

Living on the Margins: Work, Vulnerability and Everyday Struggles of Domestic Workers in Assam

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Abstract: *Domestic workers in Assam remain positioned at the margins of the labour market due to poverty, insecurity and unequal labour relations. This article examines marginality through the working conditions, vulnerability and coping strategies of domestic workers in Assam. Drawing on workers' narratives, the study identifies long working hours, low and irregular wages, job insecurity, absence of formal contracts, limited legal protection and dependence on employers as major sources of vulnerability. To manage these constraints, workers rely on multiple job holding, informal support networks, and everyday negotiation. The study highlights workers' resilience while arguing for stronger labour rights, legal recognition and welfare protection.*

Keywords: *Domestic Workers, Marginality, Working Conditions, Vulnerability, Coping Strategies, Assam*

Introduction

Worldwide, nearly 76 million workers are employed as domestic workers.¹ They are one of the most invisible groups of workers in the informal sector. Since domestic work is carried out inside private households, the terms and conditions of employment are often unclear, and many workers remain unregistered and outside the protection of labour laws. As a result, domestic workers are among the least protected workers under national labour legislation. Their heavy dependence on employers, lack of rights, social isolation, and the unregulated nature of domestic work often make them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.^{2,3,4} Domestic workers and employers often develop complex and unequal relationships shaped by subordination, dependency, hierarchy, and everyday negotiations within the household workplace.^{5,6} Existing studies

indicate that domestic work is largely undertaken by workers from poor, low-skilled, and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, with women constituting the majority of the labour force.^{7,8,9,10} Studies also show that domestic workers frequently experience low wages, heavy workloads, and dissatisfaction with earnings despite being primary income earners in their households.^{11,12} Even with growing urban demand for household labour, many continue to work under exploitative conditions.¹³

Domestic workers are positioned at the margins of both the labour market and social hierarchy. Their work is essential but not recognized as "real work." Due to the non-recognition of housework, domestic work remains invisible, thereby downgrading workers' economic and social contributions.¹⁴ In India, domestic workers play an important role in supporting households and urban life, yet they often face low wages, long working hours, job insecurity, and lack of legal protection.¹⁵ Many workers also experience disrespect, unequal treatment, and exploitative work relations. Studies show that domestic workers are often aware of exploitation, but because of fear of losing work and economic dependence, they may avoid direct confrontation with employers.¹⁶ To deal with these situations, workers adopt different coping and survival strategies in everyday life.¹⁷

Despite the growing importance of domestic work, limited studies have focused on the everyday lives of domestic workers in Assam. Very little is known about how domestic workers experience marginality, vulnerable working conditions, and daily struggles in the region. Although previous studies at both national and international levels have examined various aspects of domestic work such as working conditions, low wages, exploitation, gender inequality, employer-worker relations, social vulnerability, and coping strategies, they have largely overlooked the lived experiences and everyday struggles of workers, especially in the Indian context. In Assam, this gap is even more evident, with very few studies exploring the marginal position, vulnerabilities, and survival strategies of domestic workers.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by understanding the lived experiences of domestic workers who are positioned at the margins of society. It aims to analyse the everyday problems faced in their work life, how vulnerability is experienced within employer-worker relations and wider society, and the coping and survival strategies they adopt to deal with difficult and insecure working conditions. The study is theoretically informed by perspectives on structural inequality, feminist political economy, and agency within constrained labour relations.

Review of Literature

Many previous studies have examined different aspects of domestic workers at national and international levels. Existing literature shows that domestic workers are recognised as vulnerable workers engaged in precarious

employment characterised by low wages, long working hours, lack of contracts, and weak legal protection. Women and migrant domestic workers are often more vulnerable because of poverty, dependency, and limited awareness of rights, which highlights the need for legal recognition and labour protections under international standards.¹⁸

Studies in India show that domestic work is mainly performed by poor, migrant, low-caste, low-skilled, and socially disadvantaged women in the informal sector, with little job security or legal protection. Their work in private households often remains invisible, leading to exclusion, discrimination, harassment, denial of dignity, and lack of basic rights like leave. At the same time, some workers also organise through unions and associations to demand recognition, welfare support, and labour rights.¹⁹ Domestic workers contribute significantly to household survival, but many remain only low to moderately empowered despite earning income. Restricted mobility, domestic violence, lack of assets, and weak decision-making power continue to shape their vulnerable social and economic position.²⁰

