

The Pandemic and the Precarity of Dalit Women in the City of Chennai, Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

Experts from different fields of enquiry, particularly the economists have speculated that like all disasters, the covid-19 pandemic too might act as a leveler leading to greater social and economic equality since there would be a diminishing labour due to high mortality and also the ushering in of new moral and ethical values of humanism along with the new world order. However, these age-old predictions, seem to have failed in several contexts of disasters and more so in the context of current Covid-19 Pandemic.

No doubt, Covid -19 triggered transformation of the world of work, lives and sufferings: There are those of us privileged enough to be able to work remotely and retain our jobs and there are those deemed essential who continued to work outside their homes and thus directly exposed to the virus and also to the uncertainty of wage work since many were laid off and thus exposed to multiple precarity. For instance, in Chennai, in the midst of Covid-19 in January 2021, 700 sanitation workers were dismissed from work without sufficient reason or notice given for such a retrenchment.¹ In 2020, twenty sanitation workers among the very few permanent workers employed by the Greater Chennai Corporation died of Covid 19 among them thirteen were Dalit women sweepers and the seven were garbage collectors from Covid affected households. While on an average 15000 casual workers per day were employed by the Corporation for Covid waste disposal, none of them were provided with any safety gears and thus exposed to the deadly virus.² Those whose work was essential were also invisible and their values of collective care giving (if I care for others my children will be cared for) was also made invisible by neo-liberal state which continue to divide us on the basis of our work, caste and gender.

In the Indian context, caste based social and economic inequalities have heightened under the Covid-19 pandemic conditions. Science was invoked only to validate and valorize Brahminic ideals of 'untouchability' through means of propagation of social distancing. Measures to contain the virus through means of lock downs and social distancing have kept the lower caste workers under constant surveillance by the State and

¹ 'Chennai corporation sacks 700 sanitation workers without notice', <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/chennai-corporation-sacks-700-sanitation-workers-without-notice-141368>

² <https://thewire.in/labour/a-year-into-pandemic-chennais-sanitation-workers-still-dont-have-the-right-gear>

by the dominant caste employers, who prevented the workers' entry into their residential complexes, denied dignity and decent salaries. The State imposed lock down was like death sentence to many informal sector migrant Dalit workers. In the absence of any regular work in the cities, Dalit workers plunged into the precarious sanitation work to survive which not only brutalized their existence under the threat of virus but also pushed them back into 'dirty work' that other castes always refused to undertake.³

By now there are adequate critical readings on the effect of State measures to contain the pandemic, leading to newer forms of caste violence against the Dalits in India. Denial of dignity to the sanitation workers, endless unemployment crisis for the migrant workers who are mostly the lower caste men and women, the triple burden of care work on dalit women (being unpaid domestic labour in their households, as paid domestic labourers and as sanitation workers), denial of digital learning to the Dalit children who are resourceless, under reporting of deaths among the sanitation workers and other migrant workers on reverse migration due to lockdown, were some of the caste and gender based violence unleashed on Dalits during the Pandemic. If anything, the pandemic has brought out the embodied and heightened dimensions of precarity which is gendered. The precarity generated by informality of work with low paid or unpaid work, the precarity of reproductive labour under conditions not only of pandemic but of neo-liberalism, the new demands of care work and emotional labour , increasing physical violence both at home and in the work place against dalit women in particular, are what Judith Butler calls as 'precarization' which 'leads to slow death of the neglected populations over time and space'.⁴

My attempt in this paper is to highlight the nature of Dalit women's vulnerability as paid domestic workers and as sanitation workers and underline the need for a critical pedagogy on pandemic in order to account for the situational and ontological experiences of precarity or vulnerability and inequality and thus avoid the universal moralization of social relationships, work and vulnerabilities. This paper is based on a qualitative study that I and a post-doctoral scholar carried out in Chennai city, India, during the Pandemic times (2020-2021). Drawing from newspaper analysis, in depth interviews and telephonic conversations with Dalit women sanitation workers and paid domestic workers which also include some lower caste women, we studied how Dalit women, placed as lowest in the caste hierarchy, clustered in the informal sector work faced the Pandemic and how the latter added new dimensions to their precarious existence. How did they perceive the crisis

³ Ramaswami Mahalingam, Srinath Jagannathan and Patturaja Selvaraj, 'Decasticization, Dignity, and 'Dirty Work' at the Intersections of Caste, Memory, and Disaster', *Business Ethics Quarterly*, Vol.29, Issue 2, April 2019, PP. 213-239.

