

Full Length Research Paper

Challenges and opportunities of female domestic workers in accessing education: A qualitative study from Bahir Dar city administration, Amhara region, Ethiopia

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Domestic workers have been in existence throughout the Ethiopian history. However, there is no detail study about the actual conditions of the domestic workers. This means information about domestic workers is quite absent. Hence, this research intends to fill this knowledge gap by studying at least the educational conditions of domestic workers in Bahir Dar city administration in Amhara region. The study employed case study research design which includes solely a qualitative approach. The data were gathered from purposively selected interviewees, focus group discussants and key informants. The data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis technique. The study found that the major challenges of the domestic workers to access education are low wages, burden of work, time constraints, educational fee and unintended pregnancy. And the opportunities, are the existence of night school program and educational/stationery material support. Based on the findings the study recommended that governmental and non-governmental charity organizations should work to create strong income generating mechanisms for the domestic workers. Public discussion forums should be conducted to raise the awareness of employers regarding the overall situation of domestic workers. Strict labor laws should be introduced and implemented. And the existing activity of educational material support should be strengthened.

Key words: Domestic work, education and female.

INTRODUCTION

Although researches and documents about female domestic workers are very limited in Ethiopia, domestic workers have lived for a long period of time as one group of the society. In Ethiopian ancient literature, reference to female servants (or gered in Amharic) has been made

in various classic documents way back to the old testament. For instance, the 15th century manuscript of Psalms cited in Pankhurst (1985) - in the narrative on King Solomon, stated about 'the female servants at his service' in the palace of queen Sheba of Ethiopia'.

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Written documents dealing with servants/slaves as topical issues for discussion seem to have somehow increased in the 18th and 19thc social history of Ethiopia. For instance, Pankhurst (1976) wrote that countless women had served throughout the country as slaves or household servants. Slave owning in the early 19th c was quite common, and most well-to-do families would have many slaves, male and female, engaged in household chores. Likewise, Arnauld (1980) stated that among the rich, the mistress of the house would spend much of her time lying on an alga, or bed, and perhaps spinning, while she directed the work to her many servants or slaves.

A common feature of the day's description of female servants/slaves in the 19thc in Ethiopia was identifying them by the type of household chores they 'specialize'. For instance, Krapf (1967), noted that there were three hundred the King's 'grinding- women' and the 'water girls' who carried "all the necessary water for the King's household". Regarding the 'water girls' Arnauld (1980) noted about their social interaction, feelings and emotion as:

"...noisy crowd of chatting, romping girls, with large jars slung between their shoulders by a leather belt, or rope ... across the breast. These 'water-girls' were the slaves of the king, and their chief employment consisted of this daily duty of carrying water from the stream to the palace at the summit of the hill . . . they supply all water required for the use of the courtiers and guests, beside a body-guard of three hundred gunmen, all of whom are daily fed at the royal table."

The female servants/slaves engaged in cooking, preparing alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks and other domestic chores were other group who specialized different types of household (Harris, 1943). There were also another group of female servants who, in addition to the household chores, played important roles during the warfare. These were known as 'Camp-followers'. They often prepared food for the troops at battlefield.

Sadly enough, in the earlier period, female domestic workers had been almost considered as slaves since they received little more than their subsistence, an occasional gift of clothes, and a very small number of amoles. Servants in Tegre, according to Pearce, cited in Pankhurst (1976), were paid in salt, but were given the equivalent of only three Maria Theresa dollars a year besides their upkeep. This, Pearce felt, was indeed the maximum they could judiciously be given, for, he declares:

"I have often observed that, if though their faithfulness and attention to their master may fit to make them an addition to their pay, or any present, they become immediately ungovernable and insolent, the least indulgence spoiling them for good servants." When not so indulged they were, he says, "very submissive", and

"never received anything from their master's hand without bowing and kissing the article" (Pankhurst, 1976).

