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## Original Article

# Respect, Status and Domestic Work: Female Migrants at Home and Work

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**Abstract** The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a complex and often contradictory process for female, ethnic minority, migrant strangers, moving as domestic workers to Delhi, India's capital. Drawing on empirical work in a village in Jharkhand state, which has witnessed increasing migration of adolescent girls as domestic workers to Delhi over the last two decades, this article highlights the experience of tribal domestic workers at home and at work. It points to their agency in dealing with the contradictions they face between earning incomes, acquiring markers of status and gaining respect across the urban and rural worlds they straddle.

Le passage de l'adolescence à l'âge adulte est un processus complexe et souvent contradictoire pour les jeunes femmes de minorités ethniques migrant à Delhi – la capitale de l'Inde – pour y travailler en tant que travailleuses domestiques. Ce travail s'appuie sur une étude empirique menée dans un village de l'État du Jharkhand, qui connaît depuis deux décennies une augmentation du nombre des adolescentes migrant vers Delhi pour y trouver du travail en tant qu'employées domestiques. Il décrit le vécu, chez elles et au travail, de ces jeunes femmes d'origine tribale et met en évidence les manières dont elles affrontent les contradictions entre la nécessité de gagner des revenus, d'acquérir un statut et de gagner le respect des mondes urbain et rural qu'elles côtoient.

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## Introduction

It is a matter of respect that is all. (Priti, 26, a migrant tribal domestic worker in Delhi)

Narratives of paid domestic work across time and space point to the dilemmas and contradictions faced by domestic workers seeking respect in their lives. Contemporary accounts of paid domestic work, striving to understand global economic and demographic changes, rarely consider the domestics' desire for prestige and upward social mobility, important constituents of the notion of respect. Rather, they are driven by the expansion of young female migrant workers from poor, undeveloped regions to service the affluent across the world. This process of globalisation and feminisation of paid domestic work has been attributed to shifts in the structure of the labour market in the developed world with a rise in dual-career households (cf. Standing, 1999; Kabeer, 2007) alongside cuts in public services limiting the provision of care services to the elderly and young, in a context of both declining fertility and ageing populations (Yeates, 2005; Razavi, 2007).

Respectability is a signifier of class, but always inscribed in gender identities. It involves a complex set of practices, defined by appropriate behaviour, language and appearance, apart from social rules and moral codes, which enable the framing of people and thereby

justify the unequal distribution of resources (Skeggs, 1997). Women domestic workers do have a clear knowledge of their class position and social place, yet in their struggle for social mobility, they invest in symbols of respectability as defined by the dominant. This is, however, not a straightforward process, but highlights the ambivalence about giving up their ethnic identities and symbols of respect for elite, middle-class norms of respectability. The ambivalence persists as they realise that gaining the outward signs of material respectability does not automatically lead to a notion of respect as reflected in the treatment meted out by others (Sennett and Cobb, 1973). Respect involves mutuality, which emerges equally from the development of the self and the interaction with and recognition from others (Sennett, 2003), but for these women, there remains a hidden anxiety about the quality of their experience and its legitimisation in society. This cannot be taken for granted, but is negotiated through the interplay of personal character and attributes like age and education, and the larger institutional contexts and social structures both at home and at the destination (including the nature of the placement agency and personality of the employer). Their agency in terms of the 'ability to define their goals and act upon them' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438) can then take several forms, ranging from bargaining and negotiation, to manipulation, resistance or the more intangible processes of reflection and analysis. Depending on the structures of constraint to be overcome, it can involve both individual and collective action.

Though the identities and status of the domestic workers and their employers are often constructed in opposition to each other (Dickey and Adams, 2000; Moors, 2003; Qayum and Ray, 2003), my focus in this article is on the interaction between the identities of the migrant domestic workers in the workplace and in their village home as shaping the shifts in their social position and search for respect through their life course. The physical and cultural separation between the home and the workplace influences domestics' ways of negotiating power relations at both ends, seeking to balance hard working conditions with the prospects of respect at home. Their struggle for respect involves multiple transitions occurring simultaneously in their lives, spatial, social and emotional, and these are not necessarily unidirectional (cf. Punch, 2002). In fact, a sense of agency itself has been seen as a characteristic of the transition to adulthood, including dimensions such as freedom of movement, access to resources and decision-making capacity (Jejeebhoy *et al.*, 2010).

While the market economy leads to a preference for contractual employer–employee relationships, domestics strive for respect through displaying a sense of selflessness, responsibility, and caring and obligation towards others (Skeggs, 1997). They hope that the nurturing of such caring dispositions will be valued and draw respect from their employers, yet the ties of dependence and obligation within the intimate space of the home contribute to the perpetuation of unequal relations of class, ethnicity and gender, what Qayum and Ray call the 'culture of servitude' (2003, p. 520). At home, however, while their work *per se* is devalued, their contributions are recognised and their sense of responsibility seen as worthy of respect.

