Without working, it is not possible for people like us to meet the needs of our family.

The above comment by a domestic echo the sentiments of almost all domestics – Bihari and Miya - in the present study. It gives an impression of the pressures of life which forces these women to seek paid work outside their homes. With the domestics seeking paid work, there is an overwhelming evidence of them being significant contributors in financially sustaining their families, together with the burden of their housework. In this, the financial contributions of their husbands who are mostly engaged in irregular work are miniscule, with their money being mostly wasted on alcohol and gambling. Households with young unmarried grown-up sons earning an income are seen contributing to their mothers; however this too is on an irregular basis. And, upon their marriages this stops altogether in the light of supporting their own respective families. This necessitates the women domestics to contribute their entire earning on a regular basis, thus, making them the prime breadwinner of their family. From daily expenditure on food and other regular essential items like soap, detergent to paying for children's education, monthly rent, electricity bill everything is borne by them. Such differential contribution to household expenses in a way indicated that the domestics are left with little room to spend on themselves (Mattila, 2011). Yet, despite the irregular contributions of men (husband and sons) for household expenses, they expected their daily needs to be taken care of by their wives/mothers on a regular basis. This in most situations led to quarrels in the family as Mojiron explains:

To run a household there is so much expense. Even they (her husband and son) know it very well, but they pretend to be unaware. In a month I earn 8000 rupees by working in four houses. With that much money they expect me to bear everything for the family. When my husband feels like having fish or meat, he will buy it, I won't lie about it. But, if the prices of vegetables are too high according to him, he will bring home four tomatoes, two brinjal, and two onions. Imagine, just because prices of vegetables have increased, he expects us not to eat it. All these expenditure then falls on my head.... I need to pay the rent also for the two rooms every month, 2000 per room; leave aside the other essential requirements. Such are the expenses and no regular contribution from both father and son. My son gives 2000-3000 rupees in every 3-4 month. Can a household be run that way? He earns, so naturally he is expected to financially ease my burden. But, sadly, he hardly cares. And, this

leads to frequent quarrels in the house as both get angry when I ask them to contribute on a monthly basis.

From Mojiron's testimony one can assume the frustration she endured due to the casual attitude of her husband and adult son towards meeting daily needs of the family. Given the conditions of hand to mouth existence of most domestics, similar sentiments are echoed by others as well. The testimonies unanimously reflected their pressures to sustain resources for their families, wherein the women often find themselves at crossroads. As discussed earlier, on the one hand, they are constrained from taking up paid work outside home due to the gendered ideologies of a 'male breadwinner'; and, on the other hand, they succumb to the financial distress which leads them towards paid work outside home. In this, several domestics are frequently heard commenting: 'who likes to work in others houses? It is due to *majboori* (helplessness) we are working'. Shaped by the perception of an idealized femininity- of doing domestic work in one's own home- the domestics recourse to the word *majboori* often reflected the low regard they held for their paid work (Sharma, 2016b). It is because of this low regard, it is not unusual to see the domestics hiding their nature of paid work from relatives in their villages.

Moreover, although the data of the present study does not provide a substantial evidence on the implication of woman's paid work on gendered power relations at home, it nevertheless gives an impression of the complexities that comes in with the women attaining breadwinning position. This becomes evident when some domestics like Pinky and Mojiron shared stories of their 'loyalty' being questioned by husbands on their attaining the position of breadwinner. Pinky is a young domestic aged twenty-eight years, and a mother of two children who was bound to take up paid work because her husband failed to keep up his work as a labourer in a factory. Working in two households she says with teary eyes about the mental trauma she is subjected to because of her husband's suspicion. He doubted her with other men and often passed lewd comments by calling her a '*randi*' (prostitute). Emphasising on a similar note, Mojiron in the later part of her narrative is also heard saying about her husband's suspicion whenever she gets late to home. With a sense of disgust she said: 'he asks me to swear on my grown-up children that I am clean on my character'. Arguably, such instances reflected the feelings of uselessness on the part of men, which subsequently hurt their male ego with their wives attaining the position of breadwinner. In certain cases the feelings of uselessness are

expressed in form of verbal and physical abuse on their wives¹⁸. According to Wadhawan (2019), this feeling of uselessness in men, which particularly amounts due to their failure to provide for the family, is one of the potent reasons that push them to drinking.

It is significant, however that, this does not entail one to entirely dismiss the agency that the domestics derived from attaining a position of breadwinner in their families. While, on the one hand, it contributed towards their financial independence, as the men are mostly dependent on them for daily expenses; on the other hand, it increased their decision making abilities, with matters particularly involving their children. This in a way gives an impression of the considerable re-negotiation of gender equation within these families, despite the setbacks suffered by the domestics.

For example, Hajera took pride in resisting her fourteen-year-old daughter's marriage when she and her daughter visited their native village: 'I got very angry when people in the village were talking about her marriage. I told them on face that she is still studying, and this is not her age to get married. She might look big because of her height, but I cannot let her life to be wasted like me... I decided that day itself; I won't allow her to go to village without any purpose'. Considering the trend of early marriage amongst the Miya community, as mentioned earlier, the authority shown by Hajera reflects the confidence she developed by being the breadwinner for her children. Similarly, Saniyara expressed her satisfaction in enrolling her children to government schools in Guwahati, against her husband's decision to enrol them in a madrassa¹⁹ in their native village. Significantly, being able to invest on their children's education is a common expression of satisfaction, which several young domestics explicitly spoke about as a positive aspect about their breadwinner position in the family. As already mentioned earlier, it is one of the potent reasons for most domestics in their continuation as paid domestic workers. Again there are domestics like Sumitra who narrated how she helps her son and daughter-in-law at times of their financial crisis, albeit the same not being reciprocated towards her. Nevertheless, this did not deter her from extending them help, as it indicated her financial independence. Radhia says about expressing her agency by not cooking elaborate meals for her husband and grown-up sons when things get into her nerves: 'why will I feel like cooking three meals a day and feeding them, if they pretend to not

¹⁸The domestics are however, not comfortable to speak much on the aspects of physical abuse, when the researcher tried to inquire more on it. This can be inferred as their consciousness to protect the intimate family affairs from an outsider.

¹⁹Madrassa is an educational institution where Islamic teaching is imparted to the pupils.

understand my problems’. Apart from the married domestics cohabiting with their husbands, a sense of agency is also reflected in testimonies of the domestics who are either widowed or separated from their husband. A common expression that is reflected in the narratives of these women is: ‘we are earning with respect by not laying our hands on any illicit activities. Moreover, if there is money in your hand, there is also willingness to carry on with your lives’.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that in certain cases the perceptions and practices of Miya domestics related to their position of female breadwinner differed from the Bihari domestics. This particularly included the young Miya domestics who had come to Guwahati particularly for the purpose of earning money, in order to realise their dream of buying a plot of land and building a house in their native village. These women appeared to be positive in spending for the daily expenses of the family in Guwahati, while the earnings of their husbands is saved to realise their dream of settling down in their native village, in later years of life.

5.5 Struggles of Subordination: Everyday Resistance and Negotiation at Work

While, inequality embedded in the work relations between employer and her domestic has been recurrent throughout the chapters discussed so far, this section decipher the capacities of domestic’s in negotiating the subordination they are subjected to, at workplace. Although, their capacities are limited considering their social location in relation to employers, the study shows that, strategies adopted by them are nevertheless significant in giving meaning to their lives. Moreover, significance of the strategies deployed by domestics in negotiating unequal work relations has also found reflection in the existing burgeoning literature on domestic work (Cock, 1980; Rollins, 1985; Dill, 1988; Romero, 1992; Gill, 1994; Dickey, 2000b; Lan, 2003; Constable, 2007; Mattila, 2011; Parresna, 2015; Barua, et.al, 2016). These studies have highlighted that, despite being embroiled in a relationship of subordination, domestics reclaim a dignified selfhood through both overt and subtle everyday practices at work. Dovetailing with existing scholarship, the present study tries to build on the everyday practices of negotiation adopted by domestics in Guwahati, by drawing from James Scott’s (1985; 1990) idea of ‘resistance’.

