



Chapter 11

Housing, Spatial-Mobility and Paid Domestic Work in Millennial Delhi: Narratives of Women Domestic Workers

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11.1 Introduction

In the existing discourse on paid domestic work in India, various studies examine work relations and their role in transforming the geography of the intimate space of an employer's home into a site of power and control (Qayum and Ray, 2003). However, there is little in the existing scholarship that looks at the spatial connections between the activity of domestic work and the geography of the city. The increasing participation of urban women in paid domestic work and its interconnections with the urban processes are very well established—this chapter attempts to broaden the web of relations between the gendered occupation of paid domestic work and the spaces of the city. The attempt here is to demonstrate how places like gated neighbourhoods, working class housing settlements, public transport and toilets collectively shape the experience of women domestic workers and to explore the precise nature of the processes involved therein. For example, the chapter explores how the issue of housing for the urban poor crucially impacts the micro realities in paid domestic work in the context of provision of servant quarters by employers or in the case of eviction and resettlement of informal settlers.

The experiences of housing and negotiation are not explored much in the existing ethnographic accounts of domestic work.¹ One common, generalizing observation has been that geographic proximity between middle-class neighbourhoods and “slums” has sustained the growth of domestic work. But imagining domestic

¹Coelho et al. (2013) remains an exception in this regard, who explores the connections between housing for the urban poor and paid domestic work in Chennai.

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workers as urban poor living exclusively in slums in contemporary Delhi has serious implications for the theorization of the phenomenon. By moving “beyond the stereotypes of slums”² we can begin to see the range of possibilities through which urban poor try to negotiate the scarcity of housing.³ In Delhi, the term “slum” can represent only one type of housing, namely the *jhuggi jhompri* clusters. Based on a survey, only slightly less than one-fourth of the total population of the national capital region lives in “planned colonies” while the rest lives in seven other types of settlements⁴ with varying degrees of informality. Such a large majority of a city’s population living in “non-planned” colonies hints at the complexities with which city dwellers inhabit the city space. Experience of citizenship can vary across these different types of settlements. For example, the dwellers of “Resettlement Colonies”, “*Jhuggi Jhompri* Clusters” (JJC)s,⁵ “Unauthorized Colonies”⁶ access basic services like water, electricity, roads, transport on a daily basis through various informal networks and everyday struggles (see Ramakrishnan, Sheikh and Banda in this volume).

There are various accounts which show how women’s relation to space is subject to constant negotiation (see, for example, Phadke et al., 2011). There is abundant empirical evidence that demonstrates how spatiality not only determines women’s mundane experiences in daily life but also has a significant impact on their work-related choices to the extent that a gendered pattern in economic geography emerges (see, for example, Hanson and Pratt, 1995). However, women’s experience of city spaces can be further differentiated based on intersection of other identities, e.g. caste, class, race and religion. Shilpa Phadke et al.’s pioneering work on Mumbai demonstrates that all women generally negotiate the constraints the city imposes on their daily life. However, their strategies and ability to negotiate the city spaces vary across the diversity of social groups that they belong to. It is in this context that this chapter attempts to construct a gendered account of the city through an exploration of women domestic workers’ experiences of spatial-mobility in relation to work, and the inherent vulnerabilities of class and gender therein. While the narratives of “mobility” highlight the gendered experience of the city (see also Chap. 12), the issue of “housing” allows us to ground these narratives in the politics of class that characterizes the millennial city. Such an exploration of housing

²The introduction of the journal *Environment and Urbanization* 1(2), which discusses the need to move beyond the “slums” because of the multiple types of housing settlements for the poor that exist across the globe. For details, see *Environment and Urbanization* (1989).

³One figure representative of this scarcity is reported by the Economic Survey of Delhi, 2012–13. According to the survey, the city has a shortage of 1.65 lakh “residential houses”(p. 197).

⁴Delhi Economic Survey, 2008–09 cited in Bhan (2013). The other seven types of settlements include: (1) Rural villages; (2) Urban villages; (3) Resettlement colonies; (4) Unauthorized colonies (5) Regularized unauthorized colonies, (6) Slum designated areas, and; (7) *Jhuggi Jhompri* Clusters (JJC)s).

⁵JJC)s are what are usually known as “slums”, which are characterized by fragile housing structures and poverty (for details see, for example, Bhan, 2009).

⁶These three categories are out of the eight official types all the human settlements in Delhi are classified into. The three types of colonies are inhabited mostly by the working class in the city.



and mobility, through the lens of gender and class, unveil how the two constitute domestic work relations. In the contemporary discourse on domestic work, the vulnerabilities of domestic workers have overwhelmingly been attributed to the “private” nature of their workplace. This chapter, while not disagreeing with this crucial understanding, unpacks these vulnerabilities as also emanating from the larger socio-economic inequalities constituting the urban fabric of Delhi. By looking at individual experiences of domestic work together with wider entitlement issues, this chapter dislocates the power that produces vulnerability for domestic workers from the immediate place of work and locates it at multiple sites in the city.