Formal education is seen to provide a clear set of skills useful for future employment and incomes and endowing the status of a respected person. It contributes partially to fulfilling parental and community aspirations in the construction of a respectable identity, as reflected in speech, mannerisms, and the possibilities for gaining professional, white-collar employment as civil servants, teachers or health professionals. For the domestic workers, however, it does not provide the requisite skills for employability. Employers value proficiency in mainstream languages, the use of technology and qualities of loyalty and submissiveness (in the guise of politeness and sophistication) that are not acquired in

school. But further, for the domestic worker herself, there is a crisis of respect, in a context where respectability for women derives not just from education, but from its contribution to a good marriage, expected to provide protection, status and freedom from menial labour, with responsibility for the reproduction and well-being of their own family, rather than that of others (Ray, 2000).

This article highlights the experience of tribal domestic workers both in their rural home and in the urban workplace, and their agency in dealing with the contradictions faced between earning incomes and gaining respect across these sites. I also examine how the idea of schooling impacts women's agency, and value for domestic work.

## Methodology and Context

The article is based on research in Katona village,<sup>1</sup> Simdega District, Jharkhand, a major sending area, and interviews with key informants in Delhi. Katona is a small village with 112 households, 80 per cent belonging to the Kharia and Oraon Scheduled Tribes (STs), a majority Roman Catholic, and the rest belonging largely to backward-class Hindu groups. Literacy levels are high among the STs due to the presence of Roman Catholic missionaries since the 1870s, with only 30 per cent of them being illiterate as compared to 68 per cent of the Hindus in the village. Forty-one per cent of the STs, both boys and girls, had attained various levels of secondary education in the mission-run village secondary school, and this pattern is also reflected in the profiles of the domestic workers. Yet with uncertain, rain-fed agriculture, the emigration rate is high.

The key occupations and educational and migration profiles of all households were identified through a census survey of the village in October–November 2006. Of the 31 domestic workers aged 12–36 identified, only one was male. The remaining 30 women were live-in domestic workers. Sixty-five per cent of them were below the age of 20. I therefore decided to focus on the experiences of these women. Parents and members of the household were unaware of the exact location of employment in Delhi, but most women returned home for Christmas each year. A follow-up visit was therefore scheduled in January 2007, when in-depth interviews were conducted with eight of them, present in the village at that time. They spoke of their experiences at the workplace, visits home, and emotions and feelings of both being valued and excluded, and although all these dimensions were central to their conception of respect and respectability, they hardly ever used these terms directly in their narratives. Their notions of dignity were instead constructed in relational terms, be it to their employers, family or peers.

The sole male domestic worker was not available, but one other male migrant, formerly in domestic service, was interviewed. In Delhi, I interviewed four employers (not of these domestics) of both live-in and live-out domestics, willing to be interviewed on account of personal contacts, two placement agencies whose addresses and contact numbers were secured from the village homes of the domestic workers, and two activists engaged in the mobilisation of domestic workers for recognition of their legal rights. In Simdega, I spoke to local parish priests and social activists engaged in advising, supporting and reporting on the status of migrant domestic workers.

The next section briefly reviews the gendered ideologies of respect and respectability embedded in the arena of domestic work. I then set out the nature and dimensions of the domestic work sector in Delhi, as well as the rural homes and contexts from which the

migrant women workers are drawn, before exploring their aspirations, experiences and the contradictions they face in their quest for respect throughout their lives.

### Conceptualising Migration for Domestic Work

Despite continuing feminist scholarship on the value of domestic labour, both unpaid 'economic' work (subsistence production) and the unpaid 'care' aspects of social reproduction (the sustenance of human beings throughout their life cycle more broadly, not just servicing male workers),<sup>2</sup> different forms of reproductive work continue to be marginalised. Perceived to have limited repercussions for the rest of the economy, domestic work is ignored, given a low status, and left out of work-led entitlements such as social insurance (Elson, 1995).<sup>3</sup> While activities performed in the public realm get socially recognised and valued, work within the home is both invisible and limits opportunities for social mobility. This division of activities and their spatial separation are an essential element of the social construction of gender, with the quite systematic 'non-valorisation of women's labour' ultimately leading to their subordination (Edholm *et al.*, 1977, p. 123). Associated with femininity, domestic workers are then often denied their personhood, and equality in terms of respect and recognition for their work.

Apart from its spatial, economic and ideological invisibility, reproductive work also has both material elements (labour) and non-material or affective ones, making it difficult to fit into a straitjacket 'labour' discourse. The material includes everyday tasks of cleaning, cooking, washing, feeding and so on, and the affective relates to 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). A high degree of stress, from the fear of failing in one's task, of criticism, of displacement, is involved, leading to self-exploitation by the worker. This is more intense for live-in workers who do not have the option of walking out and finding other employment immediately like live-out domestics. The very personal, complex and even ambiguous relations of subordination inherent in domestic work then make it not just undervalued but also servile (Anderson, 2000). For Priti, there is a constant tension between personal growth and fulfilling her responsibility towards her family and employers. She said,

My employers are nice. *Didi* (elder sister) asked me to take the matriculation exam from the Open school in Delhi. I was worried about managing studies alongside the housework, so refused. If I study, who will take care of the house? But studying further would get me a better job.

