Ensuring Decent Work in the Domestic Work Sector

A Gender-Responsive Evaluation of The Maids’ Company

Rukmini Tankha
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About the Author

Rukmini Tankha is an independent consultant. Her areas of interest and specialisation include public policy, social protection, gender equality, livelihoods, migration and the informal sector. Over the past decade, she has undertaken assignments with a range of stakeholders – UN agencies (UN Women and UNESCO); international and national NGOs (Terre des hommes Foundation and PRADAN) and think tanks (Institute for Human Development and Institute of Social Studies Trust). Her policy reports and papers have been published by UN Women and the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, UNICEF, UNESCO, and Sage Publications; and her research articles have appeared in leading peer-reviewed journals such as *IDS Bulletin* and *Economic & Political Weekly*.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), who conceptualised this exercise and with whose funding this report was possible. I am indebted to Ms. Gauri Singh, the founder of The Maids’ Company for sharing her expertise of the domestic work sector and her invaluable insights from setting up this enterprise. The report was informed by discussions with and reflections of the following staff of The Maids’ Company—Ms. Gauri Singh, Ms. Indu Bagri, Ms. Pritpal Kaur, Mr. Ashish Kesharwani and Mr. Amit Kapoor. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Ms. Pritpal Kaur, who provided tireless support and shared many insider perspectives at the time of data collection in Gurgaon. I am especially grateful to the women domestic workers with whom I interacted during the course of this study, many of whom spared time on scarcely available off-days from work to share their experiences of being employed by The Maids’ Company. I would also like to express my appreciation for the selected clients who agreed to share feedback of their association with The Maids’ Company.

The report benefitted from the advice, inputs and useful suggestions of Ms. Ratna Sudarshan, Ms. Gauri Singh and Ms. Madhu Bala Nath. At the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), I received support from Mr. Rajib Nandi, Ms. Shiney Chakraborty, Ms. Monika Banerjee, Ms. Anweshaa Ghosh, Ms. Kamalika Mukhopadhyay and Ms. Ayesha Dutta for this project. Special thanks are also due to all partners and participants present during the ‘Discussion on Women in Economy’ organised by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (25 November 2019), where the report was disseminated.
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Executive Summary

The Maids’ Company was set up by Gauri Singh in 2011 in Gurgaon as a social enterprise with the motto ‘service, not servants’, aimed at providing capable and reliable domestic housekeeping services, while attempting a paradigm shift towards ‘professionalisation’ of the labour of domestic workers. Departing from other domestic worker agencies that primarily act as brokers to ensure labour supply of domestic workers for prospective household employers, The Maids’ Company sought to:

i. Ensure basic rights, minimum wages and workplace-related benefits for the women domestic workers recruited, trained and placed by them

ii. Shift attitudes and behaviours of clients towards providing decent work for domestic workers

The company adopted a number of innovations and gender-responsive strategies during different phases of its operation, with an attempt being made to keep in mind the realities of women workers. For instance, a woman community-based social mobiliser was appointed in the target area of intervention, helping to build trust and expand recruitment among local women by an ‘insider’. During trainings and skilling, besides imparting know-how of technical skills (cooking, cleaning) and soft skills, women were taught to remain alert and report to the Company any instances of sexual harassment/abuse. The format and facilitation of trainings was conducted to ensure proximity of the training venue to the living settlement of women workers, flexible hours and female trainers. Recognising constraints on women’s time and mobility to attend long, classroom-based trainings, innovations such as ‘Dekho Seekho’—a digital skill-learning platform—was developed by The Maids’ Company that contained videos on cooking, housekeeping and soft skills, and was accessible to workers on their phones at any location. During placement, the Company ensured shuttle service/travel allowance that covered women workers’ commute to client households; besides insisting on finite duration of shifts not extending into late night hours, the provision of drinking water and safe toilet facilities for women at work. Women community-based supervisors were appointed to handhold newly appointed maids; and attempts were made to place the most vulnerable women.
Among the salient opportunities for domestic workers from associating with The Maids' Company were:

- Access to the market and job opportunities by overcoming information asymmetry, averting tediousness and the risk of finding jobs in the open market besides ensuring non-discrimination and equal opportunity of recruitment of workers
- Standardised terms and conditions of employment through written, enforceable contracts that spelt out mandatory workplace benefits (e.g. state-mandated minimum wages, fixed hours of work, overtime, mandatory leaves, annual raise in salary), thus aiming to formalise the worker-employer relationship
- Security of work through access to multiple employers and providing workers with an ‘exit option’ in the case of ‘bad’ clients, thereby improving their bargaining power
- Flexibility in choice of duration and intensity of work based on women’s multiple realities and different life stages, including most importantly through the ability to leverage the replacement provision of The Maids’ Company, enabling women workers to go on sudden short-term or long-term leave, with the assurance that they would get absorbed with the same/ another client
- Access to non-workplace benefits and social services extended by The Maids’ Company:
  - Nurse in case of health ailments of domestic workers and/or family member, ensuring strategies of prevention rather than cure to prevent loss of person days of work and income;
  - Safe space for women in case of threat to their security;
  - Monetary advances/loans, adjustable against forthcoming salaries, besides gender-sensitive loan products relevant to the context of women workers (e.g., mobile phone, bicycle).

In terms of changes at the level of the consciousness of domestic workers, the interventions of The Maids’ Company were successful in addressing ‘worker’ identity and facilitating transition in the self-perception of women workers towards the realisation that they were ‘employees’ of The Maids’ Company, including through strategies aimed at ‘professionalising’ domestic work (e.g. using visible markers...
to construct ‘work’ identity and focusing on grooming and etiquette). Further, by creating spaces for interaction among workers and promoting solidarity-building activities, a sense of community and ‘belonging’ to The Maids’ Company was triggered among women workers.

However, it was observed that women workers face barriers to their work participation in domestic work owing to the realities of their migrant status, requiring them to often take sudden, intermittent and long leave of absence to their native villages. Navigating intra-household gender roles and responsibilities such as care of children and completing domestic chores were seen to have implications for choice of duration and intensity of women's participation in domestic work (and therefore earnings), linked with factors such as (i) age of children; (ii) extent of intra-household support for sharing unpaid work; and (iii) age of women. Additionally, women’s own precarious economic position meant apprehensions on their part in moving towards accepting certain formal sector security benefits that The Maids’ Company tried to institute (e.g. Provident Fund, Employee State Insurance, crèche facility), besides ‘lack of fit’ of certain measures due to the churn of workers in the sector (e.g. mechanisms such as training stipend, incentives, referrals, co-ownership of the enterprise).

Among the salient opportunities for clients from recruiting domestic workers from The Maids’ Company included:

- Avoidance of high transaction cost of searching for a maid in the open market based on information asymmetry regarding job-seeking workers
- Access to quality and reliable domestic work services, and in particular guarantee to a ‘replacement’ maid in case the existing worker went on leave
- Completion of security check through verification of maids ‘character’ that was conducted by The Maids’ Company, particularly valued by clients given that the workplace site was inside the clients’ home
- Clearly defined job description (for workers) provided in The Maids’ Company, contracts that clearly spelt out the components under a particular service/product

During the time of operation of The Maids’ Company, clients were seen to have demonstrated some change in consciousness and practices towards domestic workers by upholding pro-worker contract clauses pertaining to wages and
working conditions; for instance, they would grant four holidays a month and travel allowance to workers (perhaps as a result of involvement, pressure and monitoring of The Maids’ Company). Importantly, at a systemic level, The Maids’ Company model provided ‘proof of concept’ of how professionalism of a service provider can promote a shift in the attitudes of clients towards ‘professionalisation’ of domestic work through targeted strategies towards brand building to meet client expectations. The Company earned credibility as a recognisable and trustworthy entity while seeking to overturn client mistrust from past experiences with unreliable placement agencies, thus dispelling notions of the ‘informal’ and undervalued nature of housekeeping services.

Nevertheless, important challenges remain for the domestic work sector in terms of the attitudes of clients, for instance, the resistance to absorb service tax for ‘employee’/maids’ services and a reluctance to accept responsibility for financing social security of (informal sector) domestic workers. Additionally, clients highlighted the lack of importance of skills in their decision to appoint a maid, revealing the prevalence of personality-based characteristics and gender stereotypes that seem to drive selection (and sometimes treatment) of maids.

Given the traditionally entrenched feudal dynamics in the domestic work sector, a critical contribution of The Maids’ Company was in mediating the worker-employer relationship, especially in a scenario where domestic workers are entering into contractual labour arrangements. From the point of view of workers, The Maids’ Company provided membership of an informal collective for representation, voice, collective bargaining and third-party mediation with clients by facilitating dialogue and tripartism and diffusing tension in employment relations, building capacities of workers to ‘handle’ employers and protecting workers from client malpractices. From the point of view of clients, The Maids’ Company was able to extend much-needed professional support in settling grievances and in dispute resolution with maids. Going forward, it is imperative to recognise the need for such an intermediary entity in the domestic work sector to bridge the power imbalance between clients and domestic workers, besides deriving legitimacy from the forthcoming Draft National Policy on Domestic Workers, both for ensuring standard setting in the domestic work sector, as well as for regulating placement agencies and actors.
The Draft National Policy on Domestic Workers defines a domestic worker as “a person who is employed for remuneration whether in cash or kind, in any household through any agency or directly, either on a temporary or permanent, part time or full time basis to do the household work, but does not include any member of the family of an employer”. Domestic work refers to housework such as sweeping, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cooking, caring for children and other such work, which is carried out for an employer for remuneration. Domestic workers may thus be part-time, full-time or live-in workers, enjoy varying levels of literacy and skills; and are often migrants belonging to vulnerable social groups. Belonging to the informal sector, their work is characterised by verbal contracts with low and fluctuating wages, denial of basic working conditions and job insecurity. Domestic workers lack social security benefits, and in the absence of clear legal and policy imperatives, they remain susceptible to being exploited by their employers. The nature of the workplace—with domestic workers working across different households—makes it difficult to monitor working conditions, to organise workers to challenge injustices meted out to them and to regulate the numerous placement agencies that work as intermediaries between clients and workers. Further, working within the secluded confines of a client’s home often leaves women vulnerable to verbal abuse and sexual harassment.

The statistics on domestic workers in India vary from 4.75 million workers (NSSO Employment and Unemployment, 61st Round, 2004–05) to 6.4 million (Census

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1 KPMG Advisory Services Pvt Ltd (KASPL) (n.d.)
3 WIEGO http://www.wiego.org/informal_economy_law/domestic-workers-india
4 Chigateri et al. (2016).
Importantly, the domestic work sector remains the most prominent for female employment in urban areas: of 4.75 million domestic workers employed by private households as reported by the NSSO data in 2004–05, 3.05 million were women workers in urban areas.

Some unofficial estimates indicate that the number of domestic workers may be as high as 50 million or even 90 million, with an emphasis on the burgeoning size of the sector. Going forward too, a report by the National Skills Development Corporation predicts that the number of domestic workers in India is expected to jump from 7.79 million in 2017 to 10.88 million by 2022. These trends become even more pertinent against the backdrop of India’s dismal picture in terms of women’s declining female labour force participation rate, with recent estimates suggesting that the share of working-age women who report either being employed or being available for work falling to a historic low of 23.3 per cent in 2017–18, meaning that over three out of four women over the age of 15 in India are neither working nor seeking work.

In the past, efforts to collectivise and organise domestic workers have been undertaken by organisations and alliances such as the National Domestic Workers Movement and All India Democratic Women’s Association (in Maharashtra), Women’s Voice (in Karnataka) and SEWA (in Kerala). Additionally, past models such as those of Saath in Gujarat have demonstrated how training provided to women to become ‘home managers’ has helped them in securing improved wages and social security benefits. Learnings from these past experiences have provided rich insights on the unique features of the sector, including how special attempts are needed to mobilise and organise domestic workers, and address the particularly unique ways in which women’s work remains invisible and undervalued.

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6 Neetha (2009).
7 National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) http://ndwm.org
8 KPMG Advisory Services Pvt Ltd (KASPL) (n.d.).
10 Chigateri et al. (2016); ISST (2016).
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The Maids’ Company was set up by Gauri Singh in 2011 in Gurgaon as a social enterprise with the motto ‘service, not servants’ - aimed at providing capable and reliable domestic housekeeping services, while attempting a paradigm shift towards ‘professionalisation’ of the labour of domestic workers. Departing from other domestic worker agencies that primarily act as brokers to ensure labour supply of domestic workers for prospective household employers, The Maids’ Company sought to ensure basic rights and protections for the women domestic workers recruited and trained by them, including through transformative efforts such as attempting to make workers co-owners in the enterprise; outlining safeguards for women's welfare in employment contracts; providing supplementary health, financial and well-being benefits; and addressing workers’ grievances related to denial of decent work and working conditions in daily interactions with employers. Though The Maids' Company has since become non-operational, ceasing its operations in 2016, it was considered useful to learn from the experiences of the company—of attempting to uphold a worker-centric model and seeking to impart respect for domestic work and dignity for domestic workers, while balancing the perceptions, assumptions and prejudices of employers and simultaneously ensuring the company remained cost-competitive. Key background information of The Maids’ Company is provided below. The vision, mission, output, desired outcomes and intervention activities of The Maids' Company are provided in Annexure 1.

**Key Information: The Maids' Company**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Operation</th>
<th>2011-2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers Trained</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients serviced</td>
<td>1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Services</td>
<td>Cleaning, Housekeeping (laundry, ironing, dusting), Cooking, option of including babycare services as an add-on service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of Services</td>
<td>2 hours, 4 hours, 6 hours, 8 hours, 10 hours or 12 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Areas of Operation</td>
<td>MG Road, DLF Phase I, DLF Phase IV, DLF Phase V, Sushant Lok I, Sushant Lok II, Sohna Road, South City (Sector 41), and including apartment complexes Aralias, Magnolias, Belaire, La Lagune, Park Place, The Verandas, The Palms, The Pinnacle, Heritage City, The Icon, Trinity Towers, Princeton Estate, Laburnum, The Summit, The Palm Springs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Profile of Women Workers

- Target settlement where majority women lived: Chakkarpur, Gurgaon
- Age of women roughly between 18 – 45 years
- Majority women belonging to West Bengal, with few women belonging to Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Assam and North-East and Nepal
- Women selected to join The Maids’ Company from among those having basic knowledge of Hindi
- Having past experience of working as a domestic worker
- Having familiarity with the immediate neighbourhood (geographically)

*Based on discussions with staff of the Maids’ Company*

### The Maids’ Company Model: Theory of Change*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inputs</th>
<th>Processes</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial resources (self-funded social enterprise)</td>
<td>Mobilisation of women in urban areas of Gurgaon for domestic work</td>
<td>Work contracts with client households for women domestic workers, ensuring guaranteed worker benefits as outlined in terms and conditions of written contract</td>
<td>With Maids: Improved access to work opportunities, increased wages and expansion of workplace-related benefits for domestic workers</td>
<td>Ensuring quality domestic housekeeping services, by capitalising on the rising demand for domestic work in urban households in Gurgaon, while providing a market-based solution benefitting women with scarce employment opportunities in the urban informal economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources (mobilisers, trainers, client-facing operations staff, maid-facing operations staff)</td>
<td>Trainings/skilling for improving technical and soft skills</td>
<td>Connecting and ‘matching’ maids with client households</td>
<td>With Clients: Shift in attitudes and behaviours of employers towards providing decent wages and working conditions for domestic workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Placing women in client households</td>
<td>Placing women in client households</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on an analysis by the evaluator from inputs received from the founders and staff of The Maids’ Company*
Select Assumptions of the Model

- Domestic workers cannot bargain for their own rights with clients nor negotiate power asymmetries in the worker-client relationship; this power imbalance needs to be mediated by an organisation such as The Maids’ Company that would organise and establish strength in numbers among disparate workers.
- Client perception is an important factor in the domestic work sector. Focus on appearance and good grooming of domestic workers has a bearing on clients’ willingness to pay higher wages. Branding and targeting customer mindsets is necessary to capture labour market demand.
- Domestic workers would want ‘secure’ employment and long-term savings and/or financial security, akin to the formal sector work (e.g., Provident Fund, Employees’ State Insurance).
- Training/skilling domestic workers would help ensure access to job opportunities and equip them to demand higher wages.
- Classroom-based skill training would be a valuable strategy in equipping workers for the job market.
- Maids with past work experience would be easier to train and place in client households.

Objectives of the Study

- Conducting a gender-responsive evaluation of The Maids’ Company, highlighting, analysing and inferring learnings from strategies used by The Maids’ Company for women domestic workers
- Showcasing innovations adopted by The Maids’ Company, especially features and aspects of the model that espoused rights-based and gender-responsive principles
- Identifying opportunities and challenges of working in the domestic work sector as a whole—for policy and other development actors—from the perspective of gender needs and constraints

Expected Outcome

- Strengthening the evidence base for policy makers, development organisations and practitioners towards improving the employment opportunities and working conditions of women domestic workers in urban areas
**Output**

- Evaluation highlighting gender-transformative elements and strategies of The Maids’ Company model, towards ensuring decent work in the domestic work sector

**PROPOSED EVALUATION FRAMEWORK**

The evaluation is primarily a process evaluation that maps the evolution of strategies and experiences of ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ The Maids’ Company sought to mobilise, skill, place, collectively represent and negotiate a fair deal for domestic workers. The OECD-DAC framework of Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact and Sustainability were used to guide this evaluation, along with an additional question on Innovations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Questions</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
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<td>How did the design of the intervention seek to address and be responsive to gaps for women workers?</td>
<td>Relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were the assumptions related to women and work underlying the design and implementation of the intervention?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the content, format and facilitation of mobilisation, training, skilling and placement address the needs and constraints of women and/or incorporate any gender-responsive components/strategies?</td>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were opportunities and challenges for women workers, as a result of the intervention, related to the following?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- mobilisation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- training/skilling</td>
<td></td>
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<td>- placement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Were dedicated strategies employed to target the most marginalised groups?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What inputs were allocated to ensure results for women domestic workers?</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the value addition of the intervention in the domestic work sector in terms of benefits for women workers and benefits for clients as a result of the intervention?</td>
<td>Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What good practices/innovations/support services/partnerships contributed towards achieving results?</td>
<td>Innovations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were the challenges in ensuring sustainable mobilisation, training/skilling and placement for women domestic workers?</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
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</table>

**Note:** The Maids’ Company was a self-funded social enterprise, whose costing was borne through personal investment by its founder. For this evaluation, matters concerning the ‘Efficiency’ of The Maids’ Company and its viability shall not be explored in great detail since these would correspond to the narrow specificities of financing and limited time period of operationalisation of this particular social enterprise; and especially since these would not have relevance to the larger objective of this study, which is to distil learnings from on-ground implementation and process diagnostics of The Maids’ Company towards improving the working conditions of domestic workers.

**Frameworks Guiding the Evaluation**

The ILO’s Decent Work Framework—defining decent work to encompass facets related to job creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue, with gender equality as a crosscutting objective—has been used as a reference point in terms of describing the practices, strategies and innovations adopted by The Maids’ Company. Further, recognising that gender equality and human rights are inseparable from their specific political and social contexts, the analysis will be guided by the Social Relations Approach, which identifies that gender discrimination, like other social inequalities, are created, maintained and reproduced in institutions. In particular in this case, an attempt was made to explore how institutions such as the market, manifest as client demand of maids, play a critical role in creating and reproducing deep-seated social and gender inequalities.

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12 Kabeer (1994).
Taking cognisance of these factors, it was thought useful to critically examine different phases/stages related to ensuring employment of domestic workers, for instance (a) mobilisation; (b) training/skilling; (c) placement; and (d) monitoring.

Acknowledging the multiplicity of stakeholders and perceptions at play in the domestic work sector, and the fact that interventions are needed in multiple domains, the study was guided by the Gender at Work Framework\(^\text{13}\) (provided below). An examination was conducted to understand the changes that resulted from The Maids’ Company intervention using the Gender at Work framework from (i) the perspective of women workers and (ii) the perspective of clients.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Primary Data Collection

Primary data collection was conducted during the period May-September 2019. A participatory, consultative and exploratory approach was followed. Qualitative research methods were used, including:

\(^{13}\) Gender at Work Framework: [https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/](https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/).
(i) In-depth interviews with five staff of The Maids’ Company, including founders and members of maid/ client-facing teams to understand the background, rationale and steps undertaken towards establishment and operationalising the company; including the role played by the company in mobilising, contract negotiation and placement of women domestic workers. Based on ease and availability, focus group discussions were conducted with select past employees.

(ii) Semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews with 18 women domestic workers recruited and trained by The Maids’ Company: based on identification and advice of the founder of Maids’ Company. Only those workers were met with who had been associated with The Maids’ Company for a considerable period of time (at least 1 year) and represented cases of ‘Most Significant Change’. These workers were therefore in a position to comment on the benefits that had accrued to them as a result of continued association with the enterprise.

(iii) Key informant interviews with select clients/ employers (subject to availability): exploring the experience of six employers of recruiting domestic workers through The Maids’ Company.

(iv) Content analysis of secondary data of The Maids’ Company to supplement findings (e.g. Maids’ Company employment contracts with clients, digital application viz. Dekho Seekho app).

Convenience and purposive sampling were used during data collection, with The Maids’ Company identifying and facilitating access to selected past maids, clients and staff based on access, ready availability and their willingness to co-operate. In the case of clients, mostly telephonic discussions were conducted and, where possible, in-person interviews were conducted. Anonymity of respondents and confidentiality of their responses was assured, so as to encourage free and fair discussions. Therefore, throughout the document, names of domestic workers have been changed, as denoted by an asterisk (*) next to the changed names, while the names of clients and staff of The Maids’ Company have been withheld. Triangulation was employed to cross-check and verify the validity of the responses of staff, clients and maids to overcome any biases in reporting. As far as possible, the evaluator aimed at maximising objectivity during the analysis, for credibility of the evaluation and its contribution to knowledge.
Limitations of the Study

1. Since the report is based on findings of the intervention of The Maids’ Company, its focus is circumscribed to, and its observations and findings confined to, the selected worker profiles that The Maids’ Company worked with, viz:
   (i) Women domestic workers providing services of part-time (2 hour/ 4 hour/ 6 hours) and full-time (8 hour/ 10 hour/ 12 hour)
   (ii) Women domestic workers providing services primarily related to cooking, cleaning and, in an informal capacity, baby care

2. Access and availability to large numbers or a robust sample of domestic workers that had worked with The Maids’ Company remained a challenge since:
   - The Maids’ Company had lost regular contact with maids employed by them after discontinuing operations. This, coupled with the fact that the address and phone numbers of domestic workers keep changing, meant that domestic workers that had been previously associated with The Maids’ Company remained difficult to trace.
   - Due to the relatively short lifespan of the intervention and the large churn in the domestic work sector, with maids joining and leaving The Maids’ Company, a limited proportion of women remained associated with The Maids’ Company for a long enough period to be able to register significant benefits from this association. Thus, there was lack of access to a (large) core group of beneficiaries that may have benefitted uniformly from the intervention.
   - Most domestic workers have very little free time because they constantly juggle part-time/ full-time employment at multiple households with few leaves of absence, besides having to bear responsibilities for domestic chores and child care in their own homes.

