CHAPTER **10**

Organising Paid Domestic Workers in India: Analysing Collective Mobilisation Through a New Form of 'Unionism' in the Global South

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Abstract: Paid domestic work constitutes one of the largest arenas of informal employment for poor women in urban India today, and as in many other parts of the world, it bears the hallmarks of informality: low wages, long working hours, low status, and the absence of comprehensive, uniformly applicable, national legislation that guarantees fair terms of employment, decent working conditions, and social protection. Even though domestic workers are largely perceived to be 'unorganisable', paid domestic workers in India are mobilizing and organizing, in spite of the obvious challenges related to their structural position as informal workers. In this chapter, I examine the strategies adopted by a left-oriented trade union in Mumbai, India, as they organize and mobilise a group of paid domestic workers in the city. I argue that in order to successfully organize this group of female workers, the trade union has had to develop an innovative and alternative form of unionism, one that addresses both material and sociocultural inequalities faced by their members by paying particular attention to the strategic intersections of their lives as workers and as poor women from lower castes and classes. This new and inventive organising model deployed by the union has been able to respond constructively to the precarity and vulnerability that structure the lives of the domestic workers, both as informal workers and as poor women living on the margins of Indian society with little access to social citizenship rights.

Keywords: domestic work, domestic workers' unionisation, informal workers, social movement unionism, women, India

Introduction

Paid domestic work has witnessed a considerable growth in India over the past three decades as a result of processes that have been set in motion by market-oriented reforms. This sector constitutes one of the largest sites of informal employment for poor women in urban India today and, as in many other parts of the world, it bears the hallmarks of informality: low wages, long working hours, low status and the absence of comprehensive, uniformly applicable, national legislation that guarantees fair terms of employment, decent working conditions and social protection (Neetha, 2009). Power inequalities based on gender, caste, class, religion and ethnicity characterise the relationship between domestic workers and their employers, which severely militates against their ability to achieve the traditional work benefits, labour rights and dignity of labour that are afforded to other workers in the Indian polity (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011).

There has been a common perception in research literature that informal workers are 'unorganisable' along traditional trade union lines. Domestic workers, as a group of informal workers, are particularly difficult to organise, as they are involved in casual, fragmented and part-time activities which are conducted in physically dispersed and isolated private homes (Kabeer et al., 2013a; Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). Factors that prevent the adoption of a traditional trade union model for this group of workers include having multiple employers, being physically invisible and isolated, and the lack of both a sense of worker identity and a well-defined, formal labour relationship with their employers (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011; Cornwall et al., 2013; Kabeer et al., 2013a). However, in spite of these challenges, domestic workers have been organising and unionising globally (see Blofield & Jokela, 2018; Bonner, 2010; Boris & Nadasen, 2008; Nadasen, 2015). There have also been efforts by different groups and organisations to mobilise and organise domestic workers in India with varying success since the 1980s (see Devika et al., 2011; Menon, 2013; Moghe, 2013; Eluri & Singh, 2013; George, 2013; Gothoskar, 2005; Chigateri & Ghosh, 2015).

In this chapter, I analyse the organisational model of a trade union in Mumbai which is associated with a left-wing, national political party. This union has been mobilising women domestic workers in Mumbai since 2005, and it focuses both on the attainment of traditional work

benefits in the form of labour rights and social consumption and reproductive benefits in the form of citizenship rights (see also Agarwala, 2013). I argue that this unique form of alternative unionism deployed by the union has led to substantive changes in the lives of the domestic workers (Alberti, 2014; see also Barua & Haukanes, 2019). By addressing both the material and sociocultural inequalities faced by their members, this inventive organisational model has been able to respond constructively to the precarity and vulnerability that structure the lives of the domestic workers, both as informal workers and as poor women living on the margins of Indian society with little access to social citizenship rights. There is very limited research that provides a fine-grained and nuanced analysis of the strategies and processes deployed by unions as they pioneer innovative organisational efforts aimed at domestic workers in India. In developing an analysis of this new form of mobilisation and organisation of paid domestic workers, this chapter makes an important empirical contribution and fills a critical gap in the research literature with regard to a relatively under-researched phenomenon in the Indian context. This chapter is also highly relevant, in the global context, in understanding how trade unions can form strategic alliances with informal sector workers and successfully initiate and establish a grassroots model of collective mobilisation aimed at securing the rights and interests of this often-neglected and precarious group.

Methods and data

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Mumbai in 2013 and 2014 by the author. The data was collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions and participant observation. Fourteen interviews were conducted with the organisers and staff of the union in Mumbai. Twenty-nine interviews and four focus-group discussions (8–12 participants in each group) were conducted with domestic workers who were union members. The author also conducted participant observation in the five months that she spent with this trade union in Mumbai, during which time she attended staff meetings, meetings held in the slum communities where the domestic

workers lived ('area meetings') and meetings of domestic worker leaders at the union headquarters every month ('leaders' meetings'). The author attended and participated in a total of eight such meetings. Apart from these formal meetings, the author also spent a great deal of time over a five-month period at the trade union office with the staff and organisers, where she was able to observe their daily work and have informal conversations with the staff, which were a vital source of rich data. She also accompanied the staff in the field, when they went on home visits to meet their members and to hold area meetings; lots of informal discussions occurred while travelling to and from visits and meetings.

