


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Crises and the (Re)Organizing of Gender and Work

Work in pandemic times: Exploring precarious continuities in paid domestic work in India

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Abstract

Research on crisis have brought to fore the necessity of studying the gendered impact of such events. Covid-19 too has shown how gender relations play a role in the political economy of crisis, relief and response as well as recovery. This article focusses on the experiences of paid domestic workers in India who are among the most invisible and marginalized of India's informal workers and largely excluded from labor discourse and employment legislation. With Covid-19, the precariousness characterizing the sector has also been further exposed and exacerbated, with vast numbers of workers now facing significant challenges to livelihood, as well as several new/additional pressures and risks, both at work and at home. In this article, we examine these Covid-related challenges, drawing on interviews conducted with domestic workers, NGO practitioners, and labor rights' activists in Delhi and Kolkata between April and August 2020. We show how, during the national lockdown, many domestic workers in these cities experienced increased insecurity related to jobs and housing, as well as an increased control and surveillance at home. Furthermore, with the partial easing of lockdown and the associated 'return' to work, many experienced reduced bargaining power at work, increasingly blurred roles, and heavier workloads. Workers also experienced more overt forms of avoidance behavior, linked to ideas of caste/class and more recent notions of 'hygiene'/'distancing'. In detailing these experiences and contextualizing them within a much longer history of invisibilization and marginalization facing workers

engaged in social reproduction, we draw attention to what we call the 'precarious continuities' in paid domestic work. We argue that the crisis allows for a lens to widen the theoretical understanding around social reproduction as a form of underpaid and devalued labor.

KEYWORDS

caste, Covid-19, domestic work, India, precarity, women

1 | INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on crisis (e.g., Horton, 2012) suggests that, gender roles and norms as well as unequal access to power and resources reinforces women's susceptibility to physical and material harm in these times. Scholarship on disaster (e.g., Schroeder, 1987; Vaughan, 1987) in fact reveals that such critical moments cannot be disembodied from the intersecting socio-economic realities framed by gender, caste, class and race among others. Women's greater vulnerability to the consequences of crises and the greater difficulties of recovering, clearly underscore the need to study the 'gendered terrain of disaster' (Bhatt, 1995; Enarson, 1998). Enarson (1998:159) argues that women's vulnerability in crisis is located in the nexus of gender relations, global development and the specific hazard that occurs. The gender division of labor (paid and unpaid) being a primary axis of social organisation and women's, especially those located at the intersection of multiple marginalities, devalued position in it, further contributes to their precarity and to crisis of social reproduction. This scholarship brings to fore the necessity of studying the gendered impact of crisis.

Covid-19 has brought fundamental transformations in the world of work, with research and commentary highlighting widespread job losses in particular sectors (i.e., hospitality, tourism) and new forms/patterns of work (i.e., working from home) in others (Deshpande, 2020). The pandemic has revealed a particularly gendered impact, with women—and women of color, in particular—bearing the brunt of job losses (Kabeer, 2020; Topping, 2020). In addition, women have shouldered the burden of unpaid reproductive/household labor, or the work of social reproduction, in the face of reduced childcare, their withdrawal from paid employment and their increased reproductive burden representing a considerable rollback in terms of gender equality and women's rights (Deshpande, 2020; Topping, 2020). These experiences from pandemic thus clearly suggest that gender relations play a role in the political economy of crisis, relief and response as well as recovery.

In this article, we focus on the impact of Covid-19 on women domestic workers in India, a group which remains economically-undervalued and marginalized, despite the more recent and somewhat paradoxical recognition of this work/group—at least in public discourse—as 'essential'. Locating the experience of these women in the crisis, we illustrate how Covid-19 has spelt an escalation of pre-existing precarities for domestic workers. While acknowledging the critical impact that the pandemic had on the lives of domestic workers in India, we contextualize this within the larger socio-economic structures which shape their marginalization. The article then makes a case for understanding the crisis unleashed by the pandemic as a critical continuity in the precarious lives of the workers.

Drawing on interviews conducted with domestic workers, NGO practitioners, and labor rights' activists in Delhi and Kolkata between April and August 2020, as well as insights from our longer-term ethnographic engagement with domestic workers in these cities, we explore the challenges, pressures, and risks faced by domestic workers in India in the earlier phase of the pandemic. We discuss key issues raised by workers in relation to both their working and personal lives, and we contextualize workers' experiences within a much longer history of invisibilization and marginalization. In doing so, we show how paid domestic work in particular, and socially-reproductive work in general, continues to be shaped by gender, class, and caste, highlighting, in turn, the 'precarious continuities' in paid domestic work. We also question prevalent understandings of paid domestic work—as unskilled, 'natural' labor carried out by

women—and in turn join calls for a new understanding which recognizes this work as work and offers workers the economic and social protections they urgently need, both now and in the future.

The theoretical impetus for interrogating domestic work lies in examining how the pandemic reinforces precarious gendered labor as well as the gendered impact of the crisis of social reproduction. A systematic analysis of gender and labor illustrates how hierarchies of labor and resultant inequalities of status and income which devalue women's work are created on socially constructed gender norms (e.g., Acker, 1990; Kabeer, 1994; Sen, 1999). Mapping workers' pandemic experiences, we unearth how informal contractual relationships, covert forms of unpaid work and deployment of caste/class norms that underpin the increasingly feminized sector of domestic work is enabled by its gendered nature. Moreover, looking at the experiences of paid domestic workers allows us to locate the crisis of social reproduction in both the sites of paid and unpaid labor. Social reproduction is institutionalized through patriarchy and caste which creates hierarchies of insecure citizenship aided by the direct or passive involvement of the state to reproduce cheap labor like domestic work (Das Gupta, 2020). Social reproduction, while crucial for sustaining life, continues to be invisible, unacknowledged and societally embedded as gendered labor. Performed within the household it is commonly treated normatively as a part of women's relational role lacking any value or recognition; as paid work too, social reproduction is regarded as unskilled labor, an extension of women's natural tendencies thus attracting low pay and poor conditions (Gordon-Bouviour, 2021:213).

The article begins by offering an overview of the history and current organisation of paid domestic work in India. It then discusses how the Covid-19 crisis and its management unfolded in India in the earlier phase of the pandemic before moving to discuss the methodology. The main discussion is organized into two chronological sections. The first, covering April to early May 2020, explores the crisis as it was experienced by domestic workers during the national lockdown (late March-early May), while the second, covering late May to August 2020, examines key issues associated with the gradual 'opening up' of work and business and the associated 'return' to work for many people, including many domestic workers.¹ Our analysis of the two phases reveals how the pandemic spelt a crisis of both paid and unpaid. Analyzing across these two strands/timelines, we show how the pandemic brought new and complex challenges for domestic workers in India, while also exposing and exacerbating key challenges stemming from the structural inequalities historically underpinning this labor.

