



International
Labour
Organization

Placement agencies and migrant live-in domestic workers in an Indian metro city

A view from below into the evolving practices
of intermediaries in Mumbai



Copyright © International Labour Organization 2024
First published 2024

Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International. To view a copy of this licence, please visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. The user is allowed to reuse, share (copy and redistribute), adapt (remix, transform and build upon the original work) as detailed in the licence. The user must clearly credit the ILO as the source of the material and indicate if changes were made to the original content. Use of the emblem, name and logo of the ILO is not permitted in connection with translations, adaptations or other derivative works.

Attribution – The user must indicate if changes were made and must cite the work as follows: Placement agencies and migrant live-in domestic workers in an Indian metro-city: A view from below into the evolving practices of intermediaries in Mumbai, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2024. © ILO.

Translations – In case of a translation of this work, the following disclaimer must be added along with the attribution: This is a translation of a copyrighted work of the International Labour Organization (ILO). This translation has not been prepared, reviewed or endorsed by the ILO and should not be considered an official ILO translation. The ILO disclaims all responsibility for its content and accuracy. Responsibility rests solely with the author(s) of the translation.

Adaptations – In case of an adaptation of this work, the following disclaimer must be added along with the attribution: This is an adaptation of a copyrighted work of the International Labour Organization (ILO). This adaptation has not been prepared, reviewed or endorsed by the ILO and should not be considered an official ILO adaptation. The ILO disclaims all responsibility for its content and accuracy. Responsibility rests solely with the author(s) of the adaptation.

Third-party materials – This Creative Commons licence does not apply to non-ILO copyright materials included in this publication. If the material is attributed to a third party, the user of such material is solely responsible for clearing the rights with the rights holder and for any claims of infringement.

Any dispute arising under this licence that cannot be settled amicably shall be referred to arbitration in accordance with the Arbitration Rules of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL). The parties shall be bound by any arbitration award rendered as a result of such arbitration as the final adjudication of such a dispute.

Queries on rights and licensing should be addressed to the ILO Publishing Unit (Rights and Licensing) at rights@ilo.org. Information on ILO publications and digital products can be found at: www.ilo.org/publns.

ISBN: 9789220406205 (web PDF)

The designations employed in ILO publications and databases, which are in conformity with United Nations practice, and the presentation of material therein do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the ILO concerning the legal status of any country, area or territory or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The opinions and views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions, views or policies of the ILO.

Reference to names of firms and commercial products and processes does not imply their endorsement by the ILO, and any failure to mention a particular firm, commercial product or process is not a sign of disapproval.

Placement agencies and migrant live-in domestic workers in an Indian metro city

A view from below into the evolving practices of intermediaries in Mumbai

Indrani Mazumdar

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Market intersections, the pandemic, and the evolution of a placement agency for migrant domestic workers in Mumbai	5
2.1 Enter the digital Platform	8
2.2 How a multinational tech giant takes a cut in the 'maid' placement business in Mumbai.....	10
2.3 Momentum to the flow of domestic worker migration to Mumbai and the wage bargain	12
2.4 Pandemic effects: Slowdown in covid times.....	14
2.5 A turn to the local: Expanding the web of online intermediation	15
2.6 Of legal frameworks and parameters, limits of formalization, and vulnerabilities of workers	16
3. Between autonomy and dependence: When a domestic worker sets up a placement agency	19
3.1 From becoming a domestic worker in the city to becoming an agent in the city.....	22
3.2 Informality, exploitation, and opening of a wider world: Working as an agency employee	23
3.3 Vicissitudes of a friendship: Intersections of the private and the collegial at the interstices of intermediation	25
3.4 At home village: A pandemic and lockdown, a father dies and suddenly Mumbai becomes too far away	28
3.5 In the abyss of debt: Back to Mumbai.....	29
3.6 Starting a placement Agency: Treading on the margins of legality.....	30
4. Conclusion.....	33

► List of Abbreviations

CWDS	Centre for Women's Development Studies
GIC	Guaranteed Investment Certificate
GST	Goods and Services Tax
ILO	International Labour Organization
LSHTM	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
NOC	No Objection Certificate
RMC	Ready-Mix Concrete
WIF	Work in Freedom

► Acknowledgments

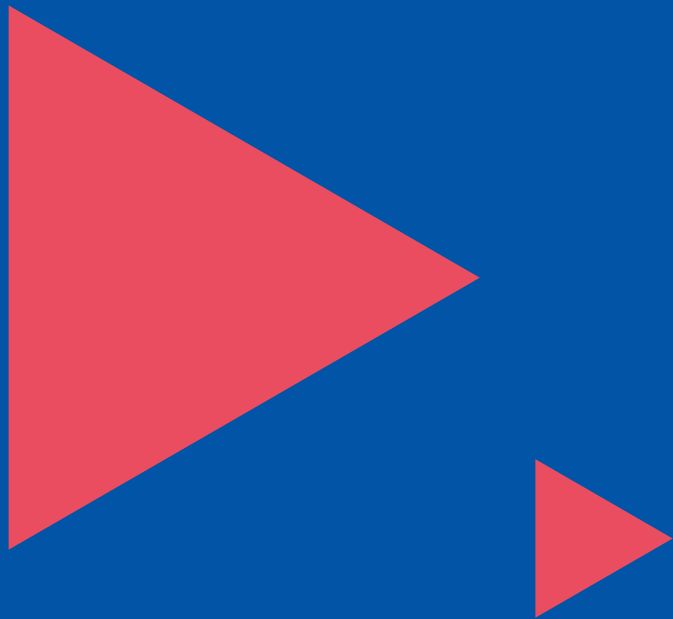
This report on placement agencies is drawn from a qualitative research study of live-in domestic workers traversing a particularly dense migration corridor from one village in Ganjam, Odisha to the city of Mumbai in Maharashtra supported by the Work in Freedom programme at ILO, New Delhi. I would particularly like to thank Igor Bosc, Chief Technical Adviser, WIF, ILO and Neha Wadhawan, National Project Coordinator (India), who not only provided patient and unstinting support for the research, but also suggested that the new material collected on placement agencies in Mumbai in the course of that research merited a greater independent focus and thought, and encouraged me to write a report that focused specifically on evolving practices of placement agencies for live-in domestic workers. I am also grateful to Akriti Paracer, Communications Officer at ILO New Delhi for her helpful suggestions and Namrata Daniel for editing and proofreading the report.

The field work on placement agencies for this particular paper was conducted in Mumbai during November 2021, a period that was marked by the continuing impact of the Covid 19 pandemic. Yet many of the insights and indeed some of the primary material also draws on field work with domestic workers in Mumbai in August 2018, some years before the onset of the pandemic. At that time, as a faculty member of the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), I was part of a collaborative study of CWDS with the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) on women migrant workers from Odisha. Partners in the 2018 field work in Mumbai were N. Neetha and Gayatri Panda from CWDS, and I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank CWDS, and my colleagues there for allowing me to reference the material gathered in 2018.

This report rests primarily on interviews with placement agency owners, and while research ethics does not permit my naming of the interviewees, I would like to place on record my deep debt of gratitude for the openness with which they allowed me to delve into their life histories, and the patience with which they explained several details of their experience of working in Mumbai and running a placement agency in Mumbai. Much of the analysis and indeed the information that has been presented in this paper, is in a sense, their contribution. Any errors in interpretation are of course my own.

1

Introduction



This paper presents a qualitative study of the contemporary world of placement agencies for live-in migrant domestic workers in Mumbai. It describes changes taking place in regimes of intermediation from a few years before and through two years into the pandemic. It delineates the commercial relations that are being forged between city-based semi-formal agencies with global internet companies, and argues that the latter is thus acquiring a share in the profits gained from the local business of placement of domestic workers. It brings out some novel aspects of the role of placement agencies in raising wages for live-in domestic work in Mumbai, while showing how basic rights, safety, and freedoms of workers are sidelined in the triangulated relationship between placement agencies, domestic workers, and their employers.

Two case studies of placement agencies are the centrepiece of the paper, which have drawn on detailed interviews with the owners of the agencies, laying emphasis on relaying their voices. The interviews included their life stories, with an eye to culling out both subjective and objective factors that have shaped the strategies adopted by the two placement agencies and their owners before and during the pandemic. Such a method has allowed for grounding the analysis of evolving practices of placement agencies in interstitial and internal processes that often remain hidden. Experiences of domestic workers with the agencies are also inbuilt into the analysis allowing for a view from below in addition to from within. Paradigmatic changes in Mumbai's skyline and its class culture over the past three decades have of course facilitated the growth of demand for live-in domestic work in the city.¹ In meeting that demand, the processes of intermediation have also changed and are continuing to evolve. Indeed, an understanding of the fast-changing modes of intermediation for migrant domestic workers becomes necessary to comprehend how some opportunities for employment and income in Mumbai are created for young women from distant villages, while

simultaneously setting limits to any enduring relationship or place for them in the city, and/or creating conditions for persistent marginality and dependence.

This paper argues that where social facilitation and networks of agents from within the social groups, communities, and source areas from which live-in domestic workers are drawn may still be playing a role in who migrates and from where, a whole world of intermediation has developed within Mumbai that is less tied to either the communities or regions from where domestic workers migrate. The new forms of intermediation follow the more impersonal systems and interconnected market dynamics spawned by neo-liberalism, which have become embedded in urban commerce, cultures, and ways of thinking and being. It is in this larger globally interconnected world that contemporary placement systems, agencies, and practices in local spheres are evolving, albeit still rooted in the pre-embedded conditions and compulsions that determine the supply of live-in domestic workers from some specific rural locations and communities in the hinterland.

Our view of evolving processes and practices of intermediation as delineated in this paper emerged from a Work in Freedom/International Labour Organization (WIF/ILO) supported qualitative study undertaken by the author which tracked domestic workers along a corridor of migration from one village in Ganjam, Odisha to Mumbai during the pandemic.² That study in turn, drew on earlier research on women's migration from Ganjam across 20 villages, and the finding that one particular village (hereinafter referred to as the home village) was sending out more than a hundred girls for live-in domestic work, most of whom were traveling to Mumbai (CWDS/LSHTM 2019).³ Both the earlier CWDS/LSHTM study as well as the corridor oriented study for WIF/ILO identified grinding poverty and distress as the foundational economic conditions that gave rise to women's entry into this particular corridor of migration

1 By far the richest in India and among the richest cities in the world, known to be India's financial, commercial, and entertainment capital, Mumbai is vested with an aura of endless opportunity, that has bestowed on it the title of 'City of Dreams', 'Maximum City' and various other labels.

2 Mazumdar, Indrani, 'home village to Big City: Looking back and ahead at a Corridor of Migration for Domestic Workers', WIF/ILO research monograph, 2022.

3 CWDS/LSHTM (2019), Women Migrating in India: Evidence from Odisha, <https://www.cwds.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Women-Migrating-in-India.pdf>

for live-in domestic work. They however, also pointed to social factors that made for one particular Christian Dalit community constituting the overwhelming majority of live-in domestic worker migrants from the home village.

The WIF/ILO supported qualitative study of migrant domestic workers traversing the home village to Mumbai corridor constitutes the backdrop to a closer view of more recent developments in intermediation systems in Mumbai that are addressed in this paper. A pursuit of the connectivities of domestic workers from one village over more than half a decade, actually opened up some interstitial aspects of intermediation processes that might otherwise have remained hidden from view, and enabled some unique insights into the evolving world of placement agencies.

Of the two placement agencies described in this paper, one may be seen to have grown out of the networked world of male agents that expanded into a semi-formal enterprise before the pandemic. The other, which was still at a startup stage and was still negotiating its way through the various registration processes, was female led. Both case studies reveal strikingly new features in the practices and profile of these placement agencies, including the intermeshing of relations between petty agencies in the intermediation business and major corporate players and international investors in the world of digital platforms. They also bring out some novel aspects to the role of agencies in wage negotiations and wage bargaining, as well as the emerging complex of relations between singly migrating women domestic workers from far-flung villages and city-based placement agencies. Many of these features that are still in the process of evolving, depart from the traditional perspectives on intermediaries and processes of intermediation for live-in domestic workers, as seen in the literature. Further, while reflecting and echoing each other with respect to some newly developing practices, the two case studies yet highlight striking contrasts based on gender and social location raising questions of both analytical and policy relevance for the discourse on intermediaries.

It is the agency practitioners' voices and experiences that are central to the narrative in this paper. Such a method has proved to be effective for the purposes of delineating the novel processes and practices undertaken

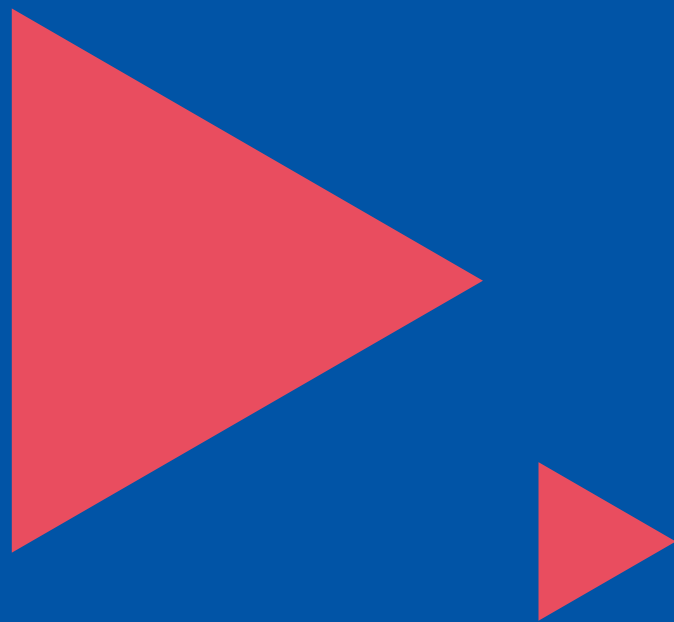
by placement agencies. An emphasis on the life stories of the agency owners, has also allowed for a depiction of the subjective and objective processes and constraints that led to dependence on corporate players and global investors in intermediation processes for the placement of domestic workers. It has also facilitated explication of the institutional arrangements, costs, risks, and investments undertaken by local agencies that underpin such integration.