11.2 Paid Domestic Work in India: A Context

Paid domestic work has expanded exponentially in India over the past few decades (Ray, 2000; Neetha, 2004). The growth in the sector is attributed to push factors including the agrarian crisis, migration, loss of industrial jobs and increasing informality. In addition, growing urbanization alongside the expansion of the urban middle class in India has fuelled the demand for paid domestic work. In fact, domestic help is understood to be so intrinsic to Indian middle class life that some scholars identify it as one of the defining features of the class (Mahapatra, 2009; Ray and Qayum, 2010). Over the past few decades, the sector has not just grown in size, but has changed in composition as well. The government figures from the late 1970s onwards have captured the increasing participation of women in domestic work (Ray, 2000; Neetha, 2004). As per the statistics of the NSSO (2004–05), there are 4.75 million domestic workers in India, of which 3 million are “women in urban areas”.⁷ It has been claimed that these figures are a gross underrepresentation of the magnitude of paid domestic work in the country.⁸ Increasing participation of women in the sector is attributed to feminization of urban poverty and prevalence of the part-time arrangement in the sector that allows poor urban women to do paid work in others’ homes while they also take care of their own homes (Neetha, 2009).

The introduction of neo-liberal reforms beginning in the 1990s has turned Indian cities into sites of complex politics along the lines of class and other distinctions. One of the ways in which class politics in India has unfolded is in conflicts over scarce urban space (Fernandes and Heller, 2006), and Delhi is no

⁷Minister of State of Labour and Employment in a response to question number 649 on 9 December 2013, asked in Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian parliament), last accessed on 7 June 2015, link: <http://labour.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Divisions/Parliament/LS%20USQ%20649.pdf>.

⁸ILO in its report on domestic workers worldwide notes the same and mentions that the estimates for India vary between 2.5 and 90 million. The figure of 90 million is a widely cited figure, however, in the light of the other figures like total labour force participation by women in the country, the figure comes across as an unrealistic one. For details see “*Domestic workers across the world: Global and regional statistics and the extent of legal protection*” (2013).



exception. Over the past decade, Delhi's goal of becoming a "world city" has been manifest in intense political struggle over urban spaces and projecting the urban poor as the "encroacher" to the space (Baviskar, 2011) guided by an ideology "rule[d] by aesthetics" (Ghertner, 2015), consumption and hygiene (Bhan, 2009; Brosius, 2013; Baviskar, 2003). In Delhi, this contestation over space—imagination of its legitimate usage and aesthetics being key elements—has unfolded in hostility towards the urban poor, resulting in the eviction of a number of informal and poor settlements across the city (See Chaps. 4–6 in this volume).

Despite all the hostile campaigns to push the poor away from the city, the middle class and the city as a whole depend on the working-poor for their survival. The working-poor as security guards, hawkers, domestic workers among other service providers sustain the privilege and status of the middle class in the city. It is not a coincidence that every study that lists the occupations for women living in the poor and informal settlements of Delhi includes paid domestic work as a major source of livelihood for these women. With the increasing antagonistic politics and socio-spatial segregation, domestic work relation is one of the ways through which the rich and the poor in Delhi interact with each other. It is an activity through which spaces that are not otherwise accessible to the poor become so, at least physically. However, it is much the same notion of space—in which the poor are encroachers on space that the middle class believes to be its own—that runs beneath the dynamics of the domestic worker–employer relationship and shapes the everyday experience of domestic workers in the city.

The chapter draws upon an original study that consisted of twenty in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions with women domestic workers from different parts of the city. The study primarily focused on part-time workers' experience of workplace, which is their employers' home. Part-time domestic workers, who work in more than one household,⁹ are a different case to study as they have multiple workplaces to work in on a single working-day. The study attempted to understand their access to basic amenities and relationship with their employers given that they spend relatively less time at one workplace. However, full-time and live-in workers were also interviewed, as during the course of my fieldwork I realized that they also had interesting perspectives to offer on the part-time arrangement. The diversity of workers enabled me to capture perspectives contrasting different arrangements. Workers were selected in such a way that there was a diversity based on social identities such as caste and religion since these identities, as the existing scholarship shows, shape domestic workers' experience of work. Domestic work is generally used as an umbrella term to describe a wide range of tasks that are performed daily within and around the household. Some of the sub-categories under "domestic worker" include gardener, driver, security guard, maid,

⁹The usage of term "part-time" does not necessarily mean that the workers spend only a small fraction of their day working. They are part-timers for an individual employer who may employ them for a specific task and the workers may have many such employers. Though workers themselves may be spending as much as a full-time worker spends on a usual working-day.



nanny and cook. These categories are not gender neutral and reflect gendered patterns and social hierarchies.¹⁰ The workers in my study were mostly cooks and maids, performing tasks such as cooking, chopping vegetables, doing dishes, sweeping, mopping, dusting, washing clothes and cleaning toilets.