2 | DOMESTIC WORK IN INDIA

Although personalized/domestic service has a long and unbroken history in India, shaped by both caste/class and colonialism (Banerjee, 2004; Sinha & Varma, 2020), demand for domestic workers has risen dramatically in recent years. Indeed, with economic liberalization and a new wave of middle-class employers entering the market, the services of cooks, cleaners, and carers have been in ever-increasing demand. The total number of such workers are now thought to number upwards of 4.75 million (ILO, 2010).² Men once made up the majority of those working in domestic/household roles (Ray & Qayum, 2010: pp. 7, 58; see also: Banerjee, 2004). The figure of the male 'family retainer' often coming from land and villages associated with the employing family's estates and working for the family for several generations (Ray & Qayum, 2010: pp. 7, 58; see also Banerjee, 2004). Today, the work is highly feminized, the process of feminization occurring in India from the late twentieth century onwards and contributing to a prevalent understanding of this labor as 'natural' and unskilled 'women's work' (Ray & Qayum, 2010: pp. 58–59; see also: Banerjee, 1985).³ Combining paid work with their own unpaid domestic/reproductive labor at home, many women work part-time, often juggling several different jobs/employers (Palriwala & Neetha, 2010; Sen & Sengupta, 2016). The work requires no formal qualifications and is relatively stable, at least compared to other types of informal sector work. It has, subsequently, become one of the chief sources of employment for women casual workers (Neetha, 2004), as well as one of the most important sources of livelihood for migrant women in India (Raghuram, 1995: p. 209). As in most other contexts, the term 'domestic worker' is not neatly defined in India; rather, it is a broad category covering a variety of different roles/jobs (housemaid/servant, cook, gardener, *chowkidar*/watchman, carer/*ayah*/attendant).

Distinction is often made between those performing maintenance tasks that is, housemaids and those performing care that is, *ayahs*/attendants.

Furthermore, caste, along with class, continues to play a role in organizing the labor, and shaping workers' experiences. Tasks/jobs viewed as dirty/dirtier and (more) menial are typically carried out by those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy (Chakravarty & Chakravarty, 2011: p. 5; see also Raghuram, 2001; Vasanthi, 2011). Workers also regularly suffer caste- (and class-) based discrimination while working in employers' homes (Frøystad, 2003; Ray & Qayum, 2010; Sen & Sengupta, 2016; Sharma, 2016). All of these go on to shape domestic work as stigmatized labor in wider public discourse.

On the whole, and despite variations in jobs/roles and pay, paid domestic labor remains economically-undervalued, understood as 'women's work', an extension of women's 'natural' domesticity, a reflection of their 'love'/'virtue', and in turn, 'low-value' and 'unskilled' labor (Banerjee, 2018). It also takes place within the home/private sphere, where the postcolonial state has been traditionally reluctant to intervene and where workers are in turn susceptible to harassment and exploitation (Neetha, 2021). This is evident when we see that much of the redressal of inequalities between men and women's work has focussed around formal equality in the workplace while the private realm remains undisturbed (Crompton & Lyonette, 2008). Resultantly domestic workers, in most cases, work without written/formal employment contracts. They also remain largely excluded from mainstream labor and social security protections/legislation. Any bargaining typically takes places on an individual level—between worker and employer—although domestic workers' unions have been more influential in certain parts of the country (Moghe, 2013).

In addition, because of the private, intimate nature of paid domestic work, and the particular relations of class/caste that have historically underpinned this labor in India, workers are often treated as both 'part of the family' and 'outsider' (Ray & Qayum, 2010). The familial discourse, or the 'rhetoric of love', which often binds workers/servants and employers/masters together, also masks exploitation (Ray & Qayum, 2010). Workers, too, sometimes invoke this to their advantage, seeking to develop reciprocal, familial-like relationships which bring important material and non-material benefits, including increased job stability and greater flexibility regarding leave (Sen & Sengupta, 2016).

3 | CONTEXTUALIZING THE PANDEMIC IN INDIA

In India, the official response to Covid-19 has largely mirrored that adopted in many other countries, though government mismanagement and shortages/delays of relief have meant that what initially began as a public health crisis quickly developed into a humanitarian one (Srivastava, 2020). The sudden announcement of lockdown on March 24, 2020 and the delayed introduction of insufficient stimulus packages to support the most vulnerable meant that millions of poor workers were effectively abandoned with no source of livelihood or protection. In the days and weeks that followed, millions of migrant workers in major Indian cities returned or attempted to return home, to their towns and villages. With the temporary suspension of public transport, many were forced to make these long and arduous journeys by foot, bicycle, and handcart (Sinha, 2020). News reports brought global attention to the crisis, typically focusing on the plight of male migrants and overlooking the experiences of women who were also working away from home, albeit in less visible, domestic/care roles.

Domestic workers were also largely left out of early pandemic policy discussions reflecting a longstanding tendency by the state, and society in general to overlook paid domestic work as a form of work. In the first few months of the pandemic, the Central government and state governments of Delhi and West Bengal all offered monetary relief and/or salary-protection to those employed in commercial establishments, factories, transport, and construction, while nothing comparable was introduced for those working in private households (Nath & Chakravarthy, 2020). If domestic workers were able to access support, this was largely in the form of charity, through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), neighborhood drives, and in some cases domestic work agencies/platforms, reinforcing the idea of domestic workers as 'household help'.⁴ The only specific piece of official guidance relating to domestic workers was a request from the Central and most state governments to employers to keep paying workers' wages while

they stayed at home to observe lockdown (Sindwani, 2020). That this was not enforced in any way meant that workers had, in many cases, been refused pay during lockdown or told to leave their jobs without any form of severance pay (see also Griffin, 2020).

In May 2020, full lockdown was lifted and certain services, including domestic services, were allowed to resume, with mask-wearing and distancing measures still in place. This was then followed by a further easing of restrictions in June 2020, with remaining rules differing slightly between states and affecting particular sectors more than others. Limited national rail services also resumed in June, although services were reportedly more expensive than before the pandemic. It was not until September 2020 that national services became more regularized (Bhargava, 2020); and, in West Bengal, local trains connecting different districts did not resume operation in any form until November 2020 (Sabarwal, 2020). This, as we later discuss, had serious implications for many informal sector workers, including many domestic workers.

4 | METHODOLOGY

This article draws on semi-structured, qualitative interviews conducted with domestic workers, NGO practitioners, and labor rights' activists in Delhi and Kolkata/West Bengal between April and August 2020. It also draws on our longer-term ethnographic research with domestic workers in Delhi and Kolkata/West Bengal (see: Banerjee, 2018; Wilks, 2019, 2021), as well as insights from two public webinars—the first hosted in April 2020 by Jagori, a feminist research and advocacy organisation in Delhi, and the second hosted in May 2020 by Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action/YUVA, a non-profit organisation supporting vulnerable groups in Mumbai.