3. The evaluator acknowledges possible selection bias among respondents, given that The Maids’ Company facilitated access to and undertook identification of all sample respondents of domestic workers and clients. Though the study sought to learn from best practices and unique strategies and case studies, a balance of opinions and unbiased representation was attempted by simultaneously probing challenges and shortcomings faced by respondents in their experience with The Maids’ Company.
4. Given that the intervention being evaluated is being done retrospectively, and domestic workers were engaged with The Maids’ Company at different periods during the five years of its operation, focus on wages earned by domestic workers and salaries administered by clients during this phase has not been emphasised or critically examined. This is partly due to inconsistencies from the memory lapse of respondents, as well as (i) variations among services performed by workers; (ii) for varying durations; and (iii) at different price points. There are also complications in analysing or benchmarking different minimum wage standards during the years of operation and now\textsuperscript{14}.  

5. The report also recognises possible shortcomings in adapting learnings of The Maids’ Company’s experience for other development practitioners and/ or government interventions or policy, given that these are based on the unique vision of the enterprise and its allocated human and financial resources, besides being rooted in a particular time and place and aimed at extending a finite range of services/ products catering to a particular target clientele, viz.:

- Context of the labour market in Gurgaon, including temporal and spatial considerations during the period of the intervention (2011–2016);
- Unique socio-economic-cultural profile and background of domestic workers present in the settlement of Chakkarpur and surrounding neighbourhoods in Gurgaon;
- ‘First mover’ advantage of The Maids’ Company at the time of providing such a service with a worker-centric focus in the market;
- Conscious strategy of The Maids’ Company to cater to mid-segment clientele in the market, thereby ensuring employment opportunities to the maximum number of women domestic workers, rather than targeting a smaller segment of elite clientele and upskilling fewer women to meet this niche demand.

\textsuperscript{14} Unanimous feedback based on interactions with clients, and also as affirmed by the founder of The Maids’ Company, was that the price rates quoted for domestic workers associated with The Maids’ Company were not disproportionately higher or costlier than the salaries paid to workers in the open market at the time.
Clarifications

Throughout this document, the terms ‘clients’ and ‘employers’ have been used interchangeably to refer to households desiring the services of domestic workers. Similarly, the terms ‘domestic workers’, ‘women workers’, ‘maids’ and ‘employees of the company’ have been used interchangeably in keeping with vision of The Maids’ Company. To avoid confusion, persons that worked in managerial and operational responsibilities of The Maids’ Company shall be referred to as staff.

The document draws entirely on the learnings and experiences of The Maids’ Company, which may differ from the approach adopted by other agencies working in the domestic work or urban informal economy space. The aim has been to demonstrate illustrative gender-responsive strategies rather than provide prescriptive recommendations. Further, given the relatively short lifespan of the intervention, the lack of access to a core group of beneficiaries that may have benefitted uniformly from the intervention and the flux of workers in the domestic work sector, the evaluation does not claim to:

- Provide a ‘one size fits all’ formula on how to work with domestic workers;
- Represent diversity in the sample of maids and heterogeneous profiles of women, nor a range of clients;
- Comment on the experiences of female live-in workers (24 hour), female domestic workers working in housekeeping in malls, female nurses, or male domestic workers (e.g. drivers, gardeners, or males working in housekeeping in malls etc.), since these workers were outside the purview of the target group of The Maids’ Company;
- Deeply examine the nitty gritties of the operationalisation, financing and running of The Maids’ Company and viability of its operations;
- Exhaustively map or quantify results of the intervention, especially through an outcome/impact assessment;
- Examine, in detail, the long-term empowerment effects for women domestic workers associated with The Maids’ Company.
OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

Key observations and learnings from the experience of The Maids’ Company have been documented in the following chapters:

Chapter 2
Stage-Wise Analysis of The Maids' Company Model

This chapter outlines and highlights strategies and innovations adopted by The Maids' Company, as well as the operational challenges, spanning different stages of working with domestic workers and covering factors related to effectiveness, efficiency and innovations of the model viz. (i) mobilisation; (ii) training and skilling; (iii) placement; and (iv) monitoring.

Chapter 3
Supply Side - Opportunities and Challenges for Domestic Workers

This chapter details the changes in the lives of women workers as a result of The Maids' Company intervention for its relevance and impact, viz. (i) formal individual change; (ii) informal individual change; and (iii) formal systemic constraints.

Chapter 4
Demand Side - Opportunities for and Challenges of Working with Clients

This chapter outlines the changes in the lives of clients as a result of The Maids’ Company intervention in terms of its relevance and impact, viz. (i) formal individual change; (ii) informal individual change; and (iii) formal systemic opportunities and challenges.

Chapter 5
Systemic Constraints in the Domestic Work Sector and Concluding Observations

This chapter examines The Maids’ Company model from the point of view of sustainability, identifying the need for such an entity in the sector and providing suggestions that could contribute towards formal, systemic changes in ensuring decent work for domestic workers.
2 Stage-Wise Analysis of The Maids’ Company Model

This chapter provides a stage-wise analysis of the processes followed by The Maids’ Company with the aim of drawing attention to strategies and challenges related to the Company’s approach and practice in operationalising its model in terms of effectiveness, efficiency and innovations.

In particular, the following stages and aspects shall be explored:

(i). Mobilisation
(ii). Training and Skilling
(iii). Placement
(iv). Monitoring

(I) MOBILISATION

STRENGTHS: Mobilisation

The Maids’ Company used a number of means to identify women who were willing to work with The Maids’ Company in domestic work. An initial survey was conducted and based on this needs assessment, the following strategies were employed:

- Targeting a demarcated geographical area, by soliciting the help of local informants (e.g. local auto drivers familiar with the neighbourhood and its inhabitants) to identify settlements where women domestic workers lived. The core focus area of intervention was decided as Chakkarpur, a settlement within Gurgaon, which had a large concentration of households with women doing domestic work.

- Leveraging the strengths of past experiences of mobilising and organising women by the chief mobilisers of The Maids’ Company (e.g. in previous projects such as a domestic workers’ pilot in Ludhiana, Punjab15).

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15 Urban Mahila and Mazdoor Alliance (UMA), an affiliate organisation of The Maids’ Company composed of many of the same team members as The Maids’ Company, had earlier worked on conducting a pilot on domestic workers based on their experience of forming and working with urban SHGs in Bhagat Singh Nagar area of Ludhiana district, Punjab. Selected strategies and learnings from this pilot were used to inform the design of the intervention of The Maids’ Company when working with domestic workers in Gurgaon.
- Tracking down and discussing with community women who among them were already in domestic work, especially when they were available at common, critical location points, e.g. cooking on stoves in front of their house, collecting water at common water taps in the evening and at vegetable vendors.

- Undertaking a mobilisation rally through the settlement where domestic workers lived, using drums and passing out flyers to create awareness among women workers of The Maids’ Company.

- Constantly ensuring visibility of supervisors/ staff of The Maids’ Company in the settlements, to build familiarity and enable relationship building with community women by listening to and sharing in the daily stories of joys and sorrows afflicting women. This is comparable to the strategy for mobilising and organising women’s micro-finance groups.

- Earning the trust of women workers by engaging with them on other pressing matters in their lives (outside of placement)\textsuperscript{16}

Following the mobilisation of women workers, The Maids’ Company conducted their police verification and provided them with ID cards that contained their basic information for easy recognition by clients.

**INNOVATIONS: Mobilisation**

- Conducting ‘social verification’ of domestic workers by asking neighbours about the maid and her character, her family members, how long she had been living in her current accommodation, whether she regularly paid rent etc.

- Appointing a woman community-based mobiliser who would assess the need for work from among women in the area, inform them about and bring them to join The Maids’ Company. The need for this was felt since community members knew and trusted ‘one of their own’ to inform them about safe and good job opportunities, besides being familiar with the economic needs of women and related challenges.

For details on these features, see Annexure 2.

\textsuperscript{16} For instance, ensuring children’s admissions in school, facilitating access to Aadhar card or extending support at the time of health crises.
CHALLENGES: Mobilisation

- **Limited Time and Availability of Domestic Workers**: Domestic workers enjoy very little free time between managing their jobs (with few leaves of absence) and their own household chores, and thus catching women workers at a suitable time of day or evening in order to establish initial contact with The Maids’ Company remained challenging.

- **Varying Migrant Flows Resulting in Flux in Supply of Available Workers**: The composition of women domestic workers searching for work varied, with some steady workers belonging to the older families of the settlement but with constant new waves of population entering the city; or else returning to villages (say, after 5 years of working in the city and returning to get married etc.).

- **Fear of Unreliable Placement Agencies Causing Apprehension in Joining The Maids’ Company**: There remains a need for serious investment towards building trust and familiarity among the community at the time of mobilising and explaining the need for any intervention. This is to allay the fears of women who suspect they may unknowingly become part of trafficking rackets.

(II) TRAINING AND SKILLING

STRENGTHS: Training and Skilling

The following approach was adopted in training and skilling conducted by The Maids’ Company:

(A) **Assessing and Bridging Skill Gaps**, including:

- Assessing the existing skills of the prospective maid
- Assessing the gap between the skill possessed by the maid and the skills needed to perform the job as per The Maids’ Company criteria;
- Matching the maid to a prospective client, keeping in mind client requirements and timings and the availability of maids, their skill level and any special preferences of the maid
(B) Dynamic Skills Curriculum focusing on:
- Soft skills and etiquette
- Technical skills related to cooking and cleaning
- Awareness of workplace rights and sexual harassment/abuse
- Refresher training

(C) Gender-Sensitive Format of Trainings, ensuring:
- Accessibility of the training venue
- Flexibility in timings to enable participation by women
- Female trainers not belonging to the community

Further elaboration of these is provided in Annexure 2.
CHALLENGES: Training and Skilling

Difficulty of Retaining Women in Long, Classroom-Based Training: That women were unwilling to spend long periods of time in a classroom to upskill themselves on tasks of domestic work is evident from the evolution in the length of training by The Maids’ Company—from 30 days 20 days to 10 days to 8 days and ultimately to 5 days. This change was necessitated since most maids did not attend the entirety of these long trainings – attending sporadically or else dropping out altogether in between. A major learning was that women workers remain more preoccupied with searching for work opportunities; or else attending to their own household chores. Women were reluctant to sit in during the demonstration period where skills are taught, often thinking they knew the basic skills and viewing this as a waste of time.

Difficulty in Standardising the Skills Curriculum: The Maids’ Company’s experience revealed that defining and equipping women with basic technical skills during training often became redundant, because of differences across client households, e.g. variations in taste and preferences of food, different cleaning and kitchen equipment to be used by maids.

Challenges of Working with Experienced Workers rather than Freshers: Though an initial criterion at the time of mobilising domestic workers to join The Maids’ Company was that they should have some past work experience in domestic work, The Maids’ Company found it easier to train new women afresh rather than assessing the skill gap of experienced workers, or making them change their style of working or previously ingrained poor work ethic.

Heavy Costs to Company towards Investing in Skill Trainings17: Investing in training was one of The Maids’ Company’s largest costs, requiring heavy investment in setting up classrooms at different locations, running classes at different times and undertaking training of trainers. Further, as shared by the staff of The Maids’ Company, for women workers the opportunity cost of classroom training was very high owing to time constraints and the long-term pay-out too low, with staff estimating that after training workers would at most enjoy 10–15 per cent increase in their salary.

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17 Based on input shared by the staff of The Maids’ Company.
INNOVATION: Dekho Seekho Digital Application - Upskilling Domestic Workers

“The idea for Dekho Seekho came from the fact that initially when a client requested a specific recipe that the maid did not know – we looked it up on YouTube ... after seeing the video, the maids used to ask us to replay it ... they found it easy since they could stop the video and keep repeating and re-watching it.”

The Maids’ Company Staff

One of the learnings of The Maids’ Company from engaging in the domestic work sector was that a dedicated upskilling intervention could contribute to increased incomes of women workers. This was seen among some women workers at The Maids’ Company who were able to command a higher income because they possessed a more varied and diversified skillset (e.g. improved culinary repertoire of multiple international cuisines in the case of cooking skills). Responding to this observation, The Maids’ Company designed a digital platform for upskilling of maids that had instructional videos in Hindi on cooking, housekeeping and soft skills training. The potential for such a digital app, in a visual medium and enabling recall value, especially given women's constraints on time and mobility, is elaborated in Annexure 3. Dekho Seekho was pilot-tested among selected women workers of The Maids’ Company at the time of its operation; however, it was fully conceived and developed after the Company wound up its operations. The initial gains for maids through introduction to this technology are described below.

“I learnt new skills and dishes by seeing videos in a tablet (referring to the Dekho Seekho app) – the children in the house I worked in used to like eating banoffee pie that I used to make for them with my own hands! I now know what vegetables to put on a pizza, and tasted it for the first time.”

Pushpa*

(III) PLACEMENT

STRENGTHS: Placement

Clients were solicited from among interested households who responded to flyers disseminated for The Maids' Company services, which were inserted in daily newspapers delivered to households in particular neighbourhoods as targeted by The Maids’ Company, as well as through recommendations by word of mouth of satisfied clients. Placing maids entailed a process of matchmaking between clients and workers, and also allowing for a trial period before both
parties formally agreed to work together. For its part, following the trial period, The Maids’ Company issued a formal contract signed between clients and The Maids’ Company, usually for a period of one year (provisions of which shall be elaborated in Chapter 3).

The procedures adopted by The Maids’ Company are outlined below:

- Vetting clients, expectations and household arrangements to ensure decent work conditions
- Instituting a trial period for testing the waters between client and worker, with both client and maid being able to exercise veto to reject the other (choice of up to 3 maids/ clients)
- Conducting on-the-job training/orientation
- Appointing women community-based supervisors to handhold newly appointed maids

Details of these strategies are provided in Annexure 2.

GOOD PRACTICE: Gender-Responsive Features during Placement and at Work

With time and exposure to the challenges in the lived realities of women, The Maids' Company discovered that there was a need for adopting certain practices and innovations to facilitate the work participation of women, in particular by defining certain gender-sensitive conditions of work, namely:

- Ensuring shuttle service/ van or travel allowance for workers to reach distant client households
- Finite duration of shift for women not extending into late night hours
- Insisting on the provision of drinking water and safe toilet facilities for women at work
- Ensuring the safety of maids at the workplace, including conducting (informal) screening of clients and judging situations of vulnerability and adopting checks and balances.
“When I was placed for the first time in a client household by The Maids’ Company, my client told me to go to the bathroom in the open, somewhere near a field – after going outside I realised that I could be seen ... including by some man who was standing on top of a tank. I came and told The Maids’ Company about this and they removed me from working with that client ... they told me that I could get an infection from going to the bathroom in the open.”

Kiran*

Further details on provisions of shuttle service for workers, gender-sensitive shift timings and drinking water and safe toilet facilities at the workplace (and also the incidents that sparked the need for such interventions) are provided in Annexure 2.
GOOD PRACTICE: Looking Out for the Most Vulnerable and Addressing Aspirations

Clients’ perception bias works against certain vulnerable women along axes such as appearance, religion, age and ethnicity, more of which shall be described in Chapter 4. Nevertheless, it is important to know that in certain instances The Maids’ Company went out of its way to accommodate women's vulnerabilities and needs—a focus that would not have been factored in if these women were searching for work as individuals in the open labour market which is blind to all concerns other than profitability and worker productivity. Additionally, an important component of matching clients with domestic workers—besides the wish list of clients—that remains unrecognised is that domestic workers themselves often have their limitations and/or preferences and their own future aspirations, which would not be taken into consideration in the open market or by all placement agencies. The role played by The Maids’ Company in looking out for the most vulnerable women in placement spanned the following, details of which are elaborated in Annexure 2:

- Reading out terms and conditions of appointment to semi-literate women
- Compensating for language barriers by placing a woman worker in a household where their native language was spoken
- Factoring aspirations of younger women and placing them in managerial roles with future employability scope outside of domestic work

CHALLENGES: Placement

Threats to Bodily Integrity and of Extortion in Exchange for Placement

“I have never and will never trust a (male) security guard to get domestic work ... they turn around and say you will have to have (sexual) relations with me ... they expect that since they are giving us an opportunity and money, they will get something in return.”

Kiran*

“One of the lady security guards in the apartment tower used to run a business - in case there was a vacancy for work in any of the apartments, she took on the role of fixing and putting a new woman on the job. For doing this, she was charging the maid a bribe of up to Rs. 1,000–1,500 ... Three of four lady security guards have been doing this for quite some time.”

Meera*
An important finding that came to light was that in the absence of information and formal channels through which women domestic workers could access work opportunities (such as The Maids’ Company), women may compromise their security and bodily integrity besides having to incur significant monetary costs to bribe key ‘brokers’ who sometimes mediate access to clients, such as security guards. Guards of apartment complexes often act as important (literal and metaphoric) gatekeepers, being the point of contact between employers and any interested workers seeking work opportunities and lacking access to spaces occupied by clients. Instances highlighting the prevalence of such trends are shared below.

Pre-Placement Attrition of Women Workers

“Even the maids who came to The Maids’ Company to get placed were simultaneously always on the lookout for work through their own sources and references ... they were interested in work placement ... not so much in giving time for trainings ... We would mobilise 50–60 maids ... of which 20–25 would go for trials with clients ... and of which roughly 10 maids would get placed and enter contracts ... The Maids’ Company processes involved police verification, skill assessment and then a trial period with the client, lasting about 10–15 days in total before the placement ... this is often a long period to wait for the maid... if in this period they heard of work opportunities from other sources, they would go there before ... preference used to be for any employment over good or fair employment.”

The Maids’ Company Staff

Formal, final contracts to women workers were issued only once placement was confirmed by both client and worker, remaining well aware and accounting for attrition that may occur, either in the training period or during the trial period, based on lack of compatibility between clients and maids. It is important to recognise that maids are concerned with meeting their immediate need of securing work, and so they spend their time either searching for work opportunities or attending to their own household chores and family matters. This search for work is an all-consuming process, and maids often tell all their friends, neighbours and any other personal sources that they are searching for work, hoping to get wind of any vacancies. In fact, some workers came for the training and then found work elsewhere, ultimately leading to a loss for the Company.
Losing Business for Upholding Decent Work Provisions: Of the many client households that demonstrated interest in The Maids’ Company, beyond the initial enquiry many clients did not pursue contracts with The Maids’ Company, given its commitment towards upholding decent wages and work for women workers. “Out of 20 enquiries we used to get for The Maids’ Company, after seeing our policies and terms of conditions for domestic workers, ultimately only two or three clients used to agree to enter into a contract with us ... initially we needed to convince clients why to ensure the provisions of the contract such as 4 holidays a month and leave of absence for gazetted holidays ... many clients used to say to us that even we don't have so many holidays ... they knew they could get a maid in the open market at cheaper rates and without giving these benefits.”

The Maids’ Company Staff

(IV) MONITORING

STRENGTHS: Monitoring

Given certain intrinsic features of domestic work—scattered workplaces and multiple clients/employers—difficulties related to monitoring of worker’s experiences as well as work conditions remained. To respond to this, the following strategies were devised by The Maids’ Company:

- **Constituting a Maid-Facing Team:** Comprised of field workers, mobilisers and a nurse, one of the main responsibilities of the team was to maintain regular touch with workers, especially after placement when women were engaged in different clients’ households. To remain in contact with workers and ensure that they were not facing any challenges at the workplace, members of the maid-facing team conducted a mandatory monthly visit to workers’ homes.

- **Instituting a Salary Day:** Envisaged as a means by which to keep in contact with the workers, the first Sunday in a month was earmarked as Salary Day by The Maids’ Company—a day when all women workers would congregate at The Maids’ Company office to receive their salaries, besides gaining an opportunity to share and vent any negative experiences they faced at the workplace (for more details, see Chapter 3).

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18 Based on inputs shared by staff of The Maids’ Company.
- **Training Women to Remain Vigilant:** Building the capacities of women workers themselves was seen to be an important component to ensure employer compliance with decent work conditions:
  - To ensure prevention of lapses in due wages\(^{19}\)
  - For red flags of client’s inappropriate behaviour\(^{20}\)

  Over time, The Maids’ Company created Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for multiple situations that were designed and created as a response to incidents/ mishaps that occurred at the workplace. The maid-facing staff were trained in these SOPs.

- **Implementing an Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS):** This automated telephony system would call maids in the morning before they went to work and ask for input on whether they were going to work that day or not (input 0 = not going to work and 1 = going to work).

- **Issuing an Attendance Card to Clients:** on which clients were expected to mark attendance of number of days and hours worked by the maid and submit this to The Maids’ Company at the end of the month. Based on this attendance card, The Maids’ Company generated the invoice of the maid’s salary.

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\(^{19}\) In particular, The Maids’ Company stressed that maids should, on their part, be alert in keeping a record of the days and hours worked (like entry and exit time for each day) and leaves of absence taken by them (to be able to tally with clients’ records of the same and point out any discrepancies). One way this was ensured was that on the days the maids were kept late, on their way back home they dropped into The Maids’ Company office to report overtime and to prove that this was how long they had worked on that particular day. Alternatively, the maids reported having worked overtime to the Company on the day of or on the following day. To re-iterate and put this on record the Company’s staff called the client to inform them that note had been made of this overtime. Reminders of this nature had to be constantly issued by the staff to clients to prevent any mishaps and to maintain transparency and accountability.

\(^{20}\) For example, during training, The Maids’ Company would build awareness and openly discuss cases of swearing, hitting or gender-based violence, and the importance of openly sharing these instances with The Maids’ Company so that the Company could address them. With time, important policies were put in place to safeguard the women’s bodily and personal integrity, including a zero tolerance policy for threats/ abuse/ violence by the client, with maid’s services being immediately terminated with the client when the worker reported any such incident.
CHALLENGES: Monitoring

- Lack of a common workplace, a dispersed workforce and working across multiple client households created difficulties in monitoring: (i) the attendance of workers, (ii) the nature of work and working conditions and (iii) the maid's performance of services
- Infeasibility of visiting and checking up on the numerous maids working in the numerous client households
- Challenges in adoption of innovations:
  (i) Implementing IVRS
      - Maids entering the wrong numeric input at the time of the IVRS phone call enquiring about attendance
      - Maids were too busy in the early morning hours to pay attention to completing such telephonic formalities, according priority to completing domestic chores in their own homes such as cooking, collecting water and looking after their children.
  (ii) Use of Attendance Card by Clients
      - Scrutiny by the client to ensure The Maids' Company was not inflating the maids' salary
      - Scrutiny by The Maids' Company to ensure that maid's account of days/hours worked was accurately clocked by the client (especially related to overtime, which the client often did not self-report and marked themselves, and which had to be brought to the notice of the Company by the maid, and thereafter to the attention of the client)

Additionally, there were a number of organisational features of The Maids' Company that both enabled and posed a challenge to its operational functioning. An analysis of these features is provided in Annexure 2.
Supply Side: Opportunities and Challenges for Domestic Workers

Following the Gender at Work Framework and based on discussions with women workers and staff of The Maids’ Company, this chapter outlines the opportunities and challenges from the perspective of women workers as a result of The Maids’ Company intervention. The three sections deal with formal individual change, informal individual change and systemic change.

(1) FORMAL INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

This section describes the change in individual conditions of women workers as a result of The Maids’ Company intervention, in terms of access to opportunities, resources and services.

