The Economic and Labour Relations Review (2025), **36**, 691–707
doi:10.1017/elr.2025.10036

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Invisible toiling hands: the work and life of domestic workers in rural India

Deepika Singh

PhD candidate at the Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
Emails: deepik32_ssd@jnu.ac.in, deepika32ssd@gmail.com

(Received 21 November 2024; revised 15 August 2025; accepted 17 August 2025; first published online 15 September 2025)

Abstract

In rural India, a large portion of the population continues to struggle with poverty, limited access to resources and education, and few job opportunities. This leads to many individuals, including men, women, and children, having to take on daily wage labouring jobs to make ends meet. Women from marginalised communities often find themselves working in fields, brick kilns, construction sites, small factories, or as domestic workers in higher caste households. Unfortunately, the wages earned from these informal jobs are often insufficient for survival, and these women also face discrimination based on caste, class, religion, and gender in the workplace. This creates an undignified and oppressive environment for these women, particularly when they take on paid domestic work, which is often exploitative and rife with abuse in rural areas.

This paper seeks to explore the intertwined experiences of paid domestic workers in rural India. It is based on primary research conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 domestic workers during and after the pandemic in the Chandauli district of Uttar Pradesh, representing a rural area. The paper contends that domestic work in rural India remains deeply rooted in caste-based servitude. The organisation of paid domestic work in rural India is influenced by a complex interplay of caste, class, gender, and religious identities. There exists not only a division of labour but also a hierarchy of labourers within domestic work. They not only encounter caste discrimination but also perpetuate discrimination against fellow workers ranked lower in the caste hierarchy.

Keywords: Caste; Domestic workers; Domestic work; Gender; labour relations; low-paid workers; precarious work; social inequality; vulnerable workers

Introduction

Domestic work as a site of gendered inequality has long been discussed within feminist scholarship. Studies on domestic work as a form of paid employment further highlight the presence of not only gender differences and inequalities but also other social categories like class, race, and caste. Studies have shown how these social relations both shape the organisation of paid domestic work and are also reproduced within the private realm of the home through the organisation of paid domestic work (Ray and Qayum 2009). Feminist scholars have written extensively on paid domestic work in India. They have highlighted that informality, followed by a lack of social protection, results in the continued exploitation of domestic workers stuck in this gender and caste-based occupation. Acknowledging the intersections of gender, caste, and class in shaping domestic workers' experiences, they also point towards the overwhelming and disproportionate presence of

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The University of New South Wales

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lower-caste women within the domestic work sector role (Raghuram 2001; Gothoskar 2013; Neetha 2013; Monteiro 2022). Research by feminist scholars contributes to a deeper understanding of paid domestic work in India, highlighting different aspects of the domestic work sector. Studies on paid domestic work in contemporary India mainly focus on migrant domestic workers in cities. This scholarship connects the increasing rise of migrant domestic workers in cities with the growing trend of middle-class women joining the workforce, giving rise to the demand for domestic workers. Despite their relevance and importance, all these contributions have based their analysis on migrant domestic workers in Indian cities. Despite the significant body of literature on migrant domestic workers in urban areas and metropolitan cities in India, there is a noticeable lack of research analysing paid domestic work in Indian villages and underdeveloped rural areas (Kothari 1997). In a country where more than two-thirds of the population lives in rural areas, it is rather surprising that there has been no substantive research study on paid domestic work in rural areas. This gap raises the question of whether or not domestic workers exist in rural India. It makes one think, why have our scholars turned a blind eye to rural settings in the context of study on domestic workers? Have they assumed that paid domestic work only exists in urban settings? Therefore, there is a clear need for studies that focus on paid domestic work in rural areas to address this gap in the existing literature. This study probes further into the question and tries to fill the gap in research and literature on domestic workers in rural areas.

Literature review

Before becoming paid employment, domestic work was performed as domestic service by servants and slaves (Rollins 1985). Domestic servitude has its roots in the past. Numerous studies on domestic labour in pre-independent, pre-colonial, and colonial India have uncovered the tradition of employing domestic servants for household chores by royal families and wealthy upper castes (Gupta 2019; Hoerder 2015; Sarkar 2019; Sinha and Varma 2019). Despite India's aspirations to break free from traditional practices post-independence, the employment of domestic workers, previously associated with feudalism and slavery, has persisted (Ray & Qayum 2009). Domestic work in India has origins in the institution of slavery, common in various regions around the world. The existence of domestic servitude in India dates back to ancient times, when slaves and Shudras were kept as servants (Madhumathi 2013). The caste system complicated domestic servitude, with the Chaturvarna System creating the Shudra Varna for service work (Dumont 1970; Ghurye 1961; Srinivas 1962). Ambedkar has discussed in detail how the varna system was a division of labour in which the Shudra Varna was given the duty of serving the top three varnas (Ambedkar 1936). Historians highlight that domestic work was predominantly the task of Shudras, who were enslaved (Lokesh 2015). Evidence of domestic slavery exists in the Vedic period, where both men and women performed domestic chores. Texts like the Dharma Sutras, Manusmriti, and Mahabharata reflect the conditions of ancient domestic workers (Sinha et al 2019). It is argued that slaves and Shudras were kept as domestic servants from the Vedic period, and this continued till the Gupta period (Mehta 1960; Sharma 1958). Though slavery was abolished in India in 1843, the tradition of domestic servitude has deeply influenced the contemporary domestic service sector, which retains remnants of its historical roots.

In this context, several pressing questions arise: Why do households still hire domestic workers? Who are the families employing these workers? Does this practice uphold the traditional feudal culture of domestic servitude? How has the nature of domestic work evolved in India? Is paid domestic work confined to urban settings, or is it prevalent in

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rural areas as well? Is it considered a necessity in rural India? What is the structure of paid domestic work there? These are critical questions that this paper aims to explore.

Methodology

This paper investigates the nature and organisation of paid domestic work in rural India through an intersectional framework. The research is grounded in fieldwork conducted during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods in Chandauli, a district located in the eastern Uttar Pradesh state of India. A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with part-time, live-out women domestic workers from the region.