⁴ Jasbir Puar, 'Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović', *TDR (1988-)*, Winter 2012, Vol. 56, No. 4, Precarity and Performance: Special Consortium Issue (Winter 2012), pp. 163-177. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23362779>

and what role did caste play in these circumstances to reinforce their precarious conditions of living? For instance, how were the sanitation workers treated during the pandemic when they had to perform all kinds of cleaning work and be involved in very risky virus-related waste management? These are some questions that were posed to the Dalit women workers.

Caste, Pandemic and Precarity

Caste System in India has always devalued Dalit work, mainly Dalit female labour who are continued to be perceived as unclean, or dirty. Such a perception has led to the contemporary occupational segregation of these workers into low paid, unorganized and unskilled work that denies dignity of labour to them. As per the National Sample Survey data for 2011, of the casual wage workers in India, 63 percent are Dalits wage labourers and 32 percent Dalits workers in India suffer (whose population is only 16 %) job insecurity and they are paid lower wages than others. Among the 1.2 million sanitation workers in India 85 percent are Dalits and Tribal communities. The ‘dirty work’ that the Dalits are forced to do for their survival coalesced with abject conditions of work with injuries to their dignity as labourers and as persons along with enormous sufferings.

Caste based exclusion denies any possible social and economic mobility of Dalits and stigmatizes the labour or performance of any tasks carried out by them. Access to education and better employment opportunities are still elusive to Dalits and the neo-liberal market economy has reinforced the caste based occupational segregation, entrenching Dalits into sanitation and other low paid informal sector jobs. Over work, lack of autonomy, inequalities of wages and poor working conditions inflict enormous violence on Dalits which is also normalized by the State. The State is often reluctant to protect Dalits against caste based social and economic discriminations such as the denial of access to common resources and so on. It also often denies basic amenities like housing, water, electricity, good transport facilities, proper school education and regular and decent employment to Dalits and Tribes.

These are what Ram Mahalingam and others call as the ‘dignity injuries’⁵ inflicted on Dalit workers whose precarity is intertwined with caste and neo-liberal market economy and presently the pandemic has only heightened their precarious existence. Although the Dalit women workers, whom we interviewed, did not perceive pandemic as a distinct moment in the continuum of their precarious existence, during the pandemic, the precarity of Dalits were accentuated due to the preexisting stigma of labour. For instance, the covid-19 preventive procedures like social distancing were selectively used by dominant caste residents to prevent lower caste and Dalit workers from performing their work, they were also denied permission to enter temples thus denying them constitutional rights as citizens,

⁵ Ramaswami Mahalingam, Srinath Jagannathan and Patturaja Selvaraj, ‘Decasticization, Dignity, and ‘Dirty Work’ at the Intersections of Caste, Memory, and Disaster’, Op cit.

the right to work, decent wages and dignity of labour.⁶

Pandemic unequally affected the Dalits, as revealed by reports across India. Incidents of abuses and assaults of Dalit migrant workers by dominant caste men, who demanded that the Dalits perform menial work for them were many. During the pandemic, a large number of Dalit children dropped out of school education and they were quickly absorbed as child labour in the informal wage work. Dalit women were waging battles on several fronts against the pandemic: against the family male alcoholism, against displacement due to job loss, being forced to work as sanitation workers under precarious conditions and so on. The Sanitation workers on the whole, as low –wage, low caste workers endured the greatest precarity and faced new and heightened workplace hazards.

Covid-Precarity of Dalit Women Sanitation Workers

The colonial Madras absorbed a large number of poor Dalit women who migrated to the city due to agrarian distress and famine, into various low paid service sector work which mainly involved the sanitation work. From the 19th century, these sanitation workers were segregated into squatter colonies with abject living conditions. They risked premature deaths due to highly dangerous manual scavenging and garbage segregation work and encountered all forms of caste based violence in their performance of labour. For several generations of sanitation workers in the City of Chennai, this occupational segregation (i.e. Dalits alone perform the cleaning work) with little possibility of job mobility meant that they alone shared the undue burden of the ‘dirty work’ of cleaning the city.⁷ Due to this historical burden and with the spread of Covid-19 more and more of Dalit women workers enrolled themselves in the sanitation work, lack of any other work.