The following section discusses the struggles of subordination encountered by domestics at workplace, and their subsequent negotiation and practices of resistance. While the

narratives of domestics suggest that their act of resistance primarily find expression through certain subtle everyday practices, this however, does not entail one to believe that the domestics' entirely refrain from any direct confrontation. On the contrary, they are seen negotiating overtly with employers, albeit sparingly, in situations which causes deep injury to their self-respect. Here, resistance as Scott argues originates from the pattern of personal humiliation inflicted upon the subordinate class (Scott, 1990, p. 112).

5.5.1 Negotiating Employer Acts of Maternalism

As discussed in Chapter 3, act of maternalism exhibited by employers in the form of gift-giving (old, new and discarded material possessions) to their domestics has been an integral part of domestic work across the globe. While, this has found reflection in the exiting scholarship on domestic work, where employers commonly perceive their domestics as 'needy' (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Barua, et.al, 2017), here, focus is on the perception of domestics towards such employer practices. The narratives of domestics in the study suggest that acts of maternalism displayed by employers acted as a source of 'degradation' for some and for some it is a source of 'protection'. But, in either case, the domestics are required to manipulate their real feelings by putting on a mask in presence of their employers.

One of the most common employer practice as embedded in maternalism, and discussed in Chapter 3, is giving of old clothes to domestics, marking it as part of their 'charity'. While, this primarily contributed in amplifying emotional gratification of employers, for some it was a medium to make room for new possessions, thus, fulfilling their consumerist aspirations. However, on the part of most domestics, this served as a major arena of contestation, wherein, they are heard bitterly complaining about their employers. The domestics most commonly referred to the deplorable condition of used clothes that are handed over to them. Significantly, while there are domestics who said about re-using their employer's old clothes, but they maintained that it is only when the clothes are in a decent condition. One such domestic is Anita, who explained it as:

To be honest, I do not have problem in wearing used clothes. But, my point is, the clothes should at least be in a decent condition to be reused again. Most employers fail to understand that, and hand over clothes which are best to be used as either dusters or rug for drying legs. Can you believe, I also have experience of receiving *mekhela sador*, where it got burned when ironed? Shamelessly she showed me the burnt *mekela* and advised me how to conceal the burnt portion while wearing it. If

she knows how to hide the burns while wearing it, then she should have kept it for herself only. As I don't like answering in her face, I bring whatever is given. When I showed it to Malti (her friend who also works as a domestic), she suggested me to give it to some beggar. I will do that only.

Further, emphasising on a similar experience another domestic who took great offence in the particular employer practice narrated her experience as:

This woman (one of her employers) gives me her old *sarees* with stains in several parts. She gives it to me in such a cheerful mood, as if she is doing me a great favour. Such people do not even think once that the stained *saree* that she herself refuses to wear, how could I put on the same? They think us to be beggars who are dying to wear their dirty and worn out clothes. It makes me very angry, but, I do not react. Back at home, I give it to someone in need.

Similar sentiments of anger are echoed in the narratives of several other domestics in the study. The testimonies are manifestations of domestics' unequal social position in relation to their employers, which did not translate into any direct confrontation on their part. Instead, as the narratives above suggest, the domestics successfully 'mask their attitude of anger' (Scott, 1990), by accepting their employers worn out clothes, as part of the public transcript. Their feelings of contempt and resistance in turn, found expression through hidden transcripts wherein, they discard the used clothes which were meant to reinforce employer's self-image as benevolent (Mattila, 2011), either to a beggar or someone 'needy'. This further, entailed the domestics to castigate the common employer perception of them as someone who is 'needy and ever-willing to accept discarded goods'.

In addition to deplorable condition of used clothes given as gifts, several domestics also denounced the employer idea of gift in the form of 'new clothes'. This becomes evident when they expressed their shock, when the researcher asked them about employer gifts they received during festive occasions. They commonly retorted to the researcher's question as: 'Are you asking about the 100 rupees *sarees* that they give us?'; 'We take their cheap *sarees* and never use them'; 'We also have knowledge about *sarees*, we buy them too. The ones given to us are of extremely poor quality'; 'We do not wear such cheap quality *sarees*'; 'We wear *sarees* worth 500 rupees with our hard earned money'. Such comments are mostly followed by a sarcastic smile, giving an impression of their momentary pleasure by mocking their 'stingy' rich employers. Furthermore, there are

also some domestics who expressed about wearing these 'cheap quality *sarees*' received as gifts, to their workplace, thereby, signifying that the *sarees* given are best suited for doing dirty work. In doing so, the domestics' as a subject to similar subordination by employers shared a common interest of constructing a discourse of self-worth and dignity for themselves (Scott, 1990).

Another arena of employer act of maternalism is manifested by serving food to their part-time domestics. While, the previous chapter discusses the daily humiliation domestics are required to encounter in the form of food served in separate utensils, the researcher discusses here, further, the struggles of their subordination when they are served with stale and left-over food. In group discussions held separately with Miya and Bihari domestics, they explicitly expressed the particular employer practice as: 'employers have this strange habit of storing things in the fridge for days. And, when they do not feel like eating it anymore, they give it to us. They don't even feel ashamed to serve us with food stored in the fridge for days. They give it to us, as though they are doing us a favour. But, we also understand things'. Nevertheless, despite their awareness of being served with stale food, the domestics mostly feigned ignorance in presence of their employers, thereby, resorting to certain informal tactics, which, contributed towards their personal satisfaction in fooling their employers (Scott, 1990).

For instance, Lakhi narrates how she uses the tactic of dumping such stale food in the dustbin without the knowledge of her employer. Her employer's husband who works in a different district of Assam, made a routine visit to Guwahati every Sunday with boxes full of sweets. Lakhi being a witness to this says that, her *malikini* (female employer) never offers the sweets when it is fresh. Rather, she offers it to Lakhi only after the third or fourth day. Unable to openly deny her employer, she asks her to pack it in a carry bag. And, on her way to home she dumps it in the nearest roadside dustbin. Mojiron, on the other hand, says about setting her rule straight in such households who offers stale food. On the pretext of not having time to wait for a cup of tea and snacks, she slyly evades such households immediately after work. Another domestic by emphasising her practice of consuming fresh food on a daily basis, in contrast to the habit of her rich employers, says that she feeds such stale food to dogs in her *basti*:

These rich people have the habit of buying things in bulk. They store 2-3 kg of fish in the fridge for days. And, when they cannot finish it, they ask us to take it by saying 'note that a piece of fish is worth 80 rupees, cook it properly and have it'.

Before giving it to us, they spell out the price. I wonder what they try to imply on us by saying the price. Have we never had any good food? They fail to understand that for us *dal* (lentils), rice and potato fry is sufficient to satisfy our stomach. Unlike them, we consume everything on a daily basis. In such households, I take such rotten food and back home; I feed it to the *basti* dogs.

Again, there are employers who expressed their maternal care by packing rotten and over-ripe fruits, and left-over food for domestics' children. The domestics expressed great indignation to such employer practice which involved their children. While, the most common tactic resorted by them is throwing such food in the roadside dustbin, there are domestics like Usha, who said about overtly expressing her displeasure towards such practices. She explained her encounter with one such employer as:

I do not accept such food. Even if they say, it is good, I deny it out rightly. In one such house, when an employer was packing food for my children, which I have seen the family consuming for the last two days, I told her on face that my children eat fresh food. They do not like consuming food which is three-four days old. And, that, if they fall sick after consuming such stale food, I will be in trouble. You must have seen her face, it turned black (*laughs*). It hit her like a bullet. (Pausing for a while, with an expression of anger she continues) these rich people consider us to be dustbins, and they expect us to be grateful for such low actions of theirs.

