



Human Rights of Women Domestic Workers in Dhaka City: Gender, Informality, and Urban Inequality

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Abstract

Women domestic workers in Dhaka occupy a highly vulnerable position at the intersection of gendered labor relations, employment informality, and urban inequality. This study examines the current level of human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers and assesses whether gender inequality, informality and urban inequality are associated with the severity of rights violations. The study uses a quantitative cross-sectional design and distinguishes the analytic unit from supplementary stakeholder respondents. The dataset contains 100 respondents: 80 domestic workers and 20 key informants. The main inferential analysis is restricted to the 80 domestic workers because the research question concerns their lived working conditions. Five-item indices are constructed for gender inequality, informality, urban inequality, and human-rights outcomes. Stata 17 is used for descriptive statistics, reliability screening, Spearman correlations, multicollinearity diagnostics, ordinary least-squares regression with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. Among domestic workers, the mean human-rights outcome score is 4.55 on a five-point scale, indicating a high level of reported rights vulnerability. In the controlled robust model, gender inequality is positively associated with the outcome ($b = 0.462, p < .001$), urban inequality is also positively associated ($b = 0.424, p = .002$), while informality is not statistically significant ($b = 0.031, p = .609$). The model explains 65.6% of the variance. These results suggest that gendered disadvantage and urban inequality are particularly important correlates of rights vulnerability, while the independent contribution of informality is less clear after controls are introduced.

Keywords

Dhaka; Gender inequality; Human rights vulnerability; Informality; Labor rights; Urban inequality; Women domestic workers

1. Introduction

Dhaka is the main economic centre of Bangladesh and attracts a large number of rural migrants who seek employment and better livelihood opportunities (Sifullah et al., 2023). However, women have relatively low participation in formal employment and approximately 96.6% of female employment remains informal (Jahan, 2024). Therefore, domestic work has become an important source of employment for poor and migrant women, particularly in low-income urban communities. Bangladesh has an estimated 2 million domestic workers, although other

estimates suggest that the actual number may be considerably higher because of underreporting (Ashraf et al., 2019). Women constitute approximately 80–97% of domestic workers in the country (Rahman, 2023).

Despite their important contribution to urban households, women domestic workers in Dhaka generally experience low wages, long working hours, weak legal protection and limited social security. Approximately 88% of domestic workers have no written employment contract, while 62% work more than 50 hours per week. Their average monthly income is approximately BDT 5,000, and about 80% earn less than BDT 8,000 (WIEGO Policy Brief No 19, 2020). This income is substantially below the estimated urban living wage of BDT 25,497 in 2023 (Khan, 2024). Migration is also an important feature of domestic work in Dhaka. About 86% of domestic workers come from outside Dhaka, while only 9% are long-term city residents (WIEGO Policy Brief No 19, 2020). Furthermore, approximately 78% of domestic workers have reportedly experienced physical or psychological abuse (BSS News, 2025).

The legal and institutional protection of domestic workers also remains limited. Bangladesh introduced the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy in 2015. However, domestic workers remain outside the main protection framework of the Bangladesh Labour Law (2006), and the policy lacks strong enforcement mechanisms (WIEGO Policy Brief No 19, 2020). Bangladesh has constitutional guarantees of equality and has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Nevertheless, domestic workers continue to experience limited practical protection. Bangladesh has also not ratified ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers (ILO, 2011). Child domestic workers remain another concern because domestic work is not adequately addressed within existing child labour protections (Ashraf et al., 2019; Hoque, 2024).

These conditions are closely associated with gender inequality, labour informality, and urban poverty. Domestic work is socially constructed as women's work, which contributes to its low economic and social recognition (Rahman, 2023). Previous studies have also identified discrimination, limited awareness of rights, harassment, and insecure employment among women working in the informal sector (Mahmood & Rezina, 2016; Sifullah et al., 2023). The vulnerability of domestic workers became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 95% of domestic workers lost their jobs during the COVID-19 lockdown (Shining a Light on the Rights of Domestic Workers in Bangladesh, 2022).

