

How Socio-Cultural Factors Like Caste and Race Influence Middle-Class Women's Experiences of Domestic Work in the US and India: A Study

Domestic work is often defined as work or services that take place within the household or a residence. Domestic workers are those engaged in providing direct or indirect 'care services' for the entire household and the scope of their work is often not defined well; and in cases where there are definitions in place, the actual work supersedes those definitions too. Domestic workers belong to both the paid and unpaid categories. It is often the backbone of any capitalist economy and adds value even in cases where the work is not paid – for example, in the case of housewives who take care of their homes and working husbands' needs so that they can go out and work and contribute directly to the capitalist workforce.

Keeping in line with these ideas, Gayatri Nair, a researcher at Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi (IIIT-Delhi), in collaboration with Nila Ginger Hoffman, a faculty at DePaul University, USA, have conducted a study that looks at similarities between the negotiation of domestic work by middle-class women in India and the US. These researchers have come up with interesting insights on how interlocking systems of oppression have produced similarities in the undervaluation of domestic work in these two countries.

The researchers have focused specifically on the social location of middle-class women, the role of domestic work as existing between the public and private spheres and the links with structures of caste and race against the backdrop of neoliberalism. They have looked closely at middle-class households in these two different cultures where women who act as household managers are economically in a position to outsource this work entirely or in part to others—often women, of colour and those belonging to 'lower' castes in the US and India respectively.

The most interesting highlight of this study is that in the US and India, domestic work remained marked as 'women's work'. Women assumed responsibility as household manager and allocated work to domestic workers, with minimal participation from men. In most cases men's participation in domestic work, much like in India followed the traditional divide where men handled the work outside and retained financial control over the household. Men's participation was also viewed as 'help' towards domestic chores as opposed to a substantive and equal division of work.

They also found that familial arrangements followed by previous generations played a role in how domestic work was carried out or commissioned in India. Married women would compulsorily partake in domestic work and marriage was always determined by caste. The structure of the household in India also affected how domestic work was performed. In the US, they observed no extended household arrangements but familial roles could have its paid equivalent – where middle class women would hire 'motherly or grandmotherly' figures to take care of children.

For middle-class women who use the services of domestic workers, the perception of work and workers is mediated through structures of caste in India, and race and ethnicity in the US contributing to its social and economic devaluation. **The researchers concluded that caste and**

race associations are reinforced as domestic work remains unregulated low-wage labour in both countries.