While, the above employer practices as embedded in maternalism reflects the sense of 'degradation' experienced by domestics, significantly, certain employer practices like extending financial help to domestics in times of their crises and supporting educational needs of their children added to complexities of the labour relationship. Existing scholarship on domestic work in India highlight that, such employer acts often contributed in developing a relationship of dependency on part of the domestics (Mattila, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). In the present study, too, domestics, specifically the single earning member of their family, articulated a similar understanding of dependency. They emphasised how such additional benefits from employers, along with their monthly wage acted as a source of 'protection' to tide over their emergency situations. This in significant ways is mostly perceived as a positive aspect of domestic work as an occupation. Indeed, domestics who spoke about good sides of their employers mainly discussed it within the shadows of such maternalism expressed by employers.

One such domestic is Beli, a single mother of three teenage children emphasises her relationship with one of her employer for whom she has been working for the past seven years as: ‘my relationship with *baideo*²⁰ is different. When I was all alone with three small kids to look after, *baideo* supported me a lot. She had also financially helped me with my daughter’s education. I won’t lie, till date; she pays for my daughter’s school admission fees, in addition to providing money to buy books’. Likewise, Noorjahan narrates how one of her employer’s helped her during her lactating period. On her second pregnancy, she did not have enough breast milk to feed her baby, which, led to malnourishment of the new born baby. It was in this trying time, her employer looked after her by lending money to buy powdered milk for the child. Moreover, she also says about having the liberty to take the kids to her employer’s house. This she says is a rare possibility in most employer households, as they did not approve domestic’s children inside their houses. Again there are several other domestics who shared about the help they receive from their employer in the form of loans. Although, in such cases, the total sum lent to them is deducted in instalments from their monthly salary, the domestic workers, nevertheless, acknowledged the benefits of the loans in sailing through their difficult times. Moreover, in comparison to other available choices in the form of money lenders and micro-financing groups in receiving loans, interest-free advance or loans granted by employers entailed to their protection from getting entrapped in a vicious cycle of debt.

Notably, the testimonies in general are reflections of the domestic workers’ feelings of gratitude towards their employers, wherein the employer’s maternal instinct in their trying times is the best thing that they could expect from the relationship. According to Romero (1992) such a relationship is guided by ‘manipulation’ on the part of both employer and the domestic. Interestingly, in this, the domestic workers of the present study concurrently project an understanding of their weak bargaining power in such households. This becomes evident when they explained about their position in the particular households as one which is ‘constantly being re-negotiated’. For instance, Beli in the later part of the conversation emphasises:

²⁰In literal sense, *baideo* means elder sister in Assamese, but, here the domestic referred to her female employer. The domestics in the study often used kinship terminologies like *dada* (elder brother) and *baideo* (elder sister) or *bou* (sister-in-law) to address their male and female employers respectively. And, the usage of such terminologies is not governed by age, wherein their employers might be either older or younger to them, thus, marking it as a symbol of deference towards their employers.

...the work at her (employer) place is very heavy, but, I cannot tell her anything considering all that she does for me and my family. To be honest, working for her sometimes gets into my nerves. *Baideo* is such that, I am required to work as per her rules only, I have no freedom to do the tasks as per my wish. If she does not like something, I need to do it again.

These sentiments are echoed in narratives of several other domestics who are dependent on their employers for more than their monthly wage. While, some domestic like Beli emphasised about the heavy burden of work load, others felt cheated for not getting their legitimate wage. Yet, despite their awareness, they hold back reasoning with such employers. Instead, they successfully ‘mastered the art of subordination’, by complying with employer’s additional work demands, as defiance or open confrontation entailed risks which they could not afford to bear (Scott, 1990). On a similar note, Constable (2007), in her study in Hong Kong, with migrant domestic workers, observed that most women were afraid to resist or assert their rights due to risks involved in losing their source of income, which helped in supporting their families back home. However, such accommodation of subordination does not necessarily imply that the domestics perceive themselves as ‘subordinate’ beings. Rather, their accommodation ‘expresses both an understanding and a critique of the existing power structure’ (Constable 2007, p. 204).

Moreover, earlier studies on domestic work has also shown how domestic workers actively perform ingratiating behaviour by conforming to employer’s expectations, thereby, manipulating their real feelings (Cock, 1980; Rollins, 1985). This reflects the power of manipulation exercised by subordinate groups as described by Scott, ‘what may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends’ (Scott, 1990, p. 34). Likewise, the domestic workers in Guwahati city had, by accommodating the employer’s demands of additional labour normalise the deferential behaviour expected from them as subordinates, in order to improve their material advantages.

5.5.2 Job Expansion at Work

We take up work in such a way, that we can cover maximum 3-4 households in a day, by working in between one and half to two hours in each household. But, the additional task at workplace, which becomes a common thing when we are a month old in that house, stretches our time. And, we consequently, get late for the next

house, which leads to sulking face of the employer. We are required to hear unnecessary things. They fail to understand that we are also helpless in such situations when we are asked to do additional tasks in the previous household.

The above testimony by a domestic on the aspect of job expansion at workplaces reflects the low bargaining capacity on the part of most domestics in the present study. Job expansion generally implies that the workers are required to accommodate certain additional tasks along with their assigned tasks. In some cases, the additional labour is compensated by employers with an additional pay of 20-50 rupees, but, in most cases, it is a form of unpaid labour extracted by employers. And, this is a major cause of annoyance on the part of domestics, as they are frequently heard retorting: ‘they make us work like donkeys, and expect us to do all additional work within the monthly wage’. The additional work often not accompanied with any extra pay is considered to be exploitation by all the interviewed domestics.

Additional tasks mainly included hanging washed clothes to dry, folding dried clothes, dusting, cleaning rice, lentils, chicken and fish, peeling garlic, chopping vegetables, slicing fruits and so forth. Furthermore, in households where more than one worker is employed for cleaning tasks, some are also asked to carry out the tasks when one is absent. Significantly, given the specificity of part-time nature of domestic work, wherein, each domestic, works on a time schedule covering 3-4 households each day, situations of job expansion appeared as an impediment to them. Accommodation of additional tasks even in one household, led to disruption of work and time schedule, agreed upon at the time of employment in all other households. Consequently, this often invited the unwarranted wrath of employers in most households, wherein, no amount of explanation on part of the domestic pacifies the anger of employer, as the above narrative suggests. Notably, several domestics accepted the anger on part of their employers in such situations as justified, as they fail to keep the *mukhor kotha* (verbal agreement of time decided at time of employment). However, this also reflects their understanding of vulnerability as paid domestics. Arguably, such consciousness in most situations restricted their ability to reason with employers.

Another aspect of job expansion expressed by several domestics is in the form of high demands of cleanliness by employers during Sundays and holidays. Comprising primarily of employers who are wage-earning women, the worker narratives suggest that, these women are personally present to keep a check on the work done, during holidays.

And, they insisted workers on doing the same tasks, until it is done to their satisfaction. This naturally stretched the domestics total duration of work hours more than usual, on these days (Sundays and holidays).

While, these are manifestations of the limited control domestics had over their work process (Mattila, 2011), it is significant to note that, in certain situations the domestic's limitations are influenced by their personal gains in the relationship, as discussed in above section. And, for some, like the Miya domestics discussed in the previous chapter, this is influenced by their past hapless experiences as women workers in public places.

Nevertheless, this does not entail one to infer that all domestics submit to employer demands. On the contrary, the data suggests that there are domestics amongst both the Bihari and Miya groups who resisted to employer demands in their individual capacity, more specifically in households which do not compensate them with an extra pay for additional tasks. This, therefore, gives an impression of their capacity to set limitations on undue use of their labour and time by employers.