Priti's narrative, full of contradictions, points to her own dilemmas and anxieties. She realises that completing secondary education would get her a more respectable job, as a teacher or an office worker, and would fulfil the expectations of her parents. Despite all the comforts, income and security, she sees domestic work as low status, yet is caught in an inescapable vicious cycle of loyalty to her employers that dampens her future prospects. The emphasis on the construction of a caring self, of one who is responsible, mature and not selfish, as a way to gain recognition as 'respectable' makes it difficult to prioritise her own self-interests (cf. Skeggs, 1997). Her employers, recognising her aspiration, have encouraged her to study, yet they have not changed the material conditions of work by appointing an additional person to help with the housework or by playing a greater role themselves so as to relieve the burden on Priti. Afraid of failing in the performance of her duties and being called irresponsible or lazy, she has refrained from pursuing her education.

Despite the contradictions and trade-offs between earning incomes and gaining respect for their work, domestic workers use multiple strategies, often deliberately, to shift the very criteria for understanding respect. The nature of work performed and employer–employee relations are crucial to their experience, yet they speak too of the shifts in broader social and gender relations resulting from particular urban lifestyles, enhanced incomes or consumption, and the experience of a new place and culture. These give them a sense of identity and personhood, enabling repositioning within their own cultures. The definitions of work for them extend to their lives beyond the workplace (Parrenas, 2001), changing over time, place and with individual contexts.

### **Changing Contexts: Bridging the Rural and the Urban**

Between 1980 and 2005, India's rural sector stagnated, while the informal urban services sector, especially domestic and care services, grew rapidly (Rao *et al.*, 2008).<sup>4</sup> While Indian elite in big cities like Delhi always sought support with domestic work and child care, the current additional demand is not just to meet the needs of working women with higher levels of education (Kaur, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Rather, middle-class women assert upward mobility through withdrawing from domestic and care work and employing 'maids' for this purpose (Kumar, 2003). The domestic worker affirms the status of the woman of the household as manager rather than labourer, reproducing a particular middle-class lifestyle and sense of respectability. With the work taking place within the employers' home, there is an effort to create a self–other contrast, not seen as sharply in other work settings (Dickey and Adams, 2000, p. 2). Mita, 16, narrated,

I did all the housework, cleaning, washing, cooking, making tea, while madam watched television all day. Sometimes she went for a massage at the beauty parlour or to meet her friends. She didn't work, but never helped, even when she invited others home for weekly parties. Unable to cope with the work, I complained to the master. But he got angry and reprimanded me.

Alongside its rapid expansion as a sector of employment, in India too domestic work has become feminized (NIUA, 1991). The 1971 Census reported only 37 per cent of the 0.7 million domestic workers in the country to be women (Ray, 2000, p. 693). Within two decades, the proportions had reversed, with Shramshakti (GOI, 1988) estimating 1.6 out of 2.3 million domestic workers to be women (70 per cent). NSSO estimates for 2004–2005 show that while female share of the total domestic work sector is 72 per cent, women constitute 87 per cent of the sub-category of housemaids (Neetha, 2009).

There are several reasons for this feminisation. Men clean and cook in public spaces like offices, shops and restaurants, or work as drivers and guards, but lacking submissive attributes, they are seen as threats in the private space of the home. As McDowell notes (2007, p. 278), the preference for women reflects their 'supposed attributes of femininity – docility, deference and empathy' as opposed to the 'street bravado and machismo of young men (which) makes them less attractive as potential employees in the interactive service economy'. Apart from employer concerns over safety within the private space of the modern, urban home, the male workers too feel that the earnings from domestic work are insufficient to run a household and perform their breadwinning roles. Additionally, the conditions of work and personalised services are seen as demeaning to their own identities as workers. Nisar, 26, presently a labour contractor, noted, 'I worked as a domestic with an army officer. When they got transferred, I left their employment. My parents wanted

me to get married, but as a domestic worker, no woman wanted to marry me. This is considered demeaning for a man'. Important in his narrative is the gender ideology of respectability, wherein for a man, this comes from not doing 'dirty' work, having independence of means, developing valued skills and abilities and maintaining a 'cultured' life, including marriage and the protection of his wife, conforming to the standards set by the elite (Qayum and Ray, 2003; Sennett, 2003). The move out of domestic work for men has also been made possible by the expansion of alternate employment opportunities.

