

SHADOW WORK

Ensuring Dignity and Security
in the Lives of Choultry Workers



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act:onaïd
ActionAid Association (India)



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*“With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose
our battle. Our battle is not for power or wealth.
But for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation
of the human personality.”*

~ Dr B.R. Ambedkar

This study is dedicated to and is an act of solidarity
with the collective struggle of the choultry workers
for their basic rights and dignity as
women and as workers.

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FOREWORD

Invisibility, informality, drudgery and extreme vulnerability characterise the world of work for women. Even when paid, the conditions of employment and remuneration are oppressive and exploitative, contravening international and national labour standards. Patriarchal values and structures that dominate society further impact the status of women workers. Their presence in the labour market is in addition to the unpaid care work forced on them by social and family norms. Thus, the expectation of women workers is that they will perform multiple activities.

The participation of women in the workforce in India, which was low, to begin with, has been declining. In the last decade, 21 million women have exited the workforce in India. There is a need to spread knowledge on issues faced by women across the realms of unpaid, underpaid and forced work. There is a need to resist the invisibilisation of women's work, campaign for the recognition of women's work, and celebrate them as workers. We need to support the efforts of women workers to hold the State accountable and demand their rights as workers. We need to strengthen the agency and capacities of women farmers, MGNREGA workers, street hawkers, home-based women workers and domestic workers and support the formation of workers' collectives, farmers' collectives, cooperatives and networks of women workers. While there are universal themes to be found across these sectors, each sector has specific vulnerabilities caused by the nature of the operations and the historical vulnerabilities faced by the workers. In this context, we present this report: *Shadow Work: Ensuring Dignity and Security in the Lives of Choultry Workers*.

The report presents the challenges faced by women workers working in choultries in and around the city of Bengaluru in Karnataka. Traditionally choultries were resting places for travellers, pilgrims or visitors to a site, most often a religious place. Over time these have come to mean workers hired for various events, including marriages, celebrations of a new home and other functions.

This report has been made possible by activists of the Slum Mahila Sanghatne, a Bengaluru-based women's organisation that works on issues of communities who live in working-class localities and also raises issues of the workers who live there. These activists mobilised choultry workers to share their experiences and voice their demands. Madhu Bhushan, a long-time co-traveller with ActionAid Association, has participated in these conversations with colleagues leading our work in the State of Karnataka and woven all these narratives into this report.

In the process, she has captured with great sensitivity and vividness the quotidian moments that make up the life of a choultry worker.

The report presents the way forward as voiced by the women workers and a collective vision of a future where the rights of informal workers in this sector are protected and promoted.

We present this report to a broader audience so we can recognise and celebrate women's role in the world of work and help build their agency to assert and advance their rights.

In solidarity,

Sandeep Chachra

Executive Director

ActionAid Association

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the involvement of Slum Mahila Sanghatane (SMS). SMS is a relatively new women's organisation, with a membership comprised of women from under-served informal working class settlements in Bengaluru, Karnataka. They assert communities rights to basic amenities, entitlements and addressing issues relating to violence against women. SMS has conducted campaigns during the COVID-19 health emergency, ensuring health rights of communities by helping them access treatment and medicine from Public Health Centres. In the post-COVID context they have stepped forward to mobilize people and link them to government programmes. SMS works to further the rights of the invisible unorganised workforce that live in the localities they work in, this includes choultry workers, *agarbathi* rollers, flower stringing workers and street vendors. For this report activists with SMS mobilizing women working in *Choultries* (marriage halls) and encouraged them to share the challenges they face and bring these issues in to the public domain.

We are grateful to Ms. Madhu Bhushan, feminist and women's rights activist in Karnataka, for bringing together this study on the status of women choultry workers in Bengaluru and its environs. Madhu has participated in numerous conversations with choultry workers, and brought out the criticalities of the working conditions and helped formulated recommendations for ensuring rights for this sector in the world of unorganised, invisible and informal work. Mrs. Sharada, a well-known writer has translated the report into Kannada language, so we could publish it in both Kannada and English.

We are deeply grateful to all colleagues who have made it possible for us to report on the lives of women in choultry work, with the objective of supporting the rights of a very vulnerable section of worker, who have been historically exploited.

SUMMARY

Choultry workers are those who do the cleaning and sometimes assist in the work of cooking in “choultries” or marriage halls that are rented out for performance of marriages or any related religious and social functions. Most of the women who go to work in choultries in their experience are from urban slum communities and come from the most socially and economically marginalized communities – largely Dalit and the urban and rural poor.

This study was conducted by ActionAid Association, with the support of Slum Mahila Sanghatane. The objective was to gather, document and present the voices of the choultry workers towards making visible the absolutely discriminatory conditions under which they labour and affecting policy level changes. As a first step individual case studies were documented. Based on this the methodology of Focus Group Discussions was used with clusters of choultry workers living in urban poor settlements both in the heart of Bangalore and outskirts to draw out their experience of the work, their analysis of the problems encountered and their demands from state and society vis a vis the changes they would like to see in their work and status. These discussions and narratives have been woven together in this report while contextualizing the broader nature of their work that would be considered informal labour which is also feminized – both of which have defined the nature of discrimination and exploitation.

The act of listening to the women, helped unpack yet another shadowed arena of women’s labour that remains undervalued, invisible and exploited.

However, the women showed absolute clarity in understanding the degrading conditions under which they labour and made specific and sharp demands on the Government in terms of social entitlements, security and protection due to workers in this sector as the first step towards establishing the dignity of their labour and affirmation of their personhood. And in that awareness, we also got an insight into the individual and collective source of their strength and power towards transforming their own realities.

Their Work

By and large they are women

They get up early in the morning. Sweep and swab their house; clean and chop vegetables, cook food, clean vessels, wash clothes and complete all their household chores which would perhaps including caring for the elders and children. If they live in villages their work would also involve cleaning out the cattle or poultry shed; and putting the cattle and sheep out to graze.

They are then taken as part of a team by a local contractor who is normally a woman from their own community, to a choultry/*chathra* (marriage hall), party hall, a new house that needs to be inaugurated or to a temple or public place where different functions happen. This could be close to their house, village or settlement. It could also be out of the city and sometimes even state.

There they proceed to sweep and swab the place; set out the chairs and tables; help perhaps in the chopping of vegetables, clean all the vessels, remove all the leaves/plates after food is eaten, wash the vessels, clean the kitchen and clean out the choultry.

They go to sleep as late as 1 am and then are woken up at 4 am since the work then starts all over again.

Marriages usually last for a minimum of two days.

Their work concludes by the evening or late night after which they find their way back to their own homes – in slums, neighbouring villages or in shanties where life and livelihoods are precarious.

And the cycle of work and life starts all over again in their home. Work that is relentless and repetitive. Work that is invisible. Undervalued. Unrecognised. Even stigmatized. For the reasons that will become clear in this report.

Who Are They?

They are who we will call in this report “choultry workers”. We will hear more details about them in their own words. In this chapter we will try to understand the nature of work they do which is largely gendered and informal in nature. And both of these dimensions need to be understood such that their specific needs in terms of policy recognition and redress mechanisms can be identified and instituted.

Domesticated Work

The work of choultry workers mirrors what gets categorised as “women’s” work – be it productive or reproductive – within homes and households. This domestic work by definition and nature is not only unpaid but also one that remains largely invisible, undervalued and unrecognized – in non-monetary terms. For it is supposed to be a “labour of love” that women are supposed to do to sustain and care for the family that in fact is the most basic economic unit of our society. Therefore, by extension it appears that this similar kind of labour that revolves around cooking, cleaning and serving even when it is “productive” and done by domestic workers who work in homes other than their own, also remains invisible, undervalued and unrecognized. Particularly since most of them come from culturally and economically marginalized communities. Choultry workers one could say constitute a sub sect of domestic workers or self-employed home-based workers.

The fact that the domestic work sector is dominated by women reflects the gendered notion of housework in our society. Where unpaid work, household work is devalued, the women then going out to do the same tasks, in somebody else’s house or indeed any other space like choultries is also considered low, and her work not recognized. The gendered nature of domestic work including that of in choultries is compounded by age, caste, ethnicity and citizenship.