We interviewed 15 domestic workers in total—7 in Delhi, 8 in Kolkata/West Bengal—and we carried out repeat/multiple interviews with 12 workers, which in turn enabled us to generate rich, detailed data about workers' lives and pandemic experiences. Some of these workers were also known to us through our previous research; the fact that we had pre-established, trusting relationships in these cases similarly enabled us to 'dive deeper' and generate rich insights. To supplement worker interviews, we interviewed representatives from two NGOs—Parichiti, a women's organisation working to support domestic workers in Kolkata, and Nirmana, a labor organisation supporting construction and domestic workers in Delhi. Furthermore, one of us (Supurna) participated in local relief in Kolkata and spoke with five employers. We have included some of these employer comments and observations in this article (with their consent) to contextualize workers' experiences. The domestic workers we interviewed were aged between 20 and 55 years (in some cases, exact ages were unclear/unknown). Ten identified as Hindu, five as Muslim. They represented a mix of part-time/live-out, migrant, commuting, local, and live-in workers who were or had been until the time of lockdown variously engaged in cooking, cleaning, and care work. Some, as we discuss, had recently turned to other forms of income-generation, including selling fruits and vegetables.

Given social distancing, interviews with workers were mainly conducted over the phone in Hindi and Bengali, at times that were convenient to participants.⁵ In a few cases, in the post-lockdown period, interviews were conducted face-to-face with adequate protection measures in place. Although conducting phone interviews, as opposed to in-person ones, can make it difficult for researchers to pick up on non-verbal clues, this was the safest and most practical option for us post-lockdown; it was also the only option during lockdown. Conducting phone interviews afforded participants greater flexibility and choice over how and where to speak to us. Again, having pre-established relationships with some workers, and conducting repeat/multiple interviews, also enabled us to mitigate some of the limitations associated with phone interviews (see: Taylor, 2002; Block & Erskine, 2012).

Conducting research on paid domestic work is a complex, challenging, and ethically-fraught endeavor—doing so during a global pandemic, especially so. The existing power asymmetries between ourselves (Supurna, a middle-class, upper-caste Indian woman, and Lauren, a white, middle-class, British woman) and domestic worker participants, were made even starker by the wider events and conditions of the pandemic, and the new and heightened challenges facing domestic workers in India. It was thus especially important to approach the research carefully. We had both

previously conducted research with domestic workers in India, and thus were able to negotiate/mitigate some of the more expected challenges of the project. Supurna, who conducted the interviews with domestic workers, was also, in some cases, able to draw on pre-established relationships with workers; this in turn enabled her to build trust and rapport (more easily) with participants. We were, in addition, flexible about how and when the research/interviews took place, balancing safety concerns with workers' shifting concerns and priorities, and we obtained informed consent verbally, as well as continually. We asked participants questions about their pandemic experiences, but, in line with a more participatory, feminist, and reciprocal approach, we also encouraged them to raise (other) issues that were important to them. Furthermore, we provided workers we interviewed with information about relief and support organisations. To protect workers' identities, we have not included their names in this article.

Since our research draws on data generated over a period of 6 months, we have organized the following discussion into two main sections, the first covering April to May 2020, a period of national lockdown in India, and the second covering May to August 2020, when lockdown was gradually lifted. The two sections cannot be seen as mutually exclusive as some issues like negotiating caste fears was faced by workers during lockdown too as will be evident from the latter section. Drawing together and analyzing across these two periods, we show how lockdown and Covid-19 more generally has been an exceptional moment of crisis for India's domestic workers, bringing new and complex challenges, while also exposing and exacerbating certain pre-existing issues connected to India's long and complex history of domestic service (Banerjee, 2004; Ray & Qayum, 2010), as well as an ongoing understanding of this labor as low-value, unskilled, 'women's work'. In particular, we illustrate how the pandemic has contributed to increased insecurity for many workers, while also leading to heavier workloads and heightened forms of control and surveillance, linked to the fear of Covid-19 among employers but grounded in earlier labor practices and forms of caste- and class-based avoidance behavior. More broadly, then, our discussion brings to the fore the entwined dynamics of class, caste, and gender which continue to underpin and shape domestic workers' experiences in India, as well as the gendered labor underpinning workers' lives more generally.

5 | LOCKDOWN LIVES: INCREASED INSECURITY AND CHALLENGES TO LIVELIHOOD

The national lockdown, introduced on March 24, 2020, spelled great uncertainty for India's domestic workers. The impact of the crisis has been felt particularly keenly by those undertaking paid and unpaid social reproduction, both within and outside their own homes (Gordon-Bouvoir, 2021). The socio-economic crisis caused further gendering of social reproduction (Neetha, 2021) both for unpaid (Deshpande, 2020) and paid domestic labor. While paid domestic work enables social reproduction in the employers' homes, the curtailment of wages (which were anyway low) meant that domestic workers found it difficult to sustain their own social reproduction. In this section, we examine the issues and experiences recounted by those we spoke to in this lockdown period, discussing, first, the dilemmas experienced by workers in relation to jobs/employers, as well as difficulties in meeting basic living needs, before turning to some wider issues including healthcare and domestic violence. In doing so, we highlight some important and long-standing problems affecting India's paid domestic workers, contextualizing workers' new/Covid-related concerns and experiences within a much longer history of precarity and marginalization. We also show how the burden of maintaining their homes and families was largely gendered. Workers' experiences of heightened control and surveillance at home further highlights the ways in which women's negotiation of patriarchal control within family rests precariously on their ability to work and earn.

5.1 | Replaceable labor

The most pressing concern for workers in the lockdown period, as reflected in the accounts of those we spoke to in Delhi and Kolkata, was that of making ends meet. For many workers, the arrival of Covid-19 and the introduction of a

national lockdown resulted in a (temporary) loss of work/wages, as well as a period of re-negotiation with employers, leading in many cases to feelings of (increased) powerlessness among workers. In some cases, employers agreed to continue paying workers while they stayed at home to observe lockdown rules. In many other cases, workers lost jobs outright, often being told by employers that it was not safe or appropriate for them to come to work (see also: Sumalatha et al., 2021). Many workers were also unsure about whether they would continue to be employed/receive pay from employers, the entire question of their livelihood appearing at this time incredibly uncertain. The uncertainties of wage payment that the workers faced once again brought to fore the intensification of crisis for those performing socially reproductive work. Unrewarded by the society and unprotected by the state the withdrawal of wages exposed the workers to a crisis in sustaining their own social reproduction.