Interestingly, the 1974 revolution might be taken as a turning point in the history of servants in this country. The pro-Marxist military government put domestic servants in the list of the oppressed and officially banned using the derogatory terms used to refer to servants (i.e. gered in Amharic for female). It was by this time that the now national parlance of yebet serategna (which literally translated to English as domestic worker) came into being. The Derg regime further introduced a system that allows domestic workers to establish their own association with their assumed oppressed compatriots that mainly consisted of prostitutes, waitresses, bartenders, daily laborers etc (Workers federation of Ethiopia, 1979).

In the current government of Ethiopia, female domestic workers have not still enjoyed equal opportunities in every area of benefits unlike the other group of women. In recent years, women's issues have become one of the premier agenda of the country. Especially, women's access to education has been recognized as a fundamental right, and increasing their access to education is among the educational goals of Ethiopia. To realize these goals, the current government of Ethiopia has put into place a variety of strategies designed to increase female participation rates in education and consequently in the overall development process. In this regard, the government scores a great success but this achievement has not touched female domestic workers.

To make it factual, UNESCO (2012) reported that Ethiopia is the 3rd most improved country in the world for primary enrolment rates since 2000 as it is one of the agenda to achieve the millennium development goal of education for all. It also reported that Ethiopia has a steady improvement in the participation of girls at primary level. The primary school girls/ boys ratio reached from 0.67 in 2000 to 0.92 in 2013. However, this achievement has not touched female domestic workers. For instance, according to the report by Ethiopia social security commission (2013), out of the four surveyed regions' female domestic workers, an overwhelming majority (60.8%) of them don't have access to primary education. Even those who have access of education (39.2%) have experienced high drop-out rate, only 41% of them survived to the last grade of primary education and there were only 29% enrolled in secondary education. This implies that female domestic workers have less access of education when they compare to the rest of women in Ethiopia. This happens not due to the reason that the government lacks interest in ameliorating the educational status of female domestic workers rather it is due to shortage of information about female domestic workers whereby the government fails to work on them (Emebet and Mellese, 2004).

Thus, this research is intended to fill this gap by studying the challenges and opportunities of female domestic

workers in accessing education in the city administration of Bahir Dar. The findings of this study will be helpful for some practical purposes. The study can serve as a source of information for development practitioners, policy-makers and development agents. The governmental bureaus like Ethiopian ministry of education can use it as a source to take action against the educational problems of marginalized group that includes domestic workers.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Description of the study area

Bahir Dar city administration is the third largest city in Ethiopia after Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa and has a population of 201,450. It is the capital town of Amhara national regional state and is the seat of the regional government and responsive sectoral office. For the administrative purposes the town is classified into 17 urban Kebeles (Local administration) with the current restructuring (2004), it also incorporated 6 rural Kebeles such as Zenzelma, Abaraji, Deshit, Worebo Kola Tsion, and part of Sebatamot, which are found in its surrounding. The town administration incorporates 3 satellite towns, 9 urban Kebeles and 4 rural Kebeles. The city has an estimated area of 186.38 kilometer square (ANRS, 2010)

Research methodology

Using appropriate research approach is a key step to achieve the proposed research objectives. Likewise, to achieve the proposed objectives of this research, the researcher relied on qualitative approach for its most advantage over quantitative approach. As Creswell (2003) argued that qualitative approach gives no prior social order external to the lived experience of the actors that predetermines outcomes of the research. The approach seeks to interpret the meaning people make of their lives in natural setting rather than describing statistical associations between variables. Again among the various types of research designs within qualitative approach, case study was taken as appropriate research design to attain these research objectives. As Kitchin and Tate (2000) claimed that since the case study research seeks to extract meaning from the data, it focuses on detail and natural order of events.

It is a concerned for an in-depth studying of a single social unit or phenomenon in holistic manner: nature of the event, relationships or processes of events and the possible outcome (Crang and Ian, 2007). This features of case study offers the researcher to have sufficient detail of information on challenges and opportunities of domestic workers in respect to education. Regarding the data collection instruments, this study employed semi-structured interviews with the purposively selected participants. For these purposes, 11 domestic workers were interviewed. Additionally, the study employed semi-structured interview for selected informants to extract supportive information about the issues. Hence, three teachers were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews, both with the target groups and with the key informants, were conducted in Amharic language. With the consent of the participants, they have been recorded through note taking and tape recording.