One such domestic is Radhia, who works two shifts a day in one of her workplaces. While, in the first shift she is assigned the tasks of sweeping, mopping and washing utensils, for the evening shift she is required to chop vegetables and wash the utensils from lunch. But, when her employer gradually add the task of sweeping the floors in her evening shift, Radhia resorted to the strategy of doing her assigned tasks in a slow pace, than usual times. This, has therefore, enabled her to avoid the extra task, by telling her employer: 'it is already late; I will not be able to do the sweeping'. Banu, on the contrary, says about complying with additional tasks of her employer, which mostly included chopping vegetables in different sizes, slicing fruits and peeling garlic. However, her defiance gets reflected when she says about consuming a few pieces of fruits while slicing it, in the absence of her employer. This she says gives her immense pleasure, as the employer is not in the habit of offering her even small portion of the fruits that she sliced. Further, justifying her action, she questions the minimum courtesy of her employer by saying: 'they make us do so much extra work, but they never offer extra money even for the sake of goodwill'. Another domestic says about defying her employer by not doing her additional tasks properly. For instance, if she was given the additional task of washing clothes, she does it grudgingly by washing it with plain water, without applying soap. Furthermore, domestics like Jasmine, Phulua and Pinky says about drawing a boundary from the very start of their work. They say about maintaining

distance by refraining from having *nashta-pani* (tea and snacks) or indulging in any personal talks with such employers who tries to extract more than the assigned work. To put in Pinky's words:

On the pretext of serving us *nashta-pani*, they try to make us to do extra work. In such households, if you deny to the extra work, they say 'I offer you tea whenever you visit, inspite of that, can't you do some extra work for me?' Such employers try to make you feel guilty of having tea in their places. So, I better keep *kaam se matlab* (strictly professional) and not anything else. Maintaining a distance with such employer becomes essential. They think twice before assigning any extra work. And, even if they assign, they pay for the work.

Significantly, while, these are manifestations of subtle forms of resistance, which mostly went unnoticed by employers, such practices, nevertheless, reflected the achievement of individual domestics in skilfully downplaying their employer's undue demands, without any dramatic confrontation. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, this does not allow one to infer that all domestics resorted to such subtle practices of resistance. For example, domestics like Sumitra, who has been working part-time for more than two decades, said about uprightly denying to employer demands, if in any *kaamor ghor* (workplace) it becomes a recurrent phenomenon. She explains:

If they ask me to do an additional task for one day, I will do it. But, if they try to take advantage of me by making it a regular thing, I won't take it. Our labour is not for free.... if you try to reason with such insensible employers, they say 'the previous worker used to do everything, she never had any issue'. So, I stopped reasoning with such employer. Instead, now, I simply say, 'I won't be able to do it'. And, that serves the purpose. The employer gets to know that I am not like others who will serve for free.

Emphasising further on the aspect, Premada, who was seated beside Sumitra during the conversation is quick to respond about her own experience as: 'if they try to put too much load on my daily work, I express displeasure to them directly through my actions'. Although, she does not clearly speak much about what 'actions' she was referring to, it is however, certain that her actions are not necessarily direct confrontation in the form of verbal misconduct, as in the later part of our conversation she clarifies: 'I do not have the habit of arguing face to face, but if I feel bad, I make sure they understand it'. On being further asked, how she makes her employer understand about her displeasure, she says: 'I

do not indulge into any talks with them, in such situations. I answer to only what is asked, and do not initiate any conversation like usual times. They (employer) also know my nature; I have been with them for the past fifteen years'. This reflects her usage of the trope of non-verbal gesture in expressing displeasure to the employer. Such non-verbal gestures despite being primarily a veiled complaint; it nevertheless communicated her dissent which is noticed by the employer: 'They also know my nature; I have been with them for the past fifteen years'. From this it can therefore, be argued that, her non-verbal gestures, acted as medium which communicated 'a general sense of dissatisfaction without taking responsibility for an open, specific complaint' (Scott 1990, p. 154). As Scott observes:

Looked at from above, the dominant actors have permitted subordinates to [such non-verbal gestures] providing that they never infringe on the public etiquette of deference. Looked at from below, those with little power have skilfully manipulated the terms of their subordination so as to express their dissent publicly, if cryptically, without ever providing their antagonists with an excuse for a counterblow (Scott 1990, p. 154).

5.5.3 Contestation over Wages

Negotiation over wages seemed to be another crucial issue which reflects subordination of the domestics. In the absence of any law which determined a uniform wage, the workers under study mostly followed certain local standards while negotiating wages with their employers. These local standards are primarily fixed on the basis of the task or combination of tasks performed in a household. Although, these standards are subject to flexibility depending on the individual bargaining power of each domestic, it nevertheless served as an initial point of negotiation with their employers. In this, the domestics usually start with a wage rate which is higher than the normal, and, on agreement to a position with the employer, negotiation of other terms of employment take place thereafter, in due course of time.

However, for most domestics the ground for negotiating other terms of employment, specifically with regard to increment of wages appeared as a distant possibility²¹. They

²¹In this, the domestics tied in a relationship of maternal benevolence (in the form of accessing loans, advance or monetary benefits for children) with employer are the most disadvantageous group. While, most fail to initiate their legitimate demand for a higher pay, those that initiated are silenced by their employer by citing about the favors that is done for them. Significantly, in such situations the employers are seen manipulating the relationship to their advantage. This becomes evident when several employers in

are most commonly heard expressing annoyance on the indifferent attitude of employers, wherein, they have to bargain every year with each employer for an increment. The result of which is an increment of usually 100 rupees in a gap of two to three years, whereas, their actual demand is between 300-500 rupees. A domestic explains this as: 'The wealth of the rich disappears when it comes to increment of our monthly wage. All of a sudden our work is being compared to nothingness'. Similarly, Lakhi and Nooreja argued as follows:

They (employer) need to have financial capacity in order to retain people at work...They never think for us as, 'she is doing so much for my house, let me give her a little more money'. They are rich people; their money won't become less if they increase our wage by 500 rupees. They have money for unnecessary expenses, but cannot pay us. A pair of sandal which they wear in their feet is worth 4-5 thousand. Think! But they don't have money to pay us. They fail to understand that for many of us, our total monthly wage is 5k, which includes our food, clothing, rent, expenditure of children. - Lakhi

I have been working for the past four years in one of my workplaces with the same monthly wage that was decided at the time of employment. Not even once, in all these years, she said about increasing my wage. Finally, I spoke up and asked her for an increment. She got furious and told me, 'I do not like when you ask for increment'. I felt very bad hearing this. All these years, I have worked in her house like my own. She used to keep piles of dirty utensils, but I never said anything. And, when I asked for increment she reacted that way. These rich people fail to understand that we too have lives to sustain. Even the place where we stay, every year the rent is increased, in workplace too, there should be an increment. - Nooreja

The above testimonies are manifestations of what Scott (1985) terms as 'vocabulary of exploitation'. In Scott's analysis, it formed a part of the backstage accusations through which the poor villagers in Sedaka attributed qualities of *stinginess and arrogance*²² to their wealthy landlords, in ways that constitute the core of 'folk' concepts of exploitation (Scott, 1985, p.187). Significantly, in this Scott argues that, such vocabularies when taken collectively, they embody an ideology of class relations, whereby, in critiquing the rich

the present study, on being asked about the process of wage increment of their domestics, expressed astonishment to the researcher's question by saying: 'Round the year she gets things (material) from me. In such situations, with which face will she ask for a wage increment? She is well aware of the advantages she receives in my house'.

²²Italics from the original text.

as stingy and arrogant, the poor implied that the rich should dispose a behaviour which is 'considerate, helpful and unselfish' (ibid, p. 189).

