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29 July 2019

To whom it may concern,

This is to confirm that the conference committee of the Women's History Network has selected Dr Mahmudul Hasan's paper "The unspeaking subaltern: female domestic workers in Dhaka" to be included in a panel session entitled "Women and Domestic Space" on 7 September 2019.

The Women's History Network annual conference "Professional Women: the public, the private and the political" is being hosted at LSE Library on 6-7 September. More information about the conference is here:
<https://womenshistorynetwork.org/womens-history-network-annual-conference-2019/#more-8847>

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gillian Murphy'.

Gillian Murphy (Dr)

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Introduction

With a current population of more than 15 million, Dhaka is one of the “10 largest cities in the world” (Cybriwsky, 2013: 96) and is projected to be the “the 2nd largest city in the world housing 25.2 million population by 2030” (Yusuf, Takizawa, & Katayama, 2007:205). As a mega-city and the most inhabited urban area in a densely populated Bangladesh, every year Dhaka attracts hundreds of thousands of rural migrants of all economic backgrounds from all over the country in search of better working opportunities (Jabeen & Johnson, 2013:152). A large section of Dhaka’s population are *madhyabitto* or middle class who have traditionally kept domestic servants, most of whom are female.

The profession of domestic work is centuries old in this region and its “genealogy … can be traced as far back as the Vedic times”. The indispensability of domestic workers in the rich households of colonial Bengal is clear from this quote: “[T]here is no way a *bhadralok* can function for a moment without a servant … one needs servants to perform domestic chores; servants are necessary even to travel around; without servants it is impossible to maintain one’s dignity.” The presence of domestic servants is needed for practical purposes and also for maintaining the status of nobility and genteelness of the employing family. However, having domestic helps is also considered a sign of westernisation and indolence of the housewives. In conventional Bangladesh society, house chores are considered to be women’s activities. In an affluent *bhadralok* family, physical labour is considered dishonourable as it was during the colonial period. Attending domestic work amounts to descending into the dishonour of a lesser being. In rich and affluent families, educated working women inevitably need domestic workers to manage household and childcare responsibilities. However, many stay-home housewives also resort to domestic workers for help in coping with family responsibilities. In such cases, some housewives relegate the entire household and childcare responsibilities to them, as they prefer to laze around and watch drama series on television. Such attitudes of housewives sometimes wedged a gap between mothers and children during the colonial period. I came across stay-home housewives who brag that they do not have to do any domestic chores and have the luxury of spending long hours on watching movies and drama series. finally she ends up as a “maid in a good house” (Ali, 2003a, p.177). Hasina’s “duty” in Lovely’s house is “for care the children cleaning wash plate wash clothes shopping and errand and thing [sic]” (*ibid.* pp.221-222). Delegating the responsibility of childcare to Hasina, Lovely, the mistress of the house, revels in “entertaining,” in giving “dinner and party” and in participating in beauty pageants (*ibid.*, p.222).

During the colonial period, for example, Rabindranath Tagore’s niece, the writer Sarala Devi Chaudhurani who came from a well-to-do land-owning family laments that right after her birth she was practically deprived of the affection of her mother who never kissed her or tapped her “gently with her hand” as her baby daughter was wholly relegated to, and at the receiving end of, domestic servants’ “care” often punctuated by abuse and mistreatment.

Although Bangladesh is one of the largest suppliers of interstate female domestic workers, most Bangladeshi female domestic helps work in urban and rural areas within the country. Dhaka, the capital and main city, has the highest concentration of female domestic service workers in the country. Often there are media reports on the oppression and exploitation of Bangladeshi domestic workers overseas, especially in the Gulf region. However, the stories

of Dhaka's female domestic helps are largely untold and unheard of. They are unlettered, unaware of the world beyond the domestic orbit and, when subjected to injustice, unable to challenge their disproportionately dominant employers. Sporadic reports that appear in the local media tell us very little about the full extent of their ground-level, quotidian experiences. Hence, Gayatri Spivak's justly famous argument about the inability of the subaltern to speak or to have a voice is highly pertinent to the plight of Dhaka's female domestic workers. Reflecting on their live-in and work experiences as household employees and as members of the secondary labour force, this research will contribute new perspectives on Spivak's notion of the forcibly muted subaltern in relation to the plight of female domestic workers in Dhaka whose subalternity is perhaps more insidiously inhuman. The female domestic workers are in a state of multiple subalternity in the household of the employing family owing to their economic, social and gender constraints as well as spatial marginalisation in the house. They lack an enabling environment or intellectual ability to represent their concerns as their subaltern silences have long been muted.

Based on the backgrounds, and taking into account the enormity of the plight, of the female domestic helps in Dhaka, I will describe their experiences, explore their social origins, shed light on their relationships with the members of the employing family and discuss factors that exacerbate their vulnerability and restrict their capability to assert their rights.

Research challenges

Even though recently there is a considerable engagement of researchers with female domestic workers, the latter are officially unaccounted for and generally unrecognised and are not covered by the census. One "stumbling block" in this area of research has been the lack of "primary sources or written documents" by female domestic workers themselves, as "the service class as subordinate actors in a hierarchically structured relationship rarely spoke freely or captured their feelings and imaginations in writing" (Banerjee, 2004:682). What we know about them mostly comes from the perspectives of the employers or of researchers who do not necessarily share their class or economic background.

We visited former live-in female domestic workers and current live-out female domestic workers. In some other cases we talked to female domestic workers over the phone and had long conversation to frame their life stories. We obtained their consent to use their narration for research purposes and recompensed them with money or gift for the time and information they offered us. We put together some stories through long conversations with domestic worker interlocutors and collected some others from other sources. We asked them about their name, age, marital status, their parents, husbands, number of hours they work in employing families, their length of stay in Dhaka, terms employing family members use to address them, the type of treatment their family members receive when they come to visit them, holidays, sleeping arrangement in the employing family, timing and type of food intake in the employing family, reasons for their arrival in Dhaka, their salary, recipient of their salary, relationship with employers, reasons for leaving previous employers, their level of contentment with domestic work section, reasons for preference for domestic work, harassment (verbal, sexual, psychological and physical) and what they did about it, ways of spending their earnings.

However, the involvement of child domestics as research participants in these studies was mostly limited to quantitative, one-time interviews in the presence of their employer. An

exception is a field study conducted for the book *Lost innocence, stolen childhoods*, written by anthropologist Therese Blanchet (1996). Her local field investigator visited the employers several times and also talked with the children when the employers were absent. However, in-depth research with child domestics is almost non-existent.

Representation of female domestic workers in literature

, and narratives about female domestic workers exist in the writings of colonial officials as well as indigenous writers.

Negative representation of female domestic workers goes back to the colonial period when colonial writers like Emma Roberts characterised them as “idle, slatternly ... dissipated... lazy” (Roberts 1835, Vol. 1: 92), while ‘A Lady Resident’ (1864: 54) advised fellow colonials to be wary of the supposed dishonesty of ‘native’ servants and of placing excessive confidence in them. As a result, the “construct of low class ‘native’ dishonesty and duplicity appeared to have been a most enduring one”. Native female domestic workers were also blamed for evading their childcare responsibility by way of “giving infants opium to make them sleep.” Female domestic servants both in Europe and British India were regarded as sexually immoral and promiscuous. Because of a host of caricatures and distorted images of ayahs in charge of childrearing and domestic work in the families of colonial officials, “it was considered inadvisable to keep white children in India beyond the age of five or six. The common practice throughout the colonial period was to send them away to be brought up in England, generally miserable and ill-treated by the families with whom they boarded on payment.” For example, at five or six years old the writer Rudyard Kipling was sent back to Southsea in Portsmouth in England to live with a foster family while his parents were in India, as his parents could not afford expensive British nannies who were available in limited numbers in the colony. Kipling later wrote about his utter misery in the foster family. As the story goes, once their holiday was over, Kipling’s parents went back to India and left him and his sister in charge of the foster family. In his semi-autobiographical short story “Baa Baa Black Sheep” (1888), his novel *The Light That Failed* (1890) and his full-fledged autobiography *Something of Myself* (1937), Kipling describes the pain he endured during the six years he lived with that family in Southsea. In colonial narratives, indigenous female domestic workers, especially the wet-nurses, were depicted “pejoratively as both physically and morally ‘dirty’”, which betrayed “deep-rooted colonial race and class prejudices.”