Further it is also a fact that those who labour at the bottom on the patriarchal pyramid of gender, caste, class and ethnicity are also more vulnerable

to sexual harassment and violence by those higher up in the hierarchy also because of the nature of this work place that is also the smallest patriarchal unit of society. And this is not surprising given the historical continuity of even paid domestic work with the unpaid reproductive and sexual labour of either wives, mothers and daughters or slaves, serfs and debts-bondswomen. A feudal patriarchy continues to inform the kind of work women do within the domestic sphere where sexual services are supposed to be part of the package deal of whatever work that the woman has to do to maintain a family and household. And it matters little whether the master or patriarch is the husband, landlord or employer within the home or home like work space for what remains common is the continued devaluation of their work and vulnerability to sexual harassment and violence. And this too is clear in the report where women speak out quite openly about the sexual harassment they are subjected to, largely by the Cooks, who despite being employees like the women are considered the masters within the choultry who feel entitled to extract sexual favours from women who are so easily accessible during working hours.

It is in this context that the call of the ILO convention, Domestic Work is Decent work, (The ILO Convention, C189, 2011) achieves great significance. It helps to change mindsets, and nomenclature from “servant” to worker. It also raises the self-assertion of women, as well as creates an identity for legislative framework.¹

It is only in recent times thanks to the continuous unionization of domestic workers across the country and sustained lobbying and advocacy that they are now being recognized as “workers” and being able to claim benefits that are due to them even while speaking out and making visible on the invisible sexual harassment embedded within the private sphere of a home they are working in or home like work place.

A similar kind of movement would be required to recognize the work that choultry workers do as decent work and one that needs to be recognized within a legal framework of labour and gender violence.

1. <https://www.actionaidindia.org/publications/ensuring-decent-work-and-dignity/>

A Gendered Workforce

As a work force the choultry workers would come under the category of informal wage labour who are in the informal sector but not self-employed, i.e. the artisans, and non-agricultural labourers who are casually employed. The gendered nature of informal workers becomes clear when we look at it a little more closely. There are an estimated 9.6 crore women who work in India's informal economy, according to a report of the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy, a gender research and advocacy organisation and the Institute of Social Studies Trust. The report states that women constitute only 23% of those employed in India's formal sector that cuts across manufacturing, transportation and production. Men form 85% of this sector that comprises of salaried employees, professionals, and organised trade/business people who hire workers. It is no surprise therefore that women comprise an overwhelming 90% of the workforce of the unorganized and/or sector. And it is no surprise that this sector is characterized by lack of adequate regulation, low labour rights, no dignity of labour, low social security and lack of protectionism (such as protective labour laws and pension benefits) that the formal sector enjoys. And in some cases, the women don't even have the right to be called "worker" largely because their work is low skilled and low paid informal work. Additionally, they have irregular work, little or no bargaining power, lack of control over earning, need to balance paid work with child care and household work and have little or no access to institutional credit, training and total lack of assets.²

It is therefore clear that the entire informal sector of which the choultry workers would form a miniscule part is also highly feminized and gendered work. And both "unproductive" domestic work in homes and "productive" informal sector where most women from marginalised communities labour like domestic workers and choultry workers are two faces of the same devalued economic coin.

2. https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/FINAL%20DRAFT%20REPORT_0.pdf

When Labour Gets Informalized and Economies are Formalized

NSSO reports state that the informal sector of which the choultry workers could be said to be a part of is that which is growing tremendously over the past decades since 2000. And these are decades marked by an ongoing globalization process in which we have seen marked changes in the labour market of India vis a vis decreases in formal or organized sector employment, weakening of worker organisations and collective bargaining institutions and a near total erasure of social security apart from decrease in the quality of employment in terms of security of jobs, terms and conditions at work etc. A closer analysis suggests that the growing informalisation of labour market has been central to most of these global transformations the general outcome of which is a trend towards greater homework with distinct gendered features and informalization of employment even among regular wage/salaried workers.³

In our “global” cities which are being show-cased as the new faces of an affluent and vibrant India, there are lakhs of people who rely on manual labour for their own livelihood. Their incomes have not grown at the same rate of their employers. Taking into account inflation in fact their incomes have often fallen over the last two and half decades, driving them into deeper poverty. The Indian economy over the years has shown a paradoxical trajectory of high economic growth with inadequate or poor employment generation. Formal employment has stagnated and paid employment as a share of total employment has fallen. This has pushed the majority of the workforce into informal self-employment, exposing them to the uncertainties of the market.

The ILO (2018) report shows that in most developing countries, this informal workforce apart from being linked to poverty has other defined characteristics:

» women informal workers are poorer relative to men informal workers.

3. Vikaspedia-Unorganised Labour force in India) Working and living conditions of workers in the Unorganised Sector – A Review of Literature....www.researchgate.net

- » the employment of older persons is more likely to be informal than that of young people with a higher percentage of older women
- » higher percentage of Scheduled Castes, both men and women are in informal employment as compared to Scheduled Tribes and 'Others'.
- » While nine out of ten Muslim workers earn their livelihoods in the informal economy, Muslim women are found to be in informal employment compared to Hindu and 'Others' religions.⁴

These trends clearly indicate the “profile” of all those who are being pushed into deeper and deeper informalization making them more vulnerable and poorer are not only women but also from the Dalit, tribal and religious minority communities. The intersection of poverty with caste, class and religion is near total complete.

Uncertain Legal Framework for Choultry Workers

Apart from it being gendered and informal if we have to understand the “legal” nature of choultry work it could be considered contractual in the most basic sense. However, the fuzzy nature of even this “contractual” relationship as revealed in this study shows that there is not the slightest shred of an any evidence of an employer employee relationship that could be used to ensure compliance on the part of the employers.⁵

Further even in the case of contractual labour in the unorganized sector that is on the increase in the globalized economy existing labour laws do not provide for similar wages and working conditions as formal sector workers. These workers do not have recourse to the formal industrial relations machinery and in fact employers make every effort to deny them any collective, or any individual recourse, to seek redress of grievances – a situation that has led to explosive industrial conflicts in recent

4. https://www.indiaspend.com/uploads/2021/03/26/file_upload-446784.pdf

5. <https://scroll.in/article/990984/in-indias-informal-economy-crores-of-women-face-gender-bias-and-insecurity>

years. This has generally affected workers' freedom of association and right to collective bargaining, and for contract workers, led to persistent discrimination at the workplace. Working as they do, like domestic workers, in multiple unmonitored work spaces which are totally unregulated the opportunities to organise and be recognised as a work force – either informal or contractual – are totally non-existent as of now.

The core vulnerability of “hidden workers” such as choultry workers, domestic help, home-based workers, those working in small sweatshops, daily wage-earners is that not being registered anywhere it is difficult to bring them under the purview of even the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act that could be used to assure them of their basic rights. As a first step towards recognition the employer-employee relationship should be clearly defined, covered by a formal contract, and wherever possible, linked to a universal social security card, which would combine the smart card, now thought to be introduced for unorganised sector workers.

Unfortunately, even this Act that could afford them some protection is now being brought under the Code on Social Security – one of the four codes that seeks to encompass all the 44 labour laws – a move that has been criticized by all established trade unions as signifying the watering down of workers' rights and the responsibilities of employers.

Therefore, even if these workers are brought under the ambit of existing or new legal provisions it remains to be seen how the new codes will be implemented once the rules are framed, and how their rights can be accessed.

Regulatory Framework for Sexual Harassment at Workplace

Given the endemic nature of sexual harassment of choultry workers The Sexual Harassment of women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, Redressal) Act, 2013(Act) is one legal instrument for redress and justice.

Further, Article 21 of the Constitution of India mandates the rights of women to life and right to live with dignity and the right to practice any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade or business which includes the right to a safe environment free from sexual harassment.

Furthermore, the protection against sexual harassment and the right to work with dignity are universally recognized human rights by international conventions and instruments such as Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The POSH Act clearly defines and includes in its ambit both formal and informal workers. It mandates the constitution of an Internal Committee (IC) at the institutional level and a Local Committee (LC) at the district level for prevention, prohibition, and redressal of sexual harassment.

Given the nature of choultry work that remains by and large informal and not institutionalized a choultry worker has the right to seek redressal from the local complaints committee (LCC) when they are sexually harassed at their workplaces. LCC, as constituted under section 6 of the Act, has jurisdiction over an entire district to receive complaints of sexual harassment at the workplace. They have the same powers as of civil court under the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908. The Act also mandates the LC to conduct regular awareness and sensitization sessions for the workers and employers to make them aware of the issue and provisions of the Act.

However, the reality is that as per a survey out of 655 districts in the country, only 191 districts have set up a Local Complaints Committee.⁶ And there is little or no recognition of sexual harassment that is a normalized form of violence let alone any awareness of the existence of a Local Complaints Committee as an instrument of redress. A concerted effort is required from civil society and unions to put pressure on the district administration to carry out its mandated task of setting up an LCC and carrying out periodic awareness sessions within all choultries in their jurisdiction that would at the very least make managements and owners of

6. <https://www.ungender.in/how-you-can-help-domestic-workers-fight-sexual-abuse/>

choultry workers aware of their responsibility in ensuring a work atmosphere that proscribes sexual harassment.