Furthermore, there are a few domestics who often complain that their legitimate demand of wage increment is silenced by employers by words like: 'If you want to work then continue, and if you do not want to work then you can leave'. It appeared that such threats of dismissal from work, compelled most of these domestics, to comply with the wages and increment decided upon by their employers. Yet, a few (more specifically those with years of experience of working as a domestic) expressed resistance in such situations by intentionally turning up late for work, doing their work shabbily, and taking frequent leave without prior notice to employers. While, such subtle everyday practice of resistance helped some in attaining an increment, some faced the brunt of dismissal from work. Interestingly, dismissal for these domestics is not a cause of remorse as they are commonly heard saying: 'we don't care about losing work in a household where they make us work, but don't pay enough. We will face difficulties for a month or two, after which we will again find work'. Moreover, it is found that in certain cases, the domestics deliberately resorted to such 'off-stage' strategies, so that they did not have to initiate the conversation of quitting work. Through this, they put the onus on their employers to remove them, which entailed them to reduce any long-term disparity between themselves and their employers. This, therefore, kept their path open to re-join such employers in future, with a better bargaining power.

5.5.4 Negotiating Everyday Inferiority

We have seen in the previous chapter, how certain overriding perception of employers towards domestic workers as 'dirty' and 'polluted' gets manifested through quotidian practices of spatial segregation, in the form of separate sitting arrangements, separate set of utensils, division of household tasks and space. While, this essentially contribute to everyday subordination of domestics at workplace, it is pertinent to ask as to: how do the domestics negotiate such perceived idea of 'dirt' and 'pollution' in the realm of their everyday lives?

Much of the narratives of the domestics in the study suggest that they took offence in the employers' perception of them being 'dirty'. Unlike their employers, the domestics perceived their work as 'dirty'. This becomes evident when they- both Bihari and Miya domestics- shared similar sentiment like: 'we might do dirty work, but, that does not

make us dirty beings'; 'Doing dirty work in several households each day, it is not possible for us to maintain a clean physical appearance in each house'; 'My skin colour may be black, but I am clean'. Significantly, although, much of this contestation exhibited by the domestics is limited only to them; it reflects their counter-claim to employer perceptions, in which they strongly rejected the employers' portrayal of them as 'dirty' (Matilla, 2011).

However, intriguingly, efforts are seen amongst some workers in removing certain employer perception of 'dirt' or 'pollution' towards them, by adapting an ideal dressing behaviour at workplace. Typically, it is mostly the Miya domestics who explicitly spoke about observing such practices as it is 'appreciated' by their employers²³. This mostly gets accentuated in group discussions, when the Miya domestics highly emphasised the significance of ideal dress behaviour, in the form of wearing clothes- *mekhela sador* or *salwar kameez*- which is acceptable to their employers.

For instance, in one such group discussion with five Miya domestics, Nooreja elucidate this in context of the tasks assigned to her in one of her workplaces: 'I and Hajera (who was also a part of the discussion) work in the same house, but our tasks are completely different. She sweeps and mops the floor. And, I am asked to do dusting and help in the kitchen by chopping vegetables and by washing utensils. I enter the kitchen and do all the work. I am also asked to make tea sometimes'. Hearing this, Shahina, who was also present in the discussion, says in a surprising tone: '*Tumak ghin nokore!*' meaning 'You are not considered dirty!' and says: 'Many Hindu people find it difficult to allow us to enter into their kitchen, and you are allowed to make tea'. To this, Nooreja running her hands over the *salwar kameez*²⁴ that she is wearing says with a smile, 'I always go neatly to work. It is important to look clean, otherwise finding work will be difficult'. Ayesha, also a participant in the discussion, joins in to support Nooreja's account by affirming that even she is appreciated by her employers for going neatly to work. Working as a domestic since the past ten years she shares her experience as: 'It is very much essential to wear clean clothes, so that employers do not consider you to be dirty and dismiss your ability to work cleanly. Most of our people (Miya women domestics) fails to understand

²³Matilla (2011), in her study in Jaipur, found contradictions in the employers' overt concern of workers cleanliness and the same worn out clothes she observed the male live-in workers wearing each day. It is in this context, she assumes that it is the person who is inherently considered as dirty by employers, and not necessarily their clothes.

²⁴It a three piece cloth which comprises of a dupatta, the upper body kameez and a lower body trouser. The pair that Nooreja is wearing is a hand-me-down from her employer.

this, and turns up for work so shabbily that we only feel ashamed. It is because of the presence of a few such people, we also get tagged as dirty’. Further, showing her collection of *mekhela sador* to the researcher, which is neatly folded and hung by a rope attached to the wall of her room, she says about receiving those as gifts from her employers, wherein she claimed: ‘unlike others, I don’t wear dirty clothes, I wear clean clothes. I wear only *mekhela sador*. I am more of an Assamese, and all my employers love me’. Adding to this, Amina working in three Hindu households says that even she receives appreciation from her employers because of wearing clean clothes and also for conversing in *khati lower axomiya*²⁵ with them. Narrating her experience in one of her workplaces, she says: ‘*Baideo* (female employer) often says to me that when she talks with me, she does not feel as though she is conversing with a Miya. She likes talking to me, and often says that she feels I am like her own, that I am like an Assamese’.

While, the above discussion reveals the manifestations of the Miya domestics in formulating their self-image as ‘clean beings’ by maintaining an external appearance, their motivation to such image construction can be inferred primarily on two grounds. Firstly, it can be inferred in relation to overt employer prejudices towards them as ‘polluted and ritually impure beings’, as discussed in previous chapter. And, secondly, in relation to their understanding that such employer perception of pollution is concomitantly influenced by several other external factors related to their hygiene, in which they are commonly despised as ‘dirty beings’. In this light, the ‘behavioural expression of idealization’ (Scott, 1990) of individual domestics, in the form of wearing *mekhela sador*, *salwar kameez* or using the dialect of employer reflects their attempts to distance themselves from certain familiar stereotypes against the Miyas in general, in the context of Assam. Arguably, although, this idealization in the form of sharing certain attributes similar to, and acceptable to employer primarily finds an outlet in the public transcript, reaffirming the superiority of dominant groups (Scott, 1990), it nevertheless, entailed the Miya domestics to diminish certain employer perception of ‘dirty’ or ‘pollution’ towards them. This gets reflected from the pride they took in expressing the appreciation and acceptance they received from their respective employers.

Another significant way in negotiating the employers’ perceived idea of ‘dirt’ or ‘pollution’ in the form of segregation practices is through bitter criticism via gossip. Gossip as a form of resistance is noted by Scott (1985) as a kind of democratic voice in

²⁵The dialect used by the people of lower Assam.

conditions where powers and possible repression make open acts of disrespect dangerous. In the present study, gossip is manifested amongst the domestic workers by critiquing about the discriminatory practices of one employer to other employers. By doing so, the domestic achieves ‘the expression of opinion, of contempt, of disapproval while minimizing the risks of identification and reprisal’ (Scott 1985, p. 282). Moreover, by resorting to such practices, they make themselves heard to their present employer, albeit indirectly, so that the same is not repeated in the particular household. One such domestic is Mojiron, who explained it as:

If I see untouchability in any house, I cannot bear it. We are also human beings. Trust me; there are certain households where they don’t consider us to be humans. They serve us tea in cups which are broken, and some are so dirty that you will not feel like holding it by your hand also. Since, on face I cannot be rude, I refuse to have tea beforehand in such households...but, I do not remain silent. I tell the *baideos* (female employer) of my other workplaces about such things, and this makes them aware too, to not repeat the same with me.

5.5.5 Employer’s Perception of ‘Threat’

We fear if anything goes missing, we will be held responsible. We are the ones who come from outside.

The above dilemma narrated by all the domestics in the present study reflect the concerns about their ‘honesty’ being put in question, each time any valuables²⁶ go missing in their employer’s place. However, this does not entail one to have an impression that domestic workers are only subjected to false accusation by employers. Domestic workers, much like any other beings are capable of committing any crime, including stealing (Sharma, 2019). This has been highlighted in the interviews of Mattila, with part-time domestics in Jaipur, where one worker explained:

Well, both things are there. There are employers who falsely blame workers, and there are also workers who steal. So, it is not all employers’ fault. They [the workers] are all situation-ridden. Greed makes you do so (Mattila 2011, p. 173).