Chandauli was purposefully selected for this study due to its designation as one of India's most disadvantaged districts, as recognised by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. Its classification as a less developed and less urbanised area renders Chandauli an appropriate site for investigating the dynamics of paid domestic work in rural India. The Ministry identified Chandauli as one of the country's 250 most backward districts in 2006, out of a total of 640, and it is currently one of the 34 districts in Uttar Pradesh receiving assistance from the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (BRGF).

The interviews were conducted from December 2022 to August 2023. Scheduling was adapted to accommodate respondents' availability, primarily taking place in the early morning or late evening due to their daytime work commitments. In-depth interviews were held in the participants' homes to foster an environment conducive to open dialogue. Participants were interviewed in their preferred local languages, Bhojpuri and Hindi, with the average interview duration ranging from 30 minutes to one hour. Before the interviews, respondents received a comprehensive briefing on the study's objectives, the interview process, the confidentiality of their data, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. They were assured of their anonymity, and verbal consent was obtained. To facilitate comprehension of their rights, respondents had ample opportunities to inquire about the process, and understanding was verified before commencing the interviews. Additionally, participants were reminded of their rights throughout the interview process.

Data collection for the study employed both snowball and convenience sampling methods, primarily due to the scarcity of official statistics regarding domestic workers, which posed significant challenges in identifying potential respondents. Preliminary pilot surveys were conducted to establish viable locations for engaging domestic workers for interviews. Participants were recruited through referrals provided by individuals encountered in these identified locations. The majority of the contacted domestic workers consented to take part in the interviews, which were conducted without any financial compensation. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio-recorded, with permission acquired from the participants. To protect anonymity, real names were replaced with randomly assigned pseudonyms, ensuring the confidentiality of the respondents' identities.

The interviews were designed to be in-depth and semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in both the content and sequence of questions. While basic demographic inquiries were predetermined, many questions were framed more as thematic prompts, facilitating an organic discourse regarding participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and beliefs. The key thematic areas explored during the interviews included the socio-economic backgrounds of respondents, their work experiences, and the significant challenges they encountered.

Following data collection, the interviews were self-transcribed verbatim in the original language before being translated into English. Both inductive and deductive methods were employed to analyse the data, framed within an anti-caste, feminist methodological

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

framework. This study utilised the concept of intersectionality and a critical caste approach as theoretical lenses to unpack the lived experiences of domestic workers, making sense of emergent themes that arose during analysis. The analysis process involved an initial reading of both original and translated transcripts to gain an overarching understanding, followed by the identification of preliminary themes and categories guided by the established framework of intersectionality. Themes and patterns within the data were systematically categorised and interpreted. Data transcription and analysis were conducted manually.

The analysis underscores the importance of examining the challenges domestic workers encounter within their employers' homes, the strategies they employ to navigate caste discrimination in their workplaces, and the means through which they articulate resistance and assert their rights.

Findings

General profile and socio-economic status of the respondents

The 25 respondents were categorised as follows: 17 individuals identified as belonging to the Other Backward Classes (OBC)[1] category, of whom 9 were Muslims; 7 belonged to the Scheduled Caste (SC)[2] category; and only 1 was identified as being from the Upper Caste. The participants, all female, ranged in age from 25 to 85 years and were uniformly married. Notably, eight respondents were widowed. Among the married women, three had disabled husbands, two had been abandoned, and three reported living with husbands who were alcoholics and abusive. A significant majority of the respondents indicated that they served as the primary earners for their families, largely due to the loss of their husbands or because their husbands were unable to work. For those with husbands in employment, the latter were primarily engaged in daily wage labour.

The financial conditions of these families were generally insufficient to meet basic necessities, including food, housing, education, and healthcare. A considerable proportion of respondents were illiterate, while others were semi-literate and had dropped out of primary education. The employers of these domestic workers were predominantly upper-caste individuals, primarily from Brahmin and Kshatriya backgrounds, with many being part of landed families, government officials, or members of the business class. The average monthly earnings for domestic workers were approximately 3,500 rupees, with wages varying between 1,500 and 6,000 rupees depending on several factors, including the type and extent of tasks performed, the number of households served, the geographic region, the social status of the employers, and the caste affiliation of the domestic workers.

Domestic workers from villages either work in Brahmin or Kshatriya landowning households or commute to nearby markets and town areas to provide services for small business proprietors, merchants, and professionals, including doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, and government officials. They also serve in upper-caste residential colonies. Intra-district short-distance migrations are commonly observed as individuals seek better livelihood opportunities. Many of the domestic workers interviewed in Chandauli had migrated from surrounding villages and resided in government-allotted houses. A large number of women residing in these housing complexes engage in domestic work to sustain their families. Furthermore, recent real estate developments have been acquired by upper-caste, middle-class families who subsequently recruit domestic workers from adjacent areas.

In Chandauli, four primary types of domestic workers were observed:

- Domestic workers for landlord families: These individuals reside in the village and serve landlord families within a feudal structure. They work under highly

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

oppressive conditions, receiving very little compensation. Most did not choose this path; instead, they were compelled to work as domestic servants due to the feudal ties they had with village landlords. While their husbands toil in the landlords' fields, these women not only handle domestic duties but also assist in agricultural labour.

- Commuting workers for upper-caste colonies and bureaucrats' families: Some domestic workers opt to travel from their villages to nearby upper-caste colonies to earn a living because the income from working for landlords in the villages is insufficient to provide even two meals a day.
- Migrants to market areas working for shopkeepers: Given the difficulties and health risks associated with travelling long distances for work, many of these women migrate to market areas. There, they find employment with upper-caste, upper-class families, while their husbands drive autorickshaws.
- Residents in government quarters working for local upper-caste families: Some disadvantaged families take advantage of government housing schemes and reside in designated quarters. These localities often serve as a hub for finding domestic workers, who are commonly hired by upper-caste families from nearby regions.

Why are domestic workers hired in rural areas?