The story of the two placement agencies described in this paper is of course still an unfolding one. Our account begins some years before the pandemic and continues through the disruptions that marked the advent and vicissitudes of life with COVID-19 till early 2022. There is evidence of a constant process of adaptation in agency practices as perennial volatility amidst crises and uncertainty have continued to become the new norm. Tracking these rapidly changing processes in the world of intermediation for domestic workers in real time has thus become the need of our times, something that we would argue, requires a constant research engagement with the interaction between the broad macro-context and developments and the particular and micro-level subjective and objective aspects and processes that play out in the triangulated relationship between domestic workers, placement agencies, and employers. The findings laid out here, in fact, point to the need to bring the practices of placement agencies into sharper analytical focus, if the perspectives and policy regimes on human trafficking are to become less divorced from the realities of contemporary intermediation in the case of live-in domestic workers, and labour law and social policy regimes as well as organizational interventions are to be made more relevant and attuned to the new issues emerging from the increasingly multi-layered intermediation systems that have come into being.

This paper is a small contribution in this regard.

2

Market intersections, the pandemic, and the evolution of a placement agency for migrant domestic workers in Mumbai



Few girls have come looking for work since the pandemic"... "During the pandemic very few girls are coming" says 32-year-old AA, who owns a placement agency for 'maids' in Mumbai, and he was interviewed in early November 2021.

When asked what the scale of difference was, he said

"Back in 2018/19, there would be hundred or more girls every month looking for work which is down to 15 or so now... Many agencies shut. I didn't shut as it would mean greater difficulty to re-establish connections later and spreading the word that we were open"

Four small rooms on the first floor of an obscure building located on the edges of an informal settlement in the heart of the suburban sprawl across the western precinct of Mumbai, houses the agency. A board outside, signposts its name, contact numbers, email, web contact, etc., and announces 'All Jobs Available here'. Below that are a series of images labelled 'Baby Care', 'House Boy', 'Housekeeping', 'Cook', 'House Care Taker', and 'Japa Maid' (*japa* being the colloquial Hindi word for the period around childbirth in the life of a woman). An add-on stairway outside made of iron strips, has to be ascended to reach a small passageway connecting a row of rooms - one small office (with an air conditioner)

occupied by the owner in front, another for staff, files and papers, while at the back is one windowless room where eight women of varying ages, who were due to be placed were staying at the time. Another room at the back with a store cum kitchen, housed a few of the resident staff. The visible members of the staff (resident and non-resident) included four young men who appeared to be from the north Indian states (Hindi speakers), and one young woman from the north-east of India.

Among the girls and women in line for placement that day, three were from Odisha, including one from the home village in Ganjam, and the other two coming from a village close by (at some 20 kms distance) in the neighbouring district of Gajapati. Two others were from Chhattisgarh, another two from Assam, and one from Kolkata. They were all sitting around on the floor of the room, each with her luggage close at hand. Among them, two were first-time migrants, and the rest of them were more experienced, having engaged in repeated rounds of migration for this line of work. The involvement of this agency in placing several girls from the Ganjam Home Village, had been first mentioned to this researcher author in 2017, although at that time it was located in the outskirts of the city more than 40 kilometres north of its present location.



Photo 2.1 AA's placement agency from the outside



Photo 2.2 Inside AA's placement agency: the halting room

The practice of maintaining a halting or holding place for migrant domestic workers by placement agencies, is of course a known and familiar pattern replicated across Mumbai and other cities such as Delhi (N Neetha 2008). Nevertheless, the story of this particular agency and its owner, brings out many trends that are of more recent origin, and sheds light on the way new participants/stakeholders have entered as players in the labour market for live-in domestic workers in a metro-city like Mumbai.

The owner of the agency hails from Assam, and came to Mumbai in 2001 as a young boy, barely 11 years old to call on a relative to return home, but as he said '*khud hi bas gaye*' (I myself became a settler) in the city. While he was hanging around with the relative who was living with a group of fellow migrant workers, he was told bluntly that there were no free rides in the city.

And so, he started working multiple jobs at that young age - as a helper on the sets in a music studio, as a *beldar* (navvy), and later learned to drive a RMC truck on construction sites.⁴ According to AA, driving these vehicles needs special skills that every driver doesn't have. For this reason, he started teaching other workers and then began acting as a go-between for them to get employed on construction sites, becoming "*a kind of small-time contractor*". However, in an aphoristic vein he added "*As time passes, things change*", and as "*the market went down*" in his line of work, his business collapsed, so he left it, elaborating that when he started there were only three '*companies*' in his line of work which had multiplied to more than a thousand.

Among the many other market-oriented aphorisms that peppered AA's conversation, the one that he used to explain his being crowded

4 RMC is the acronym for Ready-mix Concrete.

out of his earlier line of work was, “*Whatever comes into the market starts getting copied/ imitated by many people.*” Yet, an unqualified acceptance and faith in the market as defining the moral and practical universe of his aims, objectives and efforts, was evident in not only the aphoristic statements (some might call them clichés) that he was in the habit of espousing to one and all, but also in his description of what he had done and was continuing to do towards ensuring a firm foothold for his domestic worker placement agency in the marketplace, even when it meant piling up debts. In his Mumbai settled eyes his own life story was such that “*it would make a good film*”.

In 2013, AA started acting as an agent for other already established agencies engaged in placement of ‘maids’. His involvement with domestic worker placement began, according to him, when a ‘friend’ in Bangalore told him that he ‘*had some girls with him*’ who were in need of employment because their company had closed down, and they were out of work. In his twenties by then, AA reportedly asked this friend to send the girls over to him. Where were these girls from? Not so forthcoming at first, sometime later in the interview, he mentioned that the first girls for whom he was an agent, were from Assam. So, what did he do with them? He located some small agencies who were ready to accommodate and place the girls, but was told that they would charge him costs of their food, etc. for their period of stay before placement. He ‘*gave*’ some girls to such agencies, in various parts of Mumbai. According to him ‘*the work was good*’, but there were problems. Sometimes the girls would not get a ‘*good house*’ and the madams would harass them. He further elaborated:

“Some people think the girls are machines, not maids. In the beginning they say the work is of sweeping, dusting, mopping, cleaning, then they force them to do other work, threatening to turn them out in the middle of the night. They harass a lot.”

Other agencies wouldn’t respond to such problems. So I thought of starting my own. After all, the girls have come relying on us... If they face problems in one place, another is found...

I saw that there was good money to be made. But I couldn’t get customers/ clients. In the beginning, I would take the girls myself and try and connect from one client to another. I would give my visiting card and tell the madams that I had girls from the village if anyone wanted or needed them. But I didn’t get much of a response. I went around and spoke to security at various buildings. But this was also not very successful. They would ask for 50 per cent for passing on the information... Then I learned about possibilities online.”

Despite difficulties encountered on the way, the profits were obviously more than what he was able to get from his earlier labour contracting on construction sites, and seeing how profitable it could be, AA concentrated on developing domestic worker placement as his primary line of business. For this, as he said, he had registered his agency as a private limited company.⁵ We may note in passing here, that in his discourse, he presented and saw himself as helping the workers to deal with their problems, but also saw that there was good money to be made.

2.1 Enter the digital platform

Having failed to muster up enough custom through direct means, AA then went online, and as he explained,

“Around 2014, I started off with Sulekha.com. They used to give customers. But the way it worked was that they would give one customer to eight to-ten people. Then customers would choose one from among them. Ultimately, one had to establish trust, win trust and confidence (of customers) vis-a-vis the others (competitors) on one’s own”.

Sulekha.com advertises itself as a leading digital platform for local service businesses in India, focusing on “expert services clustered around Home, Life and Self and where the user need is customized.” And further, “using technology and domain intelligence, the platform seeks to understand the user need in detail and matches

⁵ On checking his company registration, it was found that he registered one Individual Proprietor firm in 2015, and another Private limited company in 2019. The address for both were the same.

it to verified service professionals.”⁶ One of the earliest internet companies to be established in India, it started off as a digital version of the yellow pages (pages listing/advertising businesses and other organizations according to the goods or services they offer in erstwhile printed phone directories). It quickly evolved into a platform for service providers, starting its larger operations in India in 2007. Major investors in Sulekha.com are from the United States of America, Japan, and Singapore, as well as India. This was the platform that AA started using to find his ‘customers’, i.e., prospective employers of live-in domestic workers in Mumbai.

While AA’s agency was indeed able to reach a larger number of clients through the Sulekha platform, this was not without cost. Additional expenditure was required to pay the charges of the platform (since such platforms derive their revenue from charging the service providers, not their customers). He said that he had been paying Indian Rupees INR 70,000 per month to Sulekha as charges. It would seem that participant beneficiaries in the profits from intermediation for the placement of live-in domestic workers in India are not just local, but also now includes global investors and players in the digital economy.

Interface with the platform of course rested on the offline commerce of actual placement. The system that AA followed was to enter into a contract with ‘customers’ (read employers of domestic workers) for supplying and guaranteeing a domestic worker for a duration of 11 months. For this the employer would pay the equivalent of one month’s salary of the worker as commission to the agency. If the worker left before the stipulated period, then the agency would send a replacement, or forfeit the commission. If the conditions were found to be difficult and unsuitable by a succession of three domestic workers, then it would be assumed that the employer was at fault, and no repayment of the commission would be made by the agency. Of course, identity papers of workers were also required to be given to employers, which is now generally copies of their Aadhar card.

Even as AA’s search for clients was facilitated by going online, the customer contacts provided by

Sulekha.com were also simultaneously provided to other agencies in the field that were registered with Sulekha (he said eight to ten - agencies would be provided together).⁷ In order to make his mark on those who made contact with his agency through the platform, there had to be enough girls available who could, on demand or whenever the calls came, be sent for the jobs. This required intensification of offline activities. So, what did AA do?

“I used to go around and talk to various agents to bring girls – most of the girls who come are from Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam, and whichever of these states they came from, 70 per cent of them are Christians. I would tell the agents, that I would pay INR 2,000 if they brought me a girl and ensured that she would work for at least five to six months. Because if she worked for only one month, then I myself would suffer a loss”.

In other words, his investments increased on both online and offline activities, and became mutually reinforcing. In order to establish a reputation online that would bring good ratings and reviews from customers on the Sulekha platform and thus generate preference for his agency, a continuous flow to his supply line of migrant domestic workers was required. Still, as he said:

“In the beginning I suffered losses. On my credit card, bank loans...My loans alone amounted to more than INR 200,000. Paying the agents, and then people wanted their food and lodging to be paid for. I maintained that everything would be free (for the girls) till I got them a job. I paid rent for a room where they stayed, with a kitchen and staff. You can imagine the cost”.

There were times when I did not get enough ready clients, then people (the girls) would be waiting around. If even ten people were there, the cost of three meals for them had to be paid for. Then there were the boys who went to pick up the girls from various stations, or who took them to the client’s household - they had to be paid. Sometimes getting a good client was difficult.

6 <https://www.sulekha.com/collateral/aboutus> Accessed on 7 November 2021.

7 We may note here that several other similar agencies were obviously also routing their search for clients through Sulekha.com

*Sometimes the girls would not settle into the job. They would say I don't feel like staying there, and things like that. It was a problem for me but what could I do?*⁸

And once again in a typical business entrepreneurship oriented aphoristic vein,

"...Still, I did not give up. I was sure that if not today, tomorrow things would be good. Slowly things changed, and times changed."

What changed was the rise of Google Ads offering a different mode of interfacing, and more direct outreach and muscle power on the internet.⁹ As AA put it, 'Google Ads came on the market'. And so, searching for a better way of accessing custom, he did an online course for Google Ads, and followed it up by moving on to the Google Ads platform.

2.2 How a multinational tech giant takes a cut in the 'maid' placement business in Mumbai

The logic behind moving to Google Ads, as explained by AA, was that in the system with Sulekha.com, each customer put their needs before the platform, and only then would they be shown a certain number of agencies, with contact details of the agencies as put out by the platform. In contrast, through Google Ads, customers could click directly on the advertisement and contact details of the agency itself. There was thus more chance of a direct one on one connect between the agency and clients, in a less mediated manner. Of course, AA deployed a series of metaphorical examples on the ways of shoppers to explain what he considered as the way of markets and business.

It may well be that he also thought that the monopolistic domination acquired by Google as an internet search engine would enable him to reach a larger clientele, but whatever be the case, it was clear from his account of costs that, in the process he had to pay double the amount of what he paid earlier. About his experience with

the pay per click model followed by Google Ads, this is what he said:

"In Google Ads, we have to pay INR 20 for every click. If someone visits (the agency advertisement) once, INR 19 is cut from my account, plus tax. Some people just visit and go away, but my money still gets cut."