Impact of Pandemic on Women Informal Workers

1.50 crore Indians have been made redundant in an economic slowdown post pandemic that has hit the women disproportionately more. While the unemployment rate among women reached 15.8% compared with 12.6% among male workers in September 2020 the impact of the COVID pandemic was felt most intensely by women in low skilled work such as farm and factory labour and domestic help.

An APU study showed that 47% of women workers who lost their job between March and December before the second wave were permanently made redundant. This, compared with 7% of male workers many of who were able to return to their old jobs or take up independent work like selling vegetables.

Traditional household roles in India further impede women's return to the workforce. India's female to male share of housework is among the largest in the world and women bear the brunt of childcare with schools closed during pandemic. Women could not go to faraway factories where some work opened up since they have to take care of children.⁷

As the report reveals in stark terms the livelihoods of choultry workers too were devastated during and after the pandemic. And the scale of devastation is such that even after the pandemic has passed it has been difficult for them to recover given that as invisible workers, they could not access even the relief and compensation that was available for the daily wage earners like auto drivers or construction workers.

In conclusion it appears that in a post globalized and post pandemic world that has seen a steady disintegration of formal employment most people,

7. <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/publications/down-and-out-the-gendered-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-indias-labour-market/>

especially women, have been forced to enter informal employment not by choice but due to lack of employment opportunities and in the absence of any other means of earning a living. Choultry work is one such avenue that needs to be given formal recognition as work if those living of it have to labour under conditions of dignity, decency and security.

The women we spoke to themselves told us that there are an estimated 3,000 choultry workers all over Bangalore. And that surely is a very conservative estimate since no formal enumeration has even been attempted to calculate how many women are doing this kind of work.

They are a ubiquitous if invisible presence in any celebration and function that we might go to in choultries where a range of events from birthdays, marriage to death ceremonies and mass feeding take place, *shaadi* mahals or new houses for which *gruha pravesha* is being conducted; or it could be a mass feeding in a temple. The celebrations are sacred and joyous. But the women who labour hard to make the occasion sacred and joyous are unseen since their work is considered menial and dirty and therefore has to be kept out of sight and mind. Unless the younger and more glamorous among them are dressed up and standing at the reception handing out flowers and welcome drinks at the entrance.

To understand and make visible their lives, their working conditions, their dreams and their demands, over the month of March 2022 we met and had some detailed Focus Group Discussions with groups of them in the places where they live. In each place we met groups of around 20- 30 women each.

The women came from different locations including:

- a. Anandapura, Anjanappa Garden, Jolly Moholla
- b. Janata Colony
- c. MCTC Colony, Kengeri AK Colony, Sanjaynagar, Narsimaiaha Colony
- d. Bannerghatta

The first three areas, where Slum Mahila Sanghatane works are all located in the heart of the city and primarily slum settlements that are part of the urban landscape of Bangalore for the past many decades. Bannerghatta, on the edges of the city and the Bannerghatta national park, is where

Society for Informal Education and Development Studies (SIEDS) has been working with several vulnerable rural communities including forest dwelling tribals. We met either in the local community centres or in open spaces including a temple under a tree.

In this chapter we seek to summarise what they shared along with some brief glimpses of personal views, stories and some observations.

Diverse and Driven by Vulnerability

They were from diverse communities – Hindu, Muslims and Christians but most were from the Dalit/OBC communities and in HP colony from the Iruliga tribal community. As Pushpalatha from MCTC Colony said of the women who do this work *“we are from different castes and religions... Bhajantri, SC, Mudaliar, Muslim etc but we go everywhere for work.”*

Most of the participants were between the ages of 17 to the mid-thirties/forties with a few older and more senior women who by and large are the local contractors who gather the younger ones to take for work to the choultries. Almost all were married with two children and more and all working in choultries since they were quite young. Not many of them have studied beyond the tenth and have little or no education. Family circumstances have forced them to go to work at very young ages.

- » Sixteen-year-old Swarnashree who has studied till the 10th said that both she and her 14-year-old sister Shruthi go to do this work to sustain their family since both their parents cannot work including her father who is a painter and has become incapacitated after an accident. Shruthi is also mute and unable to talk.
- » Twenty-nine-year-old Kamakshi from Jolly Mohalla who is married with two children has been working in choultries for the past 18 years since she was 11 years.
- » Twenty-nine-year-old Lata from MCTC has been working for the past 15 years since she was 14 years old.

- » Fifty-year-old Sharadamma from Jolly Mohalla has been working since she was ten years old.

I am one of three sisters. My elder sister got burnt by her husband who is an alcoholic and I live with her so that I can take care of her. We don't have parents. My sister had two children, one of who was born on the road. I got married one year back. My husband goes to work in a garage. I look after my sister's two children who are both in a hostel. My sister goes to beg. My husband supports us and his family.

~ Annapoorna, 18 years

Many of the women are either widowed or have husbands who had no regular job being chronically ill or alcoholics. They are by and large single earners who sustained their families on the income from the choultry. In many cases it is an intergenerational source of income since daughters as they grow up also have joined their mothers in the work that is some cases has become a little more gentrified or upmarket and therefore remunerative. As in the case of Dhanalakshmi from MCTC Colony who said that her daughter has joined choultry work but as somebody who stands at the entrance and welcomes the guests. For this she gets ₹400 while her mother gets ₹250 despite the fact that the latter's labour is more intensive.

I have been working now for 14 years. I have three children who I have fed and grown with the earnings from this work. I have broken my legs and hands in the course of this work but I continue with it. Sometimes we come home as late as 2 am and people do view us with suspicion but I don't care. This work has fed me and taken care of my children.

~ Dhanalakshmi, 46 years, MCTC Colony

I have been working in the choultries for 35 years. My husband died 30 years ago and I have brought up my entire family on this work.

I have two children both of who are married and am living now with one son and his family in his house.

~ Mallika, 53 years, Janata Colony

I have been doing this work for the past 40 years since I was a small child. I have three daughters and one son. My husband does not work. All my daughters do choultry work.

~ Sharadamma, 50 years, Janata Colony

I have been doing this job for the past 30 years. We used to get ₹80 and from that ₹10 was cut for travel. My husband used to always be drunk and never helped to earn anything for the house. I had two children who I educated by putting in a government school. My daughter died leaving a six-year-old girl who I put in a hostel. When I couldn't afford it anymore, I brought her here and it was difficult for her to adapt to a Kannada medium school from an English medium one.

~ Revathy, 59 years, Janata Colony

I have been working since I was a child. I don't have a father and my mother is very old. I am unmarried and live with my mother and younger brother who is married with 4 kids. I go and help in chopping vegetable, cleaning etc. I don't stay out since I have to come home to look after my mother.

~ Shahida, 40 years, MCTC

Conditions Under Which They Labour

The informal and casual nature of their “employment” ensures that the conditions under which they work remains unstructured and disconnected from any legal and formal framework of fair labour practices. This includes work timings, wages, responsibility of employers and access to basic entitlements including medical relief and loans or relief from sexual harassment.

Timings, work routine and job vulnerability

The normal routine in choultry work or marriage halls is that the women go there at around 6 am on the morning of the first day, work till late in the night that day and complete work only by the evening or late in the night of the next day. One night has to be spent in the choultry or in a house which might be having a *gruha pravesha* (entrance to a new home). This routine will change if it is a party hall or mass feeding in temples which would involve perhaps just a day's work. In one month, they might get jobs for about 15 days maximum so they are employed for an average of six months in the year. Rest of the time some of them either do domestic work or some do beedi rolling at home to supplement their incomes.

Structure of employment/Chain of command

The structure of employment is very layered since the women are not employed directly by the choultry or party hall owners or even by the clients who are paying to organize the events in these spaces. In fact, there is little to link the client and the choultry worker who are on two ends of this employment spectrum with the sub-contractor, food/tent house contractor and choultry owner in the centre. The food/tent house contractors are usually who are the ones who employ the women who in turn are "supplied" by the local sub-contractor who is an older woman in the community. In Bannerghatta it was an exception in that each of the women we met are part of separate teams who are linked to specific choulties and their owners directly without going through the food/tent house contractor. All payments are routed through the sub-contractor who takes a cut from the amount given by the contractor which they say is towards the travel. Since the sub-contractor is a local older woman there is usually not much of a conflict since she enjoys the respect of the younger women towards who she normally feels very protective and maternal. As Mallika a 53-year-old sub-contractor from Janata Colony said *"My responsibility is to take young girls for work. And our responsibility is to look after them."*

This does not however prevent any exploitation that gets legitimized under social relations. But most conflicts appear to get resolved within the community through mutual negotiations. As the group in Jolly Mohalla said:

“When we do work, we are given a slip of paper each day on the basis of which they pay us. Sometimes we get cheated out of the number of days we have worked so we also keep track. If we work for 20 days they reduce and put 16 days. This is how we get cheated. Not everybody has a system of register on which you sign.”