In urban contexts, the prevalence of dual-income households necessitates the employment of domestic workers due to the continued reluctance of men to share the double burden undertaken by women. Conversely, in rural areas, women are predominantly housewives in houses who hire domestic help, driven more by social constructs than by necessity. Men of upper-caste families in rural areas remove their women from menial domestic labour and replace them with domestic labourers to maintain their caste and class status (Kothari 1997). This observation invites a critical examination of the motivations behind the hiring of domestic workers in rural India, particularly among upper-caste and upper-class families.

Historically, the employment of domestic servants in Indian villages has served as an emblem of caste superiority (Mehta 1960; Rollins 1985). Domestic workers were regarded as symbols of affluence and aristocracy, perpetuating the socio-economic stratification inherent within the caste system. This feudal practice not only established a pronounced hierarchy between masters and servants but also conferred a marked sense of indignity and low status to domestic work and those who performed it. The persistent presence of domestic workers in rural areas suggests that the evolution of modern capitalism has not led to the complete dissolution of feudal practices, specifically the institutionalisation of domestic service.

Post-independence and amid modernisation, upper-caste and upper-class families in rural regions have continued the caste-symbolic tradition of employing domestic help. Given that domestic work has historically been assigned to individuals from lower castes, it is viewed as degraded labour, which families from affluent backgrounds strive to avoid. The manual, often deemed 'dirty', nature of these tasks contributes to the marginalisation of those performing them, as engagement with dirt is frequently regarded as the most contemptible form of labour (Mehta 1960; Rollins 1985). Therefore, the enduring feudal connotations of indignity linked to domestic labour and the employment of domestic workers as symbols of caste and class superiority facilitate their ongoing utilisation in rural locales.

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Challenging the dominant narrative positing that paid domestic work arose as a response to capitalist structures, whereby women from affluent backgrounds entered the workforce and subsequently hired underprivileged women to assist with domestic chores, evidence indicates that domestic workers are also employed by non-working women. Many respondents from households in Chandauli reported that their employers were primarily housewives without formal employment. In these rural settings, the husbands of these women typically occupied white-collar positions (in semi-urban areas), engaged in small businesses (in small market areas), or held status as landlords (in villages). Thus, the practice of employing domestic workers in these households primarily serves to reinforce existing caste and class status, implying that this tradition predates capitalist influences and continues to persist.

Moreover, the employment of domestic workers is not solely intended to maintain caste and class status (Dickey 2000); it also reflects upper-caste perceptions of certain tasks as impure and degrading, relegating them to those from lower castes. Specific household chores, including dishwashing, sweeping, and cleaning bathrooms and toilets, are deemed lowly and are consequently assigned to domestic workers drawn from lower-caste backgrounds. Frøystad's insightful research on master–servant dynamics within upper-caste households in Kanpur emphasises an aversion among upper-caste individuals to tasks perceived as defiling, further incentivising the employment of domestic labourers (Frøystad 2003).

Respondents frequently relayed that they were employed primarily for cleaning tasks while cooking responsibilities remained with the '*malkins*' (the mistresses of the household). Cooking, being considered a sacred and pious activity, is associated with purity, rendering the kitchen space often isolated from those tasked with managing domestic dirt. As a result, culinary duties may either be assigned to different workers or retained exclusively by the women of the household.

How are domestic workers hired in rural areas?

Research on domestic workers in India has unveiled a significant pattern of caste-based recruitment practices within this sector (Raghuram 2001; Gothoskar 2013; Neetha 2013). This fieldwork conducted among domestic workers demonstrates that caste functions as the predominant factor influencing hiring decisions, particularly in rural contexts. Almost all interviewees from these rural areas indicated that inquiries about caste identity are the first step encountered when seeking employment as domestic workers. Several respondents recounted instances where employers would visit their residences to verify their caste status prior to finalising any hiring arrangement. Additionally, employers often rely on the opinions of neighbours regarding prospective domestic workers and frequently seek references from other existing domestic workers when considering new hires.

When they were asked if they had been questioned about their caste while pursuing employment in domestic work, respondents universally affirmed this practice. One respondent articulated this sentiment succinctly:

> *Haan, jaati toh puchte hain. Sabse pehle jaati puchte hain.* (Yes, they ask about caste. That is the first thing they ask us.)

Caste and religion emerge as critical factors shaping employers' preferences and perceptions of domestic workers. Many respondents reported that employers frequently express reservations concerning the hiring of individuals from two communities: Dalits and Muslims. This sentiment was especially prevalent among respondents from the most rural locales, who noted that employers often sought confirmation regarding whether prospective workers identified as *Harijans*[3] before agreeing to employment.

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In a conversation with Reeta Verma, an OBC domestic worker from Godhana, Chandauli, she articulated the prevailing attitudes in the following exchange:

Reeta: They do not hire Muslims. If you are Hindu, only then will they hire you.

Interviewer: Do they hire Dalits?

Reeta: (laughs) What can I say? Dalits do not do this work.

Interviewer: Why?

Reeta: If they have disdain towards Muslims, would they not also harbour similar sentiments towards Dalits?

This discourse exemplifies the intersection of caste, religion, and employment practices in the domestic labour market in India, highlighting the deep-seated biases that shape these dynamics.

Why do women take up domestic work as a job? A reluctant choice and compulsion:

The phrase '*majboori mein hum ye kaam karte hain*', which translates to 'We do this work out of compulsion', was a recurrent response among participants when queried about their motivations for undertaking domestic work. This response illustrates the multifaceted nature of *majboori*, or compulsion, which compels women to engage in domestic labour due to various interrelated factors, including limited access to land resources, inadequate employment opportunities, gendered division of labour, pervasive poverty, and insufficient social capital.

The prevailing socio-economic conditions, characterised by economic instability and socio-political powerlessness, force these women into domestic roles within upper-caste households, rendering them exceedingly vulnerable. Shriya Thakkar's study on domestic workers in Delhi complements this understanding by highlighting the element of *majboori*, as articulated by respondents who describe their sense of helplessness and lack of viable alternatives in choosing domestic work (Thakkar 2024).