OPPORTUNITIES

(A) Access to the Market and Job Opportunities: Overcoming Information Asymmetry and Averting Tediousness and Risk of Finding Jobs in the Open Market

The biggest challenge faced by domestic workers is information asymmetry regarding vacancies for domestic work and lack of easy access to these client households. Most domestic workers rely on references from among their relatives, neighbours or friends to find work, and based on these leads go searching for prospective employers by themselves on foot\(^{21}\). This can be a long and time-consuming process of hits and misses, especially to find an opportunity that matches their hours of availability and which is close to their residence.

\(^{21}\) Normally, maids would put the word out that they are looking for work, and ask around informally when walking within their neighbourhood, or reach out to other workers or acquaintances in their locality. Women often roam for long periods on foot—sometimes in the hot sun—asking at apartment complexes or enquiring among acquaintances in their locality to learn about work opportunities. One of the maids said she used to go to a park, find other maids, sit and chat, and ask them if they knew of any work opportunities in the nearby houses.
By associating with The Maids’ Company, women did not have to be constantly plagued by the tension of looking for employment and/or new employers, having guarantee of getting a work opportunity by virtue of being associated with the Company. There was immense security in the knowledge that they would be able to receive an immediate and tangible placement opportunity. The guarantee of going through a safe and trusted channel such as The Maids’ Company to secure work was an important consideration for some workers, rather than having to go through placement agents or security guards, that may endanger their safety, threaten their bodily integrity or demand extortion. (See the section on challenges in placement in Chapter 2 for details.)

Going through The Maids’ Company also ensured non-discrimination and equal opportunity in recruitment, with information on workers’ marital status, caste, religion and ethnicity never being solicited at the time of mobilisation or placement. These details were also not provided to clients as per the strict policy guidelines of The Maids’ Company.

**Outlining Standards and Basic Rights at Work in Written Contracts with Employers**

Clauses of the contract of The Maids’ Company with clients kept evolving over time, initially starting with 12 clauses and expanding to 22 clauses. Changes were incorporated in contracts as a response to new incidents and cases with clients, with the aim of ensuring maximum protection to women while performing service. The following were the salient provisions that clients were contractually mandated to uphold for domestic workers:

- Payment of wages in line with minimum wages (calculated by The Maids’ Company on the basis of Haryana state minimum wages)
- 12 annual sick leaves (applicable 3 months into service)
- National holidays, such as 15 August (Independence Day), 1 May (Labour Day) and 2 October (Gandhi Jayanti)
- 5 days festival leave in a year, according to the context and religion of maids; e.g. mandatorily giving Holi off (to ensure the safety of maids); 2 holidays for Hindus (Diwali and Durga Puja); 2 holidays for Muslims (2 Eids)
- Half-day leave every month for Salary Day, on the 1st Sunday of every month, when all the maids would visit The Maids’ Company office to collect their salaries
- Monthly charges for services delivered by maids to be paid by clients to The Maids’ Company between the 1st and 5th of every calendar month
- Replacement services (of workers) to be provided by The Maids’ Company in case of unsanctioned leave/termination or end of services of appointed maid
- Provision for a proper toilet for the maid
- Provision for drinking water for the maid
- Travel arrangements for the commute. Van/shuttle to be provided if the client household was geographically distant from the maid’s residence; if this was not availed of, travel allowance for the maid was collected from the client (Rs. 500–3,000 for a month, depending on the distance)
- Maids on longer shifts to be given 2 teas (mid-morning and mid-afternoon) and lunch in a 9–10 hour service or more; 1 tea (mid-morning) in a 4–5 hour service; with tea breaks not being less than 15 minutes; and a 40-minute break for lunch
- Overtime to be issued in case the maid is retained by the client for time exceeding the duration of the shift
- 5 per cent increase in salary at the end of each year of service performed by the maid

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22 Clarity on other issues, such as whether the maid would have to cook her own lunch, eat from food prepared for the whole family, eat before the family or after them, was also sought from clients to avoid miscommunication. See Lahiri (2017), pp. 86–87.

23 Overtime (per hour) was calculated pro rata.
In terms of the benefits from association with The Maids’ Company, domestic workers reported the following (selected) gains, and as re-iterated in the anecdotes that follow:

- Timely payment of salary, especially the assurance of receiving their salary on time from The Maids’ Company. Most women workers often had to pay the rent for their premises at the beginning of the month and suffered in case of delays in payment by clients\(^2\)
- Increased salary amounts, which workers could not have demanded on their own
- Access to a regular income, used for consumption needs of the household, expenses related to raising children and children’s education as well as for investment in assets (e.g. constructing a house in their village, procurement of business-making asset)
- Assurance of certain fixed, non-negotiable benefits at work
- Adherence to a timetable and limits on the duration of the work shift by clients
- Reassurance of safety for maids regarding the character of a client, including male clients, due to vetting by The Maids’ Company
- Increase in women’s mobility, including among those who had previously undertaken home-based work
- Improved awareness of rights at work related to leave, due holidays and basic conditions of work; and the skills necessary to equip oneself for the job market and become employable, especially for freshers with no past experience of

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\(^2\) In fact, The Maids’ Company used to take the guarantee that the maids would receive their salary promptly within the 1st week of the month, irrespective of whether the client household had paid The Maids’ Company this amount. Thus, even if clients had delayed payment for the maid’s services to The Maids’ Company until the 15th even the 25th day of a month, The Maids’ Company would forward the due salary amount to the maid prematurely, at their own expense.
engaging in paid domestic work in client homes

- Access to opportunities to learn technical skills (e.g. new dishes, cuisines, cleaning techniques)

- Access to work opportunities of longer duration, with The Maids' Company having first-mover advantage in the market in terms of offering domestic work products/services of longer duration such as 10 hours and 12 hours (rather than 2–3 hours). This enabled higher wages for maids, facilitating a paradigm shift in work patterns.\(^25\)

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### Workplace Benefits Experienced by Workers

“The Maids’ Company was able to get clients to agree to give us certain benefits. If we were to go on our own, we would not be able to secure these. For a 12-hour shift, maximum we could negotiate in our interactions with clients was about Rs. 7,000–8,000 a month. The Maids’ Company was able to secure us Rs. 14,000–15,000 a month.”

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**Jyoti***

“When working in The Maids’ Company there was guarantee that clients would stick to a timetable—giving us food and salary on time, holidays on Sunday and Labour Day.”

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**Monica***

“We knew that when our shift ended at 7.30pm, we could leave—irrespective of whether all our tasks were completed. It was clear that we would get 4 holidays in a month and 12 sick leaves a year.”

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**Nisha***

“One of my clients with The Maids’ Company was a house where mostly the husband used to be home ... the wife used to usually be out of town ... though there was a single man in the house I never felt scared ... I thought he was a client of The Maids’ Company and they would have checked his background and would have all his details.”

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**Kiran***

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\(^{25}\) *While initially The Maids’ Company started with at most 8-hour shifts—based on mutual need of clients and women’s willingness to work longer hours (with the aim of earning more)—10- and 12-hour shifts were also started by The Maids’ Company.*
(C) Security of Work through Access to Multiple Employers and Improved Bargaining Power

By virtue of joining The Maids’ Company, women workers in a single stroke were able to enjoy:

- Access to a guaranteed pool of clients through a centralised platform, thus saving women the headache of constantly seeking work and thereafter individually negotiating employment on a one-on-one basis with different employers in different locations. This was a major gain for women workers, since otherwise the onus of finding work and completing all formalities to ensure their selection and appointment was on them, including undertaking security certification and negotiating terms with (sometimes multiple) employers.

- Improved negotiation and bargaining power and absolving workers of the feeling of being ‘trapped’ in one employment relationship. Their fall-back position was improved from having access to multiple employers and job opportunities, which provided an ‘exit option’ from ‘bad’ clients.

- Ability to go on long leave without fear of loss of work, with Maids’ Company rotating the supply of workers to cover for absenteeism, thanks to the ‘replacement’ provision instituted by The Maids’ Company.

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26 Based on inputs shared by staff of The Maids’ Company.
Replacement Provision and Assurance of Work: Providing Cover for Unanticipated Leave of Migrant Workers

Perhaps the most important design feature of The Maids’ Company from the perspective of women workers was the replacement provision; in case women had to go on sudden leave, an alternative/ substitute worker was provided to the client. This provision enabled women workers to go on sudden short-term or long-term leave without fearing loss of work, with the assurance that they would get absorbed with the same/ another client of The Maids’ Company when they returned from their leave. This was a critical factor that allowed women to attend to emergencies that may arise, while enjoying peace of mind that their employment arrangement would not be jeopardised. This assurance—to tide over the demand for labour services of clients with replacement workers—was an important factor that helped to some extent in regularising the demand and supply of labour in the domestic work sector, without causing upheavals. Further, this was an important measure intended to build value for ‘work’, rather than create ‘attachment to workers’ by clients.

“With The Maids’ Company, there was never any difficulty in finding work ... when I used to go home to my village for 2–3 months, I would phone up the Company and tell them in advance that I am returning to Gurgaon in 10–15 days; that I would be ready to work ... this does not happen in the open market when one looks for work on one’s own ... I would be sitting idle.”

Geeta*

(D) Flexibility in Choice of Duration and Intensity of Work based on Women’s Multiple Realities and Different Life Stages

One of the learnings of The Maids’ Company was that women workers in the informal sector are unable to continuously remain in the workforce for long periods (and often go in and out of the workforce) owing to constraints related to their gender roles and responsibilities or their migrant status. For instance, they:

27 Based on inputs shared by staff of The Maids’ Company.

28 Most maids were migrant workers, and though they may have taken permanent residence in Gurgaon, any major social, occupational or family events would necessitate their return to their home villages, for periods lasting from 15–20 days up to three or six months in extreme cases. Most maids fear that they will lose work with a particular household when they go on long leave, especially if the client hires an alternative that turns out to provide better service.

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Shoulder a disproportionate burden of performing unpaid work that demands their presence at home to undertake domestic chores and care responsibilities for both children and the elderly.

Need to take sudden and unplanned leave, on occasion, to attend to matters in their native villages.

Such constraints are elaborated in later sections of the report.

Recognising and responding to the gender needs and constraints of informal sector women workers, the Maids' Company developed components in their service provision and operations to accommodate these ground realities:

- Enabling women the flexibility to take up part-time/full-time work opportunities of varying intensity and duration. This was particularly important for women workers since it allowed them to take on different shifts based on the age of their children/age of the women themselves/extent of intra-household help available to complete unpaid work (see Annexure 3);

- Issuing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to transition new workers who would serve as replacements, without inconveniencing the client.

(E) Access to Non-Workplace Benefits: Social Support Services

Originally, The Maids’ Company sought to intervene and improve the workplace opportunities, wages and benefits that maids would receive from clients. However, as The Maids’ Company navigated its journey with women workers, the importance of intervening in non-workplace aspects of the maid’s life became increasingly apparent, to enable them to efficiently dispense their professional services. A critical realisation was the need for undertaking convergent, comprehensive and cross-cutting strategies for ensuring economic improvement in maids’ lives; that spanned workplace benefits and income enhancement on the one hand but also non-workplace benefits such as access to social support services and entitlements on the other. This approach acknowledged the multi-dimensional realities and contexts of women domestic workers, such as the need to assure their access to health, safety, credit and care facilities, all of which have a bearing on women’s work participation and impact their daily earnings and income. Thus, to maximise productivity and optimise person days in employment, it was considered imperative to go beyond the workplace. It was often unique cases or individual (negative) experiences of women that brought these concerns to the fore, providing the trigger for taking up newer interventions that addressed different aspects of maids’ realities.
Taking an Ecosystem Approach: Going Beyond the Workplace to Improve Health, Quality and Productivity of the Workforce

“The Maids’ Company intervention was important since it went into the lives, not just livelihoods of maids.”

Client (Development Sector), DLF Phase IV

“If the home environment of the domestic worker is not good, she will not go to work ... and once she decides she will not go to work, nothing can make her change her mind ... Employment brings women in and jobs are the draw at the time of mobilising women ... but these cannot be divorced from social support aspects such as providing loans, health services, child care services.”

The Maids’ Company Staff

In due course, The Maids’ Company extended access to different social services and benefits to workers such as facilitating access to:

- A nurse in case of health ailments of the worker or family member
- A safe space for women in case of threat to their security
- Monetary advances/ interest-free loans and gender-sensitive loan products\(^{29}\), relevant to the context of women workers (e.g. mobile phone, bicycle), adjustable against forthcoming monthly salaries.

Details and back-stories relating to the establishment of these innovative services are provided below.

\(^{29}\) Importantly, on its part, The Maids' Company issued loans against particular products – (1) mobile phone and (2) cycle. In particular, these two products were shortlisted by The Maids' Company based on their experience that these would be useful in the performance of service by women domestic workers. A mobile phone would help in ensuring communication between the maid and the client as well as the maid and The Maids' Company on her whereabouts including arrival and departure from the clients' house. A cycle was useful for maids working in large apartment societies – with huge distances between the entry gate and the tower of the apartment building where the client household was; usually navigated by clients in their cars. The company would buy these products at the market rate and then sell these to the maids, by adjusting this amount against their salary.
INNOVATION: Access to a Nurse for Health Checkups for Domestic Workers: Prevention is Better than Cure to Prevent Loss of Person Days of Work and Income

“In one particular incident, a maid’s daughter contracted typhoid ... after ignoring initial symptoms and facing neglect from their own medical practitioner, the client intervened and took this young girl to a private hospital where it was shared that if she had been brought in 2 hours later she would have died ... the ICU bill for this treatment was very high – about Rs. 2,50,000 ... The Maids’ Company footed the bill with the support of the client who fundraised a contribution towards this from among her office colleagues ... The case made us think that in case there had been greater emphasis on prevention ... if the maid had taken steps to show her daughter to a doctor earlier and not ignored the problem ... it would not have become so serious and the cost of care would not have been so high.”

The Maids’ Company Staff

As evidenced from the above example, the need for intervening regarding the health of both the woman worker and her family members was considered necessary, especially given that migrants living in an urban metropolis such as Gurgaon live in cramped and sometimes unclean tenements – often sharing bathrooms and remaining susceptible to disease and infections. Following this incident, the dire need was felt to arrest and catch ailments of women and their families before they became severe or fatal; besides avoiding the prohibitive nature of health costs if left unattended. This was one of the main reasons that The Maids’ Company decided to appoint a nurse, who would visit the maid and maid’s family members in case they reported a sick day leave from work. The nurse would assess the medical complaint of the maid/maid’s family member and administer any necessary medicine. In case of more serious complaints, the nurse would take the patient to the hospital outpatient department (OPD) and follow up on the suggested medical advice given.
INNOVATION: Extending Salary Advance/ Loan and Facilitating Access to Gender-Sensitive Loan Products

Based on the reality that maids may suddenly need money up front before the date that their salaries would be paid to them by clients, The Maids' Company began issuing advance to maids – up to a sum equivalent to their salary amount (credit limit = salary amount). This advance was administered as an interest-free loan, which would be deducted in instalments by adjusting against maids’ forthcoming months salaries. Interactions with women workers and The Maids Company staff revealed that loans taken by maids were used for a variety of purposes – constructing a home in villages, meeting health and education expenses of family members, expenses related to health/sickness/death of family members, buying assets such as fridge or TV, purchasing gold earrings. Most women workers admitted that the loan facility extended by The Maids' Company was useful since even among good clients, they were was no guarantee that they would give a need-based monetary advance – and usually only older clients, whom the workers had worked with for long periods, entertained this request.

INNOVATION: Providing a Safe Space for Women’s Accommodation in case of Threat to Security

The need for creating a safe space for women domestic workers was strongly realised when one of the maids of the Company faced a particularly disturbing incident – she was beaten very badly by her husband, stripped naked and left outside her home for an entire night. In order to provide maids support in such cases, The Maids' Company decided to designate one room within their office premises as an accommodation space where maids could come and spend the night in case of an emergency – related to any gender-based violence they face; or due to any reason if their safety was at risk. For instance, one maid stayed in this space for a month when her parents left home for their village and the woman did not want to stay alone in her neighbourhood, that was considered to be unsafe. The space also had facilities such as a functioning kitchen and a care-taker.

However, over time, The Maids' Company learnt to install checks and balances - issuing a large sum as advance only when the maid had worked with the company for minimum 6 months (since there were instances when maids had run away and left service with the Company with large outstanding advances). Smaller loan amounts such as Rs. 500 – Rs. 1000 were issued even to new joinees.
CHALLENGES

Navigating the Realities of Migrant Status: Barrier to Enabling (Continued) Work Participation

There is a large churn in the domestic worker sector that can be attributed in large part to the migrant status of women workers. Since most workers’ native village was outside Delhi, any urgent matters relating to family or managing their ‘permanent’ home meant that workers would require long periods of leave, often at sudden intervals. For instance, at The Maids Company, maids often returned to their source villages, on a seasonal basis, to attend to the harvest of crops on their land, to attend marriages, to vote in local elections, or to attend to sickness/death of relatives. In particular, March – May of each year remained busy months when many women workers were absent. Such intermittent and sometimes unexpected leave meant that women risked jeopardising employment contracts with their clients, who would usually find a substitute in case the maid went missing for long periods. In fact, leave of absence remained a major obstacle in the sustained retention in employment among maids and this necessitated some amount of flexibility in their work contracts.

Further, the fact that many domestic workers are migrants poses other constraints for the domestic work sector, such as:

- Difficulties in solidarity building and organising heterogeneous migrant domestic workers in cities
- Limited long-term scope of domestic work in cities for migrants who prioritise ties in their home villages
- Enhanced economic vulnerability of (single) migrant women from source villages, who may be trafficked and accommodated as live-in workers in cities with board and lodging taken care of.

These facets are also discussed in Annexure 3.

(II) INFORMAL INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

Among women workers, The Maids’ Company intervention helped trigger and facilitate certain changes in their consciousness and worldview, including in their awareness, networking opportunities and behaviour.
OPPORTUNITIES

(A) Addressing ‘Worker’ Identity and Facilitating Transition From ‘Servant’ To ‘Service’: Professionalising Domestic Work

Domestic workers do not value their own work as an economic activity, or as a professional service rendered to clients for a fee. Lack of prioritisation of self and own family needs, by placing these second only to clients’ needs, is a phenomenon that has not been unknown among domestic workers, and demonstrates the sense of deference and self-sacrifice that characterises the attitude domestic workers have towards their clients. That domestic workers consider their work from an ‘emotional’ perspective instead of an economic lens can be observed by the sense of loyalty, security and attachment that maids develop with clients, which sometimes leads them to return to old clients out of a sense of ‘obligation’ rather than accepting new employment, even if at higher wages.

(i) Building Self-Perception of Women as ‘Employees’ of The Maids’ Company

In keeping with The Maids’ Company vision that women workers were not employed as ‘servants’ but for their service, attempts were made to position women as ‘employees’ of the Company and extend to women workers all benefits that would accrue to formal sector employees. Some of the important workers’ rights clauses ensured important workplace benefits for women workers in the form of labour protections enshrined in written contracts with employers.

(ii) Using Visible Markers to Construct ‘Work’ Identity

An important strategy of The Maids’ Company was constructing a common, visible and instantly recognisable identity for maids as workers:

- Making women domestic workers initially wear uniforms31; however, it was learned that women preferred to wear a range of colourful and well-fitted outfits (which The Maids’ Company standardised), since this had the effect of improving women’s self-perception
- Making maids wear their work ID card prominently, possessing details of their background information and photograph

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31 Though in the initial days The Maids’ Company attempted to have maids wear common khaki-coloured uniforms when going to client households, this met with opposition from maids who found it stifling to wear the same, standard outfit on a daily basis. Thus, The Maids’ Company standardised a range of colourful and fitted outfits —both salwar + kameez + dupatta and sari + blouse—from which women could choose.
Providing maids with aprons with The Maids’ Company logo to be worn when performing service

(iii) Focusing on Grooming and Etiquette: Towards Negotiating as Equals

“Our experience showed that if the maid was dressed in hand-me-down clothes that were badly sized and mismatched; or had messy hair; or looked very downtrodden, this would beget poor treatment and the client would not be willing to pay very much for her services.”

The Maids' Company Staff

As re-iterated by staff, the first hurdle was to ensure maids got placed and appointed in a workplace by clients, only after which the quality of their work was examined. Staff of The Maids’ Company shared an important learning—employers treated maids that looked smart with respect, even if the quality of their work was somewhat lacking.

Therefore, The Maids’ Company placed a high premium on the grooming of maids, emphasising that maids commit to:

- Wearing clean and fresh clothes and looking neat, for instance pinning up their sari
- Not wearing glass bangles that could hinder work (especially if engaged in cleaning services)
- Keeping their hair securely tied back and keeping their fingernails short (especially if engaged in cooking services)
- Not wearing any overtly dressy accessories (e.g. big earrings)
- Focusing on hygiene\(^32\) by providing maids with a kit during training that comprised a jhola/ bag with a comb, talcum powder and deodorant to freshen up when arriving at the clients’ household.

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\(^{32}\) Hygiene was particularly important since clients often complained that maids smelt of body odour, without realising that often water may not have been available in the morning when maids left their houses for work or that they would perspire during the long journey to the client household.
Shifting Attitudes and Status of Workers: Garnering Dignity as Professionals

“At The Maids’ Company, we never felt like a maid – we felt like staff … I still use what I learnt at The Maids’ Company – including how to talk and listen to clients.”

Pushpa*

“In the beginning, when we received complaints about maid’s hygiene, women workers told us that they did not see the point of going bathed to clients’ houses, since anyway they were going to perform cleaning tasks and would get dirty … we had to make women understand that when reporting to work they need to be bathed and clean to get the professional feel that they hold a job … class is visual and some of these measures to professionalise service helped women in negotiating the class dynamic from ‘bai’ to employee … maids told us that they received respect from the auto drivers and the guards … they did not eve tease them … they thought the women belonged to a different social milieu, not their milieu … one of the maid’s husbands told us you have made my wife into a Madam.”

The Maids’ Company Staff

(B) Creating a Sense of Community and Belonging among Women Workers: Spaces for Interaction and Solidarity Building

Over time, it was realised that given that the maids worked in scattered households with little interface with The Maids’ Company and other domestic workers, strategies were needed to ensure maids kept in continuous touch with the Company. Further, it was felt necessary to instil in women workers a sense of identity and belonging, for which concerted attempts were made to nurture the individual relationship between women workers and The Maids’ Company. Towards this end, conducting a Salary Day was a successful strategy that promoted a sense of belonging among the workers. Additionally, staff of The Maids’ Company made it a point to celebrate festivals and/ or birthdays of maids, including by going to women’s houses, thus deepening the worker-employer rapport.
Salary Day: Building Solidarity between Workers and The Maids’ Company

“The point of having The Maids’ Company events or get-togethers was similar to the need for having a union—for the women domestic workers to see their own, others like them, and to see their strength in numbers ... otherwise the association of maids with The Maids’ Company remained at the level of tackling individual complaints and firefighting with those client households ... it helped in putting trust and building confidence of the women in The Maids' Company as an entity.”

