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Underpaid, undervalued, and overworked: The working conditions of cooks in India's school lunch programme

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Abstract

Motivation: School feeding programmes employ more than 4 million people globally and have the potential to contribute to the realization of multiple Sustainable Development Goals, including decent work and reducing inequalities. However, the working conditions and experiences of workers in these programmes have received little attention from academics and policy-makers alike. Consequently, it is currently unclear what the impacts of the employment generated are and whether this employment reduces or perpetuates inequalities.

Purpose: This article examines the extent to which school feeding programmes can generate beneficial employment by examining the experiences of cooks in the world's largest school lunch programme, India's Midday Meal Scheme. The article focuses on five key areas: who is employed; their pay; their workload; their access to social protection; and the effects of privatization.

Approach and methods: To examine these five areas, data from three sources are combined: primary data collected in Rajasthan; state-level secondary data; and the analysis of national-level documents.

Findings: The findings show that national policy creates a system in which cooks in the Midday Meal Scheme are underpaid, undervalued, and overworked. These working conditions are underpinned by a series of assumptions and narratives which are all too common in perceptions of care work: that the work is unskilled, not time consuming, and motivated by altruism. The state's lack of regard for these workers is evident in the growing privatization of the scheme.

Policy implications: Overall, the findings show that policy on school feeding programmes, including those in India, needs to ensure that those working in the scheme are treated as employees and receive sufficient pay and benefits. Providing decent work in these programmes has the potential to not only reduce poverty and inequalities but also to improve the implementation of school feeding programmes.

KEYWORDS
cook-cum-helpers, India, Midday Meal Scheme, paid care work, school feeding programmes

1 | INTRODUCTION

School feeding programmes are now the "most extensive safety net in the world" according to the World Food Programme (WFP) (World Food Programme, 2020, p. 16), providing food to 418 million children each school day (WFP, 2022). Although the outcomes of school feeding programmes can vary depending on the mode of feeding and context, school feeding can play an important role in improving food and nutrition security, increasing student enrolment and attendance, and can also benefit the local economy if the food is sourced locally (Drake et al., 2016; WFP, 2020). Less often discussed, however, is the creation of employment. Globally, school feeding programmes create at least 4 million jobs, an average of 1,337 jobs for every 100,000 children who receive school meals (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2022). The majority of jobs in school feeding programmes are in cooking and food preparation (97.3%), but jobs also include food packagers and handlers (1.2%) and offsite processors, food service management, monitoring, transporters and safety and quality inspectors (1.5% when combined) (WFP, 2020).

The employment created by school feeding programmes has the potential to contribute to the realization of multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the eradication of poverty (Goal 1), the provision of decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), and the reduction of inequalities (Goal 11) (WFP, 2017). However, at present there is a paucity of data to support these claims. The WFP (2017) acknowledges that more independent research is required into the effects of employment and the Global Child Nutrition Fund (GCNF) (2022) notes that the impact of employment for women and for enhancing the capacities of workers is understudied. In fact, those employed in school feeding programmes remain largely invisible in the academic literature on both school feeding and paid care work and in policy.

The reports on employment in school feeding programmes that do exist indicate the need for further research into this topic. The workforce for school feeding programmes is comprised primarily of women across low to high-income countries (GCNF, 2022). Payment may be low or entirely non-existent (Drake et al., 2016; Goswami et al., 2018), and working conditions may be difficult (Gaddis & Coplen, 2018). Instead of reducing gendered inequalities, the employment conditions in school feeding programmes may perpetuate them. Given the size of the global workforce of school meal workers, the conditions of work and experiences of those working in these programmes represent a significant knowledge gap. Here, I seek to begin to fill this knowledge gap by examining the working conditions and experiences of cooks in India's school feeding programme.

Each school day, nearly 95 million children in India consume a free school lunch provided by the Midday Meal Scheme,[1] the largest school feeding programme in the world.[2] For children in grades I–VIII[3] at eligible schools,[4] these lunches are a legal entitlement; students have a right to these meals, and the Government of India and the governments of states and Union Territories (UTs) have a legal duty to ensure meals are provided (Government of India, 2013; Supreme Court of India, 2001). These meals play an important role in increasing school enrolment (Drèze & Goyal, 2003; Garg & Mandal, 2013; Jain & Shah, 2005; Jayaraman & Simroth, 2015) and attendance (Afridi, 2011; Drèze & Kingdon, 2001; Jain & Shah, 2005). The scheme can also meet children's food needs and improve nutritional status (Afridi, 2010; Garg & Mandal, 2013), although the results can vary depending on food intake at home (Garg & Mandal, 2013).

The Midday Meal Scheme would be impossible without the 2.5 million cooks who prepare the food and comprise more than half the global school feeding workforce (GCNF, 2022). The cooks, known as "cook-cum-helpers," typically live in the area surrounding a school. The vast majority are women, belong to Scheduled Castes,

[1]The name of the scheme was changed to Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) in October 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2021). Here I refer to the scheme as the Midday Meal Scheme, as this was the name the Scheme was commonly known by at the time of the research.

[2]Calculated using data from the 2019–2020 Annual Work Plans and Budgets (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

[3]Grades I-VIII include lower primary (Grades I-V) and upper primary (VI-VIII). This is then followed by secondary education, consisting of general/lower secondary (IX-X) and senior secondary (XI-XII).

[4]Children enrolled in grades I-VIII in government and government-aided schools, Special Training Centres and *Madrasas* are *Maqtabs* supported under *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (the Education for All campaign) are eligible to receive a midday meal (Government of India, 2013; Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2014b).

Scheduled Tribes, and "Other Backward Castes" (OBCs), [5] and many are widows (Drèze & Khera, 2014). The scheme provides an important source of employment, particularly in rural areas (Sinha, 2008) and has the potential to have both promotive and transformative effects, enhancing incomes and capabilities, and addressing existing social inequities and exclusion including along lines of gender and caste. The GCNF (2021) notes that the scale of the scheme means that it could have significant impacts on the participation of women in the labour force and economic empowerment in India. Early research (Drèze & Goyal, 2003; Swaminathan et al., 2004), however, indicated that these transformative effects might not occur due to low pay and poor working conditions. Pay is still very low, and the GCNF notes that it is "unlikely to be considered a living wage" (GCNF, 2021, p. 7). However, the effects of low pay have not been studied and, in general, studies on the Midday Meal Scheme have paid scant attention to those preparing the food.