Workers were approached through two types of networks. First, some employers were approached using my personal contacts and in turn they introduced me to their workers. These interviews with the workers were conducted at the employers' homes (i.e. the workers' workplace) in the employers' absence, except in one case. Second, two organizations working on the issue of domestic work, Domestic Workers Forum and Jagori, were approached to introduce me to their groups of workers. In addition, I relied on field notes documenting interactions with several other workers and employers, observations in employers' homes, workers' housing settlements and gated communities.

11.3 Home, Paid Work and the City

In general, women are tied to the space of the home, or "spatially embedded" in the home, because of the everyday reproduction of the household that is their primary socially assigned task (Massey, 1994; Herod, 2003). In this section, I discuss the narratives of domestic workers to explore, on the one hand, their embeddedness in their domestic reproductive role, and, on the other hand, their contingent experience of paid domestic work, which happens outside their own home. Concurrently, these stories are also an exploration of the workers' negotiation of the city space through their movements, perceptions and discursive practices. For women, the decision to take up paid work outside the home involves crossing social boundaries (of marriage and family)—which are internalized and based on social location—in addition to crossing the material boundaries of home and locality.

Stories of taking up paid work are in many cases also ones of juggling home and workplace. Lalti (45) had to start working because her husband fell sick and could no longer support the family. At one point, she started working in a factory, but her husband, who was then bedridden, asked her to continue doing domestic work as it was near their home and allowed her to look after their children. In her initial days of part-time domestic work, Lalti would go to her first workplace as early as 6 a.m. and be back home by 7 a.m. From 7 until 8, she would do her household work, including sending her children to school, and after finishing all this, she would go back to work in other homes. Around 10 a.m., she would come home and do household work again. Lalti used to complete 5 h-long shifts each day. Like Lalti, other women confirmed that they took up part-time work because of its flexibility, facilitated by the geographic proximity of the workplace. Bano (60), who moved to

¹⁰Neetha (2009) while analysing the official national figures on the number of domestic workers mentions that men are more likely to be drivers and guards than cooks and house servants.



Delhi from Assam¹¹ after her husband's death, shared that there was nobody to look after her children when she started working. She would lock them inside the house and go to work in the nearby neighbourhood. In the afternoon, she would come back to feed her children before she went back for a second shift.

Financial distress remains a major push factor for workers taking up domestic work. Lalti and many others in this study look at their work as a result of helplessness. This reflects the widespread sense that this kind of work is a last resort, a feeling derivative of the hegemonic idea of domesticity, according to which normally women should not work outside the home and should be financially cared for by their husbands. Bhagwati (60), who started working as a maid when her husband became extremely ill, told me, “*apne ghar se bahar jaana kise acchha lagta hai?*” (Who likes to go out of home?) She also had to hide the fact that she was a domestic worker from the extended family, because she feared they would look down on her for working in another home. When performed by a woman in her own household space for her own family, “domestic work” produces “respectability” (Ray, 2000), but the same work when performed as labour in someone else's home may cause shame.

Change of socio-spatial location—from one's own home to others'—changes the meaning and worth of the work significantly. Workers talked about the shame in working in others' home and how people would deplore that they were working as a maid in others' homes. Meenu (45) broke down into tears while sharing the circumstances under which she began as a domestic worker. She was five years old when she lost her father and consequently stopped going to school. After that she started travelling with her mother from their home at Bhoomiheen Camp in Gobindpuri to her job as a domestic worker in C. R. Park. The two areas are very close to each other, which allowed Meenu's mother to not only continue working but also to take her child (Meenu) along with her. At the age of ten, she started work as a live-in maid in the same area. Meenu's mother married her off at fourteen. She thought this would mean the end of domestic work outside home: “I used to think that I would not have to work after my marriage. Actually, my mother married me off with the same hope. But I had to start working again [as a domestic worker] because there were financial problems in my family”.

Meenu's narrative embodies an idealized femininity that entails being at home and being taken care of financially while committing to the household work of one's own home.¹² However, the compulsion to do paid work and to go out of the home unsettles this ideal. It is the unsettling of hegemonic gender norms that some, like Bhagwati, negotiate by hiding the reality of their work. Others use the rhetoric of *majboori* (helplessness) to deal with the shame and embarrassment¹³ that marked, to varying degrees—based on caste, religion, age and marital

¹¹Assam is a state in the north-eastern India. It is approximately 2000 km from Delhi.