²⁶‘Valuables’ include anything which is a priced possession of their employers- cash, jewellery, clothes, groceries and so forth (Sharma, 2019). In the context of the present study, ‘valuables’ included even the discarded and unused items of the employers. Basically, it implied any material possession- not necessarily priced possessions- in the employer’s premise which is not found in-place.

The workers in the present study too, had a similar line of understanding. They are aware of the presence of such workers who are tempted to steal valuables from their places of work. It is in this context, several workers shared that their responsibility increased, when they are asked to search for a worker by any potential employer. They are particularly required to keep in mind that the worker does not have any intentions of misdemeanour, as it attributed to the risk of them being projected as thieves, thus, leading to a strained relationship amongst their network of employers. This shows that the indispensability of organisation of contemporary domestic work through loose informal social networks is not just a source of concern primarily for the employers, but, it is a cause of distress to domestics as well. While, for the employers it involved fear of potential slippage, for the domestics it implied real consequences as it directly determined their livelihood as paid domestics. As observed by Neetha (2004) that any accusation of theft and related criminal activity lowers the recruitment desirability of a domestic worker.

Moreover, much like the employers (as discussed in the previous chapter), in almost all the discussions, the domestics emphasised the importance of ‘trust’ in domestic work. They are aware that ‘home’ as a private space of the employer allowed them to be careless about their valuables²⁷. This, therefore, demanded their carefulness while working in such spaces. The testimonies of the domestics are peculiar manifestations of their vulnerability at employer’s domestic space. While, this feeling of vulnerability particularly emanated from the same origin, like the employers, i.e. class stratification (Sharma, 2019), the negotiations of such feelings for both the groups are strikingly different. The employers as we have seen in the previous chapter managed their fears by resorting to various practices, wherein their superior class position played a crucial role. The domestics, on the other hand, lacking any social, economic and political resources mostly worked in an ever-present fear of accusation (ibid).

Domestics like Noorbhanu elucidate how she is terrorised almost regularly in one of her workplace, that if something goes missing, she will be held responsible. This eventually urged her to quit work in the particular house, as she feared being falsely accused as a thief, thus, maligning her image as a domestic. Another worker, Reena, shared her experiences of fear by citing instances of past in one of her employer’s house, during the

²⁷However, Dickey (2000b) and Sharma’s (2019) study shows that there were employers who deliberately kept valuables like cash and jewellery in open in order to test the reliability factor of domestics.

time of marriage of the employer's daughter. Being a regular worker of the house, Reena was a witness of the ongoing wedding preparation and the valuables stored in the house, from cash, jewellery to expensive clothes. Although, Reena reiterated that her employer trusted her, and there were also days in the past, when she was left alone to work in the employer's absence, but the ongoing wedding preparations made her anxious. And this impelled her to make it a point to enter the room where the wedding valuables were stored, only in the physical presence of her employer, as it acted as a source of security for her. Further, accentuating on the aspect of missing valuables and the associated fear with it, another domestic explains:

In the initial days of work in a new house, there is fear in the minds of both employer and the worker. Once the trust is built, it becomes easier to work to a great extent. But, as workers, we are never free from fear at workplaces. Each time, the employer fails to find something valuable; there is fear of being accused as a thief. Honestly speaking, I personally like to work in the presence of employers.

The testimonies are a reflection that although 'trust' is emphasised as the most significant factor in a domestic work relation, the attainment of it is fragile. Its fragility is primarily rooted in the class vulnerabilities of domestics; wherein as lower-class outsiders in their employer's middle-class homes they become easily susceptible to be projected as 'thieves', each time an employer failed to find their valuables-in-place. This creates an undue pressure amongst the domestics to prove their honesty while at work, as 'being accused of theft was one of their greatest fears at workplace' (Sharma 2019, p. 101). This, therefore, required them to negotiate their own fears in order to cope in a workplace primarily governed by unequal class relations. For instance, while, Noorbhanu is seen negotiating her fear by choosing to quit work for the particular employer, Reena negotiated it by cleaning the room where wedding valuables are stored only in the presence of her employer.

Furthermore, speaking at length on how the workers are always required to work under the radar of employer's suspicion, Morjina, expressed her feelings in the following words:

She is always at the back of me like a police officer. It has been nine years running, I am working there. Till date, not even a needle has been misplaced, but still *baideo* follows me to each room. Her actions give a feeling as though I am a thief and my intentions are to steal something. I am not a thief! Yes, I am poor, but, my self-

respect is important to me. I know that in order to survive I will have to work, but, not by wrong means. If I need something, I will ask and take, but, not by stealing.

This demystifies the intricacies of the domestic work relation where sometimes even long-term association with employers is not sufficient in trust building. While, Morjina reiterates that, although, during her work tenure, not even a thing as valueless as a needle has been misplaced from her workplace, her employer suspected her for potential theft. And, this particularly acted as a source of humiliation for her as she asserts: ‘I am not a thief!’. However, considering the nature of the work where unequal economic and social power is deeply entrenched, it limited the choice of Morjina, thus, coercing her to negotiate silently such explicit suspicion of her employer on a daily basis, as in the later part of the discussion she says: ‘I need the money and *baideo* (female employer) needs my labour. So, despite being angry of her actions, I choose to keep quiet’. Further, Morjina’s mother, who is seated beside her during the conversation, joins in and says that the most difficult thing for a domestic worker is to gain the confidence of employers, irrespective of the honesty of the worker. Being aware of the nuances of the fragility that the work endures, she is heard saying: ‘I have always taught both my daughters not to steal anything from their *kamor ghor* (workplace). For us being honest is the most important thing, so that nobody can point a finger. People from our community get easily targeted’.

Although, such covert ways of negotiation are more common amongst the domestics of the present study, there are also domestics who addressed issues like suspicion and false accusation of theft by overtly confronting their employers. One such domestic is Bulbuli. During a group discussion, she narrated her confrontation with one of her employers, who had suspected her of stealing petty things like knife and eggs from kitchen. In her words:

Dipti *baideo* always keeps her food items locked. One day all of a sudden, she asked me, ‘Bulbuli, two eggs were missing from the kitchen yesterday’. I asked her back, ‘Why didn’t you ask me yesterday itself?’ Then she told me that she got to know about the missing eggs later in the evening, after I left. It was then, I told her on face, ‘You open the door when I come and close it when I leave your house. Did you see me taking anything while leaving your place?’. She was silent after that, and I continued with my work.

Sumitra had similar experiences in one of her previous employer's house. Often in situations when any valuable went missing from the house, the employer asked Sumitra about it: 'Where did it go? Have you seen it?' This being a regular affair was not given much importance by Sumitra, as the employer eventually used to find the missing items herself. But, Sumitra finally called it a quit, after being directly accused of stealing a knife from the kitchen. She explains this as:

I could not take it anymore. I told her on face that, I am not a thief, and such daily accusations are not fun anymore. I took my wage and stopped going to her place for work. I work in two more houses in the same building, but I never went to her place after that incident. She kept calling me, I did not go.