Here, I examine the working conditions and experiences of cooks in India's Midday Meal Scheme. I begin by briefly reviewing the literature on paid care work, generally and specifically in school feeding programmes and other government schemes in India. I then describe the methodology, outlining how three sources of data were used. Drawing on these data, I examine: who is employed in the scheme; their pay and workload, and the effects of these; their access to social protection; and the effects of privatization. I find, similarly to paid care workers in other countries and in other government schemes in India, cook-cum-helpers are underpaid, overworked, and undervalued. These conditions are underpinned by assumptions that the work performed by cook-cum-helpers is: not time consuming; unskilled; the responsibility of state governments rather than the central government; and motivated by altruism rather than income. I show that the lack of value the central government places on cook-cum-helpers manifests itself all too clearly in the increased privatization of the scheme. I argue that underpinning the Midday Meal Scheme is a clear contradiction; preferential employment is given to those in need, but the terms of employment prevent needs being met and perpetuate disadvantages. I conclude by outlining the significance of these findings for policy in India and more broadly. Changing the policy on school feeding programmes to ensure that these programmes provide decent work will benefit not only cooks and their families, but also the implementation of these schemes.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Paid care work

Care work has been defined as "occupations in which workers are supposed to provide a face-to-face service that develops the human capabilities of the recipient" (England et al., 2002, p. 455) and includes teachers, nurses, and childcare workers. However, Duffy (2005) and Razavi and Staab (2010) critiqued this definition for focusing too narrowly on nurturing. Razavi and Staab (2010, p. 410), therefore, expand the definition to include other categories of "non-relational reproductive work" such as cleaning and cooking. By this expanded definition, also used here, care workers also include domestic workers, cleaners, laundry workers, and cooks, including those working in schools (Folbre, 2014; Razavi & Staab, 2010). Although often categorised simply as paid or unpaid, care work can take many forms including unpaid work, unpaid volunteering, subsistence production, informal work, formal sector paid employment or self-employment (Folbre, 2014). Here, the focus is on paid care work, although, as I will show, the lines between volunteering and paid work and between formal and informal employment are often thin.

Care workers and those who support care provision account for 11.5% of global employment (ILO, 2018) and comprise an increasing proportion of the workforce around the world (Razavi & Staab, 2010). Despite the variation in the types of care work, several broad trends can be identified (ILO, 2018). First, both paid

[5]Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes are officially designated in the Constitution of India and are historically disadvantaged groups.

and unpaid care work is predominantly performed by women. Globally, women perform 76.3% of unpaid care work and two thirds of paid care workers are women (ILO, 2018). Second, care workers are often underpaid and care work is widely devalued (Razavi, 2011). Wages are typically low both in absolute terms and relative to those of comparable skill levels in non-caring jobs, creating a "wage penalty" for care work (Budig & Misra, 2010; England et al., 2002; Lund, 2010; Meagher & Healy, 2006). Low payment can contribute or expose individuals and their households to poverty (Heintz, 2008; Razavi & Staab, 2010) and can lead to employee dissatisfaction (Palmer & Eveline, 2012). Poor wages can also result in difficulties recruiting workers and high rates of turnover (Patel, 2009) which can affect the quality of care provided (Banerjee et al., 2012). Third, care workers are often undervalued in other ways, including limited access to social protection and opportunities such as training and job mobility (Razavi & Staab, 2010) and weak employment protection (Baines et al., 2016; Boivin, 2016). Studies in high-income contexts have also found that care workers may be overworked and have little voice within the workplace (Banerjee et al., 2012; Braedley et al., 2018). Consequently, a set of adjectives has been widely used to describe paid care workers: underpaid or unpaid, undervalued, unseen and unheard, unhappy, and overworked (Baines et al., 2016; Banerjee et al., 2012; Palmer & Eveline, 2012; Razavi & Staab, 2010).

Razavi and Staab (2010) present several theories used to explain why paid care work is widely underpaid and undervalued. First, care work is labour intensive, resulting in low wages and high costs to the recipients. A second theory, advanced by neoclassical economists, is that care work brings the satisfaction of "helping people" and therefore care workers will accept a lower wage. Third, care work is often seen as an extension of female work in the home and thus as natural, unskilled, and motivated by love rather than money (Meagher, 2016; Palmer & Eveline, 2012), and therefore does not require knowledge or training (Razavi & Staab, 2010). Fourth, those most in need of care including children and the elderly are the least able to pay, and so must rely on household resources or national mechanisms, and thus what households or taxpayers are willing to contribute. This article will show that several of these theories are all too apparent in India's school feeding programme.

Although most research on care work has focused on high-income countries, a body of research outside these contexts is emerging, showing the changing role of the state in paid care work (Razavi & Staab, 2010). In many contexts the state is becoming a less reliable employer, relying on volunteers rather than paid employees to perform care work. These so-called volunteers may work regular and a significant number of hours, but are unpaid or receive only a small stipend (Franzoni & Voorend, 2011; Lund, 2010; Patel, 2009). The reliance on volunteers is especially problematic in contexts where there are high levels of poverty and unemployment (Franzoni & Voorend, 2011; Razavi & Staab, 2010), where there are already many demands on people's time, particularly women's (Razavi, 2011), and for those for whom the stipend can be their sole income source (Patel, 2009). Care work is increasingly being outsourced to the private sector or non-profit organizations where wages may be even lower than the public sector (Lund, 2010; Razavi & Staab, 2010). Outsourcing may have negative implications for care workers and the quality of care provided (Razavi & Staab, 2010). There is also greater concern that the rise of public–private partnerships across many sectors may negatively affect female employment by reducing the number of jobs available (Romero & Gideon, 2019).

2.2 | Care work and school feeding programmes

Preparing food in school feeding programmes is a form of care work that is often but not always paid. Workers in school feeding programmes perform a variety of types of care work. Gaddis and Coplen (2017) apply Glenn's (2012) typology of care work in their exploration of the school feeding programme in the United States (US) to identify three categories of care work performed by cafeteria workers. The first is direct caring, including providing nutritious food to children (physical caring), knowing children's preferences (emotional care), and helping children access the scheme to ensure that their physical and emotional needs are met. The second is maintaining the physical

environment in which children eat, such as by cleaning and washing pots. The third is fostering social relationships including with children, adults, and communities.

The trends identified in care work more broadly can also be found in school feeding programmes. School feeding programmes may rely on volunteers (often parents) or provide only a small stipend to those preparing and distributing school meals. The US Department of Agriculture sponsored a GCNF survey of 124 countries (2022) which found that cooks were renumerated in 50% of programmes in low-income settings, compared to 55% in low middle-income settings, 86% in upper middle-income settings, and 97% in high-income settings.[6] The survey also found that 37% of the 124 programmes reported a focus on creating jobs for women, with this focus being most common in low-income and lower-middle income countries and especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Notably, programmes that do not renumerate cooks are more likely to have a predominantly female workforce (GCNF, 2022). The GCNF survey also found that 21% of programmes focused on creating jobs for youths and 80% provided some form of training, typically on topics such as food preparation and nutrition rather than business or management.