Women's occupational vulnerability in the informal sector is closely linked with migration, structural inequality, and poor working conditions, often pushing them into insecure jobs like domestic work.²¹ Domestic work is seen as "dirty work" and carries stigma, while workers use coping strategies such as confrontation, reframing, comparison, and adaptation to maintain dignity.²² In developing countries, women's vulnerability is increased by marriage, childcare, and household responsibilities, along with structural inequalities that reinforce gendered labour segmentation and make domestic work a survival option.²³

The economic vulnerability of domestic workers became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, with job loss, income reduction, food insecurity, and lack of social protection. Many survived through borrowing, cutting consumption, or returning home.²⁴ Employment vulnerability is generally shaped by insecure contracts, irregular wages, poor working conditions, and weak protection, with women facing higher risks due to unequal access to stable work.²⁵ Broader inequalities such as caste, class, and household pressure also shape their entry and lived experiences.²⁶

Domestic labour markets in urban India are structured by caste, class, and religion, leading to unequal wages and treatment.²⁷ Women domestic workers remain economically disadvantaged, undervalued, and overburdened.²⁸ Entry into domestic work is strongly shaped by caste, gender, and poverty, though everyday lived experiences remain underexplored.²⁹

Domestic workers commonly face low wages, long hours, insecurity, abuse, and lack of welfare awareness, with migration and poverty as key drivers.³⁰ Their work remains informal and unregulated, with emotional distress caused by isolation and restricted mobility.³¹ Caste-based stigma further deepens vulnerability, making it both social and psychological.³² Similar patterns of inequality and exploitation are found across regions.^{33,34,35,36}

Studies also show long working hours, poor health, unstable wages, and difficulty balancing work and family life.³⁷ Patriarchal and sexualised structures further intensify vulnerability.^{38,39,40} Labour laws largely exclude domestic work, keeping it undervalued and invisible despite its importance.⁴¹ Overall, the literature shows widespread marginality and exploitation, but limited attention has been given to the lived experiences and survival strategies of domestic workers in Assam. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by focusing on their work, vulnerability, and everyday struggles.

Theoretical framework

The present study is grounded in structural inequality, which explains how unequal social arrangements shape access to work, dignity, and security. Tilly argues that inequality is systematically produced through categories like class, gender, caste, and race.⁴² In Assam, this explains how poverty and social background push workers into low-paid, informal domestic work and position them at the margins. Therborn further sees inequality as historically and institutionally produced, shaping unequal life chances.⁴³ Thus, domestic workers' marginality is linked to structural conditions where migration, gendered labour division, and class inequality intersect.

Feminist perspectives highlight that domestic work is socially devalued. Oakley shows housework is treated as women's unpaid duty,⁴⁴ while Folbre stresses that care work is essential but underpaid.⁴⁵ Glenn adds that domestic labour is shaped by intersecting inequalities of class, gender, and race.⁴⁶ Social reproduction theory explains that capitalism depends on unpaid and underpaid care work,⁴⁷ while Fraser notes a growing crisis of care where this labour is increasingly demanded but undervalued.⁴⁸ The study also draws on agency within structure. Giddens sees individuals as active agents within structures,⁴⁹ Kabeer defines agency as constrained choice,⁵⁰ and Scott explains everyday resistance through silence and avoidance.⁵¹ However, these remain forms of constrained agency, as workers adapt without changing structural inequality. Domestic workers may shift jobs or rely on networks but lack formal protection and collective power.

Overall, the framework explains how marginality is produced through structure, how care work is devalued, and how workers survive through limited agency within everyday conditions.

In this context, the present study raises the following broad questions:

1. How do structural and workplace conditions shape the everyday work-life experiences of domestic workers in Assam?
2. In what ways is vulnerability produced and experienced in employer-worker relations and wider social settings?
3. How do domestic workers negotiate, adapt, and develop survival strategies within conditions of insecurity and marginalisation?

Data and Methodology

The study is based on empirical fieldwork in Assam, with Dibrugarh district selected as the study site due to its emerging urban character, expanding residential areas, changing household structures, and increasing reliance on domestic workers for everyday reproductive labour. This growing demand makes Dibrugarh suitable for examining domestic work, vulnerability, and survival strategies. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select five residential colonies where domestic workers are employed. Because domestic work is informal, unregistered, and mobile, accidental and snowball sampling were used to identify respondents through workplace access and referrals. Primary data were collected through face-to-face interviews to capture lived experiences directly. The study includes 43 domestic workers (male and female) across part-time, full-time, and live-in categories, enabling comparison of working conditions, vulnerability, and coping strategies. Data were analysed using interpretative narrative analysis to understand how workers make meaning of everyday experiences, employer-worker relations, and survival practices, and findings were organised thematically around working life problems, experiences of vulnerability in households and society, and coping strategies in insecure conditions. The study follows the ILO Convention No. 189 (2011) definition of domestic workers as persons engaged in paid domestic work in private households, covering both live-in and non-live-in forms.⁵² The analysis is guided by exploratory questions on daily working conditions, production of vulnerability through employer and social relations, and survival strategies such as managing multiple employers, negotiating wages and workload, relying on informal networks, and adapting to employer expectations to sustain livelihoods.