The employing family members occupy a position of power and privilege. They are in a vantage point to “observe, to pronounce, and to gaze on other human beings as subjects” and choose to focus on “moments of compliance and collaboration by servants thereby underscoring the persuasive aspect of domination”.

In literature, we see representations of female domestic workers by writers who grew up in rich households. For example, the Tagore family in Jorasanko in central Calcutta always had a large retinue of domestic staff and “recollections of members of the Tagore families are replete with memories of growing up with servants” (Banerjee, 2004:), as Rabindranath Tagore talked about ““servocracy” or the *Vrityarajak Tantra* that flourished in his household”. While Tagore provides stories of “subordination and intimidation that he and his siblings suffered at the hands of the servants”, he also presents “the image of the loyal, faithful, long-suffering servant from the perspective of a remorse-stricken employer.”

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani

In the representation of female domestic workers by South Asian writers of the colonial period, the domestic servants are often portrayed as having some power in the household. Such “writings tended to downplay the domination and highlight the affection”. For example, in her novel *Padmarag*, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain depicts a shifty maidservant, Bela, who is a mistress of the character Ghafur and has an eye for blackmail. Bela questions the selection of Ghafur’s bride and disrupts his marriage with Sakina by misleading him saying that Sakina is not beautiful. In Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, the senior domestic servant Hakiman Bua wields some power on the younger members of the family and remonstrates the protagonist of the story, Laila, for reading books:

Your books will eat you. They will dim the light of your lovely eyes, my moon princess, and then who will marry you, owl-eyed, peering through glasses? Why are you not like Zahra, your father’s—God rest his soul—own sister’s child, yet so different from you? Pull your head out of your books and look at the world, my child.
(14)

Laila faces a stiff resistance from Hakiman Bua in her pursuit of learning. In traditional South Asian society, household maidservants are usually picked from poor relatives or from distant connections; and they are treated as second-grade family members. Many domestic servants spend their whole life in the service of a family, and their long service in return earns them some kind of authority, which they sometimes exercise to discipline its younger generation. In other cases, they are depicted in a positive light or as playmates of the children of the family.

It is difficult to understand the true nature of the relationship between householders and the domestic servants by reading accounts of writers of the colonial period who belonged to the employing family. Their accounts are susceptible to selective focus on positive aspects of experience and on selective interpretations. Their avoidance of negative experience of the maidservants and downplaying “the marks of coercion and exploitation inhering in the domestic- employer relationship” make room for various reliability concerns.

Bangladeshi unskilled women workers

Compared to those Bangladeshi women who dare and manage to embark on foreign shores in search of economic opportunities, those who remain in the country and work as domestic workers come from more vulnerable and lower social strata, and from more impoverished families of mainly rural and slum backgrounds. Again, compared to those who work as domestic workers in rural areas, their counterparts in urban settings have more social disadvantages and are more likely to be subject to domestic violence and other forms of injustice. They live in, and do chores within, the four walls of the home and hence have little opportunity to socialise beyond the immediate confines of the house or to share with others their lived experiences and the treatment they receive from employing family members. Their silences, exclusions and relative invisibility make them perhaps the worst unspeaking subaltern.

Dhaka's female domestic workers are a marginalised group perhaps with the least power to represent themselves. While they stand out as a professional category of workers that suffers disproportionately high disadvantages and receives inadequate research attention, they also remain a non-representative research population. They are mostly uneducated and ill-informed about their rights or how to demand them and about what to expect from their employers. Researchers who have studied abuse – or produced books, articles or reports – on female domestic workers do not belong to this professional category.

Unlike women of many other developing countries, Bangladeshi women face tougher barriers in migrating to other countries both for “government bans on migrating as nurses and maids to other countries” for security concerns and exorbitant extortion fees they have to pay the brokers. Even though the ban was later lifted for women aged 35 and above, there are other discouraging factors for Bangladeshi women to migrate overseas such as the difficulty of getting visas and high incidents of economic and sexual/physical exploitation by employers in Arab countries.

Even though extended families are in decline and nuclear families on the rise especially in Dhaka city, child care industry has not developed and household appliances such as “washers and driers are not common.” Moreover, most families prefer eating homemade food. Therefore, even if women do not work they need domestic help to manage household work. This explains the “continued and steady demand for low-paid domestic workers in private homes to carry out time-consuming and physically demanding work”.

According to a World Bank report of February 2017, 80 percent of garment workers in Bangladesh are women. However, according to another survey of March 2018, “there are 3,596 active RMG factories in Bangladesh with 3.5 million workers, of which 60.8% are female and 39.2% are male.” Women’s participation in garment factory work in Dhaka reached its climax years ago and now for various reasons such inadequate expertise and insecurity there is a decline in their preference for this section. One obvious corollary of this trend would be reflected in the steady increase of women choosing female domestic work. Many live-in domestic workers are opting for live-out part-time multiple day jobs for reasons of freedom, flexibility, greater income and family life. According to one study, “females constitute 79 per cent the total employment” in the informal section of domestic work. A research of 2007 suggests that about “300,000 children work as domestics in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 75% of whom are girls.” “A survey conducted by the NGO Shoishab in 1999 concluded that 75% of child domestic workers in Dhaka are female. UNICEF (2004) estimates the percentage to be 86.” The threshold for Shoishab is 18 and for UNICEF, 16.

One survey of 2000 found that two-third domestic workers in Dhaka are 11-13 years old. One reason for this age group to choose domestic work is the difficulty for them to enter any formal employment sector before legal working age. Some under-aged girls are conditioned to work as domestic workers in brothels only to be “transitioned into sex work after their first menstruation.” Because of minor age and lack of awareness,¹ child domestic workers’ predicaments are more blatant. Child domestic workers are forced to take this career path because of economic crisis, parents’ death, ill health or inability to sustain them.

¹ One study found that 99 percent of employers and only two percent of child workers are aware of children’s right.

and workers are employed mainly through acquaintances from “the ancestral village or by taking in one of the many girls who would come knocking on the door with their mothers, a practice that seems to have died out.”

The vast majority of child domestic workers are untrained and full-time live-in. There is no formal agreement or mention of salary in many cases.

According a 2006 ILO report, there were

close to 148,000 children are domestic workers in Dhaka, and that 78% of them are girls.... Almost a quarter of them started working before the age of 8, with a third beginning labor between the ages of 9 and 11. Ninety-four percent of child domestic workers in Bangladesh work full-time – they are the so-called *bandha* (literally meaning ‘tied-down’), living with their employers. Less than half of the child domestic workers receive a salary, and 89% do not attend school.

Such a domestic worker works for board and lodging only, and is called ‘pete bhate’, which directly translates to ‘food/rice for the stomach’, which means that they get food but are paid nothing.

Backgrounds of female domestic workers

In colonial Bengal, domestic servants came mainly from Hindu lower castes or Muslims, while in predominantly Muslim households of today’s Dhaka city vulnerable women of poor economic (not caste) background provide the main source of domestic workers. Every day estimated 1000 poor or displaced girls from rural Bangladesh migrate to its urban centres and “enter garment work” known as “a women-driven sector” or “survive as domestic, construction, and/or sex workers” and “shift from one kind of work to another or no work at all.”

Environmental refugees

Female environmental refugees are also a good source of domestic helps. Bangladesh is most vulnerable to water-related climate hazards such as floods, cyclones, river and coastal erosion and deposition and sea-level rise. As a result, there is a continuous flow of environmental displacement and millions of people become displaced and landless and move to towns and cities. For example, in the aftermaths of cyclones SIDR in November 2007 that hit the south-central areas of Bangladesh and AILA in May 2009 that slammed the south-western coast of the country, “millions of people in coastal marginal communities becoming homeless and helpless” (Ahsan, Karuppannan, & Kellett, 2011:167). Moreover, major rivers such as “the Jamuna, Ganges and Padma annually consume several thousand hectares of floodplain” thus dislocating thousands of vulnerable people every year (*Climate Displacement*, 2012:9). The vast majority of these climate migrants throng and relocate in big cities, Dhaka having the largest share of them. They come to the city and start living on the street and in slums. While male members of such internally displaced families find outside hard-labour jobs like rickshaw pulling, most females climate migrants work as domestic helps.

My parents also tried. Our house was on the bank of a river. And we lost that while the river was moving. All went under water. This was not the first time, not even the second, it was the 9th time this happened! This time my father didn’t have money to build a new house let alone giving my education expenses.