The Maids' Company Staff

Salary Day was celebrated on the 1st Sunday of every month, a day when nearly all maids working with the Company would gather at The Maids’ Company office to collect their salaries. On this day, a range of activities took place, including the following:

- Interest-free loans/ advances were provided to women in need (to be adjusted against their forthcoming salaries)
- Women workers were able to consult a nurse who was present to undertake a health check-up;
- In-kind prizes were distributed to women for good performance/ employee of the month (e.g. saris, small earrings, bangles) based on client feedback and attendance, with women workers valuing the recognition, appreciation and validation of their work services in front of their peers
- Entertainment, including setting up a tent for the occasion, with music, dancing, games and snacks, besides light activities such as applying nail polish

This monthly event was devised by The Maids’ Company to create a dedicated space among women workers that they could call their own, which they sorely lacked given the paucity of time they face due to their work schedules and own household management responsibilities. Importantly, Salary Day provided a space where maids could vent their client-related frustrations among their peers or mimic their clients in front of others and get comic relief. The event helped alleviate worker angst and provided relief, ensuring that workers remained positive and upbeat despite the stresses of the job. The festive environment provided a ‘feel good’ atmosphere for the workers. Further, the entire team of The Maids' Company remained present and accessible on this day to discuss any grievances faced by women related to their work or home.

33 Based on inputs shared by staff of The Maids’ Company.
Additionally, during interactions with workers, few women said that it was primarily through The Maids’ Company that they were able to:

- Meet other women domestic workers, make friends and have access to networking opportunities among themselves
- Expand their worldview and improve their confidence, including by learning soft skills on how to speak, articulate and interact with others, including clients; how to look, dress and groom oneself; how to cook and identify new food dishes; unlearn past socially accepted ways of thinking related to, say, child marriage; enable shifts in their own provincial mindsets and behaviour; and expand their overall worldview and confidence

(III) INFORMAL SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

Though The Maids’ Company prompted positive changes in the realities of women workers and clients, there remain some deep structural constraints that act as barriers in ensuring decent work for domestic workers, especially in terms of attitudes related to gender roles, gender discrimination and workers’ own perceptions of what they think constitutes economic security and job satisfaction.

(A) Negotiating Intra-Household Gender Roles and Responsibilities: Implications for Choice, Duration and Intensity of Women’s Participation in Domestic Work

That women’s participation in paid domestic work continues to be affected by socially determined gender roles and responsibilities becomes clear from the fact that intra-household factors had a bearing on determining the choice, duration and intensity of women’s participation in domestic work. In-depth interactions with women domestic workers found that their choices were inextricably linked with their multiple realities and different life stages, which either enabled or constrained their participation in domestic work, such as:

- Age of Children. Women with infants or young children prefer to work short duration, part-time shifts to remain available for childcare responsibilities.
- Intra-Household Support for Sharing Unpaid Work. Women are able to work longer duration shifts in case of support from husbands/children to complete domestic chores such as cooking, preparing children for school or collecting water for household consumption needs;
- Age of Women Workers. Older women prefer to work a single, longer duration shift in one household; younger women work shorter duration shifts across multiple households, while also pursuing training courses/ tuitions/ education etc.

Examples and a more detailed discussion of these factors are provided in Annexure 3.

(B) Grappling with Mistrust of and Lack of Fit of (Traditionally) Formal Sector Benefits

One of the major challenges of moving towards ‘professionalising’ domestic work and developing the identity of women domestic workers as ‘employees’ of The Maids’ Company was provoking a shift in attitudes among women. Women domestic workers, who sometimes barely eked out a living with their earnings, were more concerned with meeting immediate, short-term consumption expenses and addressing family needs. They could not grasp and fully comprehend the value of long-term economic security and the need for social services, which in turn would facilitate their more effective work participation. For instance, The Maids’ Company attempted to:

- Extend benefits such as Provident Fund (PF) and Employees State Insurance (ESI). However, since many maids used to join training or remain in employment for 1–2 months and then leave, women were not willing to make this contribution to savings schemes; they were unconcerned with such long-term strategies for ensuring economic security when more pressing economic costs needed to be met. Further, mistrust of PF was exacerbated by the fact that some women who had previously been employed by housekeeping companies in malls had struggled to access this PF money once they left those jobs, despite PF being an entitlement that had been assured to them by virtue of being part of those companies.

- Establish crèche facilities on a co-sharing basis to facilitate women’s ability to work longer hours (especially in the case of young children); however, maids were unwilling to contribute to funding this service.

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34 Based on inputs shared by staff of The Maids’ Company.
Reluctance to Pay for Long-Term Benefits and Social Services

“I was ready to pay for Provident Fund – if we save money then we will have more at the end of the day, but other women who had less income did not agree to this, they earned a small amount of money and after expenses did not have much left ... they did not understand that if we save Rs. 500, then the Company will also put in Rs. 500 in our name. They did not believe this would happen.”

Asha*

“Measures such as Provident Fund (PF) and Employees State Insurance (ESI) were not workable since maids were not willing to contribute ... maybe these were top-down concepts that we tried to impose ... domestic workers were not interested in long-term payouts, they were very short-sighted in their need for daily wages ... in fact when we initially attempted to cut money from maid’s salaries towards contribution of Provident Fund, the maids went on strike! For these concepts to be operable, longevity of workers (in work) was needed ... but domestic workers are a transient workforce and often keep switching households ... on a monthly or even weekly basis.”

The Maids’ Company Staff

Though The Maids’ Company was able to incorporate labour protections for women within contract clauses with clients, other (traditionally) formal sector features that were attempted met with little success owing to ‘lack of fit’, owing to the large churn of domestic workers in the sector and the economic precariousness of migrant women workers. Details of attempts at implementing these features and why they faced challenges in uptake are provided below.

Difficulties in Incorporating Formal Sector Features at Work

- Attempt at Ensuring Women Workers as Co-Owners of the Enterprise:
  In the initial visioning of The Maids’ Company, there was conceptualisation to ensure that maids, in their capacity as employees, would also be co-owners or shareholders of the enterprise. In this conceptualisation, it was assumed that for maids to share profits of the company by virtue of being employees, they would need to fulfil certain criterion before becoming shareholders enjoying 20 per cent of the equity, such as working with The Maids' Company for a minimum period of two years. However,
due to the slow rate of profit making of the social enterprise; coupled with the high rate of attrition of maids and the reality that not many maids remained associated with The Maids’ Company for long periods of time, this concept did not hold much water, and was not developed and fleshed out in practice.

- **Attempt at Issuing Monetary Incentives or Fines among Maids to Ensure Punctuality/Attendance:** Similarly, though attempts were made by The Maids’ Company to establish incentives among maids – for instance to work on selected days as overtime etc. – maids did not always prefer to cash in on these. Similarly, attempting to deduct money in case maids frequently reached clients’ houses late did not serve as an effective deterrent, since maids remained dependent on multiple external factors that affected their punctuality. Further, it was observed that primacy was always given to any crisis management on their home front, and whatever the incentive or fine may be, maids were willing to forego this.

- **Attempt at Referral System among Maids for Building Employee Base:** The Maids’ Company tried to set in motion a referral system, wherein maids were told that they would be given a small sum of money (e.g. Rs. 200-500) if an older worker of The Maids’ Company introduced a new worker to the Maids Company. However, this system had to be reviewed since often after introducing the new worker to the Maids Company, there was attrition of the worker in the training and trial period itself, even before the new worker had been placed in a client’s household.

- **Attempt at Administering Training Stipend:** Further, initially, payment was also made to women during the training period in the form of a training stipend – to at least cover travel costs to reach the training venue (approximately Rs. 100 a day). However, with time it was realised that this was not a workable policy and was withdrawn, given that many maids dropped out of trainings mid-way – not continuing even to the point of being placed with a client.
Demand Side: Opportunities for and Challenges of Working with Clients

Following the Gender at Work Framework, this chapter outlines the opportunities and challenges from the perspective of clients, in terms of relevance and impacts, as a result of The Maids’ Company intervention. It is based on discussions with clients and staff of The Maids’ Company.

(I) FORMAL INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

This section describes the changes experienced by clients as a result of The Maids’ Company intervention, especially in terms of access to improved provision of domestic housekeeping services.

OPPORTUNITIES

(A) Avoidance of High Transaction Cost of Searching for a Maid in the Open Market: Overcoming Information Asymmetry regarding Job-Seeking Workers

As with domestic workers, clients too face information asymmetry on the availability of domestic workers and lack of easy access to this labour pool. Clients usually find a maid and/ or her replacement in the open market, usually by reference or word of mouth of friends/ relatives or by asking for leads from existing household/ neighbourhood workers (e.g. security guard of the apartment, worker coming to the house to iron clothes). This is usually a long-drawn and time-consuming process with no guaranteed results. The search is exacerbated by the lack of a shared space and interaction between clients and workers, and differences in their social networks\(^\text{35}\). Given the knowledge gap on worker

\(^{35}\) Sengupta (2014).
availability and existence of work opportunities, the role of The Maids’ Company in matching the labour services of domestic workers to existing demand by clients was an important contribution.

(B) Access to Quality and Reliable Domestic Work Services, especially Guarantee of Replacement

For clients, good quality, dependable and consistent performance of domestic work is the basis on which households run, especially in dual-income families who work at 9–5 pm jobs. Disruptions in housekeeping services means upsetting the running of the household, which impacts the work-life balance of clients, particularly if clients have young children who require care-giving services. Having the guarantee of a replacement if their regular maid suddenly takes leave was of pivotal importance. Further, having a seamless experience—where another worker was promptly replaced to cover for the absence of the regular worker—was a major necessity, and one that was effectively addressed by The Maids’ Company. In fact, over time, The Maids’ Company came to develop a replacement bench/provision\(^{36}\) (as mentioned in Chapter 3), comprising the most experienced maids in the Company who would be dispatched as substitutes in case existing maids of the Company went on leave. This ensured that employers did not suffer from a break in their housekeeping services.

(C) Completion of Security Check: Verification of Maids’ ‘Character’

Given that domestic workers work in close proximity with clients and their workplace is a client’s home—where they sometimes work unsupervised in the case of dual-earning households and/or look after the young children of clients—trust in the woman worker’s character is pivotal for clients. Further, in the light of the increasing distrust and negative attitudes towards migrant ‘outsiders’ arriving in cities to work\(^{37}\), The Maids’ Company was preferred by clients given its

\(^{36}\) Importantly, the best maids were kept on the replacement bench to ensure that clients who were looking for a stop-gap arrangement during the absence of their regular maid would not have to spend time on re-training the replacement, which would be time-consuming and inconvenience them further. This was a conscious strategy adopted to ensure clients were not left hanging or disaffected when their maid went on leave but continued to remained invested in the Company, despite the turnover of the workers.

\(^{37}\) Lahiri (2017); Sengupta (2014).
policy that the Company would undertake police verification\footnote{This entailed registering domestic workers at the local police station in Gurgaon by providing a photo identification, proof of (permanent) address (e.g. voter card/ PAN card corresponding to home village), local address, name of emergency contact and biometric details. This would be input in a database and an ID card would be issued. Possession of this ID card would facilitate entry of the maids into the various housing colonies/ apartment towers. Unlike with other placement agencies, The Maids’ Company incurred the cost of this verification process for the maids. Although the verification process should ideally have required the Gurgaon police station to liaise with the police station in the maid’s home village and receive clearance that the maid had not engaged in any criminal activity, this clearance was hardly ever sent by the local police station. The Maids’ Company did attempt to correspond with the police station in maids’ home villages; however, only in three cases did they receive a reply regarding these clearance forms.} of maids before introducing them to clients, including physically verifying their current address, having a copy of all their available official paper work and conducting an informal social verification (see Chapter 2).

\textbf{(D) Clearly Defined Job Description: Standardised Products/ Services and Pricing}

Domestic work falls within the larger ambit of the informal economy and workers usually get appointed by clients on the basis of loose, verbal agreements if they go through the open market. In such a scenario, one of the major benefits for clients as a result of associating with The Maids’ Company was that written contracts clearly outlined all the sub-services included under a particular product (e.g. cleaning), besides clearly articulating the responsibilities and rules to be followed by clients in terms of basic provisions to be secured for workers when at work. Standardisation of products and pricing was another attraction for clients, with The Maids’ Company clearly and transparently displaying pricing of service products on The Maids’ Company website. Clients were provided with the ability to click on a menu of services, with a calculator easily depicting services to be added to one’s cart. These services included basic services and also add-on extra services at fixed, pre-decided rates.

“Creating a job description (JD) was a very good idea ... it is important to define what is housework... besides the services in the basic package, The Maids’ Company had a drop-down list of services which we had to tick if we wanted, such as cleaning fans or watering plants. There was clarity on what to expect and what was to be done ... the JD was helpful since the maid never turned around and said I won’t do this.”

\textbf{Client (Private Consultancy Firm), Sushant Lok Phase 1}
(II) INFORMAL INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

For clients, The Maids’ Company intervention helped trigger and facilitate certain changes in their consciousness and behaviour towards extending decent work conditions for maids. This happened through (necessarily) adhering to the demands for workers as outlined in The Maids’ Company contract. It also enabled clients to avail of professional services that ensured good practices towards workers’ welfare, thus providing them a never-before option to exercise choice to demonstrate good practices in the domestic labour market.

OPPORTUNITIES

Change in Consciousness and Practices towards Domestic Workers: The Maids’ Company Prompting and Exerting Pressure to Uphold Standards

Though during interactions clients remained unwilling to (solely) attribute any changes in their behaviour towards domestic workers to the intervention of The Maids’ Company, shifts can be said to have occurred. In signing on to be associated with The Maids’ Company, clients did (in principle) agree to adhere to contractual obligations (see contract-mandated benefits outlined in Chapter 3). For instance, one critical feature that The Maids’ Company clients agreed to was providing 4 holidays in a month to domestic workers; the practice in the open labour market was to grant maids only 2 holidays a month. Further, though initially Sunday was given as the mandatory day off for maids each week, some clients complained that they were home only on Sunday and wanted to have someone to look after the house on that day. Under such circumstances, maids developed new forms of bargaining with clients; for instance, they would take another day off in the week but the client would have to assure pick-up and drop-off to their residence (since The Maids’ Company did not provide travel facility for holidays such as Sunday).

Staff of the Maids’ Company maintained that over time and with increased interaction with the Company, clients began changing the tone and nature of their relationship with maids, recognising that maids may make errors and allowing them more leeway or lowering their own expectations. Through a process of dialogue, new understandings and consensus were arrived at, allowing for more positive and healthier client-employee interactions.

Other indications of change in the practices of clients included the fact that select clients agreed to give maids a travel allowance. In one instance, one client admitted
that she changed her usual model of employing house-help when she came in contact with The Maids’ Company—agreeing to abandon her regular practice of employing a live-in worker and instead appoint a part-time worker—after being convinced (by the Company) for the need to respect the time, space and work-life balance of workers.

(III) INFORMAL SYSTEMIC CHANGE

In its relationship with clients, The Maids’ Company was able to effect important changes in the perceptions of client households by promoting the image of a ‘professional’ service provider of domestic work services, thereby undermining prevalent trends to undervalue domestic work due to the lack of obligations and monitoring of work conditions in the sector. Nevertheless, as observed through the experience of The Maids’ Company, there was hesitation among clients to accept responsibility for extending social security benefits to (informal sector) domestic workers, besides deep-seated gender-discriminatory attitudes and continued emphasis on the personality characteristics, rather than merit or skill in the selection and treatment of maids.

OPPORTUNITIES

Building Recognition and Value as a Competent Provider of Domestic Housekeeping Services: ‘Professionalising’ Domestic Work

(i) Overturning Client Perceptions of Unreliable Placement Agencies and the Informal/Undervalued Nature of Housekeeping Services

The Maids’ Company in its design recognised the need to address clients’ perceptions regarding both the value of domestic work as well as their regard and treatment of domestic workers. Their very aim of offering ‘professional’ domestic housekeeping services was to address prevalent negative attitudes and mistrust among clients that were based on past experiences of irresponsible placement agencies, that were unable to assure supply of quality and long-term domestic workers.

“When we heard about and interacted with the staff of The Maids’ Company, we were amazed ... the concept of training people in household work ... and then taking the trouble to see the problems of maids in their daily life ... coaching them on how to handle issues in their lives, providing them with crèche, transport and medical facilities—this was unheard of in the Indian scenario ... it was a breath of fresh air ... no one else had elements that were sensitive to the maids. In case of some
problem, the Company gave us confidence that a social worker went and dedicated themselves to providing counselling for the maid's problems ... As someone who consumes services, we knew that those who were providing service were taking care of the well-being of the service providers ... and this overall meant better service ... so we were happy.”

Client (Private Consultancy Firm), Sushant Lok Phase I

(ii) Gaining Buy-in of Clients through Brand Building and Positioning the Company

The Maids' Company adopted a number of concerted strategies to create customer buy-in, especially by factoring in customer mind-sets to capture market demand.

- **Naming the Company.** The selection of the name ‘Maids' Company' was chosen keeping in mind the importance of recall value among clients in the market.

- **Logo and Messaging.** This included designing cute, funky flyers for advertising The Maids' Company. Bright colours were used to design a logo of a smiling maid wearing a bindi, with her hair tied with a middle-part in a bun and appearing like a superhero ninja with a frying pan, broom and rolling pin (used to make rotis) in her armour.

Capturing Labour Market Demand for Domestic Work: Positioning the Company to Meet Client Expectations

“A lot of emphasis was placed on creating designs, logo, text and colours in the advertising that would catch the eye of the client ... on seeing something cool and chic, the perception of the client was that we are a solid brand ... many people said we liked your flyer ... one of the clients said I want my maid to look like this ... smartly turned out, nicely dressed and smiling (referring to the cartoon logo).”

The Maids' Company Staff

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39 The name was also conducive to the logic of search engine optimisation (SEO), maximising traffic during Internet searches of clients looking for maids, directing them immediately to the webpage of The Maids' Company based on the key words maid and company. This was a conscious strategy adopted keeping in mind the target audience and factoring the route they would take to look for domestic workers. It was also recognised that urban clients looking for housekeeping services may not have responded as well to the Company if traditional social sector terms such as ‘domestic workers' or Hindi phrasing related to mahila (women) had been used, such as the previous organisation that the team of The Maids' Company had set up - the Urban Mahila & Mazdoor Alliance (UMA).
“We liked the branding and the pamphlet of The Maids’ Company ... we liked the concept ... a customer care executive used to come to us to check on the maid's service like in a proper corporate service ... the Company’s response was good —if you called them, they picked up.”

Client (Corporate Sector), DLF Phase V

“The approach was that of a placement agency ++ ... Training was not about cleaning and washing dishes ... women workers were made aware of their environment ... she was able to receive a guest and answer the phone – for an employer, it imparted confidence in the maid, it provided assurance that one could leave the house to the maid.”

Client (Development Sector), DLF Phase IV

(iii) Earning Credibility: Creating a Recognisable and Trustworthy Reputation in the Market

The Maids’ Company recognised that in order to develop buy-in for its enterprise, establishing its credibility among clients was an important pre-requisite. For this,
The Maids’ Company employed the following concerted strategies:

- Employing capable staff with past relevant experience on mobilisation, identity verification processes etc.
- Ensuring accessibility and professionalism of staff with clients, focusing especially on inter-personal communication and handling situations related to grievance and dispute resolution with maids (see Chapter 5 for more details)
- Remaining transparent and accountable to clients
- Building and consolidating the image of the company through media coverage

An elaboration of these strategies is provided in Annexure 4.

CHALLENGES

(A) Client Resistance to Absorbing Service Tax for ‘Employee’/ Maids’ Services

The Maids’ Company was a social enterprise that was registered as a private limited company under the Companies Act, 1956. In keeping with its original vision of recognising women domestic workers as its ‘employees’, the Company faced roadblocks in its modality of operation since clients were expected to pay a service tax for services rendered by domestic workers. Given the prevailing attitudes of clients regarding domestic work as informal work, most clients were unwilling to bear this cost. In fact, towards the final stages of its operation, many clients tried to ‘poach’ domestic workers, with clients instigating maids to leave the Company by offering them a slightly higher salary. By going over The Maids’ Company, the clients sought to avoid paying charges to The Maids’ Company such as the annual maintenance fee, the management cost of service provision (charged at 10 per cent of maids’ salaries) and service tax payable for maids’ service while also absolving themselves of some of the stringent pro-worker terms and conditions and labour protections outlined in The Maids’ Company contracts. In the absence of The Maids’ Company, clients could directly pay the maids and possibly re-negotiate some of the provisions verbally that were previously outlined in written contracts, especially once they did not remain liable to report to and pay The Maids’ Company.

“Among certain clients, there was a bit of a perception problem; when they found they had got a good maid, they wanted to remove the middleperson (The Maids’ Company) ... they thought if we give maids a little more money, we will not have to give The Maids’ Company a large down payment and we won’t have to give maids so many leaves ... these employers were unable to tell the difference in the services between The Maids’
Company and other placement agencies, and looked at it as a profit-making company ... If the maids had a co-operative in place, then the money from clients could have gone directly to the co-operative.”

Client (Development Sector), DLF Phase IV

(B) Reluctance of Clients to Contribute towards Social Security of (Informal) Sector Workers

Though select clients may have chosen to associate with The Maids’ Company and resolve to provide good practices for the benefit of women workers (in exchange for guarantee of services), clients showed little buy-in towards contributing (monetarily) towards women’s welfare (outside of wages). Though select clients did agree to pay the travel allowance of domestic workers, attempts by The Maids’ Company to pass on the costs of maids related to healthcare or warm clothes met with little success (see Annexure 4 for details).

(C) Lack of Importance of Skills: Prevalent Personality-Based Characteristics and Gender Stereotypes Driving Appointment and Treatment of Maids

There continue to be several entrenched gendered aspects of domestic work stemming from the fact that cleaning, cooking, and caring for children and the elderly is almost universally regarded as women’s work, due to which the sector is predominantly composed of women workers. Additionally, client perceptions, which drive market demand for domestic workers, reflect gender stereotypes of an ‘ideal type’ of a domestic worker as a multi-tasking, efficient woman with personable traits, including being meek, submissive and frumpy-looking.

Further, though The Maids’ Company, as part of its internal policy, consciously did not request information from maids on their social and religious background profile at the time of mobilisation40, this continues to be a consideration among select clients at the time of appointment.

In fact, while not admitted upfront by clients, there remain strong perception biases in the domestic work sector, evidenced by instances reported by both women workers and staff of The Maids’ Company relating to:

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40 The Company did not entertain any requests by clients related to choice of maids based on socio-cultural-religious grounds, even though they received such requests from time to time (e.g. request for non-Muslim maids or preference for maids belonging to a particular state based on market perception on regional characteristics and stereotypes of abilities and behaviour).
- Limited value/preference for technically ‘skilled’ domestic workers. Clients admitted that they attach a higher premium on personality-based characteristics of women workers such as willingness to learn, personality type, punctuality, discipline and politeness (see a sampling of client’s expectations of qualities to be possessed by domestic workers in Annexure 4). This was seen to be especially true given the unique features of domestic work such as the recurring and daily nature of service, time-heavy nature and regularity of worker engagement with the client, especially in the case of 8-hour, 10-hour or 12-hour shifts, and the need for trust in the worker since the site of the workplace is inside a client’s personal living space and the worker inadvertently becomes privy to the going-ons of a household. The disregard for skill was observed to be even more pertinent given the difficulties in transferring the skill sets of domestic workers across households for the following reasons:

- Different households have different tastes and preferences (e.g. food habits, dietary needs and restrictions)
- Different clients have different routines based on age and number of household members, which impact work intensity. For example, older couples do not eat three meals a day and therefore the workload is relatively lower.
- Different households have different cooking/cleaning equipment and models (e.g. microwave, washing machine)
- Perception biases among clients in appointing maids on grounds such as appearance, religion, age and/or pre-conceived notions related to regional and ethnicity stereotypes;
- Second-class treatment meted out to maids owing to long-entrenched beliefs related to caste and ‘untouchability’ or through upholding gender-discriminatory beliefs and practices that violate the bodily integrity of women (e.g. separate use of vessels and toilets and restrictions in the movement of women when menstruating).