¹²This is similar to Raka Ray's (2000) observation of subaltern femininities and notions among women domestic workers in Kolkata.

¹³Pande (2010), in the context of how commercial surrogate mothers negotiate the stigma of surrogacy, observes that women gestational surrogates constantly downplay their agency in the choice of their work by attributing it to their helplessness and poverty.



status—the narratives I heard. Further, while geographic proximity allows women workers to do both paid and unpaid work, they constantly struggle to balance the home and workplace, a physically and psychologically strenuous task.

The constant reference to *majboori* shows the low regard that domestic workers themselves have for this work, a perception shaped by their sense of what the appropriate scaling of female labour is—one's own home. In addition, the stigma associated with paid domestic work due to its connections with caste and servility makes them see themselves as inferior beings. Looking at this aspect of work is essential as it shows workers' sense of their own status in the society, and an individual's experience of spaces is mediated by their location in a social hierarchy (Bondi and Davidson, 2005; Khan, 2007). The prevalence of practices of caste is a defining element of domestic work relations in contemporary India (Raghuram, 2001; Froystad, 2003; and others). Women, particularly those from non-Dalit castes, looked at the idea of doing the household work in someone else's home as derogatory, primarily because some of the tasks they were performing as domestic workers were lower in terms of caste occupations than their own caste.¹⁴ Not being able to tell relatives, in-laws or people back in the village about their work was not unusual. One observation that merits mention in this context is that the city as a space also gives anonymity and “freedom” to these women to do this work in spite of its reported stigmatized nature. This would not have been possible for many of them burdened by the practice of caste and status. Had they been in their village they could have faced social boycott by their caste community—“*hukka pani band kar dete hain*” (the community ends social and economic ties [if it is found someone works as a domestic worker]).

In addition, concerns of family honour on the part of male members in the family (mostly husbands) severely constrain choices. Before they took up domestic work, many of the women had the option to do jobs like segregating vegetables in wholesale markets, cleaning offices, factory labour and so on. Although the women themselves were not particularly afraid of these workplaces, their husbands decided they were unsafe and forbade them from taking the jobs. The women suggested that their husbands were anxious about the increased interaction with strangers these relatively public workplaces would lead to. Husbands were also angered by women's long commutes, doubting their wives' character/loyalty, when their commutes kept them out of the house after dark. These quarrels often resulted in women leaving the jobs to do domestic work that allowed them to return relatively early. Availability of domestic work within walking distance and in part-time arrangement allows women domestic workers to manoeuvre social control on spatial movement in addition to managing both paid and unpaid work. Kalawati (60) here said how she managed to work when the earnings of her husband alone were not enough to run the family but he still did not want her to work outside: “In the morning, he would leave for his work, after that I used to come

¹⁴The findings of the larger study confirm the association of domestic labour with shame and stigma. There are narratives which offer insight about workers' notion of the work. However, discussing those narratives is beyond the scope of this chapter.



out for work by making some excuse. Sometimes taking a bag with me and pretending to be going to the market for buying vegetables. In that duration, I would do the dishes in two houses. It did not take much time to do dishes in those two houses”.

While the need to balance paid and unpaid work is an important factor in women’s labour market choices, the narratives in my study add another layer of “spatial constraint”, hinting at the link between women’s familiarity with places and work. In a focus group discussion held in Taimoor Nagar, an informal housing settlement along a drain in the South-East of Delhi, women shared that the only place they knew in the city was their own housing settlement and the adjoining neighbourhoods where they were working, most of which were within 2–3 km of their homes. Anand and Tiwari (2006) note that in Delhi poor women’s movements tend to be very local, usually within the radius of a few kilometres. Usually, these distances are walkable and this remains true even for their commuting patterns for work (Anand and Tiwari, 2006). The narratives show that women workers’ geography of everyday life is very small and fairly local in nature. Kala, a mother of two teenage children, has been in Delhi for more than 15 years and started work in the housing societies of Mayur Vihar area of Delhi 3 years ago. Kala lives in Trilokpuri, an old resettlement colony, almost 3 km away from the area where she works. She recalls how one day, one of the women from her settlement suggested that she take a shortcut in her daily commute, but doing so, she lost her way:

Once I lost my way [while returning from work] ... [and] started crying in panic. I used to come to work through one way and go back through the same route ... [that day] I kept walking around the area in an effort to find my way back. Then I happened to see a man, who was also from Trilokpuri [the place where she lives]. He asked me what was happening as I had already passed through that area thrice. He said he was going home to have lunch. I told him that I was also on my way back home after work. Then he dropped me home on his bicycle. After reaching home, I told him that I had lost my way and urged him not to share it with anybody.

