Domestic Workers
Making Intersectionality

Self-organized groups of domestic workers, that is, trade unions, associations and networks composed and led by women employed in this sector, were key actors in many of the countries included in our study. They have played a critical role in the politicization of domestic work and in the struggle for domestic workers’ rights in recent decades, in particular between 2008 and 2018. They work towards enhancing the rights and the social and working conditions in the sector, through everyday actions and political interventions and by interacting with other actors in the field that either support or oppose their cause. In this chapter we focus on the domestic workers’ groups that were active during the years of our study, which we encountered during our fieldwork.¹

Domestic workers’ organizing can be seen as an example of a movement putting ‘intersectionality into action’. By this we mean, first of all, that this movement addresses and seeks to transform the interlocking systems of inequality that determine domestic workers’ subordinated position in society. Second, we mean that in order to bring about such a transformation it deploys a series of strategies that can be defined as intersectional politics. In so doing, this movement exercises its political agency according to a complex understanding of power relations based on the interplay of social categories such as gender, class, race and so on, according to each national context. This results in a new collective identity, which is based on – and highlights – the experience of multiple forms of marginalization experienced by domestic workers. It is on this basis that we present an analysis of domestic workers’ organizing through an intersectional lens and explore how different domestic workers’ organizations engage with intersectionality to shape their identities and political strategies.
We will demonstrate how the various manifestations of intersectionality that emerge in domestic workers’ organizing do so according to the specific characteristics of each national setting, as described in Chapter 2. These factors include the composition and regulation of the sector, and the local socioeconomic, cultural and political context. Through their efforts to politicize domestic work, organize other workers (most of them, women) and force distinct political actors and society at large to acknowledge the demands of domestic workers, the activists in these movements selectively emphasize the determinants of their social condition. That is, they attribute different meaning and political weight to gender, class, race and other factors. Through distinct elements of their activity, these movements address some forms of inequality and some intersections between social categories and social groups, while silencing or failing to address others. As a result, the meaning and political salience given to gender, race, class and other social categories varies not only across national contexts and in different domestic workers’ organizations but also within the same organization in relation to various aspects of its activity, and over time. This, in our view, speaks to the situated character of the categories around which social inequalities, as well as social struggles, are articulated in each context and case (Anthias, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2015).

In order to engage with these issues, we divide the analysis that follows into two parts. In the first, we explore the construction of a collective identity within domestic workers’ organizations. We look at the discourse produced by these groups and the way their members present themselves and their organizations, drawing primarily on a narrative analysis of interviews conducted with domestic worker activists. Where relevant, this analysis is complemented by ethnographic observations collected during local workshops and other events, and by documentary analysis (see Chapter 1). For the sake of space, in the first part of the chapter we provide examples from just three of the nine countries involved in our project: Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador. A comparison of narratives from each of these countries will demonstrate how diversity in each setting has had an impact on domestic workers’ processes of identity construction. While these three countries were similar in regard to the composition of and political tendencies within this sector (see Chapter 2), they nevertheless reveal important differences when it comes to distinct power relations rooted in colonial legacies, migratory phenomena, rural–urban relations, racism and other processes of social stratification that affect discrimination against domestic workers. In the second part of the chapter we explore the activities and demands elaborated by different groups, drawing primarily on a thematic analysis of interviews with every key category of interviewee, including but not limited to domestic
workers’ rights activists. In this section we also extend the analysis to include examples from other countries.

A new collective identity

When domestic workers organize themselves and create associations and trade unions on their own, they do so in response to the lack of rights and social recognition they experience in the labour market and in society at large. They thereby oppose the political marginalization they experience in institutional politics, civil society and single-axis social movements, which prioritize a single form of inequality (such as gender, class or racial inequality) as the primary focus of political action. This means that, at the point of reacting to this marginalization, domestic workers activate processes of political subjectification that generate a multiple-axis collective identity, being a form of political identity that integrates more than one category of difference.

In analysing these processes, we see domestic workers’ organizations as examples of self-organization by social groups located at the ‘neglected points of intersection between multiple structures of oppression’ (McCall, 2005: 1774). It is necessary for these groups to create a new collective identity in order to find their own voice, pursue their own interests and escape social and political invisibility. In doing so, domestic workers seem to be pursuing what Éléonore Lépinard (2014: 10) calls ‘intersectional recognition’, which is often sought by multiply marginalized subjects who start to organize around identities that they otherwise perceive as unrepresented in mainstream organizations. In other terms, to describe the process of identity formation that Black and Chicana feminist collectives underwent during the 1960s and 1970s in the US, Benita Roth (2004) speaks of an ‘organizing on one’s own’ ethos. According to Roth, this ethos is crucial to the founding of new organizations by subjects who identify with more than one social group, and for that reason cannot be included in a vast single-axis movement.

