

Research Paper

Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Wellbeing of Working Women in the Unorganized Sector in Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the socio-cultural elements that shape the well-being of domestic workers in Kashmir's unorganized sector, focusing on psychological, physical, and social issues. Using a mixed-methods approach, the researchers examine key characteristics such as gender roles, cultural expectations, and societal attitudes that affect these women's lives. The quantitative analysis reveals strong relationships between these factors and indicators of psychological well-being, while the qualitative findings highlight emotional and economic vulnerabilities intensified by societal stigma, employment uncertainty, and exploitative behavior. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address systemic exploitation, strengthen emotional resilience, and build community support to enhance these women's quality of life.

Keywords: *Domestic Workers, Socio-Cultural Factors, Well-being, Unorganized Sector, Kashmir, Gender Inequality*

Domestic workers in the unorganized sector are among the most vulnerable segments of the labor market, confronting various issues that substantially influence their well-being. These workers, who are mostly women and frequently migrants, face distinct vulnerabilities caused by intersecting socio-cultural factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, and migratory status (Boris and Nadasen, 2008). The nature of their work—isolated within private households—creates conditions of invisibility and exclusion, making them vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and terrible working conditions (Hall et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2021). Unlike workers in formal sectors, domestic workers sometimes work under informal agreements with no explicit contractual rights, worsening their precarity. The lack of labor law enforcement and widespread exclusion from social safeguards provide them with little resources to contest unjust treatment or improve their working conditions (Blofield & Jokela, 2018; León, 2010).

Domestic work is heavily gendered and racialized, which feeds larger socioeconomic disparities. Domestic employment has long been associated with feminized and racialized labor in various contexts, including South Africa, reinforcing entrenched inequality hierarchies (Fish, 2006). Women in this field usually endure gender-based discrimination

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and occupational segregation, receiving pitiful earnings while denied access to benefits such as paid leave, health insurance, and social security (Baruah, 2004). This marginalization is worsened by stigma and occupational discrimination, which worsen during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, research shows that over 57% of domestic workers experienced shame during the pandemic, and 40% worked without any safety precautions, underscoring their vulnerable position (Sumalatha et al., 2021). Furthermore, the informal nature of domestic work frequently results in a lack of possibilities for skill development and career advancement, trapping many women in low-wage, insecure jobs (Baruah, 2004).

Kashmir's specific socio-political and cultural characteristics determine the problems women encounter in unorganized industries. Domestic workers in this conflict-affected region have numerous layers of risk, including structural instability, economic hardship, and strongly ingrained gender stereotypes. According to research, women in Kashmir face much higher levels of psychological distress than men, which is driven by variables such as forced displacement, exposure to violence, and economic dependency (De Jong et al., 2008). These stressors are especially severe for domestic workers, whose insecure working conditions and lack of legal protections exacerbate their mental and physical health issues. Kashmir's socio-cultural milieu, characterized by traditional traditions and limited educational possibilities, limits women's capacity to pursue better work or advocate for their rights. For example, the substantial link between maternal education and child nutrition outcomes in Kashmir demonstrates how low educational attainment not only affects women's lives but also perpetuates intergenerational cycles of hardship (Tariq et al., 2023).

The isolated nature of domestic work further exacerbates the challenges faced by these women. Domestic workers, unlike workers in formal industries, are frequently barred from joining labor organizations and unions, limiting their collective bargaining strength and ability to demand improved working conditions (Boris & Nadasen, 2008). The obscurity of their labor within private houses makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and human rights breaches, while the lack of control mechanisms allows such practices to continue unabated (León, 2010). These issues are exacerbated in areas like Kashmir, where persistent violence has strained social and economic structures, making female domestic workers especially vulnerable.

In addition, the lack of social protections remains a major concern for domestic workers in the unorganized sector. Many people are excluded from national health insurance plans and other safety nets, leaving them financially vulnerable, particularly during times of illness or disaster (Dartanto et al., 2020). This exclusion has a severe impact on their physical and emotional health, as well as their livelihoods. For example, studies of domestic workers in various locations have found a high incidence of chronic illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes, and depression (Hall et al., 2019). Given the parallels in working conditions, domestic workers in Kashmir may encounter similar health issues, exacerbating their problems.

Objective

To examine the sociocultural factors impacting the well-being of domestic workers in Kashmir's unorganized sector, with a focus on gender norms, cultural dynamics, and their influence on psychological and physical health.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researchers adopted a mixed-methods approach by combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. This design allows them to capture both measurable data and in-depth insights into domestic workers' experiences.