Displaced for Dowry

The scourge of dowry is an integral part of the predicaments of female domestic workers. Many women become domestically uprooted as their husbands divorce them for their inability to pay dowry. Unmarried girls enter the domestic work sector as their poor parents want them to earn enough to pay dowry when they get married.

Box 1: A Woman Migrant Explains Why She and Her Family Moved to Dhaka

“.... My father was a marginal farmer with a few acres of land adjacent to the river in a village in Faridpur district. The farming land was under constant threat of erosion because of its location and the nature of the river. My father had to maintain a large family of 11. To reduce his burden, my mother had to take part-time work. Our economic condition was never stable and it became desperate when all my father’s land was eroded away by the river during 1970. He started working as a contract agricultural labourer in the village. But his earnings, along with my mother’s, were insufficient to maintain a large family. My grandparents, who lived with us, were perennially ill because of their old age. All of us seven brothers and sisters were sickly and one of us was always suffering from some disease because of the lack of proper nutrition. Our economic condition further deteriorated with the outbreak of the liberation war in 1971. We became destitute and our poverty became unbearable for my parents as well as for us. We all, therefore, decided to move to the capital city in 1972 where all of us could be involved with some kind of work and fight poverty. My mother found two part-time jobs with my aunt’s assistance within several days of our arrival, my father became a construction labourer, and I took a full-time domestic servant’s job.”

Their tasks

Bandha and chuta

During the colonial period, in many households young brides or wives were responsible for light indoor chores like cooking, childrearing and house-keeping and servants were hired for heavy outdoor work.

In the zamindari family of the past, there were various types of domestic servants such as “*khansamas* or butlers, cooks, gardeners, barbers, water-carriers, and others, who resided mostly outside the city limits” and “the category of servants included a vast range of employees starting from *peons* (a footman), *chaprashis* (office messenger), and *ardali* (orderlies), who served the civil servants in government offices to the *sarkars* (financial accountants), *durwans* (gatekeepers), *malis* (gardeners), *dai-ees* (wetnurses), and the *ayahs* (waiting women) serving in regular households”.

The tasks they do include “washing floor, tide-up and cleaning room, cooking, cleaning furniture, washing cloths, helping cooking, child care, dish washing, boiling water, waste dispose, shopping from nearer shop, ironing cloth, cleaning toilet, brining child from school, water flower, open gate, and care aged people.”

such as” sweeping floors, doing dishes, cleaning bathrooms, doing laundry by hand, cooking, serving meals, and taking care of children and other [end of page 154] household members who need care.”

Working hours

Generally, they remain stand by 7/24 to serve the employing family members and worked 15-16 hours per day. The abuse they endure largely goes unnoticed unless it turns out life threatening or fatal or makes permanent corporal change. One survey on child domestic workers suggests that 95 percent of them are verbally abused, seventy three percent physically and 17 percent sexually abused mostly by employers, other family members or even visiting relatives. Domestic workers do not have holiday even on 1 May. However, when some employers give domestic workers paid holiday or respite and treat them well in various ways, they do so out of benevolence or a sense of justice or moral obligation, not because of any pressure or legal requirement.

According to one study, even though “57 percent” of them are employed “through their relatives” more than 50 percent of them have no regular contact with their parents. Female domestic workers have intermittently two moments of freedom and escape from “the employer–employee power relations and dynamics”. During the day when they go to the “rooftop space of the apartment building” to hang out the washing or have some respite to interact and chat with other domestics of the same building.

Domestic workers need to be standby almost 24/7. Even after they have completed all house chores, they can be called anytime for any odd job that may come along. They can be called or woken up at any time during the day or night if there is an urgent need for any family members or if there are unexpected guests to be given food or drink on arrival.

Almost all (73.3 per cent) did not get any full day off during the week and (21.7 per cent) CDWs get rest breaks 3-4hours and alarming thing is found that (19.2 per cent) did not get any opportunity to take rest during the day.

Together but separate

In the past, the spatial separation between the householders and the servants was exhibited by a distance between the former’s residence and the latter’s quarters in the same compound. In congested apartment blocks and modern houses in Dhaka where both the groups live under the same roof, that segregation is maintained metaphorically, as the domestics are conditioned to sleep on the floor or in the kitchen. This resonates with the “imperial geographies of home” that “demarcated British colonial bungalows from the servants’ quarters.” The metaphorical segregation between the employing family members and domestic workers in Muslim households is an interesting area of discussion more so because religiously Muslims are prohibited from discriminating against domestic workers. The application of the norms of the age-old Hindu caste system to the relationship between employing family members and domestic workers on the one hand, and the bungalow-quarters divide among European colonial administrators and agents and their servants on the other, may have influenced Muslim families to maintain an unjust spatial separation between employing family members and domestic servants.

While many employers may neither encourage nor hinder domestic workers from sitting on the sofa or at dining table, there many others who would devoutly maintain this status quo as they believe this is one way to discipline them and maintain the power relations.

Often the employers have children who are of the same age of child workers in their house. While the domestics are expected to do all sorts of house chores, the biological children spend their time studying, playing, watching or socialising. The power relation that is manifest between these two groups of children can and does potentially generate a condescending attitude and a sense of superiority among the privileged group and one of inferiority and internalisation among the other.

In the past, domestic workers were considered “part of the extended family” but in today’s “altered urban scenario” they are regarded as live-in outsiders. In the household of the employing family where female domestic workers work, eat and sleep, there exists an interaction between two different social groups and power relations, which may have resonance with colonial relations in microcosm. Steel and Gardiner (2010/1888:12) put it:

The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child; that is to say, kindly, but with the greatest firmness. The laws of the household should be those of the Medes and Persians, and first faults should never go unpunished. By overlooking a first offence, we lose the opportunity we have of preventing it becoming it a habit.

During the colonial period, indigenous Christian household workers held an enigmatic position in the domestic work section. Even though, sharing the religion of colonial masters, they had “superior airs over the other servants,” their presence in the house of colonials also created an unease as the religious commonality and the Christian workers’ apparent proximity to the dominant colonising group were “perceived as dangerous, threatening to bridge the imperial distance between them”.

In Hindu society, caste barrier was one reason why servants do not accept “food from … employer’s kitchen”, in modern Dhaka city there are no “caste-ethnic boundaries” to create an inalienable difference between the employing family members and the domestic helps. Like domestic workers, many householders also did not share food with their domestics for reasons of caste prejudice and the false notion of caste pollution. For example, Rabindranath Tagore kept a Brahmin cook when in 1901 he was visiting his family estate named Shilaiddaha Kuthibari in Kushtia in what is now Bangladesh, as he could not “eat food cooked by a non-Brahmin servant”. This caste prejudice of pollution was also apparent in high-caste Hindus’ resentment to work as ayahs in the households of British colonisers. Because of the purity-pollution myth of Hindu effeteness, servants from the mali (gardener) caste were ready to do all chores except for nappy changing which was done by ayahs “belonging to the mehter (sweeper) caste.” Even if a Hindu woman of a higher caste agreed to work as a wet-nurse he would be very particular about her food to make sure that it was “dressed by a person of her own caste; and even then she [would] sometimes starve all day rather than eat it, if she [fancied] anybody else [had] been near it.”

Since Muslims did not have such notion of the transmission of pollution by touch, “most colonial households preferred to employ” ayahs from this religious group. Interestingly,

“white mistresses’ reluctance to employ sweeper-caste ayahs suggest that these white women had themselves absorbed—even if unconsciously—‘native’ social mores and prejudices.”

Most domestic workers have internalised this convention that there are specific corners in the house where they sit or sleep and that they are not supposed to sit on the sofa and eat at the dining table or the same food with or before the employing family members. Commonly, “the domestic worker is the only person that is not offered a seat at the [dining] table, and this does not match the employers’ statements about treating the child domestic workers as their own children.” This reminds me of the protagonist Najwa in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* who said: “I have been eating their leftovers ever since Lamyia said, ‘We don’t eat food unless it’s freshly cooked – you can have it’” (98). Even if there are no domestics or in case leftovers are not consumed in the house, there are many rich householders who allegedly throw them away instead of distributing them among poor as part of their strategy of not becoming the usual targets of the source of such benevolence.