You see, if four people come into a shop, it's not as if all of them will buy something. Maybe one will buy or maybe none."

I spend INR 5,000 a day on Google Ads. For that I get about 20-25 leads (potential customers who put in requests). Out of that two or three may get converted into an actual client – at the most five. Some only enquire, asking how much is a maid's salary. That's just an enquiry but my INR 20 is cut. Some people don't have the budget to pay – as you know nowadays even a kilo of tomatoes costs INR 60, they say they want a maid for INR 8,000, who will do all the work in the house. No one will work for INR 8,000 and it becomes a waste for me."

I think, if I spend INR 5,000 a day, I should get at least four to five jobs for people. My target is five for every INR 1,000 I spend."

The cost of Google Ads is at least INR 150,000 in a month."

With such an expenditure, does he manage to gain commensurate returns? To such a question, he has a pat answer,

Running any business does not necessarily mean that there's always a profit. The fact that I'm still running my agency during COVID is a big thing. Others have shut, but I think if people coming now see I shut shop, when I reopen, it will take me at least two years to revive my connections."

⁸ We may note here from his account that AA already had availed bank loans at this start-up stage of his agency, suggesting that he had the connections or backing to access and negotiate around the procedures for availing of such loans to finance his investments.

⁹ In 2018, the online advertising platform of Google Ads emerged as a rebranded version of the earlier Google Ad words.

Other than such expectations and targets, AA did not explain how the rate of INR 19 per click was negotiated. It is however, reasonable to assume that it was arrived at through a bid in the auctioning system that Google Ads follows, which includes a quality score/assessment of the service provider's advertisement by Google, apart from other factors including competition in that space, the geographical boundaries/radius that the advertisement is to reach, etc., being part of the assessment.¹⁰ In other words, Google and its analytical tools would have made an assessment of the baseline cut it could take from the value that online advertisement brought to the business of placement of domestic workers in Mumbai, and AA would have also given a figure for the maximum amount that he was prepared to invest. In all these negotiations, he was obviously guided by what he learned on the online course that he took for it, a course run by Google itself, which would be a case of a super-platform advertising itself in the name of a training and learning course.¹¹

The involvement of digital platforms in placement of domestic workers has only recently started to attract research attention in India. Some initial 'modelling of labour relationships' have been attempted within a framework seeking to address digital platforms as an alternative to word-of-mouth based placement agencies.¹² The evolution of AA's relationship with digital platforms as delineated here suggests that such a view limits the frame of analysis, erases the real life experiences and locations of workers from view, and misses out on the layers and distribution of risks and profit that have been inserted into intermediation processes, and on which digital intervention in placement of live-in domestic workers operates. What AA's account particularly exemplifies, is how a share of the profits being made in the placement of domestic workers in Mumbai is also captured by global investors and a giant multinational big

tech company, with the additional costs and risks being borne by the local placement agency. In his account, one can also discern a super-platform's control over the interface and users' behavioural biases through recording/aggregating user data and content, or the use of what has been called 'mundane labour' of internet users (Bauwens cited in Gurumurthy 2021). This then combines with monopolistic or what has been called data-polistic power to create/access/capture online markets, which then brings in further profits from service providers such as AA's placement agency.¹³

Nevertheless, what is also clear is that the functioning of AA's placement agency, and its ability to partner and share some of its profits with Google Ads, rested on a ready and steady supply of young women migrants, driven by dire straits, to seek live-in domestic work jobs in Mumbai, and without whom there would be no profits to share. The opaque impersonality in the way commerce is transacted through digital platforms may camouflage such profiteering from the distress that drives women to migrate for this form of domestic labour or the unfree conditions and permanently unsettled/transient form of work to which they become tied, but can it be denied that such is the case? Interviews with domestic worker migrants who had found placement through AA's partnership with Google Ads, certainly indicate that it is perpetual cycles of distress and unsettlement that propel them towards live-in domestic work placement agencies, which is thus inbuilt into the profits garnered by AA and the digital platforms that his agency engages with.

10 <https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/6325042?ctx=glossary>, <https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/2464960>
<https://www.wordstream.com/quality-score>

11 The characteristics of a 'super-platform' include size, ability to support their own ecosystems, and influence. Google meets all three characteristics. In a 2017 article, even before the emergence of the rebranded GoogleAds, Rosie Graham had already pointed out that 90 per cent of Google's revenue was derived from advertising, and that its dominance over the web allows Google to dictate various norms and practices that regulate the state of contemporary capitalism online.

12 See Ayush Rathi and Ambika Tandon (2021) 'Platforms, Power, & Politics: Perspectives from Domestic & Care work in India', <https://cis-india.org/raw/platforms-power-and-politics-perspectives-from-domestic-and-care-work-in-india>

13 See Digital Platforms and Concentration (2018) for a discussion on monopolization by a few on the internet at <https://promarket.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Digital-Platforms-and-Concentration.pdf>

2.3 Momentum to the flow of domestic worker migration to Mumbai and the wage bargain

We have already heard from AA that the girls coming to his agency, were mostly from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Assam. When pressed to specify some of the districts, he could not say much about the other states, but repeatedly emphasised Karbi Anglong as the main supplying district in Assam, a region and state with which he was most familiar.¹⁴ One of the reasons why he didn't have to think so much about the wherefrom, and the how's or why's of the women being placed through his agency, was that they were increasingly coming on their own rather than having to be hunted for through agents. Describing the agency's situation over the past few years, AA claimed that his earlier practice of searching for agents to bring the girls, was now no longer necessary. Instead:

"Nowadays, the girls call to say 'I'm coming'. Then I send someone to fetch them from the station they are to arrive at, so that they don't face any difficulty.

You see, our work runs on references from one to another. From one person, ten others get to know. Now suppose you come to the agency and have friends back home who can't find work, you will tell them... – 'Arre there is this agency in Mumbai with all facilities. If you want to, you can come', and they say okay.

This is how references work, the girls come by themselves

Earlier, I had a lot of problems. I needed agents to bring the girls as I didn't know where to get the girls from or how. I didn't understand the market either. In the last three to four years, I haven't needed an agent to bring them from their village. Everyone already knows the setup. The girls come on their own.

Right now is tough as we are coming out of the pandemic. Plus, November and December are lean season, when less people come. In January, it will pick

up. There will be no shortage. People will come from places like Assam, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, - from all over India. They come from places I've never heard of – in Nagaland, Manipur, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar... They come from all places. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, they all come."

Was this expanded source terrain from 'all over India' and all communities habitual sales talk, or did it reflect some reality? Perhaps some of it was indeed just a pitch. Earlier, in the interview he had categorically said *"Very few Muslim girls come. At best one or two,"* and it may be recalled that he had asserted that 70 per cent of the girls coming were Christian. Was he now contradicting himself? What appears to be the case is that the area from where girls are coming in search of domestic work in Mumbai has indeed widened (which is also confirmed by the following case study and other domestic worker interviewees), but AA himself has little interest in where they are coming from, or their background situation. When asked if there were any girls from Odisha at the agency that day, he didn't know, and had to call in one of his staff. He himself was unconcerned about the origins and conditions from which the girls were coming or the distress that was driving them. For him, as indeed in much of common discourse in neo-liberal times, they were perhaps just goods that reached him as marketable commodities whose continuous migration appeared as a facet of aspiration and progress of markets.

Yet, indeed the pattern of 'references' as he called it, was confirmed in conversations with domestic workers in Mumbai, including those present at the agency that day. The question is what was bringing so many women directly to this particular agency? One reason could be that the starting wages set by AA is relatively higher (recall how he dismissed those who wanted to pay less as wasting his time) and less negotiable downwards, than would be the case when workers negotiate on their own or through individual agents/connections. Word of this higher wage benchmark certainly spread along the same 'reference' channels. Further, since accommodation and food during the waiting period was explicitly provided without cost to the

¹⁴ AA's home district of Hojai is located in between the eastern and western parts of Karbi Anglong.

worker, it is not surprising that a number of girls/women flocked to his agency.

One may of course note that the clientele being sought by the agency was relatively higher end, having the ability to pay that higher wage, no doubt based on the fact that Mumbai has a greater concentration of those who can afford to pay more than any other place. And for whom, the online connect had been found to be most suitable, as direct accessibility to the upper echelons of the 'middle class', is otherwise restricted and almost impossible, particularly in gated and high-rise Mumbai.¹⁵ In the literature on domestic workers, the different scales or wage levels within the perimeter of a city has been so far discussed mainly in relation to live-out workers and mostly differentiated by area/colony as representing differentiations among employer categories. For live-in domestic workers in Mumbai, the area location may be less of a determinant than the nature of the residential complex, which is also perhaps why the online mode and related investments becomes necessary for the agencies to reach employer households that would otherwise be debarred to them.

Its flipside is that those among the migrants, who have reservations about going to agencies, might end up with low wages, ultimately earning less and sometimes paying more while searching.¹⁶ Yet indeed there are some among the migrant women from the home village who have still chosen to stay away from agencies, feeling that autonomous searching through contacts and friends is preferable. An earlier study had noted that a number of migrant domestic workers had found live-in employment on their own through sisters, friends and associates who were themselves domestic workers and acted as conduits to employers connected to or in the neighbourhood of their own employers (CWDS/LSHTM 2019).¹⁷ What appears to be the case is

that this may work some of the time and for some workers, but not every time or all of their rounds of migration. Plus, fellow live-in domestic workers are unable to provide accommodation during their period of job search. Thus, in the accounts of migrant domestic workers from the home village, city-based placement agencies are progressively emerging as interim destinations over the past few years and with increased momentum. The reasons for such a trend lie at one level, in the shift to provision of free board and lodging by agencies till employment is found, but also appear to be based on expectations of higher wages.

At this point, we may note that a higher wage means a bigger income for the agency, which is of course the basis for a high-level benchmark. Further, no payment was sought from the migrant women themselves, at any point during the course of their stay and employment. And this marks a difference from the earlier practice of middlemen and agencies taking a cut from the worker's monthly wages when individual agents played a more prominent role in placement for domestic workers (Neetha 2008). The changeover in practice to placement agencies relying solely on a one-time payment for a fixed term (varying from six to eleven months) from employers, has of course gained momentum on a wider scale only over the past few years. It suggests that agencies would be interested in shorter (annual) rather than longer tenures of durable employment in any particular household. Nevertheless, benchmarking of a higher wage at the start seems to have led to striking increases in the wages of many of the live-in domestic workers who were placed by AA's agency.¹⁸ Perhaps a coalescence of interests in a higher wage has facilitated the visible rise in wages of Mumbai's live-in workers, which in turn has provided momentum to the flow of migrating domestic workers to Mumbai.

15 This researcher was also refused entry into a multi-storeyed apartment block, when phone contact with a domestic worker from the home village was abruptly broken.

16 One of the migrant girls from the home village who was averse to going to any agency, was therefore paying rent for a room shared with others while searching for a job. She had been able to find only short-term jobs through her autonomous contacts, and in her last held job found in early 2022, had ended up paying a part of her salary for three months to the nurse contact who had arranged the job for her.

17 CWDS/LSHTM (2019), 'Women Migrating in India: Evidence from Odisha', <https://www.cwds.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Women-Migrating-in-India.pdf>

18 One of the workers from the home village who had been placed by AA's agency, had jumped from a INR 15,000 monthly wage at her previous employment to INR 25,000 in her present job, albeit with some additional tasks and functions thrown in, as pandemic fears inclined employers to employ one fulltime resident worker in place of the two or three (including part timers) that they might have preferred earlier. Pre-pandemic studies had commented on the higher propensity of Mumbai employers to have more than one domestic worker (CWDS/LSHTM2019).

2.4 Pandemic effects: Slowdown during COVID-19

COVID-19 restrictions and fears had without doubt disrupted the scale of migration flows of women looking for domestic work in Mumbai. (Field work at the home village in 2021 however, indicated that cycles of migration by live-in domestic workers persisted throughout the pandemic.) AA claimed that such was the difficulty in '*Corona kaal*' that while he had to pay salaries of INR 20,000 to his staff members, there were times when he himself had been able to make only INR 2,000 in a month. Still women were coming and looking for jobs in Mumbai, even in the midst of the rampaging virus, which was evident from the accounts of the domestic worker interviewees at home village and Mumbai in the larger study. Although COVID-19 data on the number of cases and deaths showed that Maharashtra had recorded close to seven times the number of cases in Odisha, and more than 14 times the number of deaths, it does not seem to have deterred domestic workers from the home village from moving towards Mumbai during the pandemic when lockdown restrictions had eased. Although none of our domestic worker interviewees claimed to have had COVID-19, they had all complained of being sick during this period. Since they didn't test for the virus, it remains of course a realm of speculation as to whether they had been infected with COVID-19.

During the pandemic Mumbai was an epicentre. Yet AA displayed insouciance in relation to health impact of COVID-19, perhaps drawing confidence from his avowed faith in the handling of the central government and indeed support for the same regime in his home state of Assam that blended into his faith in the market. Nevertheless, his own estimate was that three out of every ten who came to his agency tested positive. He claimed that he himself had contracted COVID-19 three times in the past two years. Testing for COVID-19 is now a requirement for placement and it is demanded by the employers. So perhaps his account of the

rates of infection among migrant live-in domestic workers in Mumbai, should not be discounted. Of course, a number of them were already in Mumbai when the pandemic hit, and may have felt more immune and able to manage without untoward incident. Besides compelling need at home village was a constant pressure. There were other issues and changes taking place in their lives and situation, which were bigger determinants of whether they stayed back at the village or continued on the migration track even in COVID-19 times.¹⁹

What about vaccinations? Stressing that 'government norms' have to be followed and vaccinations for all were necessary, AA said that the agency arranged for vaccinating the unvaccinated among the migrants. According to him such vaccination was not free for him and cost the agency INR 780 per person, including when the time came for the second dose. AA said that workers would be called to come to the agency when the second dose was due.²⁰ However, the clients/employers were asked to pay for the COVID-19 test that was demanded at the time of placement.