Population and Sample

The researchers conducted the study in the Srinagar district of Kashmir. The target population includes domestic workers employed in households, including part-time workers. The team used a purposive sample strategy to select individuals who met the eligibility requirements for employment as domestic workers. To ensure a thorough grasp of their experiences, the researchers chose a sample size of around 70 participants for the quantitative survey and interviewed 15 individuals in depth for the qualitative analysis. This selection method represented various demographics such as age, marital status, and geographic region, allowing a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural elements influencing their well-being.

Data Collection Methods

The researchers collected the study's data using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to ensure a comprehensive knowledge of the socio-cultural elements impacting domestic workers' well-being. Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to capture information on demographics (age, education, marital status, etc.), working conditions (hours, wages, type of work, employer-employee relationships), and psychological well-being indicators such as stress, anxiety, and satisfaction levels while using Carol D. Ryff and Corey L. M. Keyes' Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB) (1995). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to obtain qualitative data, which included questions about sociocultural norms, gender expectations, and coping techniques. In addition, focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with small groups of domestic workers to address common difficulties, support systems, and collective experiences. Participants' observations were also used to get first-hand insights into their working conditions, interpersonal connections, and daily routines, which added dimension to the analysis.

Analysis

The researchers analyzed the data using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a thorough understanding of the elements that influence domestic workers' well-being. They applied descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, and means were used to summarise demographic and job-related information in the quantitative data. Inferential statistics, including correlation and regression analysis, were used to investigate the links between socio-cultural characteristics and domestic workers' psychological well-being. In qualitative data, thematic analysis will be used to discover repeating patterns and major themes emerging from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. NVivo or a comparable qualitative data analysis program was used to organize, code, and analyze the textual data, assuring a methodical approach to discovering the nuances and complexities of the workers' experiences. This combination of data and thematic analysis provided a strong and thorough understanding of the elements influencing the well-being of domestic workers in Kashmir.

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Ethical Consideration

All participants provided informed consent and received a consent form detailing the research’s purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality safeguards. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and used solely for research purposes. Pseudonyms were used in data reporting to protect confidentiality, and audio recordings were securely maintained with access restricted to the research team. Cultural sensitivity was emphasized throughout the data-gathering process, with proper regard for local customs, traditions, and sensitivities, to ensure that the research is suitable and respectful of the community’s values.

Findings

Quantitative analysis:

Carol D. Ryff and Corey L. M. Keyes’ Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB) (1995) is a popular tool for measuring an individual’s well-being across various domains, representing a comprehensive approach to mental health. It consists of 18 components, separated into six main dimensions:

- **Self-Acceptance:** A positive attitude towards oneself, recognizing personal strengths while tolerating faults.
- **Positive Relations with Others:** Capable of maintaining warm, trusting interpersonal relationships as well as important social connections.
- **Autonomy,** A sense of independence and the ability to control one’s behavior based on own principles, despite cultural constraints.
- **Environmental Mastery:** The ability to skilfully control and change the environment to suit personal requirements and goals.
- **Purpose in Life:** Having defined goals, a sense of purpose, and direction in life.
- **Personal Growth:** A continual sense of growth, seeking new experiences and realizing one’s full potential over time.

The 18 items use a Likert scale to measure these aspects, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The scale measures the presence and absence of positive functioning in various areas, revealing information about an individual’s psychological health and well-being. Table 1 below presents all the statements from the Psychological Wellbeing Scale and the corresponding quantitative findings derived from the analysis.

S.N O.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	A little Agree	Either agree nor disagree	A little disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far	14	19	12	0	2	0	0	23
2.	Some people wander aimlessly through life,	11	19	14	0	2	0	0	24

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	but I am not one of them.								
3.	The demands of everyday life often get me down.	40	16	4	1	4	1	2	2
4.	In many ways I feel disappointed about my achievements in life.	16	4	6	5	2	3	16	18
5.	Maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me.	17	23	9	2	1	0	7	11
6.	I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future.	8	7	4	3	5	3	19	23
7.	In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live.	21	7	13	4	6	0	4	15
8.	I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life.	13	11	13	8	9	2	12	2
9.	I sometimes feel like I've done all I could in life.	12	15	10	2	4	8	10	9
10.	For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth.	36	15	2	2	0	8	7	0
11.	I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world.	41	10	3	3	1	3	1	8
12.	People	47	12	2	2	0	0	0	7