When paid, the income cooks receive can improve livelihoods (Devereux et al., 2010; Drake et al., 2016; WFP, 2017), particularly for poor women (Drake et al., 2016). However, the evidence base is thin. Employment as cooks is reported to have led to the "empowerment of women" in Nigeria (Drake et al., 2016, p. 402) and to households being able to meet basic needs in Botswana (Drake et al., 2016). Cooks being unpaid can result in sub-optimal cooking arrangements, as found in Namibia (Drake et al., 2016), and can also lead to discontent among cooks, as in Laos (Goswami et al., 2018).

In the US, workers in the school lunch programme are typically low-paid and unable to access full-time employment (Gaddis, 2019). It can be difficult to get a permanent position and even then it can take more than 10 years to become full-time with benefits (Gaddis & Coplen, 2018). Therefore, one third of school lunch workers in the US participate in at least one government scheme for food security or child/household poverty and are twice as likely to do so as the workforce as a whole (Gaddis, 2019; Jacobs & Graham-Squire, 2010). Due to the poor working conditions, schools can struggle to recruit workers and consequently be under-staffed, creating pressures to work overtime, during breaks, and without pay (Gaddis & Coplen, 2018; Jacobs & Graham-Squire, 2010).

Overall, as the GCNF notes: 'the impact of school meal programs on their communities through the creation of employment (especially for women) and the building of worker capacity is an understudied aspect of this field' (GCNF, 2022, p. 54).

2.3 | Care workers in India

In India, government schemes rely on poorly paid workers or "volunteers." Nearly 2.5 million women work as anganwadi workers and helpers (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023), implementing the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme. ICDS provides supplementary nutrition and health services to children under six years of age and pregnant/lactating women, as well as pre-school education (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2020). Anganwadi workers/helpers must have passed the grade 10 exam and should be between 18 and 35 years of age when they begin the work (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2022). In return for their work, anganwadi workers and helpers receive an honorarium rather than a salary of 4,500 and 2,250 Indian rupees (INR) per month, respectively (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2018a). State governments may increase this amount from their own resources. The minimum amount provided by the central government is far lower than minimum wages and the salary of a primary school teacher whose work is

[6]GCNF categorise countries by income using World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2022).

comparable (Palriwala & Neetha, 2010). Studies have repeatedly found that anganwadi workers and helpers find their renumeration inadequate (Ghosh & Sengupta, 2022).

There are almost a million more women working as community health workers, termed Accredited Social Health Activists or ASHAs (Mission of Health and Family Welfare, 2017). ASHAs are considered volunteers, not employees, and receive renumeration for some tasks (Bhatia, 2014; Swaminathan, 2015).

Underlying these schemes and the construction of care work more widely in India is the ideology of gendered familialism (Palriwala & Neetha, 2011). Familialism in so far as the state views people as members of a family and community rather than individuals, and gendered as women are perceived as dependents and mothers, rather than independent workers (Palriwala & Neetha, 2011). Paid care workers are therefore devalued: receiving low wages, often not covered by labour legislation, and without childcare facilities.

Although the working conditions of anganwadi workers and helpers and ASHAs have been studied to a degree, cook-cum-helpers in the Midday Meal Scheme have largely been ignored. It is not clear what the conditions of work for school cooks are and what the impacts of these conditions are. Here, I begin to redress this imbalance.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data from three sources. First, I collected primary data in Rajasthan in 2014–2015. The research was conducted in four blocks across two districts; Girwa and Kotra in the Udaipur district and Kumbhalgarh and Khamnor in the Rajsamand district. In the first three blocks, the midday meal was supplied under a decentralized model, in which cook-cum-helpers prepared the meal on the school grounds. In the Khamnor block, the meal was supplied from a central kitchen in the town of Nathdwara and distributed to the schools each morning. Research was carried out in 42 schools, randomly selected from a list of schools in the four study blocks. Schools were visited without advance warning. Along with two research assistants, I conducted semi-structured interviews with cook-cum-helpers (n = 31) and teachers (n = 42). The number of cooks is lower than the total number of schools as no cooks were employed in the 10 schools supplied by a central kitchen and in one school the cooks had not come to work on the day of the visit. Where possible, I observed the food being served. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with government officials at the national, state, district and block levels (n = 12).

Second, data from the 2019–2020 Annual Work Plan and Budgets were compiled for each state / UT (n = 36). From these reports, I extracted data on: the number of cook-cum-helpers employed; their honorarium; their gender and caste; training; and the complaints made about their honorarium. I also compiled data from the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 Annual Work Plan and Budgets (n = 36 each year). Since 2022, the publicly available documents have been less detailed. I therefore extracted data on the honorarium only.

Third, I analysed the following documents on the Midday Meal Scheme: the written report on the Annual Plans and Budgets for 2019–2020 (n = 35); minutes of the Annual Plans and Budget meetings for 2023–2024 (n = 36); minutes of the committees responsible for overseeing the Midday Meal Scheme (n = 14); reports of field monitoring by experts comprising a Joint Review Mission (n = 21); questions presented in the Lok Sabha (n = 4); and the 2010 Planning Commission report (n = 1). Qualitative data from interviews and document analysis were analysed thematically in NVivo. The findings from these data sources are now presented collectively.

4 | WHO COOKS INDIA'S SCHOOL LUNCHES?

The Government of India launched a national school feeding programme in 1995, commonly known as the Midday Meal Scheme. According to a 2004 Supreme Court order, "in [the] appointment of cooks and helpers, preference shall be given to Dalits, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" (Supreme Court of India, 2008, p. 59). Unlike the situation with anganwadi workers, the Government of India does not specify educational requirements. States/

UTs may specify who should be employed as cook-cum-helpers. For example, in Tamil Nadu only women are employed, a quarter of posts being reserved for "special categories like widows and destitute women" and 4% of posts are reserved for people with physical disabilities who take the post of "Noon Meal Organiser" (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2018). In Uttarakhand, all cook-cum-helpers must be the mother of a child enrolled at the school and are called *Bhojan Matas* (meal mothers). In the study state of Rajasthan, there are no such requirements in place. In Karnataka, only women are appointed as cooks, the age parameters being 30–40 years' old, the head cooks must have passed 7th grade, with "preference given to widows, single mothers and destitute women" (Government of Karnataka, 2019).

Data from the Annual Reports show that in 2018–2019 most cook-cum-helpers employed in the scheme were women and belonged to traditionally disadvantaged castes (Table 1). Women accounted for the majority of cooks everywhere but Lakshadweep—and for more than 90% in 18 states / UTs. In Rajasthan, 89.5% of cooks were women. As such, cooking in the Midday Meal Scheme is an activity predominantly but not exclusively performed by women. The proportion of cooks belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes, or Minority Castes was 100% in Andhra Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Lakshadweep, and more than 75% in 30 other states/UTs. In Rajasthan, 85.6% of cooks belonged to these groups; 11% to Scheduled Castes, 17.7% to Scheduled Tribes, 53.3% to Other Backward Castes, and 3.6% to Minority Castes. In comparison, the 2011 Census found that 8.6% of India's population belonged to Scheduled Tribes and 16.6% to Scheduled Castes (Government of India, 2011).