The domestic workers have “their own plate and cup – easily distinguishable, worn-out metal or melamine – and never use any of their employers’ plates or glasses for their own meals” even though this cannot be equated with the Hindu caste norm of untouchability as the workers “do prepare food for the employers and touch their eating utensils.”

Words, words, words

Some of the common terms used to address female domestic workers are bua, khala, moinar ma. Bua is a short for kajer bua which technically means female domestic worker, khala aunt and moinar ma, mother of moina. Bua is a derogatory term and khala is a misnomer. Conversely, female domestic workers use respectful terms, such as amma and apa, when addressing employing family members. This blanket nomenclature for all domestic workers has resonance with colonial paternalism.

Abuse

According to one report, from 2001 to 2009, “at least 305 child domestic workers in Bangladesh died from torture, many were severely injured, and 77 were raped.” It is difficult to get the correct statistics of such abuse and killings because of the nature of the relationship between the two parties and of the settings of such crimes. Even if life threatening tortures and murders are reported in the media and the culprits (employers) face legal consequences, the employers either bail “themselves out of prison” or pay “their child domestic workers for not going to court.”

In Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), patriarchal repression expels the character Hasina from her marital home and drives her into an uncertain life in Dhaka, where she becomes a victim of the capitalist economic system. First she is raped by her rich landlord Mr Choudhury, who is a contractor;

The predicaments of domestic workers in urban centres are more precarious than those of those in rural areas because of the variant architecture of village life in Bangladesh. As Jensen puts it:

With the boom of high-rise residential buildings in Dhaka, most urban middle-class households now reside in apartment buildings without yards, gardens or other open spaces nearby, decreasing the scopes for children and youths to find meeting places for social interaction outside formal arenas like schools.

As opposed to gated buildings and high-rise housing blocks in cities, houses in rural areas are more porous and permit outside interactions. Domestic workers also work both inside the house and in the yard, which allows them greater opportunities to intermingle and communicate with neighbours and other villagers. Moreover, villages in Bangladesh are well-knit units where people are known to each other. So if a domestic worker is abused, she will be able to at least share her grievances with others, which is always the case in urban life.

In the book *Arguing with the crocodile: Gender and class in Bangladesh* (1992) White writes about female domestic workers in Bangladesh: “They are open to physical beating and their sexual abuse is very common. The onus on them is to please, and they face expulsion if they fail to do this” (*ibid.*: 84).

Limitations of legislations

International Labour Organization (ILO) in June 2011, arranged the International Labour Conference and adopted the Convention concerning decent work for domestic workers and a Recommendation supplementing it, also referred to as the Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189) and Recommendation (No. 201), 2011 aim to protect and improve working and living conditions of millions of workers worldwide which covers decent work conditions for domestic workers.

According to International Labor Organization (ILO) (2011) new standards of decent work for domestic worker Article 4(2) mentioned that- “Each Member shall take measures to ensure that work performed by domestic workers who are under the age of 18 and above the minimum age of employment does not deprive them of compulsory education, or interfere with opportunities to participate in further education or vocational training.”

According to Jensen (2013), female child domestic workers “often experience the surveilling power of their employer’s gaze as a Foucauldian panopticon, which both disciplines and engages children in forms of self-discipline.” Because of the nature of power relations, they have “thin agency” in the house of the employer, while their earning power even if meagre “opens up for potentially thicker agency … vis-a`-vis their parents” more so when they are the only breadwinners in the family and enables them to resist coercive family decision regarding their marriage. Needless to say, their participation in this informal section is crucial for the sustenance of other family members who live in slums or squalid conditions.

The household environment where a female domestic worker works is a delicate setting and it is difficult to bring this “uniquely vulnerable work relationship” under legislation. She works “within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives” and “the material, cultural, spatial and discursive constraints of their life and work” do not offer them many alternatives. She is exposed to potential tangible and intangible mistreatment from her employer 24/7 and is not in a position of equivalence to legally fight her employer. Any audacity on her part to challenge her employer will end up her being unemployed and leaving

the house penniless into the merciless grip of poverty. Often domestic work is “considered to fall outside the frameworks of the legal regulation of employment regulations” and in Bangladesh there is almost no regulation or formalisation of this employment sector. Even though Bangladesh constitution prohibits forced labour and all forms of exploitation, both have continued unabated. In case of mutual rights and responsibilities of the employers and employees, in all likelihood, the former will have the upper hand as they are educated and better informed and are at vantage point to assert their dues.

Bangladesh Labour Act regards a person aged 0-13 as a child and prohibits child labour stating that “that no one is to ‘employ children below 14 years as a regular employee’ (article 10a)”. In 2011, the apex court of Bangladesh “ordered that no child under age 12 should be employed as a domestic worker.” It also seeks to ensure that children at domestic work do not perform “any hazardous work” and urges the employers to provide “them with proper food and accommodation, education, recreation since they work full time”. However, it is almost impossible to ensure or enforce these legislations and recommendations “behind closed doors of private homes” that is the workplace of the domestics. As Jensen (2007) puts it: “Laws protecting working children do not reach secluded spaces of private homes where the labor and bodies of child domestics are available to employers around the clock.”

The way forward

Formalisation of the domestic work sector has not gained ground. Recruitment agencies are few and far between.

The contention that “increased economic opportunities and NGO empowerment campaigns” contributed to improving “the work conditions of domestic workers” in the last decades is arguable.

The view that poor Bangladeshi parents regard their daughters as “burden” so marry them off early or let them work as live-in domestic workers has orientalist paternalism. Such a notion disregards the dire economic straits parents suffer and the absence of social safety net in Bangladesh society. Such senseless demonisation of parents also overlooks the fact that they are also forced to give their under aged sons to more difficult and squalid work environment to help them maintain family.

Along with attempts to formalise the domestic work sector, stirring Islamic religious consciousness in the psyche of the Muslim employers may persuade them to treat their domestic workers well. Religious preachers and imams can highlight teachings of Islam that demand its adherents to treat their subordinates well. Islamic religious preachers and speakers in Bangladesh and in many other societies overly emphasise the ritualistic aspects of the Islamic faith and do not touch on its humanitarian values which have the potential to guide its adherents to treat other human beings including domestic workers well.

“And surely We have honored the children of Adam, and We carry them in the land and the sea, and We have given them of the good things, and We have made them to excel by an appropriate excellence over most of those whom We have created.” (17:70)

"And be good to the parents and to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy neighbour of (your) kin and the alien neighbour and the companion in a journey and the wayfarer and

those whom your right hand possesses; surely Allah does not love him who is proud, boastful" (iv: 36).

"Your slaves are your brothers..so he who has a brother under him should feed him and clothe him as he himself feeds and dresses; do not ask them to do things which are beyond their power and if you do ask them to do such things then help them" (Bukhari)

"Let them marry from the believing maids whom your right hands possess. Allah knows best (concerning) your faith. You (proceed) one from another.. so wed them by permission of their folk, and give unto them their portions in kindness" (iv: 25).

"None of you should say: this is my slave and this is my slave-girl: he should rather say: This is my man and this is my maiden."

"Get him seated on the horse behind you, for, surely he is your brother, and his soul is similar to yours."

Umar's journey from Madina to Jerusalem with his subordinate

Anas ibn Malik (RA) said: I was in the service of Prophet (peace be upon him!) for ten years, and he never told me off. When I did something wrong, he never asked me, "Why did you do that?" When I missed to do something, he never asked me, "Why did you not do that?" The Messenger of Allah had the best character of all people. (Tirmidhi)

"Surely God has made you their masters: and if He had willed He could have likewise given you in their possession as slaves."

Accident of birth

brotherhood between some Arab chiefs and some freed slaves: Bilal ↔ Khalid, Zaid ↔ Hamza, Kharijah ↔ Abu Bakr

Zainab ↔ Zaid

military commanders and leaders: Zaid → Osama

the famous decision of the Caliph. Omar bin Al-Khattab to whip the son of Amr bin Al-Aas, the victorious general and honored governor of Egypt as he had beaten an Egyptian Copt without any legal justification with the renowned father himself having a very narrow escape from the whip of the Caliph.