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	would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others.								
13.	I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago	7	3	2	0	0	9	24	25
14.	I often like most parts of my personality.	27	18	2	5	2	9	7	0
15.	I tend to be responsibilities influenced by people with strong opinions.	35	12	4	1	8	1	8	1
16.	I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others.	18	5	2	2	7	6	16	14
17.	I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from the way most other people think	35	18	2	0	8	0	7	0
18.	I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important	28	25	2	0	8	0	7	0

- The Self-Acceptance factor of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale reveals considerable obstacles in participants' evaluations of their life narratives and relationships. A substantial percentage (33.3%) expressed unhappiness with their life stories, with only a tiny minority (19.4%) indicating satisfaction. Regarding a feeling of purpose, fewer individuals (26.7%) agreed that they have a clear direction in life, but a significant 34.7% strongly disagreed, indicating a lack of perceived life

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direction. Maintaining close relationships presents challenges, with a majority (33.33%) agreeing and 24% strongly agreeing that such relationships are tough and irritating, while just 16% strongly disagree.

These findings show that participants have low levels of self-acceptance, as seen by dissatisfaction with their life development, a lack of a clear sense of purpose, and difficulties creating and maintaining meaningful connections. This emphasizes the need for interventions that promote self-awareness, life satisfaction, and interpersonal skills.

- Positive Relations with Others elicit diverse viewpoints on future orientation, personal growth, and relationships. A sizable proportion of participants (36% strongly disagree and 26.7% disagree) reject the idea of living day-to-day without long-term preparation, demonstrating a preference for goal setting and planning. Similarly, the majority (35.7% strongly disagree and 34.3% disagree) do not support the idea of abandoning important life changes, indicating a broad desire to improve. In terms of relationships, 49% disagree with not having warm and trusting relationships, indicating that many participants believe they have made significant ties.

Some people find it difficult to maintain intimate relationships, despite feeling giving and having meaningful connections. This disparity indicates the necessity for social skill-building or community involvement initiatives to establish supportive relationships.

- The Autonomy factor of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale indicates a combination of external influences and great self-assurance among people. A majority (66.7%) admit to being swayed by persons with strong beliefs, indicating a vulnerability to outside influences. This contrasts with high levels of self-confidence, with 50.7% strongly agreeing and 25.4% agreeing that they believe in their own beliefs even when they vary from the majority. Furthermore, a sizable percentage (43% strongly agree and 36% agree) prioritize their values over others' judgments, demonstrating self-reliance and independence in value assessments.

Participants have a high level of self-assurance and prioritize internal values, but their vulnerability to strong opinions suggests a potential autonomy gap. Encouraging critical thinking and assertiveness training can help them gain independence.

- The Environmental Mastery factor reveals mixed opinions of life achievements and high confidence in managing everyday duties. Half of the individuals (50%) are satisfied with their life achievements, while 31% are disappointed, demonstrating a disparity in how accomplishments are regarded. In terms of everyday life management, a vast majority (86%) believe they are competent in handling obligations, indicating a high level of control and capacity to manage life's demands. However, 83% believe they have done everything they can in life, with a sizable percentage (24.3%) strongly agreeing, which could imply a sense of finality or fulfillment, but it could also reflect resignation.

The findings show that participants have strong skills in managing everyday obligations, indicating a high level of environmental mastery. However, contradictory feelings about life achievements may indicate underlying dissatisfaction or unfulfilled objectives. This emphasizes the need for interventions that improve not only practical managerial abilities but also generate a sense of success and fulfillment. Encouraging introspective practices, goal-setting, and chances for personal improvement may help participants match their everyday

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obligations with their long-term goals, resulting in a more balanced and fulfilling sense of mastery.

- The Purpose in Life dimension provides insights into participants' sense of purpose, control, and personal progress. A sizable majority (56.18% strongly agree and 22.47% agree) feel burdened by the demands of daily life, indicating difficulties in dealing with daily stresses. Despite this, 31.4% strongly agree that they feel in control of their situation, while 22.9% strongly disagree, demonstrating diversity in perceived control. Notably, the majority of participants (52.2% strongly agree and 23.2% agree) see life as an ongoing process of learning, change, and progress, indicating a strong focus on personal development.