The participants conveyed a shared sentiment: had they possessed alternative options, they would not have opted for domestic work, expressing a desire for their children to pursue different career paths. Many respondents reported that financial crises, catalysed by factors such as the untimely death of a spouse, alcohol abuse and domestic violence or abandonment by husbands, and physical disabilities of husbands, forced them into domestic employment. This underscores the undesirable nature of such work, characterised by exploitative and oppressive conditions that often elude societal recognition due to the perception of the household as a non-traditional workplace (Moras 2008).

A considerable portion of the respondents entered the domestic work sector due to the absence of a male breadwinner in their families. Many began this job following the untimely death of their husbands, which placed them in a position of sole responsibility for their children's welfare. Zoya Begum, a 40-year-old domestic worker, recounted,

My husband used to make and sell bidis[4]*. I only started working after my husband passed away eight years ago.*

Zoya's experience is reflective of the plight of many marginalised women who undertake domestic work out of sheer necessity, given the dearth of alternative income-generating opportunities. She stated,

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If there were some small business opportunities, we would work there instead of bearing this drudgery of cleaning tasks in other people's homes. We are fatigued by this arduous work and do not derive satisfaction from it; we engage in it solely out of compulsion.

Some respondents indicated that they had explored alternative employment avenues, such as factory work, yet preferred domestic labour due to its comparatively flexible nature. Factory jobs frequently imposed rigid schedules and prolonged working hours, hindering their ability to care for their children and households. In contrast, domestic work offered a modicum of flexibility.

Shahina Parveen, age 35, articulated,

Working in factories is an option for us, but it takes away our entire day. We must leave our children unattended with no care throughout the day. Domestic work allows us some time to return home during the day, enabling us to manage both our household responsibilities and our external work commitments.

This perspective emphasises the necessity of balancing domestic responsibilities with the demands of employment, a challenge faced by many women in similar socio-economic circumstances.

Many respondents reported that their husbands had either abandoned them or struggled with alcoholism and displayed abusive behaviours, which often resulted in domestic violence. Furthermore, some women indicated that their husbands were suffering from chronic illnesses or had become disabled due to accidents, leaving these women with limited employment options. Consequently, the most readily available job, frequently the only one accessible, was domestic work. Several respondents also served as full-time caregivers for sick or disabled family members in addition to their jobs as domestic workers, leading to extreme time poverty and minimal opportunities for rest.

Seema Chaudhari, for instance, describes her husband as an auto driver who expends all his earnings on alcohol, thereby compelling her to seek work as a domestic worker. She recognised that she never aspired to engage in domestic work; if not for her financial obligations, she would not be in this position. Divya Bari, age 30, elaborated on her decision to pursue domestic work, explaining that she had explored alternative employment opportunities in small-scale industries producing pickles and bindis. However, these options proved to be more time-consuming and offered diminished financial rewards. As she stated,

We do this work so that our children can pursue their studies and avoid this type of labour.

Geeta Kharwar, age 35, further emphasised that her entry into domestic work stemmed solely from compulsion, asserting that she would not have chosen this line of work if other opportunities had been available. Similarly, Shweta Kanaujia, age 45, who has dedicated over 20 years to domestic work, remarked,

Who enjoys doing jhaadu-pochha-bartan (cleaning tasks)? I engage in this work out of necessity due to financial constraints.

Neetu Jaiswal, age 45, from Pandeypur village in Chandauli, has been employed as a domestic worker since the death of her husband 15 years ago. She is the mother of three children, one of whom is a disabled daughter who is bedridden and entirely reliant on Neetu. With tears in her eyes, Neetu conveyed the difficulties she faces as the sole caregiver for her daughter while also fulfilling her role as a domestic worker, expressing

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that her circumstances would have been significantly improved had her husband been alive.

Research observations revealed a significant number of domestic workers engaged in this profession as a generational practice; their mothers were domestic workers, and they have continued this lineage, often alongside their own daughters. This trend illustrates the absence of socio-economic mobility within this occupation, as multiple generations remain entrapped in the same work. Due to inadequate earnings to support their children's education, many children are compelled to engage in wage labour at an early age instead of pursuing formal education.

Most domestic workers who were interviewed either lacked formal education, were illiterate, or had attained only a primary-level education. Very few had completed secondary schooling, which severely restricted their access to better employment opportunities. Interactions with paid domestic workers corroborate the arguments presented by feminist scholars, who contend that paid domestic workers do not voluntarily choose this profession; rather, they are drawn into this workforce out of various socio-economic necessities and demonstrate a willingness to exit this occupation when better opportunities present themselves (Thakkar 2024).

Domestic labour relations in rural India

Neelam Devi, a 50-year-old Dalit woman from the *Chamar* caste in a village in Chandauli, illustrates the prevailing conditions of domestic labour. Neelam has been working as a domestic worker in the household of a *Thakur* landlord for the past two years, succeeding her late mother-in-law, Kamla Devi. Kamla's labour spanned three decades, during which she received a meagre compensation of 300 rupees per month. Despite her debilitating illness, Kamla continued to fulfil her duties until her health deteriorated completely. Neelam reported that any requests for financial assistance or advance payments led to hostility from the employer's family, compelling her to navigate her precarious financial situation largely without support.

The living conditions of Neelam's family were dire, characterised by a leaking roof and deteriorating infrastructure in their mud house, which is also owned by the *Thakur* family. Neelam articulated the denial of basic governmental benefits, asserting that the village head has consistently obstructed her family's access to rightful government schemes. Consequently, her family is compelled to engage in domestic work and other forms of labour to secure their livelihood.

In a separate but related case, Leela Gupta, a 30-year-old widow from another village in Chandauli, shared her experience of working under a similar structure of caste-based oppression. After the loss of her husband over a decade ago, Leela initially travelled to Chandauli market for work until health issues restricted her mobility. Subsequently, she began working in the household of a *Thakur* landlord. Leela recounted the discrimination she faced, including the use of separate utensils designated for her use alone due to her caste status. This practice underscores the entrenched caste hierarchies that dictate social interactions and labour relations. Moreover, she reported that any demands for wage increases were met with resistance, with her wages being deducted for taking leave — a reflection of the exploitative nature of her employment.