The same overall trends were present in the sampled schools (Table 1); most cooks were women (93.5%) and belonged to historically disadvantaged castes (77.4%). The higher proportion of cooks belonging to Scheduled Tribes in the study sample compared to nationally and in Rajasthan reflects the population composition of the study area; Scheduled Tribes accounted for 58.9% of the population in the Girwa block, 95.8% in Kotra, 24.8% in Rajsamand, and 29.9% in Kumbhalgarh. Age was captured in the primary research; 12 cooks (39%) were under 35 years of age, 14 (42%) were between 35 and 54 years of age and six (19%) were 55 or over. Importantly, the Midday Meal Scheme was providing employment to older people, for whom other types of employment may be hard to come by.

Sixteen of the 31 cooks in the primary research (51.6%) stated that they had been selected for the role due to their need for work, with six specifically mentioning that this was the result of their being widows. Another 11 answered that they were selected because they were good cooks. Seventeen of the 31 teachers interviewed in schools employing cook-cum-helpers could provide a reason for the choice of cook. Eleven stated that cooks were chosen due to their need for the work, with two specifically mentioning the cook being a widow and one

TABLE 1 Gender and caste of cook-cum-helpers in the Midday Meal Scheme in 2018–2019.

		Cook-cum-helpers employed in 2018–2019 (n = 2,500,017)		Cook-cum-helpers surveyed in this study (n = 31)	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	291,965	11.7	3	9.7
	Female	2,208,052	88.3	29	93.5
Caste	ST	569,294	22.8	13	41.9
	SC	363,425	14.5	1	3.2
	OBC	1,036,923	41.5	10	32.3
	Minority[7]	157,437	6.3	-	-
	Other	372,938	14.9	7	22.6

Source: Annual Work Plans and Budgets for 2019–2020 and primary data.

[7]Minority was used as a category in the secondary data, but not in the primary data.

mentioning caste. Four teachers mentioned their cooking ability. In general, preferential employment of those who needed the work was observed; however, the need was interpreted more broadly than by caste and gender and, more importantly, the scheme provided a source of employment for widows and the elderly. Cooking ability was a consideration, indicating the skill required for the job.

5 | UNDERPAID AND UNDERVALUED

5.1 | Absolute and relative underpayment

The Government of India considers cook-cum-helpers to be part-time honorary workers, not government employees. Similarly to anganwadi workers and helpers, cook-cum-helpers receive an honorarium, not a wage. Since 2009, the minimum honorarium for cook-cum-helpers has been INR 1000 per month (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009), equivalent to approximately USD 12.4.[8] The cost of the honorarium is shared between the Centre and the state in a ratio of 60:40, with the exception of eight states in the North Eastern Region, and three states in the Himalayan Region where the ratio is 90:10 and UTs, where the Centre provides 100% of funding (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2015a) (see Table 2). Typically, cook-cum-helpers are not paid during the school holidays and therefore are paid for 10 months of the year.[9] Cook-cum-helpers usually work six days per week, meaning a monthly honorarium of INR 1,000 equates to an annual income of INR 10,000 or approximately INR 38 per day (USD 0.46).[10] In practice, the payment may be even lower. For example, one cook in the sample was paid INR 900 rather than INR 1,000, as the teacher subtracted INR 100 to compensate for cleaning the grain elsewhere.

States/UTs can provide a higher honorarium using their own resources, and consequently the honorarium varies across India. In 2018–2019, 13 of 36 states/UTs provided only INR 1,000, 19 provided more than INR 1,000 and less than INR 5,000, and just four provided more than INR 5,000 (approximately USD 60.21) (Table 2). By 2022–2023, the honorarium has increased in 20 states / UTs, stayed the same in 13 and decreased in two UTs (Table 2). These changes were the result of altering contributions by state/UT governments, with increases often being the result of protests by cook-cum-helpers (see subsection 5.3). However, the pattern remained similar; eight states/UTs provided INR 1,000, 24 states provided more than INR 1,000 and less than INR 5,000, and four provided more than INR 5,000. Furthermore, the increases were sometimes small, at INR 500 (USD 6.02) or less in seven of the 20 states /UTs. Notably, prior to 2022–2023, the UT of Lakshadweep was adding INR 10,000 from own resources, which has since been removed, reducing the payment to INR 1,000 and consequently making the retention of cooks difficult.

Low payment is particularly common in the North East Region and UTs. Payment of more than INR 5,000 occurs in three states (Haryana, Kerala, Tamil Nadu) and the UT of Puducherry. There is a history of school lunch provision in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry, long predating the introduction of a National Midday Meal Scheme in 1995. Commitments to pay more than the minimum honorarium of INR 1,000 are long-standing in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In 2014–2015, the honorarium was INR 4,750 in Kerala and ranged from INR 950–5000 in Tamil Nadu depending on the role. This reflects the commitment to welfare provision in the two states (Deshpande et al., 2017). In Puducherry, the honorarium increased from INR 1,000 in 2015–2016, to INR 19,000 in 2016–2017. In Haryana, the honorarium was higher than the minimum in 2014–2015 at INR 2,500, then later increased to INR 3,000. The honorarium was doubled to INR 7,000 in 2022 reported to be

[8]At an exchange rate of USD 1 per INR 83.04 in January 2024.
[9]There are exceptions. For example, in Uttarakhand cooks are paid for 11 months and also receive an extra INR 1,000 incentive every year.
[10]If cooks work six days per week for 10 months and 10 months is 43.5 weeks, then cooks will work for 261 days per year. INR 1,000 per month, means they receive INR 10,000 per year or INR 38.3 per day.

TABLE 2 Payment for cook-cum-helpers in the Midday Meal Scheme in 2018–2019.