At present, the Chennai Corporation sanitation department recruits sanitation workers through open competition and through outsourced companies. Given the caste- based segregation of work and due to lack of occupational mobility, Dalits in large numbers in Chennai city enroll for the sanitation work which is very low paid and contractual. This is more so after the sanitation work being outsourced to private companies by the Chennai Corporation. Even in places where there is no system of outsourcing the job, in times of disasters like floods and during the spread of Covid-19, the local administration approached only the Dalit castes for cleaning work and for disposal of bodies since the other caste groups refused to undertake such ‘dirty work’. The employment crisis among the other caste groups does not induce them to take up cleaning work.

Inevitably, a large number of new recruiters for sanitation work in the city, during the

⁶ Smita Patil, ‘Gender Equity and COVID-19: Dalit Standpoints’, *Economic and Political weekly*, Vol. 56, Issue No. 11, 13 Mar, 2021.

⁷ Susan J. Lewandowski, ‘Urban Growth and Municipal Development in the Colonial City of Madras, 1860–1900’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 34, Issue No.2, 1975, PP. 341-360, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-asian-studies>.

pandemic were largely Dalit women who were displaced from other informal work and from their permanent corporation work as cleaners. Today, there are about five lakhs urban sanitation women workers among whom 90 percent are Dalit women.⁸ In addition to the regular sweeper and garbage disposal work, many of them were ordered to work in the newly formed Covid-care wards, recruited to segregate covid-19 related garbage and sent as sanitary workers to the virus infected houses to disinfect the place. Funeral ghats were also filled with only Dalit workers. The mass recruitments of Dalits for Covid-19 cleaning work has certainly increased the workplace hazards for the already precarious low-waged Dalit workers. Further, the work format itself exposes the workers to all forms of vulnerability.

The Sanitation workers of the State (like the paid domestic workers) do not have a separate rule-book that lays down guidelines for their work timings, holidays, maternity benefits and so on. There is no proper place for the workers' roll-call and they are always made to stand outside the corporation branch -offices (untouchability may be invisible here but reinforced through means of these performances) or made to squatter on the road until such roll-call. If they arrive early, they are not allowed to sit inside the office. The site of sanitation workers gathering in large numbers along the road side, for roll-call is the daily scene in Chennai city since the corporation officers impose unwritten rules of maintaining distance by the sanitation workers for, they perform the 'dirty work'. Arbitrary dismissal of these workers is quite a routine and it was more so during the Pandemic. For instance, in the year 2020, even as the State celebrated these workers as 'covid-warriors', about 700 sanitation workers were dismissed without being served with any notice. This is a kind of precarious stability that the sanitation workers experience at work along with extremely uncertain, short-term scheduling of work with increased unpredictability of daily tasks, however with long hours of work since they could be ordered to work in Covid-wards or at home to disinfect, in addition to road cleaning, sewage cleaning etc.

In other words, there is a temporal component of precarity for sanitation workers whose work hours increased and schedules became more predictable during the pandemic, accompanied by heightened unpredictability of daily tasks. The workers estimated that roughly about 23% increase in work without any incentive for the same. About 20% workers, including the permanent workers, complained of non-payment of wages and delayed payment of wages. The other kind of temporal precarity faced by lower caste wage workers heightened women workers' precarity: workers who were laid off in the pandemic were still linked to their employers despite being technically unemployed. They were left in a state of temporal uncertainty that discouraged them from seeking a different job, or even thinking themselves as 'unemployed'. In addition with the pandemic there has been a heightened dimension of precarity in bodily integrity due to new threats of direct

⁸ <https://www.wateraidindia.in/sites/g/files/jkxoof336/files/the-hidden-world-of-sanitation-workers-in-india.pdf>

exposure to a potentially deadly virus. There is a systemic threat to their bodily integrity especially for the sanitation workers whose premature deaths make the covid-precarity only an added dimension to the precarious existence.⁹

The emotional dimension of precarity is vast and varied for these workers but requires attention. There are cases where their children have cried and elders persuade the workers not to go for work under the virus threat while women workers are torn between these emotions and emotions of labour where worry is about retaining the work that is always temporary and contractual. Essential workers tolerate increased risks to their physical safety because they cannot afford the cost of losing their jobs altogether. The disposability of the wage labour adds to the precariousness of these workers, particularly dalit women and migrant workers who are a replaceable part of the labour process. The fear of losing the job always loom large in the Dalit women workers' mind. When roads are the workplace, women sanitation night workers, face sexual harassment by the male passer-by as well as caste based harassment by the dominant caste supervisors for which they have no means to make complaints since a formal complaint redressal mechanism as per the prevention of sexual harassment Act is absent from Municipal or corporation workspace. A woman worker informed us that the night work has always involved drunken men on the road throwing stones at the workers and passing lewd remarks about the worker and sometime physical harassment. Fear of dismissal based on characterization of woman worker as quarrelsome inhibits many of them from raising complaints against such harassment at work.