But to return to the slowdown induced losses incurred by AA and his agency. As he further explained, the number of girls coming were less than 25 in a month. According to him, possibly 10-12 girls would continue with their job. The placement of such reduced numbers did not generate enough revenue to even pay for his costs. Then, how was he managing to stay afloat? Was he tiding over his losses with his savings? Not really. He was in fact, borrowing to keep things going, and it was also obvious that he had access to a line of easy credit, which perhaps was one of the factors that bolstered his faith in the market regime and its systems.²¹

19 See account of the second case study in this paper which includes some experiences as a domestic worker during the pandemic. Among ten domestic workers covered in the monograph, it was striking that four of them had lost their fathers over the past two years, and the rest all recounted tales of distress and family needs that had to be met through their migration.

20 Being called by the agency for the second vaccine dose was confirmed by one interviewee worker in service at that time, who had been placed by the agency.

21 It is well established that with the ascendancy and dominance of finance in contemporary capitalism, speculative expectations continue to fuel investment through protracted periods of loss, even for very large multinational companies.

2.5 A turn to the local: Expanding the web of online intermediation

Nevertheless, all was not hunky dory, and in his efforts to deal with the situation of slowdown, declining income as well as outright losses, AA was moving into another level of online engagement. As he explained:

I have started working on another project. The present system is that people hire maids from an agency. Now if you go to an agency, then you have to pay the agency fees such as as INR 18,000 or INR 10,000 or something. I have set up a new online portal where you can hire yourself.

Now if a candidate for a job comes to me, then I upload all their details on the portal. Now if you want to hire a maid, you can visit the portal and look at the information of a candidate and contact them yourself. For this, the charge is nominal, INR 500 or so. In a way that's a 99 per cent discount.

Suppose there's a married couple or if an employer wants a maid for two to four hours a day. For four hours, the salary will be between INR 5,000 to 6,000. If they go to an agency, they will pay some INR 5,000 rupees to the agency. If the agency supplies a maid, what if she leaves after a month or two? The agency will then have great difficulty in finding someone else at the same location. With this new portal, the couple can locate 100 people at the same location for just INR 500.

Now if you want a worker for 24 hours, then someone can even come from Pune.

So, does this mean that this is for part time domestic workers? To this question AA responded indirectly:

I have made this for people's convenience. It is still in the process of being launched. When I launch it, I know that it will be good for many people. They will like it. It's like they won't have to pay agency charges.

The work is for local people. Now, if a local woman is at home, and she thinks, "If I can get work for four-five hours in a day and I get INR 5,000, it

will work for me." So, she can apply. Now there's someone nearby in whose house she can work, and they will see her profile and contact her.

How do local women contact him? His answer is 'online.' AA's unshaken faith in markets can be here seen to be extended and almost mystical belief in and expectations from online systems of connecting with markets. And he further averred,

These days, 80 per cent of everything is digital. If anyone wants or needs anything, they go online. Even a woman at home will go online saying "I want a job nearby"...Even in our advertisements for full-time maids, there are people who put in a request seeking jobs for themselves...There are many local people who approach us for jobs. They ask us through online. It's not as if they come to our office.

Right now, when we advertise for customers, they approach as customers and say I want a job. There are lots of calls like this, almost 20 out of every hundred leads are of jobseekers. Every day there are five -six calls like this - someone says I want a job in Malad for two-three hours and like that. Let me tell you that so far, I hadn't paid any attention to this. Now up to now, if you are a candidate, I have not given you anything. Still, you are searching as a client, and then saying you want a job.

Now if you are a client, you would search a maid service or agency in Mumbai or something like that. But if you're a job seeker, then you may search for maid jobs in Malad or in Goregaon and something like that. Now if you do any such search then our portal will come before you...

What would be the language for such applications?

It would be English. In Mumbai the most 'normal of normal' people have studied up to class four or five. Anyone in Mumbai can more or less understand as to what is written here in English.

This is the direction of my efforts. I have spent INR 120,000 to make this portal. I have designed it myself and got the work done by developers.

His idea is to expand his portal's outreach to 'All India', and in the several kinds of options offered on the portal, many other cities are included. In a sense, it's his own digital platform. Significantly, such a platform works on the basis of clients paying his agency through a payment gateway that in turn takes a two per cent cut from each such payment before transferring to his account, introducing yet another tier in the operations of the union of finance and technology that benefits from the placement process for domestic workers.²² With INR 120,0000 already invested in the portal, and more probably required to get all the linkages and outreach mechanisms in place, it remains to be seen whether AA's vision of mass utilization by workers and employers translates into actual practice. Till then, it would seem that he is continuing with his earlier practice of online advertisement for drumming up clients for live-in domestic workers coming to his agency, taking a month's salary from the employers as his agency fee, and relying on the flow of migrant girls/ women to sustain his business.

Upon enquiry some four months after the interview, the portal had still to become functional, the flow of migrant girls to the agency was still nowhere near pre-pandemic levels, and it appeared that AA's business of live-in domestic workers' placement was increasingly being supplemented by local recruits being placed for full time (12 hours) live-out domestic work.

2.6 Of legal frameworks and parameters, limits of formalization, and vulnerabilities of workers

What about regulatory frameworks and laws? AA's response was that his placement agency was registered under various laws. At a preliminary level, it was registered as a

private limited company, which meant Goods and Services Tax (GST) registration as well, or in other words he was officially integrated into the tax regime, and seemingly not part of the 'black economy'. Further, he had access to bank loans which meant that he would have the necessary papers including his balance sheet, and audited accounts, all part and parcel of the process of formalization of his agency as a service company.

With reference to labour, AA further stated that he was registered under the Shops and Other Establishments Act 1951. Part of the ensemble of Indian labour laws, this is supposed to regulate the payment of wages, hours of work, leave, holidays, terms of service and other work conditions of people employed in his office (his staff). Needless to say, with self-certification and lack of inspections having become the norm, there is little oversight of its implementation.²³

Crucially, with reference to the relationship between the agency and domestic workers, AA stated that he also had a '*license as a contractor under the central government law*'. When asked whether this was under the Contract labour law (The Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1970 (CLRA), he said yes, but it was clear that he was not informed of the legal provisions in relation to regulation of contract labour under CLRA. In all probability, he had obtained the licence under the Inter-State Migrant Workmen's (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 (ISMWA).²⁴ More importantly, he had acquired the license merely as a form of permission or legal instrument allowing him to operate in the placement business. What was emphasised as particularly important for him was what he termed the '*NOC*' (No Objection Certificate) from the police, which was based on submission of his various company registration and lease documents at the local police station.²⁵

22 Razorpay is given as the payment gateway on AAs portal. A fintech company established in 2013, its backers include Guaranteed Investment Certificate (GIC), one of the investment entities that manage the Singapore Government's reserves, Sequoia, an American venture capital firm headquartered in California, Ribbit Capital, a global venture capital firm focused on fintech (financial technology), founded in 2012 and also located in California, Tiger Global, an American investment firm founded in 2001 by American billionaire hedge fund manager, Chase Coleman III, that again focuses on Internet and financial technology industries.

23 In fact, the practice of self-certification was first initiated in relation to the Shops and other Establishment Act across various states in India in the 1990s, long before it was introduced for factory legislations.

24 The ISMWA is supposed to regulate the employment of inter-State migrant workmen and to provide for their conditions of service, including suitable residential accommodation, medical facilities free of charge, etc of course the enactment of Labour Codes, and particularly the Occupational Health, Safety and Conditions of Work Code, 2020, both absorbed and repealed CLRA and ISMWA, but procedures that were put in place under the earlier laws continue to remain in operation.

25 Although such an NOC is not listed as a requirement for obtaining a contractor's licence under ISMWA in Maharashtra, an NOC from the host state is a requirement under ISMWA in AA's home state of Assam, which suggests that his contractor licence was indeed obtained under ISMWA.

He emphasised that this had to be done, he said, *"because so many girls come from outside and stay at the office."* In all, AA's view was that the running of the agency *"involves a lot of time and tension in keeping track of and fulfilling the many requirements and procedures"*

As per information provided online, AA's agency claims "All the requirements of Companies Act 2013 and the rules made thereunder relating to registration of the company under section 7 of the act and matters precedent or incidental there to have been complied with...."²⁶ The agency also lists out its 'terms of use' for clients in the form of a template for the contract between employers of domestic workers and the agency. Clients are informed that if they do not accept the conditions, they should 'not use the website and its services.' Among the series of conditions of the template service contract between the agency and its client (employer), are charges for placement of the 'maid' are specified as 'One month salary' plus GST at 18 per cent, and guarantee of replacement if a maid leaves in between for a 'period of six months from the date of joining of the first maid'. One condition is that the client has to give the 'job description' and cannot make the 'maid' do anything outside that job description nor reduce the salary, and also that 'the maid will be not be tortured, harmed mentally or physically'. However, it is also suggested that the client undertake a police verification of the maid and 'check the maid's bags before she enters and leaves the home.'²⁷

Provision for a weekly off for the domestic worker or any other leave, is conspicuously absent from the conditions, as are any limits on the hours of work in a day and any provision for social security in the form of provident fund or health insurance. There is however a provision that in case of absence of the 'maid' because 'she is unwell/family emergency' no replacement will be given if she joins back when 'she is healthy/fit for work' within a time frame of ten days. The wage is clearly expected to be negotiated, and it is stipulated that it is to

be paid directly to the worker. No reference is however made to compliance with the minimum wage, although the actual wages received by the domestic workers placed have been well above any statutory minimum wage for 8 hours across most schedules of employment for at least the past five years.²⁸ AA's agency contract with the employers is thus not geared to the rights of the workers, in which the hours of work and leave (including to go out), as also health and social security, are among the key issues. The absence of any mention of these allows the employers enormous latitude in exercising excessive power and authority over workers' worktime, leisure time and mobility, or in other words over the bodies of their live-in domestic workers.

On the face of it, the several forms of registrations by AAs agency including with tax laws, would suggest that a process of formalization is taking place, but contractual aspects are determined by the placement agency's commercial relationship with the employers of domestic workers who are their clients. Even the provision against torture and harm of workers is explicitly for the purposes of ensuring no liability of the agency and so the clause reads "If the maid leaves due to any such reason (the agency) will not replace the maid and neither refund the placement charges paid by the client."

The lack of any protections for workers was highlighted by an incident that took place some four months after the interview with AA, when an SOS call was received by the researcher author from one of the migrants, 22-year-old RM from Odisha who was present at the agency on the day of the interview, and with whom intermittent telephonic contact has been maintained. A month after RM's placement with a job remit of looking after an elderly lady in a Mumbai household, her employer had taken her to Punjab ostensibly for a few days, which stretched without any end in sight to more than three months, and where the tasks demanded of her had extended to the housework for a larger

26 Section 7 of the Companies Act merely provides the procedure for incorporation of company to be filed with the Registrar within whose jurisdiction the registered office of a company falls.

27 A quick survey of websites of other placement agencies revealed that the text of contractual stipulations on AAs website is almost word for word, a copy of a similar contract on one of them.

28 Domestic workers were not included in the schedules of employment under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 (MWA) in Maharashtra, despite it having been recommended within the state government. Although the Code on Wages, 2019 now subsumes the MWA, its definitions are such that domestic workers are still not covered.

family unit as well as looking after the elderly lady, which included pressing her legs through the night. As she said “For four months, I have been toiling day and night without any sleep.”

RM had previous experience in working across a number of households as a domestic worker in Mumbai since 2016. Yet, when she told her employer that her employment was supposed to be in Mumbai and she wanted to return there and her employer threatened to call the police if she tried to leave, she was too frightened to take any steps. She had after all been taken to an unknown place where she knew no one, and in fact had no idea of where she actually was since they had arrived at the destination in the middle of the night by train. She could just see that there was a college in front of the house. Repeated attempts by RM to call the agency had not been responded to and she was desperate.

Only, after telephonic reassurance that her employer could not bring in the police, and that the employer herself could be charged with trafficking and coercing into bondage for holding RM against her will, did she manage to muster the courage to ask a local shopkeeper to write down the colony location (it was in Jalandhar) in a WhatsApp message.²⁹ She then told her employer that her mother was ailing and she wanted to go home, at which her employer threw her out of the house instantaneously without paying her the last month’s earned wage. Following further long distance telephonic advice on how to reach the railway station, RM found that there was no train to Mumbai till two days later. Then, she took the overnight train to Delhi, where she was assisted with accommodation and the booking of a ticket to Mumbai, where she had her own circle of friends and felt more secure and able to find a job. By then contact with the agency had been established and she was told that they would find her an alternate employment if she was able to reach Mumbai on her own.