What also emerged in the discussions was the fact that the number of sub-contractors has increased over the years. Consequently, now there are so many that almost every road in these localities has at least one contractor and most are women.

Structure of wages

There is no defined structure for the wages paid to choultry workers. While the amounts in each area varied the average wage appears to be anything between ₹500 – ₹700 for the two days that they work. About ₹100 – 200 gets cut from this by the sub-contractor to take care of the travel. Some said that one way is theirs and contractor pays for one way. There were some complaints about delays in payments and about tips given by clients to the sub-contractors not getting shared with the women.

“They fill us into tempos like cattle along with all the pots and pans. While returning we come back on our own.”

While in some cases as in Bannerghatta the *chathras*/choulttries are located relatively close to their village/settlements/homes most others spoke about how they have been taken across the city for work and in many instances, they have gone out of Bangalore too – Mysore, Krishnagiri, Goa, Ooty, Hyderabad and even as far as Maharashtra and Rajasthan. However even when they travel out of town, the wage they get is the same. The only extra payment is that which is paid for the days of their travel when they are travelling while all other expenditure including food and stay is taken care of.

The other concern some of them expressed in Jolly Mohalla was that of their wages coming down since there were migrants coming in who are willing to work for less. *“Now Gujaratis have come and are willing to work even for ₹200! They have deprived us of work! Migrants now do the jobs that we used to do.”*

Occupational hazards and lack of medical relief

There are occupational hazards part of this work that are totally invisible given the informal nature of employment. Primary among them arising from the fact that are constantly working in water and cleaning large vessels – a hazard that has resulted in debilitating accidents for which they have not received any medical relief or reimbursement but are in some instances has left them totally incapacitated to work for life.

In cases of accidents the support they have been given ranges from a paltry ₹30 to a “generous” ₹800. If more money has been advanced it has been recovered from the wages. In almost all cases it is the sub-contractor who comes forward to help – either in terms of moral or economic support. The contractor, owner and client do not come forward at all. If at all they do it is to blame them for the accidents saying that they should have been more careful. Many stories emerged from every area that showed total callousness and indifference to the basic human needs if not the rights of the women – either on the part of the contractor or the owner.

Two accounts were particularly heart rending.

I have worked for 14 years. I slipped and fell while I was working 2 years back. Nobody came and even picked me up – only Chandramma (the sub-contractor) did. They gave me ₹30 and sent me home. My husband's leg is also broken and I myself cannot work too much anymore. I have two children – my daughter is married and my son goes for work but does not give any money home.

~ Rangamma, 60 years, MCTC Colony

Two years back when I was washing vessels I slipped and fell and fractured my back. I had to take care of all the expenditure which came up to 4 lakhs. I can't work anymore. Contractor just told me that these are my own personal problems that I should take care of.

~ Kaniyamma, Jolly Mohall

Kaniyamma who shared her story has a visible hump on her spine as a result of the fracture that she has had which has obviously not healed well and therefor has become a physical deformity. And yet there is no forum at which she can seek compensation or justice.

Access to loans, bonus and other extra benefits

Apart from the tips that some of them said that they get through the sub-contractors who may get it from the contractors, owners or clients none of them can directly seek for and ask for any extra benefits like loans for their children's education, house construction or any other emergencies. The only extra "benefit" they get is that related to the routine bonus given by most employers in India (both in the formal and informal sectors) during the festival of Dussehra. And this is dependent entirely on the individual generosity of the employers who can also be extremely stingy and miserly. As Ratna from Bannerghatta shared *"In Dussehra we get ₹250 as bonus from our chattrha owner. Earlier they used to give us old clothes that we rejected and we told them to give us money instead."*

Gouri also from Bannerghatta who works with an apparently more generous owner said that they get ₹1,000 apart from clothes/sari for themselves, their husband and children.

None of them were even aware of any benefits that they could claim under any scheme for workers compensation from the government like COVID relief when there was a total loss of employment and livelihood for the women during and after the lockdown. Now there seems to be some awareness about registering for eShram cards that the Slum Mahila Sanghatane is helping them with in the slums where they are working.

Gender Blindness vis-a-vis Lack of Basic Amenities, Personal Security and Risk of Sexual Violence

Despite the choultry workers being a predominantly female workforce there is absolutely no recognition of and sensitivity to the need for specific amenities, safety and security. The fact that women spend nights out without any male member of the family whose 'protective' presence ensures their 'honour' and 'chastity' has led to the stigmatization of this work and the perception of the women as easy and loose. On the other hand, the other the total lack of any concern for the safety and security of the women in the workplace has contributed to the increased vulnerability of the young women whose only source of security and safety are the older women or sub-contractors who guard them like hawks against predatory men. In this context various factors contribute to the different kinds of vulnerability that women face in this "work space" called the choultry:

Lack of child care

The workspace is totally blind to the need of young mothers who might need to bring their small children for work since they cannot leave them at home for any reason. As shared by a young mother in the group in Jolly Mohalla *"Yes sometimes we have to take our children to work and where they walk into the kitchen and slip on soap in the kitchen."*

Or as another woman said: *"Pregnant women, forced by either the contractors or difficult circumstances at home are forced to come for work not even five months after delivery. We put a jhoola (swing) for the baby at the work place. Some allow and some don't allow."*

Lack of bathrooms

While the women are expected to keep the entire premises including the bathrooms spick and span it is ironical that in most cases, they are denied access to the toilets that they are made to clean - either in the choultry or in the houses they go to for functions. This becomes especially dehumanizing and unsafe when they are forced to go in public spaces, like

next to gutters and drains to the toilets or when they have their periods and have no private space to go to in order to change their clothes, clean themselves or change their sanitary pads. It was heart rending to hear of how they manage to take care.

- » My job is largely to take out the yele (leaves) and clean out the pathres (vessels). We are also asked to clean even the houses. But they don't allow us to go to bathrooms. Nobody takes any responsibility for those of us who go work in choultries.
- » When we are in the choultry we can use the bathroom but when we go out of Bangalore we have to go outdoors or in the nearby drains/mori. We don't get any mattress to sleep on – it is only the road.
- » They don't even open the toilets till the programme/event starts. They tell us that we can go wherever we want. When we have periods we really suffer for lack of toilet. We have to go and change our pads in between tables and chair.
- » We are not allowed to go to the toilets in the chathra and we have to go out either in the fields around or near the public drains

Lack of secure sleeping facilities

While the rare choultry owners like in Bannerghatta have kept aside rooms for the women to sleep and stay when they stay overnights, in almost all the other groups, the women stated that they were given no separate space where they could sleep. They have to sleep in the open inside the tents or in the big halls where there is no safety and security. Stories of sexual harassment are most common but least spoken about. And in this instance, it is the sub-contractor who takes the women for work who takes on the responsibility of protecting her flock from any predatory men who usually are the cooks who share the same physical space with them. It was quite disturbing if not surprising to hear similar accounts from across different settlements.

- » We get little or no space to sleep – it usually is between the piles of vegetables in the kitchen.

- » We travel out on work also. I have gone to Anantapur, Krishnagiri, Mysore. We usually go out on temple work. When we go, they give us a gymkhana and we sleep on one corner of the hall. There is usually no place there for us to have a bath etc. Once when we went to Muthathi we had a bath in the river and that was nice.
- » They don't even give us dhurries to sleep on. Our clothes get wet and we have to dry ourselves in the warmth of the stoves and fires in the kitchen. We have to sleep next to the side wall for warmth and safety.
- » We have absolutely no safety and security in some cases. I protect my girls by making them sleep on other side of me and covering them with my own hands and legs in case anybody tries to come and take advantage in the night.
- » In the nights when we sleep, I put all the young girls inside and sleep on the outer edge to guard them from the side.
- » We know that the bhatrus (chief cook) frequently come and make passes at the girls and when that happens, we have to stand guard when the girls are sleeping.

Lack of safe mobility

Considering that the women are expected to work into the late hours of the evening nobody in the chain of employment apart of course the sub-contractor who is also from the same community takes responsibility for the safe return of the women to their homes. They are expected to find their ways back however late it might be. This makes them vulnerable not only to the men on the streets but also the police who harass them presuming that they are out doing sex work that they consider illegal and immoral.