Feminisation, premised on the availability of cheap and trustworthy female labour, is accompanied by the increasing recruitment of poor, ethnic minority women as domestics, especially from the tribal areas of eastern India. Delhi alone has over 300 000 domestic and related workers (NSSO 2004/5). Kujur and Jha (2006) calculate that nearly a third of them belong to the Scheduled Tribes. Neetha (2004) further found in Delhi that almost all the live-in maids were migrants, of whom 90 per cent were Christian tribal women. They are preferred as live-ins due to the stereotypes of them being simple, honest, obedient and hard-working, all positively valued attributes in domestic service, and hence easier to control than their non-tribal counterparts. Over 50 per cent of such tribal women workers belong to Jharkhand<sup>6</sup> (Kujur and Jha, 2006). Census 2001 data confirms the presence of 38 364 female in-migrants from Jharkhand to urban Delhi, more than double the number over the previous decade.

In live-in domestic work, trust is very important. The worker lives in the home and therefore employers in Delhi go through agencies to ensure some security. The past decade has seen a jump in the number of such agencies, with estimates varying from 650 to 2650.<sup>7</sup> In Katona, several agencies are active; parents have their visiting cards, but cannot contact their daughters despite repeated phone calls. Geeta, a fishworker's daughter, returned after 3 years in Delhi in September 2007, but had no news of the four girls who accompanied her. To earn additional commission, the agency moved her to a new home every year. The agent collected her wages from the employer. They would not let her go home, and therefore she left secretly and lost a large part of her earnings. Interviews with placement agencies in Delhi revealed that it was common practice for the agency to collect the monthly salary from the employer. Supposedly kept in deposit for the domestic worker, a majority of them received only a small fraction of their wages, and even less if, like Geeta, they tried to break free of the tied labour relations with the agency.

The agencies are run by local men in Delhi. They usually hire women from the ethnic minority groups as agents (jobbers) in the villages to ensure a steady supply of workers. These jobbers are referred to in kinship terms, but this does not necessarily make them sensitive to the domestic workers' interests. Nina, 16, noted,

Seven of us were taken by an 'aunt' to Delhi by train and left in a placement agency. We were confined to a tiny room, allowed out only when some prospective employer came to interview us. I was given some clothes and toiletries by the placement agency for which they deducted the first two months salary. I worked from dawn to late in the night, cooking for six people, making umpteen cups of tea, cleaning the house, washing clothes and utensils. I slept on the kitchen floor and was threatened with beatings if I complained of fatigue and overwork. I was to be paid 1200 Rupees<sup>8</sup> per month. I left in three months, as I could not stand it any longer, so got only a month's pay. Even this was taken by the 'aunt's' daughter at the station.

Social activists and church functionaries in Delhi and Jharkhand and the families of the migrant women spoke of these 'aunts' becoming prosperous quite quickly through the supply of domestic workers. The agencies provide information, access to jobs and first

residence, but in the absence of any regulation, many have turned into grossly exploitative institutions. Given the predominance of tribal Christian women, several denominations of the Church, especially the Catholics, have also set up agencies in Delhi, to help recruit and train workers and ensure them a decent wage and living conditions. A few like Sruti have secured jobs in Delhi this way – they get regular leave, both to visit home once a year and on Sundays to go to church, and the agreed wages. Church agencies too take a commission to meet their overheads, but the worker directly receives the salary from her employer.

How does the world of Delhi, mediated through the plethora of placement agencies, relate to the domestics' lives in their village, Katona, 15 km away from the district headquarters? Rain-fed agriculture is the main source of livelihood in the region. The major crops are paddy, maize, groundnut and black-eyed beans. Only 12 per cent of the arable land is irrigated, making productivity low. Migration is then a key livelihood strategy in Katona, with 25 per cent of adult men and 15 per cent women migrant during the survey in 2006–2007. Older men migrated for agricultural work in North-West India or road construction in the border areas, and younger men looked for jobs in factories, as clerks or security guards in Delhi and other cities. For girls and women, these options hardly exist; their hard work in rural areas is seen as preparing them for domestic service in the cities. Some are recruited as nuns by Christian religious orders. Though trained and often placed in respectable jobs, such as teaching and nursing, both their emotional needs and physical mobility are strictly monitored and controlled, similar to those of domestic workers. The justification in both cases is a paternalistic view regarding their need for protection.

Male migrants are usually older and married and female migrants younger and unmarried,<sup>9</sup> pointing to the gendered differences in work-life trajectories for rural men and women. This implies that biological age is not necessarily an appropriate marker for understanding the multiple and simultaneous transitions in the life of a tribal woman domestic worker. Further, seeing these transitions in a linear pattern from childhood to adolescence and adulthood does not hold true in these ground realities, but is rather shaped by differential life-cycle patterns (particularly puberty and marriage) and gendered social norms, with women expected to eventually settle down with their own families rather than continuing to migrate for work. Dependence and male protection is for women the ultimate sign of respectability and status acquisition, rather than independence.

Dorothy, schooled up to class 7, one of Katona's first women to move to Delhi in 1986, narrated,

My father had six years of service left in the army after serving for 15 years. My grandfather died and my father took early retirement and came home. I was then in class 3. He cultivated some paddy but this was not enough. There was no money. Being the eldest of seven siblings, I decided to move to Delhi after grade 7, to earn to support my siblings.