Losing her way heightened Kala’s sense of vulnerability in an unknown place. This particular experience shows how spaces can become threatening when women lose a sense of familiarity with a space. Such experiences can make women “retreat to the perceived safety of their homes, whose walls serve to reinforce their own weakened boundaries and fragile sense of identity” (Bondi and Davidson, 2005). In general, most of these women have explored the city very little, even if they have lived in it for long time. It is women’s lack of socialization with public spaces and embeddedness in the space of the home and family that explains such experiences of alienation with the city. In addition, the narratives also demonstrate how the choice to work is deeply embedded in space. What also emerges is the fact that women workers do not only face constraints passively but they also try to manoeuvre them. In the next section, I examine some of the ways through which women domestic workers attempted to do so.



11.4 Manoeuvring Fears and Scarcity of Housing: Case of the Servant Quarters

Women interviewed as part of this study lived in urban villages, resettlement colonies and servant quarters within middle-class gated colonies. With the scarcity of space in India's cities, having live-in workers has become rare but has not disappeared altogether. It is still common for many government colonies to have servant quarters attached to senior bureaucrats' residences, of which there are many in Delhi. However, this arrangement is not confined to government colonies; many upper-class private colonies have similar arrangements.

The arrangement of servant quarters in Delhi, I argue, is not just about the convenience of the employers but also an example of how women domestic workers, as urban poor, try to negotiate the scarcity of affordable quality housing in the city also in their attempt to overcome the constraints pertaining to spatial-mobility.

My sample included several workers who were either living in servant quarters or had lived in one at some point. Their narratives reflect a complex role such quarters play in a worker's life, as both a valuable benefit and a limiting force. Maria, a migrant from Jharkhand, was one of the workers living in servant quarters. She had been working for her present employer for 7 years, initially as a full-time, live-out worker. She used to commute a distance of 8 km from Okhla, her place of residence, to Defence Colony, where her employers lived. She justified her choice of moving into the servant quarters saying that she used to go back home around eight, travelling by bus in a supposedly unsafe area. Also, her daughter was growing up and Maria was concerned about her safety in that area. So, she just accepted the facility of the servant quarters when her employer made the offer. However, Maria also acknowledged that since she had moved in with the employer, who lived in a gated colony, her ability to bargain for better wages had gone down: "...[Every time I ask for a raise] madam says 'I have given you accommodation in such a good area. That quarter itself is worth a lot of money' ". While moving into her employer's house reduced Maria's commuting time and costs, it also gave the employer more control through constant surveillance and power over Maria, as she was at her beck and call throughout the day.¹⁵ By moving in with the employer, Maria rid herself of the vulnerability that the city had imposed on her as a woman, while simultaneously making herself more vulnerable to her employer as a worker. Hanson and Pratt (1995) describe the act of navigating the constraint of distance as a kind of "geographic manoeuvring". I argue that women domestic workers' choices to move in with employers represent certain forms of spatial manoeuvring, which are much more nuanced than what Hanson and Pratt's analysis captures, as some narratives in the following section will show.

¹⁵Control over space has been identified as key to any kind of social control (Henri Lefebvre paraphrased in Qayum and Ray, 2003). In domestic work relations, "live-in" arrangement has been seen as one which enhances employers' control over the workers (Ray and Qayum, 2010). This is something which comes out in the autobiographical account of Halder and Butalia (2006), who herself is a domestic worker in Delhi.



Mala, a mother of four adolescent daughters, attributes her decision to live in a gated colony to the perceived safety such colonies have in opposition to all other kinds of residential areas. She earlier used to live in Mehrauli, an urban village, but she left that area because she did not find it safe for herself and her daughters. Mala finds the current work arrangement exploitative and she is susceptible to eviction without any notice. She finds the arrangement exploitative because workers are on call at all points of time and employers can call them anytime, simply because they live next door. Also, the locality in which she lives, employers' referrals play an important role in finding work. She shared that if a worker left work from a particular household at her own will, finding a new household in the same locality would be difficult, as the new employer would need a referral and workers leaving work on their own were usually not appreciated by employers, she explained. It is in this context that workers explained the nature of the power employers had over them. However, Mala justifies the choice in the light of the fact that it is very expensive to find a place to live in general and a safe place to live with young daughters in particular.