Of the 15 workers we interviewed in Delhi and Kolkata, only seven reported receiving wages or the promise of wages for April 2020, while eight (five of whom were working in Delhi) said their employers refused to pay them for April, with some of these workers also reporting having received deducted wages for March reflecting the first 10 days of lockdown/absence from work (See also: Joseph, 2020). Parul (late thirties), a live-out worker in Kolkata, was one of the several workers to experience such uncertainty regarding work/pay. Her employers asked her to stop coming to work during the lockdown and also refused to pay her for those days of forced absence. Parul had worked in this household for a few months only and was reluctant to press the matter of payment for fear of losing her job. Her experience was not unique and like those of others pointed to an erosion of workers' bargaining power, tied to the underlying issues outlined earlier in relation to paid domestic work but exposed and heightened due to Covid-19 (see also: Joseph, 2020; Sumalatha et al., 2021).

Practitioners/activists working to support domestic workers during lockdown reported that many employers saw no need to keep paying workers who were unable or unwilling to come to work: 'When we appeal to employers, they say, "How can you demand salary for the domestic workers when we are doing all the work and they are sitting at home?"' (Meva Bharati, Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union, Jagori webinar, April 2020). Domestic workers speaking at the YUVA webinar confirmed that many employers had been doing their own cooking and cleaning during lockdown, worrying that this would be a long-term arrangement, rendering their services redundant post-lockdown: 'In one of the houses I worked in, the *madam* could not even make her own tea, but for the last 6 weeks she is cooking, cleaning all by herself. So I wonder sometimes if she will need me to come back for work at all' (Usha, Mumbai, YUVA webinar, May 20). For many workers, then, the national lockdown brought further uncertainty at work, as well as a heightened sense of their labor being 'low-value' and 'unskilled' (Banerjee, 2018), with workers' roles/jobs in turn being expendable (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: pp. 118–120). The rationale put forward by employers for withholding wages also negates the notion of the crisis as universally felt across classes. Reproducing the invisibility of domestic work in normal times, the pandemic experience too is framed in these narratives as a crisis specific to the employing class which the domestic workers were taking advantage of. That the employers could claim this both discursively and materially is made possible by the compounding of pre-existing precarities that such workers already labored under.

A corollary to the loss of work/wages experienced by many workers during lockdown was the difficulty in paying for basic necessities, including rent. Many domestic workers do not own their own homes, and because of low wages and job insecurity often struggle to pay rent month-to-month (Wilks, 2019: pp. 81–82). With Covid-19, and subsequent job/wage losses, keeping up with rent payments became yet more difficult for many workers. Swapna (early forties) and Dipali (late forties), two live-out/part-time migrant domestic workers in Delhi, recounted how they had been harassed by their landlords for rent during lockdown, leading them to worry about eviction. 'The situation is very dismal, *didi*. This is the month of Ramzaan and we have nothing to give the children, nothing to eat' (Swapna, Delhi, April 2020).

From workers' accounts of lockdown, it seems clear that their ability to negotiate with employers (i.e., about keeping work/wages while observing lockdown rules) was tied to the level of familiarity and familiarity they had managed to establish with employers pre-pandemic, and in turn to how much bargaining power (they felt) they had in the relationship. As the literature on domestic work highlights, workers with long-standing employment relationships generally fare better in negotiations about leave and other benefits, while those with newer relationships typically

lack bargaining power and are thus more vulnerable to dismissal/replacement (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: pp. 118–120; Wilks, 2019: pp. 166–169). During lockdown, this pattern appears to have continued, with workers in long-standing and more stable relationships generally faring better than those in newer and less stable relationships.

Shyamoli (early-forties), a live-out/part time worker in Kolkata, explained how her lack of bargaining power as a recently-recruited worker contributed to her agreeing to a request from one employer to keep working during lockdown, despite the many risks this brought for her and her family. Shyamoli could not manage without this job/wage and her employer would not agree to continue paying her unless she continued to carry out her work. Shyamoli lived close to this employers' home, but going to work during lockdown meant having to leave her slum at five in the morning in order to avoid the police who had been patrolling the area to enforce the lockdown. Like others who had also continued going out to work at this time, Shyamoli worried about police harassment,⁶ and also about contracting Covid-19 since she did not have any proper protective clothing (she used a simple handkerchief to cover her face but was aware that this offered limited protection).

In other cases, workers were asked to stay back at employers' homes when lockdown began, an arrangement which enabled some of these workers to undertake extra work for extra pay. As lockdown persisted, however, many of these workers became increasingly homesick and worried about returning home, a situation made worse by the lack of care/support from employers, as well as continued suspension of trains which made it difficult and expensive for workers to return home.

Mamata (late-forties), a live-out/part-time, commuting domestic worker in Kolkata, described how she had been staying over at her employer's home since lockdown was announced. She agreed to stay over because she felt guilty leaving her elderly employers alone; their adult children, she noted, lived abroad, and they had also always been kind. When we spoke to her, however, Mamata had begun to worry about her own family, whom she had then not seen for several weeks. Her employers were unconcerned by this, and instead continued to pressure her into staying on at their home, with little thought about how this would entail missing Eid with her family. 'People say that this (lockdown) will continue until September, how can I stay away from home until then, especially with Eid next month?' (Mamata, Kolkata, April 20). Although Mamata was thus 'essential' to her employers, and also on familial-like terms with them, she was ultimately not *like them*, her needs and family/affective ties mattering much less than theirs.

The accounts discussed in the section shows how lack of formal/written contracts make it possible for employers to vary the terms of labor to their advantage, both in the case of new and old workers. Thus, the constructed familiarity within the employment relationship, which can often bring benefits for workers, can also work against them. At the same time, the lack of familiarity in some employment relationships translates into trust deficit and in turn similarly contributes to low/reduced bargaining power for workers. The experiences of the domestic workers also bring to fore how the crisis of social reproduction in the pandemic needs to be understood in a continuum; the compulsion to perform work enabling social reproduction in the employers' home comes at the cost of being able to perform socially reproductive work in their own homes.

5.2 | Healthcare

Healthcare, both in relation to expenses for pre-existing medical conditions and the risks associated with Covid-19, was another serious concern for domestic workers during the earlier period of lockdown. In March 2020, it became evident that workers were at risk of contracting Covid-19 from employers who had recently returned from abroad, and that few employers were taking steps to protect their domestic workers from the virus (Kakodar, 2020). These issues were compounded by the difficulties workers already faced in accessing affordable healthcare, and of the added difficulty of doing so during a pandemic when services were under additional strain. Dipali, introduced above, was worried about meeting her daily expenses and paying for her husband's cancer medicines since her employers had stopped paying her wages at the time of lockdown. With the sudden loss of wages, and having used up most of their meagre savings on food and other basic necessities, the pair was unable to afford these medicines. 'We are in a

desperate situation, no food, no medicine, no money. The governments keep announcing schemes but none of these ever reach us' (Dipali, Delhi, April 2020).