- » Once we were left on the road in Kumbalgodu quite late in the night when some drunks followed us and we had to ask for help from those on the road.
- » The Muneeshwara choultry I go to is close by my house and I report to the owner directly. My work is largely with the bhatru. When we come back late, we are usually stopped by the police and searched and we

show them the food we are bringing back from the choultry to show that we have been out late on work.

- » Nobody takes responsibility for our security or transport. We have to depend on the goodness of the owners.
- » Contractor does not take any responsibility for our safety. He just gives us money for travel that is all. Sometimes if it gets too late, he might send us by tempo. Otherwise, they drop us in the godown (the kitchen that is used by those catering) where we sleep and go home in the morning. In the godown the only room there is for those men who live there and are permanent.

The unspoken reality of sexual harassment

While on the one hand the fact that women stay out alone in the nights has contributed to the stigma associated with choultry workers who are seen as “easy” women, the fact is that there have been many instances of young girls getting into relationships with the men they meet in the course of their work that would include helpers in the cook’s team who are largely male. And that perhaps is because they do get some freedom away from the more policed atmosphere that young girls are subjected to within their own communities. Many such instances were shared in Jolly Mohalla where a girl spoke about her sister who got pregnant when she was 18 years old after an affair with a cook from Uttar Pradesh who promised to marry her but finally did not. She now lives with her child as a single mother and has become an example to show in the community about why girls should not go for choultry work. They also spoke about a lot of love affairs that have happened across the states with migrant boys especially from Bihar/UP when the boys usually abscond. In one incident they shared of how a boy who had run away after sleeping with a girl, was caught and brought back to marry her.

It is on account of this that sub-contractors they said have even stopped taking young girls for these jobs.

"I have stopped taking young girls since they may fall in love and run away. I only take married women now after a couple of experiences."

~ Kokila, Bannerghatta

But the issue of affairs and runaway marriages has to be separated from that of sexual harassment which unfortunately gets mixed up in public perception. For while the former is an issue of individual choice the other is that of violence against individual will. However, since very few women have really spoken out against sexual harassment for the fear of getting re-stigmatized there are little or no channels through which the latter issue can be raised for relief, redress or justice. The women have had to directly speak out and resist the one who harassing or trying to molest them by shouting at or even slapping them. As a young girl in Jolly Mohalla said: "Yes we get sexually harassed. Sometimes we shout back and even slap them."

In rare cases, as in Bannerghatta the manager of the choultry took action on the complaint of Lakshmi about a bhatru who tried to assault her in the night by throwing him out of the job the next day.

None of the women had any awareness about the LCC or Local Complaint Committees that are set up under the DC in every district. And this is not surprising given that it is an absolutely ineffectual institution that is supposed to be accessed by casual and informal sector workers like domestic or construction workers but in fact has rarely ever been even constituted let alone heard about.

But everybody has a story to share many of which have had very serious repercussions.

In one place I know that the bhatru (chief cook) raped one girl and she got pregnant after which she was forced to get aborted by her family. The Bhatru took up no responsibility at all! That is why Bhatrus usually ask only for young girls. That is why I don't bring young girls.

In Sethu's place also such things happen. Like I know one place where the girl suddenly started coming with a young child but no husband.

~ Renukamma, Janata Colony

I used to first personally take the younger girls myself then gradually the owner told me to send them and not to come myself and that he would take care. I once trusted him and let them go when a girl got pregnant. She threatened to commit suicide by pouring kerosene on herself.

~ Jagadakka, Jolly Mohalla

Younger women who are slim and fair are given other jobs like the "welcome" committee that also gives tambula (betel leaf). They get double the amount. In this kind of work there is more safety and security rather than in the normal choultry work. For the former they even send them back in vehicles when it gets too late. I have protested against sexual harassment when I faced it. I might be fair and slim but my voice is loud. One bhatru propositioned me saying you are nice I will look after you. When I protested, he did not take me seriously. In the night he was drunk and came and slept next to me. I was so angry I tore his shirt up. The boys came to me and said he is the boss how can you treat him like this? I said he is thippe/dirt to me and I don't care if he is boss. He does not call me anywhere any more. I don't care. I still get jobs.

The government has not cared for us. We waited long for somebody to listen to us. Why is this work viewed suspiciously? Only because we spend nights out??

~ Dhanalakshmi, 46 years, MCTC

The rare woman like Dhanalakshmi has been vocal and articulate in challenging both the gendered stigmatization of this work and the reality

of everyday sexual harassment in their work place. Overall, it is evident that this dimension of their work is something they are conscious about and are doing something about individually even if they do not see or articulate it as a collective problem that needs to be addressed. This does not seem to be the case when it comes to the other invisible factor of caste.

The Elephant in the Room: Caste Discrimination at Work Place

Apart from gender, caste is another invisible factor that defines choultry work. This is not only account of the fact that it is “menial” labour that is automatically associated with the Dalits, lower castes and the poor but there is a notion of “purity” and “cleanliness” associated with the food and celebrations especially when the event is conducted by the upper castes as a result of which there is an inbuilt and invisible discrimination. Like gender this issue too did not come to the fore except when we began to ask focused questions on it. And then when they began to reflect and speak, they did not stop. But it is also obvious that caste is something that more than gender has been internalized and therefore not resisted openly. We heard accounts from them about how many of them have spoken out against sexual harassment but none of them have really questioned the “place” they are put in when the functions are that of the upper castes.

The women in Jolly Mohalla described the caste and community dynamics:

“The work we do is dependent also on the castes of the clients. It is different from Sethus, for Gujarati and Kannadigas. In the marriage of the Sethus we are also asked to come and help in cooking including cutting vegetables, making poori, chapathi, sabji etc. For Kannada marriages we are only asked to wash vessels. They bring their own cooks.”

In response to the question “How do the ones conducting the marriages see and treat you?” the answer was clear

"The ones who are conducting the marriage don't even see us and even if they do, they chase us away if they think that we look too dirty. They also abuse us using curse words. If we ask why are you addressing us like this, they say this is our language"

Kanchana from Bannerghatta was even more clear:

"If the functions are organized by Brahmins or Lingayats we are not allowed inside the kitchen at all. They bring their own cooks. For other communities we are allowed inside the kitchen where we even help with the chopping of vegetables etc."

Caste specialisation is therefore quite the accepted norm in choultry work.

Caste does affect the way that we are treated. Brahmins don't get us to serve but only to clean. We can't go inside or to the bachalmane/washing area. When we need water, they pour it from the top. It is strange that only when we go inside, we become untouchable but when we serve, we are not! Brahmins and Lingayats want only fair and clean looking women.

Sethus not only allow us into the kitchen they also ask us to make rotis and pooris.

~ Sharadamma, 50 years, Jolly Mohalla

No, they don't allow us to do the serving of the food. Will they allow those who clean yenjalu (the empty eaten plates and leaves) to do the job of serving?? We have even cleaned vomit at times. We are looked down upon since we do menial work that they expect us to do saying – this is your work do it.

Caste plays an important role. When we are taken only, we are told whose house function it is. If we are going to the house of Brahmins then we are told exactly where we should be and we should not cross any lines.

It is obvious that the everyday practice of caste like gender that dwells in every home and community including private and public kitchens is

extended into the space of choultries too. And therefore, like gender discrimination this too cannot be addressed and weeded out only through appropriate legal provisions and punitive action but also through collective and concerted actions to push for a transformation of mindset.

People come and drink and vomit and shit outside the bathroom. We have ourselves vomited seeing that and yet cleaned all this filth up. The attitude is that it is your duty to clean up so do it without any complaints. The owners should also tell the clients that they should keep some discipline and keep the space clean.

Impact of COVID

COVID impacted the livelihoods of all daily wage earners in the informal sector in very drastic ways. Choultry workers were no exception. In fact, even at the time of conducting the FGD's, months after the lockdown had been lifted, the receding of the pandemic and restoration of some normalcy they are still feeling the impact. This is primarily not only in terms of the reduction in jobs but also the weight of indebtedness they incurred during the lockdown that is weighing them down. Most of the women have been routinely taking credit from MFI's but their inability to pay interest during the lockdown has almost tripled their debt burden. As the women in Jolly Mohalla said:

"We take loan from MFI's – Bandhan, SKS, Grameen. We don't know how much interest we give. Because of COVID we did not pay interest for 3-4 months. Now our loans have shot up from rupees 40,000 to one lakh. Our cards have been taken away by the MFI."

Women from Janata colony spoke about how they have come down to 2-4 jobs a month from the 7-8 jobs they were getting earlier. Some also felt that they are getting less work since caterers have started now taking over this sector.