Moreover, in order to cross-check and validates the data obtained via interviews and to come up with a common understanding about the conditions of domestic workers, the researchers facilitated focus group discussion with domestic workers. To this effect, one focus group discussion was held and the discussion consisted of 8

persons. The discussion was conducted in Amharic language and the information recorded through note taking. The criteria of selecting the interviewed domestic workers were having of assertiveness behavior and staying at least one year in domestic work. To find this group of domestic workers, the researcher got prior knowledge from their neighborhood and employers.

Before beginning the interview, the researcher repeatedly told the purpose of the research and continually assured them that the recording and note taking are only used for the purpose of the research. Besides, the researcher informed them that their identity would be kept confidential and not disclosed even after the study. This encouraged them to be free to reveal things without fear. The interview session was arranged based on discussion with informant domestic workers and conducted in private and safe place. The interview and the discussion were conducted in Amharic language and the information recorded through note taking and tape recording.

To interpret the data obtained from the above stated tools, the researcher employed a thematic qualitative data analysis. In this regard, the analysis of the raw data involved five stages. At the beginning, the raw data obtained from interviews, key informant interview and focus group discussion were translated from Amharic to English; the raw data were then coded and organized on the bases of their dimension; the conditions of each dimension and category of data were interpreted. Following this, the description and classification of the raw data was made, and finally they were analyzed qualitatively. During analysis, the redundant information obtained from the data was eliminated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part presents the findings of the study. The findings are summarized and grouped into two major-sections. These are challenges and opportunities of accessing education.

Challenges of accessing education

Domestic workers have shown strong zeal to access education, however, their interest to access education is curtailed by different factors. Below are the challenges that domestic workers have confronted, as the study findings pinpointed.

Losing wages

Losing wage is one of the obstacles to the domestic workers' schooling. In line with this, the focus group discussants revealed that when they joined school, their employers refused to pay their monthly wages in order to compensate additional expense that their education might incur. The employers make another deal with the domestic workers, which may oblige domestic workers to lose their wages. Lack of money, the employer's lack of interest to pay wages when their domestic workers manifest the interest to start schooling, and inability to fulfill the basic needs hinder their dream to access education. The experience of the following interviewee explains the situation as follows:

Case 1

I used to earn \$5 per month before I started schooling. But after I joined school, my employers refused to pay me my monthly wages. Now, I am suffering because I have no money to buy clothes, shoes and other materials that I need. As a result, I am planning to quit my education at the end of this year.

According to the international labour organisation ('ILO') domestic work is undervalued and poorly regulated, with many domestic workers remaining underpaid and unprotected. Many countries do not address the issue of domestic work in any legislation, with the result that domestic workers remain vulnerable to unequal, unfair and abusive treatment and are subjected to work conditions which are not in line with the ILO's Decent Work Paradigm (ILO, 2012). Likewise, in Ethiopia no minimum wage is set for domestic workers and therefore one finds that most of the domestic workers are poorly paid. No strict regulations are in place to even make sure that monthly salary is paid for (Ethiopia bureau of labor and social affairs, 2010). Similarly, this study picked up a trend that the wages got lower or even lost as the workers started schooling. Therefore, losing of wage caused by the absence of appropriate regulations is one factor that hampers domestic workers to access education.

Work burden

Based on the data collected from the focus group discussants domestic work load is the other bottleneck which restricts domestic workers from schooling. The routine domestic work and the quantity of tasks that the domestic workers are supposed to carry out are usually very heavy. This affects the performance of them at school as well on the capacity to regularly attend their classes. Employers usually do not show willingness to ease the work burdens for the benefit of domestic workers' education. Concerning this, one of the interviewees stated as follows:

Case 2

I am a grade 6 student. I always face a heavy work burden. Consequently, my academic performance became below standard. When I sit to attend class, I usually feel sleepy. This is because I always go there being entirely exhausted by the domestic work. Last year, I failed to be promoted to grade 7. If I fail this year, I will be forced to quit schooling, and I will wait until things become convenient for me.