The situation indicates a broader human-rights problem among women domestic workers in Dhaka. They generally work with limited contractual protection, low income, long working hours, weak social security, and limited access to justice (BSS News, 2025; WIEGO Policy Brief No 19, 2020). Their exclusion from the Bangladesh Labour Law (2006) further limits their access to legally enforceable employment rights (Bangladesh Labor Law, 2006). Although the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2015 provides guidance on wages, working hours, and welfare, its implementation remains weak (Jahan, 2024). Therefore, the formal existence of policies does not necessarily ensure effective protection for women domestic workers.

Previous studies have examined informal employment, domestic workers' working conditions, gender discrimination, child domestic work, and legal protection. For example, Ashraf et al. (2019) examined issues related to domestic work and child domestic workers (Ashraf et al., 2019). Mahmood and Rezina (2016) examined gender discrimination and women's experiences in informal employment (Mahmood & Rezina, 2016). Seery (2020) discussed issues related to domestic workers and their rights (Seery, 2020), while Shameem et al. (2024) examined legal

and human-rights concerns affecting domestic workers (Shameem et al., 2024). However, these studies have generally addressed different dimensions of the problem separately. Consequently, there is limited quantitative evidence on how gender inequality, labour informality, and urban inequality jointly relate to the human-rights conditions of women domestic workers in Dhaka.

This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between gender inequality, employment informality, urban inequality, and human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers in Dhaka City. The study specifically aims to assess the current level of human-rights vulnerability and to estimate the association of gender inequality, employment informality and urban inequality with such vulnerability. The study therefore has four objectives:

1. To assess the current level of human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers in Dhaka City.
2. To estimate the association between gender inequality and human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers.
3. To estimate the association between employment informality and human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers.
4. To estimate the association between urban inequality and human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers.

Based on these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the current level of human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers in Dhaka City?
2. To what extent is gender inequality associated with human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers?
3. To what extent is employment informality associated with human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers?
4. To what extent is urban inequality associated with human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the integration of Human Rights Theory, Gender Inequality Theory, and Urban Informality Perspective. Human Rights Theory explains that all individuals are entitled to basic rights such as dignity, fair wages, and safe working conditions (ILO, 2011). However, in informal employment settings, these rights are often not protected due to weak legal enforcement. Gender Inequality Theory explains that women face structural discrimination in labor markets due to patriarchal norms and social roles (Misra & Kumar, 2026). Urban Informality Perspective explains that informal workers in cities experience exclusion from legal, economic, and social protection systems (Banks et al., 2020). In Dhaka, this is intensified by migration and urban poverty.

Based on the objectives, the following diagram is presenting the conceptual framework of the study.