The narrative of Lata Paswan, an 85-year-old Dalit woman, further exemplifies the harsh realities faced by domestic workers in rural India. After her husband lost his vision, Lata transitioned to domestic work, supporting herself while simultaneously providing care for her spouse. She worked for both a *Thakur* and a Brahmin family and received no monetary compensation from the latter; her labour was exchanged for food, clothes, and other informal benefits. Although she earned 700 rupees per month from the *Thakur* family, Lata revealed that she and her husband often subsisted on a single meal per day.

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The absence of any support from governmental programmes, despite her numerous attempts to enrol, highlights the systemic barriers faced by marginalised populations.

The same narrative unfolds in every village, revealing a pervasive pattern of caste-based servitude within the domestic work sector in Indian rural areas. Villages continue to employ domestic servants rather than domestic workers, and these individuals receive minimal compensation for their labour. Women from marginalised castes typically engage in domestic work in upper-caste households in exchange for rations and shelter. Many take on these household responsibilities because they are burdened by debt, having borrowed money from upper-caste families for emergencies such as medical expenses or their daughters' marriages. When they are unable to repay these loans, they become bonded labourers, performing domestic tasks, working in fields, and undertaking various forms of manual labour for their employers.

These examples illustrate that, despite being in a post-colonial and independent era, feudal relations persist, with clear caste identities: employers are typically upper-caste landowners, while employees are often marginalised Dalitbahujan[5] women. The dynamics illustrate the complex interplay of caste, gender, and economic vulnerability, revealing broader socio-economic structures that perpetuate inequality and exploitation in rural labour markets.

How do employers treat their domestic workers?

In the interviews with domestic workers, their experiences with their employers were probed at greater depth. Initially, respondents spoke positively, indicating that their employers treated them well. However, when asked further about issues like extra work requirements, weekly leave, and experiences with harsh language, their responses unveiled the exploitative labour conditions they endured. Some workers noted that their employers employed affectionate language to foster a false sense of belonging, leading them to believe they were part of the family while exploiting them for free labour. Many participants also expressed frustration over their employers' inexplicably rude behaviour. They reported being frequently scolded and addressed in a harsh tone, likely to reinforce the social hierarchy and maintain control over them.

Talking about her experience at her workplace, Shweta Kanaujia (age 45) reported that her employers refused to grant her leave, and when she took leave for 2–3 days due to an emergency, her employer fired her. Some of her employers were very rude and scolded her in harsh tones. She had to remind them that they could treat her that way. Sharing her ordeal, Shweta said:

> *At one place, I used to take care of an old woman, used to feed her, bathe her, but she always talked to me rudely. Her son, who had hired me, also used to scold me. I left the job because it was too much for me to bear. At another place, I used to do sweeping, but they asked me not to use a wiper but to do it by hand. I stopped working there. I am poor, so people try to exploit women like me.*

There is thus considerable tension between two groups of women: the employers of domestic workers and the paid domestic workers themselves (Rollins 1985; Thakkar 2024). This tension extends beyond the concept of sisterhood, often discussed by feminist scholars. Instead of treating their domestic workers as equals, employers typically extract as much labour as possible while offering minimal wages, influenced by factors such as caste and social standing. Many respondents noted that their employers expected them to undertake additional tasks that they would likely decline if given the choice. This behaviour reflects Bridget Anderson's argument that employers not only claim the labour of their employees but also their sense of self (Anderson 2000). Domestic workers

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

expressed that while their employers claimed to regard them as part of the family, this assertion did not lead to any meaningful familial treatment or benefits. Instead, many found this sentiment to be condescending. It placed them in a position where voicing concerns about extra duties or low pay made them appear ungrateful or as though they did not share the same feelings as their employers.

This paternalistic attitude acts as a façade to obscure the exploitation of domestic workers. Many interview participants reported frequently being assigned extra, often unpaid tasks such as giving massages to family members, running errands for groceries, and chopping vegetables. These extra duties were often framed as favours in exchange for small treats or snacks, or as a loyalty test to determine their worthiness as 'family members'.

Sara Begum (age 55) articulated her frustrations about the additional work of this kind that she was expected to complete without fair compensation:

> *I am asked for a leg massage and a neck massage. 'Could you also pick up some vegetables on your way home?' They request that I take on these tasks without paying me. The only compensation I receive is food, which they consider a charitable act on my part. I work for them as if they are family, yet they refuse to raise my wages despite treating me like one of their own. While they have the option to decline our requests, we cannot say no to their demands without the risk of being fired.*

Humiliation is frequently employed by employers as a means to reinforce a sense of servitude among their workers. Respondents reported experiencing this routine humiliation in various forms, such as being addressed in harsh tones, scolded for minor mistakes, given leftover food, wearing torn clothing, being required to sit on the floor, using separate utensils, and following peculiar rules. These acts of symbolic humiliation by upper-caste employers constitute direct assaults on the self-respect of workers, dehumanising them and making them feel inferior. This dynamic allows upper-caste employers to maintain their perceived superiority and further entrenches workers in a subservient role, resulting in compliance with little resistance (Varman, Al-Amoudi, & Skålén 2023).

Reeta Verma (age 40), who worked in Rudra Apartments, Godhana, talked about her lived experience of working in a Brahmin house:

> *The old Panditayin[6] is always angry with me and uses bitter language. She asks me to take a bath before doing the cleaning work in her house. She does not let me enter her puja ghar[7].*

There was no apparent avenue of redress in cases where even sickness did not fetch compassion from employers. This was illustrated by the example of an employer who not only refused to grant leave but also replaced a worker no longer able to come to work due to extreme illness. Varsha Singh (age 30), who lived in Baburi, Chandauli, with her daughter and mother (her husband had left her), worked in the Sarveshwari colony, which is a *Thakur* colony, cooking and washing utensils. When she was approached for the first time, she was suffering from typhoid and was bedridden. When contacted again after 2 months, she was still recovering from her illness. She spoke about her employers:

> *I was sick, but they did not give me sick leave. I was suffering from typhoid, was extremely sick, and asked for leave, but did not get it. They made me work till I was completely bedridden. They killed me and left me to die. This is a sin. They are sinners. Now that I am bedridden and cannot work any more, they have never come to inquire about my well-being. They replaced me as soon as I stopped going to work.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The treatment meted out to domestic workers by upper-caste employers does not fall under the employer–employee relationship. It reflects a master–servant relationship that reinforces caste-based servitude (Srinivas 1995; Frøystad 2003).