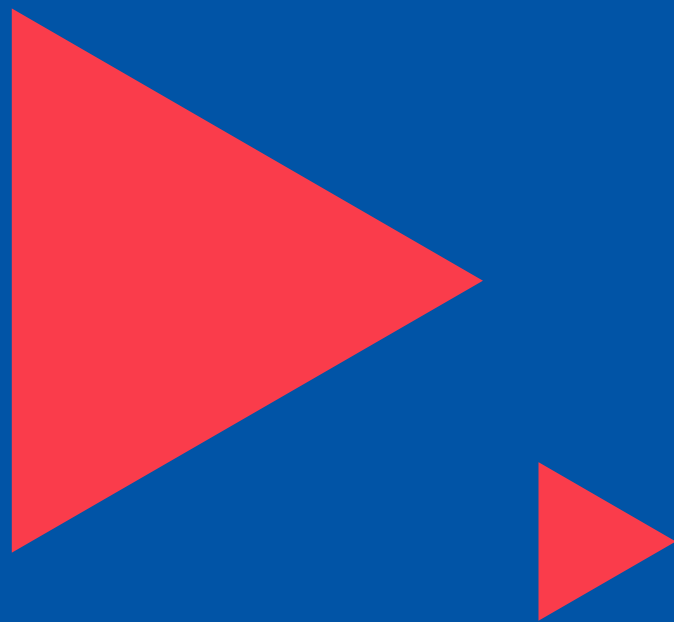
RM’s story illustrates how the agency contract does not address the vulnerabilities inbuilt into the power that employers are able to exercise over live-in domestic workers. Nor does it provide any relief to a worker facing mistreatment and wage theft, even as it ensures that on the back of such mistreatment,

the agency is protected from any contractual liabilities towards its client (RM having left the job within the six-month period). In RM’s case, it was her ability to communicate on phone, albeit in a constrained manner, that encouraged her to find a way of escape, but it could not ensure payment of her dues. In the case of a friend of hers who had also been placed by the agency some months before RM, even telephonic contact had been lost (her phone having suddenly been switched off from January 2022), and although RM repeatedly asked the agency people to find out what had happened to her, they said they were unable to trace her. Clearly the agency did not feel any obligation to check and locate a worker they had placed and with whom the telephonic communication had broken down.

²⁹ Through this crisis, the researcher author was the only connection that she had managed to get through to.

3

**Between autonomy and
dependence: When a
domestic worker sets up a
placement agency**



Following a different trajectory into intermediation enterprise from AA, 22-year-old BN's attempt to establish a placement agency in the metropolis, is founded on the compulsions and crises in the life of a domestic worker. Before we begin with the unusual case of BN, it is perhaps pertinent to mention that it is not as if the involvement of women in organised intermediation for domestic workers in Mumbai is new, or that BN's is the first instance of a female headed placement agency. Indeed, one of the oldest agencies involved in placement of live-in domestic workers in Mumbai is 'Regina Pacis', an institute run by nuns. It too has a hostel/halting place for migrant girls, and additionally runs a 15 day orientation and training programme for domestic workers, alongside its placement services.³⁰ Regina Pacis is however, a religious congregation based institution, associated with the moral and social patronage plus charity oriented discourse of one of the orders in the Catholic Church that has long propagated domestic service as a most suitable occupation for poor young women.³¹ Although many migrant girls in Mumbai, particularly Catholics from Adivasi and other marginal communities, have indeed become domestic workers through Regina Pacis, the overwhelming majority of the girls even from the Christian dominated home village in Ganjam, Odisha, are now moving along different networks, agents, and agencies.³²

BN's placement agency follows a quite different trajectory of emerging intermediation from below rather than in the tradition of from above

as exemplified by Regina Pacis. Although BN is herself a Catholic Christian from the Dalit caste of Panos in Odisha, her entry into the life of a domestic worker from the Home Village, and her route into the world of placement agencies completely bypassed the patronage, controls and backing of Church institutions and connections. In fact, BN's agency story is one of no religious institutional backing at all and is located in secular social and economic processes and forms of market connectivity. What it particularly highlights are the gendered vulnerabilities and risks that emanate from working as a young and single woman with limited education in the otherwise male-dominated business of intermediation and placement. In the elements that have shaped BN's trajectory, the vicissitudes of her home village context, her life as a domestic worker in Mumbai and Bhubaneswar, a stint as an employee of one of the Mumbai-based placement agencies, and a complex personal relationship with an agency employee, all have a role to play and need to be taken into account.

When interviewed in early November 2021, BN had only recently rented a one-room flat (around 12 square yards) in the satellite city of Navi Mumbai.³³ The room was on the third floor of a narrow tenement building, housing perhaps two to three families on each floor, amidst the narrow lanes of an informal settlement located in an old village in the new city. Although bare of any furniture, the flat, with its small bathroom and kitchenette was sparkling clean, and it is this flat that BN was using as a halting area for the migrant girls that she seeks to place.

30 One of the congregations under Mumbai's Gloria Church, Byculla, the Regina Pacis institute announces itself as "a place for the young domestic worker a place 'to lay her head' when she first arrives from the remote village in search of a livelihood free of any charge", to receive a 15 day orientation and training in the basics of housework and then placement as a domestic worker "in a safe and happy home with favourable conditions of service." See <https://gloriabyculla.wordpress.com/regina-pacis/>

31 The nuns at Regina Pacis are attached to a Congregation of the Catholic Church, founded by Vicenta María López y Vicuña (1847-1890), named Religious of Mary Immaculate (RMI). Vicenta Maria was associated with a home for domestic servants in her home country of Spain. The international RMI website declares, "We were born to respond to the needs of the young girls who migrated from the countryside to the city in search of work, and found themselves without home, without work and without means to survive." See <https://www.religiosasmariainmaculada.org/en/we/who-we-are/> RMI run Yuwati Niwas/Yuwati Sewa Sadan, in is also among the first institutions to train and place migrant girls from rural families as live-in domestic workers in Delhi. Both in Mumbai and Delhi, these institutions were instrumental in promoting and establishing the practice of hiring of live-in domestic workers drawn from Christian tribal families in Jharkhand, Odisha, in these two metropolitan cities.

32 Out of the ten domestic workers from the Ganjam, Odisha home village interviewed by this research author, only one had ever had a connection with Regina Pacis, and she too had chosen to move out of its orbit towards other agencies.

33 Navi Mumbai (which translates as New Mumbai) is of course an integral part of what is known as the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) on the eastern side of the Thane creek that separates the mainland from the original peninsular city of Mumbai. The colonial city of Bombay, had been built on the archipelago of seven islands of Bombay, Parel, Mazagaon, Mahim, Colaba, Worli, and Old Woman's Island. The suburbs are an integral part of the city but retain such a designation as a district. 75 per cent of the population of Greater Mumbai in 2011 was concentrated in the suburbs. Beyond the two districts of Mumbai City and Mumbai Suburban, the MMR includes parts of three other districts of Maharashtra in the mainland Konkan region. Navi Mumbai, which is located across the two districts of Thane and Raigad, is separated from Mumbai City by an estuarine creek but linked through bridges.



Photo 3.1 Inside BN's placement agency room

At the time of the interview there was no one in line for placement by her, so she was staying alone at the flat. Just a few days before, we had met whilst she was escorting a cousin from her village for whom she had arranged a temporary placement. After dropping the cousin at her employment destination, BN opted for being interviewed at a roadside park, although the interview concluded in her Navi Mumbai flat some days later. She was particularly open and frank, perhaps because there was some comfort in having resumed an acquaintance that was made some three years before, plus a sense of closeness because of connection with some relatives at her home village. And so, in BN's narration of her journey and particularly its current stage of setting up a placement agency, she revealed a striking mix of the deeply personal and the business side to her enterprise, albeit with some initial circumspection and reserve followed by a compulsive outpouring.

For making sense of the scattered and compulsive elements in her narrative, it is perhaps useful to begin with that first point of acquaintance with BN that was on a Sunday evening in August 2018, and took place at the park located near a church where many of Mumbai's live-in domestic workers used to attend a Hindi service. There were more than a hundred girls gathered at the park that Sunday, walking about holding hands, sitting and

chatting with each other, with a handful of young men in the background. That particular park was referred to in an earlier study as "a zone of freedom, an important venue for socialising and fraternising with friends from home villages, and also with similar domestic workers from other parts of the country working as live-ins in Mumbai." (CWDS/LSHTM 2019). BN was there to meet with some of the workers who had been placed by an agency where she had only recently become an employee. She had already supervised the placement of seven out of eight girls in the week preceding, of which three girls were from the home village. Smartly dressed in jeans and with short hair at the time, she displayed a free and friendly style of interaction. She easily agreed to meet the next day for a one-on-one chat about her work.

When she came to meet the next day, BN was accompanied/escorted by a young man with whom she had become acquainted during one of her train journeys to Mumbai. They had become friends, although they shared no connection of religion or caste, nor even of class background - with only language and district of origin being a common ground, apart from the zest and angst of youth on the move. He was a trained engineer, and was soon to be traveling to West Asia, but was obviously concerned about BN's situation, and displayed a somewhat protective air. Why such a detail is being mentioned here,

is because it is indicative of BNs cosmopolitan capacity to make friends with both men and women without gendered inhibition or reserve, a quality that has proved necessary for her in the placement agency business, but can also propel vulnerabilities and risks.³⁴

3.1 From becoming a domestic worker in the city to becoming an agent in the city

BN's account of her life as a migrant begins from 2015, when she was 16 years old, and a student of Class 9 at the home village. On hearing that two girls whom she knew, were going to Mumbai, she made an impulsive decision, she asked the girls if she could accompany them, quickly borrowed INR 1,000 from a '*bhaiyya*' friend and without discussing her plan with her parents, she made her first journey to Mumbai.

She was obviously attuned to the idea of working and earning in Mumbai, since her elder sister had earlier been a domestic worker there for several years. While talking about her childhood, BN presented a frankly expressed self-view of being an extremely naughty hoydenish child, so much so that her parents sent her off to a residential school for orphans, in the hope that she would become disciplined. Her father used to cut wood in the forest lands around the home village, but as she said then, he "*was a drunkard*". Her mother worked as a mid-day meal worker in the village school.³⁵

In her first encounter with Mumbai, she was introduced to a friend of the girls she had travelled with, and it was in the household where that friend of friends worked, that BN got her first job. Some six months into her first job in Mumbai, BN's brother came and took her back to the home village. BN's second job and journey to Mumbai, was fixed through an agent known to her family. This time, BN, was 18 years old, she told her parents that she wanted to go to Mumbai. The job she got was for housework and care of a little boy, for which the agent

negotiated a salary of INR 7,000 and two off days a month. However, as she discovered, she was unable to actually get those off days most of the time. After several months of working there, one day some hot water accidentally spilled on the boy's hand, his mother got angry and slapped her hard and repeatedly, and so BN left the job. When she was leaving, the employers '*snatched away*' her clothes and sim card, and refused to let her take them. Her *bua* (father's sister) then arranged another job for her with a household, where her own daughter had been working, where BN's tasks included cleaning bathrooms, dusting, and housekeeping. She stayed on there as a kind of temporary *badli* (replacement) worker only till her cousin sister sent another girl from the village for the job, following which she immediately left for the Home Village.³⁶

Two months later, she was back in Mumbai. This was in February 2018, a year in which BN made several transitions, including moving out of her teens. She told her parents that she was going with other friends, whereas in fact, she travelled alone. She became acquainted with some other girls on the train, and on reaching Mumbai, went with them to an agency, where they were put up in a room above the office with some four to five girls who were already there. This was her first encounter with the agency system. From there, she was placed in a household for cooking and childcare on a salary of INR 12,000. But she left the job after a month because "*They only ate breakfast and dinner there. I didn't get lunch and was left hungry*". With that one month's salary, she again went back to the village, but returned to Mumbai after a month on her own and was introduced by a friend to another agency from where she was placed in a house for a salary of INR 13,000. She again left that job after a month because "*Madam used to shout*", but this time she did not go back to the village. Instead, she returned to the agency that had placed her. It was this same agency where the then 20-year-old BN was working, when we first met.

Starting by helping out in making food arrangements for the girls who came to the

34 That young man has since returned to India after working in the Gulf for three years, and according to BN, he was located and working now in Bhubaneswar. In 2021, they were still friends, albeit at a distance, with contact sustained by occasional phone chats.

35 At that time, midday meal workers received a wage of INR 1,000 per month.

36 This was probably BN's first introduction to a kind of *badli* worker or replacement system that became a standard practice of retaining employer clients by agencies.

agency, BN had soon graduated to escorting them to employers, etc. From that, she moved to also talking to various employers on the phone, helping negotiate salaries of workers, and bringing more workers with whom she herself had personal contact, to the agency. Having become fully integrated into its functioning, she rented a small room for herself next to agency office. It was a very busy time, as *"many girls kept coming"* and from morning till late night, BN was busy working on the phone, negotiating with employers, travelling daily to various parts of the city, and keeping a relationship going with the migrant women/girls for a few months after they were placed. (According to her, that agency collected its fees from the employer, three months after placement) BN had been promised a monthly salary of INR 13,000 by the agency boss, but after working there for approximately three months, it was already clear that she was not being paid in any regular manner.

[Based on interview with BN on 20.08.2018 in Andheri, Mumbai].

Three years down the line, when interviewed in November 2021, BN was in the process of setting up her own agency. But as we shall see, the intervening period between the years 2018 to 2021 was not a simple line of transition from working for an agency in Mumbai to setting up her own in the same city. It was punctuated by her leaving the agency job and returning to domestic work, several months of declining income status, and inability to hold on to any job, and then the intervention of a family tragedy and the pandemic. Ultimately, it was mounting debt that drove her into setting up her own agency in 2021. Nevertheless, her experience as an agency employee, and the knowledge acquired in the process, was a crucial element in that decision. To that experience, we may now turn.