For men, migration is important for performing their breadwinning roles, but for women the reasons are more varied, ranging from escaping the chiding of relatives for failing in exams to earning to support the family. Some wished to experience city life before marriage. Others sought to escape the burdens of reproductive work at home. Mita said,

I had heard about Delhi from the village women working there. They wear beautiful clothes and bring expensive gifts when they come for Christmas. The financial situation at home was worsening. I realized that work was available in Delhi and one could earn money. I also wanted to

see the big city I had heard so much about. I had never attended school, but my brothers did. I felt bad so left without informing them.

Mita's narrative reiterates poverty as a central factor for migration. But it also stresses the multidimensionality of causality, ranging from the personal to the emotional. Attracted by the gifts, she also aspires to see the city before settling in the village. She felt bad that instead of studying like her brothers she worked unacknowledged on the household farm. Feeling neglected, she ran off to Delhi with an agent.

Working life is not easy for domestics. But they draw from this experience, materially (incomes, skills and familiarity with consumption goods), and discursively (cultural representation), to strengthen their claims for respect. In the next section, I examine the workplace experience and the strategies they adopt vis-à-vis their rural home, to draw out the spatial and social interconnections between them, and how these contribute to their negotiation of respect through their life-course transitions.

### **Experiencing Domestic Work in Delhi: Narratives of Domestic Workers**

Gaining respect in the workplace is the most contested domain in the domestics' life. Employers expect round-the-clock personal service with unwavering intensity. The challenge for the domestics is to meet these expectations yet maintain a semblance of control over their lives. While the hard working conditions and long hours of work are a given, the experience of domestic work is shaped largely by the personality of the employer and the respect and human consideration they show the domestic worker. Priti is very fond of her employers. The fear of any criticism from them makes her work very hard.

I wake up at 7 am, make tea, prepare the two children for school, and make breakfast for madam and sir. They leave by 10 am; I eat my breakfast, then start cleaning and cooking. This takes up the rest of the day. I go to bed after midnight. Sometimes, I feel so burdened by the work that I begin hating myself. But everyone is not lucky to get to do what they want. The lifestyle is good. I have my own room with an attached toilet. I get good food. I hardly spend any of my earnings on myself, as *didi* gives me all the clothes and toiletries I need.

Priti's salary in 2007 was Rs 2500 per month, more than the remuneration of the teachers in the village mission-run school. Her lifestyle is good, she has privacy when needed, yet she resents being a domestic, because her parents and relatives had higher expectations of her. Domestic work, associated with dirt and personal service, is socially stigmatised. Like Priti, Dorothy's employers also treat her well. She perceives her working experience as largely positive, except for restrictions on her mobility. She says, 'I am not allowed to go out except for 3–4 hours once a month. They say it's for my safety and well-being'. Tribal women are stereotyped as simple and child-like. Their lack of fluency in Hindi, the local language, is used to control their physical movement and autonomy, albeit within a discourse of protection.

The use of kinship terms such as 'daughter' or 'younger sister' is a common stratagem to incorporate domestic workers into the private space of the family, while simultaneously defining areas of exclusion. Maternalism and the discourse of kindness and support to the domestic workers, identified as poor women, can perpetuate non-egalitarian, hierarchical relationships between the employer and employee that facilitate the extraction of unpaid labour, especially emotional labour (Parrenas, 2001, p. 170; Anderson, 2002). The discourse of being a part of the family reinforces their personal loyalty, while allowing



minimal external interaction contributes to preventing social recognition and the organisation of collective voice.

All the domestic workers are unmarried, as marriage constrains continuing with paid domestic work. Prakash worked in a factory, while his wife Sunita was a domestic who had to quit after childbirth. Though responsible for caring for the employers' children, she was not allowed to bring her child to work. In the construction of their relationship with the employer, domestic workers' personal sexual lives and identities as mothers are denied and a child-like dependence and need for protection is emphasised. This dependent relationship enables control, for recognising the sexuality of the servant can potentially disrupt the domestic order, as adult aspirations are not easy to accommodate and subordinate (Shah, 2000, p. 107). Marriage confers respectability on women, but domestic workers are often deprived of this option.

Priti's and Dorothy's employers recognised their physical and social needs somewhat, but the majority experience is more like that of Mita and Nina narrated earlier. Many domestics are beaten and ill-treated by their employers. Others do not get a proper place to sleep and are deprived of food. Even when they have some leisure time, they are not allowed to watch TV, a family activity in middle-class homes, or permitted to go out to socialise. The spatial inequality and segregation manifested through food rationing, use of separate utensils, wearing hand-down clothing, sleeping arrangements, and being prevented from watching TV signify forms of personalised control and lower social status of the domestic worker in relation to the employer. They are expected to work sincerely, non-stop, like a part of the family, yet they are excluded from leisure time activities of family members, thus reinforcing the asymmetrical relationship between them.