The union that has been analysed in this chapter was established in 2005 and exists in 22 districts of Maharashtra, with a total membership of approximately 55,000. In Mumbai, 11,000[1] domestic workers are part of this union. Although the larger central union to which this union is affiliated started working with domestic workers as a group three decades ago in different states in India, their aim at that time was not to organise or unionise domestic workers but rather to intervene on an individual case basis when problems such as false accusations of theft or cases of sexual harassment against workers were reported. Subsequently, it was only in the 1980s that the work of organising domestic workers became important, when the slogan 'Organising the unorganised' became the central theme and focus of the larger union body. This new focus gave an added impetus to the efforts of the organisation in working with domestic workers and other unorganised sector workers with whom they had worked previously. This change of strategy that led to organising domestic work marks a significant shift in their approach to labour organising. This is also indicative of a larger shift in the left-wing trade unions in general, which turned their attention from the organised sector to those working in the unorganised sector.

After the launch of neoliberal reforms in India, the profile of the organised sector became more unorganised, with contract and flexible labour replacing permanent jobs and the formal sector witnessing increased informality of employment. In this context, it became necessary for the central trade unions to address the needs of the unorganised sector, due

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1   This was the number of union members at the time when fieldwork was conducted in 2014.

to the shrinkage in the organised sector. Since 2004, the larger union began to plan ways in which domestic workers all over India could be organised and brought in under the Minimum Wages Act (1948), and ways were explored to extend social security provisions and maternity benefits to them. By 2010, unions of domestic workers were successfully formed in several states in India. The union was also closely involved in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) discussions leading up to the establishment of Convention 189 in 2011, concerning decent work for domestic workers. This union was established with the primary goals of demanding and securing old-age pensions for workers in the state and the establishment and operation of the Domestic Workers' Welfare Board[2]. While the Domestic Workers' Welfare Board was established in 2008 as a result of long and tireless efforts by the union in conjunction with other domestic workers' groups, the battle for the pension is still ongoing. However, as my analysis below will show, this union also works to address the practical and everyday needs of the domestic workers, thereby extending its remit to go beyond labour rights and address the welfare and citizenship rights of its members.

The context of paid domestic work in India

Estimates for the number of domestic workers in India range from 4.75 million to 90 million (Chigateri et al., 2016). Paid domestic work is one of the largest sectors in female employment in urban areas in India today (Neetha, 2009; Government of India, 2011). As the majority of domestic workers in the country are women, this is a highly feminised occupation in India (Sengupta, 2007; Oco, 2010). There has been a steep increase in the number of women in paid domestic work in India over the decades, especially between 1999 and 2005 (Neetha, 2009; 2013). This sector of work is largely invisible and greatly devalued because of its association with reproductive labour and its performance by poor women (see, for

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2   The Domestic Workers' Welfare Board is a tripartite structure, which is comprised of representatives from the state, the employers and domestic worker groups. The Board was established in Maharashtra in 2008 but was dissolved in 2015 after the present Bharatiya Janata Party-led government came to power in India in 2014.

example, Gothoskar, 2013; Chigateri et al., 2016). This is manifested in long working hours, physical and verbal abuse, sexual harassment and dismally low wages (John, 2013).

Existing scholarship shows that power inequalities based on gender, class, caste and ethnicity characterise the relationship between domestic workers and their employers in India. This significantly exacerbates domestic workers' vulnerability and marginalisation, particularly within the employment relationship and, more generally, within Indian society at large (Gothoskar, 2013; John, 2013). It is estimated that almost one-third of domestic workers in India are of Scheduled Caste[3] background, and their vulnerability is increased by illiteracy and low levels of education (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011; Sengupta, 2007). Domestic work in urban areas in India is carried out primarily by migrants, i.e. women who have left their homes in rural areas and migrated to cities in search of employment, although some workers are also second-generation migrants who have lived in the cities since birth (Neetha, 2013; Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). What further accentuates the vulnerability of domestic workers in India today is that these workers lack access to statutory and legal protection measures in existing national labour laws. Due to this, they cannot claim work-related benefits such as maternity leave and social security, nor can they make demands for the right to decent working conditions, minimum wages, working hours, weekly holidays, paid leave and so on (John, 2013). Thus, the devaluation that is associated with domestic workers and domestic work in India is produced at the intersection of unequal categories related to class, caste, ethnicity, gender and non-recognition as workers.

New approaches in the organisation of precarious workers

The prevailing assumption in research literature is that precarious and informal workers are 'unorganisable' along the lines of traditional trade unions. Precarious and informal workers lack economic structural power

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3   Scheduled Castes or the former untouchable castes or depressed classes are the lowest castes in the Indian caste system, which have been provided with certain special privileges by the Indian State in recognition of their historically marginalised position within the Indian polity (Ghurye, 2016).

due to their dispersed and peripheral location in production chains, and associational power due to their occupational locations. This is not conducive to collective organisation because they work in private homes, for intermediary contractors or are self-employed (Chun & Agarwala, 2016). Trade unions were traditionally built around a non-precarious workforce, and this has shaped their structures and modes of organisation and mobilisation. Due to this, most mainstream unions have not been able to respond effectively to either 'informalisation from above' (the hollowing out of formal labour accompanied by declining state protection) or 'informalisation from below' (the expansion of self–employment and survivalist activities), and as a result most industrial unions have had very limited success in integrating and mobilising precarious workers (Theron, 2010, p. 87; Siegmann & Schiphorst, 2016).