The findings indicate that, while participants experience daily problems, their significant emphasis on growth and personal development demonstrates resilience and adaptation. This suggests an inherent ability to overcome obstacles and keep a forward-thinking attitude. Interventions aimed at defining life objectives, improving coping mechanisms, and cultivating a deeper sense of purpose can help participants better link their growth-oriented mentality with effective techniques for overcoming obstacles.

- The Personal Growth dimension of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale reveals a strong focus on self-improvement, altruism, and self-acceptance among participants. The majority (70.6%) emphasize the value of finding new experiences that challenge their viewpoints, indicating a willingness to evolve and a drive for self-discovery. Furthermore, the majority of participants (68% strongly agree and 17% agree) see themselves as generous and willing to give their time to others, demonstrating a community-oriented and giving character. In terms of self-acceptance, 38.9% strongly agree and 25.9% agree that they like the most of their personality, with only a small percentage (12%) expressing unhappiness.

The findings show that individuals are strongly committed to personal progress, embracing challenges and valuing self-improvement. Their prosocial instincts and strong self-esteem emphasize this component as a major strength. This strong growth orientation serves as a critical foundation for general well-being, implying that utilizing these characteristics can assist participants in better navigating other aspects. Continued promotion of self-reflection, new experiences, and personal discovery can help to reinforce this strength and promote overall well-being.

The scale's overall findings show that individuals experience significant personal progress, confidence in their ideals, and self-acceptance on an individual level. However, obstacles remain in managing stress, maintaining strong relationships, and reaching overall life happiness. Addressing these issues through interventions such as stress management, social skill development, and promoting a sense of purpose may improve overall psychological well-being. Emphasizing participants' growth mindsets and forward-thinking attitudes can serve as a basis for long-term improvement in all dimensions of well-being.

Further themes generated through Qualitative analysis are as follows:

Theme 1: Psychological and Emotional Wellbeing

The participant narratives reflect the significant psychological and emotional toll that long working hours, low salaries, and poor working conditions have on female domestic workers. These women often find themselves caught in a constant balancing act between household responsibilities and demanding jobs, leading to exhaustion, isolation, and guilt.

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One of the participants said, *"I often feel like I'm walking on a tightrope." Managing my household obligations while working as a domestic helper gives me little time to myself. Some days, the tiredness is so intense that I cry quietly at night. But I can't quit working since my family is counting on me. It's difficult to convey these feelings to anyone; even my husband doesn't understand why I'm so stressed."*

Similarly, another participant describes the emotional exhaustion caused by working tirelessly without praise or support: *"Working in other people's houses is demanding, not just physically but mentally. I feel invisible; no one asks how I'm doing or if I need a break. They expect me to smile and work tirelessly. When I go home, I don't have the energy to talk to my kids, and I feel bad about it."*

These experiences are supported by research, which shows that a lack of emotional support, along with unrelenting work expectations, causes severe mental health strain for domestic workers (Gong, 2023; Ryu, 2015).

Many domestic workers claim that employment insecurity has a negative influence on them, leaving them feeling helpless and anxious.

One participant shared, *"Every time there's a conflict in the city, my employers get angry if I'm late, but they don't understand what I go through to reach their home. The fear of losing my job is always on my mind, and it makes me feel helpless and anxious."*

This sense of powerlessness is a recurring theme in the literature as well. Domestic workers frequently face harassment and discrimination with little legal rights, resulting in chronic stress and anxiety (Theodore et al., 2018).

The stories also emphasize the physical toll of overwork, with many workers reporting health issues like bodily aches and exhaustion.

One participant mentions, *"There are days when I feel so low. My employer speaks to me rudely, and I can't say anything because I need this job. The stress has started affecting my health. My body aches all the time, but I can't afford to stop working or visit a doctor."*

The failure to address physical health concerns due to the demanding nature of the work has been noted in the research, which suggests that domestic workers frequently experience ergonomic injuries and health issues as a result of toxic substance exposure without the option to seek medical care (Theodore et al., 2018).

Furthermore, participants who feel alienated from society have reported experiences of social isolation and invisibility, which exacerbate the psychological damage.

One participant stated, *"I feel lonely despite being surrounded by people all day. I think about what life could have been if I had the chance to study or get a government job. It's not just the work; it's the feeling of being invisible to society that hurts the most."*

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The participant narratives highlight the significant emotional, physical, and psychological costs of working as a domestic helper. The key findings imply that these women are under a lot of stress since they are always juggling domestic responsibilities and hard careers, which causes tiredness, loneliness, and guilt. Many people claim a lack of emotional support from their companies and families, as well as little or no appreciation for their work or well-being. Fear of employment uncertainty and abuse is widespread, creating emotions of helplessness and worry. Their health suffers as a result of the strain, with physical symptoms such as body pains and headaches becoming more common, yet taking time off is not an option due to financial constraints.