Dorothy speaks of playing badminton with her employers' daughter, or learning English from her. The participation in such leisure activities constitutes an important element of their identities as people, not just workers. It creates a sense of self-respect, yet is often the most uncertain element of the work experience. In the ultimate analysis, incomes can be claimed, but it is respect in inter-personal relations and mutual recognition, expressed through the granting of personal space, sharing of the same food, or participation in leisure activities, that are often the hardest to negotiate and defend.

### **Contributions, Aspirations and Representations: Gaining Respect at Home**

In recounting the history of her migration and how her own work and life had changed over time, Dorothy was constantly trying to point to her struggles to gain respect.

My uncle and aunt moved to Delhi and I went with them. I initially worked in their house, but was not paid and could not go out. A friend introduced me to a family in Punjabi Bagh. Here I spent 8 years. They were very nice people who never made me feel out of place. I was able to send some money home to my parents.

A few years later, my father contracted tuberculosis. I brought him to Delhi and spent Rs 7000 for his treatment. The doctor asked him not to exert himself, but he had to work in the fields. He died in 1996. The period after my father's death was very difficult. I don't know how I survived those days. I worked so hard to provide for my siblings. My mother worked in the fields, yet she could not manage, so I returned to the village to help. I stayed till 2002. We applied for my father's pension from the army and after much running around started receiving this at the local bank. This income was insufficient to run the household. My youngest brother migrated to Punjab, but never sent any money, nor kept in touch. Two of my brothers in the meantime got

married, one moved to his wife's village and now only one lives here. We couldn't make both ends meet, so I returned to Delhi.

Dorothy's narrative demonstrates her burden of economic and emotional responsibilities. She migrated to Delhi when her father could not support the family. When he died, her remittances were inadequate to tide them through; her mother needed emotional support and she had to prioritise this element of her responsibility. It is often assumed that sons will support their widowed mothers, but this is not necessarily the case, and as the eldest, Dorothy did so. Taking over the male role of provision and care of her widowed mother, however, strengthened her influence in her village home, vis-à-vis her siblings and enhanced respect in the community.

Yet this respect does not come easily. While women's work in the village is valued, paid domestic work is looked down upon and generally accorded low status. Respect then accrues from constructing the discourse around fulfilling responsibilities. Cultivation is insufficient for subsistence, and the domestics' remittances become crucial contributors to daily maintenance and quality of life of the rural household, debt repayments and education of siblings. Their financial contributions entitle them to participate in decision-making at home, such as in the education or marriage of their siblings. Simultaneously, they also provide a more legitimate face to female autonomy and independence.

Working conditions are harsh, and thus the migrant domestic workers formulate other criteria of status. This could include the monetary remuneration they receive for their work, substantially more than what they could earn locally; savings, exposure to urbane lifestyles, including dress and personal effects; fluency in a different language and form of speech; and familiarity with technology. As Dorothy said,

I get my salary, Rs 2700, in cash. I send this to my mother, who deposits it into my bank account. Earlier I used my savings to finance my father's health care, weddings, school fees and household expenditures. I buy gifts from Delhi for everyone when I come home for Christmas. This time I bought a jacket, sweater, saris and watches for my siblings. I thought I would get some utensils, but my mother is scared of the pressure cooker. I am contemplating on getting a solar panel to electrify our home.

Here, respectability is linked to markers of class difference reflected in clothing, consumer goods, having a bank account, understanding technology (evinced in the reference to the pressure cooker and solar panel), language and mannerisms. As these are privileged signs of class distinction, and cannot fully be claimed as signs of status vis-à-vis the employers (Tolen, 2000), domestic workers shift the site of expression to recreate themselves in their rural homes. In contexts of general poverty, the accumulation of money and goods serves as the first marker of respectable status. Apart from these symbols, they also base their claims to respect on their new knowledge, skills and practices. At the workplace, they receive gifts from their employers, a sign of their patronage and higher status; at home, the domestic workers in turn are able to engage in gift-giving rituals based on their higher earnings. The difference, however, is that the latter comes to symbolise mutual dependence and respect, a reciprocal arrangement, though not necessarily equal, but which can ensure the staking of claims to land and other household resources in the future, and thus bind rather than estrange people (Mauss, 1990). The idea of status then needs to be reworked from the perspective of women's respect and their ability to claim a sense of personhood, while negotiating unequal gender relations with their families, employers or community. Unless this is done, women's agency on their own terms cannot be understood.

For many, domestic work becomes a career. It is well-paying compared to local options and enables higher net savings in contexts where food and accommodation are provided. Nevertheless, they aspire to ultimately leave domestic work as it is perceived as lacking in dignity. It is not seen as a life-long option, even though employers may be kind and, as in the case of Dorothy, include them in their leisure activities. The domestics then consciously work towards developing a range of strategies to ensure their future security, be it gift-giving or saving money in a bank account. In the past, Dorothy had used her savings for her siblings, but now hopes to use them to construct a house in the village and set up a small shop. Her connection to the home and construction of a respected identity there is manifested in her aspirations for the future.