With the emergence of precarious work as the norm, there has been an undermining of the base of traditional trade unionism, creating the challenge of how unions can build new strategies that are adapted to these new realities and forms of labour. In response to this challenge, there have been numerous attempts to revitalise the old labour movement in an endeavour to incorporate the growing ranks of informal and precarious workers (Bonner & Spooner, 2011; Milkman & Voss, 2004; Turner, 2005). This has led to the spawning of alternative labour mobilisation models which surpass the existing models of economistic business unionism to encompass a model of trade unionism in which 'improving wages and working conditions for workers are grounded in broader issues of economic, social justice and human rights for the working class as a whole' (Flores et al., 2011, p. 2). By organising much more broadly around issues that move beyond the workplace and by paying attention to how the intersecting structures of race, class and gender underpin precarious work, these new and inventive organisational repertoires have been able to respond constructively to precarity and begin the work of securing better terms and conditions for workers, not just as workers but also as citizens, family and community members, women and consumers (Webster, 2006). This form of alternative unionism, known as social unionism or social movement unionism, attempts to put the 'movement' back into the

labour movement by combining citizenship with labour rights (Lambert & Webster, 2001; Waterman, 1999; Moody, 1997; Ross, 2007, 2008).

The emergence of precarious workers' political, economic and social mobilisation through a new form of labour politics and collective action highlights the centrality of the abilities of precarious and informal workers to spearhead an inventive countermovement to address the challenges of traditional union strategies to organise this sector. These marginal workers are ushering in a new form of working–class movement, melding union and community interests to reinvigorate their demands for economic and social justice and citizenship (Meyer, 2016). The loci of these countermovements have been documented in multiple global locations. Chun (2009) has highlighted the manner in which vulnerable workers in the United States and South Korea use 'symbolic leverage' to enhance their power, by redirecting 'the site of struggle from narrowly defined workplace disputes to public contestations over values and meanings' (Chun, 2009, p. 173). Rina Agarwala's (2013) study of informal workers in India points to how vulnerable and precarious workers are organising as citizens and casting the state as being responsible for protecting their rights and entitlements rather than pressing for demands from their employers. Similarly, Rizzo's (2013) study of taxi drivers in Tanzania shows how workers are appealing to the state, not only to provide them with social protection but also as a force of structural power that they can use against their employers.

The complementarity between processes of framing and consciousness-building in social movements

Social movement scholars have written extensively about the concept of framing and frame alignment processes as being critical elements in the spread of mobilising ideas and sustaining long-term participation in social movements (Snow et al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988). Framing is thought of as 'meaning work,' which is an inherent part of an active and contentious process where social movement activists are focused on constructing and disseminating meaning or interpretive frames which

differ from and challenge existing frames or socio-political conditions (Benford & Snow 2000, p. 613; Ayres, 2004, p. 14). Framing thus has been explained as the 'conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action' (Mc Adam et al., 1996, p. 6). Snow and Benford (1998) state that social movements 'frame or assign meaning to and inter-pret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists' (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198).

Collective action frames emerge from the above-mentioned framing activity and can be understood as 'action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of social movement organisations' (Benford & Snow, 2000, pp. 613–614). They provide diagnostic attribution in terms of identifying the problem or situation in need of change and prognostic attribution which is con-cerned with resolution of the problem (Benford & Snow, 2000). In terms of diagnostic framing, movement activists can utilise an 'injustice frame' to highlight particular victims and amplify their victimisation, generate a shared understanding of the causes of the perceived injustice and focus responsibility or blame on the responsible agents (Gamson, 1992, p. 68). 'Prognostic framing', on the other hand, is useful to develop a proposed solution to the problem and strategies for carrying out this plan (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616). Finally, movement activists can use 'motivational framing' to develop a rationale for engaging in and sustaining collective action, which also includes the construction of appropriate 'vocabularies of motive' that help them to deploy specific rationales and justify and legitimate their collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617). 'Master frames', while similar to collective action frames, operate on a larger scale and provide 'broader interpretive paradigms for multiple movements, shaping the outlook of activists and movements' (Ayres, 2004, p. 14). Social movement activists develop movement-specific and sometimes master collective action frames, to define a situation or event as unjust and in need of change. The success of a social movement is dependent on how well-interconnected these three framing tasks are in relation to organisation and mobilisation of social movement participants.

The importance of framing processes notwithstanding, social movements cannot rely solely on this activity to ensure the success of movements. Rather, frames need to be combined with other strategic mobilising activities which focus on cultural and social meaning-making, participatory communication and processes of consciousness-raising among movement participants in order to promote individual and collective agency, ideological commitment and collective action. As Ryan and Gamson (2015) have pointed out, framing can only be effective when movement participants develop a critical understanding of the power inequalities and relations that contribute to their oppression and identify ways to challenge these power relations, without which subaltern groups cannot exercise 'the right and power to intervene in the social order and change it through political praxis' (Ryan & Gamson, 2015, p. 139). Thus, what is imperative is to complement framing activities with the promotion of critical consciousness and reflection, participatory dialogue and, ultimately, collective action (Ryan & Gamson, 2015). The process of consciousness-raising is particularly germane here as it affords access to physical and cognitive spaces, isolated from power, where movement participants can come together to discuss and express concerns, become aware of common problems and challenges, and 'begin to question the legitimacy of institutions that deny them the means of resolving these problems' (Hirsch, 2015, p. 106).