Detailed instances reflecting institutionalised gender discrimination in clients’ preferences are provided in Annexure 4.

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41 Thus, over time, The Maids’ Company shifted the structure and focus of their skill-training curriculum by (i) retaining the focus on soft skills training, including grooming and etiquette; (ii) reducing the number of days for practical components of technical skill training (e.g. practice sessions of cooking and cleaning or investing heavily in expensive infrastructure and input towards other aspects of specialised technical skill training); and (iii) ensuring workers received customised handholding and orientation from clients in the particular household where they were placed, while on the job.
This chapter examines The Maids’ Company Model from the point of view of sustainability, identifying its value addition to the sector, besides providing suggestions on opportunities that could contribute towards formal, systemic changes in ensuring decent work for domestic workers.

ENTRENCHED FEUDAL DYNAMICS: Bridging the Power Imbalance Between Clients and Domestic Workers

Traditionally, employer-employee relations in the domestic work sector remain characterised by lack of recognition and respect for workers, with domestic work continuing to be considered as informal and unspecialised work and, therefore, remaining undervalued. This, in turn, negatively impacts the perceptions and actions of clients towards providing decent work, wages and working conditions for domestic workers. As shared by the staff of The Maids’ Company, there remains a strong undercurrent of a feudal hangover and classism among clients, with clients thinking they ‘own’ or can control maids’ time, movements and access to spaces and social interactions and that maids should always remain deferential and subservient towards them\(^{42}\) (see Annexure 5 for details).

Interactions with staff of The Maids’ Company revealed that clients get most irked when maids ‘talked back’ to them rather than accepting a mistake or weakness in their service. Some instances were reported of clients making fake accusations or frivolous charges against the maid and complaining to The Maids’ Company, almost as retribution for not ‘obeying’ them or as intimidation tactics, and in an attempt to flex their muscle in power games with the maids. However, when push came to shove, these charges were withdrawn, given the

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\(^{42}\) For more on this, see Lahiri (2017), p. 87 and p.150.
inconvenience that the absence of the maid would entail, besides the effort of re-training a new worker to get accustomed to the demands and routine of the household. Additionally, it was observed that in the open market, any rightful benefits that workers ask of their clients are requested out of empathy and on the grounds of humanity—with the client retaining the overall prerogative to define the extent of benefits. While clients on their part were seen to constantly maintain a balance sheet of ‘favours’ granted, these sporadic acts of benevolence resulted in maids beginning to look upon clients with the hope that they would sponsor their long-term economic and social security, rather than grant them due worker benefits.

**FACILITATING THE TRANSITION: Moving from Feudal Relationships to Contractual Labour Arrangements**

Given the scenario above, The Maids’ Company intervention becomes even more significant when considered against the backdrop of the markedly differing lifestyles, worldviews and day-to-day life stresses of clients and women domestic workers. Especially in Gurgaon, these two groups occupy distinctly segregated physical spaces with little overlap and access to each other’s populations. The staff of The Maids’ Company shared how certain features of the clients’ homes/ workplace demonstrated a severe disconnect from the realities of blue-collar workers—and even more so women—making it difficult for them to navigate gender-insensitive spaces and technologies (e.g. having to travel long distances on foot within apartment complexes from the main gate to the clients’ apartment, facing gatekeepers such as guards, operating elevators) and/ or remaining intimidated by mechanised household appliances and technology (see Annexure 3 for details).

As a result, there is a unique predicament in the domestic work sector:

1. Women domestic workers belonging to the informal sector fall through the cracks, neither enjoying the benefits of:
   - Formal, organised sector labour welfare guarantees; nor
   - Clearly defined or easily accessible government-supported social protection

There is a thus a tendency for workers to look to their clients/ employers to provide both these benefits and security which they lack access to, resulting in a stark ‘feudal’ dependency on clients by maids.
2. Conversely, given the attitudes of professionalising of work and movement towards ‘contractual work’ in the formal sector, clients influenced by such attitudes seek to engage in purely employment relationships with domestic workers, deriving the maximum work from them, but without necessarily wanting to get embroiled in a personal relationship with maids. Nevertheless, remnants of old feudal elements of such relationships remain, with some clients willing to extend social support to workers out of what they perceive as ‘kindness’ (but not necessarily feeling the need to adhere to strict labour standards and guarantees unless prompted by an external pressure group such as The Maids’ Company).

**Maids’ Perspectives: Clients as Insurance in the Absence of Formal Social Security and Access to Social Protection**

“Loyalty and dependability on clients are important for maids ... even if the maids have worked in a client’s household for only 2 hours over 5 years, these clients give them old clothes and on occasion a Rs. 10,000 interest-free loan ... in the informal sector, these clients are the maids’ insurance policy, they will not leave them.”

*The Maids’ Company Staff*
Clients’ Perspectives: Absolving Themselves of Feudal Responsibilities and Moving towards Contractual Work

“I previously contacted many agencies for a live-in maid (before The Maids’ Company)... but I got fed-up with the interference and found it was difficult to handle the emotions of the women – they used to get homesick because they were staying away from home and I too had to manage a full-time job and had two small children ... I wanted help, not an additional burden.”

Client (Corporate Sector), Sushant Lok I

The pivotal importance of The Maids’ Company was in helping both women workers and clients negotiate this transition along the continuum—from a traditionally feudal employer-employee relationship in domestic work towards a new ‘contractual’ arrangement as desired by clients.

VALUE ADDITION OF THE MAIDS’ COMPANY: Managing and Mediating the Worker-Employer Relationship

Among other contributions, the value addition of The Maids’ Company in the domestic work sector was particularly critical in terms of:

- Bridging information asymmetry related to lack of information about job opportunities and access to client population by workers, and vice versa
- ‘Professionalising’ domestic work, by both winning over clients through carving out a niche as a professional service provider in the domestic housekeeping space and providing women workers improved self-perception and dignity of their work

Over and above these factors, a critical contribution of The Maids’ Company, which was also recognised as one of the reasons for its establishment, was the role it played in mediating the employer-employee relationship.

(A) Workers’ Perspectives: Membership of an Informal Collective Providing Representation, Voice, Collective Bargaining and Third-Party Mediation with Clients

“There was an awareness and trust among maids that there was someone (The Maids’ Company) looking out for them and backing them.”

The Maids’ Company Staff
“Migrant labour is easily exploitable ... The Maids’ Company provided the possibility of a kind of anchor – plus it provided strength to women in numbers.”

Client (Development Sector), DLF Phase IV

According to the founder of The Maids’ Company, the need for an entity such as The Maids’ Company was felt (at the time of its inception), based on the realisation that:

- Domestic workers did not recognise the value of their own work services, nor understand the indispensability of their service for their clients
- Domestic workers did not leverage such an understanding to adequately negotiate and bargain for increased remuneration for services rendered or for better work conditions
- Domestic workers did not know how to ‘position’ or ‘sell’ their product/service

These assumptions ring true given the status of the domestic work sector and the nature and characteristics of the work, workplace and features of the employer-employee relationship, due to which a range of grievances remain between maids and clients in the work relationship.

The Maids’ Company played a pivotal role in protecting women workers through:

- Facilitating dialogue and tripartism, including in particular supporting workers’ perspectives by communicating the maids’ grievances to the client in a strategic manner;
- Building capacities of workers to ‘handle’ employers, including negotiating client interaction;
- Diffusing tension in employment relations;

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43 The staff of The Maids’ Company reported the following common grievances of maids—being denied leave at a time of need or emergency; not receiving timely payment of salary at beginning of the month; not increasing salary despite working with a client household for a long time; quantum of work allotted being disproportionate to the number of hours of work in shift; not agreeing to payment of more money for extra work; not getting adequate rest between tasks during a shift, with employers eager to extract work out of maids to the last minute; not being released at the given time at the end of the shift; being kept beyond shift hours to do more work; being reprimanded for reporting late for work on holiday; constant nit-picking by clients and/or rude behaviour of client’s family members; not being given fresh food at every meal; being given stale food; or not being given adequate quantity of food or preferred food (e.g. rice).

44 Major client grievances of maids related to the following—absenteeism or sudden request for leave; arriving late for work; poor quality of work; appearance/hygiene/behaviour/manner of speaking.
- Protecting workers from client malpractices, thus shock-absorbing workers from any negative client behaviour affecting maids (e.g., related to discrepancies related to quantum of work and vulnerability to violence and harassment at the workplace. See Annexure 3 for details.).

A detailed explanation of these strategies is provided in Annexure 5.

The need for the backing of an informal collective supporting women domestic workers—a role played by The Maids’ Company—became ever more evident in the scenario when the enterprise became non-operational. Instances of inconsistency in upholding of worker benefits by clients, with impacts on leave, wages and work hours for domestic workers were commonly observed.

**CHALLENGE: Inconsistencies in Workplace Benefits Evident after Closure of The Maids’ Company**

It is interesting to observe the scenario after The Maids’ Company ceased operations. Though few women workers continue to work with the same clients that they had been initially placed with at the time of The Maids’ Company, there appears to be lack of consistency in clients’ commitment to formal benefits for workers, as had been outlined in The Maids’ Company contracts. For instance, in interaction with domestic workers, it came to light that there had been loss of certain benefits such as:

- Reduction from 4 leaves a month to 2 leaves a month
- Not being granted mandatory national holidays such as 1 May, 15 August and 2 October, as under The Maids’ Company
- Varying commitment of clients to annual increase in salary
- Varying commitment of clients to covering travel allowance and medical costs and extending advance salary to the maid in case of need (mostly extended on goodwill)
- Possibility of deduction in salary in case of taking holidays in case of sickness
- Possibility of extending hours of work shift if work is not complete
- Less rigour demonstrated by clients in adhering to payment of wages for overtime (e.g. with the maid remaining responsible to check and calculate extra payment for working on Sundays/ extra days)
- Onus on the maid to appoint a replacement from among her known contacts when she went on vacation to the village
(B) Clients’ Perspectives: Professionalism in Dispute Resolution with Maids led by The Maids’ Company

“If one called The Maids’ Company, their customer service was so professional that they understood your point of view and communicated this to the maids, and also found a middle ground so the work did not suffer ... there was a contact person who used to know about the maids and go to the client house and check and see what was wrong ... the staff was committed, transparent and dependable.”

Client (Private Consultancy Firm), Sushant Lok Phase 1

For clients, the following benefits were made possible as a result of joining The Maids’ Company—professional support for addressing grievances related to maids; amicable resolution in case of wrong doing by a worker; and access to the option of formal arbitration in serious cases of dispute resolution (as expressly mentioned in a clause of the contract, though never exercised by any of the clients). A detailed explanation of these strategies is provided in Annexure 5. In fact, clients reported very positive feedback in terms of responsiveness and prompt and efficient nature of client servicing of The Maids’ Company and the support extended by staff in mediating conversations with maids on daily complaints, conflicts and grievances. Such pro-activeness demonstrated by The Maids’ Company helped establish it as a reliable and professional entity. This can be seen from an instance where a client had a negative experience with a maid, who was found to be stealing. Since The Maids’ Company took the lead in promptly investigating this claim and seeking to resolve it fairly, the client was able to look past the experience—recognising it as an isolated incident with one individual worker and not letting it cloud the reputation of The Maids’ Company as a whole.

“I had an incident with a maid from The Maids’ Company ... we realised over time that she was stealing from my house – The Maids’ Company took prompt action to intervene in the situation ... they went to the maid’s house and recovered what had been stolen from my house. I was also given a replacement within no time ... in my experience, no other agency would have done that. Because the replacement was provided, I realised that this was an individual case, and did not hold The Maids’ Company responsible for it.”

Client (Corporate Sector), DLF Phase I

This sentiment was echoed by another client, who reported that The Maids’ Company had extended support and helped carry out an investigation when she was faced with an incident of a maid picking up things from the house.
REVISITING ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE MAIDS’ COMPANY MODEL

In conclusion, lessons from The Maids’ Company — dissecting select assumptions of the model in terms of working with domestic workers; and analysing whether these assumptions were reinforced or falsified based on experiential learnings — is provided below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select Assumptions of the Model</th>
<th>Experiential Learnings (Reinforcing and/ or Falsifying Assumptions)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Domestic workers cannot bargain for their own rights with clients nor negotiate power asymmetries in the worker-client relationship; this power imbalance needs to be mediated by an organisation such as The Maids’ Company that would organise and establish strength in numbers among disparate workers.</td>
<td>• Onus for transformative change cannot be on domestic workers; a mediating platform such as The Maids’ Company is needed for engaging with employers, prompting them to change attitudes and practices towards upholding decent work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Client perception is an important factor in the domestic work sector. Focus on appearance and good grooming of domestic workers has a bearing on clients’ willingness to pay higher wages.</td>
<td>• Extent of prejudices, assumptions and biases of client towards women domestic workers related to personality-based characteristics remains deep-seated.</td>
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<td>• Besides appearance, other axes may affect selection decision of maids by clients (e.g. religion, ethnicity/ regional stereotypes, age).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upskilling is necessary to ensure access to job opportunities (as in the formal sector)</td>
<td>Facilitating access to the market and job opportunities and standardising terms and conditions of employment is the biggest gap in the domestic work sector. Unless this is assured, women’s access to skilling remains secondary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on skill would equip domestic workers to demand higher wages</td>
<td>Women workers (and clients) do not value the importance of (technical) skills. Skill and merit are not the only (and often not the most important) determinant in employer selection of domestic workers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clients may be willing to pay more for maids with wider skillsets (e.g. expansion in culinary repertoire)</td>
<td>Long duration, classroom-based training not considered valuable by women workers owing to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom-based skill training would be a valuable strategy in equipping workers for the job market</td>
<td>- Priority of women is to spend time in finding and clocking days of remunerative work or attending to own household demands such as looking after children/ domestic chores.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Different needs, tastes, preferences of different client households, requiring constant unlearning and re-learning of skills. These are more easily gleaned through on-the-job training.</td>
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<td>• Domestic workers would want ‘secure’ employment and long-term savings and/or financial security, akin to formal sector work (e.g. PF, ESI)</td>
<td>• ‘Lack of fit’ of select formal sector features with domestic workers based on their context and circumstances of economic deprivation, with women workers displaying immediate need for steady income and migrant status requiring sometimes sudden and often unanticipated long leaves to native place.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Flexible features of occupation prove integral to the choice of maids to work in domestic work, especially flexibility in hours of work/ shift duration and replacement provision.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Domestic workers do not only want in-cash salary, monetary benefits or incentives, but need access to social services to improve their workforce participation. Absenteeism of maids is not to be taken as an indication of work-shirking; rather it is often symptomatic of issues and disturbance in non-workplace realities of women, and require comprehensive interventions to enable full and free participation of women in economic opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Maids with past work experience would be easier to train and place in client households, rather than freshers with no experience.</td>
<td>• Difficulties persist in re-working and re-training workers having past experience in domestic work, owing to previously ingrained poor work ethic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unintended Activities (taken up during the course of implementation based on felt needs of women workers and operation of the Company but departing from the original vision and mission of the Company)

- Providing additional social support services for women workers on issues that affect their attendance, impede their participation in work or jeopardise their household economic security or bodily or personal integrity (e.g. nurse to address health, loans, safe space in case of violence)
- Solidarity-building activities among women workers and the Company, to gain the trust of the workforce, create opportunities for interaction among workers to share grievances and seek refuge in numbers of their common work identity

WAY AHEAD: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FORMAL SYSTEMIC CHANGE

That the domestic work sector lacks formal rules in its operation can be attributed to the lack of clear articulation on domestic workers rights and employer responsibilities in current Indian laws and policies.

(A) Deriving Legitimacy from (Upcoming) Government Policies for Standard Setting in the Domestic Work Sector

At the level of policy and national-level initiatives, India is yet to ratify the international convention concerning decent work for domestic workers—ILO Domestic Workers Convention (2011) (No. 189)\(^45\). Presently, only seven states—Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Odisha and Rajasthan—have notified minimum wages for domestic workers under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 and only three states—Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu—have constituted a Welfare Board for domestic workers\(^46\).


\(^46\) KPMG Advisory Services Pvt Ltd (KASPL) (n.d.)
Going forward, leveraging the provisions and measures of the forthcoming Draft National Policy on Domestic Workers⁴⁷, as is being formulated by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, may be useful. It may also be pertinent to examine the implications of the new Draft Code on Social Security, 2019 for domestic workers. In the absence of a national policy⁴⁸ and any existing (dedicated) social protection measures supporting domestic workers, The Maids’ Company was unable to gain legitimacy among clients by rallying around any state frameworks or obligations; nor could they leverage any one guaranteed channel of social protection support. Collaboration with formal state agencies (e.g. National Commission for Women), leveraging of existing laws and initiatives for the unorganised sector and migrants⁴⁹ and/or partnering with other actors working on issues in the domestic work sector can increase visibility, validity and relevance of the need for protecting the rights of domestic workers among clients, while ensuring a more broad-based impact.

Further, the slew of measures introduced by The Maids’ Company (as elaborated in the report) serve as an important roadmap for what could constitute gender-responsive processes and strategies to be followed by employers as well as mediating agencies operating in the domestic work sector.

⁴⁷ The proposed Draft National Policy on Domestic Workers seeks to visibilise and recognise the contribution of domestic workers through a number of measures, including among others, properly defining the different categories of domestic workers, ensuring inclusion of domestic workers in relevant existing legislations, ensuring domestic workers have the right to register as unorganised workers, thus facilitating their access to rights and benefits, including benefits such as right to minimum wages and access to social security, right to enhance skills and form their own associations/unions, protection of domestic workers from abuse and exploitation; access to courts, tribunals and a grievance redressal system; and establishment of a mechanism for regulation of private placement agencies. A past draft bill submitted by the National Platform for Domestic Workers—the Domestic Workers Regulation of Work and Social Security Bill (2017)—is another rich resource for development practitioners, which extensively outlines strategies for the domestic work sector.

⁴⁸ Countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and the United States have stringent policies on domestic workers, outlining due benefits, and in some cases penalties. In India, lack of government policies supporting basic working conditions for domestic workers as well as guidelines for regulating placement agencies remain a critical obstacle in imposing greater pressure and/or punitive action on both employers and fly-by-night placement agencies to ensure compliance towards decent work, wages and working conditions. Further, discussion with the founder of The Maids’ Company revealed that in Singapore the government recognises and regulates operation of a finite number of domestic work placement agencies, and only these outfits are allowed to receive client demand and interface with prospective domestic workers, thereby allowing for standardisation of practices.

⁴⁹ For instance, facilitating access of women domestic workers to benefits under the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act (2008), Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act (1979), Minimum Wages Act (1948), Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1956), National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), and new initiatives such as Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), Atal Pension Yojana (APY), Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maanadhan, Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY).
(B) Regulating Placement Agencies and Actors

It is important to note that there seems to be no regulation or verification of placement agencies that are established or operate in this sector. Previous studies indicate that there are over 800–1,000 placement agencies in Delhi itself. Even when The Maids' Company was set up, there was no due diligence conducted by any government or other formal agency to check the nature of the set-up and its compliance with any standard code of labour practices. Clients interacted with also reported dissatisfaction from their experiences of engaging with placement agencies (prior to and after The Maids' Company), complaining about their lack of a standard code of conduct and the fact that they demonstrated no sense of accountability to clients. Deeper investigation is also needed into the role of institutions such as churches and/ or convents, which are known to facilitate placement of young girls in domestic work, a practice that was corroborated during interaction with domestic workers of The Maids' Company. It remains relatively unknown how these networks operate and the nature of work arrangements that women are placed in. A more detailed discussion of this is provided in Annexure 5.

(C) Revisiting Design of Policies for Migrant Domestic Workers

It is worth considering domestic workers' migrant status when designing policies for domestic workers, given that workers remain invested in their native villages. This prompts the need to focus on facilitating access to short-term economic assets for workers in cities (e.g. non-negotiables like bank accounts), with the option of building supplementary skillsets to ensure future employability in case of return to villages where domestic work may not be in high demand or as high paying as in an urban metropolis like Gurgaon. A more detailed fleshing of this argument is provided in Annexure 5.

Outside of laws and policies, and based on the learnings of The Maids’ Company model, the following measures could be considered for the future, which are elaborated in Annexure 5:

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50 Neetha (2009).
Re-examining the skill-heavy focus of current government initiatives aimed at skill training and certification in industry-relevant trades under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) as well as through entities such as Domestic Workers Sector Skills Council (DWSSC)\(^{51}\) and skill curriculums developed in alignment with the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF)\(^{52}\). This would be true given the experience of The Maids’ Company that investing heavily in (i) technical aspects or (ii) long duration training in skill upgrading may be counter-productive, with on-the-job training remaining the most relevant. Among domestic workers, interactions demonstrated the importance, in their minds, of other technical skills, such as language proficiency skills in Hindi and English\(^{53}\).

- Expanding the scope of initial training to include components of worker solidarity building;
- Creating spaces for interaction to disrupt the status quo of disconnectedness among workers and bridge information and awareness gaps, with the possibility of improved working conditions and benefits for domestic workers;
- Facilitating increased work participation of women by building links with creche services for childcare;

\(^{51}\) In particular, the Domestic Workers Sector Skills Council (DWSSC) aims to proactively work to, among others, define job roles, occupation standards and career progression for all job roles within the domestic work sector; standardise processes of assessment, accreditation and certification of domestic workers so as to meet market demand for domestic work; develop a Labor Market Information System (LMIS) that contains information on the profile of domestic workers in India, the market demand and list of organisations working in the sector; create a favourable environment for domestic workers; and establish a national institutional network for skill development of domestic workers in India. For details, see http://dwsscindia.in

\(^{52}\) Core Occupational Standards for various trades have been developed, including through developing Qualification Packs and Curriculums, besides outlining career planning strategies for enabling specialisation in different trades to allow for ascending the skill ladder with subsequent certifications for different profiles such as household multipurpose executive, caregiver mother and child (non-clinical), home cook, baby caregiver, general housekeeper, child caretaker, elderly caretaker (non-clinical) and housekeeper-cum-cook.

\(^{53}\) Most domestic workers interviewed belonged to West Bengal, having Bangla as their native language, and with very few having attended formal education, thereby not being able to read and write in Bangla, let alone Hindi and English. For example, one maid shared that it would be critical to learn how to read Hindi or English as sometimes clients would leave for office early and not be able to meet the maids during the day, only leaving maids instructions through a written note on the fridge saying what should be cooked that day. Learning English would also enable domestic workers the opportunity to work in the homes of foreign clients who were known to pay higher wages for domestic work services.
- Working on demand-side interventions, including sensitising clients on what constitutes decent work, capitalising on the indispensability of and trust in domestic workers for clients to promote discussions on the economic value of work and exploring collaborations with the private sector on other models such as The Maids’ Company;

- Tapping the demand of the market, aggregating services and acting as a one-stop shop for housekeeping services, while training husbands and other female and/or male members of domestic worker households so that a consolidated approach to improving the economic well-being of an entire community household could be taken.
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- ILO  
- National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM), India http://ndwm.org
- National Domestic Workers Alliance, USA https://www.domesticworkers.org
Annexure 1
THE MAIDS’ COMPANY - BACKGROUND OF THE MODEL

Vision

Establishing a social enterprise providing a market-based solution for improved livelihoods for women in the informal sector, with the aim of:

- Capitalising on rising demand for domestic work in urban households in Gurgaon,
- Securing increased work opportunities, incomes and better working conditions for women domestic workers
- Redirecting a share of the pie of India’s economic boom to semi-literate, unskilled women workers in the urban informal sector, of which domestic workers constitute the largest proportion

Mission

- Leveraging the fact that domestic work is the fastest growing employment space in urban areas of Gurgaon
- Tapping and meeting the immense unmet market demand for quality domestic housekeeping services
- Offering a market-based solution for matching clients seeking domestic workers with women in need of scarce employment opportunities in the urban informal economy
- Linking women domestic workers to the job market - ensuring opportunities for decent work, wages and working conditions for maximum numbers of women, addressing their rights and economic vulnerability in a tangible and immediate manner with demonstrable economic gains

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54 Based on analysis by the evaluator from inputs received from the founders and staff of the Maids Company.