It is not only the lack of protection from such violence that make them vulnerable to work-based exploitations but they are also deprived of dignity of work. There are no vehicles for sanitation workers to commute to workplaces and they either use garbage van or walk a long distance at the cost of dignity of the worker. A woman worker told us that during the State and National lockdowns many of them who had to reach the work site, for lack of public transports (which were stopped plying due to lock down restrictions), had to clamber onto the garbage vehicles meant to transport garbage without protective gears and otherwise had to walk several kilometers to reach their work-sites. This is in contrast to the white-collar workers who could work from home during the lockdowns. The sanitary workers were also told that they would lose their jobs if they were absent during the lockdown. These conditions did not bind the sanitation supervisors, the better educated, mostly from better off castes, who would not stand or travel with the sanitation workers. During the Covid-19 many workers had to brave health hazards and deaths in the family as they were forced to reuse disposable gloves and poor- quality shoes that did not

⁹ Data for these findings are from interviews with the women Sanitary workers of Greater Chennai Corporation and from contract workers with Urbaser-Sumit, a private garbage collection contractor in partnership with the Chennai Corporation.

adequately cover their feet. Sanitation workers were denied drinking water from many residential areas since the residents feared contact with the workers who were considered to be carriers of virus. Further, as a woman sanitation worker confessed, these workers had to prioritize the death and grievances of the tax paying upper caste citizens over their own especially when it had to be about disposal of dead bodies or about disposal of virus-related waste.

In 2020, more than 1000 sanitation workers under Chennai Corporation tested positive for Covid and many died. While some of their children and mothers' bodies were disposed without even the knowledge of the workers, illustrious city citizens who passed away in Covid-19 were given State honour and glorious burial.¹⁰ As Judith Butler observes, whose life is grievable and worth protecting, whose suffering and pain matters depends on dominant social values.¹¹ In the case of the Dalit sanitary workers, the hegemonic Brahminic patriarchal social values that informs the state functioning and order, denies the sanitation workers the right to mourn and the right to conduct the last rituals or pay homage to dead family members.

The Paid Domestic workers: Covid-Precarity and Caste based Vulnerabilities¹²

The Covid-19 virus combined with the state measures to contain it through lockdowns has severely affected one of Chennai's indomitable informal workforces, the paid domestic workers. In the last three decades, Chennai has seen a phenomenal growth of paid domestic work along with the growth of other service sectors. A large section of poor women who live in the slums of the city have taken up paid domestic work as viable employment for their family's survival. There are roughly about 1.8 million poor women in Tamil Nadu work as paid domestic workers. Their work is primarily a dually informalised work since it is performed in the private informal sphere of the domestic with women who are often invisible as 'workers' in addition to the work being contractual with no employment protection or worker benefits such as the provident fund, health insurance, accident benefits or old age pension and so on. For example, the paid domestic workers are not covered by workmen's compensation act as they are not treated as 'workman' by a narrow definition given in this conservative act that excludes any employment of 'casual nature' or the ones that is not seen involving 'trade' or 'business'. The paid domestic work is also

¹⁰ <https://thewire.in/labour/a-year-into-pandemic-chennais-sanitation-workers-still-dont-have-the-right-gear>

¹¹ Judith Butler's theory of precarity is useful as a term that defines both the ontological and situational vulnerabilities that connote fragility, exposure to harsh conditions, interdependency, vulnerability, unequal social and economic conditions and so on. Precarity is also relational. See, Judith Butler (2004), *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, (New York: Verso).