Furthermore, these women express a profound sense of invisibility and low self-esteem, which is exacerbated by cultural stigmas and limited prospects for personal and professional development. The central theme is emotional labor, unrecognized sacrifice, and the psychological toll of being underappreciated both at home and at work.

Long working hours, inadequate income, bad working conditions, a lack of social support, and cultural stigma all contribute to female domestic workers' declining mental health. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of fair wages, recognizing domestic work as legitimate employment, and providing better working conditions to increase worker well-being (Ryu, 2015; Figueiredo et al., 2016). Furthermore, the mental health of domestic workers indicates that loneliness and social isolation are significant risk factors for depression and lower life satisfaction (Lim et al., 2023; Gong, 2023), as demonstrated in this study.

Theme 2: Working Conditions and Economic Vulnerability

The participant narratives offer an intimate glimpse into the significant financial and emotional strains that female domestic workers endure. One recurring topic is the absence of job security and the severe economic vulnerability that these women face.

One participant shared, "I clean three houses every day to earn enough to feed my children. There's no such thing as a day off, even if I'm sick. If I don't show up, I lose money, and sometimes, I lose the job altogether."

This reflects the precarious nature of their employment, in which any absence due to illness or personal concerns results in cash loss or job termination. The lack of paid sick time and the danger of job loss heighten feelings of helplessness and stress.

Another participant highlights Another participant discusses the exploitation they suffer in the form of non-monetary rewards, saying, "One of my employers offers me leftover food instead of paying me appropriately. I feel humiliated, but I accept it since I have no option. My spouse does not earn enough, and my children need to eat."

This highlights the unequal power dynamics at work, in which financial dependency pushes workers to accept low pay and bear emotional humiliation. Financial instability has a well-documented impact on mental health since low income and financial stress are linked to poorer health and life satisfaction (Klug et al., 2020). Economic vulnerability limits personal autonomy, causing feelings of powerlessness and mental suffering.

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Many domestic workers report working long hours for inadequate remuneration, exacerbating their sense of economic and personal stress.

One participant stated, *“I work from early morning until late evening cleaning houses, but the pay is never enough. Sometimes I skip meals just to make sure my children have enough to eat. My employers don't understand how much I struggle, and I can't ask for more because they can easily hire someone else.”*

This narrative shows the immense pressure domestic workers have to survive on pitiful earnings, frequently sacrificing their well-being to suit the demands of their families. Their failure to negotiate higher salaries or working conditions emphasizes their fragility and lack of agency, reinforcing the cycle of exploitation.

The physical toll of overwork is another important component of their lives.

One participant stated, *“When my health starts to decline from overwork, I feel trapped. There's no room to rest or recover. If I take even a single day off due to illness, I worry about losing my job. But if I keep working, my body grows weaker, and the cycle continues.”*

This indicates how overwork affects both physical and mental health, as the urge to keep working despite worsening health exacerbates feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. Interestingly, social resources, such as support from employers or networks, have been proven to be more important in determining stress levels than personal resources (Van Der Ham et al., 2014). Participants reported that a lack of company support exacerbates the mental and emotional toll of the job.

One participant commented on the disregard for her well-being: *“The cost of living keeps increasing, but my salary has stayed the same for years. I have asked for a raise several times, but my employers always find an excuse. They think I should be grateful for what I get.”*

Employers' dismissive attitude highlights a lack of regard for workers' rights and contributions.

In conclusion, the findings of these participant narratives and the literature strongly show that the economic dependency and vulnerability of female domestic workers in India harm their autonomy, mental health, and general well-being. The cycle of overwork, low income, exploitation, and social isolation causes severe emotional and physical stress. Research emphasizes the significance of improving working conditions, providing fair compensation, and increasing job stability to counteract the harmful consequences on mental health (Sharaunga et al., 2015; Klug et al., 2020). A complete approach, including economic empowerment, access to social support networks, and greater legal protections, is required to improve these workers' mental health and autonomy. By recognizing their employment as legitimate and providing greater compensation and job stability, we can begin to address the underlying issues that contribute to their economic fragility and mental distress.