For many workers, there was also a felt need to try and hide potential signs of illness at work and thus attempt to mitigate the risk of dismissal/replacement—particularly as domestic workers have been seen and treated as potential 'carriers' of Covid-19 from the very outset of the pandemic (Dey, 2020). Urmila, a part-time worker in Kolkata, recounted how her employer issued an ultimatum after hearing her sneeze 1 day at work. She was told to either take a Covid-19 test immediately or quarantine for 14 days without pay. Aware that both options would end up costing her, Urmila was stuck: 'If I go to a government centre for test without any sign of fever or doctor's prescription, they will drive me away. People like me cannot afford to go to private facilities. If they are so concerned, they should pay for it. I don't know what to do' (April 2020). As we can see here, employers' fears about contracting Covid-19 in some cases mapped onto existing middle-class assumptions about workers as 'dirty' and 'dangerous' outsiders, exacerbating their hardships.

5.3 | Work, family and patriarchal control

The impact of the pandemic was not just felt in the working lives of those we spoke to but also at home, with their families and in their domestic lives. The livelihood crisis resulting from the pandemic has been registered across genders. Although the impacts of the pandemic has been felt by both men and women in casual employment, with many men losing work/wages and suffering increased insecurity just as women, our discussions with the women domestic workers reveal a particularly intense and dual impact in women's lives. Women not only suffered losses in relation to work/wages, but we see how the burden of maintaining their own homes and families was largely gendered with them taking on additional workload. Further they have been subjected to increased forms of control and surveillance at home which are connected to their own and men's unemployment and the intense financial strain resulting from Covid-related job/wage losses, but is grounded in pre-existing patterns and explanations of patriarchal control. As our discussions highlighted, women's wellbeing, and the wellbeing of their families, rested precariously on their ability to bring home money earned through paid domestic work. Though low, their wages were at least regular, and also often better than those earned by their husbands/sons. Furthermore, women's ability to undertake paid work in 'respectable' middle-class homes had previously enabled them to negotiate traditional gender norms and strike bargains with husbands/family about their mobility and employment. They often needed 'justified' reasons to leave home, but retained (limited) control over their mobility and work within the dominant caste-patriarchal norms of their communities. With the pandemic, many women found themselves having to again re-negotiate with husbands/family. In some cases, they also reported facing increased/aggravated surveillance and control at home (see also Rukmini, 2020).

Kuhu (forties), a live-out/part-time worker in Kolkata, spoke about feeling 'trapped' as a result of lockdown. She had previously enjoyed the relative freedom her work in the city afforded, noting how that had allowed her to meet other people and take a break from the stuffy, confined home she shared with her husband. She also spoke resentfully of the additional (unpaid) domestic work she was now expected to do at home, and how her husband had become increasingly controlling, hardly allowing her out of the house. 'He is not violent, but he is very controlling. I sometimes argue with him, but he gets very angry. I try to avoid this, especially at this time. But I feel so claustrophobic (*dom bondho lage*)' (Kuhu, forties, Kolkata, April 2020).

Those who decided to stay on at employers' homes similarly reported having to re-negotiate their mobility/work with husbands/family during this period, and in turn increased feelings of anxiety in relation to their marital/familial relationships. Sakina (late-thirties), a part-time/live-out, commuting *ayah* who had stayed behind at her employer's Kolkata home during lockdown, was initially pleased that she was able to earn extra money for her family. Her prolonged absence, however, soon started to make her husband unhappy. As lockdown stretched on, Sakina found herself facing a difficult dilemma. She was told by her employer that they would not take her back if she left during

lockdown; but the longer she stayed, the more anxious she became about her husband's reaction when she eventually returned home. Reflecting on her situation, and the situation facing many others like her, Sakina was resigned: 'For people like us there are no laws, no benefits to protect us and before any virus affects us, either hunger or our husbands will kill us' (Sakina, Kolkata, April 2020). Pre-existing gender relations in the home and labor relations at the worksite compounded by lack of state protection during crisis illustrate the multiple ways patriarchy plays out in everyday and critical moments to shape precarious continuities in the lives of such women.

Further Kuhu and Sakina's accounts support wider findings from the literature on gender relations in India, showing how, because of persisting ideas around women's 'honor' and the associated stigma around women's mobility/sexuality/paid work, working-class women must carefully negotiate work and mobility, and attempts by men to control their behavior and movements, performing respectability and guarding against suspicion from husbands, sons, and others (Grover, 2011: pp. 50, 54; Wilks, 2021: pp. 184–198). Kuhu's account further illustrates how a sudden loss of work can be similarly difficult to negotiate, with women again suffering serious repercussions, including increased surveillance and heavier workloads at home. The abrupt change in circumstances (for Kuhu, the sudden inability to leave home for work, and for Sakina, the sudden inability to return home) threatened the delicate bargains that these women had earlier secured, resulting in a loss of autonomy and mobility and, as their accounts show, feelings of claustrophobia and a lack of control.

6 | NEGOTIATIONS AROUND RETURN TO WORK: 'NEW NORMAL'

Covid-19 brought great uncertainty for domestic workers in India, not only presenting problems for their immediate livelihoods and survival, but also for their future working lives. With the easing of the lockdown from late May 2020, the concerns of domestic workers shifted to take into account new challenges, including how to get to work, how to stay safe (both on the way to work and in employers' homes), and how to negotiate new/changed expectations among employers. In this section, we reflect on these various challenges, experienced by domestic workers during the later 'opening up' phase (late May–August 2020), when lockdown restrictions were lifted and domestic workers and others were encouraged to return to work. We show that this return marked a new stage in workers' Covid-related experiences, bringing new and different problems/negotiations for workers, while also acknowledging that many workers, particularly those who lost jobs during lockdown, continued to be concerned about finding work and staying afloat post-lockdown. In addition, we illustrate how dynamics of caste and class continued to shape domestic workers' experiences of work during and post-lockdown, with long-standing ideas about workers as 'dirty' and 'dangerous' outsiders being further legitimized and reinforced by fears of Covid-19 and the new and more socially-acceptable discourse on 'distancing'. This section highlights how the pandemic has resulted into further devaluation in socially reproductive labor framed as it is by caste, class and gendered marginalities.

6.1 | Locked-down mobility

The main issue facing some of the domestic workers we spoke to in the immediate post-lockdown period was that of getting to work since many forms of public transport, including local trains, remained suspended or were severely curtailed even after lockdown was lifted. In Delhi, many of those working as cooks, carers, and maids are migrants from West Bengal, Jharkhand, and other eastern states (Banerjee, 2018; Wadhawan, 2013). In Kolkata, large numbers of domestic workers live in villages and semi-urban areas outside the city, commuting daily by local train (Roy, 2003; Wilks, 2019, 2021). With national and local trains suspended even after the opening up of other sectors, such workers remained stuck, without transport and without proper access to livelihood.

Some of those we spoke to in Delhi at this time were migrants who had earlier traveled to Delhi from West Bengal to find work. They had returned to their villages just before the outbreak of the pandemic to celebrate Holi—an important Hindu festival—and with the outbreak of Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown had become stuck.