Though affordability remains a key reason why workers want to live in “free” accommodation provided by an employer, the choice is significantly shaped by the women workers' notions of safety in different types of neighbourhoods. However, it is important to remember that “safety” for a woman is not just about protection from sexual violence but also about honour (Phadke et al., 2011), which is seen to be harmed via local rumours and gossip about her “character” (Donner, 2006). Shyamonisha, a resident of Mukundpur, a working class and unauthorized colony, shared that she did not like living in the colony because its environment was not good—“*mahaul kharab hai*”. According to her, people in the area gossip about her character because she dressed up well like “*kothiwale*”¹⁶ (rich people). She attributed her lifestyle (which does not go well with the socio-cultural norms of the area) to the time spent working as a maid in the middle-class neighbourhoods. She found the environment of middle-class colonies “liberating” where people did not judge her for the way she dressed up. On the other hand, she regarded the atmosphere of Mukundpur as “unsafe”. By unsafe she referred to situations in which people, both men and women, passed remarks on her way of dressing and gossiping about her working outside home. “People are not good here. If you go out they keep staring at you”, she said. While she portrayed a rosy picture of her experiences of working and living in middle-class neighbourhoods as a maid, she also shared, in a passing comment, that these residential campuses had strict norms regarding working class people who lived there. Expressing her sense of loss of a good housing in a “good” neighbourhood she said:

I feel like going back ... but I cannot live there with grown up kids—nobody will hire me. Women [domestic workers] whose kids grow up in such neighbourhoods are removed from the job. Women with young kids are retained and preferred ... perhaps, since [grown up] girls and boys start having affair.... At one point, the restrictions had become so stringent that people [from servant quarters] could not even gather outside and have a casual chat.

¹⁶A colloquial Hindi term used by workers to refer to the class of employers. The term literally means people with big houses.



Workers who decided to move in with their employer shared mixed feelings, acutely aware of the trade-off between the “freedom” of living independently and the “safety” and “good environment” of middle-class neighbourhoods. Living with an employer gave him or her excessive control, as Waldrop’s (2000) ethnography of Golf Link area shows, wherein some house owners of the neighbourhood felt entitled to command working class people in the area, whether they were employed by them or not, to work for them. As one worker contrasting live-out arrangement with live-in explained to me, “It is better to work as a live-out worker, because in this arrangement we come back home. If tomorrow I feel like bunking the work, I can do that. Those who work as live-in servants, have no option but to work”. While moving in with an employer is certainly an act of “manoeuvring” the city—overcoming the distance of commute and the corresponding constraints—such manoeuvring has its price: workers are more dependent on and vulnerable to employers.

11.5 Spatial Stickiness of Networks: A Case of Eviction and Resettlement

Delhi’s vision to become a world-class city has been insidious for the survival of various groups that do not fit into this narrow aesthetic. In the name of environmental and aesthetic concerns, middle-class activists have moved to claim more space in the city over the past two decades (Baviskar, 2011). Eviction and relocation of the inhabitants of informal settlements from the banks of the Yamuna river (Menon-Sen and Bhan, 2008), relocation of industries from the city to the peripheries of the city (Ahmed, 2013; Baviskar, 2011), and the ban on cycle rickshaws, though temporary, in Chandni Chowk area have all redefined the urban poor’s relation with the city and their livelihoods.

For part-time domestic workers, displacement and resettlement in Delhi have not only increased the time and money spent on travel between home and work,¹⁷ it also made their own, unpaid household work much more challenging (Baviskar, 2009; see Chap. 6 in this volume). After being relocated, Bano had to leave all of her former employers in Lajpat Nagar and East of Kailash as the earnings from the domestic work were not enough to offset the increased travel expenditure from Madanpur Khadar, a resettlement colony. Bano asked the employers to raise her wages in light of the change, but they refused.

Madanpur Khadar (Khadar hereafter) came up as a resettlement colony in the background of beautifying/recreating the city for the Commonwealth Games held in 2010. The first group of people were resettled in Khadar in 2004. The settlement is

¹⁷Menon-Sen and Bhan (2008) in their study of Bawana resettlement notice that in case of part-time domestic workers the only option was to go back to their old middle-class neighbourhoods as there was no middle-class colony near the resettlement colony at least within 10 km.



located in the bed of river Yamuna¹⁸ in south-east end of the city limits. Most of the households that were relocated here were from the informal settlements, i.e. *jhuggi jhompri* clusters, from different parts of south Delhi. Workers I interviewed were relocated from their place of residence, some of which were as much as 20 km away.