¹² This section is mainly extracted from my joint paper with E.Deepa and for more details on the paid Domestic workers and Covid-19, See, S. Anandhi and E.Deepa, 'Protecting Livelihood, Health, and Decency of Work: Paid Domestic Workers in the Time of Covid19', MIDS Occasional Policy Paper 7 COVID-19 Series, June 2020.

excluded from a range of worker's protective and welfare acts such as the Minimum Wages Act 1948; Maternity Benefit Act 1961 and the Contract Labour (regulation and Aboilition) Act 1970; therefore they are not entitled to even minimum worker's benefits such as weekly holidays, sick leave and maternity leave. There is also a problem of fixing the categories of domestic work as skilled and unskilled, with most works being categorized as unskilled leading to low pay for these workers. For example, in a recent minimum wage notification even cooking, child care and elderly care have been categorized as unskilled work leading to low pay for such arduous care work. The minimum wage fixed by the state of Tamil Nadu for these workers is woefully inadequate which has not taken into account the specific nature of vulnerabilities and the intense physical labour involved in this work. Working as part-time or full time and as live-in for eight to ten hours a day either in one house or in multiple houses these workers are subjected to various forms of gendered exploitations, sexual harassment at the workplace, for instance. Further, with their labour being expropriated without adequate compensations or any work security, the livelihood of the domestic workers is extremely fragile and uncertain.

With the Pandemic paid domestic workers are facing the crisis of employment and nonpayment of salary, in addition to the preexisting social stigmas against them. Some of them are forced to go for work amidst the virus crisis, risking their life with no health security. A large contingent of these women workers belongs to the slums of Chennai with inadequate housing and sanitation facilities and with lack of income to meet any health crisis. Under these abject living conditions they also share an undue burden of the social distancing policy of the state. Keeping in mind, the many woes and challenges faced by the domestic workers during the pandemic, in this policy note we suggest various measures for social and health protection of these workers along with other labour welfare measures that are on records for many decades without being strictly implemented.

a) *Covid -19 and the Crisis of Employment*

The impact of Covid 19 on women domestic workers is profound and sometime immeasurable. The first major problem faced by these workers is sudden unemployment which is no less a threat to their lives than the virus itself. In compliance with lockdown many employers have requested their domestic workers not to come for work until they are called back (ILO News: 7th May 2020). This has created enormous uncertainty for the paid domestic workers who began to fear the job loss. A domestic worker from north Chennai, in her interview with us captured this anxiety thus: 'If I stay at home without work my family will starve, if I leave home defying the lockdown, corona will get me. I dread to think but dared to go for work (uyirai panayam vechuthan velaikku pogiren)'. Though at present we do not have adequate data on the extent of job loss among the paid domestic workers, the recent protest by the domestic workers belonging to Pen Thozholalar Sangam (Women Workers' Association) and their demand that the state immediately issue

an order to the employers to take back the domestic workers, make clear that the crisis of job loss is real, intense and that it has severely affected the livelihood of these workers (The News Minute, September 2, 2020).

Some employers have shrewdly dismissed these workers just before the lockdown and promised to take them back once the lock down is eased. However, some of them are not convinced about getting their jobs back. After twenty one days of lock down, a worker in her interview said that much of her trepidation is about her employers who might get used to doing their housework by themselves and not call her back and what if they too get only half pay therefore not pay her salary during the lockdown. 'I am not sure if they will call me back for work', (yenna velaikku vetchipaangalaanu theriyala) was her remark on the plight of unemployment. Several domestic workers in Chennai city have not received their monthly wages for the past two months. Some of them have received only half pay for the month of March and nothing for the following months. A woman who works for the bachelors said, her employers paid only half the salary for three months and were also demanding her to be present for work when she faced the problem of transport. According to her, they were also unwilling to advance loan for any health contingency. Some workers have risked police vigilance and putting their own health at risk went to work so that they do not lose the job. They also undertook more work in these households where the demands of care work as well as sanitation work have increased due to Covid-19 crisis.

Reverse migration of families in search of rural livelihood have forced some of these domestic workers to leave Chennai without a hope of getting back to their work in the city. Our prediction is that due to job loss in other sectors of informal work, with no employment guarantee scheme for urban workers, there could be a huge supply of domestic workers from poor women seeking job for survival. This would not only increase the competition among the workers but will also reduce their bargaining capacity in terms of wages and other benefits including their capacity to negotiate their demands for toilet facilities within employer's home or for any other health security.

b) Low Pay, Liquidity Crunch and Welfare Crisis:

A large proportion of women domestic workers are middle aged married women among whom a substantial number of them are widows or divorced or living with alcoholic abusive husbands with financial instability in the family. We may note that men in these families too lack any stable income and most of them are casual workers who work in the informal sector as construction workers, sanitation workers and so on or self-employed as auto drivers, electricians, plumbers, painters etc. They too have lost their income due to the lock down and thus multiplying the family's hardship. With a monthly income, these women workers are often the main providers for their family and therefore are encountering the worst situation of liquidity crunch in their homes at a time when cost of essential commodities has gone up and their familiar neighbourhood stores where they

have monthly accounts or loans to purchase household items are shut for a while. Some of them told us they could not venture out to borrow money from their employers who could also not transfer the same through phone banking since many of these workers are not familiar with such technologies. The divorced or separated women workers often do not hold ration card or bank account to avail the government welfare schemes during the pandemic.

Pressure to pay rent on time despite the Tamil Nadu Government order (G.O NO.195, March 30, 2020) not to collect rent for these months has forced many of them to borrow money for high interest. One single woman worker narrated her experience of being harassed by her landlord thus: 'I am living in a hut paying Rs.2500 per month as rent. The owner has been harassing me to pay the rent and I had to fight with him two days reminding him of the Government order not to force collect rent. Finally he relented but it is still like a dagger on my neck'. The state welfare provisions, as many pointed out, are not adequate to meet the needs of the entire family.

Though Tamil Nadu Domestic Welfare Board has been allocated special relief funds to manage the crisis of the workers during the Pandemic, the Board suffers from long years of inactivity with no proper registration of the domestic workers to deliver the welfare schemes. It is estimated that the Greater Chennai alone would have 5.5 lakh domestic workers whereas by 2009, only 64,825 women workers were registered with the Board. Among the registered only 17,066 members have received any benefits from the Welfare Board and many of them are not even aware of manual workers' welfare schemes.

c) *Return to work: New Woes:*

In Chennai, ever since the slums have been relocated in faraway Kannagi Nagar and Perumpakkam, the paid domestic workers living in these resettlement colonies travel a long way to the central parts of the city for work spending a huge amount as transport cost. One may note here that in the case of domestic work, trust, loyalty to employers and regularity brings the workers several benefits. Therefore, women workers endure long distance travel to keep their relationship and work intact. In order to retain their work with their previous employers, these workers shell out a huge amount of their salary as travel cost (Coelho et al: 2013). With the ease of lockdown when these workers were expected to return to work, many of them could not do so since their mobility is severely hampered by lack of transport facilities. The anxiety of losing work due to lack of transport was expressed thus by a young worker who lives in Perumpakkam and works in Mylapore: 'I do not know what to do. If I do not take up the work when called, the employers might go for other workers and I stand to lose these houses of work. I cannot walk such a long distance for work; I am in a fix and caught in a dilemma. (En nilamai, iruthalai kolli erumbu madhiri)'.

d) Care workers or Carriers of Virus?

‘Will we come to work with the virus when we care for them? (avangala paathukira nanga noiyoda velaikku varuvama?)’, asked a worker during our interview with her. With the spread of virus, the stigma attached to the domestic work and the workers are reinforced through means of identifying these workers as carriers of virus. In Chennai, taking into consideration the upper caste-class anxiety about manual workers as being the carriers of any disease, many resident associations have barred entry of domestic workers and drivers into their premises. This is despite the state relaxation of lock down rules (DT Next, June 10, 2020). Karpagam, a worker from the Pen Thozhilar Sangam noted that the ‘members of Residents’ Welfare Associations (RWAs) of various apartments have told them not to visit the apartment for work until next year’. She further observed that the affluent apartment dwellers ‘are not ready to take workers who hail from homes in the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board’ (The Newsminute, September 02, 2020). Similarly, A. Kumari who works for several houses in an apartment complex said that she was asked to leave immediately once the employers got to know that she lives in the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board tenements in Perumbakkam (The Hindu, September 03, 2020). ‘It has been three months and I am struggling to find a job’, she said. In cases where they have been called back to work, severe restrictions and surveillance are put in place to the extent of denying dignity to the workers. One worker confided that after the lockdown, new kinds of surveillance practices are put in place in her employer’s house making her feel uneasy and self-conscious about her hygiene status. ‘Interrogating me as to whether I keep my house clean and whether everyone at home bathed etc, in addition to the routine wash of my feet with turmeric water before entering their house have become a new routine making me feel conscious of my working class status’. Another worker felt that though maintaining hygiene and self-distancing are good to keep the virus away it should not be used to stigmatise or cast aspersions on the workers. In some residential apartments domestic workers are prohibited from using the lift to reach houses in several floors. So far it appears that instructions on maintaining social distancing given to these workers is used in subtle ways to reinforce the preexisting stigmas against the workers who seem to risk their own life for want of adequate provisions for hand-washing, self-isolation and wearing of masks or any other personal protective gears.