3.2 Informality, exploitation, and opening of a wider world: Working as an agency employee

BN's closer association with the agency actually began at a time when she had developed a skin disease with pustules erupting on several parts of her body. Having returned to the agency office after leaving the job where she had been placed, she just hung around there for several days while she got her medical condition diagnosed. A degree of latitude in accommodating migrant

girls at the agency seems to have provided her the time and opportunity to initiate both her diagnosis and treatment, which required fortnightly injections over a period of two months. But she did not have enough money to pay for those injections, and when the agency owner asked her to help with the cooking arrangements at the holding accommodation for a nominal payment, she readily agreed. In fact, according to BN, another girl who later took over the same tasks of cooking and cleaning after her, had also returned to the agency from a domestic worker job for recuperation when she fell sick, and was similarly asked by the owner to take over the cooking. It would appear that the agency allowed workers to stay on, in times of ill health or sickness – the holding area for workers seeking placement also providing an interim place for shelter and food in such situations. This kind of an arrangement naturally allowed the agency owner to easily commandeer the labour and contacts of the girls at little cost.

According to BN, when she first started working at the agency, the owner used to run the office alone. Although there were other agents with whom he would liaise, none of them worked from the office. Given her friendly and cooperative nature, BN quickly became involved in assisting the boss in the business, over and above cooking and cleaning. Soon she was performing multiple tasks in the placement processes on a fulltime basis and also bringing in girls looking for work from among her own contacts. BN's day would start early at 6 a.m. with the cooking of food for the girls/women in transit, and then from 10 a.m. onwards, most of the rest of the day was spent in escorting workers to their employment destinations and meeting/negotiating with employer/clients. The problem was, that although she was told that she would be paid at least INR 13,000 for her work, her payments were made on an ad hoc basis, and linked to the earnings garnered from the employers of domestic workers who were either brought by her to the agency, and/or in whose actual placement she played an active role.

In other words, she was being paid on a piece rate basis, out of the profits earned by the agency owner from the business that she herself brought in, which also led to no payments in cases of non-continuance by workers or non-acceptance by employers. The amounts she received could be as low as INR 2,000 or INR 3,000 in a month. The owner kept assuring her

that if she just continued to work, she might get even make more than INR 15,000 at times when the agency was able to earn more, and on such a vague assurance, she continued to work for several months. Since it was a verbal, informal, and casual arrangement, she had no real terms to her work contract. Without a specific percentage or commission being even orally committed to, and with the actual payments to the agency by employers only occasionally passing through her, she also remained in the dark as to how her payments were actually calculated, and perhaps didn't realize if, when, or how she was being short-changed.

The flexible functioning that had initially allowed her the freedom to stay at the agency during the time of her ill health thus became an instrument of extracting excessive work, transferring risk, and non-payment of a regular salary by the owner. Still, in her own eyes, she was running the office of the agency with the owner, and felt committed to the job. Pushed to do more and more, she was finding the work stressful and difficult to manage without additional support. She then negotiated with her boss to take on an educated male friend of hers (B) to assist in the office, but he quit within a week. BN's own view was that he left the job because he felt uncomfortable dealing with so many women.

But through B, one evening in October 2018, she met a friend of his (let us call him TT), who was also in search of work in Mumbai. A passing conversation between the three of them took on a deeper tone as they talked about what they want to do in life. BN's account of that evening brings out her childlike and free spirit at one level, and again gives us a little insight into the situation of confinement in which she had spent her years as a live-in domestic worker in Mumbai. More importantly, it explicates the problems she was facing because of her own limited education, and why she felt the need for support to function effectively in the world of the agency. And finally, it tells us much about this young girl's negotiating abilities and confidence in her judgement (she was just 20 years old at the time).

It was around 6 p.m. in the evening, and the three of us sat down near a small kiosk to have tea and a sandwich, and got talking about various things that we could do. I said, let's open a small restaurant. TT said he wanted to be a photographer and open his own studio. B made a funny face and said "we all want so much, but nowadays nothing works out"– he's very funny, a great comedian... Anyway, we had to buy some medicines and were just walking about...

It was during Ganpati Visarjan... I became so excited on seeing it... In my whole life and after so many years in Mumbai, I had never seen a Ganpati Visarjan... Never seen so much crowd.³⁷

Anyway, after the visarjan, we sat down somewhere and I kind of took an interview of TT. I asked him if he knew how to use a laptop and computer. I asked him if he could read English and copy or draw up contract papers, could he make Aadhar cards for girls who didn't have one...I asked if he had a problem with working with so many women, would he commit to treating them with courtesy even if they made a mistake, and not get angry or scold them... After discussing with him, I felt that he was capable of doing the agency work. So, I took his Aadhar card and Pancard and convinced sir (the owner) to take him on for office work.

TT was a little uncertain as to whether a small girl like me could actually get him a proper salary, but I told him, tension mat lo (don't stress). I will see to it that you are paid.

I might not get paid properly myself, but I would ensure that he was paid a salary of INR 18,000.

Then he said that he had to pay his room rent the next day, so I asked how much it was. He said INR 1,500. I went to my room, got INR 1,500 and gave it to him as an advance.

³⁷ Ganpati Visarjan refers to the immersion of idols of Ganapati (the elephant headed God in the Hindu pantheon) at the end of a ten-day festival marking the birth of Ganapati which is the biggest festival observed in Maharashtra.

The upshot was that TT joined the agency, and the two of them started functioning as a team. She would take the girls and manage most of the face-to-face negotiations at employers' households, and he would manage the online work and other paper work at the office. He became a kind of manager, drawing up the contracts with employers, explaining the terms to the girls, tracking and distributing tasks of who was to go where and who would go with whom, keeping track of payments that had to be made or collected, and so on. BN had been trying to assist the owner in doing all this work before he came, but was handicapped by a limited ability to comprehend or write large amounts of written text, which held her back in developing her computer and accounting skills, but her oral negotiating skills were highly developed. With TT's induction, the agency office became more streamlined, the accounts were better maintained, as a result of which, BN's payments became more regular, even though it was nowhere near as much as she had been promised. In working together, and supporting each other, a special friendship developed between BN and TT that would later become a crucial and functional necessity for her when she decided to set up her own agency, but also cause her much emotional distress and grief.

3.3 Vicissitudes of a friendship: Intersections of the private and the collegial at the interstices of intermediation

Looking back at the period from October 2018 to March 2020, BN tried to explain how important that friendship was for her, how it grew but was never made public, how it waxed and waned, yet sustained. It all began sometime in December 2018. Her account was as follows:

Things were not going so well for me at the agency. The owner would often complain about the amount of provisions that were used. I didn't like having to listen to such carping, and sometimes when things ran out, I would just buy some items out of my own money. Once, sir scolded me really badly, saying how had so much rice, dal, vegetables, gas, etc. been used up. I was very upset, and decided to leave the job. TT was away at his village that time, and I had gone to a friend's place

– she was living with her boyfriend in Belapur - when TT called me. So, I told him that I was going to leave the job.

He could hear me crying, and kept asking what had happened. I wasn't telling him, but when he said 'you are a good friend of mine, and so I'm asking', I felt something very deep inside... There were so many girls with whom I was friends, but they would be nice in front of me, and then behind my back say bad things about me. Only if they needed something...if they needed money or had some problem, would they think of me. Not otherwise...And so when TT voiced concern and said I was a good friend of his, I was very touched. So, I told him about how sir had scolded me, and that I wanted to go home to the village. He told me to just hold on till he returned, and then I could decide what to do.

When TT returned from his village, he said let's go out somewhere. ...I was in Mumbai, had been here for so many years, but had never been out anywhere. I only knew Patwardhan garden (the park where we first met) and I'd only been to Mount Mary Church once, that too with my bua (aunt). I'd not gone out anywhere else. Then, the two of us went to Bandstand – it was the first time I'd been there. We caught some fish, and fed the crows... we laughed and looked around at others, and we just enjoyed ourselves...

We used to just get an e-pass, and travel up and down in local trains phokat mein (just like that/for no reason). When I was with him, I used to feel protected...

Although we worked in the same office, no one there knew of our friendship... it was then that I gave him the name of TT that would only be privately used between us without others knowing...

After saying this, suddenly all BN's pent-up feelings of betrayal, lack of reciprocity, aloneness, continuing attachment, came pouring out in an intense flood of words, some extracts of which are given below. It is however, pertinent to point out here that these aspects of BN's inner emotions and upheavals had not played out in isolation. It was not just the fact that she felt humiliated by her boss, but also intersections

with a series of other material developments in her work life of which the first was that by the end of 2018, she had left the job at the agency, and returned to live-in domestic work where her earnings were considerably more. Looking back from November 2021, she explained why she left the job at the agency in bad terms.

I needed money. I had come here to earn some money. When I was working at the agency, I was not getting a proper or regular salary. So, I left.

I went back to 24-hour housework...

According to BN, it was some months after she had left the agency that she realized that her feelings for TT had become special, and that he had become the most important person for her. After that, 'the friendship began to move further'. As she put it:

Whenever he was around me, I used to feel so good...So happy with him... I got so deeply involved in the friendship and he would always keep telling me, 'Don't get too close...Don't get too serious...we are just friends... I can never think of a love marriage...my marriage will be arranged by my family...

TT had told me some days earlier that his younger brother was to go to the village, and was short of money to buy clothes. So, when I went to the market for some work, I bought some clothes for him and his brother... I spent more than INR 3,000. When he came for the contract, I gave what I had bought to him ... He said 'Who told you to get so many things'. He got angry with me and refused to take the things at first. But in my mind, I thought there is indeed a place in his heart for me... and later, he called and told me he was wearing the clothes I'd got...

One day, he had to come to Bhandup to drop one of the girls. He called me to say he was coming that side. He said it was not possible for him to come there every other day, but this was a chance for us to meet. I made up a story for my madam that I had some work, and met him that evening. He gave me a flower! A rose! I was so surprised. I said 'You brought a flower? You! That too for me! He said 'yes, I got this flower for you'...and I said thank you. After it died, I kept that flower in the pages

of a notebook. It is at home... you see, no one has ever given me flowers, nor have I given to anyone...that he had given it to me felt really good.

The nature of the friendship was not all roses however, and in BN's narration, it seems to have become progressively more complicated and difficult to maintain through differences in social and spatial location, and perhaps in cultural conditioning as well as inequalities of gender and reciprocity of feelings.

Nevertheless, in BN's stated view 'everything was going fine' in the friendship at the time. Such a view persisted even when the special and exclusive nature of the relationship appeared to be waning. It persisted even through TT's family arranged engagement. In her account:

He [TT] brought in another girl (S), an old friend of his to work in the agency... She would always talk badly with me, and I didn't like her. She would make comments and sneer at my clothes, at the way I used to dress... I had short hair then, and nothing would suit me...I myself couldn't understand what I should wear... I didn't like S ... but because she was his friend, I was determined to be her friend. If I got something for him, I would also get something for her...

He told me that his marriage had been arranged... When he was to go for the engagement, I bought him some good clothes...I went with him to the airport. It was on 3 July 2019 It was the first time he was flying... for me it was the first time ever I went to the airport... We told each other that whoever we get married to, we would still try to be best of friends...

For more than two months after that 3 July 2019, BN was unable to get any leave from work. And when she managed to take a few days leave during festival season in September, and visited the agency office to meet TT, she said that he just ignored her, and didn't even talk to her. Upset and angry, she left and then went off to Pune with her bua (father's sister) and her husband. There was no phone connectivity at the place where they had gone, for two days. When she returned to Mumbai, reaching the station at around 8 p.m. at night, she was in a state of emotional dilemma and explained what she did then:

It was raining that night. I couldn't think what I should do. I went into a church to pray. In my prayer, I asked God what I should do. Should I go back to work? I was having trouble at my place of work and didn't feel like going there. On the other side, there was this fight going on with my friend... Ultimately, I didn't return to work that night, and just went straight back to the Jogeshwari office...I wanted to talk to TT, but it was very difficult.

After that I just didn't go back to work at Bhandup at all. I'd left my clothes there, and just had two sets with me. For two to three months, I had almost nothing to wear, not even underwear...I was so immersed in trying to make up with TT that I had lost myself...

I was staying at the agency, but I was not working there. I was there as a maid, not a madam. I would be sent to some place for work, but would be just crying all the time and unable to do the work properly.

I felt so bad...I would tell myself, what are you doing? You have to control yourself. I was so angry with myself. Sometimes I would go up onto the terrace thinking of suicide. But no. Every morning when I was at the agency, I would get ready and wait for him to come at 10 a.m. in the hope of being able to talk to him. But he would always sit only in the midst of others and ignore me. But I kept trying to make contact. Why my heart was so fixed, even I could not understand.

Over the next six months, BN was sent to work in some three households. In the first two, she barely stayed a month or so. She said that in one job, the food given to her was very little, and she was left hungry most of the day and returned back to the agency. While working at the second place, she fell sick with a fever, and again returned. It was becoming a habit to keep returning back to the agency, and staying there for some days, no doubt drawn by the hope of someday being able to find a way of connecting with TT.