Intersectional hierarchies in paid domestic work in rural India

One of the fundamental characteristics of the caste system is its inherent association with caste-specific occupations (Ambedkar 1936). This relationship not only reinforces the caste hierarchy but also sustains the system itself by perpetuating these distinct roles (Jodhka 2015). In rural India, the organisation of domestic work is profoundly influenced by caste dynamics, whereby the division of labour is intricately structured along caste lines, thereby reinforcing the very framework of the caste system. The quotidian realities of domestic work reveal the interplay of both gender and caste hierarchies.

The caste-based constructs of purity and pollution continue to profoundly shape the organisation of domestic labour in India (Frøystad 2003; Neetha 2013). These constructs dictate not only which women from specific caste categories are permitted to perform certain domestic tasks but also inform their choices regarding the households in which they work. The relationships between domestic workers and their employers, as well as the interactions among domestic workers themselves, are similarly regulated by these entrenched caste notions. For instance, it is common for upper-caste households to categorically refuse the employment of Dalits as cooks, while caste-Hindu domestic workers may be reluctant to engage in tasks such as cleaning toilets or working for Dalit employers (Sharma 2016).

A hierarchical division exists within household tasks that align with this caste-based organisation of labour. Cooks are predominantly recruited from middle-caste groups, including *Guptas* and *Jaiswals*. Neetu Jaiswal, aged 45, exclusively performed cooking and utensil cleaning duties in a *Thakur* household located in Rudra Apartments. Her employers had employed a separate individual for floor cleaning and explicitly stated their policy against permitting Muslims or Dalits within their residence.

Champa Gupta, aged 50 and hailing from Godhana, Chandauli, has accumulated 25 years of experience as a domestic worker. Her employers, who were of *Marwari*, *Jain*, and *Tiwari* backgrounds, employed her as a cook while hiring separate workers for cleaning tasks. Gupta corroborated the practice of employers inquiring about caste prior to hiring, noting their strict refusal to engage Dalits. She asserted, 'They will not hire a *Chamar*[8]. Some may consider hiring Muslims, but not *Chamars*. There is a *Chamar* in our locality who was initially employed by someone, but she was subsequently dismissed once her caste became known'.

Domestic workers from the Dalit community are assigned cleaning tasks in accordance with the caste system (Grover et al 2018). Employers often seek to keep them away from areas they deem 'pure', maintaining as much distance as possible from Dalit workers within their homes (Thakkar 2024). Neha Paswan, a 35-year-old Dalit domestic worker tasked with cleaning duties in the *Pandit* Colony of Chandauli market, was tasked with cleaning duties. She revealed that she was prohibited from entering her employers' kitchen or the *puja ghar* and was not hired as a cook. Kalavati Dom, a 60-year-old Dalit woman, was employed as a sweeper at a local powerhouse, where her responsibilities included cleaning toilets and collecting waste. When asked about her potential interest in domestic work, she said:

> *Nobody will hire me as a domestic worker. I am from a low caste. Who will eat my cooked food? Everyone treats me as untouchable. When I approach individuals seeking employment, they ask about my caste, and upon learning that I am a Dom, they refuse to consider hiring me, stating they cannot employ a Dom*[9]*. No one even drinks water touched by me. Our work*

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

involves dealing with waste and deceased animals. Who would wish to come into contact with us?

Kalavati's family had been engaged in the occupation of sweeping for generations, indicating a profound entrenchment within this caste-based vocation. While women from higher castes often disdain domestic work, those belonging to the lowest strata of the Dalit community frequently express a preference for domestic employment over their traditional roles, which entail cleaning toilets and handling waste. However, such opportunities remain inaccessible to them.

Domestic workers from the Dalit community continue to be perceived as untouchable in many Indian villages and rural settings. They are routinely assigned tasks associated with marginalised castes and often face prohibitions against touching various objects within their employers' residences. In certain instances, they are restricted to specific areas, such as bathrooms and toilets (Srinivas 1995). Moreover, they are typically not served food in the same utensils utilised by their employers; instead, they are reportedly provided meals in old, worn utensils, plastic bags, or their own containers, often consisting of leftover or stale food (Varman et al 2023). This practice reinforces a physical and social distance, as Dalit workers are generally prohibited from sitting on their employers' furniture and are instead expected to remain seated on the floor.

Not every household that employs domestic workers relies entirely on them for domestic tasks. Employers often prefer to cook for themselves when time constraints are not an issue, typically seeking hired help only once they attain a comfortable financial situation. Menial tasks such as cleaning toilets, washing dishes, and sweeping floors are among the least favoured jobs by upper-caste employers and are frequently delegated to domestic workers. In interviews, several respondents indicated that they primarily undertook cleaning chores. When asked whether other individuals were hired for cooking, they responded that employers usually handled the cooking themselves. Some respondents mentioned that they solely performed cooking duties. Upon inquiring about their choice to focus only on cooking, they explained that if they engaged in cleaning tasks, they would not be employed specifically as cooks; therefore, they had to choose between cooking and cleaning. This division of tasks appears to be diligently maintained by upper-caste employers and is reluctantly accepted by domestic workers.

Caste hierarchies appear to be present not only between domestic workers and their employers but also among the domestic workers themselves. Within lower-caste groups, a differentiation in tasks performed influences intra-group relations among workers. When individuals occupying slightly higher positions within the caste hierarchy receive preferential treatment from their employers and are entrusted with tasks deemed less impure, these workers may, in turn, exhibit discriminatory behaviours towards their peers from lower castes, who are engaged in more 'impure' occupations.