From workplace-based organisation to community-based organisation, and addressing the practical needs of union members

One of the most visible ways in which this union has incorporated elements of social movement unionism in its organisational repertoire in Mumbai has been to shift from traditional workplace-based organisation to community-based organisation. Paid domestic workers who are union members work on a part-time basis for multiple households during the day. The women in this study typically worked for three to four households where they were predominantly tasked with cleaning activities, while some did a combination of cleaning and cooking. These women are physically dispersed as they work for households located in different parts

of the city and, thus, do not have the opportunity to congregate together at any one specific location during the day. In order to effectively respond to this structural barrier related to workplace organisation which is inherent in all paid domestic work in India, the union began its first efforts to interact with these domestic workers in their homes in the urban slums and low-income communities in 2005. Typically, these meetings began late in the evening, after nine p.m. when the women had finished their domestic duties of cooking and taking care of their families. This strategy of shifting the locus of organisation from the workplace to the community was met with success, and more and more women began to register for union membership. Over the years, this modality of grassroots mobilisation became entrenched as a successful tried-and-tested method of organising domestic workers, and the union sought to establish primary contact with their members through community or 'area' meetings. These meetings, which are held once a month and coordinated by the leader of the area or community, are a critical interface for the building of a class-based solidarity, a working-class consciousness and a movement aimed towards securing social and political justice for these women, based on their identities both as workers and as legitimate rights-bearing citizens (Meyer, 2016). Through such grassroots mobilisation, the meetings have come to represent an arena where the union carries out the important cultural and political work of addressing both the economic and material, and the cultural and political subordination of their members, thereby fusing the two realms of economic and political mobilisation.

The union has strived to pay attention and respond to the strategic intersections between class, caste and gender that inform the multifaceted nature of subordination faced by its members. This strategy was conceptualised and promoted by the union soon after it was established, as a way of building credibility and trust with its members. Given that attaining labour rights for the workers was a long-term goal, it was considered important for the union to address the practical, everyday concerns of their members in order to demonstrate their relevance in the lives of the domestic workers and also to provide the 'breathing space' it needed to take on the longer-term goals (Kabeer et al., 2013b). In the first years after the union was established, the organisers found that the domestic

workers were grappling with a number of practical problems which were not related to their work as such. In the first phase of its work, the union began to address all these issues in a systematic manner and helped its members to obtain ration cards[4] and bring about reforms in the Public Distribution System (PDS)[5]. The union also helped members to obtain voter identification cards, it opened bank accounts for them, organised health camps for the women and their families, helped the children of the workers to enrol in schools and counselled the husbands of the women to create greater awareness with regard to equality and cooperation within the household. The National Secretary of the parent union explains this strategy in detail below:

> Because in [the] unorganised sector, they are working every day and you cannot organise them in the way you can formal sector employees… They have to be involved, it's a question of bread and butter for them. And they are not collected at one place….so you have to initiate work from that point of view. Looking at their personal problems and then intervening… earlier when forming their unions, it had to be done through their homes. For domestic workers, that is part of our strategy. This is what we are saying: those who are living in a cluster and going to an area to work… in that cluster, first of all, you have to build a connect [*sic*] with them, a rapport with them. And naturally, you have to talk to them to find out their problems. Whatever are their priority concerns, you have to deal with those…

The outcomes of these interventions were instrumental in providing tangible benefits to the domestic workers but, just as importantly, these interventions also helped the women to develop a shared identity as citizens with legitimate claim-making status, which profoundly transformed the way they saw themselves and their place in the world. Having state-sanctioned documents such as ration cards and voter identification cards,

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4   In India, ration cards (issued under India Public Distribution System or PDS) are used primarily by the poorer sections of society for purchasing subsidised foodstuffs (wheat and rice) and fuel (LPG and kerosene). These cards are an important subsistence tool for the poor, as they provide proof of identity and a connection with government databases (they are also used to establish identity, eligibility, and entitlement).

5   The Indian Public Distribution System (PDS) is a food security system established by the Government of India with the aim of distributing food (staple food grains such as rice, sugar and wheat) and non-food items (kerosene) to the poor population at subsidised rates and through a network of fair price shops called ration shops.

for the first time in their lives, enabled the women to assert their identity as citizens with rights to economic and social protection from the state (see also Barua & Haukanes, 2019). As Wahida and Lata elaborate below:

> See, I had nothing. Today if you go to get a ration card, you have to spend 4000-5000 rupees[6] (due to giving of bribes)… But in our union, this card can be made by just depositing 500 rupees. Had this union not been here, we wouldn't have got this status and would have never reached where we are standing right now. We got to know the power of the government just because of this union…

> We met them (the union organisers) and listened to them… we joined the organisation and within a year, we got ration card[s]. First, they made the trade union membership card, then voter registration card and then ration card. I am not literate and so I didn't have anything. I didn't even have a birth certificate. I was born at home – so from where would I get the birth certificate?… Now I have the voting card, trade union and ration card. They made me open a bank account too. Now if I have thousand rupees, I can keep [*it*] in the bank. Otherwise, for poor people like us … whatever we get, we eat and sit silent, where do we save? (*Translated from Hindi by the author*)

As well as ration cards, voter identification cards and trade union membership cards, the union helped to open bank accounts for its members. At the time the interviews were conducted for this article, almost 6,000 to 7,000 domestic workers had their own bank accounts. The union also held discussions with the women on the value of health and free medical camps, and dispensaries were organised for domestic workers and their families. Cancer detection camps were held and treatment and follow-up was provided to those who were found to have cancer, in collaboration with a local hospital in Mumbai.