Now I have been here (in her village) for four months. How to go back if the trains don't resume? But you think they (employers) will keep my job till I return? Why? It's not like no one apart from Shaalu knows how to cook or wash dishes (laughs). In the news they tell us so many people have lost their jobs, anyone of them can get my job isn't it? With no job here (in the plantations) and there (in Delhi), what is to become of us? No news will tell you that (Shaalu, August 2020).

Given the gendered patterns of and access to transport, women, unlike men, rarely own their own modes of transport but are, rather, dependent on public transport for getting to work. Commuting domestic workers living in Kolkata's suburbs and dependant on local trains (Roy, 2003; Wilks, 2019, 2021), were unable to reach the city for work due to train service suspension, resulting in what others have called 'forced immobility' (Bandagi, 2021).

I have lost all the jobs that I had, they have all employed domestic workers locally. Who will wait for five months? I don't blame them, but what is to become of us? [*amader ki hobe*] There were days when we had nothing to eat and just kept our stomachs filled with water. Now I have started selling fruits in the locality. I buy them from the market and then go from street to street selling them. The number of sales is low, there are far too many vendors but at least we can eat a meal (Tamanna, Kolkata, July 2020).

As Tamanna explains, selling fruit locally was one of the few available options open to her when the trains stopped running and she was unable to reach her employers' homes in Kolkata. Her earnings from selling fruit were lower and more unpredictable than those earned through doing domestic work. Her decision to undertake this work was ultimately distress-driven, and it also constituted what Joan Robinson (1936) had called disguised unemployment, whereby declining demand for a particular product/industry/service pushes workers into other sectors where returns are lower (Robinson, 1936: p. 226). In short, without the adequate provision of alternative regular work for women such as Tamanna, there has been crowding in more insecure types of informal-sector, piecemeal work, including food-vending. Such precarisation has further increased feelings of insecurity among such workers, while also possibly (further) eroding their self-identity as 'productive' workers (see: Sen, 1975: pp. 3–5; Banerjee, 2018).

6.2 | Change in labor conditions

Workers accounts reveal how their workloads increased post-lockdown, as they had for many of those who had continued working *throughout* lockdown (on this latter point, also see: Agarwal, 2020). As Rai et al. (2014) already note while social reproduction workers already faced substantial disadvantage before the outbreak of the pandemic, the national lockdown made this especially difficult. Indeed, with an increasing number of middle-class employers/family members, and in particular young professional couples, working from home, the expectations and demands on domestic workers in many cases also increased. The pandemic shifted traditional boundaries between home and workspace, intensifying the pressure on these workers who were now expected to serve in both the home and the remote workplace. Live-in workers, in particular, reported, having heavier workloads during and post-lockdown, linked, in their view, to the fact that their employers were spending increasing amounts of time at home.

There is no time to breathe even. During normal times, the morning was hectic, in packing everyone's tiffin to take to office or to school. But now the whole day is hectic, there is no packed tiffin but hot

meals with more courses to cook. Plus, with everyone at home, someone or the other is demanding tea or coffee, and sometimes snacks. What with dishes piling up and so much more food to prepare, I think I have lived in the kitchen for the last three months. Sometimes it feels like you are a machine just churning out food at their command, no request, no sorry, nothing (Anita, Delhi, June 2020).

Anita describes how preparing several hot meals, as well as on-demand tea/coffee/snacks for employers who are constantly present, is tiring and time-consuming work. As she also told us later, she was not paid extra for this additional work. Indeed, it seems then that her employers did not even register the difference between Anita's pre- and post-lockdown workloads, regarding what she viewed as new/additional tasks merely as part of her ongoing, ordinary role, once again foregrounding how socially reproductive labor of the domestic worker was rendered invisible as *work*.

Sarika (late thirties), a live-out worker in Kolkata, recounted a similar experience, describing how, although she had been employed, pre-pandemic, as a child-carer, post-lockdown, her employers had asked her to also start performing certain household tasks, including washing dishes and washing and folding clothes. These new tasks had previously been carried out by another worker, a commuter who, because of recent issues with train travel, had been unable to come to the city for work. Sarika's husband had recently lost his own job; and, in this period of personal crisis, and given the heightened levels of competition due to the pandemic, Sarika felt she had to accept the new terms of employment, even though she knew she would not be paid any extra money. As her account below indicates, her employers were aware of the wider situation and thus of her reduced bargaining power. In Sarika's view, they used this knowledge to their advantage, to get her to agree to the new arrangement.

They argue that they are doing me a favour by keeping me in employment, as with all the family staying at home, there is no need for a child-minder. My husband has lost his job in the factory, and if my job goes too, how will I feed my two daughters? So I had to agree. They have not even increased the wages for the extra work (Sarika, Kolkata, July 2020).

For Leela (late forties), a migrant domestic worker in Delhi, it was not so much the lack of additional pay that bothered her as it was the fact that, post-lockdown, she was asked to do work which she had previously clearly explained she was unwilling to do.

During the lockdown the part-time worker was not able to come. The mistress suggested that I sweep the rooms on alternate days. She said she will also pay extra for this. But it is not only the question of money. Right at the time I joined I told them that there are some work I *will not do*. Sweeping and mopping floors I will simply not do. But there is a lot of pressure from them (Leela, Delhi, June 2020).

Leela had previously negotiated this job based on certain clear exclusions, with her seeking to eschew certain household tasks (i.e., sweeping and mopping floors), which may have been because of an understanding of these tasks as 'dirty'/dirtier than others. She greatly resented her employers' attempt to go back on this agreement post-lockdown but, as with Anita and Sarika, felt stuck and eventually agreed to the new terms, aware that her options would likely be similarly or more limited in other jobs/homes.

In all three of the accounts discussed here, we see how, because of a lack of fixed job descriptions and formal labor rights, as well as the historical specificities of paid domestic work—namely that domestic workers occupy a curious position as both 'part of the family'/quasi-kin and 'outsider'/*kajer lok/naukrani*/servant (Ray & Qayum, 2010; Sen & Sengupta, 2016)—workers' roles are often blurred and thus susceptible to interpretation by employers. Furthermore, workers regularly feel obliged to accept requests for new/additional work, without additional pay, regardless of previous agreements settled on verbally with employers (Sen & Sengupta, 2016). The fact that workers are generally very poorly remunerated, and that they are regularly asked to undertake more work for the same or little extra pay, also speaks to the low value that is placed on this labor, and to the fact that (women's) paid domestic work has been

and continues to be understood as an extension of (women's) unpaid socially reproductive labor, and thus as 'natural' and 'unskilled' work (Banerjee, 2018; Sen & Sengupta, 2016).