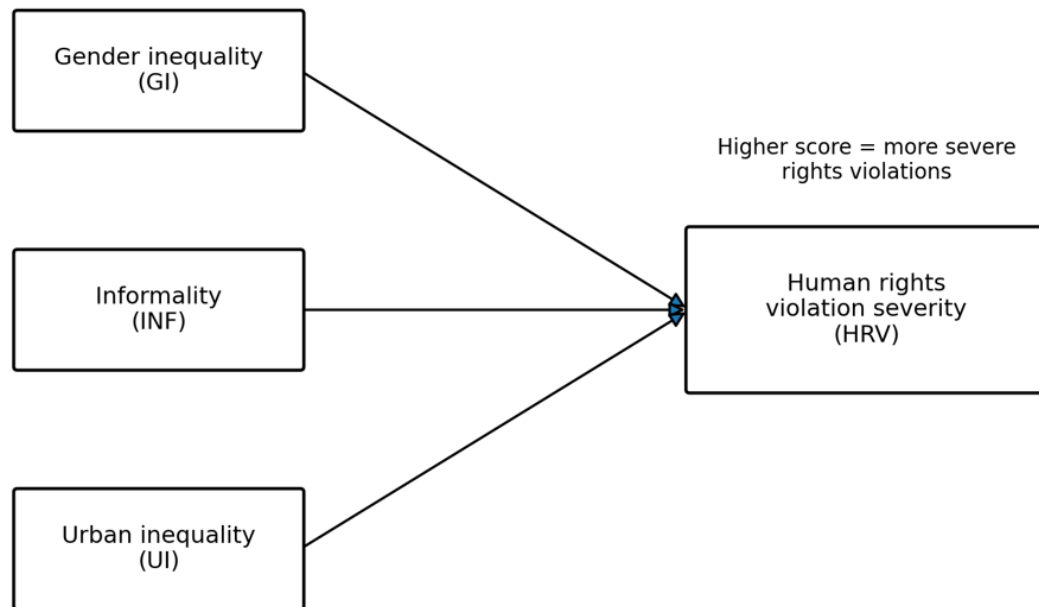


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

According to the conceptual framework, the structured hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Higher gender inequality is positively associated with greater human-rights violation severity among women domestic workers.

H2: Greater employment informality is positively associated with greater human-rights violation severity among women domestic workers.

H3: Greater urban inequality is positively associated with greater human-rights violation severity among women domestic workers.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design and Unit of Analysis

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. The study included 100 respondents, comprising 80 women domestic workers and 20 key informants from NGOs and labour rights organizations. The unit of analysis was the individual woman domestic worker. Therefore, the main regression analysis was based on the 80 domestic workers, while the 20 key informants were treated as supplementary respondents.

The 80 domestic workers were aged 15-48 years, with a mean age of 28.89 years ($SD = 7.99$). The full sample of 100 respondents ranged in age from 15 to 50 years, with a mean age of 31.83 years. As some participants were below 18 years of age, appropriate consent and assent procedures were followed. Relevant safeguards for minor participants were also applied in accordance with the applicable ethical requirements.

3.2 Sampling and Recruitment

Data were collected through Google Forms and face-to-face interviews in Dhaka. A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit both domestic workers and key informants. Women domestic workers were recruited based on their experience of domestic work and their residence or employment in the study area. Key informants were recruited from NGOs and labour rights

organizations based on their professional or field experience related to labour rights, women's rights, or domestic work.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria used for participant selection are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Inclusion criteria

Participant group	Inclusion criteria
Women domestic workers	Female domestic workers aged 15 years or above
	Currently working or recently worked as a domestic worker in Dhaka
	Had direct experience of domestic work and related employment conditions
	Willing to participate in the study
Key informants	NGO workers or labour rights activists working on labour, women's rights, or domestic workers' issues
	Had relevant professional or field experience
	Willing to participate in the study

Table 2. Exclusion criteria

Participant group	Exclusion criteria
Women domestic workers	Persons who did not perform domestic work
	Persons outside the study area
	Persons unwilling to provide informed consent or assent
Key informants	Persons without relevant professional or field experience
	Persons unwilling to participate

Questionnaire and Measurement: Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing five-point Likert-scale items. Four composite indices were developed, with five items used to measure each construct: gender inequality (GI1-GI5), informality (INF1-INF5), urban inequality (UI1-UI5), and human-rights violations (HRV1-HRV5). Each composite index was calculated as the arithmetic mean of its five items, as confirmed by the Stata syntax.

The HRV index measured the severity of human-rights violations experienced by the respondents. The direction of all items was checked against the original questionnaire. Positively worded items were reverse-coded when necessary, so that higher scores consistently represented greater severity of human-rights violations.

Data Quality and Statistical Analysis: The data were analyzed using Stata 17. The dataset contained complete responses for all 20 Likert-scale items. All responses were within the intended 1-5 range, and no duplicate respondent identifiers were identified.

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to assess the human-rights conditions of domestic workers. Second, Spearman's correlation analysis was used to examine the bivariate relationships among the study variables. Third, variance inflation factors (VIFs) were calculated to assess multicollinearity among the independent variables. Fourth, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to estimate the associations between gender inequality, informality, urban inequality, age, and the severity of human-rights violations.