In the context of employment selection, middle-caste workers demonstrate agency by opting not to work in households of Dalits, Muslims, or other castes perceived as inferior to their own. Such decisions are frequently informed by preconceived notions rooted in social stereotypes, rather than personal interactions. For instance, Hindu domestic workers tend to express reluctance to engage with Muslim and Dalit employers, while Muslim workers typically seek employment solely within Muslim households. The practice of caste discrimination among domestic workers is largely a reflection of societal norms and attitudes absorbed from their environment. However, it is important to note that these individuals do not strictly adhere to such discriminatory practices. Interviews with workers reveal that those residing in proximity to lower-caste coworkers tend to challenge and redefine these biases. For example, Champa Gupta, a domestic worker from a rural background, articulated how her long-standing beliefs about Dalits as being inferior shifted after her relocation to a mixed locality. She had since developed meaningful relationships

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with her formerly marginalised counterparts. Champa recounted her experiences with caste discrimination, stating,

> *In the past, when Dalits worked on land owned by Thakurs, they were relegated to sitting on the floor while Thakur landlords occupied their cots. Dalits were discouraged from sitting on the cots and were provided with separate utensils; their water and food were served from a distance. However, significant changes have occurred since then. The election of Mayawati, a Dalit woman politician, as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh marked a pivotal turning point, as it encouraged greater social integration, with individuals visiting her home and sharing meals.*

Similarly, when queried about her perspective on the caste system, Geeta Kharwar articulated,

> *All humans are fundamentally the same; we all bleed the same. While I do not subscribe to the notion of high and low castes, I do adhere to certain societal norms. I tend to limit my interactions with Harijans. In our society, we must navigate these contextual realities.*

This analysis underscores the complex interplay between caste dynamics, personal agency, and social transformation among domestic workers, revealing a shifting landscape influenced by both historical context and contemporary socio-political changes.

Significance of the study

The existing scholarship on paid domestic work in India, though valuable, focuses on urban areas, where the demand for such labour is more visible and concentrated. However, a significant yet unacknowledged segment of this workforce exists in rural settings. Studies investigating the lived experiences of domestic workers in rural areas are essential for providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities of domestic work relations in the country. This research on paid domestic work in rural India suggests the scale and scope of this unseen workforce, demonstrating that precarious labour conditions are not solely an urban phenomenon. It challenges the prevailing assumption that domestic work exists strictly within the realm of paid employment, detached from feudalistic, caste-based relationships. Rather, it unveils an additional dimension of the existing literature by illustrating the domestic work sector as one deeply rooted in servitude and caste-based exploitation, a situation that continues to endure despite various waves of modernity and modernisation. Considering the domestic work sector as a continuation of caste-based servitude introduces a fresh perspective that merits further exploration within scholarly discourse. This study aims to encourage more research in this vital area.

Marginalised women in rural areas may juggle multiple roles: agricultural labour (often informal and seasonal), unpaid domestic work in their own households, and then paid domestic work in upper-caste homes. The study highlights how their labour is exploited and how they suffer from the 'double burden' of productive and reproductive labour, leading to extreme time poverty and chronic fatigue. It reveals the deeply entrenched social hierarchies and informal arrangements within which rural domestic work operates, leaving domestic workers highly vulnerable.

The study foregrounds how caste determines who performs this stigmatised labour and how it shapes the conditions of their employment, including remuneration, treatment, and vulnerability to abuse. It illuminates how gendered expectations of labour, often intertwined with caste-based notions of purity and pollution, push women into these roles, further entrenching their disadvantaged position. It reveals the specific gendered vulnerabilities that arise from the intersection of caste and economic necessity in rural

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contexts. Through a lack of data on paid domestic workers in rural India, this community remains largely invisible to policymakers, resulting in a lack of targeted interventions, social protection schemes, and legal safeguards.

Limitations of the study

Domestic servitude in rural India requires probing on a much deeper level with a comprehensive and in-depth approach to investigation, involving a broader range of respondents, including employers, and covering extensive geographical areas. India is a geographically heterogeneous landscape, so generalisations cannot be drawn based on a small case study conducted in a single region. Despite these limitations, this study marks an initial step towards directing scholarly attention to an underexplored facet of domestic work by analysing the organisation of domestic work in rural settings. It is hoped that it will contribute to effective policy formulation, offering insights for NGOs and labour unions to mobilise and empower this community, strengthening their collective bargaining power and advocating for their rights.

Conclusion

The nature and organisation of paid domestic work in rural India exhibit distinct features when compared to urban contexts. While the urban domestic work sector has largely transcended its feudal characteristics, the rural domestic labour sector remains deeply intertwined with caste-based feudal structures. This study illustrates that caste-based prejudices and practices are particularly pronounced in village settings. Women hailing from lower-caste, marginalised backgrounds often encounter significant barriers in escaping their caste-specific occupations. These individuals face dual forms of discrimination; not only do they experience gender and caste discrimination in their work environments, but they also endure gender-based discrimination and violence within their familial contexts.

In navigating these multifaceted layers of oppression, domestic workers frequently assume the role of primary economic providers for their families. They bear the financial responsibilities of their households while simultaneously fulfilling the domestic and caregiving obligations to both their employers and their own families. Regrettably, these workers lack equitable compensation for their labour and find their own care needs unmet, thereby experiencing a considerable care deficit.

The intersection of caste and domestic work manifests in multiple ways, as articulated in the research. The effects of caste on domestic workers are contingent upon a variety of factors. In rural locales, domestic workers often lack critical exposure and awareness, which renders them vulnerable to adverse experiences and fosters a sense of helplessness that compels them to endure conditions of servitude and subjugation. Despite these systemic challenges, some domestic workers assert a measure of agency, often manifested in the ability to refuse mistreatment from employers. Nonetheless, this assertion of agency is generally unfeasible for women in villages, who are often bound to their employers through feudal relationships. Notably, some Muslim respondents indicated a preference for avoiding employment with Hindu families due to experiences of discriminatory treatment.

This study highlights the precarious nature of the domestic work sector in rural India, underscoring the urgent need for scholarly attention and intervention from both state and non-state actors. It is imperative to acknowledge the existence and specific challenges faced by domestic workers in rural regions. Addressing these unique issues is essential for

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fostering equitable labour practices and improving the overall social standing of domestic workers in these contexts.