When asked how they survive without jobs 59-year-old Revathy from Janata Colony said

"We take money on loans or roll agarbatti or do house work. If we roll agarbathi we get ₹120 per day for a whole day's work. ₹30 for 1000 and we can roll about 2,000 – 3,000."

Adding to this Naseema, 45 years, also from Janata Colony said

"earlier for rolling agarbathi we used to get Rs 70 per day and even now we can earn up to only ₹1,000/2,000 pm."

COVID and the changes in the sector are making the women more vulnerable especially those who are not able to fit into the new catering culture because they are not slim or fair enough as women expressed in the earlier sections.

Changes Women Workers Would Like to See

In the discussions based on a very clear awareness of the discriminatory and exploitative nature of class, caste and gender that informs this work the women made the following proposals for more dignified, equitable and safe working conditions. The suggestions are reproduced in their own words:

Bannerghatta

- » Minimum wages should be given and a maximum 8 hour working day. We should get at least ₹1,000 for two days including overtime.
- » They should provide us with food/tea even if the cook comes late and is not able to cook for us.
- » Medical expenses should be taken care of.
- » Separate room and bathrooms should be provided for our safety and privacy.
- » There should be no discrimination on the basis of caste etc. It is the responsibility of the choultry owners to state and maybe put up a

public statement saying that we do not allow any discrimination of our workers based on caste etc.

Jolly Mohalla

- » Our demand is that we get at least ₹600/700 per day.
- » We need a contract between us and the contractor to establish that we are workers.
- » Our salaries should be directly put into a bank account instead of giving us cash.
- » Accident relief should be given by our owners.
- » We need safe and secure transport when it gets late in the night.

MCTC

- » We need recognition as women workers. The cooks should behave in a more responsible way to women and should be sensitized about gender. Don't look down on those whose clothes are torn.
- » Hostel workers get more facilities than us. The Muzhrai department (Welfare Departments) should help us and ensure that better working conditions are enforced in choultries.

Mamatha

Mamatha, is a 28-year-old single mother, who lives in the AK colony slum area of Bangalore. She has a 10-year-old daughter who goes to the local government school. She is a choultry worker and is the only bread winner of the family. On an average she gets called in as a choultry worker 2-3 times a week, based on the wedding season and how many ceremonial/auspicious days there are in the month. Her working hours range from a minimum of 12-15 hours, and for each time she goes to work she gets paid around ₹500-600 as compensation from her employer. The money gets passed through different people before she gets the money, and the resulting money is actually about ₹50-100 lesser than what she is actually supposed to get. As part of her job, Mamata has to go to the location of the function/marriage hall and sometimes is forced to stay over at the location if she has to get up very early and would be hard to travel back to the location. During those times, the employer and his/her team does not provide any proper sleeping arrangements. She and her co-workers do not have any safety when they are sleeping in the location. She and her co-workers asked to bring their own blankets or any other things that they may need for sleeping. They take shifts among each other to go to sleep, so that they can make sure they are safe. Their duties include cutting vegetables, cleaning the choultry, washing vessels, serving food for the guests in the banquet and even clearing up their plates/banana leaves. She has no standard employer and therefore cannot approach the employer to ask for anything.

During the lockdown, there were restrictions on opening marriage halls and having gatherings with large crowds. This had a major impact on Mamata.

1. These are case studies that have been put together by ActionAid Association in the course of preparing for this Study

She did not have any work for almost 2 years. She had a hard time trying to make ends meet. She did some household chore work for ₹100-200 per day. She does not have any social security because she does have an identity card that identifies her as an unorganized sector worker. She was not able to avail any of the social security schemes that were launched by the government.

Rukmini

Rukmini is a choultry worker who lives in a joint family with her husband, her three kids, her sister and her sister's two girl children. As a choultry worker, Rukmini makes around ₹200-400 per day depending on the number of hours she works. She works for a minimum of around 10-12 hours. Even during times when there was no pandemic Rukmini was suffering to put food on the table for her family every day, even if her employer pays her on time. She lives with her family in the government allocated MCT slum quarters. She and her sister work as choultry workers to support the family and sometimes when they are sick her sister's daughters come to work. During their shifts as choultry workers, Rukmini and her sister do not feel safe when they are staying overnight in the marriage halls but are trying to adjust by taking shifts in sleeping and watching over each other. With the bare minimum money that she, her sister and her husband are earning, they try to make ends meet and are still unable to pay the bills, afford food and pay their kids' school fees.

But the lockdown and quarantine really did affect the financial and social status of Rukmini and her family. By not allowing marriage halls and crowded gatherings to happen, Rukmini and her sister were not able to find other sustainable sources of employment to keep their family running. They had to borrow loan from local money lenders to help run the family. She also does not have an identity card that recognizes her as an unorganized sector labourer to avail the social security schemes that the government offered to such labourers during the lockdown period.

Hanumakka

Hanumakka is a 44-year-old choultry worker who has been working as a choultry worker for 20 years, and resides in Janata Colony slum. She has a severe case of diabetes and takes medication for her heart also. The pandemic was not only hard on her because of her financial condition but also because she lost her sister to the Corona virus. She is a widow, and her two daughters are married. But sadly, their husbands do not treat them well and they are victims of domestic violence, so they decided to stay with their mother. She also has a grown son, who is unemployed and does not take up any responsibilities towards the household. The pandemic had disrupted the only source of income that she was receiving.

In general, she works 1 night and 2 days and gets paid around ₹550-650. Along with this she also does household work as a maid in certain houses. Whenever she gets called for choultry work, she takes an off from household work she does, saying she is sick, and goes to do the choultry work. Any random neighbour, who is also a choultry worker generally informs her about a job requirement. The nights that she has to stay in the marriage halls are not easy to manage. There are no proper facilities provided, only a blanket and sometimes even that is not provided. She carries her own blanket whenever she goes for work. She cleans vessels, cuts vegetables, sweeping and moping the halls, serving and clearing food plates, etc. She gets paid and is also served food, only if there are any leftovers from the particular ceremony/function she works at. The working conditions are also not very employee friendly. If she takes a day off or leaves halfway through the day due to emergencies, she is considered to be irregular, and the employer does not call her back to work again. The amount of money she earns is about ₹100-200 lesser than what she supposed to receive, as there is a system of corruption among her employers and their superiors. There is also a one or two day delay in her receiving the payment.

She has no standard income but has to get a regular supply of medicines. Because of the lockdown restrictions and no income, she found it very

hard to purchase the medicines she needs for her diabetes and heart. And since she has severe health issues, she is unable to perform well and be regular for choultry work and because of this, she is not called up frequently. She was not able to avail any of the social security schemes that were launched by the government because she did not have an unorganized sector labourer ID card.

Kuppamma

Kuppamma is a 43-year-old choultry worker who resides in a rented house in Janata Colony slums. She lives with her husband, daughter and two sons. Her husband goes to work occasionally, and her daughter has a physical disability. One of her sons is married and has moved out while the other is working. She has been jobless for the last 2 years due to the lockdown restrictions on public gatherings and using of marriage halls. Her monthly family expenses are often unmet and she was forced to take a loan to support the family. She has not paid her house rent for the last 3 months.

As a choultry worker, Kuppamma earns around ₹250 for one day and around ₹500 per night. During nights when she has to stay at the location, she and her co-workers are forced to sleep in the storeroom or in the kitchen also sometimes. No proper facilities or safety measures are ensured for their safety. The money she receives gets passed down through a couple of people and whatever she gets is around ₹100-200 lesser than what she was supposed to receive. On an average she gets around 1-2 work calls a week and 10 in a month if it is an auspicious season.

The location of the places she has to visit are pretty far from her house and hence she either arrives home very late or has to stay back at the location. This is very inconvenient as she has to spend on transport, and this also creates issues at home. She is given whatever leftover food is available along with her wage payment.

Jayalakshmi

Jayalakshmi is a 36-year-old, single mother of two girl children who resides in Janata Colony slums. She has no unorganized sector ID card and basically has no proof of work. She lives in her parents' house and is the only bread winner of the family. As a choultry worker, she has untimely hours of work and very low compensation. She receives on an average ₹350-500 for every time she goes for choultry work. On an average she goes 2-3 times weekly for choultry work. Any random neighbour, who is also a choultry worker generally informs her about a job requirement. Sometimes the employer pays on time and sometimes they don't. She and her co-workers are forced to work long hours, with minimum pay, and no facilities for sleeping or resting or any safety precautions for the women who work there. Even the money she receives is lesser than what she is supposed to receive. If the employer gets a big contract which pays him/her a lot of money, he/she still pays the same amount of ₹350-500. In fact, she or any of her other co-workers are unaware of the money that the employee gets from a customer. If anyone is to question the employer about the salary, they are not called back again for work.