The Breusch-Pagan test was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 6.36$, $p = .0117$), indicating the presence of heteroskedasticity. Therefore, heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors were used

in the final regression model. In addition, a 1,000-replication bootstrap analysis was conducted as a robustness check.

The regression model was specified as:

$$HRV_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GI_i + \beta_2 INF_i + \beta_3 UI_i + \beta_4 Age_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where HRV represents the severity of human-rights violations, GI represents gender inequality, INF represents informality, UI represents urban inequality, Age represents respondent age, and ε represents the error term. Model 1 excludes age, whereas Model 2 includes age as a control variable. The final regression model reports heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

4. Results

Table 3. Respondent structure and analytic sample

Respondent group	<i>N</i>	%	Role in analysis
Women domestic workers	80	80.0	Primary unit of analysis; main regression sample
Key informants	20	20.0	Supplementary stakeholder respondents; excluded from main regression
Total	100	100.0	Full field dataset

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the study variables

Variable	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Human-rights violation severity (HRV)	80	4.550	0.195	4.20	5.00
Gender inequality (GI)	80	4.538	0.264	4.00	5.00
Informality (INF)	80	4.538	0.184	4.20	4.80
Urban inequality (UI)	80	4.538	0.117	4.40	4.80
Age	80	28.888	7.986	15	48

The descriptive results provide an initial answer to the first research question concerning the level of human-rights violation severity among the sampled domestic workers. The mean HRV score was 4.55 on a five-point scale, with a standard deviation of 0.195 and a range from 4.20 to 5.00. Based on the coding scheme, the result indicates a high level of reported human-rights violation severity among the sampled domestic workers. The three explanatory indices also had high mean scores. The mean scores for GI, INF, and UI were approximately 4.54.

4.1 Internal Consistency

Table 5. Internal consistency of the study indices

Index	Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Gender inequality	GI1–GI5	0.922	High internal consistency
Informality	INF1–INF5	0.886	High internal consistency
Urban inequality	UI1–UI5	0.881	High internal consistency
Human-rights violation severity	HRV1–HRV5	0.895	High internal consistency

Table 5 presents the internal consistency results for the four five-item indices. Cronbach's alpha values were 0.922 for gender inequality, 0.886 for informality, 0.881 for urban inequality, and 0.895 for human-rights violation severity. These values indicate high internal consistency across all four indices.

4.2 Correlation and Multicollinearity

Table 6. Spearman correlations among study variables

Variable	HRV	GI	INF	UI	Age
HRV	1.000	0.714	0.351	0.517	0.078
GI	0.714	1.000	0.384	0.433	0.127
INF	0.351	0.384	1.000	0.239	0.263
UI	0.517	0.433	0.239	1.000	-0.134
Age	0.078	0.127	0.263	-0.134	1.000

Spearman correlation analysis showed positive associations between HRV and GI ($\rho = .714$), INF ($\rho = .351$), and UI ($\rho = .517$). The association between age and HRV was weak ($\rho = .078$). The VIF diagnostics indicated no serious multicollinearity among the predictors. The VIF values were 1.53 for GI, 1.39 for UI, 1.32 for INF, and 1.20 for age, with a mean VIF of 1.36.

4.3 Multivariate Regression Analysis

Table 7. OLS regression results for human-rights violation severity

Predictor	Model 1: b	Model 2: b	Final robust model: b	Robust SE	p
Gender inequality (GI)	0.4842	0.4620	0.4620	0.0650	<.001
Informality (INF)	0.0580	0.0314	0.0314	0.0611	.609
Urban inequality (UI)	0.3634	0.4238	0.4238	0.1342	.002
Age	—	0.0027	0.0027	0.0019	.169
Constant	0.4411	0.3106	0.3106	0.4445	.487

Model 1 included gender inequality, informality, and urban inequality. The model explained 64.6% of the variance in HRV, with an adjusted R^2 of .632. Model 2 added age as a control variable. The inclusion of age increased the R^2 to .656 and the adjusted R^2 to .638. The overall Model 2 was statistically significant, $F(4, 75) = 86.93, p < .001$.