Likewise, one of the key informants also strengthened this information as follows:

I am a teacher in Fasilo primary school. As the education system of Ethiopia is self-contained, the students are

learning all subjects with a single teacher until they reach grade 4. Hence, I teach my students from grade 1 to grade 4, and this helps me to understand their problems in detail. The students who are domestic workers are not actively participating in class. They are dizzy and often fall asleep in class due to the workload that they have at their house. As a result, many quitted their schooling as they failed to withstand the challenge.

Most studies found that domestic workers are faced with a higher amount domestic workload than any other groups (Henry and Gravel, 2006). According to the world bank east African studies, domestic workers have spent approximately 105 hours each week performing household work which includes cooking, taking care of children, cleaning, washing etc. They are often exposed to work intensity as they are often doing two or more activities at once, such as taking care of children while cleaning. Such work intensity would bring many negative health consequences upon them, such as lack of sleep, stress, and lack of recreation (Beck et al., 2013). In the same vein, this study found workload as a major problem of domestic workers and its consequences are directly affected their educational condition. For instance, they became dizzy and often fallen asleep while they were in class, and as a result of these they could not actively participated in class.

Time constraint

According to the focus group discussants, lack of time to study is another problem that affects their education. The following cases further strengthen time constraint as a factor hampering domestic workers' academic performance.

Case 3

I am a grade 9 student. I am working throughout the day without any rest. I don't have time to study. Sometimes, I am inclined to stop my education because I know that I could not be successful in my education under this circumstance.

Case 4

I am from the rural community of Sekella Woreda in west Gojjam zone. I came to Bahir Dar to get access of education. I have worked as a baby sitter in my aunt's house. Though I do not have monthly wage, my aunt is fulfilling the necessary stationery materials and uniforms for schooling, and I am happy with the access I got, but my problem is time constraint. From grade 1 to 5, for instance, I used to stand 1st to 3rd, but after that my result has decreased. I know where my weak side lies- I do not

allot ample time and do not study being programmed. This is due to the time constraint the domestic workload has brought about. When I became a grade six student, I ranked 5th which was uncommon for me. This shows that my performance is decreasing from time to time. If this condition is continued in such manner, I will quit my education until things become suitable for me.

The above interview results show that even though domestic workers are committed to tolerate the low wage they earn per month, they do not want to compromise the factors that are going to constrain their education. They start domestic work to enjoy the opportunity they missed in the rural area, among which education can be one, but after employment they are usually busy with domestic work to fulfill their wishes and plans. Unless they finish the routine domestic work, they won't move on to their lessons. As a result, many of them fall short of time to deal with their lessons, and finally end up being unsuccessful in achieving their objectives. To protect such challenge, Ethiopia has no form of regulation of any kind for domestic workers and labor laws covering domestic workers have not been yet introduced (Ethiopia bureau of labor and social affairs, 2010). Similarly, in most Sub-Saharan African countries domestic workers have not legislative rights including no set of working hours, and little access to social protection. Their isolation and vulnerability as workers is made more complex by their invisibility in private homes and their dependence on the good will of their employers. Hence, they have been often forced to work long hours and this condition would in turn affect their other needs which include education (Gernigon, 2010).

Education fee

Some of the focus group discussants stated that the technical and vocational college fee is very expensive. Most of the domestic workers who completed grade 10 manifested their wish to join technical and vocational colleges in the extension program, because this can provide them alternative skills as well for future job opportunities. However, since the fees are higher than their paying capacity, they usually fail to achieve their personal objectives. In general, the domestic workers' low income, the precariousness of their living, and their difficulty to plan for themselves affect their capacity to afford the expenditures related to schooling. The following interviewees stated the condition as follows:

Case 5

I came from the rural area of Motta. Having failed to cover my school expenses, I started domestic work in 2006 and continued for three years until I completed grade 10. I would have liked to pursue my education in a

technical and vocational college, but I discovered that the monthly fee was unbearable as to capacity. Upon completion of grade ten, I started to work in a cafe for a monthly wage of \$10. Side by side, I started part-time domestic work and used to earn \$11. This was not even enough to cover the college fees as it is too expensive.