Furthermore, while these problems are not new, our analysis shows that with the arrival of the pandemic, workers have, in many cases, felt an even greater sense of powerlessness in negotiations with employers. Post-lockdown there has been a further blurring of working roles, and an erosion of the autonomy and task-specialization previously achieved/negotiated through community organizing and engagement with domestic worker and labor rights' organisations. Anita, Sarika and Leela all described feeling stuck post-lockdown, that they had no choice but to meet their employers' new/changed demands, with their accounts conveying both a sense of frustration and resignation. Their accounts also illustrate, more broadly, how, despite changes in urban working patterns and lifestyles (i.e., the recent increase in the number of people working from home), there has not been any significant reduction in demand for paid domestic workers. Rather the pandemic has changed, at least in many cases, the nature and amount of work domestic workers are expected to do, with many workers again feeling obliged to accept often poorer terms and conditions of employment. Underlying these experiences and negotiations, and helping to explain workers' feelings of powerlessness, is the ever-present threat of dismissal/non-payment of wages, and in turn the lack of formal rights and benefits for workers.

6.3 | Class, caste, and contagion at home

A resumption of work included having to protect themselves from Covid-19 and negotiating with employers' fears about contracting Covid-19 along with the associated idea that workers, as familial-outsiders pose a threat to the safety of the home and family. Research shows how domestic workers must frequently negotiate ritual distancing, also termed avoidance behavior linked to enduring ideas about class/caste and purity/pollution, whilst working in employers' homes; and how, in turn, workers often experience humiliation and a lack of dignity linked work (Frøystad, 2003; Sharma, 2016). For instance, although some workers have familial-like relationships with employers, they are also often prohibited from using the family bathroom, entering holy spaces (i.e., the prayer room), and drinking and eating from utensils/vessels used by family members (Ray & Qayum, 2010). With Covid-19, as workers' accounts show, employer concerns about worker-outsiders and the distancing practices resulting from these concerns appear, in many cases, to have increased/intensified. Indeed, earlier ideas about avoiding contact/touch with workers, often expressed by employers, pre-pandemic, in terms of maintaining 'hygiene' (Sen & Sengupta, 2016: pp. 156–157), have, as some worker accounts show, been bolstered by fears of Covid-19 and a more general discourse about social distancing, which has in turn been appropriated/exploited by media and advertising, reinforcing the idea of domestic workers as dirty/dangerous.⁷

At the most extreme end of the spectrum, ideas of workers as 'contagious' and 'dangerous' have resulted in them being asked to stay away from employers' homes, sometimes permanently. Sanjana (late twenties), a live-in domestic worker in Delhi, recounted how she had been visiting her cousin's family in a slum near her employers' home the night before lockdown was announced. When the news broke, her employers refused to let her come back to their home to resume her work, explaining their decision in terms of wanting to protect their young children. Sanjana felt that this was hypocritical, since her employers had been regularly leaving the house for work; and she also resented being made to feel 'dirty' and 'other', despite having lived with this family for long. 'Both my employers were regularly going to office. If you can pick the virus from outside, it would be more likely that I could have picked it from them. But no, they always think that places where poor people live are the ones crammed with insects and diseases' (Sanjana, Delhi, April 2020).

On returning to work post-lockdown, workers have also experienced increased and intensified forms of avoidance behavior linked to ideas of class, caste, and hygiene, but now also reinforced and legitimized by fears of Covid-19 and the new emphasis on (Covid-related) social distancing. A few workers recalled being instructed to change clothes before entering employers' homes, something which made them feel 'dirty'/'contaminated', or to wear masks/gloves,

frequently bought with their own money, while at work. Their employers, they noted, often went without such masks/gloves—something which was not only concerning for health/safety reasons but also deeply frustrating given how uncomfortable it often was for workers to wear masks, particularly when doing strenuous tasks or during hot, summer months (see also: Satyogi, 2021). The renewed focus on disciplining the laboring body was viewed by the workers as a reflection not only of employers' fears about Covid-19 but also wider fears about worker-outsiders (see: Dickey, 2000) and more ingrained and long-standing prejudice/contempt for domestic workers and the working-class generally. Speaking of the police but also employers and middle-class society as a whole, Mamata (introduced earlier) remarked: "They feel that we are carriers of disease..." (Kolkata, April 2020).

Unsurprisingly, given long-standing caste prejudices and ideas about Muslims as 'unclean'/'untrustworthy' (Varshney, 2003),⁸ Dalit and Muslim workers fared particularly badly in the initial post-lockdown period, facing aggravated forms of distancing and harassment and, again, devastating job/income loss. As worker accounts and other sources indicate, employer reservations about Dalit and Muslim workers, which had earlier been couched in the more socially acceptable language of hygiene, appear to have become more widespread with the pandemic. Some employers have also arguably become more openly outspoken about such reservations, blaming 'dirty' Muslim domestic workers for spreading the virus. 'I have no issues with any religion *but it's a fact* that Muslims tend to be very dirty. So far she was in my house and I could supervise her, but if she goes back she might come back with the virus' (Employer, Kolkata, May 2020, emphasis authors' own).

Live-out/part-time workers, who make up a large proportion of domestic workers in Delhi and Kolkata and who work in multiple homes daily, suffered in this early opening-up period, with their 'excessive' mobility again being perceived by employers as threatening and mapping on to middle-class anxieties around pollution/touch. The part-timers we spoke to noted how some of their employers had attempted, in many cases successfully, to restrict the number of houses they visited for work, often without any mention of compensation for lost jobs/wages. Madeeha (early thirties) recounts how she had to give up her part time work at the insistence of her primary employer (in whose house she worked as live in), insinuating that she would be a health risk if she continued. Madeeha was frustrated and worried about having a reduced income; but she also felt powerless and dependent on this employer and job, her main source of income, and so in the end agreed: 'If the mistress refuses to let me stay and work in her house because I am also working elsewhere, what can I do? I had to agree to her restrictions.' (Madeeha, Delhi, June 2020). Maya, a part-timer in Kolkata faced similar demands from one of her employers who demanded she gave up her work in the other houses, agreeing even to increase her wage, though not enough to compensate for her loss of income. Two of the workers that we spoke to admitted to lying to employers about working in other homes in order to continue with their jobs—an incredibly risky decision carrying a high chance of dismissal if found out.

As these accounts show, and as we have illustrated through our reading of them, the recent treatment of domestic workers as potential Covid-19 'carriers' must be viewed within a much longer history of avoidance behavior practised by employers and grounded in long-standing ideas of caste and class. Similar to the widespread discourse about criminality which positions domestic workers as potential thieves (see, for instance: Srivastava, 2011), this 'carrier' discourse and the way in which it manifests through specific behaviors and instructions is experienced by workers as deeply humiliating and infantilizing. Further, such treatment erodes workers' sense of autonomy and control over their labor and is thus deeply resented.