Developing the identity of a worker: The cultural project of framing

The union has worked intensively and systematically to provide the collective framework and social conditions within which the domestic

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6   One USD is roughly equivalent to 77 Indian rupees.

workers have been able to undergo the journey from a 'servant' identity to a 'worker' identity and develop a model of organisation that foregrounds the worker identity in preference to any other. In order to do this, the union has framed the problems faced by the domestic workers in terms of a lack of labour and social citizenship rights. Developing an 'injustice frame' to define the situation and problems faced by their members helped to generate a shared understanding among the women of the causes of the injustices they experienced. By focusing on the state as the agent responsible for causing and reproducing the vulnerability of domestic workers, the union was able to attribute culpability to an external agent and also motivate its members to participate in collective action and protest against the state. The union asserted a solution to the problems faced by its members in the form of collective bargaining with the state, which was constructed as the primary object towards which claim-making should be directed. In interviews with the two senior organisers of the union, the issue of how domestic work is not legally recognised as work was a common refrain, and the importance of acknowledging domestic work as being equal to any other kind of work with concomitant labour rights and social protection was underlined:

> …there is no recognition of their work, they are not being recognised as a worker. They are not being given the status as a worker. This is the biggest problem in the places they work. I feel that if they are given recognition as a worker, then 50% of the union's work will be done. I feel there is a strong need to change this perspective.…When you say domestic work, work means work, then why don't you call that person a worker? What other definition can you give to it? You should define them as a worker.

The emphasis on developing a worker-based identity among its members and framing the demand to be recognised as workers with rights like every other worker has been at the core of the union's organising and mobilising activities. This process of identity building among domestic workers takes on an even greater importance in a context where many of the women themselves do not recognise the jobs they do as work but see them as a natural extension of their domestic and reproductive duties as wives, mothers and childminders within their own homes (Kabeer et al.,

2013b). This process of shared identity building as workers was observed to be an ongoing part of the union's activities which takes place in all its interactions with members, either in formal meetings or more informal conversations and exchanges between union organisers and the women. In addition to the 'area meetings' mentioned above, the second type of formal meeting is the 'leader's meeting', which is usually held at union headquarters. Both of these meetings are critical interfaces for dialogue and discussion between the union organisers and the members, and among the members themselves. A variety of issues are raised and discussed at these meetings: local problems and issues in the different areas where members live, such as the education of the children of domestic workers, problems with housing (particularly if any of the women are facing eviction from their homes), problems with the supply of subsidised grains and food stuffs to the women, local conflicts that may occur with other stakeholders in the slum areas and so on. Also problems that members face at their workplace, their relations with their employers, planning and developing of union programmes and activities, and the issue of renewal of important documents such as union membership cards, ration cards, voter registration cards are addressed. Apart from these issues of a more practical nature, substantial time and effort is devoted to promoting and building awareness and consciousness among the women with regard to their roles as workers and in asserting the importance and value of the work done by domestic workers for their employers. This discursive and cultural work undertaken by the union, framed in terms of dignity, respect, and rights, is deemed as being critical by the union organisers:

> We try and instil motivation in the women about the work they are doing. They should not feel that being domestic workers makes them worthless. We try to make them self-respecting women who believe in themselves. In any kind of work, if you do not get respect, you should not do it. The houses they work in, they don't get respect there – so the first thing we tell them is that the work you do is worthy of respect. They should not feel their employers are giving them charity… that is why we stress a lot on self-motivation and self-respect.

This senior organiser went on to describe how the goal of enhancing the empowerment of their members permeates all their work. Below, she gives

a concrete example of how the issue of the women not getting subsidised grains from the government shops was tackled by the women themselves as a result of the interventions by the union. Neighbourhood/area committees comprised of domestic workers from different areas were established to monitor the practices of the government ration shops:

> …we do work for their (the members) empowerment. For instance, we have training workshops in which the area leaders and other domestic workers participate… We asked them, 'What is your biggest problem?' and they said it was the ration shops. They have ration cards but do not get food grains against it; even the grains they get is so bad that even animals will not eat them. When they told us that this is their biggest issue, we put together a street play and told them that they had to perform the play in front of the ration shop. By doing this other people will become aware about your issue and you will get a chance to speak your mind. The fear that you have of how will you speak alone, will be taken care of on such a platform. You will see the motivation in you come to the surface… We did this campaign for a month. We continued doing this and, as a result, the effect was that they felt that this is my right, that there should be a complaint book. I go to the shop and the shopkeeper says there are no rations, then you ask for the complaint book in which you complain. Due to this, the women were full of motivation, as a result of which, for each shop, a committee of 5–6 women was formed.