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These findings are consistent with previous research on economic vulnerability among domestic workers. According to research, low salaries and financial distress are directly related to poor mental health and life satisfaction (Klug et al., 2020). The unstable economic condition of domestic workers frequently causes significant levels of stress and worry. Van Der Ham et al. (2014) observe that, while workers' overall well-being may appear to be good in some situations, economic insecurity nonetheless causes significant stress. This echoes the narratives in which individuals express constant concern about job loss, financial insecurity, and the consequences for their mental health. Furthermore, a lack of financial security limits personal agency, resulting in decreased autonomy in both professional and personal lives.

Theme 3: Discrimination, Stigma, and Exploitation

The participant narratives depict the severe societal shame, prejudice, and exploitation experienced by female domestic workers, illustrating the varied nature of the issues they face.

One participant reflects on the societal stigma she faces: "People in my neighbourhood look down on me because I clean houses for a living. They treat me like I'm inferior. Even though I work hard, I don't get the same respect as women working in offices. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth the humiliation."

The feeling of being looked down upon exemplifies the class and gender discrimination that domestic workers frequently face. The stigma associated with domestic employment not only undermines workers' dignity but also lowers their self-esteem because they are typically perceived as inferior to other office workers.

Employers' dehumanizing treatment of employees exacerbates this stigma.

One participant shared, "Some people treat me like I'm dirty just because I clean their homes. They make me sit on the floor and don't let me use their utensils. It hurts, but I have to endure it because I need the money."

This illustrates how domestic workers are frequently exposed to physical and emotional abuse, such as being refused basic privileges like sitting at a table and using home products. These behaviors strengthen the notion that they are unworthy of respect and basic human dignity.

The sensation of powerlessness is often visible in cases of exploitation.

One participant recounts a false accusation of theft: "One of my employers falsely accused me of stealing a small item from their house. They searched my bag in front of everyone, and I felt so humiliated. Later, they found it in their own house, but they never apologized."

The narrative highlights domestic workers' vulnerability to unfair treatment and abuse, as the risk of losing their jobs frequently keeps them from advocating for their rights.

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Similarly, another participant describes feeling powerless in the face of disrespectful treatment: "My employer's teenage son orders me around and speaks disrespectfully. When I complained, his mother told me to keep quiet and focus on my work. I feel so powerless."

This depicts how hierarchical family dynamics in employers' homes can further degrade domestic workers, often condemning them to endure mistreatment without recourse.

These narratives show the connection between gender and class discrimination, with domestic workers being marginalized economically and socially. Employees are frequently stuck in a cycle of exploitation, afraid to defend their rights for fear of punishment or job loss.

One participant's experience of being coerced into taking on tasks outside her duties, "Sometimes I'm asked to do work outside of my duties, like washing cars or cleaning areas that aren't part of the house. If I refuse, they tell me they can easily find someone else" reflects the lack of autonomy in their work. This exploitation stems from the broader societal view that domestic work is undervalued and easily replaceable, reinforcing workers' vulnerability.

Research from diverse global contexts supports the conclusions of these testimonies, revealing the prevalence of exploitation and mistreatment in domestic employment. Domestic workers in Portugal, particularly migrants, are more likely to face various types of abuse, such as mistreatment, harassment, and denial of rights (Figueiredo et al., 2016). Similarly, research in Arab Gulf states shows that domestic workers, particularly Filipino and Indonesian women, are subjected to common kinds of abuse, such as long working hours and delayed payment (Blaydes, 2023). These stories highlight the global nature of exploitation in domestic employment, where workers' rights are frequently ignored and their maltreatment goes unreported.

Furthermore, stigmatization and exploitation of domestic workers are not limited to individual employer-employee interactions but are deeply ingrained in larger cultural and structural issues. In Lebanon, the sponsorship system, which binds domestic workers to individual employers, exacerbates vulnerabilities and rights breaches, producing a group of "illegal workers" who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Pande, 2013). Similarly, research in Nigeria demonstrates how gender-based exploitation is embedded in cultural norms, with women in domestic employment facing additional problems due to ingrained gender biases (Ajibade Adisa et al., 2020). These systemic elements reinforce prejudice and exploitation, making it difficult for workers to leave their marginalized situations.