7 | CONCLUSION

This article, like other studies of crises/disasters (Enarson, 1998; Horton, 2012), has underscored the importance of studying the gendered impacts of crises/disasters, showing how the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many of the pre-existing socio-economic issues affecting India's domestic workers. For such workers, who are located at the multiple margins of caste, class, and gender, the pandemic has brought a devastating loss of income/livelihood, increased job competition and insecurity post-lockdown, and, in many cases, changed labor conditions,

with workers generally faring worse and suffering reduced bargaining power and autonomy with employers. In addition, it has contributed to many similarly difficult challenges in workers' personal lives. The experiences of domestic control/surveillance discussed here show how complex negotiations of gender, class, and caste straddle the spaces of home and work. The delicate bargains that women previously negotiated within their homes/marital relationships in order to work and access greater mobility/freedom have been threatened by Covid-19 and the subsequent loss of paid work in other people's homes. Workers' pandemic experiences have, moreover, illustrated how workers laboring in often humiliating and exploitative employment conditions/relationships, and as women suddenly unable to leave their homes, the pandemic has contributed to an often acute loss of control and autonomy, and thus to a feeling of being 'stuck'.

More broadly, the article has demonstrated how, despite increased visibility on and conversations about domestic labor, and indeed some recognition of domestic workers as 'essential' workers, there has not been any significant change in how paid domestic labor is understood and in turn in how workers are treated and remunerated. Indeed this work remains economically-undervalued, viewed as 'unskilled', 'women's work'. Many workers, moreover, have found it difficult to maintain the degree of role specification they had previously been able to negotiate at work, faring worse than they had pre-pandemic. Many have been forced to accept new and worse terms of employment, receiving low(er) pay and undertaking less desirable forms of work.

We have also drawn attention to the continuing intersection of caste-class structures in the gendering of domestic work, and how employer concerns about proximity with workers have, in many cases, become more pronounced with the pandemic and the subsequent legitimization of distancing measures. New/heightened forms of surveillance and ostracization have emerged out of pre-existing modes of avoidance behavior, resulting in a further loss of autonomy and dignity at work for many workers and a further blurring of the divide between 'service'/'work' and 'servitude'. The pandemic has, in short, contributed to an increased sense of indignity at work, as well as an increased sense of dependence upon employers.

Complementing several other recent studies on paid domestic work during the pandemic (e.g., Neetha, 2021; Satyogi, 2021; Sumalatha et al., 2021), ours has drawn attention to what we call the precarious continuities in paid domestic work in India, highlighting how there remains, in India, as in many other countries, a dominant understanding of paid domestic labor as unskilled and low-status 'women's work'. Furthermore, while workers have to some extent, and in some quarters been revealed as 'essential', the work of cleaning and caring more necessary than ever, the work is still not seen as skilled/high-value and workers remain poorly paid. It is this contradiction which underpins and explains the continued precarity of paid domestic workers in India. More generally, the experiences of domestic workers in India illustrates an exacerbation of structural marginalization around gender and work issues. The state and society's non-acknowledgment of social reproduction reinforce it as a gendered and privatized endeavor (Gordon-Bouviour, 2021). We suggest then that while the pandemic has revealed social reproduction to be essential, ironically it has also spelt much precarity for certain sections of workers engaged in such labor. Through our analysis of paid domestic work/ers in India we have illustrated how understanding the gendering/feminization and invisibilization of social reproduction in general is central to understanding the current situation facing paid domestic workers across the country. As we show, the conditions and experiences as described by those we interviewed are the result of pre-existing gender inequalities and socio-economic structures which have intensified as a result of the pandemic. They are an outcome of the pre-existing socio-economic, political, and cultural patterns of gender inequality compounded by a lack of protective state policies during and post-crisis. Expectedly, then, those who were already severely marginalized have faced the brunt of the crisis, a process we frame as precarious continuities. Such continuities are further enabled by intersectional marginalities of caste, class and gender in which most workers undertaking socially reproductive labor are located. Their experiences need to be read not only through the material loss of earnings and security but also how the precaritization in material terms and continued devaluation as labor too spells a loss of dignity. The article then offers a lens to extend our theoretical understanding of how gendered labor plays out in crisis situation both through continuities and disjuncture.

As Horton (2012) notes, times of crisis can also be moments of rupture, providing opportunities to rethink, reorganize, and challenge existing hierarchies. As the pandemic continues to lay bare the structural inequalities affecting domestic workers and other groups in India, urgent measures are clearly needed. The unions and domestic worker organisations have been calling on the governments to move quickly to protect the workers and adding pressure for ratification of the ILO convention and framing a national policy on domestic workers. The crisis has to some extent given impetus to activists and organisations working with domestic workers in particular but also women workers in general to call for understanding this labor of social reproduction as essential for the continuity of material life. The crisis thus provides a sliver of opportunity to push for a structural and societal change which will enable domestic and other workers to avail the support and protections they need, both now and in the future.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports this research is not publicly available due to conditions of anonymity and consent. The data can be made available, suitably anonymized, from the corresponding author (Supurna Banerjee) on reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ We use the term 'return' with caution, recognising that some workers did not stop working with the introduction of lockdown.
- ² Although this figure is still often used when talking about paid domestic work in India, it is likely that this number is now much higher given the ever-increasing demand for domestic workers and the likelihood of undercounting linked to the problem of definition. Indeed, unofficial estimates are often as high as 50 million.
- ³ The shift from primarily men to primarily women workers took place considerably later in India than it did in Western Europe and North America (Katzman, 1978; McBride, 1976). In India, women started entering domestic service in significant numbers in the 1920s and 1930s, following the destruction of traditional caste-based occupations and women's exclusion from agricultural and industrial employment, but it was only in the early 1990s that women workers started to clearly outnumber men workers in national census data (Ray & Qayum, 2010: pp. 58–59; see also: Banerjee, 1985). More recently, as Ray and Qayum (2010: pp. 43–46, 59) note, feminisation—and the accompanying shift to live-out work—has been fueled by changes in urban living arrangements—specifically, the move from large, traditional, family houses to smaller, modern apartments in the latter decades of the twentieth century.
- ⁴ See, for instance: the 'Help the Helper' fund set up by online domestic work platform *BookMyBai* (BookMyBai, 2020).
- ⁵ Organisation/practitioner interviews were conducted via Skype in English. We have retained practitioners' names in the article, having obtained permission for the same.
- ⁶ Others workers spoke about fear of police harassment too, explaining how they had been questioned by police when going to the market for food and other necessities.
- ⁷ For a particularly egregious example of such media reporting/advertising, see the Kent RO Systems dough maker advertisement, which warned employers about allowing domestic workers, whose hands could be 'infected', to knead dough in their homes (see: The Economic Times, 2020).
- ⁸ Anti-Muslim sentiment has also become increasingly socially-acceptable in the contemporary period, with increasing intolerance in India linked to the election of a Bharatiya Janata Party national government in 2014 (Burke, 2015).

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