In a similar vein, the need for organizing on one’s own was a recurrent topic in our interviews with domestic worker organizers. Speaking of their relationships with feminist, workers’ or other organized groups, they pointed to a ‘secondary marginalisation’ (Cole, 2008: 446) in their experience in the political arena. This means they often denounce the invisibility of domestic workers’ needs in political projects that promise to support them as the target group of feminist initiatives, as discriminated workers and generally as vulnerable subjects in need of others’ help. Their situation resembles the case of women of colour in feminist and anti-racist movements in the US in the early 1990s, as examined by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1991). She showed
the ways in which women of colour were caught between two separate movements that purported to support them either as women or as people of colour, but which in fact obscured the specific forms of violence and intersectional oppression which they experienced as a result of belonging to both groups simultaneously. The result was a gap in representation in the political sphere that reflected and reinforced the marginalization they lived in the social sphere (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245).

Returning to our study, in Chapter 5 we will see that domestic worker activists often speak of their discomfort with feminist and women’s rights groups that advocate for supposedly universal principles of women’s emancipation, but which in practice are biased towards the interests of economically and racially privileged women. In fact, in the eyes of domestic workers, feminist recipes for women’s liberation often rest on the availability of cheap and exploited labour provided by female workers with a lower social status. A similar argument can be made to explain the scepticism of domestic workers vis-à-vis workers’ movements or anti-racist movements that concentrate solely on class or race issues, leaving domestic workers’ intersectional identities inadequately accounted for. In the view of many domestic workers, their struggles for equal labour rights cannot be subsumed under the ‘universal’ interests of the working class or migrants and racialized people. Likewise, they perceive that the interplay between gender and class works differently for them than for other workers (and women more generally), which often leads to diverging interests.

For all these reasons, we can see that in many cases these activists have set up autonomous organizations with their own identity – distinct from those of trade unions, anti-racist or feminist and women’s rights groups – with the specific purpose of addressing their own problems. Such an affirmation of autonomous political agency reminds us of analogous processes undergone by other multiply marginalized subjects who were behind a new wave of activism in the early days of intersectional analysis (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981; Combahee River Collective, 1982; Hancock, 2016; Collins and Bilge, 2020).

The process of self-organizing around new intersectional identities that has been described so far seems to be a common element across the domestic workers’ groups that we met in each of the nine countries in our study. However, our comparative analysis also reveals important differences between countries, especially in relation to the kinds of inequalities that become emphasized in the building of new collective identities as ‘organized domestic workers’. Different organizations may attribute distinct political salience to the social categories shaping domestic workers’ subordinated positions (such as race, gender, class or nationality). Importantly, they may also understand the relations between these categories either as separate elements that impact
on domestic workers or as mutually constructed forms of discrimination that intersect and reciprocally modify one another. In other words, when comparing domestic workers’ organizations, we may find distinct examples of the difference between what Ange-Marie Hancock (2007) calls ‘multiple’ and ‘intersectional’ approaches being illustrated ‘in action’. In the multiple view, the effects of social categories are cumulative but remain separate from one another, while from an intersectional perspective they merge with and modify each other. This distinction guides our understanding of the way in which social movements conceive the relationship between the categories which are most relevant in shaping their own political identity. With this perspective in mind, in the following pages we explore what happened in the context of our three Latin American cases.

*The legacy of slavery*

In Brazil we find an outstanding example of the construction of collective identity based on the intersectional articulation of gender, race and class. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Brazil has a strong and well-structured trade union movement of paid domestic workers which is highly articulated at both the local and the national levels. All the accounts collected in our fieldwork coincide in pointing out that the struggle for rights and a better livelihood, developed by domestic workers since the 1930s, has created a new political actor that has been described in previous research as a ‘black working-class women’s movement’ (Bernardino-Costa, 2014: 79). In fact, most of the leaders of this movement that we met during our fieldwork identified as Black women and they maintained relationships with Black feminism, as well as with the Black liberation and labour movements.