Finally, the narratives of female domestic workers reveal a complex convergence of discrimination, stigma, and exploitation, all of which are entrenched in societal views, economic structures, and power disparities. These workers confront not only physical and emotional abuse, but also social marginalization, which makes it impossible for them to demand fair treatment or oppose the exploitation they face. The findings are consistent with the research on the pervasive mistreatment of domestic workers around the world, emphasizing the need for a holistic strategy to address these concerns. Legal safeguards and structural reforms, as well as initiatives to modify public views towards domestic employment, are critical to improving domestic workers' dignity rights, and well-being. By

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addressing the stigma and exploitation that these workers suffer, we may help to create a more equal and respectful environment for them in both the workplace and society.

DISCUSSION

This study emphasizes the complex interplay of sociocultural, economic, and psychological elements that influence the well-being of domestic workers in Kashmir's unorganized sector. These workers endure systemic discrimination based on traditional gender stereotypes and societal imbalances, which devalue their labor and perpetuate stigma. Such marginalization manifests itself in the denial of basic rights and access to home necessities, which reinforces feelings of invisibility and low self-worth. This is consistent with the findings of Boris and Nadasen (2008) and Figueiredo et al. (2018), who demonstrate similar global concerns. In Kashmir's patriarchal culture, the combination of class and gender exacerbates these vulnerabilities.

Domestic workers are psychologically stressed, anxious, and emotionally exhausted as a result of excessive working hours, job uncertainty, and a lack of acknowledgment. Quantitative analysis finds low self-acceptance, autonomy, and environmental mastery, whilst qualitative insights highlight a lack of emotional support from employers and family. These findings are consistent with previous studies on emotional labor, such as Ryu's (2015) study, which highlighted the critical need for mental health interventions, such as counseling and resilience-building programs. Economically, participants describe precarious employment, low pay, and exploitation, with some being reimbursed in kind rather than monetary. Their lack of negotiating power allows employers to enforce exploitative tactics that perpetuate structural imbalances. These findings are consistent with Klug et al. (2020), who link financial stress to poor mental health outcomes, emphasizing the significance of legislative reforms to promote equitable salaries, job security, and inclusion in social safety schemes.

Social isolation exacerbates these issues, as the private nature of domestic employment limits opportunities for peer connection and collective advocacy. Employees typically describe feelings of loneliness and exclusion, which exacerbates their emotional and psychological distress. Community-based initiatives, such as women's support groups, could help to address these challenges by promoting collective empowerment and minimizing isolation, as evidenced by Van Der Ham et al.'s (2014) research. To address these multifaceted difficulties, structural reforms are required, including legal recognition of domestic employment, public awareness campaigns to combat stigma, and capacity-building efforts such as financial literacy and vocational training. These efforts should be supplemented with mental health support services and tailored interventions to combat systematic exploitation.

The findings of this study are consistent with global patterns of exploitation, stigma, and economic vulnerability experienced by domestic workers in informal labor marketplaces. Comparative studies by Blaydes (2023) and Pande (2013) indicate common challenges across geographies, emphasizing the universality of their concerns. In Kashmir, these issues are exacerbated by socio-political instability and limited economic prospects, necessitating specific interventions that address both immediate needs and structural impediments to improving domestic workers' well-being.

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Limitations

- The study's focus on Srinagar limits generalizability to other regions.
- The sample size, though diverse, may not fully capture all perspectives.
- The influence of socio-political factors, while significant, was not explicitly explored.

Recommendations:

- **Policy Reforms:** Promote legal recognition of domestic labor, including fair compensation, paid leave, and job security. Include domestic workers in social security programs, such as health insurance and pensions.
- **Community Support:** Establish networks and women's groups to promote peer support and decrease isolation. Offer legal aid and conflict resolution services through local non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
- **Capacity Building:** Provide training on financial literacy, time management, and mental health awareness. To Provide workshops on resilience and stress management.
- **Public Awareness:** Raise awareness about the importance of domestic employment through media campaigns and community outreach to combat stigma. Collaborate with local leaders to encourage favorable attitudes towards domestic workers.
- **Mental Health Support:** Offer counseling and helplines to address stress and emotional difficulties. Facilitate group activities to improve social relationships and alleviate loneliness.
- **Skill Development:** Ensure access to vocational training and education for professional progress. Encourage lifelong learning for personal development and self-improvement.
- **Workplace Improvement:** Encourage standard agreements for equitable working conditions and hours. Educate employers on the ethical handling of domestic workers. These actions aim to improve the well-being, dignity, and empowerment of domestic workers in Kashmir's unorganized sector.

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Conflict of Interest

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