Gender inequality was positively associated with human-rights violation severity in the final robust model ($b = 0.462, SE = 0.065, t = 7.11, p < .001$). Therefore, the result supports H1. Urban inequality was also positively associated with HRV ($b = 0.424, SE = 0.134, t = 3.16, p = .002$), which supports H3. In contrast, informality was not statistically significant after controlling for the other predictors and age ($b = 0.031, SE = 0.061, t = 0.51, p = .609$). Therefore, H2 was not supported. Age was also not statistically significant ($b = 0.0027, p = .169$).

4.4 Robustness Checks

A 1,000-replication bootstrap analysis was conducted as a robustness check. The bootstrap coefficient for GI was 0.462, with a bias-corrected confidence interval of approximately [0.328, 0.581]. The corresponding interval for UI was approximately [0.126, 0.671]. The confidence interval for INF included zero and was approximately [-0.101, 0.153]. These results indicate that GI and UI remained positively associated with HRV in the bootstrap analysis, whereas the association between INF and HRV was not statistically distinguishable from zero.

The model without age produced a similar pattern. GI remained statistically significant ($b = 0.484, p < .001$), and UI remained statistically significant ($b = 0.363, p = .010$). INF remained statistically non-significant ($b = 0.058, p = .316$). This stability suggests that the main regression findings were similar with and without age as a control variable.

5. Discussion

The first finding concerns the high reported level of human-rights violation severity among the sampled domestic workers. The mean HRV score of 4.55 on a five-point scale indicates a high level of reported rights-related violations under the revised coding direction. This finding directly addresses Objective 1 and shows that human-rights concerns remain substantial among the domestic workers included in the study.

The second finding concerns the strong positive association between gender inequality and human-rights violation severity. Gender inequality had the largest coefficient among the substantive predictors in the final regression model. The association was also statistically significant and remained stable in the robustness analysis. This finding supports the theoretical argument that domestic work is influenced by gendered social expectations and unequal bargaining relationships. Therefore, legal and labour protections may not be sufficient on their own when social norms and unequal power relations continue to undervalue women's domestic work.

The third finding concerns urban inequality. The positive coefficient for UI indicates that greater spatial and service-related disadvantage is associated with higher human-rights violation severity after controlling for gender inequality, informality, and age. This finding suggests that the urban environment and unequal access to services may contribute to the vulnerability experienced by domestic workers. Therefore, policies addressing domestic workers' rights should also consider their living conditions, access to urban services, and broader forms of social and spatial inequality.

6. Policy and Practical Implications

First, labor protection should focus on enforceable rights rather than policy recognition alone. The original literature review identifies a gap between formal policy and practical enforcement, particularly regarding contracts, wages, working hours, social protection, and grievance mechanisms.

Second, gender-responsive interventions should address both economic and social dimensions of vulnerability. Because gender inequality is the strongest predictor in the final model, interventions could prioritize legal awareness, access to complaint mechanisms, protection from discriminatory treatment, and recognition of domestic work as productive labor.

Third, urban policy should be connected with labor policy. The significant UI coefficient suggests that affordable housing, safe mobility, access to basic services, and social protection in low-income urban areas may form part of a broader rights-protection strategy. This is especially relevant for migrant workers who experience multiple forms of urban disadvantage.

Fourth, social-protection measures should be designed for workers whose employment relationships are informal or difficult to monitor. However, because informality is not independently significant in the final regression, policy claims should not imply that informality alone explains the observed outcome. The evidence instead supports an integrated approach in which gender and urban inequality are given particular attention.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a clear quantitative assessment of human-rights vulnerability among women domestic workers in Dhaka. The descriptive analysis shows a high level of reported

human-rights vulnerability, thereby answering the first objective directly. The multivariate results indicate that gender inequality and urban inequality are significant positive correlates of rights vulnerability, whereas informality does not retain an independent statistically significant association after controls are included. These findings support an integrated policy response centered on enforceable labor protection, gender-responsive rights interventions, social protection, and urban inclusion.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethics Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with appropriate ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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