To simply look at the change in commuting distance that results from relocation, however, as the only outcome is to miss some crucial elements of the urban space. Until very recently, the only way to get to the resettlement colony was by an informal private transport network of vehicles called RTV¹⁹ (road travel vehicle), which were usually over-crowded round the clock with a capacity of 15–20 passengers. It was not unusual to see RTVs carrying 35–40 people. Early morning, the first few trips of RTVs are especially used by domestic workers. During my own experience of travelling by these vehicles, I learnt that the driver did not start the trip before the bus was fairly crowded and moreover could stop the bus for long durations at any point to pick up more passengers and thus the journey could be unduly long. Workers often arrived late at their workplace because of this, which resulted in conflicts with employers, sometimes even leading to them losing their jobs. Meenu shares how the locally run RTV service impacts her everyday work experience:

It has become a routine; I do not get *gaadi* (RTV) from here and [then] I do not reach there [workplace] on time, and [as a result,] there is a quarrel every day. I also told [the employer] to hire someone else. Public transport is a serious problem in our Khadar. At present, there are six *gaadis* running and in those six too, they close the door [after certain number of passengers have got into the *gadi*] and do not open it. Then, how will I go? [My facilitator tells me that they have started closing the door after an accident recently in which a woman died by falling off the vehicle]. Even today, one woman fell off the vehicle and lost some of her teeth. People run after the *gaadi*.

The poorly run informal RTV service remains the key mode of transport for the residents of Khadar (see Fig. 11.1). And, examining the domestic workers' experience of travelling by these RTVs highlights the fact that the relocation has increased the physical distance to work, but the poor quality of informally provided transport and near absence of state-run public transport enhances this physical distance further. Such effects have constraining effects particularly when it comes to women workers, as they juggle with the pressures to be back home early and reach their workplaces on time.

In this case, the resettlement has also intensified some of the challenges that often constrain women's mobility-related decisions across city spaces. For example, access to a toilet—which is always negotiated—has been an experience that has changed tremendously ever since the people have been relocated. Employers'

¹⁸Yamuna is a drying river. During the monsoons (raining months) the water level in the river increases and causes flood in the areas around its banks. Khadar is one such area that is impacted by the flood in Yamuna.

¹⁹Originally, these vehicles were introduced for transport in rural areas and that is why initially RTV stood for "rural" travel vehicle. But with the expanding usage of the vehicle in urban areas, the name was changed to "road" travel vehicle.



Fig. 11.1 An RTV leaving from Madanpur Khadar for Nehru place. *Source* Photo by Shahana Sheikh



refusal to allow workers the use of their private toilet is fairly routine²⁰ and is part of a broader strategy to segregate household resources like utensils, food, dining area among others (See, for example, Dickey, 2000a). In my sample, workers had diverse experiences as far as the access to toilet was concerned: some used the same toilets as their employers, while others either used separate toilets or had no access to toilets at all. Workers from Khadar explained that before relocation, their workplaces were close to homes, usually within 1 or 2 km, and thus they could always come back home for using toilets.

In cases where toilets are inaccessible at worksites, the distance enforced by resettlement requires workers to strategize differently. Not drinking “too much” water was one of these strategies, according to some workers. Rajeshwari, who works in Sarojini Nagar, uses the toilet before leaving for work and then after returning home. Over time, some employers have built separate toilets for workers on their terraces in acknowledgement of the longer distances that have to be travelled for work post-relocation. The struggles around access to toilets can become a marker of the working class women’s “unwantedness in the city”²¹ and the lack of public toilets, in the light of employers’ inaccessible private toilet, becomes an everyday reminder of that. Delhi’s poor civic culture for public toilet exacerbates the vulnerabilities of women domestic workers. A High Court Committee during an inspection in 2007 found that out of 3192 public urinals in the city, only 132 were for women (Sheikh, 2009) and it is in the light of facts like this that the perspective on women domestic workers’ spatial-mobility and the challenges associated with it can be further nuanced. The question then is: Why cannot workers find work close to their homes? Why do they travel if it is so strenuous? In the case of Madanpur Khadar, there are a few middle-class neighbourhoods within a range of 3 or 4 km where these workers can find work and some workers have started working there. However, for a large number this is still not a possibility because of lack of new networks.

²⁰See, for example (Vasanthi, 2011), in which the author mentions the issue of inaccessibility of toilets as one of the findings of a study conducted in Hyderabad.

²¹See the section on ‘peeing’ in (Phadke et al., 2011) where the author narrates women’s experience of navigating the city in the absence of adequate provision of urinals.



In Delhi, when domestic workers get relocated to far-off areas, they often continue working in their old neighbourhoods simply because they have networks in a particular locality (see, for example, Ramakrishnan in this volume). Having networks in a particular place allows domestic workers to signal that they can be trusted for two reasons: (1) if one has a past record of crimes like theft, then one cannot last long in a particular neighbourhood, and (2) in case, a potential employer wants to verify one's past record, he/she can do so by contacting other workers and employers in that locality. Usually, for part-time domestic workers, references from an employing household play a major role in finding work in new households. While such references are important to signal workers' quality of services, they are also indispensable in signalling their trustworthiness in the light of the widespread image of domestic workers as potential criminals and a source of threat for their employers (Waldrop, 2000).