State/UT	2018–2019	2022–2023			
	Total monthly honorarium (INR)	Total monthly honorarium (INR)	Centre contribution (INR)	Minimum state contribution (INR)	Additional amount from state resources (INR)
Andhra Pradesh	3000	3000	600	400	2000
Arunachal Pradesh (NE)[11]	1000	2000	900	100	1000
Assam (NE)	1000	1500	900	100	500
Bihar	1500	1650	600	400	650
Chhattisgarh	1200	1500	600	400	500
Gujarat	1600	3000	600	400	2000
Goa	1000	*1000*[12]	600	400	*0*
Haryana	3500	7000	600	400	6000
Himachal Pradesh (H)	1800	*2600**	*900*	*100*	*1600**
Jharkhand	1500	2000	600	400	1000
Jammu and Kashmir (H/UT)[13]	1000	*1000*	900	100	*0*
Karnataka	2600/2700[14]	3700	600	400	2700
Kerala	9000	12,000	600	400	11,000
Madhya Pradesh	2000	2000	600	400	1000
Maharashtra	1000[15]	1500	600	400	500
Manipur (NE)	1000	*1000**	900	100	*0*
Meghalaya (NE)	1000	2000	900	100	1000
Mizoram (NE)	1500	1500	900	100	500
Nagaland (NE)	1000	*1000**	900	100	0
Odisha	1400	1400	600	400	400
Punjab	1700	3000	600	400	2000
Rajasthan	1320	1742	600	400	742
Sikkim (NE)	1000	1000	900	100	0
Tamil Nadu	3000–24200[16]	*3000–24200**	600	400	*2000–23200**
Telangana	1000	3000	600	400	2000
Tripura (NE)	1500	2500	900	100	1500

(Continues)

[11]NE- North Eastern Region, H- Himalayan Region, UT- Union Territories

[12]Italics denote that the total amount was not explicitly stated in the 2023–2024 report (for the 2022–2023 academic year). An asterisk (*) denotes the amount was explicitly stated in the 2021–2022 report (for 2020–2021).

[13]The Himalayan state of Jammu and Kashmir was divided into the two UTs of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh in October 2019.

[14]For helpers and cooks respectively.

[15]In Maharashtra, in rural areas the honorarium ranges from INR 1,000 for up to 25 enrolled students to INR 10,000 for 900 students or more. In urban areas, the honorarium ranges from INR 2000 for 500 students to INR 10,000 for 10,000 students or more (Government of Maharashtra, 2019). This is not mentioned in the minutes for the 2022–2023 or 2023–2024 review meetings.

[16]In Tamil Nadu, assistants receive INR 3,000–9,000, cooks receive INR 4,100–12,500 and organizers receive between INR 7,700–24,200 per month (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2019a).

TABLE 2 (Continued)

State/UT	2018–2019	2022–2023			
	Total monthly honorarium (INR)	Total monthly honorarium (INR)	Centre contribution (INR)	Minimum state contribution (INR)	Additional amount from state resources (INR)
Uttarakhand (H)	2000	*3000 (plus INR.1,000 per annum)**	900	100	*2000**
Uttar Pradesh	1000	2000	600	400	1000
West Bengal	1500	1500	600	400	500
Andaman and Nicobar Islands (UT)	1000	1000	1000	0	0
Chandigarh (UT)	3000	3300	1000	0	2300
Dadra Nagar Haveli (UT)	3876.25	*4274**[17]	*1000*	*0*	*3274**
Daman and Diu (UT)	3721				
Delhi (UT)	1000	*1000*	600	400	0
Lakshadweep (UT)	9500	1000	1000	0	0
Puducherry (UT)	19000	10000	600	400	9000
Ladakh (UT)	NA	1000	1000	0	0

Source: Annual Work Plans and Budgets for 2019–2020, 2022–2023 and 2023–2024.

in response to protests (Haryana, 2023). However, there have been widespread reports of delays in receiving these payments (Haryana, 2023).

Payment may also be delayed. Twenty-five of the 31 cooks interviewed reported that their payment was delayed, typically by three to six months. Government officials attributed this to delays in the flow of funds to the block level. Since the fieldwork was conducted, many states, including Rajasthan, have started providing direct electronic transfers to the cooks' bank accounts, which can be expected to reduce delays. However, secondary data show that delays still occur. Delays were mentioned in eight of the Work Plans and Budgets for 2019–2020,[18] and by eight of the 14 Joint Review Missions conducted since 2018.[19] In 2018–2019, state governments received 1,797 complaints about the non-payment of honorariums.

Payment is also relatively low compared to other paid care workers in India. The work performed by cooks in the Midday Meal Scheme is perhaps most comparable to anganwadi helpers, who also typically work six days a week and assist in cooking and cleaning (Ministry of Women and Child Development, n.d.; Palriwala & Neetha, 2010). Yet, the minimum honorarium for anganwadi helpers stipulated by the central government is more than double that of cook-cum-helpers. Even when additional resources are added by state/UT governments, the

[17]The UTs of Dadra Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu became one UT in November 2019.

[18]Delays are mentioned in the 2019–2020 Annual Work Plans and Budget write-ups for: Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram, Nagaland, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.

[19]Delays are mentioned in the reports for the Joint Review Missions to: Chhattisgarh (2019–2020); Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh (2018–2019); Punjab, Gujarat, Arunachal Pradesh (2017–2018).

honorarium for cooks may still be significantly lower. This is especially at odds with trends in paid domestic work, where cooks may receive a higher wage than those engaged in housework or childcare, particularly for casual employment in urban areas (Palriwala & Neetha, 2010). However, for both cooks and anganwadi workers and helpers, the amount is typically low in absolute terms.

Cooks in the Midday Meal Scheme also receive less than non-care workers, including those employed in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)[20] and far less than the national minimum wage.[21] An exception is Kerala, where, under the Minimum Wages Act, cooks in the Midday Meal Scheme are guaranteed a minimum wage of INR 350 per day (Government of Kerala, 2016). Across most of India, however, cook-cum-helpers face the common wage penalty for care work, earning less than non-care workers. However, cooks also face an additional penalty, earning less than other paid care workers performing similar duties in another government scheme.

5.2 | Impacts of low payment

At the time of fieldwork, cooks in Rajasthan received a minimum of INR 1,000. The honorarium increased to INR 1,200 in 2017–2018 and then to INR 1,320 in July 2018. In 2022–2023, the honorarium was INR 1,742 (Table 2). Unsurprisingly, the primary data show a monthly honorarium of INR 1,000 to be inadequate. The 31 cooks interviewed considered their salary to be insufficient. When asked to explain why, 15 considered the workload to be much higher than the salary warranted and three considered the amount "not enough to survive." One cook, a widow, answered "How can I survive without money?"[22] One cook thought that the workload was worth INR 100 per day, and another suggested INR 5,000 per month. Beyond these formal interviews, the inadequacy of the payment was remarked on repeatedly by cooks, especially by those who were the sole earners in their household, such as widows.