BN and TT certainly remained in some form of communication through the phone within the agency premises and also when she was working in the various households, since it was part of his job to maintain contact with the girls after placement. Nevertheless, an incident she recounted is indicative of the abject condition to which BN had been reduced during this period. In the way it panned out, there is a hint of office malice at work in the background, to humiliate her.

S ma'am who worked in the office, sent me for a job. I was told that someone had called the agency asking for a maid to look after an old lady whose relatives were going out of town for three months.³⁸ I was sent with my Aadhar card, and PAN card xeroxes and the number of the person I was to meet in Andheri. I received a message from that number while on the way, asking me to give INR 800 and copies of my identity cards to a lawyer who would meet me there. I had absolutely no money, so I called the agency owner and told him that I was being asked for money, but I had none. He said he would send me the money, and I should take it out and give it, and he sent it immediately. When the man showed up, I gave him the xeroxes and the money. He told me to reach Goregaon station at 7 a.m. the next morning, where he would come with a car and take me to the house, and then he vanished. I went to Goregaon the next morning, and waited from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., without water or food, but no one showed up. It was all a fraud and they were just thieves.

I went back to the agency room, and just curled up under a sheet, and cried and cried and cried. I was so angry with TT. He hadn't checked on anything, no one had seen the person who had made the call, for which I had been sent. It was all just on that one call. He didn't even ask me when I returned as to what had happened.³⁹

In spite of all the tension, abjection, and humiliation that she felt subjected to in the public domain of the agency office, there were

38 A change in tone and status is noticeable in BN's choice of words here. Where earlier in the interview, with reference to the period when her friendship with TT was on a growth trajectory, she had referred to TT's friend (S) by her name on equal terms, within the context of a declining trajectory to the friendship, and BN's own abjection, she refers to S as S ma'am.

39 At this point, the casual manner in which particularly the more experienced girls who may not need escort were being handled by the agency may be noted.

still a few occasions of private outings at the Bandstand and other places that kept her tied into the friendship. BN and TT seemed to have reached some kind of halfway meeting ground, by early 2020, when she was settling into a job in suburban Mumbai's Mira Road for a salary of INR 20,000. Able to once again send some money to the home village, and retain an income in hand mitigated her material circumstances as well as inner turmoil. It was during this time that TTs marriage dates were fixed. She was not upset by that, since she felt that she had been with him and helped him choose his bride.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, strains in the friendship again came to the fore, and BN returned to the home village, telling him that she would return only after he was married. As we shall see, that was indeed what happened, but there's more to that continuing story whose relevance persists because of its role in the process of setting up of her agency in 2021. But before that event in the home village took on a greater role and priority in BN's life.

3.4 At home village: A pandemic and lockdown, a father dies and suddenly Mumbai becomes too far away

On March 15 2020, just a few days before the nationwide lockdown, BN finished with her last job, and took the train to the Home Village. Back in the village, she became preoccupied with the need to build a house for her family. As she explained:

The place where we stayed (on rent) was made of mud, and they had not given enough mud as needed for it... The floor was not made...Between the outside and inside the house there was no difference...It was not like a house at all...not a way to live... There was no electricity, no light in the night... It was there that papa became seriously ill

Papa had tuberculosis. We couldn't get him to eat anything, his teeth started hurting and he couldn't chew... And we couldn't give him the kind of food he needed... He had become so thin, all bones. There was no bed, and he was forced to lie on just a chatai (Reed mat) on the floor covered by a sheet. It hurt

him. It was horrible...I used to lift him and bathe him, but we couldn't really help him...couldn't save him. Doctors said they would send an ambulance, but none came. We didn't have money to hire a vehicle...

I myself developed high fever for several days,... I just wanted some quiet, I could not bear to hear papa crying with pain,...it was unbearable.

A few days before he died, he asked to be shifted to our own house, but we couldn't take him because there was no roof... He needed a bed. We couldn't even give him that... And that was how I saw my papa die...in a place that was just mud and mud all around

Her father dead, a house still to be built, and although her younger brothers were there, there was still no earnings to maintain the family, who barely managed to survive, in part with the free rations from the government that were made available during the pandemic. So shortly after, BN went back to work, but this time she went to the state capital Bhubaneswar, which was closer to home. But where she had been earning INR 20,000 in Mumbai, she settled for work at a salary of INR 10,000. Why?

After Papa's death, my mother was alone. My brothers were there, but they are small. And my mother needed her daughter...She loves daughter and son in the same way...Never made a distinction between us...It's different from others. And we also love her the same.

I was determined that I would not let what happened to my father happen to my mother. So, I went to Bhubaneswar to work.

BN's duties in Bhubaneswar included all the housework and looking after two little children. Although she quickly settled in to the job, the unbuilt family house was weighing on her mind. The estimated cost of completion was INR 400,000, and she could see no way of managing that from her salary. Since her relationship with her employer was one of ease at the time, when asked why she was so worried, BN mentioned

40 They had examined the photographs of prospective brides, and made the selection together.

that building the house was costing more money than she had. According to BN, her employer then offered to give her a loan of that amount.

Once she had taken the loan however, things began to change, causing her to regret having taken it.

I don't know what came over me. I took the loan, such a big loan.

Of course, the house got built, the roof was made... But then she (the employer) started to say all kinds of things. She would say 'I've given you so much money... my account has been reduced to zero... Then she would say, 'Now I don't have any money, not even enough to buy a chaddi (underwear)'. Every day she would say such things, and I would feel so harassed... She gave me the money but also gave me daily jibes. When I wanted to see my mother, she would say, 'Just because your home is close by, you think you can keep going there every two months'...

I used to feel so very bad... I didn't show it on the outside. I would smile and laugh. But I would lock myself in the bathroom and weep. I was so keen to work there, to look after the two children... I would start working at 6 a.m. and continue till 11 p.m... there was no resting time... Even eating lunch became so late. Sometimes I would be able to eat at 4 p.m., and sometimes as late as 6 p.m. in the evening...

I was so grateful that she had given me the money... I thought I would work there... but on listening to her constant taunting, I just didn't feel like being there.

3.5 In the abyss of debt: Back to Mumbai

Then, one day when she was able to go home, saying that she would return in four days, after spending barely one day in the home village, BN just left for Mumbai:

It came to my mind that I would easily get INR 20,000 or more in Mumbai, and would more easily be able to pay off the loan.

I know that it was wrong of me to just

leave like that without telling her, but if I had told her, she would not have let me go. And I just couldn't bear her continuous taunting any longer.

This was March 2021, so BN was back in Mumbai exactly a year after she had left. Through her old placement agency, she found a job at a salary of INR 20,000. And then she received a call from her Bhubaneswar employer saying that she urgently needed INR 100,000 by the end of April. BN was at her wits end as to how to arrange the money, but once again her employer - this time in Mumbai - said that she would give her an advance on her salary. So, BN took an advance of INR 160,000 lakhs, sent off INR 100,000 lakh to her former employer in Bhubaneswar, sent half of the remaining amount to her mother, and the rest was used to pay off sundry other smaller debts.

Working over a period of five and a half months as a domestic worker, from March to September, BN was able to work off a major part of the advance she had taken from her Mumbai employer. But as often happens in situations when workers become indebted to their employers, her working conditions deteriorated to a point when she again felt compelled to leave the job. What happened was:

It was a very big house. I had to do all the housework, and help in the kitchen. But I was being made to do several things that were not part of my duties. And the work became just too much.

Then they brought a big dog. I had to feed the dog, give medicines, bathe it and everything else. It's like caring for a child. It was giving me too much takleef (hardship, difficulty). So, after five months I left the job.

I had paid back more than INR 100,000 out of my salary. I gave an additional INR 48,000 when I left.

How did she raise those INR 48,000?

I managed the money from here and there... through my friends... that too by paying extra interest...

It was like this... in order to pay off the loan I took in Bhubaneswar, I took a loan in Mumbai. In order to pay back that Mumbai loan, I took loans from my friends. In trying to escape one

problem, a second problem came into being. In trying to solve that, there was a third problem... problems just kept mounting.

And so, now I have opened my own agency. But you see, there is no one to support me. Nobody wants me to do this work... My brothers don't want me to do it, my mother doesn't either... I myself don't want to do it. But I'm doing it because I think that if I do this work, I can quickly give back all the money to everyone.

What made BN think that opening an agency would give her a chance of making the required money?

In this line of work, if it goes well, then there is fayda (benefit/profit) but if work doesn't go well, then there's a lot of nuksan (damage/loss)...

What she perhaps left out was her calculation that if she was able to place even two domestic workers in a month, then her fees would be twice what she could earn in a month as a single domestic worker. Further, during the time when she was an agency employee, she had seen the owner earning several lakhs in few months. While these must have been on her mind when she decided to start her agency, her actual statement at the time of interview of course showed an increasing awareness of the problem of rising investment costs, and the danger of mounting losses.

[Interview with BN on 07.11.2021, Navi Mumbai]

3.6 Starting a placement agency: Treading on the margins of legality

At the beginning of the interview with BN, and before she became open about the personal side of her life, in response to questions regarding how she actually went about starting her agency - how she contacted people, etc. BN had explained in the following words:

I started this work online... I have a dear friend... he's from UP. He works at the agency where I used to work earlier... Whenever I have had a problem, he has stood by me. He has never left me alone with my problem. Now he's married, but he still stands by me.

If I have opened this agency in my own

name, it is with his help. It is of course my money that has been used. But getting contacts and introductions and things like that, has all been done by him... He is still working at that other agency. Actually he was a camera man... took photographs... he was a model... but he's left all that work and is doing this work.

The name she has chosen for her agency combines two names, her own and her friend's, with a twist. Both the names used are nom de plumes. Her agency had just started operating - less than a month before the interview. In that period BN had placed three girls, but two had backed out. The third was also saying she wanted to leave the job. BN explained that because of the uncertainty, she had not finalized any contract. Which meant of course, that she had also not received any fees.

Regarding the online side of the work and the difficulties that she was encountering, BN showed how her agency name was listed on the web using her phone.

See this is on Sulekha.com. Money has to be deposited with them. My friend has made this website for me. Making contacts online, remaining connected online - this is all done by him.

Now I have to raise INR 30,000 to pay for online registration, and to get a licence... But in Mumbai, in order to register online, to register a company... nothing can be done without a house. My Aadhar card is of my village. My Pancard is of Mumbai, but it is linked with my Aadhar card, so the address is of Odisha.

Right now, the situation is that I have to deposit INR 20,000 to get the agreement (lease) for my room. Only with that agreement can I register and get a licence... So far, I haven't been able to do this...

Registration is necessary. If I don't register or get a licence, then I may be caught by the police. Anything can happen. This work is not so easy. Especially for me. For a boy/man, it's still alright, but not for a girl. It's not safe...

And I live alone. I work alone. Wherever I have to go, I go alone.

The fact of the matter is that BN knows she needs a licence (as a contractor), but has little idea about what it's for, except as protection from the police.

There is of course the question of how contact is made with the girls. After all her newly started agency would be unknown to those looking for jobs. Was she calling in girls from her Home Village? In answering this question, BN asserted that she was not. So how does she go about it? As she put it:

Actually, apart from Sulekha.com there is another option. From Sulekha, we only get clients – the big madams who come as clients. In OLX India, it's the girls who come asking for various kinds of work. Someone wants to do child care, someone wants cooking, or japa work. So, they have to all be contacted. So, what I do is I call them and ask them what kind of work they want.

When they come to Mumbai, I bring them from the station to my room. I take care of their food and stay here. Some of them understand that I have helped them and want to work with me. Some just leave me when they hear of offers of higher salaries from other places. Then it's a loss for me. After I have taken care of them, given them food, etc. In Mumbai, rice and vegetables are all so costly...

Still, if the girls work well, and with an 11 month contract, then there will be a profit for me...

[Interview with BN on 2 November 2021, Andheri Mumbai]

Here we have the entry of yet another global online marketplace – OLX, which launched in India in 2009.⁴¹ OLX however, was mostly free with paid classified postings and paid premium listings of more recent origin. With its tagline 'Yaha Sab Kuch Bikta Hai' which means 'Everything Sells Here', it has attracted a diverse user base, especially through providing a platform mainly for selling used goods that touches even lower income groups. On perusal of the website, it was evident that there were a number who were selling ordinary phones for a few thousand 'due to financial difficulty'.

Postings with contact numbers and addresses of both applicants as well from employers are seen on the website and are probably both being mined by BN.

There is a hint that her friend was also acting as a mole in the agency where he was a regular employee, and passing on some of the contacts from there to BN. When asked if the agency people would not object to her poaching, she said they would if they knew. BN had no compunction at trying to draw some girls away from that agency and indeed gave a moral justification, on the grounds that some of the girls were being taken advantage of there by the brother of the owner. She mentioned that a case had been registered by a girl against that brother, who had since then fled back to his hometown to avoid being arrested. There was another staff member there, who according to her, is a serial offender too. Yet, in describing her own experiences while working there, she was explicit that no one there had ever misbehaved sexually with her.

[Interview with BN on 7 November 2021, Navi Mumbai]

By February, 2022, BN had managed to get the agreement on her flat done and applied for registration of her agency. The licence however, was still pending. In the meantime, she had managed to place three more girls out of ten who had come to her agency, the others having rejected the jobs on offer. A typical case was of three Muslim girls from Rajasthan (the only unusual aspect being their social origin which is rarely seen among live-ins). They stayed with her for a week, but only one accepted a job. The other two left. When they were leaving, she said that since they were refusing all job offers, they should at least pay for the food they had when staying with her, at which they abused her and refused to pay.