This was further corroborated by another senior organiser in the union, who elaborates below on the impact such union activities have had on the promotion of the emotional repertoires of self-worth and confidence in the union members:

> …for example, those women that you saw there… None of them would even think or dream of, you know, sitting in a meeting like this, sitting in a chair, talking to everybody. They wouldn't even do that. Nothing like this happened to them before. Now if something happens… the women confront the ration shop owners in the shops.

The cultural and discursive framing of domestic work as important and critical work and the questioning of social and cultural beliefs which construct domestic work as less respectable or dignified than other types of

work is carried out by using the symbolism of the domestic workers being the main pivot on which the households of their employers and their families rest. The senior female union organiser who most often attends both the area and the leaders' meetings was often observed asserting the notion that domestic work is legitimate work which serves an extremely important function and role in the political economy of the country (see also Narayan & Chikarmane, 2013). Using the symbolism of the domestic workers being the backbones of their employers' households, this organiser would often assert that if the women did not undertake domestic and care duties in these households, their employers would not be able to hold down their jobs or maintain their families and, as such, their households would collapse (see also Barua & Haukanes, 2019). This signifying work was repeatedly performed by the union organisers and volunteers in all their interactions and meetings with the women, over a long period of time. The impact of this consciousness and capacity-building project resulted in the domestic workers being able to initiate a journey during which they came to see themselves in a new light, as self-determining subjects rather than objects of broader forces beyond their control (Selwyn, 2016).

Collective bargaining with the state and holding the state accountable for labour and reproductive/welfare rights

As seen above, this union departs from the traditional trade union model by organising and mobilising much more broadly around issues that move beyond the workplace and by paying attention to both the material and cultural inequalities faced by its members. In order to respond to the precarity and lack of social, citizenship and labour rights of the domestic workers, the union constructs the state in the role of the employer in that collective bargaining is done with the state and not the individual employers of the domestic workers. In doing this, the union significantly distinguishes itself from a traditional labour trade union. The reasons for targeting demands towards the Indian state were two-fold: firstly, due to the fact that the women work for multiple households, there is no scope for

collective bargaining with employers, as there is no single employer body in this context; and secondly, the state is the most influential institution which has the power and authority to enact and implement legal provisions to safeguard and protect the rights of its citizens and workers. In the context of paid domestic work in India, this assumes even greater significance given that domestic work is not formally regulated by the state. As a result, private employer households can effortlessly and with impunity escape accountability and responsibility towards their domestic workers and exploit their labour, as elaborated on by a union organiser below:

> As a way of organising them (the domestic workers), we very consciously said right in the beginning that this is [a] different kind of union. In fact, the idea of a union itself was totally new to them. So then we put forward this idea that [sic] let's ask for [a] pension from the state. They said, 'Where we are working, we are not even getting our salary; why will the state give us [a] pension?' They laughed… So we told them how socially important their work is and so on, and that the state will have to give it (the pension) …we talked to them, so they agreed. So at that point in time, we told them that you may have your issues with your employer and you do have, we know. Probably they don't pay you properly, they make you work and they don't pay you**…** All those issues will be there. But this union right now will not take up these issues.

In a similar vein, the second senior organiser states below the importance of confronting the state in order to ensure that the rights and entitlements of the domestic workers are safeguarded:

> …(this union is) very, very different. Like I said, this taking up of various issues of their (domestic workers') lives is something very new as compared to the others. Maybe in the old times, they did take up all such issues, I don't know… But slowly it has come around to their issues and mainly economic issues at the workplace. So this is an aspect but we do not take this up directly with the employers… So in this union, we are having a lot less conflict with the employers… Instead, many quarrels/conflicts are happening with the ration shopkeepers…it is happening with the officers. It is happening with the bureaucracy, with the police. So it's happening in this way. Now the conflict that we were having… we are demanding from the state that they look towards the situations of this group… there is conflict/argument with the state.

The foundational objective of the union was to organise domestic workers in Mumbai so that a critical mass could be formed with which to push for the rights and entitlements of these women as legitimate workers. This objective has been the most important one for the union and in the decade or so of its existence, they have used various strategies to achieve this goal. These mainly encompass peaceful protest by way of taking part in rallies and demonstrations, conducting strikes, confronting the state to force it to pay attention to the issues and problems of domestic workers, building visibility for the issue of domestic workers both from within the system and outside, and creating awareness about the realm of paid domestic work in society at large. These events are organised at times when the union knows that state presence is guaranteed, as a way of building visibility for their cause. However, the union has exercised tact and discretion when it comes to framing its demands to the state to avoid jeopardising the interests of the domestic workers, which has been an important priority for the union and has informed all its work and activities.

Rallies and processions have been held in Mumbai, other districts in Maharashtra and in Delhi over a range of different issues: the reformation of the Welfare Board, as it has more or less become defunct now in the state of Maharashtra; securing pension schemes; securing health insurance for domestic workers; protesting against inflation and price rises; reformation of the PDS; protesting against negative cultural representations of domestic work in the media and so on. At the time fieldwork for this study was carried out, the organisation had carried out in excess of 150 rallies and demonstrations. Awareness raising on the issue of domestic workers has been carried out through the medium of street plays in different areas and communities in the city. Visibility towards the concerns of domestic workers has also been created through one of the union organisers in her role as a member of the state's Domestic Workers' Welfare Board.