Cook-cum-helpers' dissatisfaction with their pay is not confined to the study sample; cook-cum-helpers from across India regularly protest in a bid to receive higher pay. For example, in Bihar in 2019 cooks went on strike for 39 days, consequently receiving a pay increase of INR 250 (Singh, 2019). In August 2020, alongside anganwadi workers and helpers and ASHAs, cooks went on strike demanding minimum wages of INR 21,000 per month and a payment of INR 10,000 per month when schools are closed (Sindhu, 2020). Table 3 provides a non-exhaustive list of protests by cook-cum-helpers in 2023. These examples of recent collective action highlight the persistence of poor working conditions in the scheme. Even in states where more than the minimum of INR 1,000 is paid (including Kerala), the working conditions are inadequate. For example, *The Assam Tribune* quotes a cook as saying:

> We have been working as midday meal cooks for more than a decade, but we are still paid a small amount of Rs. 1,500 per month, which is not enough to meet our basic needs. We have not received any salary for the last six months. We have no job security, no social security, no health insurance, and no pension. We are treated as bonded labourers by the government and the education department. (Thousands of midday meal cooks, 2023)

Low pay affects the implementation of the scheme by making recruitment and retention difficult. Three teachers and one cook commented that no one wanted to work as a cook as the payment was low, especially

[20]In 2020, workers in the MGNREGS should have received between INR 190–309 per day depending on the state/UT (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020).

[21]In Rajasthan in 2019 the minimum wage for unskilled workers was INR 225 per day or INR 5,850 per month (Government of Rajasthan, 2020).

[22]Interviews with cook-cum-helpers at schools 17, 35, and 41, conducted on 15 November 2014, 23 December 2014, and 8 January 2015 respectively.

TABLE 3 A non-exhaustive list of protests by cook-cum-helpers in 2023 and examples of demands.

State	Month, Year	Examples of demands	Source
Kerala	March 2023	Increasing the honorarium to INR 900 per day, revising cook-to-student ratio; considered part-time contingent workers	The New Indian Express (Vidyadharan, 2023)
Andhra Pradesh	April 2023	Government to supply cooking gas; increase honorarium; cancellation of the contract given to Akshaya Patra	The Hindu Bureau (Visakhapatnam, 2023)
Karnataka	October 2023	Increased honorarium; pension; compensation in the event of death; recognized as workers	The New Indian Express (Midday meal workers in Karnataka, 2023)
West Bengal	October 2023	13-point demands including: monthly salary of INR 21,000 for 12 months; social benefits and leave; festive grants or bonuses; recognized as government workers	NewsClick (Mid-day meal workers protest in Kolkata, 2023)
Uttarakhand	June 2023	Increased renumeration; permanent employee status with the education department	The Times of India (Tyagi, 2023)
Assam	December 2023	Monthly pay of INR 10,000 for 12 months; social security measures; compensation in the event of death; cancellation of the privatization of the scheme	The Assam Tribune (Thousands of midday meal cooks, 2023)

relative to the workload. This issue has also been recognized by state governments (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2019; Government of Chhattisgarh, 2019) and by the Planning Commission (2010). The Government of Arunachal Pradesh (2019) cites the higher wages received by daily labourers as a factor in the frequent turnover of cooks. The frequent turnover is problematic, as typically cooks do not receive training before they start their position, but instead receive training annually or less often. When turnover is high, it becomes more likely that cooks are working without training.

5.3 | A recognized problem

The inadequacy of the honorarium for cook-cum-helpers is widely recognized by state governments. In the 2019–2020 Annual Work Plans and Budgets, 13 states[23] governments (notably where the honorarium at the time was INR 2,000 or less) explicitly recognized the inadequacy of the honorarium. Therefore, many states have proposed increasing the honorarium. For example, in 2019 the state governments of Odisha, Meghalaya, and Tripura proposed an increase to INR 3,000, including for 12 months in Tripura. The honorarium has since increased to INR 2,000 in Meghalaya and INR 2,500 in Tripura. Overall, the honorarium increased in seven of these 13 states by 2022–2023 (Table 2). Seven out of 24 Joint Review Missions[24] recommended increasing the payment, noting that the honorarium was insufficient for cooks belonging to disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Human Resource

[23]These states recognized the inadequacy of the honorarium in their 2019–2020 Annual Work Plans and Budgets: Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Goa, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura, and Uttar Pradesh.

[24]These Joint Review Missions recommended increasing the honorarium: Chhattisgarh (2019–2020); Andhra Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh (2018–2019); Arunachal Pradesh and Punjab (2017–2018); Assam and Maharashtra (2015–2016).

Development, 2018a) and that the wage was much less than the minimum wage for unskilled labour (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2015b). In Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, the honorarium in 2022–2023 was INR 3,000, yet in the minutes from the review meetings for these states, it is reported that social audits found the need to increase the honorarium paid to cooks.

The Government of India is all too aware of the inadequacies of the honorarium. The minimum honorarium of INR 1,000 was introduced in 2009, and by 2011 the inadequacy of this amount especially in cities was reported in the meeting of the National Steering-Cum-Monitoring Committee for the Midday Meal Scheme. The Secretary for School Education and Literacy (SE&L) responded "it is not feasible to have different rates of honorarium for Cook-cum-helpers engaged in different regions in the country…the job of Cook-cum-helper is a part time job. Hence, daily minimum wages cannot be provided" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2011). In the July 2012 National Level Review meeting, the Gujarat representative reported that cooks were requesting an increase in honorarium on par with anganwadi workers (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2012). In response, the "Secretary (SE&L) clarified that the nature of jobs performed by anganwadi workers and MDM [Midday Meal] cook-cum-helpers are different. Hence parity of payment is not feasible" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2012, p. 4). The issue of low payment was repeatedly raised in meetings throughout 2013–2016. When faced with complaints, for example from the Education Minister of Bihar in 2014, the Minister of State for Human Resources and Development responded that states should increase the honorarium from their own resources (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2014a). Notably, proposals in 2014 to double the minimum honorarium were not accepted (Rajya Sabha Secretariat, 2016). Increasing the honorarium continues to be the responsibility of state/UT governments. In the 2022–2023 Programme Approval Board advised Jammu and Kashmir "to make the provision of additional contribution to honorarium of cook-cum-helpers from UT's own resources" (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Questions about the honorarium have been raised in the lower house of the Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha. In 2015, when asked to explain why cooks were not permanent government employees and why they are paid such meagre wages, the Minister of Human Resource Development answered that cook-cum-helpers are engaged "on a part time basis" and confirmed that there were no plans to make them permanent employees or to increase their honorarium (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2015c). In 2017, when asked to explain the reasons for the different wages in different states and the steps taken to increase wages in the Midday Meal Scheme, the Minister of Human Resource Development responded that cook-cum-helpers "are honorary workers who have come forward for rendering social services. In recognition of their services, the CCHs [cook-cum-helpers] are paid honorarium, and not wages" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2017a).

There are several narratives underpinning the government's view of the work done by cook-cum-helpers: it is part time and thus undeserving of minimum wage; it is different from the work performed by anganwadi workers; it is an honorary position for providing social services; and the responsibility for increased payments lies with the states/UTs, not the Government of India.