Findings and Discussion

The study uses interpretative narrative analysis to examine the lived experiences of 43 domestic workers in Dibrugarh district of Assam. The findings are organised under four interrelated themes: (1) Employment Structure and Informality, (2) Structural Marginality, (3) Vulnerability, and (4) Coping Strategies, with discussion integrated within each theme to show how structural inequality is produced and reproduced in everyday life.

Participants

The study is based on 43 domestic workers, including 4 male and 39 female workers, clearly showing a strong feminisation of domestic labour where women constitute about 90.69% of the workforce. Among male workers, 2 are full-time and 2 are part-time, while among female workers, there are 2 live-in, 7 full-time, and 30 part-time workers, making part-time employment the dominant form (about 76.92% among women). This distribution highlights that domestic work is primarily fragmented and flexible labour rather than stable

employment.

The age profile shows that domestic workers are concentrated in economically active age groups. Male workers are between 28 and 60 years, while female workers are mainly between 18 and 57 years, with a strong concentration in the 20–40 age group among part-time workers. This indicates that domestic work is largely a survival-based occupation undertaken during key productive and reproductive years of life.

Educational attainment among respondents is consistently low. Most female workers are either illiterate or have only primary or upper primary education, with only a few reaching HSLC or higher secondary levels. Male workers show slightly more variation but also remain largely within low educational categories. This clearly reflects the structural link between low education and entry into informal domestic labour markets.

The community profile shows that most workers belong to marginalised social groups, particularly Tea tribe communities, followed by Ahom, Muslim, Kaibarta, Nepali, and Bengali groups. Geographically, workers are mainly from Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, and Tezpur, indicating strong rural–urban and tea garden–urban labour migration linkages.

Marital status further reflects gendered patterns of employment. All live-in female workers (100%) are unmarried, showing that this category is associated with women without family responsibilities or support systems. Full-time female workers show mixed status, including married, widowed, and unmarried women. Part-time female workers are predominantly married (around 76.6%), followed by widowed/separated and unmarried women. This clearly shows that part-time domestic work is closely tied to married women managing dual responsibilities of paid and unpaid labour, while live-in work reflects extreme vulnerability and dependence.

Household economic conditions show that most respondents belong to combined-income households, where survival depends on multiple earners. Domestic work is therefore not an independent livelihood but part of a broader household survival strategy. Several workers entered domestic work after crises such as the death of earning members, family breakdown, or acute poverty, showing that entry is often forced rather than voluntary.

Employment Structure and Informality

The employment structure of domestic workers is characterised by extreme informality, lack of regulation, and complete dependence on personal networks. All 43 respondents (100%) entered domestic work through informal channels such as relatives, neighbours, friends, or known households. There is no formal recruitment system or institutional mediation. As one respondent stated, “We got the work only through people we know, never through any office or written system,” clearly reflecting the absence of formal labour markets.

Similarly, all respondents (100%) reported that employment is based on

verbal agreements without any written contracts, documentation, or legal recognition. This ensures complete flexibility for employers while leaving workers without protection or rights.

In terms of occupational distribution, male workers are engaged mainly as drivers, gardeners, and cleaners, while female workers are concentrated in domestic household tasks. Among female workers, 2 are live-in (5.1%), 7 are full-time (17.9%), and 30 are part-time (76.9%), showing that part-time work dominates domestic labour structures. This indicates that domestic work is not a single stable job but a fragmented form of employment spread across multiple households.

Wage patterns further highlight inequality and employer dominance. Workers reported that wages are entirely decided by employers, with little or no negotiation. Many workers were unaware of exact wages before starting work, showing lack of transparency. Earnings vary widely: live-in workers earn approximately ₹2000–₹4500 per month, full-time workers ₹5000–₹8000, and part-time workers ₹1200–₹4000+ depending on number of households. Male workers earn between ₹1200 and ₹13000 depending on job type.

As one worker stated, “Salary is what they give, not what we decide,” which captures the absence of bargaining power. Around 85% of respondents reported irregular wages, delays in payment, deductions, and non-payment for extra work such as festivals or additional tasks.