Both of the union organisers express that their relationship with the state is one of confrontation and conflict, as they 'fight' with the state and the agents of the state, such as the police and other local and street level bureaucrats in order to further the goals of the union. The female union

organiser narrated how as a member of the Domestic Workers' Welfare Board, she has been working tirelessly to influence the Board to remove the age limit that has been set for those domestic workers who are eligible to get a pension. The state has set the age limit at 59, but the union argues that there are scores of domestic workers who are above the age of 59 who are now too old and frail to work and are, in fact, most in need of a pension scheme:

> We have repeatedly said, 'Remove the limit as we are working with these women and know that women who are above 60 and 70 are still having to continue working. You are saying only women between 18–59 will be registered but where will the rest go, the ones who spent their entire lives working?' We say, 'Why did we fight all this while?' The one who fought with us for so many years and is now above 60, she is now not getting anything… This is injustice. Whenever there is a Welfare Board meeting, I pick up this topic and fight… many people make fun of me. But I feel, just remove that limit, and give something to them.

Another very important strategy that the union has adopted to raise the visibility of domestic workers and their issues is competing in the political elections of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation. Domestic worker leaders and the volunteers of the trade union (themselves former domestic workers) have competed in these elections twice. Although they lost on both occasions, the fact that they stood for election and were able to get some votes has contributed a great deal to the morale and energy of the workers' collective and helped to strengthen the visibility of paid domestic work in the public domain by raising awareness about domestic workers and their concerns in different areas and communities in the city.

Discussion

The above analysis shows that this union has succeeded in mobilising and organising a group of informal sector workers in Mumbai by embracing elements of social movement unionism in their organisational repertoire and model. By addressing both material and cultural inequalities

faced by its members, the union has been able to address the problems experienced by the women that arise at the intersection of stigmatised precarious work, gendered subordination and caste-based stigma. These strategies, while retaining the traditional trade union focus on bargaining with the state to regulate and secure the labour rights of workers, have been expanded to also address the practical needs of domestic workers.

According to Axel Honneth, when individuals encounter disrespect and lack of recognition in their personal and public lives, their psychological integrity is compromised and they experience 'moral injury' which leads to a lack of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (1997, pp. 22–27). This negatively affects a person's ability to identify, interpret and realise their needs and desires. Honneth (1997) argues that self-realisation and human agency depend on a person's psychological integrity, and one of the most important ways in which human agency can be developed and enhanced is through social relations of mutual recognition. In this sense, agency is relational and can be fostered by intersubjective relations that promote respect, dignity and solidarity within a group. A core part of the organisational work done by the union revolved around promoting the agency of its members and transforming their feelings of inferiority and devaluation to develop counter-discourses and oppositional sensibilities which had the potential of disrupting and unsettling the dominant relations of power and hierarchy within which the women were located.

It is not uncommon for marginalised groups to believe that they are powerless in changing the oppressive and unequal conditions under which they live and work, and that their voices and perspectives are irrelevant and inconsequential. Social movements can counteract this by providing the conceptual tools and affective ties and networks to enable their members to think critically and differently about their oppressive realities and to gain the awareness, control and ability to ultimately transform these realities (Prilleltensky, 1989, p. 800). Such strategies not only instil critical awareness of the shared understanding of individual problems and injustices faced, but very importantly also help to promote collective identity building and a sense of solidarity among members, which is a major incentive for collective action. While these identities may not come naturally to people, social movements can and often do play a critical role

in consciously creating these identities among members of their target constituencies (Whittier, 2015, p. 115). Without a focus on developing such types of agency and capacities among participants, framing particular issues or problems facing groups as unjust or unfair and offering solutions to counteract these problems will be of little value and have limited impact in achieving movement objectives and goals. However, when these two activities – framing and consciousness-building – are carried out in tandem within groups, the potential for transformation within the larger project of building an effective movement is significantly strengthened (Ryan & Gamson, 2015, p. 141).

As I have explained above, this process of conscientisation and collective identity building undertaken by the union was inextricably linked to strategies of discursive and cultural framing, more specifically diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing. Diagnostic framing, as mentioned earlier, describes the boundaries of a problem or form of injustice and generates a shared and mutual understanding among members of a social movement about what the problem/situation facing them is and why this situation has occurred. It also identifies the aggrieved parties or victims, as well as the actors or agents who are responsible for perpetrating the injustice. By diagnosing and framing the problems faced by the domestic workers as the denial and eschewal of labour and citizenship rights which are their rightful claim and constructing the state as being the primary object of antagonism responsible for not securing and protecting the rights of the workers, the union was able to mobilise the support and collaboration of its members for whom such a framing and interpretation of the causes for their marginalisation made profound sense and gave meaning, which in turn inspired and legitimated the activities and campaigns of the union (Benford & Snow, 2000). The union utilised the prognostic frame of non-violent protest and action against the state as a remedy to bring about positive change and improvement in the lives of the domestic workers. By offering a constructive solution, it was possible to achieve both 'consensus' and 'action' mobilisation (Klandermans, 1984, p. 615) among its members, fostering both agreement and action. Pervading all the activities and discursive framing work deployed by the union was the propagation of the belief that the injustices done to

domestic workers in India, both historically and at the current conjunc-
ture, are the result of an apathetic and culpable state which has denied
them their rightful entitlements, and that these injustices can only be set
right through coordinated oppositional and transformative action on the
part of the workers as an organised force and entity.