'Once or twice he did sound fanatical, nagging me and Lamya to wear the hijab, making a fuss because I smoked – but he kept his limits, he was never extreme. We regarded him as a minor irritation. At times I worried that he was spending too much time at the mosque. Maybe, I thought, a terrorist group would mess up him mind and recruit him but thankfully he's not interested in politics, so that's a relief. And now this, out of nowhere, he wants to marry the maid!' 264

Conclusion

My interest in gender studies stems from that in social justice and human rights issues and has thus far largely manifested in my research in the field of literature. My impersonal,

detached observation of, and an attitude of compassion towards, the suffering experienced by a most vulnerable group in Bangladesh society, the female domestic workers in Dhaka, have encouraged me to branch out of my usual research terrain and undertake this project. The preponderance of female garment factory workers and huge research focus on them has somewhat marginalised the issue of female domestic workers in academic discussion.

28th WOMEN'S HISTORY NETWORK CONFERENCE 2019

LSE WOMEN'S LIBRARY

Friday 6 September – Saturday 7 September 2019

PROFESSIONAL WOMEN: THE PUBLIC, THE PRIVATE AND THE POLITICAL

Conference committee: Judith Bourne, Caroline Derry, Kate Murphy and LSE Library team

FRIDAY 6 SEPTEMBER 2019

From 09:00 Registration - Coffee / Tea (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

09:45 -10:50 Welcome (Martin Reid, Deputy Director of LSE Library and Maggie Andrews, Chair of Women's History Network) and Keynote 1 (Workspace 4): Mari Takayanagi, "Broken reed, dead letter - or sacred year? The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919"

11:00-12:30 PANEL 1-3

PANEL 1 WOMEN IN LAW (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

Chair: Mari Takayanagi

Rosemary Auchmuty (University of Reading) and **Erika Rackley** (University of Kent), "1919 and the process of doing feminist legal history"

Katie Broomfield (Royal Holloway), "'Prejudice and a fear of competition': opposition from within the legal profession to the admission of women 1870-1919"

Helen Kay (Independent researcher) on "Chrystal Macmillan: Using the Law to gain Equality"

Laura Noakes (Open University), "Early women barristers and the negotiation of professional and political identity"

Dana Denis-Smith, "First 100 Years"

PANEL 2 WOMEN AND PUBLIC LIFE (R01 on Lower Ground Floor)

Chair: Jan Lomas

Gail Savage (St Mary's College of Maryland), "Gatekeeping the corridors of power: the director of women's establishments 1920-1945"

Anna Muggeridge (University of Worcester), "'I have been a councillor for years and if anybody tells me I am not good enough for the job I will give them a punch': working-class women constructing a professional identity through public office"

Jennifer Holmes (Independent researcher), "Ray Strachey and women's employment"

Jane McDermid (University of Southampton), "Violet Conolly (1899-1988): a glimpse of the private woman through her professional life"

PANEL 3 WOMEN AND WRITING (Workspace 2 Ground Floor)

Chair: Kate Murphy

Elise Smith (University of Warwick), "'Is that the doctor?': Elizabeth Seifert and the romanticisation of women in mid-century medicine"

Nancy Rosoff (Arcadia University), "'I have been very proud of my girls': Principals and Headmistresses in British and American School Stories"

Lyndsey Jenkins (Mansfield College Oxford), "'I don't think there is a job today, except becoming a parson, that a girl *can't* do': the construction of professional identity in Noel Streatfeild's children's literature 1936-1950"

Elizabeth English (Cardiff Metropolitan University), "'Much learning hath made thee mad': academic communities, women's education and crime in Golden Age Detective fiction"

Bhaswati Chatterjee (Vidyasagar College, Kolkata, India), "New Women in New Professions: Their journeys in their own words"

12:30-13:15 Lunch

Executive Committee meeting in R01 on Lower Ground Floor

13:15-14:05 Keynote (Workspace 4 Ground Floor): Helen Glew, 'Professional women, the marriage bar and the question of married women's right to work c.1920-1950'

14:10-15:10 PANEL 4-6

PANEL 4 'ADDITIONAL LIVES': SHINING A LIGHT ON THE LIVES OF LESSER-KNOWN PROFESSIONAL FEMALE ACTIVISTS IN MID-20TH CENTURY BRITAIN VIA THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY (Workspace 4)

Chair: Eve Colpus

Ruth Davidson (King's College London), "Liberalism and the professional woman: Lady Emmott (1866-1954)"

Caitriona Beaumont (London South Bank University), "The effectiveness of skilled organisers: Margaret Fletcher (1862-1943) and Gertrude Horton (1901-1978)

Anne Logan (University of Kent), "Professionalism, activism and criminal justice: reconstructing lives of early women magistrates"

PANEL 5 EDITING WOMEN ENGINEERS BACK ONTO THE MAP - WES CENTENARY TRAIL (R01 on Lower Ground Floor)

Chair: Ceryl Evans

Alice White (Wellcome Collection), **Sarah Holloway** (Heritage Open Days), **Helen Close** (WES Centenary Project Officer)

PANEL 6 WOMEN IN PUBLISHING (Workspace 2 Ground Floor)

Chair: Margaretta Jolly

Helen Southworth, "Some of the lesser-known women workers at the Hogarth Press"

Nicola Wilson, "The role of 'middlewomen': Sylvia Lynd (1888-1952), Clemence Dane (1888-1965) and Isobel Quigly (1926-2018)"

D-M Withers, "The professional evolution of Virago Press in the late 1980s"

15:10-15:45 Break (tea and coffee in Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

15:45-16:45 PANEL 7-9

PANEL 7 ROUNDTABLE: WOMEN LAW REFORM CAMPAIGNERS (Workspace 2 Ground Floor)

Chair: Anne Logan

Caroline Derry (Open University) on Alison Neilans, **Laura Noakes** (Open University) on Chrystal Macmillan, **Judith Bourne** (St Mary's Twickenham) on Helena Normanton and Gwyneth Bebb

PANEL 8 WOMEN IN/AGAINST THE GENTLEMEN'S PROFESSION: ORAL HISTORY PERSPECTIVES ON FEMINIST PUBLISHING IN THE 1970S AND 1980S (R01 on Lower Ground Floor)

Chair: Jeannine Baker

Margaretta Jolly (University of Sussex), **Polly Russell** (British Library), **Penny Mountain** (New English Library)

This panel will introduce the work of 'The Business of Women's Words, a Leverhulme-funded project which is examining the history of women's publishing in the context of the UK Women's Liberation Movement.

PANEL 9 WOMEN AND POLITICS (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

Chair: Lyndsey Jenkins

Sharon Thompson (Cardiff University), "Edith Summerskill: feminist in a divided house"
Ann Marie O'Brien (Maynooth University), "From 'token' woman to Madam Ambassador: the role of women in Irish foreign policy 1947-1973"
Paula Bartley (Independent researcher), "Labour Women in Power: Cabinet ministers in the 20th century"

16:45-17:45 AGM (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

18:30-20:30 Reception at Middle Temple sponsored by Sybil Campbell Collection Trust, Economic History Society and the Friends of the Women's Library. Middle Temple is a short walk from LSE. There will be a presentation of WHN prizes and short talk by Rosalind Wright CB QC on her exhibition 'Celebrating a Century of Women in Law' in Middle Temple Hall.

SATURDAY 7 SEPTEMBER 2019

From 9:30 Registration for Saturday day attendees and tea / coffee (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

10:00-10.50 Welcome Keynote 3 (Workspace 4 Ground Floor): Angela V John "Looking at Lady Rhondda: Businesswoman, Campaigner and Journalist".