55 This thinking entailed providing decent work opportunities for maximum maids catering to the mid-market segment of clients – rather than targeting only high-end clients and providing specialised or premium trainings and work opportunities to finite maids.

56 Aim of the intervention was to provide maximum women with jobs, by interfacing solely with the client in the market - rather than other initiatives that aim to organise women into collectives and/or rights based platforms as a starting point, and undertake long-term advocacy with state agencies towards impacting policy frameworks.
Output

Matching and securing work contracts with client households for women domestic workers, ensuring guaranteed worker benefits as outlined in terms and conditions of written contract.

Desired Outcomes

- Increase in work opportunities, wages and expansion of work-related benefits for domestic workers.
- Shift in attitudes and behaviours of clients/employers towards domestic workers - providing them with decent wages and working conditions through exercise of labour clauses in written contract.

Intervention Activities

- Mobilisation of women in urban areas of Gurgaon for domestic work.
- Trainings/skilling for improving technical and soft skills.
- Connecting and ‘matching’ maids with client households.
- Placing women in client households.
(I) MOBILISATION

INNOVATION: Social Verification of Domestic Workers

Often agencies that conduct police verification – providing a clean chit on the maid’s character – do so without receiving clearance from the corresponding police station in the maid’s home village, providing assurance that the maid has not been involved in any recorded criminal activities. Recognising the constraints of the police – in terms of both personnel and incentive - to conduct such a mass verification of maids in proper manner, The Maids’ Company used to conduct an informal ‘social verification’ process of maids, by taking inspiration from a procedure often conducted by banking or financial institutions to vet a candidate (talking to neighbours/relatives/confirming regular sources of income etc). Such a social verification may be a more practical safeguard to be adopted at the time of mobilising women to work in domestic work.

INNOVATION: Appointing a Community-Based Mobiliser at the Destination

Role: The role of the chief mobiliser57 of The Maids’ Company was to:

- Inform and brief women workers of the work opportunities at the Maids Company
- Introduce the interested worker to The Maids’ Company

57 The chief mobiliser was chosen based on important pre-requisites in terms of personal attributes: (i) Having lived in (for a long period of time) and being familiar with the settlement and its inhabitants – the mobiliser had been living in that location since 2002, or almost a decade before the intervention, and was well versed with the occupants; (ii) Being able to build rapport with locals in the community by speaking in Bengali, since majority of domestic workers in the area of intervention belonged to West Bengal and felt comfortable talking to one of ‘their own’; (iii) Being able to allay fears of members of the community - regarding an unknown company such as The Maids’ Company - by capturing attention of community members and providing them a short brief on the company’s background.
- Pro-actively engage with all community members and remain available to entertain queries of women looking for work, including through house-visits and/or by phone

- Act as the local focal point for the community for The Maids’ Company – taking attendance of women workers by checking in at the houses; or directing the nurse to the exact location of houses of absentee women

**Benefits and Remuneration:** Importantly, mobilisers received a fixed monthly salary from The Maids’ Company:

- Unrelated to targets of fixed number of maids to be mobilised in a month;
- Mobiliser not having to provide guarantee of the women introduced by her, linked to duration of service she served (especially important since in reality the mobiliser has no control over how long a woman worker may last in a particular employment relationship). Thus, there was no penalty on the mobiliser in case the worker introduced left a contract mid-way, as it emerged exists with other placement agencies.

(II) **TRAININGS/ SKILLING**

**GOOD PRACTICES: TRAININGS/ SKILLINGS**

**Dynamic Skill Curriculum**

The curriculum of skill trainings broadly covered two aspects:

- **Soft Skills and Etiquette** – focus on how maids should conduct themselves, including role play exercises of how to speak, how to behave and related dos and don’ts (e.g. not knocking on doors too loudly, learning how to carry water, ensuring all dishes were clean)

- **Technical Skills** – for example, in the initial phases, for cooking, different mock cooking stations were made with induction stoves where maids were taught skills such as how to chop vegetables, as well as how to make some basic dishes; for cleaning, best practices were focused on how to sweep and mop (e.g. mopping in one direction etc.).
- **Awareness on Workplace Rights and Sexual Harassment/Abuse**: As part of the trainings conducted by The Maids Company, maids were made aware and taught their labour rights and protections – especially the provisions outlined in their contract related to wages, working conditions, hours of work and leaves. Further, maids were told that in case they experienced any verbal abuse or instances of threats, misbehaviour, beating or sexual violence by clients, they should not remain silent or fearful; and inform the staff of The Maids’ Company. A conducive atmosphere of trust was thus cultivated with the maids to enable the maids to come forward with any complaints of this nature, following which, given the zero tolerance policy of the Company for such incidents – the services of the maid at that client household would be terminated.

- **Refresher Trainings**: were also conducted for maids from time to time, especially in case a complaint was registered with The Maids' Company against a maid, related to either her technical skills or etiquette.

**Gender Sensitive Format of Trainings**

- **Accessibility of Training Venue**: Experience of The Maids' Company revealed that training venue needed to be accessible by The Maids’ easily, rather than situated at a distant location. In fact, The Maids' Company had to change the training venue to ensure it was closer to residence of majority of maids – to make it worth their while to attend.

- **Incorporating Flexibility for Enabling Participation by Women**: Trainings were conducted in batches approximately four times a day and for roughly 2 hours at a time, to enable flexibility. Thus, women could participate in any batch as per their convenience and daily timetable - balancing any existing paid work, own household chores and/or care responsibilities.

- **Female Trainers Not Belonging to the Community**: Female trainers were employed to impart trainings to domestic workers; with mostly women staff of The Maids' Company engaging in maid facing operations, while male staff interacted with clients and undertook sales related operations. A related learning was that having community-based trainers for domestic work was not a good strategy, since it was observed that they did not enjoy authority among their peers. This is especially true since most women workers think that they know all there is to know regarding how to perform the tasks of domestic work, since it is not a very specialised skill. It was realised that the trainer needed to be a person of a different milieu – whom the maids thought was capable of teaching something new (e.g. related to etiquette or grooming).
(III) PLACEMENT

STRENGTHS

(i) Vetting Clients, Expectations and Household Arrangements to Ensure Decent Work Conditions

Among the important provisions that were checked by Maids’ Company staff at the time of shortlisting clients, and before placement of maids, included:

- Gauging the space and living conditions of clients – including the number of persons in household, rooms in houses etc.
- Gauging expectations of client with respect to services
- Aligning expectations of clients with maids abilities
- Checking for proposed arrangements client was willing to offer for maids rest and toilet/bathing space
- Checking for proposed arrangements client was willing to make in terms of food for maids

(ii) Instituting a Trial Period for Testing the Waters between Client and Worker

After the Maids’ Company matched clients and maids based on availability, skill and other preferences, there was a mandatory trial period when the maid worked in the client household for a brief period before contract finalisation. Initially the trial period was for 10 days, then it got reduced to 7 days and finally 5 days; during this time, either the maid or the client could say no to agreeing to the contract. During the trial period, it was integral to:

- Ascertain whether the clients’ expectation of quantum of work to be completed by the maid was a realistic demand, matching the desired number of hours of the maids’ shift;58
- Ensure if there was compatibility of temperament of client and temperament of maid;
- Provide a window to build understanding of clients’ tastes, preferences, scope of work and routine of the household by maids

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58 Importantly, especially to ensure that there were not any discrepancies in specification and overwork of maids, a supervisor was also sent across by the Maids’ Company to visit the client household – to assess the actual quantum of desired work, and to understand whether it could be realistically performed within the number of hours in the shift of the maid. For example, a client may have opted for part-time services of a maid for 8 hours; whereas the actual work necessitated 10 hours to be completed. In such a scenario, the supervisor would recommend that the client take the ten hours part-time service rather than the eight-hour service of a maid. The supervisor was able to act as a third party, not being swayed by either the client demands or the maid’s ability to do work.
Interestingly, the process allowed for introduction of a maid to up to 3 clients, with the client exercising veto power to reject the maid in case her services were considered inadequate. However, importantly, the Maids’ Company also allowed the domestic workers a say in whether they would like to be allotted to that client, and in the event of any major complaints, the maid was introduced to an alternative client (with choice of up to 3 clients). The trial period helped in serving as a litmus test:

- If more than 3 clients rejected a maid, it served as an indication that she may be unemployable.
- Alternatively, if different maids rejected the same client more than 3 times, it served as an indication that there may be something amiss in the client and clients’ expected demands of services to be performed.

Notably, maids were paid for per day work during the trial period, which was incurred by the clients’ household, and usually adjusted against person days worked by maids in the final contract.

(iii) Conducting On-Job Training/Orientation
The client-servicing executive would take a detailed work order from the client at the time of placing a worker. This would allow the company to transfer the information seamlessly to the worker and orient her to the job. Further, this detailed work order would allow The Maids’ Company to place a different worker and transfer the job-related information, in case of absenteeism of a maid with that particular client, thus enabling continuity of service.

(iv) Appointing Women Community-Based Supervisors to Handhold Newly Appointed Maids
Another strategy adopted by The Maids’ Company was having a local cadre of women ‘supervisors’ to accompany and show newly inducted maids the ropes of the job during the trial period with clients – for a period of 3-7 days. In particular, The Maid Company supervisors were earmarked different geographical areas for which they were given responsibility of managing domestic workers of The Maids’ Company belonging to that area. Supervisors enjoyed seniority in terms of income earned and through sometimes performing selected office-based tasks of The Maids’ Company; besides themselves often working as maids in client households; and/or serving as replacement for other regular maids that may go on leave.
INNOVATIONS: Gender-Responsive Features during Placement and at Work

With time, and with exposure to the challenges in the lived realities of women, The Maids' Company discovered that there was need for adopting certain practices and innovations to facilitate work participation of women – including in particular by defining certain gender-sensitive conditions of work.

**Shuttle Service for (Distant) Commute of Women to Client Households:**

While initially The Maids' Company targeted houses in areas in close proximity to Chakkarpur, the main settlement where most maids lived; with time the need for providing travel arrangement for maids was felt for the following reasons:

— To tap the market demand for domestic work in new neighbourhoods, which may be at a little distance away; and with exhaustion of work opportunities in houses within a particular radius

— To provide a safe option for women’s mobility from their own homes to the client’s residence – especially for women who were unaccustomed to traveling much on their own and were fearful or unfamiliar with the routes and layout of new neighbourhoods where they get work opportunities

— To ensure that maids reached their client’s houses on time

Ensuring transportation of maids from their own residence to the clients’ residence came to be an important factor in maid’s willingness to work in client houses in different neighbourhoods. If the distance was roughly 3-4 km, then maids would cover this distance by foot. Starting services of a mini van or shuttle demonstrated the interest and need of some maids in availing of this transport service. Alternatively, in case maids did not avail of the Company run van, The Maids' Company charged clients between Rs. 1000 – 3000 a month for travel allowance of maids (depending on distance of neighbourhoods from maids residence); which women then used for whichever mode of transport they preferred to travel by (e.g. bus, auto, rickshaw).

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59 Nevertheless, challenges remained in coordinating the van/ shuttle owing to the following difficulties: (i) Often maids missed their pick-up and The Maids' Company staff had to individually go by scooter or auto to pick them up to guarantee they reached their clients’ household. (ii) Similarly, on the way back, in case clients kept the maids working for slightly longer than their allotted shift time and failed to release them – they would miss their backward shuttle, since many maids waiting in the shuttle would complain they needed to get back to their homes. (iii) Moreover, initially there was reluctance or fear of maids to sit in the shuttle or auto/ vehicles, including with males and/or male staff of Maids Company.
In particular, as described below, one incident of eve-teasing of a maid by a group of young boys also prompted The Maids’ Company to intervene and ensure a safe commute for all the women workers.

“One of the maids told us she was being stalked by four men in a Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) ... we told her to change her route or take a rickshaw, but they kept following her for 2 weeks ... one day they followed her and arrived at the clients house, following which the client fired her.”

_The Maids’ Company Staff_

**Finite Duration of Shift for Women not Extending into Late Night Hours:** As part of Company policy The Maids’ Company designed maids shifts to start and end in such a manner that, at the latest, all shifts would start at 7am and end by 7pm. Ensuring that work shift ended by 7pm was particularly important to enable maids safely travelled home to their own residence at a decent hour; especially if they were walking in poorly lit areas or availing of local public transport which was not operational after a particular time.

**Insisting on Provision of Drinking Water and Safe Toilet Facilities for Women at Work:** Following hesitation expressed by women workers in asking clients for water to drink multiple times a day, and therefore remaining thirsty out of shame including on hot days - a contract clause was devised by The Maids’ Company explicitly stating that drinking water be made available to the maid. Similarly, the staff of The Maids’ Company staff shared that in the beginning they had not anticipated that clients would not provide for basic toilet facility for women domestic workers. However, later on, during the initial screening of the client households, sales representatives of The Maids’ Company were made to ask and check to see what arrangements for rest and toilet facilities clients would make available for the maid – only after which that client would be approved for selection.

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60 _Lahiri (2017), p.86._
Ensuring Safety of Maids at the Workplace

Conducting (Informal) Screening of Clients: The Maids' Company staff shared an instance of their pilot conducted with domestic workers in Ludhiana when a single male client was making many comments on maid he was allotted – specifying that he did not prefer her since she had a dark complexion and was not pretty. Additionally, the staff had seen lots of empty bottles of alcohol lying around his house. Eventually the Company rejected this client – as a precaution and not wanting to endanger the maid who would go to work there. Nevertheless, the staff of The Maids' Company maintained that there are no blanket profiles of clients, who necessarily should be blacklisted.

Judging Situations of Vulnerability and Adopting Checks and Balances: The Maids' Company staff shared how with time and experience they developed an informal system of checks and balances to counter different profiles of clients. For instance, in case of a group of bachelors living together, the maid who was matched with this client household was chosen by The Maids' Company based on possession of certain attributes – for instance, she was an elderly and experienced woman who would know how to handle this group of men and give them a handful in case they misbehaved; rather than having a young, inexperienced maid or a fresh migrant work there, who may feel intimidated by such clients.

GOOD PRACTICE: Looking Out for the Most Vulnerable and Addressing Aspirations

Reading out Terms and Conditions of Appointment to Semi-Literate Women: Many of the women that were employed by The Maids' Company enjoyed various levels of formal education. Therefore, in keeping with standard practice adopted by government agencies for contracts signed with illiterate parties, at the time The Maids' Company hired them – a letter of hiring was given to women, provisions of which were read out to the workers. After having heard the provisions, women signed an undertaking saying that the document had been read out to them, they had understood it and granted their consent to enter into such an agreement.
Compensating for Language Barriers: In one particular instance, The Maids’ Company went out of their way to customise and find a suitable client for Neelima*. Though she was a good worker and had sincerely attended the trainings of The Maids’ Company, she was mostly fluent in Bengali, and her Hindi was weak. Recognising this, The Maids’ Company took special efforts to ensure her placement in a Bengali-speaking household, where she would be able to adjust accordingly – and where she subsequently worked for 5 years. This was despite the fact that The Maids’ Company had taken a decision to mostly work with those maids who knew Hindi at the time of mobilisation, selection and screening.

Factoring Aspirations: For instance, Monica*, 23 years of age, a younger maid, due to the influence of her peers regarded domestic work with some disdain and stigma, and always wished to get an ‘office’ job. Recognising this, The Maids’ Company tried to incorporate her in a managerial capacity, despite her young age. “Most of my friends work in retail in shops, or in pantry services, or in offices for data entry. All my friends used to keep telling me that you will remain a maid all your life ... At The Maids’ Company, besides my shifts working as a domestic worker, I was also an assistant trainer and taught, supervised and checked behaviour of other maids.”

Monica*
Assistant Trainer, The Maids’ Company

ORGANISATIONAL FEATURES: The Maids’ Company

STRENGTHS

The rationale and vision guiding the social enterprise was perhaps the biggest defining feature that set it apart from other agencies working in this space. The fact that the founder of The Maids’ Company had previously worked in SEWA – a prominent organisation renowned internationally for its experience of mobilising and organising poor, self-employed women workers – was also evident in the design and strategies attempted to be adopted by the enterprise, focusing on important aspects such as community-based organising, economic empowerment including access to rights, social security and fostering leadership to empower women workers.

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61 Given the fact that a large number of women domestic workers in Chakkarpur belonged to West Bengal and were fluent in Bengali, as oppose to Hindi, The Maids’ Company over time made it a pre-requisite that maids know a basic level of Hindi before joining The Maids’ Company, especially since there had been instances where maids had misunderstood their clients’ instructions (e.g. mistakenly empty alcohol bottles or medicine bottles instead of washing them).
A critical defining feature of The Maids’ Company was its ability to put to immediate use its learning from each of the many negative incidents of employer-employee relations - that showed up how clients could subvert rights due to workers. Instead of getting dismayed, these learnings were used as fodder to craft new clauses in worker contracts - that would act as deterrents and safeguards against perverse client behaviour and thus constantly evolving new labour standards and pro-worker measures.

Further, the fact that The Maids’ Company was a self-funded enterprise also enabled certain benefits in its structure and functioning, as shared by the founder of the Company, including:

- Flexibility of operations, without being bound to any fixed programme targets, activities, deliverables or rigid timelines as imposed by external funders
- Constant innovation and tweaking of model in the aggressive pursuit of results to justify own expenses and track results from own investment - making swift decisions to implement mid-course additions and revisions or expansion in strategies to ensure a fair deal for both maids and clients - including based on staff’s internal monitoring

**CHALLENGES**

Nevertheless, from an operational perspective, there remained obstacles that prevented the social enterprise from ‘taking off’, for instance:

- Limits to the scope and range of activities that could be taken up The Maids’ Company owing to lack of access to deeper, institutional funding (being a self-funded enterprise). Need for allowing scope for a longer gestation period was felt, before model reached maturity and yielded sustainable economic returns.
- Learning by doing - not having an existing benchmark, blueprint or model of how to work in the domestic work sector that could be picked up and scaled
- Challenge of successfully playing a ‘balancing act’:
  - Ensuring women workers’ wages, labour protections and dignity
  - Ensuring clients remained satisfied with service provided by maid
  - Matching demand of clients and supply of labour of domestic workers – in particular:
— Matching client preference of services with maid’s availability (time) and her willingness to perform those work tasks; while also keeping in mind varying profile, personalities and temperaments of individual maids

— Rotating supply of labour services of workers - ensuring availability of maids and/ or their replacement, including accounting for the limits in labour supply owing to the transient nature of the workforce

— Managing differentiated worker profiles and products, while keeping in mind considerations of standards and pricing related to hierarchy among tasks

— Factoring need to target unsaturated geographies/ residential colonies in terms of (untapped) demand for domestic workers; while taking into account feasibility of intervening in those colonies given distance from living areas/ settlements of domestic workers and optimising related logistics

- Challenges of running a social enterprise with an ethical slant, including associated risks of losing competitiveness and client business in case of skewed attention to rights of workers, and correspondingly endangering of work opportunity and income for domestic worker

- Relatively short timespan of the intervention imposing limits to ownership by domestic workers and higher-order empowerment benefits (see Annexure 3)

- Possibility of clients striking independent work arrangement with domestic workers of The Maids' Company, thereby extricating themselves from obligation to uphold contract clauses due to workers; leading to redundancy of the role of The Maids' Company

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62 This was seen to be true especially when many workers would take extended leave at the same time around harvest/ festival time; but clients may desire uninterrupted service. For instance, The Maids' Company staff had to constantly anticipate the (mismatch in) demand by a particular client and supply by maids of their labour services - if a maid wanted to take leave for a certain period, the Company used to in advance suggest the client book a replacement, and arrange for another domestic worker to step in for the same period.

63 For instance, women working the following profiles - cleaners (sweeping, mopping, cleaning toilets etc); housekeepers (laundry, ironing, dusting, making beds and putting in order living spaces); cooks, who could be single cuisine and multi cuisine cooks; and women providing babycare services.

64 For instance, certain geographies within Gurgaon where maids supply was high but client demand was nearing exhaustion; and conversely there were some neighbourhoods where market demand was there but maids did not live around these areas.
INNOVATION: Dekho Seekho App – Potential for Upskilling Domestic Workers

Dekho Seekho (“Look and Learn”) was a digital skill-learning platform developed by The Maids’ Company, accessible at any location in the form of a free-to-download “app”. The platform holds potential for skilling of women:

- Appealing to women who may face constraints on mobility or time preventing their physical attendance in classroom-based trainings and who require flexible options to access and consume information, including in their own free time and enabling wide outreach and scalability
- Enjoying relevance among workers of any literacy level, and across old and new learners, and having high recall value owing to the ease of visual medium
- Enabling consistency in quality of content, which may vary with training of trainers (ToTs)
- Allowing women access to standardised and basic instructional content (e.g. rather than leaving women to have to choose from among different versions of a particular recipe available in the form of multiple YouTube videos)

“I mostly did cleaning work when I was with The Maids' Company... but at the same time I got to know cooking from the tablet (Dekho Seekho app) ... earlier I knew only how to make simple food, but I learnt how to make South Indian dishes like idli, dosa, sambaar, rajma and chole; and breakfast dishes like upma and poha ... I would like to learn how to make Chinese food in the future ... the good thing about the video is that when I see it even for one time, it stays in my mind.”

Meera*

65 Each category of videos had many more subcategories (e.g. for cooking, an array of recipes by meal, occasion/target group, cuisine; or how to clean each of the different rooms in a house, do laundry etc.). Further, two features of the app work in conjunction with one another: one for employers and one for workers, with the option for employers to remotely leave voice instructions, messages and reminders for workers which are delivered to the worker through the app, advising maids what tasks to complete along with the relevant video (e.g. for a chosen recipe).
CHALLENGE: Intermittent and Long Leave of Absence - Inter-Linkages with Migrant Status

“If a maid needs to take leave, especially long leave, nothing can stop her – no money or no good behaviour of client.”