The urban–rural contrast in gender relations is important in Dorothy’s narrative. Though she speaks of the bonding in the village, she is uncertain about the way her brothers would treat her and whether they would give her a share of the property. She has given them gifts for two decades, but can only hope for reciprocity, as the material and emotional obligations of adult married brothers to their sisters are not so clear. In the city, however, she has seen and experienced much greater equality of gender relations, even though her own freedom of movement was restricted. She did have access to a privileged space in her employer’s home, but not as an equal. The experience of urban culture and lifestyle in an upper middle-class home developed in her a sense of independence and autonomy, of desiring a place of her own before she is too old, rather than depending on marriage as the only form of social support. Experiences such as hers, in terms of the interaction of different worlds, the urban and the rural, the rich and the poor, the material and the social, in shaping elements of identity and agency, and bringing to the fore the contradictions within, are often not given adequate consideration in most discussions of domestic workers.

Having been exposed for years to less oppressive urban cultures, Dorothy’s aspirations had changed; she was no longer interested in marriage. Priti would definitely like to get married and have a family once she has discharged her responsibilities towards her siblings. She says, ‘There are marriage offers from the village, but now people know that I will refuse till my brothers finish studying. I like the city and would like to live here. I told *Didi* that I want to marry a Christian, but so far I have not found anyone I like in Delhi’. Priti strongly aspires to either a marriage or a higher-status job in the city to acquire and sustain respectability. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to follow up on Priti’s present life trajectory, but none of the 30 domestic workers from the village were married. The exception was Sunita, but she is no longer engaged in paid domestic work. Their aspirations have changed; they desire an urban lifestyle and greater equality, and find it hard to settle back in a rural environment, but also lack the resources required for marriage. A dowry would be needed to compensate for the lack of ‘status’, but almost all their earnings are exhausted for the maintenance of their rural home and as gifts, leaving them with little for setting up their own household.

In the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the domestics undergo many transitions, sometimes simultaneously and not always expected. The first of these are spatial, from the village to the city and back again, and relatively easy to understand. Much more complex are the material, social and emotional transitions accompanying such spatial movements, though in non-linear ways. They have moved from a state of hunger to relative well-being, though this is not guaranteed and depends on the employer’s personality and their own physical abilities to work. As long as they are able to work and take gifts home, they are respected, but inherent in this respect is a fear of marginalisation

the moment they are unable to do so. While marriage is expected as a normal life-course transition within the local context, this often does not occur due to the changing aspirations of the migrant women workers and their desire for equality alongside the structural constraints to marriage faced by somewhat older women.

Their sense of commitment to the family and community and the need for affirmation therein can lead to subordination of many of their personal aspirations, evident in most of the narratives presented above. Gaining respect can become a double-edged sword as it can lead to a negation of one's physical self. Many of the domestic workers could opt for lower wages, but also less strenuous working conditions, by moving to live-out domestic work, if they chose not to send money or gifts home. While individuals who cannot labour are not appreciated, the respect accorded by the community to the domestics seems to be for the tangible benefits they bring rather than the physical and emotional sacrifices they make. The women internalise these patriarchal norms of respect, deeply discounting their own bodies in the process, thereby serving the dual purposes of perpetuating the extraction of women's labour and keeping them in a subordinate position within the larger social order. Respect can also emerge from women's creative associations both at work and at home, but this too is hampered at various points: starting from the individualising experience of schooling to the nature of dispersed work, located within individual homes.

### **Representation, Voice and Respect: The Role of Education**

Going by Fraser's (1994, p. 598) conceptualisation of the principle of gender equality for domestic workers as including income, leisure time and respect, domestic work provides income (some like Dorothy and Priti earning more than teachers in the local high school), but not leisure time (though often women in the village also work long hours) and respect in the workplace. This matters most to the women's sense of identity and personhood. This section briefly explores the ways in which women workers exercise agency to secure recognition and respect for their work, while at the same time shifting the terms of discourse to include respect in other domains of life, especially vis-à-vis their rural home.

At the individual level, education can potentially contribute to opening new opportunities, as teachers, nurses or nuns for girls, but with the growing competition for jobs, education does not necessarily guarantee one (Chopra, 2005). Given their ethnicity, gender and location within the social hierarchy, it is difficult for tribal women to break through segmented labour markets and the power relations therein into new areas of work that can potentially provide transformative respect along with fair earnings. This implies a situation where the acknowledgement and recognition of each other's needs and views are mutual and one is no longer worried that the treatment from others may injure one's dignity (Sennett and Cobb, 1973). Despite a few narratives suggesting that domestic workers seek to overturn these ways of defining people in terms of respectability, the larger view continues to see education as status-giving. Priti says,

I have to stay in Delhi till my brothers are studying, maybe another three years, as I have to pay for their education. They want to study. These days without education there are no jobs. I took one of my brothers to Delhi and paid for his driving lessons. He now works in my employer's office.