10:50-11:00 Break

11:00-12.00 PANEL 10-12

PANEL 10 WOMEN AND THE ARTS 1 (R01 on Lower Ground Floor)

Chair: Zoé Thomas
Erika Lederman (Victoria and Albert Museum), "Women photographers, institutional practices and the South Kensington Museum"
George Mind (University of Westminster/ National Portrait Gallery), "Feeling 'at home': femininity, domesticity and emotional labour in women's photographic portrait studios, Britain 1880-1910"
Rosamund Lily West (Royal Society of Sculptors), "Pioneering women at the heart of the Royal Society of Sculptors"

PANEL 11 WOMEN AND PROFESSIONS (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

Chair: Elspeth King
Judith Hewitt (Devil's Porridge Museum) "Women and work at HM Factory Gretna in WW1"
Lisa Cox-Davies (University of Worcester), "One of the most stereotypically occupations in our society": how women established themselves in the police forces of the West Midlands 1939-1975
Kirsty Parsons (National Army Museum) on Women's Royal Army Corps

PANEL 12 THE POLITICAL IS PROFESSIONAL: EXPLORING WOMEN'S ACTIVISM (Workspace 3 Ground Floor)

Chair: Eve Colpus
Emma Lundin (Malmö University, Sweden), "'My governance works for fairness and equality': how the personal became political for women in the Swedish Social Democratic Party"
Kate Law (University of Nottingham), "Sisterhood and solidarity: Leeds Women Against Apartheid 1989-1994"
Charlotte Lydia Riley (University of Southampton), "Not (just) making the tea: the women of the Fabian Colonial Bureau"

12:05-13:05 PANEL 13-15

PANEL 13 WOMEN AND BROADCASTING (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

Chair: Maggie Andrews

Kate Murphy (Bournemouth University), “Analytical chemist, naval architect, chauffeuse ... professional women and BBC women’s programmes 1923-1968”

Jeannine Baker (Macquarie University Sydney), “Under the spotlight: women camera operators in Australian television”

Eve Colpus (University of Southampton), “‘Wake up with Anna, Angela and Esther’: the advent of breakfast television in Britain and the ‘scripting’ of the woman television broadcaster”

PANEL 14 THE EMOTIONS OF EMANCIPATION: EXAMINING THE SUBJECTIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN STUDENTS AND PROFESSIONALS IN INTER-WAR RUSSIA, HUNGARY AND BRITAIN (Workspace 3 Ground Floor)

Chair: Lucy Brown

Judith Szapor (McGill University), “Women’s emancipation in the era of illiberalism and antisemitism; Jewish professional women in Hungary, 1920-48”

Julie Gottlieb (University of Sheffield), “A Career in Crisis: The lifework and death of Dame Helena Swanwick”

Hannah Parker (University of Sheffield), “Would it not be more honest on my part to say that I am not fit for purpose and leave?: Education, labour and self-worth in women’s letters to Soviet authorities, 1924-1941”

PANEL 15 WOMEN AND THE ARTS 2 (R01 on Lower Ground Floor)

Chair: Zoé Thomas

Anne Hultzsch (Bartlett School of Architecture), “Editing gardens for women: Jane Webb Loudon and the architectural public in mid-19th century Britain”

Leah Armstrong (University of Applied Arts Vienna), “Designing a profession: Gaby Schreiber & Associates”

Luca Csepely-Knorr (Manchester School of Architecture), “Female landscape architects and the independent Landscape Institute”

13.05-13:45 Lunch

13:45-15:00 PANEL 16-18

PANEL 16 WOMEN AND DOMESTIC SPACE (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

Chair: Judith Bourne

Clarice Bland (University College Dublin), “Professional and Powerful: Spiritualist Mediums in Victorian England”

Laura Schwartz (University of Warwick), “Feminist schemes to professionalise domestic service (and why they failed)(Britain 1897-1914)”

Md. Mahmudul Hasan (International Islamic University Malaysia), “The unspeaking subaltern: female domestic workers in Dhaka”

Lauren Samuelsson (University of Wollongong Australia), “Our Cookery Experts: three *Australian Women’s Weekly* food editors that transformed the way Australia ate 1942-1982”

PANEL 17 PROFESSIONAL WOMEN AND GENDERED IDENTITIES (Workspace 3 Ground Floor)

Chair: Katharina Rowold

Debbie Challis (LSE Library), “Education, the professions and fertility: Frances Wood’s statistical study”

Alice Billington (Oxford University), “Educational leaflets for adolescent girls in 20th century Britain: knowledge, stigma and etiquette”

Sally Horrocks (University of Leicester), “The Cold War, domesticity and British women’s employment in science and engineering 1940s-1970”

Grace Whorrall-Campbell (University of Cambridge), “Gender, emotional labour and emotional management in British chain stores”

PANEL 18 WOMEN AND NURSING (R01 on Lower Ground Floor)

Chair: Susan Cohen

Linda Martz (American University of Paris), “‘We must fight for the honour of our uniform’: issues and outcomes surrounding the Registration of Nurses Act 1919”

Frances Cadd (University of Nottingham), “All is fair in love and care: Avis Hutt and nurses’ protest in 1930s Britain”

Hannah Forsyth (Australian Catholic University), “The industrialisation of women’s work in the 20th century: the case of nursing in New South Wales c 1901-1971”

Teresa Doherty (Royal College of Nursing), “1.6 million names, #EveryFamilyANurse: the information legacy of the Nurses Registration Act 1919”

15:00-15:15 break

15:15-16:15 PANEL 19-21

PANEL 19 WOMEN AND FILM (R01 on Lower Ground Floor)

Chair: Maggie Andrews

Lizzie Thynne (University of Sussex), “Jill Craigie and the suffragettes: making feminist film in the 1940s”

Adam L Miller (Aichi Shukutoku University Japan), “Hugely influential, largely overlooked: exploring the works of the French female filmmaker, Alice Guy-Blaché”

Charlotte Bill (Clapham Film Unit), “Versailles 1919 – Return of the Dangerous Women”

PANEL 20 WOMEN ACCOUNTANTS AND SURVEYORS (Workspace 4 Ground Floor)

Chair: Mari Takayanagi

Helen Thornley (Independent researcher), “The Two Ethels: how the accountancy profession responded to the admission of women”

Jane Berney (Independent researcher), “The barriers to entry and career progression of the first female members of the accountancy profession”

Carrie de Silva (Harper Adams University), “The extraordinary career of Irene Barclay (1894-1989) – the first woman chartered surveyor”

PANEL 21 WOMEN AND PROFESSIONS 2 (Workspace 3 Ground Floor)

Chair: Anna Muggeridge

Mark Hay (Institute of Historical Research), “Incorporating women: corporate succession in Amsterdam Banking Houses and the female moment in Dutch history 1810-1820”

Joseph Cook (University College London), “Geraldine Bridgewater and the London Metal Exchange”

Poster competition entries in Workspace 4:

Katie Broomfield (Royal Holloway), "That unholy thing, the admission of women to the legal profession"

Marleen Hoffmann (Archive of Women in Music Frankfurt) poster will present the major activities of the Archiv Frau und Musik and its operating association, the International Workgroup on Women in Music

Camesha Scruggs (University of Massachusetts), "Teaching us how to toil: African American female domestic service training in the early 20th century"

Brigitte Stenhouse (Open University), "Moving into the public sphere: Mary Somerville and the circulation of 'French Analysis' in early 19th century Britain"

The unspeaking subaltern: Female domestic workers in Dhaka

Md. Mahmudul Hasan
International Islamic University Malaysia

My research interest

social justice and human rights

in the field of literature

impersonal, detached observation and an attitude of
compassion

Research challenges

- non-representative research population
- limited access to live-in domestic workers

Virtual imprisonment

- “They do not allow me to go out. I wanted to play with the neighbouring kids but they do not allow me. They are worried that I will tell other people about everything.”

unspeaking subaltern

Ranajit Guha defined subaltern “as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way”.

Spivak: “The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern.” (de Kock 45)

- They are unlettered, unaware of the world beyond the domestic orbit and, when subjected to injustice, unable to challenge their disproportionately dominant employers. Sporadic reports that appear in the local media tell us very little about the full extent of their ground-level, quotidian experiences.

Dhaka

- Current population: about 20 million
- projected to be the “the 2nd largest city in the world housing 25.2 million population by 2030”
- Bangladesh is arguably the second most densely populated country it the world after Singapore.

Three groups of vulnerable working women in Bangladesh

- Migrants to other countries

Restrictions: government bans, difficulty in getting visas, extortion by brokers and sexual/physical by foreign employers

- RMG workers

Restriction: age, lack of skills and security concerns

- FDWs

No major restrictions

Another group

- Some under-aged girls are conditioned to work as domestic workers in brothels only to be “transitioned into sex work after their first menstruation.”

- 80% of domestic workers are female
- 2006 ILO report: 78% child domestic workers are female.
- Almost a quarter of them started working before the age of 8.
- A third beginning labour between the ages of 9 and 11.
- Less than half of the child domestic workers receive a salary.
- 89% do not attend school.

- “petey bhatey” – “food/rice for the stomach”

Working hours

- stand by 24/7
- Generally 15-16 hours per day

Holiday

- Domestic workers do not have holiday even on 1 May. However, when some employers give domestic workers paid holiday or respite and treat them well in various ways, they do so out of benevolence or a sense of justice or moral obligation, not because of any pressure or legal requirement.