The Maids' Company Staff

One of the most contentious reasons that maids often altogether left working in client households was to take short or long leave (ranging from approximately 2 weeks to sometimes even 2 months), which clients denied them – despite the maids having worked there for relatively long periods (e.g. over a year or more). Such leave – including its sudden-ness and long duration – can in part be attributed to the socio-economic vulnerability and migrant status of maids and their families. For instance, reasons for leave among domestic workers included:

- Short term leave for own sickness, sickness of family member or in case of some altercation/ violence at home
- Short term leave for urgent matters (e.g. completing formalities for enrolling child in school admissions)
- Long leave for returning to home village for harvest season or for elections
- Long leave for attending major festivals in home village (e.g. Chatt puja in Bihar)
- Long leave for attending weddings in home village
- Long leave to attend to sickness/ death of relatives in home village

CHALLENGE: Migrant Status - Vulnerabilities and Challenges for Women Domestic Workers

Difficulties in Organising: Lack of Solidarity among Heterogeneous Migrant Domestic Workers

An overall lack of solidarity among domestic workers was observed at the destination, especially significant for forging solidarity for collective bargaining, which could be attributed to:

- Heterogeneous social composition of migrants from different states and districts living in close residential quarters in an urban metropolis - but perhaps lacking the same strong socio-cultural ties as affinity groups in rural areas;
- No common place of work, with domestic workers engaged in scattered and disparate client households with little time for contact, meeting and information exchange between each other; besides overwhelming pre-occupation with daily matters of running their own household.

In fact, there may a tendency among workers to look at each other as competition, as candidates for the same jobs.

**Long-Term Scope of Domestic Work in Cities for Migrants with Ties in Home Villages?**

Interaction with domestic workers revealed an important trend – that economic gains secured from The Maids' Company were usually directed towards economic investment towards building a house – but in workers’ native villages. This points to the reality that demand for domestic work is very much a city-based phenomenon; and skills or even availability of work opportunities related to the domestic work sector would be redundant if women were to permanently migrate back to their home villages. This provides important food for thought related to assumptions related to domestic workers – whether they aspire to settle in cities; and if not, would there be a need to re-skill themselves for sectors and occupations of relevance in their native homes (see *Annexure 5*).

**Understanding Pathways of Mobilisation of Domestic Workers: Economic Vulnerability leading to Trafficking of Migrant Women from Source Villages**

Some placement agencies or agents mobilise women in source villages itself, with instances being reported of women being initially recruited into domestic work by known relatives or acquaintances, who would lure them to cities. Such instances exposed the inter-relatedness of other phenomenon such as trafficking for domestic work, including of minor girls. In such scenarios, live-in domestic work becomes as an entry point and foothold for (single) migrant women in need of accommodation at destinations.

Interestingly, looking back at the journey of some of the maids who worked (part-time) in The Maids' Company reveals important trends related to placement agents in the sector – especially for live-in workers. For example, an illustration of the means by which mobilisation and placement of domestic workers takes place through unregulated placement agents in source villages can be observed from the case of Monica*, a 23 year old unmarried girl. Prior to working at The Maids' Company, Monica first arrived with stars in her eyes to live in a big city like Delhi.
“A known woman from my hometown, whose husband was in the Delhi Police, brought 5-6 of us girls in a train to Delhi and placed us as live-in workers. This was in 2011-12 ... for the first year I got no salary, after that my salary was Rs. 800 a month, but I never received it – it was sent to my parents at home. After putting me in this work, I had no contact with the lady, she must have taken her commission and disappeared. It felt like torture in that house – I was not given food on time and was not allowed to go anywhere without permission. Initially my parents and my sister, who was also in Delhi, were not even told the address of the house in which I was working.”

Monica*
23 years, unmarried, from Simdega district in Jharkhand

Similarly, the case of Karishma* below illustrates how live-in work is sometimes an important entry point for women, especially single women, to facilitate settling down in cities when they first come in search of work – since their accommodation (board and lodging is provided for). Women often remain in this live-in work until they find alternate work or networks that could facilitate their exit from such employment arrangements.

“Before I was married, I used to work as a live-in worker (24-hour) ... one man from the village who was known to me brought me and my brother here ... I must have been about 13-14 years ... my brother also did live-in work ... my parents knew about this and we used to send money back to them ... I worked in one house for 1 year and another house for 1 year ... I left and to go back to the village to get married ... when we had a quarter (at the destination) I started doing part-time work.”

Karishma*
North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal

CHALLENGES: Intra-Household Gender Roles and Responsibilities: Implications for Choice of Duration and Intensity of Women’s Participation in Domestic Work

Age of Children Affecting Women’s Participation in Domestic Work

“Initially when I joined The Maids’ Company, my youngest son was only 7-8 months. His brothers used to take him to the aanganwadi and look after him ... I had to feed him outside milk since I could not breastfeed him ... I joined The Maids’ Company
since there was desperate need for money in the family to raise our four children - I realised I needed to work to supplement the household earnings the day we got locked out of our house because we had not paid the rent... I used The Maids' Company earnings for running my household and raising my children ... I took on two part time shifts at The Maids' Company providing cleaning services – a 4 hour shift and a 2 hour shift ... and in addition, I was also a part-time replacement in 3 or 4 houses in case other maids went for a holiday, working there for 7-15 days as per need ... it was hard to manage all these but we needed the money ... when my children were small, I did not take the 8 hours shift since there was no one to help us out with the children ... if you ask others for help, they expect money ... now my children are older, I would be willing to work 8 hours if I get an opportunity.”

Meera*

32 years, mother of four boys aged 17 years, 15 years, 10 years, 8 years

“I left my two children in the village with my mother until they were about 6 years old – they came to Gurgaon only when they could be enrolled in school here in Class 1.”

Vidya*

30 years

Intra-Household Support for Sharing Unpaid Work

“When I worked with The Maids' Company in a 10 hour shift of babycare, my own two daughters were 16 years and 8 years ... at the time my husband looked after my children since he was unemployed ... he used to make food and fill water in the house ... one person needs to be at home to manage the house.”

Kiran*

“I used to wake up at 5 am, make the food for the household, then leave by 9 am for my shift and return by 5pm ... my husband does not help with the house chores but my son lives with me and is pursuing his Bachelors in Commerce ... he used to help sometimes with filling water in the morning from the community water tap, and making rotis at night.”

Sita*

Age of Women Workers – Aspirations vs. Security

“Maids in the ages of 18-25 years of age did not stick to The Maids' Company ... they had more options available to them.”

The Maids' Company Staff
“I worked two part-time shifts at The Maids' Company – an 8 hour shift, followed by a 2 hour shift. After that I used to go for tuitions to learn Hindi, English and computers. I chose to work in part time shifts since I could get income and study. In full time, you work longer hours and get lesser salary ... I want to study, learn English, and get an office job so that I can get good work ... even air hostesses do the same work as us but they ask for their qualifications ... I am taking a course to become a nail art technician, and hope to start my business soon.”

Monica*
23 years

“If you work part time for 2 hours in 4 households, and earn Rs. 5,000-6,000 month in each household, then you end up earning quite a bit. But this requires a lot of running around. In an 8 hour shift, it is hectic in the first half upto 2 - 2.30 pm, after that work intensity gets less.”

Kusum*
42 years

**CHALLENGE: Nature of Domestic Work - Lack of Clear Specification in Quantum of Work and Basis for Determining Wages: Time-Based or Task-Based**

Determining a standardised metric to measure work and fix wages remains an important unresolved aspect of domestic work. Organisations such as Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) have in the past recognised discrepancies related to norms for setting wages - including issues such as whether the wage ought to be time rated or piece rated; in kind, hourly or weekly, part-time or full time; based on house size or persons per household; adjusted for boarding; include medical care and other necessities, among other concerns. Some of these concerns came to the fore in discussions with domestic workers and staff of The Maids' Company.

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66 *This section is based on discussion with the Founder, The Maids Company.*

67 *See https://www.wiego.org/informal_economy_law/domestic-workers-india*
Absence of Clear Metric Defining and Valuing Work Effort or ‘Capping’ Work Performed

Few maids complained about inconsistency and dissatisfaction arising from expectations of clients of the work effort required of them. For instance, for cooking, few maids reported that even if they had signed up for a two-hour shift, there was no upper limit or ‘cap’ on the amount of work that clients demanded from them. Clients would expect maids to cook limitlessly, allotting them tasks that, in terms of work effort, may often exceed time duration of their shift (e.g. demanding three meals to be made serving upto 3-4 persons, including vegetable and meat dishes; or else in another instance upto 20-30 rotis (breads), sometimes within 2 hours.)

“I do not like to make food – if there are 4 people – there is 4 times more amount of work to do”.

Sita*

Discrepancies in Scope of Work – Requesting of ‘Extra’ (Unpaid) Services:
Additionally, clients sometimes asked maids to perform additional tasks (outside of the services they had been hired for). For instance, one client asked Meera* to perform a foot massage, on the pretext that Meera had finished her allotted chores (cooking) for her four-hour shift before time; and thinking that she could ask the maid to perform any other service. However, after performing this task for 2-3 days, and learning that she would not get any extra money for this – Meera raised this issue with The Maids’ Company.

“Now I know to demand Rs. 500 extra if I perform extra services like a massage for my client ... even if we don’t have time, and the client agrees to give us more money for extra work - we will make time.”

Meera*

Variations in Worker Productivity in Same Time Period

Standardisation of wage rates is further complicated by worker productivity, or the variation in efficiency and pace at which workers complete work. Able workers were able to complete the same quantum of work at a faster speed – finishing work of a two-hour shift in say 1 hour 15 minutes. Conversely, slow pace of work completion by workers was one of the major complaints of many clients, and one of the workers, Kusum*, aged 42 years, admitted that she had been rejected during a trial period with a client for not performing work fast enough.
Given such complications, it is important to note that the contract issued by The Maids' Company to clients explicitly mentioned that – “the maid will not be asked to do any odd job(s) on a regular basis which is/ are not mentioned in the package(s)”. Nevertheless, these concerns prompts an important question related to the methodology of how – for the sector as a whole – valuation of domestic work services should be conducted. Pricing of services remains complicated owing to:

- Different possible metrics of measurement (work in hours; or number of persons in a household for cooking; space in terms of number of BHK for cleaning etc.). This has important implications for tensions related to controls imposed on labour - since clients prefer to pay according to time-based metrics, whereas women workers prefer task-based payment, with flexibility to leave once assigned tasks are completed, rather than having to remaining available to a client for a fixed duration of time
- Different products/ services within domestic work;
- Considerations for pricing such as the informal hierarchy of services in market – starting at the bottom end with cleaning -> housekeeping -> cooking -> babycare
- Benchmarking pricing of domestic work products/ services to national or state prescribed minimum wages (calculated in daily wage basis), further adjusted to hours in case of part time services
- Ambiguity on how a combination or mix-and-match services (e.g. cooking and cleaning) would be valued

**CHALLENGE: Vulnerability to Violence and Harassment at the Workplace**

Vulnerability to violence and harassment at the workplace for domestic workers is a pervasive reality due to the unique site of the workplace, within the confines of a client's household. There has been recent progress in international policy circles towards recognising an international labour standard to combat violence and

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68 For cleaning services, new digital platforms such as Urban Clap are costing services using two related metrics - time (in hours) and space (in terms of Bedroom Hall Kitchen (BHK) – 1 BHK/ 2BHK/ 3 BHK/ 4BHK.
harassment at work viz. - ILO Convention concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work (No. 190) and the ILO Recommendation Concerning The Elimination of Violence And Harassment In The World of Work (No. 206). In India, statistics\(^{69}\) indicate that out 28 states and seven Union Territories, there were 3,564 cases of alleged violence against domestic workers reported in 2012.

At The Maids’ Company, anticipating the possibility that maids may be vulnerable to violence in the seclusion of a clients household, special efforts were taken during initial trainings to teach the women to speak up in case of breaches – especially related to threats, verbal or sexual harassment and bodily harm that may be inflicted upon them; besides also adopting a zero tolerance policy of violence against women workers. Staff of The Maids' Company indicated that they came across different and sometimes disturbing stories related to client households, and violent behaviour towards domestic workers. Some instances narrated by The Maids' Company staff of few selected incidents that came to light included:

- Client overreacting and screaming at maid for cutting apple with skin, instead of without skin
- Male client threatening maid for speaking badly with his wife - saying he would throw her off the terrace and then go down and pick her up again and throw her off terrace again
- Female client threatening maid and raising hand to hit her for leaving food uncovered in the fridge
- Client forcefully retaining the maid after the end of the shift, locking her up on the premises and not letting her leave until she finished work
- Client expressing dissatisfaction that how could a maid she get pregnant within 2-3 months of working in their household
- Male client roaming around the kitchen with his trouser zip open when maid was washing vessels

Maids being subjected to perverse sexual behaviour of male clients – a male client increasing the volume of porn in the presence of maid; a male client being accidentally caught in a compromising position with dogs

In the absence of an enterprise such as The Maids' Company, it is safe to say that similar stories may not come to light, be shared by domestic workers or be registered as complaints to any external authority.

**CHALLENGE: Negotiating Gender-Insensitive Spaces and Intimidating Technology**

An interesting facet of design of client households, especially in the high-rise apartment blocks of Gurgaon, is their lack of consideration towards how women workers will negotiate these spaces. In particular, the staff of The Maids’ Company shared how certain features of the workplace demonstrated severe disconnection from realities of blue-collar workers, and even more so women workers; and proved to be intimidating to women:

- Crossing heavily trafficked crossroads to reach client households
- Facing stringent security conditions within apartment complexes with gated entry, requiring vetting of all entrants, including domestic workers;
- Traversing long driveways within apartment complexes - from the main gate of the complex to the doorstep of the apartment in certain colonies - sometimes amounting to a 2 km walk. While this distance was usually covered by house-owners in their cars, women workers used to have to walk this distance.
- Overcoming fears of operating latest state-of-the-art hi-tech appliances and/or automated gadgets and appliances and fittings in newly constructed builder flats in Gurgaon. Women workers often felt daunted by nuances of how to work such appliances and remained worried they would be pulled up for misusing them (e.g. different models and types of fridges, microwaves, locks, taps and flushes in bathrooms).

“We had one maid telling us that she would not take up work in a high rise apartment where there were elevators, and that she would only work in a house ... she had once pushed a wrong button in the lift and ended up going to the basement ... she got completely flustered being in a dark, empty space with parking and no mobile signal.”

*The Maids' Company Staff*
GOOD PRACTICE: Building Credibility of the Enterprise among Clients - Creating a Recognisable and Trustworthy Reputation in the Market

- **Employing Capable Staff with Past Relevant Experience:** Some of the staff of The Maids' Company, especially the founders and chief mobilisers were experts in this area, having past experience of working on projects in association with SEWA and other grassroots organisations - including mobilising and organising women into urban SHGs under their own NGO (Urban Mahila and Mazdoor Alliance); besides sustaining activities of these groups, including a domestic worker pilot in Ludhiana. Besides the on ground implementation efforts, women trainers were also strong, confident women; and selected male staff also brought unique experiences – e.g. having worked with Gurgaon police on verification processes of urban informal workers.

- **Ensuring Accessibility and Professionalism of Staff:** Lot of effort was spent on earning trust of clients, including by staff of The Maids' Company who remained available to address client grievances almost 24 hours and 7 days a week; rather than disappearing with the advance paid by clients as down payment. Further, training was conducted for fundraising and client facing staff of The Maids’ Company on inter-personal communication, to ensure they exuded the feel of a formal sector company working with domestic workers, including ensuring staff ‘look the part’ to earn the trust and validation of middle or upper class clients (e.g. dressed in suit and tie). Additionally, staff/supervisors maintained a strong rapport with the maids and even after The Maids' Company wound up, The Maids' Company supervisors remain available to clients and help to match them with maids who are looking for work.70

- **Remaining Transparent and Accountable to Clients:** The Company differentiated themselves from other placement agencies especially through features such as having a proper website furnishing all details of the company.

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70 Based on discussion with clients.
such as the rates of maids per hour and per service on drop down menus, bank details and contact details of the company; and providing clients a breakup of costs and sharing what their fee to the Company was being used for. Further, contracts with clients also clearly spelled out conditions related to notice period to be given by clients and workers, issues of payment of outstanding dues, as well as how much of the annual fee paid to the Company may be refunded in various scenarios.

- **Building and Consolidating Image of the Company though Media Coverage:**

Coverage of The Maids’ Company in newspapers, journals and magazines articles - profiling the Company’s founder and company best practices - helped in raising its profile and reinforcing its credentials among clients; thus differentiating it from other small time placement agencies.

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### CHALLENGE: Professionalizing Domestic Work

#### Costing of Social Services - Who Pays for a Better Quality of Workforce?

Though not always guaranteed, The Maids' Company did attempt to shift costs related to social security benefits of maids to the clients and/or attempt to extend services to maids on a co-sharing basis with them. As discussed in an earlier section, in the case of travel allowance, most clients agreed to pay in case the clients’ household was far from the maids’ residence. However, in selected other domains, costing of social support services remained a challenge since clients were unwilling to invest in social security benefits of maids, especially in case of part-time workers who may leave their jobs mid-contract.

**Health:** As described in the exceptional case in the earlier section, a client did incur major costs related to Out Patient Department (OPD) expenditure of a maid whose daughter got typhoid, along with the assistance of the Maids Company. However, in most other cases, The Maids' Company used to meet the charges of the nurse, including costs related to medical treatment of maids until a certain limit; exceeding which the maids themselves and The Maids' Company would share this on a 50-50 contributory basis. Attempts to convince clients to pay for health insurance did not meet much success owing to the churn of the workforce.

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*For instance clients were informed what amount would be charged to The Maids’ Company as up front payment, what amount would taken as maintenance fee of the Company, what amount would go towards maids salaries, including refund on deposits in case the maid discontinued services and related adjustment of wages to be paid based on actual days worked etc.*
“Some clients told us they would be willing to pay for health insurance of their maid but since in a given year, the maid may change many times – they were unwilling to sponsor this insurance for multiple maids. They said that they would be OK to pay for such a service if it applied for any maid allotted to them – irrespective if three of four maids changed in their house in a year ... but insurance is issued against a specific person's name ... so we did not know how to get around this.”

**The Maids' Company Staff**

**Warm Clothes for Women:** During the winter months, in order to provide some respite from the cold weather, The Maids' Company procured socks, mufflers, and warm innerwear for roughly 120 maids working with them at the time. Though the Company suggested to the clients that they could share these costs with The Maids' Company on a 50-50 basis (towards clothing for their respective maids); however, out of roughly 120 clients, only 3 agreed to do so.

**CHALLENGE: Nature of Client Expectations of Domestic Workers - Unimportance of Skill**

“Because one employs domestic workers to work in the most intimate and sacred spaces of one's home – be it one's bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens and often for over 8 - 10 hours a day, being responsible for one's food, clothes, and children - different clients have strong opinions on what kind of maid they would prefer - for instance some one who is quiet or else chatty. Compatibility of the maid with the client is essential to establish trust ... this is unlike, say, the services of an Uber driver, with whom one associates for a shorter duration such as a 15 minute car ride ... even if the client has an unpleasant experience, they can just leave a low rating of the service.”

**The Maids' Company Staff**

“There is no such thing as a trained maid ... for the first 15-20 days, you have to train maids since every house has different expectations and food requirement ...the one thing we insisted on is discipline ... both my wife and I go to work so we need assurance that the maid will turn up every day, 6 days a week ... If a maid is regular and responsive, in Gurgaon, people would not mind paying Rs. 2000 more here and there ... but the service has to be good.”

**Client (Corporate Sector), DLF Phase V**
“Job skills for me are not the number one priority – those can be picked up along the way ... for me it is important that the maid has good mannerisms, is polite and courteous, gives respect; she should not be too aggressive and headstrong; she should be willing to learn and be flexible; should have an enterprising mentality, be honest, clean, hygienic and groomed.”

**Client (Corporate Sector), DLF Phase I**

“Skill is not a major determinant for me in the selection of a maid ... it is not rocket science ... I look at (1) hygiene (2) attitude and willingness to learn and (3) if the maid has an intelligent mind ... everyone has a unique way of running their home ... often the maid needs to un-learn their past habits.”

**Client (Private Consultancy Firm), Sushant Lok Phase 1**

## CHALLENGE: Instances of Bias in Selection and Appointment of Maids by Clients

**Appearance:** The critical importance of client perception of maids in the domestic work sector has been a well-recognised feature. Often, the first face-to-face meeting of a client with a maid is enough to determine the maid's selection – mostly based on superficial, external factors related to overall appearance of maid, rather than her skill levels in a particular service. As described in earlier sections, ensuring grooming of maids was seen to be one of the key strategies to increase their chances of employability.

“At the time of placement, one of our clients told us why have you given me a fat maid, she can't move, how will she do any of the work ... another client rejected a maid saying she had some pimples on her face and it looked like an infection.”

**The Maids' Company Staff**

“We realised over time that some maids were not able to get a job with clients – for instance if they looked very poor with unclean clothes or unkempt hair ... or they looked very unhealthy or very old or very nervous ... we tried to give them a chance to get placed through The Maids' Company policy of three trials with client households ... but the clients did not prefer to appoint them.”

**The Maids' Company Staff**
(ii) Religion: Interaction with both staff and women workers revealed that some clients had reservations in appointing women belonging to the Muslim community; whereas preference was given by some to Christians. Interestingly, the staff of The Maids' Company maintained that mostly the younger generation of clients is not concerned with if a maid is Hindu or Muslim, revealing that if at all the older generation makes enquiries about this; rather than younger clients. Further, one of the women workers maintained that given the prevalent discriminatory client attitudes, some of the Muslim maids had taken on Hindu names, and used to adorn certain traditional Hindu ‘markers’ for the sake of getting employment – such as sindhoor, bindis as well as characteristic Bengali red and white bangles.

“Many clients on hearing my name asked me if I was Muslim ... they realised I was Hindu on seeing that I wear these red and white bangles ... Muslims wear glass bangles and don’t wear sindoor.”

Kiran*

“Clients asked me my religion after seeing my name ... some clients prefer Christians (like me), they think we know English and are honest.”

Monica*

Another incident shared by a woman worker demonstrates the clear bias harboured by clients. Following the shut down of The Maids' Company, when Pushpa* had to go on leave in one of her client households, her employer asked her to provide a replacement. Anticipating that it better to be transparent, Pushpa asked her replacement to inform her employer that she was Muslim, and had married a Hindu, which she failed to do. In turn, the employer on finding out that the replacement was Muslim let her go – citing that she had lied and she could no longer trust her – especially since she had left the care-taking of the whole house on the replacement. Further, the client turned around to Pushpa and said,

“I am a staunch Brahmin, it was on your reference that I appointed that girl, you should have told me you were appointing a Muslim as a replacement ... now you will get cursed.”

Client of Pushpa*

Age: Another factor on the basis of which domestic workers were discriminated was their age – with some clients preferring younger maids who would be more efficient and agile. Staff of The Maids' Company also shared that those women workers who looked old, weak, lazy or had low energy could be rejected by clients at the time of selection.
“Nowadays clients want a jeans-wearing girl, not a sari wearing woman ... I was once rejected by a client who said that you will not be able to run after children ... some clients do not like newly married maids, they think they will become pregnant and leave.”

Kusum*

42 years of age

Ethnic/Regional Stereotypes: Another aspect affecting decision-making of clients regarding selection of domestic workers had to do with assumptions based on ethnicity/place of birth of women workers – fuelled by socially perpetuated positive or negative stereotypes – and assigning blanket behavioural attributes to women.

“We learnt that maids have different reputations in the market – maids from the North East are thought to be more hygienic; some clients do not prefer Muslim maids since they believe they are unclean; maids from Jharkhand are usually single girls and are thought to have very good discipline; whereas those from West Bengal come with their families, and may be harder to discipline.”