Jummi, who was relocated to Khadar (almost 19 km away from her original place of work/residence), explained the significance of networks due to which she continued working in her old neighbourhood:

I leave for work at 4.30 am. Only [if] I leave early then will I get a seat [in RTV]. If I start late then I will not get a place to sit [and] I will have to travel standing [throughout the way]. [There,] we have responsibility. I have *sanaagat* there. Now, If I go to a new colony, I will not have *sanaagat* there...

She further explained the meaning of '*sanaagat*' in the following words:

...By *sanaagat* I mean ...you will not let any stranger enter your home. There are all kinds of valuable objects lying there [in the employer's home] ... there are people [employers] who have jobs [working couples ... they leave the key to their apartment with the neighbours. I take the key and perform the tasks, and give the key back to neighbours. Like sometimes, *maalik* [employers] are sitting outside in the sun [in winter] and we are working inside the home—this is called trust. If the employers' valuable objects start going missing, then who will let me enter their home?

In domestic work, networks are also a kind of investment in goodwill, as Jummi's narrative demonstrates. Goodwill, which allows workers to access perks like small loans, gifts, jobs for male family members and money for children's education, is primarily based on trust that one earns by working in a locality over several years. This narrative makes more sense in the light of the larger politics of fear of and hostility towards the urban poor. The representation of domestic workers as a threat to employers in the light of the crimes committed by some workers, accentuates the need for networks and goodwill (Matilla, 2011). The ease of entry can be confined to certain households in a locality and cannot be infinite in the sense one cannot work in any neighbourhood one wishes to. Moving so far away puts these women at the risk of losing the neighbourhoods wherein they have networks. And loss of the network entails loss of a goodwill earned over many years by working in particular neighbourhoods. Thus, workers have to constantly weigh the cost and benefits of losing old neighbourhood and finding new ones.



11.6 Conclusion

Ray and Qayum (2010) through their provocative writing on domestic work relations in Kolkata, called the “culture of servitude”, draw our attention to place-specific nature in which domestic work relations are organized and embedded. According to them, every place has its own ideologies, norms, spatial and historical features that characterize domestic work relations. The narratives presented in this study provide us insights into a set of issues highlighting the place-specific characteristics of domestic work relations in Delhi from one set of women domestic workers’ point of view. The abundant scholarship (e.g. Froystad, 2003; Ray, 2000 and Dickey et al., 2000b) on domestic work in India shows the vulnerable position of domestic work in relation to their employers. The narratives here allow us to go beyond the generic vulnerability of domestic workers in relation to their employers and expose us to larger interconnections that enhance and feed into these vulnerabilities. Examination of why domestic work is chosen as a possible livelihood option tells us that there is a complex set of reasons, which shapes these choices. However, the complexity is overshadowed by one common thread across all the narratives, which show how social and spatial boundaries actively produce this work as a “choice”. The workers’ desire to live in middle-class neighbourhoods in servant quarters shows how such arrangements allow for breaching the spatial segregation and accessing “safety”, though with an escalated level of “unfreedom” and dependency on the employers. Another context which shows heightened dependency of workers on employers is the case of eviction and resettlement, wherein due to past networks workers continue being dependent on old neighbourhoods, which are now far off, simply because new networks cannot be built overnight and without them they cannot find work in a new locality even if it is in the proximity.

Finally, an examination of the city of Delhi through the perspective of women domestic workers exposes us to the dialectics between an informal and unregulated activity that takes place in the private spaces of households and the larger, often informal, spatial dynamics of the city. Thus, the desire to live in a servant quarter in a middle-class neighbourhood for its perceived safety and the notion of it being “free accommodation” in spite of constant feelings of being exploited and having little or no bargaining power, tell us about the live aspect of the deficit of housing in Delhi, in both quality and quantity. Similarly, the sticky nature of networks in domestic work makes women domestic workers go back repeatedly to their old neighbourhoods in spite of their relocation to far-off areas, and this produces particular types of gendered mobilities with new sets of relations to urban transport and new patterns of vulnerabilities.

Thus, this chapter triggers a larger set of questions about the “urban” and paid domestic work, and the spatial intertwining of the two. It tries to take the vulnerabilities and power inequalities beyond individual experiences and examines them in the light of various structural issues in the context of extreme inequalities that are not just economic but also socio-cultural and civic. The intent is not to “fetishize” space, but rather to look at its role in shaping the urban life—as a resource,



a constraint, a site of contestation and negotiation—from the gaze of the marginalized. It enables us to see the wider set of relations stretched over the city space that produces domestic work relations. By looking at individual experiences of domestic work together with wider entitlement issues, this chapter dislocates the power that produces vulnerability for domestic workers from the immediate place of work and locates it at multiple sites in the city.

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