Abuse

- One survey on child domestic workers suggests:
- 95% verbally abused
- 73% physically abused
- 17% sexually abused
 - mostly by employers, other family members or even visiting relatives.

Internally displaced

- environmental refugees
river and coastal erosion and deposition
SIDR in November 2007
AILA in May 2009

Story

- “Our house was on the bank of a river. And we lost that while the river was moving. All went under water. This was not the first time, not even the second, it was the 9th time this happened! This time my father didn’t have money to build a new house let alone giving my education expenses.”

Displaced for dowry – story

I am the oldest among seven sisters, no brother. We lost our father at early age and my mother raised us singlehandedly. I got married at 14. Within days, my husband started to abuse me both verbally and physically. I became pregnant but he was not happy about my pregnancy. My mother borrowed money to pay him dowry gradually. By the time I was about 3-month pregnant, he received the full dowry payment and abandoned me. Having nowhere to go, I came to my mother and added to her burdens – of daughters and loan. I gave birth to a son at home and decided to act as his mother and father. When my son was one year old I came to Dhaka for domestic work.

Colonial

- “idle, slatternly ... dissipated... Lazy” (Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan, with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society [1835]*)
- “I have known instances, where the amah or the ayah for obvious reasons, has given narcotics, concealed under one of their finger nails, under the pretence that they were quieting the child by allowing it to suck her finger.”
 - R.S. Mair, *Medical Guide for Anglo-Indians (1878)*

- In colonial narratives, indigenous female domestic workers, especially the wet-nurses, were depicted “pejoratively as both physically and morally ‘dirty’”, which betrayed “deep-rooted colonial race and class prejudices.”

Employing family members

- They are in a vantage point to “observe, to pronounce, and to gaze on other human beings as subjects” and choose to focus on “moments of compliance and collaboration by servants thereby underscoring the persuasive aspect of domination”.
- Rabindranath Tagore talked about *Vrityarajak Tantra* or “servocracy” the that flourished in his household.

- While Tagore provides stories of “subordination and intimidation that he and his siblings suffered at the hands of the servants”, he also presents “the image of the loyal, faithful, long-suffering servant from the perspective of a remorse-stricken employer.”

Hakiman Bua to Laila

- “Your books will eat you. They will dim the light of your lovely eyes, my moon princess, and then who will marry you, owl-eyed, peering through glasses? Why are you not like Zahra, your father’s—God rest his soul—own sister’s child, yet so different from you? Pull your head out of your books and look at the world, my child.”
 - (Attia Hosain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* [1961])

- Playmates of the children of the family or even mistresses of male family members.
- In Rokeya's *Padmarag* (1924), Bela questions the selection of Ghafur's bride and disrupts his marriage with Sakina by misleading him saying that Sakina is not beautiful.

Women in employing families

- Working women
- Housewives

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (1872-1945): “Like an inaccessible queen she stayed away from us. Our maid’s lap became our mother’s lap. I never knew what mother’s affection was; mother never kissed me or pat me gently with her hand.”

Jivaner Jhara Pata (1942-1943) – The Scattered Leaves of My Life (2011)

Monica Ali's Brick Lane (2003)

- Hasina's "duty" in Lovely's house is "for care the children cleaning wash plate wash clothes shopping and errand and thing [sic]" (*ibid.* pp.221-222). Delegating the responsibility of childcare to Hasina, Lovely, the mistress of the house, revels in "entertaining," in giving "dinner and party" and in participating in beauty pageants (*ibid.*, p.222).

Female domestic workers

- Rural
- Urban (worse off)

Two moments of freedom

- Rooftop space of the apartment building (limited)
- Journey to the corner shop (voyeurism and teasing)

Two types

- Bandha
- Chuta

- Bangladesh Labour Act regards a person aged 0-13 as a child and prohibits child labour stating that “that no one is to ‘employ children below 14 years as a regular employee’ (article 10a)”. In 2011, the apex court of Bangladesh “ordered that no child under age 12 should be employed as a domestic worker.” It also seeks to ensure that children at domestic work do not perform “any hazardous work” and urges the employers to provide “them with proper food and accommodation, education, recreation since they work full time”.

Limitations of legislations

- Spatial constraints
- Job insecurity
- In case of mutual rights and responsibilities of the employers and employees, in all likelihood, the former will have the upper hand as they are educated and better informed and are at vantage point to assert their dues.

- *Arguing with the crocodile: Gender and class in Bangladesh (1992)*: “They are open to physical beating and their sexual abuse is very common. The onus on them is to please, and they face expulsion if they fail to do this.”

“Words, words, words”

- Kajer lok
- Griho kormi
- Bua (derogatory)
- Khala (misnomer)
- By name (mostly if there are underage)

Discipline?

“The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child; that is to say, kindly, but with the greatest firmness... first faults should never go unpunished. By overlooking a first offence, we lose the opportunity we have of preventing it becoming a habit.”

Flora Steel and Grace Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888)

Agencies

- Thin
- Thicker

Together but separate

- The bungalow-quarters divide among European colonial administrators
- Caste division and the false notion of caste pollution

Leila Aboulela's Minaret (2005)

- Najwa: “I have been eating their leftovers ever since Lamya said, ‘We don’t eat food unless it’s freshly cooked – you can have it’” (98).

Story

- I am Farjana. I am 15 years old. My parents live in the village. We are very poor. My father is jobless. My mother works in neighbouring houses. From there they get some money and food. I have no siblings. For having a better life, they send me to Dhaka. My life in Dhaka is worse. I work as a full-time live-in domestic worker, as I have no other option. I have been working for this family for about 7 years. I do not have any holiday and they do not let me to go anywhere. My parents do not come to see me. I sleep in the kitchen and their leftovers.

- The domestic workers have “their own plate and cup – easily distinguishable, worn-out metal or melamine – and never use any of their employers’ plates or glasses for their own meals” even though this cannot be equated with the Hindu caste norm of untouchability as the workers “do prepare food for the employers and touch their eating utensils.”

Internalisation – story

- There is a separate room for me where I sleep on the floor. I am allowed to sit on the sofa but I do not sit. Everyday I eat the same food. I eat later in the kitchen. They call me to sit on the dining table with them but I feel shy.

The colonial divide

- During the colonial period, indigenous Christian household workers held an enigmatic position in the domestic work section. Even though, sharing the religion of colonial masters, they had “superior airs over the other servants,” their presence in the house of colonials also created an unease as the religious commonality and the Christian workers’ apparent proximity to the dominant colonising group were “perceived as dangerous, threatening to bridge the imperial distance between them”.

The caste divide

- Rabindranath Tagore kept a Brahmin cook when in 1901 he was visiting his family estate named Shilaidaha Kuthibari in Kushtia in what is now Bangladesh, as he could not “eat food cooked by a non-Brahmin servant”.
- Because of the purity-pollution myth of Hindu effeteness, servants from the mali (gardener) caste were ready to do all chores except for nappy changing which was done by ayahs “belonging to the mehter (sweeper) caste.” Even if a Hindu woman of a higher caste agreed to work as a wet-nurse she would be very particular about her food to make sure that it was “dressed by a person of her own caste; and even then she [would] sometimes starve all day rather than eat it, if she [fancied] anybody else [had] been near it.”

Cultural contamination

- Since Muslims did not have such notion of the transmission of pollution by touch, “most colonial households preferred to employ” ayahs from this religious group. Interestingly, “white mistresses’ reluctance to employ sweeper-caste ayahs suggest that these white women had themselves absorbed—even if unconsciously—‘native’ social mores and prejudices.”

Remedies

- Formalisation
- Professional recruitment agencies
- Religious sensibilities

Role of imams and religious preachers

- Ritualistic aspects of the Islamic faith vs. its humanitarian values

The Qur'an

- “And be good to the parents and to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy neighbour of (your) kin and the alien neighbour and the companion in a journey and the wayfarer and **those whom your right hand possesses**; surely Allah does not love him who is proud, boastful.” (4: 36)

Prophetic traditions

- “Your slaves are your brothers. So he who has a brother under him should feed him and clothe him as he himself feeds and dresses; do not ask them to do things which are beyond their power and if you do ask them to do such things then help them.” (Bukhari)
- “None of you should say: this is my slave and this is my slave-girl: he should rather say: This is my man and this is my maiden.”