A more interesting process was unfolding with the girl who had accepted the job. She had asked for a salary of INR 15,000, but the salary agreed to by her employer was INR13,000. Confident that she would be able to negotiate a salary of INR 15,000 after three months, BN promised the girl that she would herself pay her the balance of INR 2,000 for three months. Obviously, her calculation was that if she was paid INR13,000 as

41 OLX is headquartered in Amsterdam, and owned by South African media and technology group Naspers. OLX India was launched in 2009.

an agency fee, she would pay INR 6,000 out of that to the girl in order to ensure that she stayed on the job. That would still leave her with INR 7,000 from the commission. This was in early February, 2022. But by mid-February BN had to somehow raise the money to pay her rent, and so started working temporarily for a month as a replacement domestic worker for a salary of INR 20,000. What about the flat and agency? She said that she had hired another girl to take care of the flat and would instruct her on the phone as to what to do if any other girls came there.

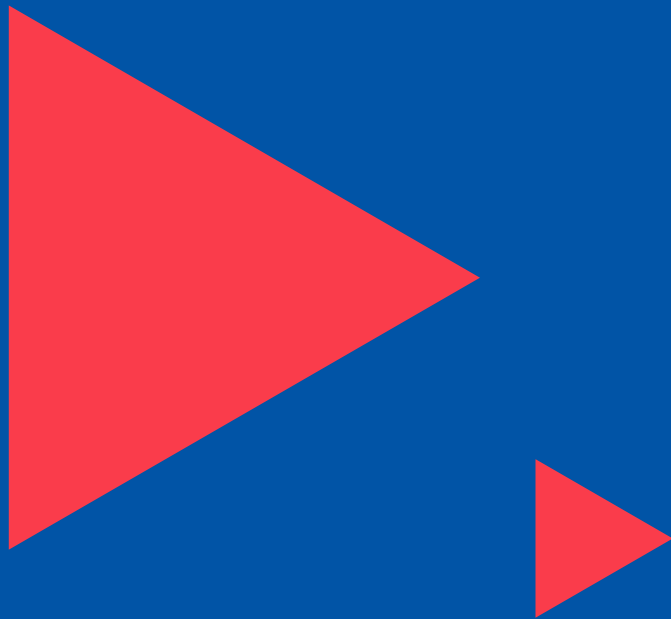
[Based on Telephone conversation on 20.02.2022]

So, as we can see, in order to keep her agency afloat, BN has reverted to temporary domestic

work on one side, and what may be termed a sharing of the fees with the workers on the other. It remains to be seen whether such practices will succeed in enabling her to indeed keep her agency running, and if so, whether it will introduce a new element into the placement agency business. At the time of writing this paper, BN had returned to her flat from her temporary job and had three girls staying there, but it seemed as if all jobs on offer at that time were of a temporary nature. Perhaps a specialisation in filling in temporary jobs in patient care, or vacancies caused by more durable workers going on leave may emerge as a niche area for BN's agency.

4

Conclusion



The two case studies in this paper have been presented in the voices of city-based agency owners, in order to lay out the subjective and objective processes at work in the evolving practices of placement agencies. In a sense, they constitute part of a living archive of where and how intermediaries have found a place for themselves in a city like Mumbai, and the interconnectedness of their location and practice with the larger world of global commerce, finance and technology. The case studies point to placement agencies for live-in domestic workers occupying an intermediate space between the formal and informal. Integration into market systems and the rules of operation therein, including registration under company and tax law, obtaining licenses as contractors under labour law, and the use of formal contracts between agencies and employers of domestic workers all speak to a degree of formalization. Yet domestic workers' rights, freedoms, protection from duress, and decent conditions of work have remained side-lined in the triangulated relations between placement agencies, employers of domestic workers, and the workers themselves.

Formalism and sidelining of workers' rights in the formalization and regulatory frameworks in which placement agencies are located

Hitherto the discussions and debates around regulating placement agencies at destination states have remained unclear on the precise nature of regulation required. For example, a draft Bill for 'Registration and Regulation' of Private Placement Agencies (PPA) in Maharashtra, placed for discussion in the public domain by the State Commissionerate of Skill Development, Employment and Entrepreneurship in September 2021, refers to the spectacular growth PPAs as 'a catalyst for new forms of human resource management services', which 'can be contributors to better working conditions.' Still, not a single provision in the draft bill refers to what those better working conditions signify, although it does bar agencies from taking any fees or other payments from workers.

While the Maharashtra draft was not formulated specifically for migrant domestic workers, the Delhi Private Placement Agencies (Regulation) Order, of 2014 was, and pointedly addressed PPAs "providing domestic workers in the National Capital Territory of Delhi." But even

the latter which also debars agencies from taking money/fees from workers, makes no mention of entitlements of workers other than that a passbook is to be provided to them by the agency with names and addresses of workers and their employers, salary amount and periodicity of payment (not exceeding a month), and return fare amount if the worker has worked for twelve months. The failure to delineate any other entitlements, relating to leave, ceiling on hours of work, social security, etc. is in part due to the continued absence of any law or policy for domestic workers at national or state levels, despite more than two decades of wide-ranging discussions and consensus on the need for both, and in spite of the preparation of a draft legislation by the National Commission for Women as far back as 2008.

As such, it would seem that the very conception of regulation of destination-based placement agencies has remained limited to merely laying out a legal procedure for registration of the agencies, with the regulatory aspect confined to disallowing agencies from taking of any fees from workers. As we have seen from the two case studies in this paper, a shift in the revenue model of the agencies towards taking fees from only employers is already more or less in place, as is their registration and incorporation into the tax regime. Yet, as has been pointed out, the approach to registration and/or obtaining licences has been formalist and does not include any substantive perspective on domestic workers' rights.

Arguably, the terms of contracts that are drawn up between placement agencies and employers towards inclusion of basic rights for decent employment, is perhaps a key area requiring regulatory oversight. In the absence of any law or regulation relating to the conditions of work of domestic workers, even registration of the workers under central or state level social security laws and schemes have not been undertaken by the placement agencies. In all, the formalization process as seen in placement agencies has allowed for continued and unchecked exercise of coercive power and authority over workers' lives by employers, which raises a question about whether the assumed relationship between formalization and rights of workers holds true in the current pattern of limited duration employment.

Entry of global corporates in the digital economy as beneficiaries and partners in the business of placement of domestic workers through transactions with local semi-formal placement agencies

The findings laid out in this paper point to a complex web of transactions between semi-formal placement agencies in Mumbai and global corporates that dominate the world of the internet. Our two case studies explicate the process by which internet companies conduct business and transact with placement agencies. In analysing the nature of these transactions, it is argued that giant internet companies are receiving a share in the profits being made through the placement of domestic workers in India's cities.

There is obvious evidence that online engagements by placement agencies have led to increased access to employers of domestic workers for placement agencies. This assumes greater significance in the contemporary situation of the widening of physical class distance through insulation and securitisation of households of the upper echelons of the middle classes against the *hoi polloi* located in the informal settlements of Mumbai city where the placement agencies are located. Yet, acceleration of access to employer clientele through the online mode has also reinforced offline activities of placement agencies in order to match supply and demand for live-in domestic workers in Mumbai. Frameworks that view digital platforms as an alternative to word-of-mouth-based placement agencies are challenged by the evidence of a mutual reinforcement of online and offline activities in the real world of recruitment of migrants from poorer and crisis ridden rural hinterlands with their own regional and community specificities and compulsions.

Further, the manner in which internet companies have become profit sharers in the business of placement of domestic workers, i.e., through transactions at the interstices of commerce and advertisement, have left them free of any accountability vis-a-vis the rights of the workers whose work forms the basis of the profits so earned. Regulatory frameworks would therefore need to account for the new stakeholders inserted into the pre-existing triangle of relations between domestic workers, placement agencies and employers towards evaluating their practices and at the very least developing codes of conduct

for their transactions that give due recognition to the rights of domestic workers as women and as workers.

Pandemic effects: Slowing down of inflow of migrant domestic workers

Where field research in the Ganjam, Odisha home village had indicated that women were continuing to migrate to Mumbai for live-in domestic work, evidence from the case study of the longer established placement agency clearly indicated that there had been a considerable slowing down in the momentum of such migration in the aggregate. Fewer numbers of incoming migrant women had led to closure of several placement agencies, and considerably reduced incomes for the ones that continued to operate.

Rough estimates from one placement agency that continued to operate through the pandemic, suggest that around a third of the women who came to Mumbai at the time, were infected by COVID-19. Costs of vaccination were borne by the agency, although the COVID-19 test cost was borne by the employers.

In adapting to the new uncertainties of situation, one of the agencies had included placement of local fulltime (12 hours) live-out domestic workers within its ambit. The other, which was less known across the pre-existing and traditionally established circuits of migration for live-in domestic work, seemed to have developed contacts with migrants from new source regions through telephonic following up on online job seekers.

Evolving relations between placement agencies and domestic workers: Of risks, vulnerabilities, and some common interests amidst gendered hierarchies of power within agency spaces

In the relations between placement agencies and migrant domestic workers, risks and vulnerabilities to the unchecked exercise of coercive power by employers over the bodies and lives of live-in domestic workers has already been referred to. One of the reasons identified in this study, is the side-lining of basic rights to decent work conditions in the contracts between agencies and employers at the time of placement. Further, while domestic workers' documents covering identity and permanent address are provided to employers at the time of placement, no pass book is provided to the workers themselves.

At the same time, a degree of coalescence of interests between workers and the agencies has emerged in the sphere of wages, following a shift in the revenue model of the agencies towards deriving their income solely from employer clients while providing free board and lodging to workers during their period of job search in the city. The evidence suggests that in trying to push up their own revenue, placement agencies have played a role in benchmarking higher wages and pushing up wage levels for live-in domestic workers in Mumbai.

Such a situation is both of a conflict and coalescence of interests suggesting that a simple criminalization approach in law and practice that dominates anti-trafficking discourses vis-à-vis placement agencies is inadequate when it comes to addressing the concerns, freedoms, and interests of workers themselves.⁴² What was particularly striking, was the influence of a marketist orientation on agency managements as well as their internet company partners in treating domestic workers as mere commodities on the market is apparent in both the practice, language, and even images used.⁴³ Arguably such commodification of migrants in domestic work has also played a role in the process of debasement of the value of the domestic workers in relation to the staff and management of agencies.

Further, despite gendered hierarchies within placement agencies where typically the management and staff is male dominated, while workers to be placed are all female, in a city where most live-in domestic workers have no place to go to in times of ill health or any other problems, it would appear that the agency holding/halting space for migrants also provides a place of shelter that workers do take recourse to. Nevertheless, the relations of power that operate within the agency spaces including structural risks of sexual harassment and exploitation. If such structural risks that lie embedded in the gendered hierarchies within placement agencies are to be addressed, then not only should they be brought under the

purview of Prevention Of Sexual Harassment (POSH) at Workplace Act, 2013 but policy engagement with the need for safe shelters and residential spaces for single migrant women workers would also need to be placed on policy agendas.

The complex of relations between migrant domestic workers and placement agencies is of course still evolving and the rapid pace of change that have been outlined in this paper. It suggests that a longitudinal engagement with their operations and the lives of migrating domestic workers in real time also needs to be placed on the research agendas.

42 It may be recalled that conflation of placement agencies with traffickers lay at the heart of the case filed by the mother of a minor who had gone missing from a household where she had been sent to work as a domestic worker by an agency (traced later), Bachpan Bachao Andolan and Shramjeevi Mahila Samiti in the Delhi High Court, which delivered the first judgement on registration of placement agencies in 2010. It was on the basis of this judgement that the Delhi Private Placement Agencies (Regulation) Order, of 2014 was issued.

43 Stock images of domestic workers and employers who are all from white races rather than Indian communities are commonly seen in the signboards and internet advertisements of placement agencies.

► References

Mazumdar, Indrani. 2022. 'Home Village to Big City: Looking back and ahead at a Corridor of Migration for Domestic Workers', WIF/ILO research monograph,(mimeo).

CWDS and LSHTM. Unpublished "Women Migrating in India: Evidence from Odisha—Summary Report (unpublished draft)." New Delhi, India: Centre for Women's Development Studies & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (2019).

Google Ads Help "<https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/6325042?ctx=glossary>"

Gloria Church "<https://gloriabyculla.wordpress.com/>"

Neetha, N. 2008. "Regulating domestic work." *Economic and Political Weekly*: 26-28.

Indorewala, H. 2018 "Housing and dishousing in Mumbai: A historical outline of slum discourse and policy." *Urban Spaces in India*: 53-74.

Rathi, Ayush, and Tandon, Ambika. 2021. *Platforms, power and politics: Perspectives from domestic and care work in India*. Center for Internet and Society.

Religious of Mary Immaculate "<https://religiosasmariainmaculada.org/en/we/who-we-are>"

Rolnik, Guy, Samantha Eyler-Driscoll, Asher Schechter, and Camilo Patiño. 2018. *Digital Platforms and Concentration*. In 2018 Antitrust and Competition Conference E-Book of the Stigler Center for the Study of the Economy and the State.

Sulekha <https://www.sulekha.com/collateral/aboutus>

Contact details

ILO DWT for South Asia and Country Office for India
Core 4B, 3rd Floor, India Habitat Centre
Lodhi Road, New Delhi – 110003, India

T: +91 11 4750 9200
E: delhi@ilo.org