The lockdown has been very hard for Jayalakshmi as well. As a single mother of two young girl children, she struggles to make ends meet. She sympathizes with other choultry workers who have the burden of living in a rented house and unable to pay rent. The daily wages that she is earning from choultry work does not help her family survive the pandemic and make ends meet.

Ammu

Ammu, is a 36-year-old mother of three children, who lives in the slums of Janata colony along with her mother and husband. Her mother is physically challenged, so she stays with Ammu. Her husband sells flowers in the local market. They do not live in a rented house. As result of the pandemic and the lockdown, both she and her husband had very low-income turnovers, as they both work in the unorganized labour sector. To make end meets,

they have taken loans from the local moneylender for their children's school fee, her mother's medication, and regular household expenses. As a choultry worker, Ammu used to earn around ₹200-250 for one session, and about ₹450-500 if she works the whole day. Her duties include washing vessels, clearing and serving food, cutting vegetables, etc. Sometimes the locations of the job are located very far away from her house, so she has to stay the night at the location and finish her work. This causes a lot of tension between her and her family members. At the location, there is no proper sleeping arrangements, and she barely gets any sleep because it is not very safe. Her employer does provide food for them very late in the night at around 2-3 AM, if there was anything left over from the function/wedding. Ammu has no constant employer; every time she goes to work it is a different employer. Some of them pay money on time with the right amount, and some do cheat and pay her less. But she is unable to stand up for herself because if she does, she will not be called again for work. If she leaves early for any of emergency, she does not get paid at all. She or any of her other co-workers are unaware of the money that the employee gets from a customer. If anyone is to question the employer about the salary, they are not called back again for work.

Vennila

Vennila is a 38-year-old mother who lives with her husband and daughter in the slums of Sanjay colony. She was born in Tamil Nadu but got married and settled down in Bangalore. Her daughter is 20 years and helps in the household. Vennila has been a choultry worker for almost 15 years. She and her husband both work to earn money for the family. But because of the lockdown she and her husband have been out of work for almost 2 years. They haven't paid their rent for a long time. As a choultry worker, Vennila used to earn around ₹700-800 for her overnight work session, and after the amount being passed down through a couple of her superiors and employers, she gets paid around ₹500-600. But now she barely gets called in for choultry work. The family has been surviving on drinking and eating kanji since they were not able to afford a lot of food varieties. During

such hard times, if she asks for a little bit of extra money to her employer whenever she gets called for doing choultry work, the employer denies her the money and stops calling her for work thereafter. She is unable to pay her daughter's college fee and her family has struggling to make ends meet for the last 2 years. She and her husband even tried to communicate this to local area counsellor to get some kind of help, but they did not receive any help from the counsellor as well.

Even when she was working regularly as a choultry worker, there were many hardships that she had to face. For some days, she would have to stay the night at the marriage hall/location if it is too far away to travel back. The sleeping conditions were not good. She and her co-workers have had to sleep on the road sometimes, with nothing but a blanket which they bring from home. She is given food to eat of there are any leftovers from the function/wedding. She washes the vessels, cleans the halls, serves food, clears out plates and cuts vegetables for the catering groups. Before the pandemic she was called in for this work on an average of 10 times a month, earning up to ₹5000-6000 a month. She or any of her other co-workers are unaware of the money that the employer gets from a customer. If anyone is to question the employer about the salary, they are not called back again for work. Some of her employers are good in nature and pay on time while others are not always nice to choultry workers like her. The pandemic was very hard on her and her family. They had to live off the food that was distributed as relief by other NGOs and some political figures in the locality. Even though, she and her daughter do go to houses and work as maids, they get paid very low and that money is not enough for them to sustain their family.

Lakshmi

Lakshmi is a woman in her late 40s, who lives by herself in the slums of Sanjay Nagar. Her husband died a few years ago, and her all her kids are married and have moved away. She has no family or relatives or friends to look after her. So, when the lockdown was imposed and restrictions on public spaces and marriages were ensured, Lakshmi had no source of

income or work. She has taken loans from multiple people to help sustain herself, pay rent and buy essentials. Her loans have piled up a lot of interest and she does not have a stable income to pay off her debts. She is unable to pay rent or procure food for her on an everyday basis. Before the pandemic, she used to earn around ₹600 for an overnight work session as a choultry worker by cleaning vessels, serving food, cutting vegetables, clearing out plates, etc. On a monthly average she would go for work for about eight to nine times. This had helped her sustain herself financially. Even though the overnight stays were not always comfortable or safe, she had a place to go and might probably be given food when there were leftovers. She has been unemployed and out of work for almost 2 years now. She feels very alone as she has no one in her life to look after her or be with her, and this choultry work was the only thing in her life that kept her going. She does not have an ID card that recognizes her as an unorganized sector labourer and is unaware of the schemes and provisions that the government offers.

Maheshwari

Maheshwari is a 38-year-old, single mother of 4 kids. She lives in a house in Anjanappa Gardens with her kids and two sisters. One of her sisters is visually challenged and she looks after her. She has one girl studying in college, a boy in high school and 2 infant girls. She has been working as a choultry worker from a very young age. She earns around ₹400 if she works the entire night. There are no proper facilities like restrooms and sleeping arrangements at the places where she has to go to work. It is up to her and her co-workers to find a place and go to sleep. They take shifts in watching each other so that they feel safe in those places. One full day of work for Maheshwari consists of washing vessels, chopping vegetables, serving food, clearing out food plates, etc. The last two years have given no work for Maheshwari. She is the head of her family and is unable to make ends meet for her family. Her house rent costs ₹2000 and she hasn't paid her rent for the past 7 months. She is unable to afford nutritious food to feed her growing infants and is also unable to pay her daughter's

college fee. Her daughter helps her run the house by going to work as maid in houses to earn some money. She looks after the kids and her visually challenged aunt when Maheshwari goes to work, but that has also not been enough to sustain this family of seven members. They do not own a ration card nor the ID card that recognizes her and her daughter as unorganized sector labour workers. Maheshwari and her family have been struggling for the last two years. She is worried about her daughter's education, her sister's health and the growth of her infant children. She is under constant pressure and worry about the future of her family.

Gowri

Gowri is a 32-year-old, single mother of two kids who lives in Anjanappa Gardens in Bangalore. One of her kids is 10 years old and the other is 3 years old. She is a choultry worker and used to earn around ₹400 for a day's work, but now she is hardly called for any work. And even when she is called, the crowd is very small due to lockdown restrictions, so she is paid only around ₹250-300. She works for around 15 hours and will only be paid this much. As a single mother, with very young daughters, and no other family or friends to help her out, she brings her kids along with her whenever she is called for choultry work. She asks whoever is free at the moment to watch over her kids. Some places that she goes for work do not have bathrooms and some don't have proper places to eat and sleep. All they get is the leftover food and the very minimum wages. Gowri has been trying to make ends meet during these tough times. She somehow manages to pay the house rent, but there still the water bill and electricity bill that has to be paid. She works as a maid in some houses and even washes people's clothes at times to earn some extra money. She struggles to buy food as she does not have a ration card nor an ID card that identifies her as unorganized sector worker. Her elder daughter has online classes to attend, so she has to make sure she has a working data plan for that and is also very behind on paying her daughter's school fees. Even during hard times like this, her employers do not always pay her on time, and whatever money she earns is always around ₹100-200 short of

what she was supposed to get. Gowri has no other family or friends to help her during such times. She is unaware of the schemes that the government offers for unorganized sector labourers and is even unaware of the need for a ration card.

Following are the summary findings of this small study that draws upon the data obtained from the women choultry workers through Focus Group Discussions, the case studies documented and through a broad understanding of the context of this work.

1. Choultry workers are drawn from the urban and rural poor communities living in slums, small towns or lower middle-class localities and comprise largely of those lowest on the caste, class and gender hierarchy.
2. They are largely women, most of who are single and the sole wage earners in the family since the husbands are either dead, alcoholic or unable to work.
3. The work is invisible since it revolves basically around cleaning which is considered menial and therefore degrading and demeaning. It also comes under the informal work sector that is characterized by a total lack of regulation, no labour rights including minimum wages and decent working conditions, no dignity of labour, total lack of social security including health care and lack of protectionism (such as protective labour laws and pension benefits) that the formal sector enjoy. Almost all of them very hit very hard during the two years of COVID and lockdown with a total loss of livelihoods from which they are yet to recover. None of them were able to avail of any of the benefits that the Government announced for even daily wage workers since they had no identification that identified them as workers.
4. Their average income is between ₹500 – 700 for two days and they get work for a maximum of 15 days a month and there is no room for negotiations.
5. With the employer/employee relationship being vague and established through two or even three levels of contractors, accountability becomes difficult to establish.