e) Paid Domestic workers and the Unpaid Care work:

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the persistent inequality in the gender distribution of unpaid care work with all of them indicating the unusual burden of domestic responsibilities with no assistance from men in doing household chores. ILO observes that prior to the COVID-19 crisis, over two third of 16.4 billion hours were spent by women in unpaid care work every day across the world. This has now increased manifold (ILO Brief, May11, 2020). This is more so in the case of poor domestic workers whose low pay

and temporary employment has always undermined their capacity to hire paid labour to do care work in their families, thus adding to their paid care work responsibilities. During lockdown and due to the Pandemic, this unpaid care work in their own houses has intensified for the paid domestic workers. The absence of day care centers, schools and permanent presence of unemployed men demanding care along with the elderly care and increasing attention to sanitation have added to the woes of domestic workers doing unpaid family work. In addition, there are everyday ordeals of erratic water supply, lack of transport, lack of time to access ration shops, public hospitals and corporation dispensaries faced by these workers.

Altogether, Covid-19 has exacerbated the crisis of existence for women domestic workers with their lack of access to labour and social protection including health care and maternity protection, especially when many of them with their reduced immunity are forced to work even under such life threatening conditions. Therefore, these women workers are, as ILO observes, likely to be more impoverished and marginalized from income replacement and from social protection schemes than the formal workers. It is also worth taking note of ILO's warning on lockdown measures here. It has said that the '[l]ockdown measures will worsen poverty and vulnerabilities among the world's two billion informal economy workers' (ILO May 7, 2020)

Need for a Coordinated Social and Health policy for Domestic Workers

More than ever before, in the present context of the pandemic it becomes important to recognize the domestic workers' economic productivity and their right to a safe healthy working environment. The state must take effective measures in this direction. Incidentally, India has not even ratified the ILO convention on Domestic Workers which mandates nations to provide occupational safety and health of these workers (ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011).

Given the vulnerability of paid domestic workers, prioritising monetary and health support along with meeting their immediate needs become the state responsibility. In particular, the state has to attend to their special needs of sanitation, health care and evolve specific social protection schemes. About ten Central Trade Unions in India have already demanded immediate measures from the state to protect the livelihood of vulnerable workers in the informal sector including the migrant workers and for the inclusion of Trade Unions in the Covid-19 response task force. The Central government so far has not responded to these demands (ILO, October 9, 2020).

Rethinking the Role of Tamil Nadu Domestic Workers' Welfare Board

In consonance with the demands of the Trade unions, the Tamil Nadu Domestic Welfare Board may initiate few consultative processes with trade Unions that work for the welfare of domestic workers and include them as part of the task force to address the specific needs

of the domestic workers. In this regard, the Board must recognize specific gendered nature of discriminations and exclusions that are faced by these workers during the pandemic in order to prioritize their occupational health and livelihood issues (ILO Briefing Note, May 5, 2020). In this regard ILO guideline on this might help the state to evolve a coordinated health and social policy: '[s]trengthening occupational safety and health, adjusting work arrangements, preventing discrimination and exclusion, and providing access to health care and paid leave (and also to food and social services for the most vulnerable) are all indispensable strands of a coordinated health and social policy response to the crisis' (ILO Policy Brief on Covid-19, Pillar :3). Treating domestic workers as essential service workers and providing them with necessary personal protective equipment along with reliable and accessible information and affordable health services is the responsibility of the Tamil Nadu Domestic Workers' Welfare Board who can be helped by the domestic workers' unions. Simple measures like having mobile Covid -19 testing centers placed in various public places where the workers could easily get tested will help them and the state to contain the spread of virus. Similar such demands have been placed by the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF, March 18, 2020).

Established in 2007, the Tamil Nadu Domestic Workers Welfare Board offers a range of financial assistance to the registered domestic workers ranging from children's education, marriage and maternal health expenses of the workers, death related benefits for the worker's heir and a nominal pension amount and so on. Unfortunately, the welfare board has not even paid attention to the compulsory registration of all domestic workers to benefit from these schemes. Domestic workers are not even aware of the existence of the Board. For this, the Board must adequately publicise their activities and schemes and evolve new norms and rules for compulsory registration of the workers.