- “Get him seated on the horse behind you, for, surely he is your brother, and his soul is similar to yours.”
- “Surely God has made you their masters: and if He had willed He could have likewise given you in their possession as slaves.”

- Anas ibn Malik (RA) said: I was in the service of Prophet (peace be upon him!) for ten years, and he never told me off. When I did something wrong, he never asked me, “Why did you do that?” When I missed to do something, he never asked me, “Why did you not do that?” The Messenger of Allah had the best character of all people. (Tirmidhi)

Minaret (2005)

- “Once or twice he did sound fanatical, nagging me and Lamya to wear the hijab, making a fuss because I smoked – but he kept his limits, he was never extreme. We regarded him as a minor irritation. At times I worried that he was spending too much time at the mosque. Maybe, I thought, a terrorist group would mess up him mind and recruit him but thankfully he’s not interested in politics, so that’s a relief. And now this, out of nowhere, he wants to marry the maid!”

Live-in: Story 1

- The main reason of mine to come to Dhaka is not financial crisis rather the behaviour of my mother. I know I am adopted. But Is it necessary to remind me that I am adopted? It is true that she has adopted me but she has no affection for me. She just fulfilled her responsibility. Nothing else. She always abuses me with many bad languages. I can never share any of my problems with her. She makes me responsible for every single mistake in every moment. I asked my owner to give my salary to my mother so that it may help her. Everything is very hard for me. I do not have family. I do not have shelter and support. Who is gonna take my responsibility? All those situations make me strong to face the reality. I am learning to be self responsible. I want to change the perspectives of my mother towards me. I want to study more. Here after doing my household work, I sit to study.i am happy with my house owner. She is very kind to me. She treats me well and I do not give her any chance to complain.

Live-in: Story 2

- I am the oldest daughter of my parents. I have six sisters and no brother. My father died many years ago when all of we were small. My mother had to struggle a lot to raise us. But she did not give up and never think of getting married again. When I was 14 years old, I got married. At the begainning my married, life was good but in a few days my husband started to have problems with me. He used to talk with me in slang language. Even he raised hands on me. Within these I realized that I was pragent. He was never happy with my pragnency. My mother got me married with a huge burden of dowry. She was paying my husband gradually. When my mother fulfilled the desired amount, he stopped to come home at night. When I was 2.5 months peagent, he left me all alone and stopped to contact with me. At that moment I came to my fathers house. It was hard for my mother to manage me cause she was having the burden of loan and interest that she borrowed to pay my dowry.

The situation was very hard for me. I had to handle myself for the sake of the baby. Finally the day arrived, I gave birth a baby boy. I had my delivary at home. That was the most amazing day of my life. When I saw my son's face first and held him on my arms, all the pain I suffered became meaningless. On that moment I promised with me that whatever happen I will be raising my own son and I wll live for him. He is never going to miss his father. I am his father and mother both.

- When my son became 1 years old, I came to Dhaka through one of my relative. I startrd to stay as a permanent worker. They paid me 5000 TK. I worked there for 3 years. The amount was not enough for my child and family. That's why I had to leave the job and started to work as a part time house worker (chota kaj). I rented a small room. From 7 to 5 I work in 3 to 4 houses. Now my monthly income is 10000 TK. Every month I send money to my mother. My third sister got married few months ago. I have to manage 70000 TK (dowry) to give her husband. It is very hard for me. Staying in Dhaka is very expensive.

- My second sister got married when I was working as a permanent worker. My mother gave her husband 80000 TK as dowry but she stayed with her husband only for few months. Because she was mentally a bit abnormal. We thought after marriage everything will be fine and she will realise by herself. But we were wrong. That's why I managed a home where she works as a permanent.
- By the way my struggle is going on. Day by day it is becoming harder. I have to work hard to manage my family because there is none in my family who can earn money. Now my son is 5 years old. He goes to a local madrasha. I want to educate my son. I tried to bring him here but he is more comfortable to be with her grandmother.
- Recently I am facing a new problem. My husband is trying to contact with me again. He is observing that now I am independent and managing my family. But I can say that he only wants to take the financial help of mine. I am never going to give him any chance to come nearer me. He left me when I needed him. In shaa Allah I am strong enough to manage myself.

Live-in: Story 3

- I am Jhikok Begum. I am 30 years old. I have only one sister and no brother. We are very poor and for this my father got me married at an early age. I got married when I was only 14 years old. My family had to bear a huge burden of dowry for me and my sister as well. Within a few days of my marriage I could understand the character of my husband. He was jobless and completely dependent on me. To manage the family I had to work as a day labourer. The money that I earned had to give him. Because he was a regular gambler and drug addicted. If I did not give him the money, he beat me. Within the few days of my marriage, my father died. I lost the hope of going back to my father's house. I did not want to be the burden of my mother. Silently I was suffering the torture of my husband. Some of my relatives advised me to have a baby to bring change to my family. I followed their advice. I was trying to have a baby. Within a few months I became pregnant. When I told him, he flew into a temper. He started to torture me more. Then I became bound to come back to my mother.

- But the society of ours became the curse for me. They started to talk bad about me and my family. The neighbours mocked about me. We had to suffer a lot. When I was 6 months pregnant, I got divorced. That day was joyous and sorrowful for me. Because I was free from that cruel man. On the other hand my child is going to live his life without his father. The day of my delivery was very hard for me. I had no money to go to hospital for my delivery. For this my delivery had to be done by a local midwife. She had no clear knowledge about delivery and its complications. I gave birth a baby boy. But accidentally he is born handicapped. That was a great shock for me.

- About 10 years I am working in this house. Now I am in good condition. The house owner call me as 'Bua' and their children call me 'khala'. As I am illiterate, I do not have any scope to do any other work. I do not have vacation on Eid but I go to see my boy after every 3 or 4 months for 3-4 days. None come to see me here. There is a separate room for me. I sleep there on the floor. I am allowed to sit on the sofa but I do not sit. Everyday I eat the same food. I eat later in the kitchen. They call me to sit on the dinning table with them but I feel shy. I came to dhaka to earn money for my disable son. I get 6500 TK and give me more money when go to see my son. I send the money for my son. They give the money in my hand. There is no specific time for my work. I have to do all the household work. I am happy with this family. I have never searched any other job because I do not have place to stay. If I want to stay in a rented house, then the cost will rise. I will be doing this job till I need to bear the expenses of my son and mother. They have never raised hand on me or abused me. If I become sick, they lessen my work and take me to the doctor. Sometimes I go to the shop and market. Everyone likes me.

Story 4

- I am Farjana. I am 15 years old. My parents live in the village. We are very poor. My father is jobless. My mother works in neighbouring houses. From there they get some money and food. I have no siblings. For having a better life, they send me to Dhaka. My life in Dhaka is worse. I work as a full-time live-in domestic worker, as I have no other option. I have been working for this family for about 7 years. I do not have any holiday and they do not let me to go anywhere. My parents do not come to see me. I sleep in the kitchen and their leftovers.

- My owner promised my parents and brought me here for study. They told me that I will study and help them with household work as well. But only for two months I could study. After that they stopped my study. They give me 5000 tk per month and do not give that money to me. They send it to my parents. I have to do all the household work. From morning to night I work. I cook, wash clothes, moop floor, feed the dog, wash the utensils, etc. I am not allowed to sit on sofa or bed. When aunt become angry with me, she raises voice on me and uses very slang languages. I am not happy with my job but I am bound to do this. I do not want to work here anymore. I want to study. I want to eradicate the poverty of my family by doing a better job. Only education can help me in those. Sometimes aunt raises hands on me and abuses me.

- When I fall sick, they give me some medicine referred by the medicine compounder from nearby medicine shop. They do not allow me to go out. I wanted to play with the neighbouring kids but do not allow me. Because they have the fear that I will tell everything to others. Uncle treats me better than aunt. This is the bitter story of me. I want to be a girl like other girls who are having all the basic needs, those who have the mental and family support. I want to have a happy family like other girls.

- According to one report, from 2001 to 2009, “at least 305 child domestic workers in Bangladesh died from torture, many were severely injured, and 77 were raped.” It is difficult to get the correct statistics of such abuse and killings because of the nature of the relationship between the two parties and of the settings of such crimes. Even if life threatening tortures and murders are reported in the media and the culprits (employers) face legal consequences, the employers either bail “themselves out of prison” or pay “their child domestic workers for not going to court.”