Over the decades, this movement has promoted more widespread awareness of the intersectional discrimination affecting paid domestic workers and, in particular, Black domestic workers. Unionized domestic workers have drawn attention to the interplay between racism, classism and sexism and highlighted the specific forms of oppression experienced by Black domestic workers. They point out not only that these women constitute a great proportion of employees in the sector (see Chapter 2), but that they are also subject to specific forms of exploitation, violence and misrepresentation. For instance, Creuza Maria de Oliveira, a prominent figure of the movement and secretary general of FENATRAD, describes domestic workers as follows:

*We domestic workers, we are a category made up of women, black women. [We are] women who support society and contribute to the economy although our work is not recognized – neither*
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as paid activity nor as unpaid domestic work at home … Even today we suffer from domestic violence, being assaulted by the employers. In this power relationship, it is the worker who follows orders, who is under the domain of the housekeeper. She still suffers sexual violence, moral harassment, the violence of not having her rights respected. (De Oliveira, 2017a)

In this interview, De Oliveira points out the hierarchical relationship with the (male and female) employers and the widespread experience of violence lived by domestic workers. She implicitly emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between domestic workers and women in general, as the lack of recognition given to both paid and unpaid domestic work is a particular burden for racialized and low-class women. As a seasoned activist, she explains in the same interview the difficult process of unionizing people in this labour category, a task made harder by the stratified composition of the sector in terms of gender, race and education level. Moreover, this process requires undertaking the difficult task of overcoming internalized prejudices against women’s participation in politics. She goes on to say:

Organising domestic workers is very difficult because we are mostly black women with low education … We [organisers] have been struggling to get close to these workers, who were taught that women do not do politics. That unionism is something for men, not for women. (De Oliveira, 2017b)

In the case of Brazil, it is worth mentioning that domestic worker activists often elaborated on the legacy of colonial slavery to define the specific forms of intersectional discrimination and racism experienced by Black domestic workers. In doing so, they provide us with a deeper understanding of the meaning of ‘race’ in the construction of their identity.

Lúcia Maria Xavier, president of the Black feminist non-profit organization Criola, an ally of domestic workers’ unions, explains:

‘Women employed in domestic service, Black domestic workers, are the counterpoint to everything that exists in society. When you look at these women, you have a clear sense of what racial inequality means. So when someone says that there is no racism [in Brazil], it is because they are not looking at domestic workers … Above all, this kind of work is done as it was done at the time of slavery: they look after the families, they take care of the families … That’s why it’s weird to me when someone says “I didn’t see racism there”.’ (Lúcia Xavier, Criola, Brazil)
The continuity between the figures of the Afro-descendant slave and the contemporary domestic worker is a recurrent topic in Brazilian public discourse on domestic work (Kofes, 2001; Ribeiro Corossacz, 2015: 117). The same parallels recur in the narratives we collected from domestic worker activists in their discourses around identity formation. Indeed, building on Xavier’s quote, the Brazilian activists can be said to have employed two kinds of rhetorical device. Firstly, they made an analogy between the exploitative working conditions and racism endemic to contemporary domestic service and those that existed under slavery (the idea that the work is carried out “as it was done at the time of slavery”) to emphasize the challenge involved in campaigning for labour rights. Secondly, they established a connection between their activity and the history of the anti-racist movement in their country. By inheriting this legacy, domestic workers’ organizations achieved a unique political role insofar as they were defending the rights of those who were “the counterpoint to everything that exists in society”. In other words, they successfully managed the thorny enterprise of inaugurating an original identity as an organization, while simultaneously invoking the historical genealogy of movements struggling against the oppression of women and Black people in Brazil.

Afro-descendant women in post-war society

In Colombia we found a distinctive intersectional articulation of race, gender and class in the ad hoc identity being built by UTRASD, the most visible domestic workers’ organization in the country at the time of our fieldwork, with around 200 members. The Colombian domestic workers’ movement is racially mixed, with organizations led and composed by both Black and mestiza workers. In this context, UTRASD represents an interesting case of an intersectional identity, which should not, however, be taken as representative of a broader national tendency. The organization was founded in Medellín in 2013 by a group of Afro-Colombian domestic workers, mainly internally displaced people who had been involved in an activist-research project on Afro-Colombian women’s conditions. The project gradually made them aware of their specific experiences of violence and discrimination inside and outside the workplace. This gave rise to a collective process of politicization, seeking a form of representation tailored to their specific experience as ‘black Colombian domestic workers’. These events are described by María Roa Borja, UTRASD president at the time of our fieldwork, in an interview held at the organization’s office:

‘This process brought positive results for us as domestic workers and, in particular, for Black women: women victims of armed
conflict, displaced women, female heads of households, abused women, raped women, women discriminated against. [All] women who, as domestic workers, have gone through all kind of things that this country cannot even imagine. And why are we in domestic work? We were not asked “what do you know? What is your [work] experience?” But colour, race, this marks me in a way that I have to be a domestic worker.’ (María Roa Borja, UTRASD, Colombia)

In María Roa Borja’s words, we hear how the identity of organized Colombian domestic workers stems from the acknowledgement of the fact that domestic workers live at the intersection of several social categories, simultaneously marked by gender, race, class, family status and regional origin. They are also especially vulnerable to violence, which was exercised against Black and rural women in particular in the context of the armed conflict that has torn the country apart since 1964. Indeed, the civil war has most negatively affected women from regions with predominantly Afro-Colombian populations. They form a large proportion of those who have been internally displaced and who have thus entered domestic work in order to make a living in cities such as Bogotá and Medellín (see Chapter 2). At the same time, her words relate to the criticism made by UTRASD of pervasive racist and sexist representations of Black women. She elaborates on how stereotypes of Black women determine their limited job opportunities and segregate Afro-Colombian women within the domestic work sector, limiting their possibility of social and labour mobility and overlooking individual characteristics and experiences.

Moreover, based on our reading of the grey literature on the union’s activity and in-depth interviews with its members, we believe that UTRASD promoted an intersectional discursive repertoire in which domestic work was addressed as a simultaneously gendered, class-based and racialized activity. The specific experiences of gendered racism and racialized economic exploitation among Afro-Colombian women employed as domestic workers is at the centre of UTRASD’s identity – a fact which explains the recurrent description of UTRASD as ‘the first ethnically based domestic workers’ union in the country’.  

A particular role was assigned to Afro-Colombian women internally displaced by the conflict, while indigenous, mestiza, or migrant women domestic workers seemed to be left out of UTRASD’s main identity discourse. Yet UTRASD presented itself as being open to all domestic workers, walking a tightrope between a concern on the one hand with Afro-Colombian identity, and on the other with the general interests of domestic workers:

‘UTRASD is an inclusive, not exclusionary, union. Even if its name says “Afro women”, there are also mestizo and indigenous
women in the union. We defined ourselves as Black women and so we began. When this union started, we were 28 Black women. That’s the reason for its name … [But] the advocacy is not only for Afro women, women from Antioquia or Chocó⁴ … We do this for the benefit of all women nationwide.’ (Maria Boa Roja, UTRASD, Colombia)

The UTRASD leaders’ discourse is based on inclusivity and the aspiration to be able to advocate for domestic workers’ plurality of interests. Their capacity to fight for the advancement of this entire social category because of racial differences, rather than in spite of them, is based on the assumption that Afro-Colombians’ perspectives can embrace those of all other vulnerable groups, since they are ‘the ones who suffer the most’. This is how one of the activists of UTRASD explains the idea, drawing on her direct experience:

‘Since I was a minor, I started to do domestic work. My first experience was before the age of 15 and I was subjected to abuse. This experience marked me … It gave me the strength to defend domestic work, because I have suffered so much … It doesn’t mean that in every job I was mistreated or exploited … but I had very tough experiences which marked me as a woman and as a domestic worker.’ (Anonymous interviewee, UTRASD, Colombia)

The identity formation promoted by UTRASD and primarily centred on Afro-descendant women needs to be understood within a wider political context in which the social integration of historically marginalized communities (especially Afro-Colombians) is supported on the basis of the 1991 Constitution. This includes advancing compensation policies for displaced people, mostly from Black minority communities, which have been implemented by the state since 2012 within the framework of the peace process. This process of identity formation thus pays special attention to the gendered impact of the war, both in terms of its negative effects on women as victims of violence and in terms of their potential role as peace builders in a post-conflict society.

**Putting race aside**

A comparative look at Ecuador reveals yet another configuration of the collective identity being elaborated by organized domestic workers. Here we see that the intersectional dimension involves only the categories of gender and class, race entering the picture as a secondary issue, which corresponds
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to the multiple approach described by Hancock (2007). This means that race-based discrimination is recognized as an additional burden on domestic workers (especially for indigenous and Afro-descendant communities), but not as an intrinsic feature of the social organization of domestic work or of the collective identity being promoted by the movement. This interpretation applies in particular to ATRH, the most visible and longest-running domestic workers’ organization in the country, founded in 1998 in Guayaquil (Moya, 2015; Masi de Casanova, 2019) and counting around 250 members at the time of our fieldwork.