The Maids' Company Staff

CHALLENGE: Instances Of Second-Class Treatment Meted Out to Women Domestic Workers At Work

Caste-Based Notions of Purity and Pollution

In urban households of Gurgaon, while clients may not explicitly ask maids their caste category at the time of placement; however certain institutionalised forms of discrimination remain evident in practice. For instance, The Maids' Company staff reported that in many households, maids were allotted separate vessels and toilets for their own use. Additionally, it was shared by The Maids' Company staff that especially in cooking and kitchen related services - as part of which women workers were expected to perform tasks such as washing dishes during the time of religious fasting, cleaning the temple area within homes, or handling the raw materials used during rites and rituals – that the concepts of ‘purity and pollution’ assumed greater significance. Even in cleaning services, one of the clients expressed similar notions.

“One of our clients told us to make sure that when making the bed, the maid should not touch the bed when leaning over.”

The Maids' Company Staff
Gender Discriminatory Practices Limiting Performance of Work: Some clients made special requests of The Maids' Company at the time of filling in the application form for a maid. For instance, one client requested that the maid inform the client when she was menstruating, so that they could ban her from doing certain works on those days, upholding long-held gender-discriminatory menstruation taboos. For instance, on days when the women had their period, they would not be allowed to do works such as – kitchen work, cleaning the utensils of the temple - but instead remain confined to tasks such as washing dishes outside the main house and cleaning the balconies. Demanding to know such information about women’s bodies, and letting it impede the work tasks to be conducted remains a clear violation of the bodily integrity of women workers.

OPPORTUNITY: Selected (Unprompted) Good Practices of Clients towards Domestic Workers

That selected clients did look out for worker welfare (outside of The Maids' Company contract stipulations) comes through from some of the below-mentioned actions and gestures:

- Displaying sensitivity to religious beliefs of women workers, with a client cooking meat (pork) and herself washing those respective dishes – only on the weekly off days of a Muslim maid; respecting the fact that pork is considered ‘haraam’/ forbbidden

- Client buying things for maids using their credit cards during the time of demonetisation, and giving her those supplies; opening a bank account and getting medical insurance for the maid and her 2 sons, besides giving maid advance for her sister’s wedding which settled with maid over the period of one year

- Client (doctor) assisting maid during time of pregnancy, including providing monetary support

- Client bearing the medical costs of an accident and not cutting money for almost 2 weeks of sick leave

- Client sending maid with driver to market to make spectacles costing Rs. 1500; same client given maid protein powder to increase strength, to remove weakness following sickness
Annexure 5

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF WORKING IN THE DOMESTIC WORK SECTOR

CHALLENGE: Feudal Undercurrents in the Client-Worker Relationship - Instances

“When we introduced a maid to one of our clients, she sat down on the sofa along with myself and another staff of the Company... the client asked her to get up and sit separately ... we thought he was asking her to sit in an adjacent single-seater chair ... but he was suggesting she sit on the ground.”

The Maids' Company Staff

“A client who was angry with a maid for reporting late to work on a repeated basis issued a false accusation against her that she had stolen a chocolate ... we said that our whole Company was premised on trust and dignity of workers so if this was lacking, we would explore the matter and terminate services if the case was found to be true ... on realising that the maid may be discontinued, the client eventually withdrew this accusation.”

The Maids' Company Staff

“Lot of times if a client helps the maid by talking her to a big private hospital or by giving her old vessels ... the maid thinks the client is doing something great for her ... and this makes them feel indebted to clients, without realising that the client may be sharing things which are anyway old and wasteful to them ... the clients also keep reminding and taunting the maid that they should be grateful for all that they have done for them.”

The Maids' Company Staff
GOOD PRACTICE: The Maids’ Company Interventions to Manage the Employer-Employee Relationship

Workers Perspectives

(i) Facilitating Dialogue and Tripartism: Maids often remain fearful of articulating their grievances related to the nature of work or work demands in front of the clients. Given the obvious skew in the power and standing of the two parties (employers and employees), there effectively remains little space for representation of maids’ opinions, dialogue, negotiation or bargaining between the client and maid. Thus, The Maids’ Company – as a third party – was seen to play an important role by invoking the principle of social dialogue and ‘tripartism’ as used by the ILO\(^\text{72}\); acting as a third-party mediator and power broker – talking at par with clients and responding to their objections to maid’s service; while attempting to uphold maids rights and perspectives. Importantly, this role becomes even more significant given that prior to (and during) The Maids’ Company intervention, the staff reported that none of the domestic workers they worked with were part of any domestic worker union or collective. The Maids' Company thus acted as a ‘pressure valve’, absorbing both client and maid dissatisfaction - not letting these frustrations pile up. In particular, from the maids perspective, the Company interacted with clients with the aim of:

- Communicating the maids’ grievances or point of view to the client in a strategic manner with the aim of generating a workable solution to problems, adopting concerted strategies to placate clients who felt deeply offended or attacked in case of such grievances\(^\text{73}\).
- Placating women in case of persisting bad behaviour of clients, validating and supporting their concerns and building trust, making the maids feel there was ‘someone in their corner’ - and in certain cases providing them suggestions for moving towards the most favourable exit strategy (e.g. if mid-month, convincing the maid to remain with the client till the end of the month to receive salary and then leaving work).

\(^{72}\) ILO defines social dialogue and tripartism (in the conventional sense) as the process of negotiation, or exchange of information between, or among, employers and workers, on issues of common interest - with representatives of the government usually acting as an official party to the discussions.

\(^{73}\) An important learning in this regard was that tapping and leveraging the existing ‘cultural capital’ of staff of Maids Company was effective (e.g. English speaking, graduates with particular inflection) – to calmly talk to and appeal to clients' sensibilities to represent the maid's point of view. This played a significant role in the tone, manner and responsiveness of clients to women workers’ grievances, which was markedly different to the tone that would have been adopted in direct communication and dispute resolution with the ‘maid’.
Shock-absorbing other negative client behaviour disaffecting maids: As described previously, since clients paid The Maids' Company for their service (and not the maids directly); and The Maids’ Company in turn paid this salary to the maids – over time, the Company took it upon itself to absorb any delays on the clients' part in paying and transferring the salary - to ensure that the maids would not face any delay or disruption in their income at the beginning of the month.

(ii) Building Capacities of Workers: Equipping Workers to ‘Handle’ Employers:

This included through for instance:

- **Ongoing Capacity Building with Women on Negotiating Client Interaction:** Any discrepancies with maids resolved through either:
  - Simulating scenarios of dispute between employer and maid in pre-placement trainings, to advise women workers and equip them with capabilities to negotiate conflict
  - Training and/ or re-skilling the maid in the areas on which the client had issued complaint
  - Counselling of women workers by staff of The Maids' Company, to understand what was the reason for the behaviour of maid that had peeved the client; and ascertaining whether there were any difficulties she was facing at that stage of her life due to which her work was suffering
  - Advising women workers on coping mechanisms even if they wanted to discontinue working with a ‘bad’ client, for instance:
    - Explaining the benefits of completing work till the end of the month, even if dissatisfied, to ensure women received that full month’s salary (instead of abruptly leaving and incurring loss of person days of income for missed days of work)
    - Asking women workers to ask clients for a reference letter and/ or salary slip at the time of leaving service – which could be used as a reference for future employers

- Encouraging women workers to constantly communicate with client: For example, conveying to women workers the importance of regular and effective communication with clients, ensuring employers remain aware of maids’ schedule, days of leave, the end time of their shift to prevent missing their shuttle bus etc.
(iii) **Diffusing Tension in Employment Relations**: The maid-client relationship dynamic is constantly characterised by emotional upheavals, tension, sulking and a sense of the maid feeling wronged by the client, or vice versa. In order to build an amicable relationship between maids and clients and infuse positivity into the relationship, some methods were employed by The Maids' Company – for instance, maids gave Diwali cards to clients – containing personalised messages composed by them, appreciating the clients.

(iv) **Protecting Workers from Client Malpractices** - including related to lack of clear specification of quantum of work and vulnerability to violence and harassment at the workplace, stemming from intrinsic vulnerabilities faced by domestic workers owing to the unique nature of work as well as the nature of the workplace (see Annexure 3).

### Clients' Perspectives

(i) **Extending Professional Support to Clients in Dispute Resolution with Maids**

“If one called The Maids' Company, their customer service was so professional that they understood your point of view and communicated this to the maids, and also found a middle ground so the work did not suffer ... there was a contact person who used to know about the maids and go to the client house and check and see what was wrong ... the staff was committed, transparent and dependable.”

*Client (Private Consultancy Firm), Sushant Lok Phase 1*

Clients reported very positive feedback in terms of the support extended by staff of The Maids' Company in mediating conversations with maids on daily complaints, conflicts and grievances. The responsiveness and prompt and efficient nature of client servicing of The Maids' Company was a particular stand-out. Such proactiveness demonstrated by The Maids' Company helped to establish itself as a reliable and professional entity. This can further be seen from an incident where a client had a negative experience with maid, who was found to be stealing. Since The Maids' Company took the lead in promptly investigating this claim and seeking to resolve it fairly, the client was able to look past the incident - recognising it as an isolated experience with one individual worker – and not letting it cloud the reputation of The Maids' Company as a whole.
(ii) Ensuring Amicable Resolution with Client in Case of Wrong Doing by Worker

In all cases of wrong doings by women workers that were found out (e.g. instances of theft), The Maids' Company played an important two-fold role - pursuing the matter with clients and simultaneously with maids:

- Counselling the domestic worker to declare beforehand if she had undertaken theft, saying that otherwise The Maids' Company would need to conduct a search investigation and it would look bad if stolen items were discovered. In case the accusation was found to be true, the accused maid’s services would be terminated with the client in the first strike; given also the severity of the offence. In turn, as per company policy, the next client that the accused maid was matched with would be provided the background information that the maid had been dismissed from the previous job because of accusation of theft.

- Providing clients with immediate replacement of maid after terminating services with accused maid; besides as described above, helping in recovery of missing items. Clients were also told that it was up to them if they wanted to escalate the matter and file a police complaint; while at the same time making them aware of how vulnerable poor women remain to harassment and violence at the hands of the police. Clients of The Maids' Company did not report any cases to the police, perhaps, due to the efficient and timely intervention by the Company.

(iii) Providing Option of Formal Arbitration in Serious Cases of Dispute Resolution:

Besides the informal role played by the Maids Company in negotiating disputes between clients and women workers, the Maids Company contract also contained an ‘arbitration clause’, outlining that any difference arising out of or in connection with the contract would be resolved by a mutually agreed arbitrator, and failing agreement on which, an arbitrator would be appointed by the civil courts of Gurgaon. Staff of the Maids Company reported that neither the clients nor workers ever invoked this clause of arbitration during the time of operation of the Company.
**CHALLENGE: Lack of Regulation of Domestic Worker Placement Agencies**

Past commentators\(^{74}\) have detailed how placement agencies provide the most basic contracts to clients – outlining only major information such as parties names and addresses, the salary and fees and the worker’s start and end date – with mention of work conditions remaining conspicuously absent. Staff of The Maids' Company reported that the existence of placement agents or agencies came to the fore only when bad practices came to light. They shared that there were other players in the market at the time The Maids' Company was operational, and that have sprung up since – a boutique service offering domestic worker services mostly targeted at foreign clients/expats with English speaking maids; a retired service professional who used to run a business of live-in maids in a particular apartment tower; besides scattered NGOs and agencies usually providing 24 hour maid services. One of the maids shared that there existed another placement agent in the neighbourhood who used to supply maids to foreign countries such as Dubai, Hong Kong, Singapore – where the visa process for entry for maids was relatively easier. According to the staff of The Maids' Company, most of these outfits are mostly concerned with maximising earnings, and keep no track of the maid's status or health. Further, in recent times, the sector has seen a proliferation of new, albeit unregulated, initiatives through online platforms seeking to provide domestic work services\(^{75}\). It would be interesting for future assessments to unravel how these platforms are shaping labour standards related to wages and working hours of domestic workers.

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**CHALLENGE: Varying Aspirations of Migrants to Settle in Cities**

“There is major demand for domestic work in cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Calcutta. Domestic work exists in the West Bengal/Assam side as well, but over here demand and charges are much more... In my native maternal home, women work in agarbati or bidi factories, collect betel leaves in the fields, or make namkeen (snacks) for sale. If I ever go back to my husband's village in Assam, I would not do domestic work there. That is why I enrolled in a training course

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\(^{74}\) Lahiri (2017), p.85.

\(^{75}\) For instance – entities such as B-ABLE DomesteQ (servicing Delhi), Homehelp4India.com (servicing NCR), Bookmybai.com (servicing Mumbai, Thane, Navi Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Surat), Kaamwallbaiss.com (servicing Mumbai), JobNukkad.com (servicing Mumbai).
Pushpa*

“We have a house in our home village which is lying closed for 4 years ... by early next year I am going to return to take care of the house ... I am only waiting for one of my fixed deposits here to mature ... My children don't like living here ... they say leave us in the village where we have our friends and where we can stay in our own room in our own house ... they don't like living here cramped in one small room and having to share a toilet with the neighbours ... I will use my savings from working here in domestic work to invest in a medium sized tempo which would work in tea gardens; as well as to hire a space which could operate as a beauty parlour. Lot of people in my village know parlour services but there is no one to set up a parlour shop and procure the room and products.”

Jyoti*

OPPORTUNITY: Designing Policies for Migrant Domestic Workers Invested in Villages

(i) Prioritising Access to (Short-Term) Economic Assets and More Immediate Economic Security

An earlier section has discussed the difficulties in operationalizing contributory measures of long-term economic security such as provident fund or insurance given domestic workers’ economic vulnerability and precarious standard of living. However, it is important to note that other (short-term) innovations extended by The Maids’ Company such as advance/loan and gender sensitive loan products met with great success – and these models could be replicated. Given this understanding - that domestic workers are more concerned in the here and now and have limited ability and willingness to save - an important and most basic asset which could be guaranteed to domestic workers plagued with economic vulnerability would be a savings bank account. Interactions with staff of The Maids’ Company revealed that at the time of the intervention, opening bank accounts that were necessary for account opening were very hard to produce for migrant workers. Neither did the workers have proofs of address of their source villages; nor did they have such formal documents for their address at the destination,
especially given the precarious nature and tenure of their accommodation in slums. The Maids’ Company did undertake selected efforts to ensure possession of identity proofs among workers, by conducting camps on Sundays to make Aadhar cards for domestic workers. Perhaps access to a bank account in the current day could be facilitated more easily given current financial inclusion schemes such as the Jan Dhan Yojana. Adopting a dedicated strategy for ensuring individual bank accounts in women’s name would help in promoting savings, control and retention of income, which in turn could contribute towards improved decision making of women in intra-household affairs, both economic and social.

(ii) Building Supplementary Skillsets for the Future

As can be gauged from the above, interactions with domestic workers revealed that there may be need to revisit assumptions relevant to long term scope of domestic work based on aspirations of migrants – and whether domestic work has long-term prospects, especially in case they plan to ultimately invest in and settle in their native village, rather than in cities where they work. An important suggestion emanating from interactions with domestic workers was that, for the long-term, it may be useful for them to learn supplementary skills, relevant for outside of domestic work, to improve their employability for instance - beauty parlour services and/ or stitching - that would enable self-employment of women at a later date and ensure their employability in other contexts such as if they were move back to their source villages where domestic work was not much in demand.

OPPORTUNITY: Expanding Scope of Initial Trainings to Include Components of Worker Solidarity Building

There could be scope of re-thinking the modality and form of organising and facilitation of domestic workers – to create more of a ‘we’ feeling, in particular by changing the thrust of initial trainings:

- Building understanding on the need for such an intervention and rationale for collectivising among workers – to collectively bargain with clients for improving their lot – attempting to move focus from each individual worker’s concern of placement with client to appreciation of how rallying together and learning and sharing from others’ similar experiences can be beneficial in commanding improved workplace terms and conditions in the long term. The visioning would be towards developing a level of awareness, information exchange and bonding among members and allegiance to the collective such that if one
faced exploitative conditions from a client in any one household, the group would be able to stand up for each of its individual members.

- Attempting stronger focus on promoting awareness of labour laws, rights, entitlements which should accrue to workers
- Creating understanding among women of their own work identity, and their essential economic contribution in running their client’s household - which in turn provides the basis and enables clients the freedom to participate fully in the workforce
- Dedicatedly building capacities of a ‘critical mass’ of domestic workers (say 100 workers) – in particular investing more heavily in building work identities of community based mobilisers and supervisors who could serve as the lead champions and advocates for such an intervention, even in the absence of mediation from The Maids' Company. Strategies such as demarcating geographies to select mobilisers/ supervisors were adopted by The Maids' Company, but perhaps as stronger focus on building a dedicated a ‘cascade model’ of information dissemination or grievance redressal among workers may have helped prevent attrition.

**OPPORTUNITY: Creating Spaces: Disrupting the Status Quo of Disconnectedness among Workers**

The importance of creating spaces for women to meet, besides to facilitate their social interaction, has powerful potential to enable them to horizontally network, expand their worldview, and engage in and information sharing regarding good practices related to salary, benefits, working conditions and client behaviour - also imperative for women to learn about better standards/ benchmarks and to provoke them to improve their lot.

**Bridging Information and Awareness Gaps: Possibility of Improved Working Conditions and Benefits for Domestic Workers**

“The maids (of The Maids' Company) had the same amount of holidays as us (clients), and on the same days (Sunday) ... luckily I had 2 maids so I had a back up ... so I used to give leave to one on one day, and the other worker on another day. It also created issues with my other local maid (non Maids' Company), who began asking for more money and benefits without the same specialisation.”

**Client (Corporate Sector), Sushant Lok I**
The potential for disruption in status quo from interaction and solidarity building among workers can also be observed from limitations imposed on interaction between The Maids’ Company and non Maids’ Company workers by clients within any one household. For instance, staff of The Maids’ Company also attested that in households where there were multiple workers servicing the household, clients preferred to keep The Maids' Company workers and non Maids' Company workers separate – lest they talk and communicate among themselves on the differences in their salaries and benefits; thereby emboldening (non Maids' Company) workers to demand a better deal and forcing clients to improve their terms and conditions.

“It used to be fun working with The Maids' Company ... at least once a month we used to meet all the other maids ... we even danced on one occasion ... we are now meeting for the first time after 4 years ... when the company shut then everything stopped.”

Karishma*

**OPPORTUNITY: Facilitating Increased Work Participation of Women by Building Linkages with Creche Services for Childcare**

To enable women the option of working longer hours, providing child-care facilities would be critical. Quite a few maids interacted with indicated they often leave behind their children in their native villages to be looked after extended family until school-going age, since husband and wife may live in nuclear families in cities – with lesser familial or social support for child care from in laws/ parents/ siblings. Linking domestic workers with child-care services in neighbouring aanganwadi centres (if they exist) would provide major relief for women who are often disproportionately burdened with the responsibility of child-care. In fact, discussion with three domestic workers pointed to the phenomenon of informal crèche-like arrangements that have sprung up in Gurgaon, where domestic workers can leave their small children with one woman caretaker by paying her an approximate sum of Rs. 2,000 – Rs. 2,500 a month. A client also pointed to the existence of schools that are being converted into crèches after 3pm.
OPPORTUNITY: Working on Demand Side Interventions – Sensitising Clients

Shifting the Onus on Client Behaviour

“Just like in other interventions such as child trafficking – instead of targeting the victim, focus should be on more effective strategies targeted at the perpetrators ... similarly interventions on gender equality need men on board ... here focus needs to be on the market to educate employers on how to think about domestic work ... how much will maids be able to bargain for themselves?”

The Maids’ Company Staff

Much of the discourse around the informal sector remains confined to how one can mobilise and organise workers to claim their rights and entitlements, without holding to account the employers who engage these workers in unregulated work conditions. The domestic work sector is unique in that unlike in other service sector value chains, there is direct contact between service providers (maids) and end user (employers). Thus, given the lack of intermediaries in the supply chain, the onus of employee’s well being can fall directly on the employer. According to The Maids’ Company, efforts should be directed towards educating employers on upholding provisions of decent work. As previous commentators\(^\text{76}\) have documented, in certain types of struggles one needs to involve both entities in the power dynamic to help change the status quo - necessitating the buy-in of the ‘haves’, rather than expecting the disempowered bring about transformative change themselves. Where selected notable good practices of clients came to the fore during interactions with domestic workers, these seem to have been driven by sensitivity demonstrated towards workers, rather than any (external) coercion imposed on employers by The Maids' Company contracts.

‘Domestic Work Makes All Other Work Possible’\(^\text{77}\) : Capitalising on Indispensability of and Trust in Domestic Workers for Clients to Build Economic Value for Work

“When demand (of labour) outstrips supply, that is when one has the power to be able to negotiate.”

Client (Development Sector), DLF Phase IV

\(^{76}\) For more on this, see Lahiri (2017), p.83.

\(^{77}\) Borrowing a phrase from the ‘National Domestic Workers Alliance’, USA https://www.domesticworkers.org
“Trust is a big factor in this sector ... I have never gone through any other placement agency since I wanted the maid to look after my children ... at the time my two children were in Prep (pre-nursery) and Class V ... after having my children I was sceptical to go back to work but once the maid stepped in, it gave me a lot of peace of mind.”

Client Family (Lawyers), Ardee City, Sector 52, Gurgaon

Trust and familiarity is often the bedrock of employer employee relationship in the domestic work sector – with many clients leaving keys of their empty house with cooks or cleaners; or else trusting their own children with domestic workers for babycare. For instance Jyoti*, 37 years, shared that she had worked with her clients for so long, that they would be willing to forgive any (even major) mistake of hers. This was especially true in her case, since her clients travelled frequently and left her to sleep over in the house with their children – approximately 2-3 times a month, for which she was paid Rs. 1000 per night. The comfort and trust of leaving children with a known or well-trusted maid is next to none. Staff of The Maids' Company also shared that many times clients would become so dependent on their existing maids that they would rather not let her go; since this would mean re-starting the process of finding a new, trust-worthy maid and making her accustomed to the ways of the household. However, from a remuneration standpoint - the criticality of this implicit trust invested in workers and the dependency on them to perform these services on a daily basis has not been leveraged.

Exploring Collaborations with the Private Sector

Further, given that domestic workers service nearly all middle-class and high income households in India, including corporate sector households; tapping Corporate Social Responsibility to come up with innovative partnerships and solutions to meet the increasing demand for domestic workers remains a possibility – including through financing of innovations such as The Maids' Company model.
OPPORTUNITY: Tapping the Demand of the Market: Aggregating Services and Acting as a One-Stop Shop for Housekeeping Services

“Clients prefer to have a single point of contact to take care of their multiple housekeeping service needs ... the attraction that everything related to the household is being looked after - this could be done through expanding from maids to their other household members (for other services) – this would promote greater cohesion both within and outside the family.”

Client (Development Sector), DLF Phase IV

Clients often look to hire service professionals for a number of housekeeping needs – other than cooking, cleaning and babycare, which was under the ambit of activities of The Maids’ Company. For instance, a host of services such as plumbing, electrician, carpentry services, pest control are needed by households. Rather than juggle disparate service providers for each separate and differentiated need – it could be useful to invest in trainings husbands and other female and/or male members of domestic worker households – so that a consolidated approach to improving the economic well being of an entire household could be taken; further promoting loyalty to an entity such as The Maids' Company. Women could also be trained in services such as plumbing, electrician, carpentry services, pest control – breaking existing gender stereotypes and norms and what is considered ‘women's work’ – and moving towards non-traditional occupations.

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78 Based on discussion with Ms. Madhu Bala Nath.