Case 6

I became domestic worker when I was in grade seven (2008) since I lost my parents. Currently, I am a student in Bahir Dar Technique and Vocational College studying Cooperative Accounting. I used to be a fairly good performing student and that is why I joined preparatory school, but I failed to join university. The work burden, coupled with my health problem, made me fail. When I was in grade 9 and 10, I used to perform well since I was not loaded but later on, as fulfilling sustenance has become a priority, I started to use much of my time for domestic work. I work in four houses as part-time domestic worker and earn \$20 per month, out of which \$14 is allocated for house rent and college fees. I use only \$6 for my living expense. I do pay \$9 for my college fee but if I fail to pay on the exact day, I will be penalized. My income is not constant or guaranteed, so I usually pay late with penalty. I tried to ask for 50% discount as I am an orphaned, with no one to help me; I have not yet got any solution.

International standard classifications of occupations stated that even if domestic work contributes to sustaining life and is critically related to economic and social development; it is not regulated in many contexts. This is because it is invisible and done within the private space of the home – not defined as a “workplace”. It also holds the low value of women's unpaid housework, not defined as work, because it is not considered as producing value. Domestic work is seen as a “labor of love” or part of women's inherent attributes, needing no special skill (Mata-Greenwood, 2001). This fact is being true when it comes into Ethiopia. As a result of this, Ethiopian domestic workers do not earn what they deserved and their remunerations are too minimal (Ethiopia bureau of labor and social affairs, 2010). This study found that given their low wages, domestic workers spend most of their salaries on basic needs like food, cloth and shelter. Due to their low wages most of them were not able to pay their educational fees as it is expensive to them.

Unintended pregnancy

The focus group discussants explained that even though the problems of domestic workers is multifaceted and deep rooted, unintended pregnancy is one of the most severe bottlenecks hindering their effort to continue

education. To this end, the following interviewees described their experiences as follow:

Case 7

I am from the rural kebeles of Debreremarkos. Upon the death of my father, my mother got married to a man who became my step-father. Because we could not understand each other, he fired me out of the home, and I came to Bahir Dar. Then, I was employed as a domestic worker at the age of 15, with the help of a broker. I worked for five years for a man who was a bachelor. My monthly wage was initially \$1, but was later increased to \$3. I was learning in the evening program. Meanwhile he promised to marry me; I had sexual relations with him willingly, and later got pregnant. When the pregnancy became seven months, he created a pretext and advised me to go to my mother and bear there. I gave birth to a male baby, and later, he refused to take me back. I stayed with my mother for some years until my baby grows. Later I came back to Bahir Dar and started domestic work. Currently, I am earning \$6 but send \$4 to my son. As a result, I couldn't pursue my education and for this I have often accused the man who impregnated me.

Case 8

My parents passed away while I was a kid, making me helpless in the rural area. I had no one to live with. Then, I became a cow keeper whereby my teacher got me and brought me to Bahir Dar to live with his mother. I started again schooling in Bahir Dar serving as a domestic worker of my former teacher's mother. I have attended school up to grade 4. Unluckily, the old woman got retired and she fell short of money to cover my school expenses. I did not want to quit my education, so I looked for another domestic work. I succeeded in getting a new employment as well for my project of education, up to grade 8. The family where I started working was not an extended family, but a husband and a wife, where the wife was working in the rural area. I worked for some time, but one day, the man forcefully raped me. I was 14 by then, and I got pregnant. I had no any knowledge if or not I was pregnant until four months. Once I recognized that I was pregnant, I decided to go to Felega Hiwot Hospital where I could abort, but they told me that it was impossible as it was above three months. Knowing that I was pregnant, my employer (the man) used a pretext to fire me, blaming me for having stolen some gold. He didn't give me my monthly wage. I managed to get a work as a daily laborer and I brought up my child. Then, I got married to a man who is a daily laborer like me, from whom I gave birth to a baby boy. Also this man denied me when I gave birth to my second child. Now I am working as a part-time domestic worker. I am still very

eager to continue my schooling, but I failed to do so since I am a mother of two children.