The above testimonies are reflections that often in situations when domestics are directly accused of theft, they negotiate it overtly. However, such overt responses ought to be analysed in broader context of the individual positions of domestics concerned. Both Bulbuli and Sumitra could confront their employers owing to their association as paid domestic for several years. With years of experience they are well aware with the nuances of the work relation. Moreover, in both the cases, they do not continue to work as domestics for economic compulsion, which happened to be a primary reason for most domestics under study. While, for Bulbuli her husband earned a living which is sufficient for sustaining her family of two members, as her sons are married and live separately, for Sumitra, domestic work served as a source of extra money, as she earned considerable money by renting three rooms in the *basti*. Additionally, Sumitra could dispose an act of resistance by quitting her job as she had no permanent dependent family members to look after, though she kept providing for her son and daughter-in-law in times of crisis. In contrast, Morjina could not dispose a similar act considering the responsibility of her two school-going children and mother, in addition to the daily expenses. Although, her husband is also an earning member, but his income is mostly saved to buy a small plot of land in their native village. All this together contributed in complicating her negotiation in the particular workplace, as she could not pay the price of either losing her job or maligning her image. Besides, her position in the workplace is influenced not just by her inferior class in relation to the employer, but, also by her ethnic identity. In the context of Assam, where employers largely held 'Miyas are dangerous' (as discussed in the previous chapter), it can be inferred as to why Morjina's employer displayed signs of explicit suspicion towards her, despite long years of

association. The typecasting of the community also gets reflected in the verbatim of her mother, as she says: ‘People from our community get easily targeted’. From this, it can be argued that, in paid domestic work, the specificities of middle-class homes along with the intersection of various identities- class, gender, and ethnic- of a domestic determined their work relation with employers. Moreover, in case of Miya domestics, their awareness of society’s perception in general, and employer’s particularly, entailed a sense of vigilance towards their own actions, wherein, they adapted to the established norm at workplace. This can be seen as an act of ‘self-surveillance’ (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011, p. 31), in which, it is not necessarily in cases like Morjina’s where the employer explicitly showcased wariness. But, responses of other Miya domestics, too, reflected a sense of ‘employer’s gaze upon them even when they are not physically present’ (Sharma 2019, p. 106).



Image10: With Miya domestic workers after a group conversation.



Image 11: FGD with Bihari domestic workers.

5.6 Towards Recognising the Rights of Domestic Workers

Although, the subtle practices of everyday resistance reflect the workers efforts to bring change in their work conditions at the individual level, this, however, entailed towards meeting their short-term goals, thus, failing to give them long-term recognition as ‘workers’. Existing scholarship has highlighted lack of organisation amongst the domestics as a primary factor towards such failure (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Mattila, 2011; Sengupta & Sen, 2013). Mehta in an early study on paid domestic work in Bombay argued that the lack of organisation amongst domestics is mainly influenced by five factors: a) the lack of homogeneity in the group and the fact that they work separated from one another; b) the personal and sometimes intimate relationship between employer and employee, which makes workers consider organising inappropriate; c) the privileged positions of some domestics, which they would not want to threaten; d) the perception of many workers of their position as temporary; and e) the ‘apathy, ignorance’, and pervasive depression among domestics because of their low-paid and low-prestige jobs (Mehta, 1960 cited in Rollins 1985, p. 47). These challenges cited by Mehta almost six decades ago appears to be somewhat relevant even in present times, as the present study in Guwahati, reveals the workers not being part of any organisation or union. This in a way reflects the plight of domestic workers in the region, wherein, they fail to raise a collective voice for their rights.

Nevertheless, an air of change has been witnessed in Guwahati, with NGOs like YUVA (Youth for Voluntary Action) making efforts to raise awareness amongst domestic workers in certain slum pockets of Guwahati²⁸. In this, they have taken initiative to organise the workers by forming informal collective amongst domestic workers in their respective slum settlements, in which Uzanbazar Railway Colony slum is also one amongst them. This has particularly been formed with the aim to make the domestics of the settlement meet collectively, wherein they could exchange information in determining their work conditions. But, the findings of this study reveal such collectives failed to sustain in the long run in the Uzanbazar Railway Colony slum owing to the differences such as caste, ethnic, religion amongst workers in the settlement. Arguably, for achieving a common sense of goal, it is important for workers to move beyond such considerations; as such differences only contribute towards strengthening the employers' ability to further exploit the rights of workers. The other reason for failure of successful operation of such collectives is due to the inability of domestics to incorporate the regular meetings in between their busy schedule of paid and unpaid domestic work. This is further hindered due to the differences in work timings of each domestic.

Apart from grass root activism, the NGO has been actively involved in empowering domestic workers of the settlement in organising protests, around larger issues of their basic minimum rights. In November 2019, the researcher attended one such protest demanding social security for domestic workers, under Unorganised Sector Social Security Act, 2008. The researcher joined the domestic workers of the present study from their slum settlement to the protest site near Guwahati Club rotary. The protest was noteworthy in the sense that, the women are seen coming together as one group with their sole identity as 'domestic workers', and not along their caste, ethnic and religious identities. The protest was further joined in by domestic workers of various localities of Guwahati reflecting heterogeneity. The protest was significant in the sense that, it was led in support of CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions), and was also joined in by other NGO networks in the city.

Seated on the road behind the barricades set by police, the domestics present showed little fear of being recognised by their employers, wherein they are not seen shying away

²⁸While, there has been other NGO's like Action Aid, Centre of Development Initiative (CDI) which have also been fighting for domestic workers rights in Guwahati, the researcher focuses on the initiative of YUVA, as the organisation served as the researcher's entry point to the field i.e. Uzanbazar Railway Colony slum. Moreover, the researcher has also closely observed various meetings organised by the particular NGO in Guwahati.

from cameras of the local news correspondent covering the report. They are seen waving flags representing the logo of CITU and holding banners that reflected their demands as a worker, to the state government. Most domestics skipped their work for the day to attend the protest. While, some openly stated the reason to their employers about their skipping of work a day prior to the protest day, others simply skipped work without any prior notice to employers. Towards the end of the protest, one of the domestic came forward to hand over the memorandum to the police personnel, to be submitted to the State District Commissioner. The memorandum had eight clear demands ensuring the protection of domestic workers rights: a) implementation of the Act ensuring the social security of domestic workers in the state level; b) fixing 3000 rupees as their monthly pension; c) ensuring scholarships for their children; d) ensuring maternity benefits for them to the tune of 20,000 rupees; e) fix a sum of 3 lakhs rupees towards expenses for their critical illness; f) incorporate the issue of their housing in the proposed Act; g) continue their labour registration and increase the number of employees in the labour department; h) increase the minimum wage to 50 rupees per hour.

It is significant; however that, several domestics staging the protest are unaware of their purpose of being there. They mostly had a fade idea that it is possibly for their demand of wage increment and weekly/monthly day offs without a pay cut or unwarranted anger from employers²⁹. For the workers, no other workplace issue as listed in the memorandum seemed greater than the twin issues of wage and leave. A few amongst the workers gathered in the protest delivered heartfelt speeches about their workplace woes, wherein employers dismissed their legitimate demand of wage increment and showed indifference in granting them leave, while some are heard delivering fiery speeches by criticising their employers, thereby, giving valid arguments as to why monthly day offs are a necessity. This is applauded by all the domestics gathered in the protest, signifying their support to each other in their demand as workers to the government.

Most of these speeches are reflective of the narratives of the domestics in the present study, wherein most questions related to recognition of their rights in the form of social security benefits are dropped by them. The issues that are visibly and unanimously raised by all – Bihari and Miya – are in terms of their wage and leave, thereby, making it the two most potent issues of workplace and their right as workers. In negotiation of wages,

²⁹Chigateri's (2007) study shows most workers being unaware of their minimum rights in states like Karnataka where state level regulations have been implemented for domestic workers, and has a longer history of domestic workers organisation.

the domestics often failed to overtly ask for an annual wage increment, and those that did are silenced by the employers, as reflected in the previous section. While, some experienced domestics succeeded in negotiating for a wage increment by resorting to subtle practices of resistance (as mentioned earlier), most domestics failed to do so. In this, they perceived such street protest as a medium for making their demands heard to employers. Nevertheless, many domestics at the same time are also heard confiding their apathy to the researcher, towards such protests, when in group discussions they unanimously agreed: ‘we have been going for such protest rallies since so long, but what is the use? Our wages are still low. The government is still deaf to our problems’.