6 | OVERWORKED

When the Midday Meal is prepared in schools, cooks are expected to perform all tasks related to cooking, serving the meal, and washing utensils (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2010). Tasks observed or frequently referred to by cooks in this study included cleaning the cooking area, cleaning grains, collecting firewood, preparing ingredients, cooking and serving the food, and washing the cooking utensils. As was observed during fieldwork and has been noted elsewhere (Swaminathan et al., 2004), these tasks may be performed in unpleasant conditions. I frequently observed cooks cooking on an open fire in an insufficiently ventilated kitchen in the midday heat. The cooks reported that it took up to six hours to complete these tasks,

which were performed six days a week. As noted by the Government of Madhya Pradesh, these activities consume the whole day and therefore cook-cum-helpers "are not able to do any other job" (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2019, p. 53).

Performing all tasks related to preparing and serving the meal is no small undertaking. In practice, the workload may be even more onerous than it might seem at first sight. First, it is common for fewer cooks to be employed than there should be. There should be one cook employed in schools with 1–25 students, two cooks for 26–100 students, and an additional cook for every additional 100 students (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009). Only eight of the 42 schools sampled (19%) employed the correct number of cooks; the rest had fewer. For example, one school had nearly 80 students but only employed one cook, who unsurprisingly thought her wage was insufficient relative to the workload. This reflects a wider issue. Compiling data from the 2019–2020 Annual Reports, in 2018–2019 nationally 95.7% of the number of cooks who should have been employed were in fact in place. Fewer cooks were engaged than had been approved the previous year in 24 states/UTs. Of the few governments that provide a reason for this discrepancy, some attribute the difference to decreased enrolment numbers, whereas others note that this is due to centralized kitchens (Andhra Pradesh) and the low honorarium (Meghalaya). I observed that the workload increases if a cook is absent, for example, due to illness, or when there is inadequate infrastructure, such as no on-site drinking water, in turn requiring the cook to fetch water from elsewhere.

Observation showed that it was difficult for cooks to perform all these tasks, particularly on days when the state-level menu dictated that several dishes needed to be prepared (for example, *dal* and *roti*) and especially in schools with one cook. I observed cooks adopting a range of coping strategies, including reducing the quantity of food served (such as one big *roti* per child) and not adhering to the menu by cooking one-pot dishes instead (for example, *khichdi*, a mixture of rice and lentils). As the nutritional content of the midday meal is calculated according to a fixed menu and quantities, these shortcuts have implications for the nutritional value of the food. Another coping strategy that I observed in 17 schools was to ask students (mostly girls) to prepare the meal; also noted by the 2018 Joint Review Mission to Gujarat. The participation of children in cooking has clear implications for their education and health and safety.

Cooks are not necessarily trained to perform these tasks. In 2018–2019, nationally 51.2% of cooks received training. Only eight states/UTs reported that all cooks had been trained and 11 reported that no cooks had been trained.[25] As noted previously, the turnover of cooks can be frequent. For example, six of the 31 cooks interviewed had been in the position for fewer than 12 months. This means that in the states/UTs that did not provide training in 2018–2019, new cooks starting that year did not receive formal training. Moreover, if cooks are not trained, there is no guarantee that they know about the nutritional guidelines or hygienic food preparation, as noted by 13 of 21 Joint Review Missions.[26] Many state/UT governments must therefore assume that training is not necessary, perhaps because those employed must already know how to cook, and/or cooking is not a skill.

7 | SOCIAL PROTECTION

As cooks in the Midday Meal Scheme are not government employees, they are not automatically entitled to employment-related social protection such as pensions or paid maternity leave. A small number of states provide some form of social protection. For example, in Odisha eligible cooks may receive 90 days' paid maternity leave

[25]In 2018–2019, the following states/UTs reported that no cooks received training: Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Maharashtra, Nagaland, Odisha, Rajasthan, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Chandigarh, and Lakshadweep.

[26]The lack of training and the impacts on the meal was noted by the Joint Review Missions to: Chhattisgarh (2019–2020); Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh (2018–2019); Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Arunachal Pradesh (2017–2018); Haryana, Telangana, West Bengal (2015–2016); Uttarakhand (2014–2015).

(Government of Odisha, 2015). In Tamil Nadu, cooks receive 180 days' paid maternity leave and 12 days' casual leave, are covered by health insurance schemes and receive a festival bonus, a pension, and lump sum on retirement (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2019a). However, the vast majority of cooks in India's Midday Meal Scheme do not receive such benefits.

The commitment of the central government to providing social protection to cooks in the Midday Meal Scheme extends to encouraging states/UTs to encourage cooks to prevail in three national-level schemes (Minister of Human Resource Development, 2015). These include two life insurance schemes, the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY) and Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) and an old-age pension scheme for those working in the unorganized sector and not covered by any statutory social security scheme called Atal Pension Yojana (APY). Notably, these schemes are available to all citizens of India. Premiums for these schemes can be paid by the cook themselves or the state/UT government (Minister of Human Resource Development, 2015), while anganwadi workers and helpers have these premiums paid for them (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2018b). The Minister of Human Resource Development (2015) considered these schemes to have "immediate relevance for the social security of cook-cum-helpers"; however, by 2018–2019 enrolment in at least one of these schemes had occurred in only 10 states/UTs. Midday Meal workers and other groups of workers demanded universal coverage of PMSBY and PMJJBY during their strikes in August 2020 (Sindhu, 2020) and improved social security is a standard demand of Midday Meal workers (see Table 3).

8 | A DISPOSABLE WORKFORCE?

The precarity faced by cook-cum-helpers is being exacerbated by changes from decentralized to centralized meal provision. State governments are entering into public–private partnerships with organizations to supply the Midday Meal. These typically involve a non-governmental organization (NGO) receiving government funding and free grain to prepare and distribute the meal. NGOs can also collect donations from the public (both in India and overseas) to supplement government funding.

In the centralized model of meal provision, food is prepared at a large centralized kitchen, transported to schools, and is then served by centralized kitchen staff or helpers from the area surrounding the school. If the midday meal is served by a helper, states / UTs should divide the honorarium between the school and the centralized kitchen (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2017b). Switching to centralized provision therefore reduces the honorarium that cooks receive. For example, in Bihar and Assam, the honorarium is shared equally between the kitchen and the school, reducing the cooks' honorarium to INR 750 in Bihar and INR 500 in Assam (Government of Assam, 2019; Government of Bihar, 2019). As has been shown here, the minimum honorarium for cook-cum-helpers is already inadequate; halving this honorarium is likely to be devastating.