In fixing the minimum wages for the domestic workers, the state has overlooked the problem of fixing the categories of domestic work as unskilled labour – cooking and childcare for instance -- leading to low pay for these essential care workers. All these have serious implications for the dignity and decency of work for the domestic workers.

Being informal work, no domestic worker has any legal entitlement to sickness leave benefits. In the present context of Covid-19, as ILO has pointed out there is a need for a coordinated health and social welfare response to the crisis so that the state can ensure occupational safety, better working environment for these workers without discrimination and exclusion (ILO Policy Brief on Covid 19, Pillar :3). To address specific health needs of the workers in times of pandemic like this, employers should be made to pay a nominal amount towards insurance scheme or other benefits for the workers.

Work from Home (WFH) policy, mainly for the private sector employees may affect the paid domestic workers who work in such houses, as some workers anticipate increasing workloads with houses multiplying as office space with no additional wage for doing any extra cleaning or sanitation work. Some workers even expressed their anxiety about

working for houses with bachelors who would be working from home. Extending the laws related to sexual harassment at work to the domestic work sphere and improving wages for the increasing workload would enable these workers to feel safe at work. As we noted elsewhere, two legislations concerning domestic workers, the Unorganised Workers Act 2008 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013, at present are inadequate in addressing the specific forms of exploitations peculiar to this work (Rajkotwala and Mehta 2020).

With the postponement of school education, the likelihood of inducing young girls into paid domestic work will result in an increase in child labour in small towns and in rural Tamil Nadu (Kundu, April 21, 2020). Providing accessible technology based educational solutions for vulnerable families could become an important solution to mitigate the problem of child labour (ILO Brief on Covid19).

As long-term measures to mitigate the vulnerability of paid domestic workers, following steps can be taken by the state through the Domestic Welfare Board: Formalisation of the domestic work sector through:

- 1) mandatory registration of domestic workers with the corporation divisions/wards.
- 2) employment of only registered domestic workers and punitive measures for employers violating such norms. As the trade unions perceive such registration to have a benefit to both employer and domestic worker, it is a workable option.
- 3) registered workers should be entitled to a) living wage (time rated- or job specified wages) to be fixed by the labour department ; b) decent working conditions to be clearly laid out c) guidelines for treatment of domestic workers; d) leave, annual bonus, transport, etc. as part of the contract; e) right to associate and freedom to participate in union activities ; f) right to access to good public health centres near their homes; g) right to information related to their welfare provided by the government through the Domestic Welfare Board.
- 4) The State could additionally levy tax through corporation to cover the cost of social security and insurance. The money collected from worker, employer, and the additional levies could form part of the Domestic Workers Fund. The existing Domestic Workers Labour Board could be the nodal body for the welfare and oversight.
- 5) Mandatory savings to be introduced through means of some co-operative efforts which might enable the domestic workers to utilize, borrow and lend to other women during this kind of crisis.
- 6) Housing security for women workers to avoid eviction threat by landlords, state and lenders. This is especially important in the light of rural migrant workers sell their small sized patta lands in the village to buy non patta land in the city for their permanent dwelling with little housing security.
- 7) Displacement of workers within the city which has huge social, economic and health

cost for the workers should be stopped.

Conclusion

In this paper an attempt is made to critically engage with the narratives of Dalit women workers to understand the nature of precariousness related to their labour and their lower caste and gender identity. In mapping the intersectional aspects of Dalit women's precarity as essential workers I have tried to discount the universal value attributed to sufferings due to pandemic and emphasized the caste and gendered as well as spatialized contexts of sufferings and resistance. The emphasis of this paper is also on the need to pay close attention to the material realities of caste and gender which shape the specific experiences of Dalit women in dealing with disasters. As we could note from the narratives of the sanitation women workers, in their view pandemic has not ruptured or reconstituted their lives in any manner. Instead, pandemic became an extension of neo-liberal processes of informalization and exploitation of the unskilled, low-paid workers. Under the influence of neo-liberalism, for the last three decades women from the marginalized social groups like Dalits were left out of commercial production processes (being incorporated in service works). Their work relations are already fragmented, discontinuous, already invisible and their status is what Antonio Negri calls as "immaterial labour". The precarity of their labour is enmeshed in these conditions.

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