Their issues of annual wage increment are further intertwined with wage deduction when they are absent from work, pushing them more towards precarity. While, this practice of the employers angered the workers considerably, most being without any alternative, chose not to respond. However, there are some who are vocal about their confrontation with employers in matters of wage deduction. These workers mainly comprised of them who have been in the occupation for a longer time and have gained experience over the years. Their testimonies echoed: ‘we don’t work in households which deduct wages. We negotiate everything prior to taking up the work’.

Furthermore, it is notable that, negotiating leave appeared as a contentious issue between workers and employers (see also Matilla, 2011; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). The workers work seven days a week, with no provision of day offs. Leave of absence is not taken into consideration by both the parties while negotiating the terms of employment. It appeared as an unsaid understanding between them that there will be some absenteeism in times of crisis, which keeps the space open for negotiation and re-negotiation over issues of leave (Sen & Sengupta, 2016). Despite this, the contestation over leave seems not to end. It gets reflected when almost all the workers interviewed are critical of the indifferent attitude of the employers when they avail leave. And this indifference is more when they avail leave particularly on Sundays and holidays. This can be best elucidated from Phulua’s (a Bihari domestic) testimony:

They (employers) feel that only their big houses need cleaning. Our houses with one room need no cleaning. They say ‘to clean one room how much time you need’. They hold an opinion that we are *kaamwalis* (maids), so we should rot in dirt. They treat us in such a way, as though we are meant to clean only their used clothes and *jootha bartan* (used utensils). They fail to understand that they are getting us as

helps to do their dirty work, but from where do we get help to do our housework? We also need day offs to do our housework, to rest, to spend time with family, to have a good Sunday lunch with family, but it is never taken into consideration.

Furthermore, the indifferent attitude of employers in terms of leave is also reflected during the festive seasons which irritated the workers considerably. For example, the Miya women particularly complained about requiring to work during Eid celebrations in the Muslim households, where the employers invite them with their children to be part of the celebrations. And on their arrival they are asked to perform certain tasks, the most common being cleaning utensils and other kitchen related tasks.

Given such precariousness of their workplaces, which are more immediate causes for the domestics in securing their livelihood, the researcher is not surprised when all the domestics demonstrating the protest focussed on the twin issues of wage and leave, as their minimum rights as a 'worker'. At least, this in part reflects the workers consciousness of their underpayment, and their legitimate demand of day off as worker, which in a way is a positive step towards bringing transformation in paid domestic work. In this, YUVA as a non-governmental organisation has made a modest beginning in raising the consciousness amongst the domestic workers about their legitimate rights. More concrete signs of the particular NGO are further reflected through their consultation meetings in Guwahati between officials, civil society, lawyers, NGOs, and domestic workers, in realising the rights of domestic workers. Therefore, the NGO, in significant ways helped in building the awareness of domestic workers in relation to the state, albeit not in relation to their employers.



Image 12: A protest rally of domestic workers organised by YUVA demanding implementation of Domestic Workers Social Security Rights.



Image 13: A domestic worker participating in an 'Empowerment and Training Camp' organised by YUVA.



Image 14: *Consultation meeting organised by YUVA with civil society members on issues related to domestic workers empowerment. Both members of civil society and domestic workers are present in the meeting.*

5.7 Conclusion

Discussing various parameters which influence the participation of Bihari and Miya women into paid domestic work, the chapter analyses the significance of ‘paid work’ in shaping their everyday lives and vice-versa. While, for the Bihari women, domestic work is a part of intergenerational employment, the Miya women are the first generation domestics in their families to take up work in Guwahati. However, despite this difference in work trajectories of both the groups of domestics, a common thread ties them together, where participation in paid work outside their homes is a ‘financial necessity’ for sustaining their families. Married at a young age, the domestics are bound by circumstances to take up paid work, upon their marriages, with their husbands failing to provide for their growing family. While, this entailed shame as it necessitated to their crossing of the social boundaries of marriage and family, and the material boundaries of home (Sharma, 2016b), at the same time it also required them to compromise the hegemonic ideals of femininity by performing domestic work in others houses for money. Yet, despite the shame and low status entailed in paid domestic work, they perceived it as a relatively better option for a married woman because it enabled them to strike a balance between paid and unpaid work at home. Unlike other manual labour,

paid domestic work has a flexible time schedule, which is particularly viewed as a positive aspect of the work because it entailed to their fulfilment of routine acts of domesticity in their homes.

Much like their middle-class counterparts, the gendered expectations of domesticity as wives and mothers run through households of each domestic, wherein the assistance of their husband is minuscule. However, unlike their middle-class employers, the poor domestics could not afford the luxury of outsourcing domestic labour from market. Although, domestics mostly performed their domestic chores single-handedly, those with young unmarried daughters and school-going daughters are seen turning to them for domestic help; and in some cases, they are seen seeking help from other female members of the family. In this, the young sons are never drawn into housework. The findings reveal the men being socialised into a gendered world from a very young age, wherein domestic work is seen as a woman's work. Arguably, the normative rule of patriarchal ideologies of associating housework with woman has been deeply entrenched in these households since generations. And, in this sense, it is not surprising to see reluctance on the part of domestic's husband in assisting them with household chores. 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 for housework on their young unmarried daughters.

Furthermore, with the participation of these women into paid work, they are inducted into the position of 'breadwinner' for their families, which further complicates their daily lives. With the non-contribution of their man, they are required to bear all the expenses in sustaining their families, 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, 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'. Nevertheless, these setbacks on the lives of domestics do not entail one to entirely dismiss the agency that they derived from their breadwinner position. This most commonly gets reflected when they took pride in their financial independence and their abilities to take decision on matters involving their children. It is significant, however that, amongst a few young

Miya domestics their differential contribution to household expenses are found to be deliberate, as they aspire to invest in their native villages for a better future.

Moving beyond these challenges that the domestics negotiate in their home, the last part of the chapter explores strategies resorted by the domestics in order to negotiate the quotidian practices of subordination (as highlighted in the previous chapters) they encounter in their workplaces. While, these practices served as a key component in marking everyday inequalities – class, ethnic, religious - between employer and the domestic worker, the narratives of the workers suggest their compliance to these inequalities as part of their daily work routines. This however, did not signify their passive acquiescence; rather it implied their conscious manipulation of real feelings in presence of employers. Given the unequal power equations in which they are embedded, and a sense of their own precarity as dependents of a poorly regulated sector of informal economy (Neetha, 2009), ‘compliance’ served as a significant strategy for the workers in deploying subtle practices of everyday resistance (Scott, 1985; 1990). This, in significant ways, entailed to their inverting of the power dynamics as embedded in employer’s practices of distinction, and contributed in constructing themselves as superior beings in relation to their employers. It is also worth noting that, in situations where employer’s practices of subordination served as an injury to the domestic worker’s inner-self, their subtle assertions to power found its way as open confrontation. But, at the same time, it is noteworthy that, such overt resistance on employers face depended on the domestic’s experience in the work, their social location –class, ethnic and religious- as domestic workers in employer’s household space, and their interpersonal relation with the particular employer. Moreover, such overt resistance are in a way subtle, as it does not necessarily transform into any dramatic confrontation between employer and the domestic.

While, such subtle practices of everyday resistance reflect the workers efforts to bring change to their work conditions at the individual level and empowers them to question the authority of their employers; these however, fail to bring long-term significant changes in their overall work process. In order to bring long-term change, it is essential for the domestics to raise a collective voice for their rights as workers. But, this often gets dampened due to differences – caste, ethnic, religious – amongst the domestics. Nevertheless, in recent times, with the efforts of some NGOs in Guwahati, the domestics are seen coming collectively with their identity as ‘domestic workers’. And, are seen

being part of protest rallies in public spaces, thereby, expressing their suppressed anger against employer's practices. Although, there is a long-way to go, but, organisation of such protests in a way reflect a modest beginning towards recognising their 'rights' as domestic workers.

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