As international labour organisation ('ILO') reported the private confinement in which domestic workers work, is a perfect breeding ground for sexual abuse. The fact that this workers work in isolation, they are susceptible to mistreatment by their employers and the lack of power, fear to lose their jobs and bad financial situations forces them to keep quiet about such abuse (ILO, 2012). Likewise, this study identified that domestic workers are forced into sexual intercourse with their male employers. Consequently, they experienced unwanted pregnancy and such situation created problem upon their schooling.

Opportunities of Accessing Education

The existence of night school program

The existence of night school program in Bahir Dar town is a good opportunity in creating access to education for domestic workers. In this regard, the focus group discussants revealed that, due to the nature of their job, they could not go for schooling in the regular program, so they commonly follow the evening program. In line with this, one of the interviewees shared her experience as follows:

Case 9

As I am a domestic worker, I have to clean the house, prepare food, wash clothes and do other domestic routines. These household tasks should be accomplished during day time. If I prepare food at night, it will get spoiled next day and may pose health problem on the family. Hence, the nature of my job does not allow me to attend schooling in the regular program/day time. The only alternative I have is to get enrolled in the evening program.

The Government of Ethiopia has spent most its national budget on education and in the last decade more than 80% of the new schools have been built across the country. In line with this, most of these schools have evening programs in addition to the regular one (Workineh, 2013). This condition is, therefore, a good opportunity for housemaids' schooling as the nature of their job would not allow them to go to school at the day time.

Educational/stationery material support

The focus group discussants stated that a non-governmental organization named *Communita Voluntari Per il Mondo /CVM/* provided them educational material support. Besides, there are some employers who do fulfill

stationery materials, including uniforms for their domestic workers. The following experiences of the interviewees help disclose the situations further:

Case 10

As I am a student, I am working in my employer's house with no salary. Although my employer agreed to cover my educational expenses, she does not fulfill all I need. As a result, I faced problems of not getting exercise books, pens and other educational materials. However, after I became member of Ewiket Birhan domestic workers association, CVM supports me with the necessary educational materials that I need.

Case 11

I am from kebele 09 of Bahir Dar. I joined domestic work in order to get access to education as my parents had no the capacity to cover the necessary stationery materials that I need in the course of my schooling. I am now in grade four; it was via my relatives that I met my employers. They do not pay a monthly wage, but they merely fulfill stationery materials and uniforms I need for my education.

Over the past few years, in response to global changes in the labour market as well as persisted exploitation, domestic workers' organizing has shown signs of revival—a revival that uses both traditional and different organizational models and strategies. Alongside this there is a growing interest and concern by non-governmental organizations (NGO), and governments in the situation-or plight- of domestic workers (ILO, 2012). To this end, some NGOs like CVM have worked in Ethiopia to support domestic workers. Similarly, the information we get from the above two interviews tells us that there are supports domestic workers enjoy because they are domestic workers. They, for instance, explained that they received support of stationary materials such as pens, pencils, exercise books etc. from CVM because of the fact that they belong to the associations that CVM facilitates with the technical assistance of the office of women, children and youth. Some also get the will of their employers to go to school and some sort of educational materials support. To this end, one can understand that these groups of housemaids getting advantaged from supports which have made them enjoy relative access to education for a better tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

It is widely assumed that access to formal education is a prerequisite for improving women's status. To this end, many women across the world are increasingly benefited from education. Yet, Ethiopia domestic workers do not

enjoyed such privilege due to multifaceted factors. These factors include losing wages, heavy work load, long hours of work, education fee and unintended pregnancy. However, the availability of educational/stationery material support and the existence of night school program promote domestic workers' opportunities to education. To tackle the identified problems, the researcher suggests that strong income generating mechanisms should be created for domestic workers; public discussion forums should be conducted to raise the awareness of employers regarding the overall situation of domestic workers; strict labour laws covering domestic workers should be introduced and implemented; and nongovernmental and governmental organizations should work further on scaling up educational material supports.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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