Cook-cum-helpers already working in schools should not be displaced if there is a change from decentralized to centralized provision (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2017b). In reality, cook-cum-helpers may lose their jobs. In the sample schools in Khamnor block, no helper was employed at any of the 10 schools that received the meal from a centralized kitchen. In two locations, we encountered women previously employed as cook-cum-helpers at the school before the shift to centralized provision. Both women expressed disappointment that their employment as cooks had ended. When I asked a sub-state-level government official about the loss of employment in the centralized model, he replied that the "employment doesn't matter much as they are only getting Rs.33 which is even less than NREGA [National Rural Employment Guarantee Act]." His disregard for the employment of cook-cum-helpers reflects all too clearly a wider discourse underpinning the construction of care work in the Midday Meal Scheme; that the employment of cook-cum-helpers does not matter.

Data from the Annual Work Plans and Budgets show that the negative impacts of centralized provision on employment are more widespread. In 2018–2019, in 46 of the 146 districts (31.5%) in which centralized kitchens provided the Midday Meal, no cook-cum-helpers were reported to be employed in schools. A reduction in the

number of cook-cum-helpers employed at schools reduces or entirely removes the employment of local people, who, as shown earlier, are mainly women and those in need. Cook-cum-helpers have therefore protested against centralized provision, including in Assam (Saika, 2019). Karnataka (Protest held against privatisation, 2019) and nationally (Sindhu, 2020) (also see Table 3).

9 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the construction of paid care work in India, focusing on cook-cum-helpers in the Midday Meal Scheme. The Midday Meal Scheme has been shown to provide employment to some of India's neediest. Echoing wider trends in care work (ILO, 2018) and school feeding programmes (GCNF, 2022), cook-cum-helpers are predominantly women. Many belong to historically disadvantaged castes and/or are widows and need the work.

In some states, especially Tamil Nadu and Kerala, cooks in the Midday Meal Scheme are treated as government employees and receive the associated level of payment and social security. Their basic rights to minimum wage and leave are met, reflecting long-standing commitments to school feeding and welfare provision. The data presented here, however, show that these working conditions are rare. The same adjectives repeatedly applied to paid care work in other settings have been shown to be all too applicable to cook-cum-helpers in the Midday Meal Scheme; across most of India, cook-cum-helpers are underpaid and undervalued, experiencing wage penalties both when compared to non-care workers and to other care workers. Despite recent increases in the honorarium in many states due to the increased contributions from state/UT governments, absolute pay is still low and is less than INR 5,000 (USD 60.21) per month in 32 of 36 states/UTs. Eight states/UTs still only provide the minimum INR 1,000 for 10 months of the year. The low payment impacts the capabilities of cook-cum-helpers, subjecting them to poverty as the honorarium is inadequate to meet their needs and those of their household. When increases in payment at the state/UT level do occur, these are minimal and often hard won. Although the honorarium varies across India due to different contributions of state/UT governments assignable to policy legacies, political will, and financial resources, in most locations the amount is inadequate.

Cooks are also often overworked which, combined with low payment, impacts the implementation of the scheme. As has been found elsewhere (Gladdis & Coplen, 2019; Patel, 2009), poor wages result in difficulties recruiting workers and high staff turnover. Again, reflecting wider trends in this type of care work (Razavi & Staab, 2010), in most of India cook-cum-helpers also have little access to employment-related social protection, and efforts to engage cooks in national insurance schemes have been sporadic and limited. In most states, cook-cum-helpers do not receive adequate training, either. There is thus a central contradiction at the heart of the Midday Meal Scheme; preferential employment is given to those in need, but the low payment means that their financial needs are not met. Comparing the outcomes of these different levels of pay and working conditions across states / UTs is a clear area for further research, as has been noted by the GCNF (2021).

The Government of India relies on 2.5 million cooks to implement one of its flagship food security programmes, but the value it places on this work is approximately INR 38 per day. There is thus a very thin line between paid care work and unpaid care work or volunteering. Echoing wider trends in the state construction of paid care work (Razavi & Staab, 2010), the Government of India does not offer reliable, secure, or formal employment. In fact, its social programmes are based on maintaining informality. In doing so, the government disregards its own labour laws, including minimum wages (Chandrasekhar & Ghosh, 2015; Palriwala & Neetha, 2010), denying those implementing key government schemes the role of government employees and the associated rights and benefits. The increasing use of public–private partnerships in the scheme can further disadvantage cook-cum-helpers, leading to lower wages or loss of income entirely. The state's lack of regard for (or discussion of) the impacts of centralized provision shows that not only is the state an unreliable employer, it is also an uncaring one.

Underpinning these working conditions are narratives all too familiar in the construction of paid care work. First, as is also the case for anganwadi workers and domestic workers (Palriwala & Neetha, 2010), the work cook-cum-helpers perform is considered neither labour intensive nor highly skilled. This is evident in the government's persistent view that the work cook-cum-helpers do is part-time. The work performed is seen as unskilled, evident in the lack of commitment to training. There is arguably a gendered element to this; the assumption that women already possess the cooking skills required. Cooking in the Midday Meal Scheme is valued less than the work done by anganwadi workers and helpers, evident in the differences in minimum payment and social security provision. Second, there is the view that work in the Midday Meal Scheme is motivated by altruism. The narrative that cook-cum-helpers work to provide a social service rather than for an income all too clearly reflects wider trends in the views of care work, both that care workers will accept a lower wage for helping people and that care work is motivated by altruism rather than money (Meagher, 2016; Palmer & Eveline, 2012; Razavi, 2011; Razavi & Staab, 2010). This view is used to justify not treating cook-cum-helpers as government employees and giving them an honorarium instead of a wage. Of course, the widespread protests of cook-cum-helpers demanding increased payment and benefits shows that the work in the Midday Meal Scheme is in return for payment. Underpinning these narratives is the discourse of gendered familialism (Palriwala & Neetha, 2011). Cook-cum-helpers are not viewed as independent wage earners but rather as part of a family (as the small honorarium would necessitate additional income) and as part of the wider community for whom they are performing a social service.

Employment in the Midday Meal Scheme could be transformative. By providing a source of decent work, the scheme could enhance incomes and capabilities and reduce some of the inequities and structural conditions that entrench poverty and food insecurity. The employment offered could contribute to the achievement of several SDGs. Instead, Government machinery serves to do the opposite; to keep those in need needy, perpetuating existing disadvantages and marginalization along lines of gender, caste and socioeconomic position. In its present form, the Midday Meal Scheme is a missed opportunity.

These findings are of relevance to policy on school feeding more broadly. When those working in school feeding programmes experience low pay, reductions in poverty or inequalities do not occur, but rather are perpetuated. This not only negatively impacts workers and their families, but also the implementation of the scheme and ultimately schoolchildren. National-level changes in policies on school feeding programmes are required to ensure that those working in the scheme are sufficiently paid, are valued, and have a manageable workload. More research examining the working conditions and experiences of those who cook school meals around the world is needed to inform these much-needed policy changes.

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The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This article reports analysis of primary data. The ethics of data collection and analysis were approved by the Department of Geography ethics review committee, University of Cambridge.

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