The framing work carried out by the union to address the injustices and
grievances faced by its members was simultaneously bolstered by build-
ing a collective worker identity and initiating the process of engendering
a 'worker' identity as opposed to a 'servant' identity among the women,
which helped in raising the status of and reducing the devaluation asso-
ciated with their work. The process of creating awareness among the
domestic workers with regard to their value as workers and the building
of a collective worker identity significantly helped to form the basis from
which to make claims on the state. Getting the trade union membership
card and the Domestic Workers' Welfare Board card enabled the women
to formally prove their identity to the state and access state benefits and
services. Greater awareness of their rights and entitlements as workers,
as well as intersubjective interactions and relations with the organisers of
the union and with each other and participation in union activities were
closely linked to the development of new emotional repertoires and sensi-
bilities in the women, characterised by feelings of greater self-confidence,
self-efficacy and personal courage (see also Barua &Haukanes, 2019). An
unintended consequence of these new emotional repertoires of courage
and confidence that the women came to possess was the reinforcement of
the ability of domestic workers to counteract dominant discourses and
practices deployed by their employers in the unequal domestic labour
arrangements within which they were situated (see Barua et al., 2016).

A key feature of the organisational model of the union, in which
it departs from a traditional trade union model, is the way in which
it directs its demands and protests towards the state rather than the
employers of the domestic workers and engages in collective bargaining
with the state and its agents. The characteristics of protest actions are
linked to their 'capacity to mobilize public opinion through unorthodox
forms of action and so put pressure on decision makers' (Della Porta &
Diani, 2020, p. 163). Research on social movement studies has established

that activities linked to protest politics such as petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, occupations and so on have become increasingly popular during recent decades and are 'on the rise as a channel of political expression and mobilization' (Norris, 2002, p. 221; see also Chapter 2 in this volume). This type of contentious action in the form of non-violent collective actions of resistance and protest is a strategy that this union is both familiar with and uses widely as a confrontational tactic, given that the union is closely affiliated with a much older and larger national union. The union has used such protest action successfully to achieve a wide range of goals relating to this issue: influencing policy makers and politicians and sensitising them to the urgency of addressing the problems of domestic workers; building public visibility and awareness of the cause of the workers and strengthening the collective identity of the workers; building potential allies among civil society groups and society at large; and disrupting and challenging established norms and institutionalised structures that perpetuate the unequal status and marginalisation of domestic workers.

In her seminal study of the organisation of informal workers in the beedi and construction industries in India, Agarwala (2013) has pointed out that new and alternative labour movements in contemporary India place the locus of struggle within the state and petition the state to provide a wide variety of social security and welfare provisions to decommodify the labour of informal sector workers. She argues that this type of informal labour politics is all the more striking in the context of a retreating Indian state post neoliberal reforms, which have, in their unfettered support for capital and unbridled economic growth, turned a blind eye to the undermining of protective labour mechanisms for Indian workers. In this context, Agarwala (2013) elucidates how informal workers from the industries mentioned above have been successful in crafting a new and innovative form of labour politics, by forcing the state to decommodify their labour through claiming their rights not as workers but as citizens. In a historical conjuncture where the state is trying to relinquish its role of protecting the labour rights of even formal sector workers, these informal workers are holding the state responsible for their welfare through the forging of a new social contract between themselves and the state and

demanding not only state recognition for their work but also state provisions for their reproductive needs.

The findings from my study resonate with the argument made by Agarwala (2013) in that this union has made attempts to petition the state for the decommodification of the labour of their members through inclusion in the state's Domestic Workers' Welfare Board. The boards were instrumental in providing a range of welfare benefits to domestic workers, such as medical assistance in case of accidents, financial assistance for the education of the children of domestic workers, medical expenses for treatment of ailments of workers or their dependants, maternity benefits, payment of funeral expenses to the next-of-kin on the death of a worker and so on (the Maharashtra Domestic Workers' Welfare Board Act, 2008). However, one aspect in which this union deviates fundamentally from the organisations in Agarwala's study is that this union focuses on both securing the labour rights and social and consumption rights of its members. This is a very important difference given that in the context of paid domestic workers in India, there is an urgent need to not only focus on their identities as citizens and poor women but to ensure that structural changes necessary to enshrine their rights as workers in the law are engendered. Without this, the material and cultural deprivation and devaluation of domestic workers will continue to be reproduced and reinscribed, both in domestic labour arrangements within the home and in the larger discourses and perceptions pertaining to domestic workers and domestic work in Indian society. Trade unions such as this one, which have been successful in constructively attending to the duality – both material and cultural – implicit in the struggles of paid domestic workers may offer a tentative but significant way forward in forging a new labour politics of redistribution and recognition for informal sector workers. We now know that trade unions can effectively address the needs of this sector of workers through the creative adaptation of the traditional model of unionising and thereby promote grassroots-based structural transformation and social justice for subaltern groups which have been hitherto overlooked by both the law and traditional labour movements.

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