Notes

1 The Other Backward Class (OBC) is a collective term used by the Government of India to classify communities that are 'educationally or socially backward' (i.e., disadvantaged).
2 The Constitution of India recognises certain castes, races, and tribal groups as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under Articles 341 and 342. Scheduled Castes are those castes/communities who suffered from the age-old practice of untouchability, who are subjected to geographical isolation and need special consideration for safeguarding their interests.
3 Harijans is a well-known term used for Dalits, meaning 'children of God', as coined by M.K. Gandhi; however, it was later rejected by Ambedkar and contemporary Dalit scholars and activists. The author does not endorse the term, using it here solely to accurately represent the verbatim responses of the research participants.
4 Bidis are inexpensive, locally produced cigarettes.
5 Dalitbahujan is a term used by Kancha Ilaiah for 'people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority' (Ilaiah, 1996).
6 Panditayin is a term used for Brahmin women in the local language.
7 Puja ghar is an area in the house designated for offering prayers to God.
8 Chamar is a caste within the Scheduled Castes category.
9 Dom is a scheduled caste whose caste occupation is scavenging.

References

Ambedkar BR (1936) *Annihilation of Caste*. New Delhi: Shree Publishing House.
Anderson B (2000) *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour*. London, New York: Zed Books.
Dickey S (2000) Permeable homes: domestic service, household space, and the vulnerability of class boundaries in Urban India. *American Anthropological Association* 27(2), 462–489. https://www.jstor.org/stable/647180
Dumont L (1970) *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Oxford University Press.
Frøystad K (2003) Master-Servant relations and the domestic reproduction of caste in Northern India. *Ethnos* 68(1), 73–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184032000060371
Ghurye GS (1961) *Caste, Class, and Occupation*. Bombay Popular Prakashan.
Gothoskar S (2013) The plight of domestic workers: confluence of gender, class and caste hierarchies. *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(22), 63–75. Retrieved from https://www.epw.in/journal/2013/22/special-articles/plight-domestic-workers.html
Grover et al (2018) Portraits of women's paid domestic-care labour: ethnographic studies from globalizing India. *Journal of South Asian Development* 13(2), 123–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/0973174118793782
Gupta C (2019) Servants and Mistresses: Literary and Legal Sketches in Early Twentieth-Century Uttar Pradesh. In Sinha N and Varma N (eds), *Servants' Pasts: Late-Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century South Asia* (Vol. 2) Orient Blackswan, p. 236.
Hoerder D (2015) Historical Perspectives on Domestic and Care-Giving Workers' Migrations: A Global Approach. In Hoerder D, Meerkerk EN and Neunsinger S (eds), *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*. Brill.
Ilaiah K (1996) *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Kolkata: Samya Publication.
Jodhka S (2015) Ascriptive hierarchies: caste and its reproduction in contemporary India. *Current Sociology* 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115614784
Kothari U (1997) Women's paid domestic work and rural transformation: a study in South Gujarat. *Economic and Political Weekly* 32(17), WS5–WS12. Retrieved from https://www.epw.in/journal/1997/17/review-womens-studies-review-issues-specials/women-s-paid-domestic-work-and-rural
Lokesh. (2015) Making the Personal Political: The First Domestic Workers' Strike in Pune, Maharashtra. In Hoerder D, Meerkerk EN and Neunsinger S (eds), *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*. Leiden: Brill.
Madhumathi M. (2013). Migration for domestic work - a case of female domestic workers in Bangalore. *International Journal of Social Science & Interdisciplinary Research* 2(1), 44–61.
Mehta AB (1960). *The Domestic Servant Class*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
Monteiro TS (2022). Intersections of caste, class, and gender in healthcare sanitation work in India: social work imperatives for restructuring marginalized women's care work. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review* 16, 254–264. https://doi.org/10.1111/ASWP.12264

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moras A (2008). The private home as a public workplace: employing paid domestic labor. *Workplace Rights* 13(4), 377–400. https://doi.org/10.2190/WR.13.4.c

Neetha N (2013). Paid domestic work: making sense of the jigsaw puzzle. *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(43), 35–38. Retrieved from https://www.epw.in/journal/2013/43/review-womens-studies-review-issues/paid-domestic-work.html

Raghuram P (2001). Caste and gender in the organisation of paid domestic work in India. *Work, Employment and Society* 15(3), 607–617. https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170122119011

Ray R and Qayum S (2009). *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India*. Stanford University Press.

Rollins J (1985). *Between Women: Domestics and Their Employers*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Sarkar T (2019). Caste–ing Servants in Colonial Calcutta. In Sinha N and Varma N (eds), *Servants' Pasts: Late-Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century South Asia* (Vol. 2,). Orient Blackswan, p. 250.

Sharma RS (1958) *Sudras In Ancient India: A Social History Of The Order Down To Circa A. D. 600*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Sharma S (2016) Of rasoi ka kaam/bathroom ka kaam: perspectives of women domestic workers. *Economic and Political Weekly* 51(7), 52–61. Retrieved from https://www.epw.in/journal/2016/7/special-articles/rasoi-ka-kaambathroom-ka-kaam.html

Sinha N and Varma N (Eds.) (2019) *Servants' Pasts: Late-Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century South Asia* (Vol. 2) Orient Blackswan.

Sinha N, Varma N and Jha P (Eds.) (2019) *Servants' Pasts: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century South Asia* (Vol. 1). Orient Blackswan.

Srinivas L (1995) Master-servant relationship in a cross-cultural perspective. *Economic and Political Weekly* 30(5), 269–278. Retrieved from https://www.epw.in/journal/1995/5/special-articles/master-servant-relationship-cross-cultural-perspective.html

Srinivas MN (1962) *Caste in Modern India, and Other Essays*. Asia Publishing House.

Thakkar S (2024) Exploitation, harassment and violence: lived experiences of women paid domestic workers in India. *Journal of South Asian Development* 19(1), 44–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/09731741231164872

Varman R, Al-Amoudi I and Skålén P (2023) Workplace humiliation and the organization of domestic work. *Organization Studies* 44(11), 1853–1877. https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231157034

Cite this article: Singh D (2025). Invisible toiling hands: the work and life of domestic workers in rural India. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* **36**, 691–707. https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10036 Published online by Cambridge University Press