In talking of the benefits of education, she draws here on elitist and patriarchal notions of cultural capital that perpetuate respectability in terms of particular kinds of work (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). While migration for domestic and other forms of labouring tasks provides income (economic capital), it continues to be seen as degrading. The differences in the outcomes and experiences of migration may or may not be attributed to education, but clearly educational processes contribute to producing and reproducing social inequalities alongside social respectability through inherent mechanisms of rejection or co-option. Seemingly providing these women some personal confidence to negotiate both at home and in the workplace, the negotiations are limited by the structures discussed earlier, that is, marriage and the necessity of providing incomes on the one hand and gaining 'respect' through these processes on the other.

Domestic workers of all age groups and educational levels struggle to gain respect at home and in the workplace, but their strategies differ. All of them work hard to earn for their family. The younger ones are unable to speak out and negotiate, and thus their only strategy for resisting intense exploitation at the workplace is to flee home. Older women seek to display greater levels of tolerance, diligence and patience, drawing on kinship ideologies to build an inter-personal relationship, but if things do not improve, they feel confident to change employers rather than return home. The oldest women seek stability of employment as a strategy for ultimately being included in leisure-time activities as well, signifying a recognition of their personhood. They also realise that as they grow older it is difficult for them to find new employers, and hence begin to develop an independent asset base as also emotional and social support relationships at home.

Though schooling contributes to enhancing certain skills such as fluency in Hindi, maintaining simple accounts and recording messages, and to this extent confers respectability, it remains individualistic in its philosophy. It is the more informal life experiences that enable migrant domestics to build networks, sharing information and personal emotions. Domestics often travel together in groups from Katona, for the sake of both safety and support, though they lose contact once they are placed in individual homes. Yet they worry about each other. There are instances of older women spending considerable time looking for younger ones from their village who migrated for domestic work but are soon untraceable, caught in the grip of exploitative placement agencies. In Delhi, most of the work-related associations are facilitated by church-based placement agencies; for the others, the only way to associate is by counselling young women seeking work, preparing them for domestic work based on their own experiences and insights. It is these interactions with other domestic workers, often younger, at the workplace, and their families and peers at home that ultimately give these women a feeling of being both valued and respected.

## Conclusion

This article sought to unpack and highlight the notions of respect embedded in women's agency and their experience of paid domestic work. The experience of such work by young, migrant women is not straightforward, or always positive, but demonstrates attempts to exercise agency in a context of constraint, influenced by locally determined hierarchies and power relations, personal interactions of domestic service, as well as the larger socio-economic context within which they are located. In the best scenarios, they earn reasonable incomes and are treated well by their employers, but given its association

with reproduction rather than skills, domestic work continues to be socially and ideologically devalued.

Yet the women workers have sought to shift the markers of status, delinking it from the nature of work itself and tying it in more closely to elements of consumption, lifestyles, self-dignity and voice at home. Education contributes somewhat to improving workplace negotiation and terms of employment, yet its relationship to respect and involvement in decision making vis-à-vis their rural households is ambiguous, as it continues to operate within and reinforce the boundaries set by patriarchy. The search for respect is thus often contradictory. It potentially involves compromising with personal aspirations and personhood, unless, as in a few exceptional cases, the very basis of this discourse is shifted to one that is transformative for them as individuals but also vis-à-vis the structures within which they are located. The transitions through the life-course, from adolescence to adulthood, then entail understanding transitions in 'respects', attributed and perceived, both by oneself and by others, and the actions derived from such perceptions.

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## Notes

1. All names used in the article have been changed.
2. See Molyneux (1979), Folbre (1994) and other contributors to the domestic labour debate.
3. The System of National Accounts (SNA) was revised in 1993 to include subsistence work and unpaid, home-based or self-employed work (Hirway, 2005). The production of services, defined as the preparation of meals, laundry, cleaning, shopping, care of children, the elderly and sick, and volunteer services, continued to be excluded.
4. Women paid domestic workers, both full- and part-time, doubled from around 1.25 million in 1995 to over 3 million in 2004–2005 (Neetha, 2009).
5. An analysis of the National Sample Survey data by education level shows that while at post-secondary levels of education, women's employment has been stable at approximately 12–13 per cent in urban areas, there has been a rapid expansion for women with less than primary levels of education in 'low-paid jobs, often in a subsidiary capacity, in the service sector, in schools and hospitals or as domestic help in households' (Unni and Raveendran, 2007, p. 197). Micro studies confirm this (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya, 2009).
6. Jharkhand state has a relatively large proportion of tribal population, locally referring to themselves as adivasis. The south-western parts, consisting of Simdega, Gumla and Ranchi Districts, provide the largest number of domestic workers to Delhi. They also have a strong network of missionary schools and long-standing missionary activity.
7. Delhi Police has licensed 650 domestic help agencies, but according to recent NGO reports, there are 1200 registered and 2650 illegal domestic help agencies in Delhi (Karan Choudhury, *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 27 February 2011, p. 3).
8. 1 GBP = Rs 72.3, so Rs 1200 = GBP 16.5, as on 12 March 2011.
9. Seventy-five per cent of male migrants were over 18, but nearly half of the female migrants were not yet 18.

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