6. Given that there is no kind of contract between the employee and employer there is no basis for them to establish their identity as labour that can enable to access basic rights and services as even unorganized workers.
7. The gendered nature of the work not only ensures that it does not get the value and recognition to commensurate with the labour involved but also ensures working conditions that make the women more vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation. Their only layer of protection is that provided by the local sub-contractor to the younger women in her team. The working and living conditions in the choultry are also extremely degrading and demeaning apart from being insecure.
8. Caste and class discrimination and exploitation is also an inbuilt feature of this work for which too there are no forums for redress since they neither have the bargaining power or trade union memberships and connections.
9. Collectivization of these women who can be empowered to fight for their own rights is almost impossible since like in domestic work they are working in isolation of each other. Even where they are working as a group, they all are drawn from the same locality and loyalty is ensured through the senior woman from the community who is their leader or sub-contractor.
10. They have no information related to forums like labour courts or sexual harassment committees that they can access when they face either economic exploitation or sexual violence.

Recommendations

In the above context of the insecure, informal and non-regulated nature of their work that makes the choultry workers susceptible to gender, class and caste exploitation and discrimination the following are the recommendations made towards restoring their dignity of labour and ensuring basic rights:

1. **Enumeration:** The first step towards recognizing and acknowledging this work will be for the related authorities in administration and the labour department to do a ward/panchayat wise enumeration of the workers in choultries and other such establishments.
2. **Registration:** The second step is to ensure their registration through the District Administration as informal workers such that under the provisions of the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 or the new Social Security Code whose rules still remain to be formulated identity cards can be issued to them that will enable them to access all benefits due to them under law.
3. **Work contracts/employment letters:** There must be letters of employment issued by every contractor to the sub-contractor specifying the names and wages of each employee which could be the basis on which they can also obtain labour identity cards to access benefits available for all unorganized workers.
4. **Registration of contractors:** All contractors should be registered ward wise or in panchayats or municipalities such that they can be held responsible and accountable for ensuring decent working conditions for the workers in the choultries.
5. **Workers Facilitation Centres:** Such centres had been mandated under the 9th clause of Chapter 4 of the Unorganised Worker's Social Security Act to:
 - » Spread information about available social security schemes
 - » Assist an unorganized worker through all the registration steps
 - » Help in the enrolment into suitable schemes

The rules that need to be formulated under the new Social Security Code should also specify that structures similar to worker facilitation centres should be set up in every ward such that choultry workers too could be facilitated to get their rights.

6. **Registering of Choulties, marriage halls and other similar institutions as work spaces:** The Muzhrai (Welfare), Labour and other concerned departments should take responsibility for not only registering all such choulties and marriage halls that come under their purview but also ensure that there are no labour violations including minimum wages and proper working conditions.
7. **Minimum Wages, overtime and bonus bank accounts:** The minimum wages is about ₹13,000 for domestic workers. Choultry workers too should be put on a similar scale and this amount along with overtime should be specified and this should be paid along with over time and bonus. Therefore, the minimum wage for the work should be approximately ₹1000 for the two days of work they do apart from overtime and bonus. The contractor who makes the payment should do so through transferring to the bank accounts of the employees and not hand the payment over to the sub-contractors who should be paid independently.
8. **Working Conditions:** Private rooms along with bathrooms should be provided to all the choultry workers along with uniforms and other protective equipment like gloves etc. There should also be provision of creches wherever possible or at least ensure that the women are able to leave their babies in the nearest government set up community creches.
9. **Provision of transportation:** Given the vulnerability of the women who almost always go back late in the night after completing work it is the responsibility of the contractor/choultry owner to provide safe transportation back to their homes.
10. **Social Protection and skill development:** Strengthening access to social protection through the SC/ST commission, Social Welfare Departments, Women's Commission and Labour departments to look into the caste-based discrimination and violations, provide appropriate protection measures with focus on old age pensions and health, housing, occupational health and skill development to enable

higher earnings. The children of choultry workers in particular must be supported with training and education such that they could be enabled to get out of the crushing cycle of poverty and degradation.

11. **Skill upgradation:** With the burgeoning of caterers and event management agencies younger women from these areas are being employed with better working conditions including outfitting them in uniforms etc that gives them more dignity of labour. The scope for this should be widened with a more systematic training of the young women such that they can handle themselves and the job more confidently and professionally.
12. **Compensation for loss of livelihoods during COVID:** In the context of the total loss of livelihoods during the two years of COVID for which they received absolutely no compensation unlike other unorganized workers who were registered, the Government must disburse equivalent compensation amount and also waive of the interest on the loans incurred in this period.
13. **Public notices prohibiting discrimination:** All choultries and similar working places should have public notices stating that sexual harassment and caste discrimination is a crime and punishable in law. And if there are any such incidents choultry owners too must be held accountable and responsible.
14. **Access to Local Complain Committees:** Under the provision of the POSH Act the District Officer must form the Local Complaints Committee for the respective district that will receive and redress complaints of sexual harassment from women workers in the informal sector. Women must be made aware of the existence of LCC's and encouraged to go seek redress if they continue to suffer from harassment despite their own efforts or that of the local contractors and choultry owners to challenge the violators.
15. **Monitoring by Labour department:** Concerned Labour officers should make routine visits to these places to ensure that there are no

violations of basic labour rights including decent and human working conditions.

16. **Collectivisation:** It is the responsibility of civil society organisations and trade unions to ensure the collectivization of these workers in specific areas and ensure that they have knowledge about their rights, facilitate their registration as workers and engender the necessary confidence to assert them with the concerned authorities.
17. **Committee:** A Committee comprising of members from the departments of Labour, Social Welfare, Muzhrai, Women and SC/ST Commission along with NGO's and Unions working with the urban and rural poor must be set up into looking into the different dimensions of this form of work that has gender, caste and cultural dimensions. They must put into place codes to be followed in such work spaces with regard to proscribe institutionalized and discriminatory norms of gender and caste exploitation that is built into this work and ensure that these are widely publicized. Accountability mechanisms should be put into place to ensure that these codes are followed and enforced in these work spaces. The committee must also look into systemic ways of helping restore dignity and rights to the workers, facilitate upgradation of skills and ensure educational opportunities for their children.

Annexure

QUESTIONS FOR FGD'S WITH CHOLTRY WORKERS

I. Background/personal Details

1. Where are you from (local/migrant/city based/from village)?
2. What work do you/your husband's do?
3. What are your children doing – studying/working?
4. What kind of house do you stay in – is it your own/rented/leased?
5. Is the slum/settlement regularized?
6. What is your dream of an ideal life?

II. Working Conditions

1. How long have you been doing this job/how did you know of it?
2. Which choultry are you working in. Are you working in more than one?
3. Are you working directly or through contractor?
4. What is the average payment you get per day/how many days in a month do you work?
5. How many hours do you work and what is the work that you are supposed to do?
6. How often do you have to stay overnight and what facilities do you get?
 - » For sleeping
 - » Eating
 - » Bathroom etc
7. Does your contractor/employer give you additional benefits like:
 - » Loans

- » Medical support
 - » Education support for children
 - » Facilitate worker cards?
8. Are the employers/contractors understanding about your needs and difficulties?
 9. What difficulties did you face during lockdown? Did you know about the relief given by government for domestic/unorganized workers and were you able to access them?
 10. Describe the work you do in your own words the way you see and feel about it.

III. Women Workers: Personal Security/Social Security and Social Stigma


1. Is the kind of work you do done only by women or are there men too? How many? Are there any specific communities associated with this work in terms of caste/religion?
2. How do people around view this work? Is there any stigma associated with this work because you are:
 - » Woman
 - » SC/ST/Dalit?
3. How are you treated by those who either come for the weddings or by those who are organizing the wedding?
4. Have you heard of any experiences that women may have had in terms of sexual harassment or have you undergone any such experience?
5. Have you heard of the prevention of sexual harassment law and where you can try to go and get some relief if ever you experience it?
6. How do you travel to work and back? If it gets late does the employer/contractor facilitate your safe return home


7. What do you do with your children when you go to work?
8. Have you heard of the schemes available with the government for workers in the unorganized sector like you? Have you got any worker id cards?
9. What are the changes that you would like to see in your work and sector?

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Cover Photograph: A meeting with choultry workers in Bengaluru where the report findings and recommendations were shared and finalised.