Working hours are also highly unstable. Live-in workers are available throughout the day without fixed hours, full-time workers work 5–10 hours daily, and part-time workers work between 2–10 hours across multiple households. Around 70% of part-time workers work in 2–8 houses daily, leading to continuous movement and physical exhaustion. One worker described, “We go from one house to another the whole day without knowing when it will end,” highlighting temporal insecurity.

Working conditions show systematic deprivation of rights. All workers (100%) reported absence of contracts, lack of fixed weekly leave, and dependence on employer discretion for rest. About 60% reported health problems such as fatigue, body pain, respiratory issues, and chemical exposure, yet most cannot access medical care due to low income and lack of rest. Many stated, “Even if we are sick, we have to go to work,” reflecting structural compulsion.

Overall, these conditions reflect strong structural inequality, where domestic work remains invisible, unregulated, and highly exploitative, reinforcing employer control and worker insecurity.

Structural Marginality

The findings clearly show that marginality among domestic workers is structurally produced rather than individually determined. Around 90% of respondents entered domestic work due to poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and household survival needs. Many come from tea garden and

rural backgrounds marked by intergenerational deprivation, low wages, and limited education, which restrict access to formal employment.

As one respondent stated, "We do this work because there is no other option to eat," highlighting the absence of real choice. Domestic work thus becomes a survival strategy rather than an occupation of preference.

All respondents (100%) are engaged in unregulated private household work without institutional protection. This structural invisibility excludes them from labour laws, social security, and grievance mechanisms.

Key structural drivers include persistent poverty (90%), gendered expectations of care work, low education, and caste-class segmentation that channels marginalised groups into informal labour. Feminist political economy explains this as the systematic devaluation of reproductive labour, where care work is socially essential but economically unrecognised (Folbre, 2001; Fraser, 2016).

Thus, marginality is continuously reproduced through overlapping structures of poverty, gender inequality, caste/class hierarchy, and institutional absence.

Vulnerability in Everyday Life and Employment Relations

Vulnerability among domestic workers is multidimensional and deeply embedded in everyday life.

Economic vulnerability (80%) arises from low and unstable wages, irregular payments, and job insecurity. Even small changes such as job loss create immediate survival crises, as one worker said, "If one house removes us, everything becomes difficult."

Social vulnerability (75%) is expressed through stigma and discriminatory treatment. Workers are referred to as "servant" or "helper," reinforcing social hierarchy. Practices such as separate utensils and restricted spaces further marginalise workers within households.

Emotional vulnerability (70%) includes humiliation, fear of job loss, and inability to express dissatisfaction. Workers stated, "We cannot speak even if we feel hurt," showing emotional suppression.

Hidden abuse (40%) includes verbal aggression and false accusations, which remain unreported due to the private nature of households. Migration-related vulnerability (50%) affects workers displaced by floods, poverty, or rural hardship, leaving them without support networks in urban areas.

These vulnerabilities are reinforced by power asymmetry, where employers control wages, workload, and job continuity (90%). Fear of job loss leads to silence (85%), as expressed in, "If we speak, we lose the job." Employment remains fully informal (100%), with no legal protection. Domestic work takes place in private households, making it invisible, unregulated, and beyond state monitoring. This structure ensures continuous reproduction of inequality.

Coping Strategies and Constrained Agency

Despite structural constraints, domestic workers actively develop coping

strategies, though these reflect constrained agency rather than empowerment. Multiple job holding (65–70%) is used to reduce income insecurity, with workers engaging in 2–8 households daily. This increases physical and emotional exhaustion.

Informal networks (70%) such as relatives and neighbours help workers find and maintain employment in the absence of formal systems. Silence (80–100%) is the most common strategy, used to avoid conflict and job loss. As one worker said, “Silence helps us survive,” showing silence as a survival mechanism rather than acceptance.

Conditional negotiation (40%) occurs only when employer relations allow, showing limited bargaining power. Fatalism (30%) reflects acceptance of hardship, with statements like “This is our destiny.” Job switching (35%) is used when conditions become unbearable, but remains constrained by network dependence. Overall, these strategies demonstrate constrained agency, where workers act within limited structural possibilities.

Conclusion

The study shows that domestic work in Assam is highly feminised, informal, and structurally insecure. Worker's face overlapping economic, social, and emotional vulnerabilities produced through poverty, gender inequality, caste-class structures, and institutional absence. Employment relations are marked by extreme power imbalance and lack of regulation, ensuring employer dominance. While workers actively adopt coping strategies, these do not challenge structural inequality but instead reflect survival within it. Domestic work thus emerges as a space where inequality is continuously produced, vulnerability is normalised, and survival is negotiated within structural constraints.

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