In the interviews and at the events we attended during our fieldwork, we noticed that ATRH leaders did not define themselves in racial terms. In their view, the category of the ‘Ecuadorian organized domestic worker’ is shaped by the interplay between two main axes of inequality: gender and class. Neither race nor other categories of difference, such as age or migration status, despite occasional inclusion in some statements, were consistently referred to as factors in their subjugation or made into central features of group identity. For instance, Lourdes Albán, an active participant of ATRH, describes the composition of the association and, more broadly, the condition of domestic workers as follows:

‘We are from low social classes, whether Black, White, indigenous, mestiza or whatever … We are people who decided to work in a household out of different circumstances, some of us did not have any other opportunity … It is a hard job, it is not recognized, rights are always violated. Here we can see the patriarchal system … just because you are a woman, you must be related to reproduction … I would say that it is largely a job performed by low-class women.’ (Lourdes Albán, ATRH, Ecuador)

For Lourdes Albán, as for other ATRH leaders, domestic workers experience a specific form of oppression rooted in the gendered construction of both paid and unpaid domestic work, as well as in the gendered and classist construction of paid domestic work as a job for women from lower social classes. A racialized component (“whether Black, White, indigenous, mestiza or whatever”) is present, but underplayed. Later on in the same interview, Albán is asked to elaborate on how racist discrimination intersects with other forms of oppression in the lives of domestic workers. She says:

‘For example, mestiza women are less mistreated, it has been seen, they have fewer problems than Black and indigenous women – far fewer … Our comrades told us of their experiences, from which we know … that “for being indigenous, we are called dirty
I do not mean that mestiza women aren’t discriminated against, but discrimination is stronger against these other comrades.

(Lourdes Albán, ATRH, Ecuador)

On the same topic, the president of ATRH, Maximina Salazar Peñafiel, says:

‘On the issue of racism, those who suffer most from discrimination in paid domestic work are the comrades of Esmeralda, the Afros ... And the comrades who are indigenous, too ... Somehow it affects us, because you should put yourself in the other’s shoes.’

(Maximina Salazar Peñafiel, ATRH, Ecuador)

In these excerpts, both Salazar Peñafiel and Albán recognize the relative privilege they enjoy as mestizas, in comparison to domestic workers from Black and indigenous groups. They also acknowledge the higher risk of exploitation and abusive behaviour to which racialized workers are exposed. However, they seem to think that the interests and needs of these specific groups of domestic workers can be incorporated into the general struggle for the advancement of domestic workers’ rights. In fact, ATRH claims to represent the interests of all organized domestic workers, no matter which sector of society they belong to. Thus, in comparison to the Colombian and Brazilian organizations analysed here, ATRH arguably promotes a new, inclusive collective identity by not emphasizing historical legacies (as in Brazil), or the epistemic privilege of Black perspectives (as in Colombia). Instead, they promote the intertwining of class and gender over and above other social differences, to address and mobilize all domestic workers.

Overall, the analysis presented so far demonstrates the fact that, rather than being a well-defined social identity that exists prior to mobilization, the category of domestic worker emerges as an outcome of the organizing processes under consideration in these pages. Indeed, although to some extent related to the demographic composition of the sector according to each local and national context, the collective identity being promoted by domestic workers’ groups does not automatically reflect this. Rather, it takes shape through a creative process of politicization, in which the intersecting systems of oppression affecting domestic workers in each local context are identified and named in distinctive ways by activists implicated in these struggles.

Activities and political demands

In this section we explore some of the activities and political demands put forward by the domestic workers’ groups that we encountered in our
fieldwork. We show how these groups formulate demands and propose actions that simultaneously address distinct systems of power relations, thus reflecting their intersectional approach to collective identity, as explained in the previous section. Their activities and demands involve multiple domains of intervention (legal, cultural, social and political) and engage domestic workers from different backgrounds. This is accomplished not by flattening differences among them but, rather, by emphasizing wider and more inclusive claims or actions that can easily be embedded into each particular reality.

In order to show how this takes place, we focus on three types of activity: (1) sensitization or awareness raising in society in general; (2) interventions at the level of language and the cultural representation of domestic work; and (3) empowerment and training among members. As we will illustrate, such activities are based on the concept of ‘domestic work as work’ and range from the fields of labour law and institutional politics to the media, public discourse and the spheres of everyday life. In fact, domestic workers’ groups have taken steps beyond the struggles for labour, economic and social rights and good working conditions normally promoted by organized workers and trade unions, and have tried to get to the root of their situation by pursuing equality, empowerment and recognition beyond rights.

Domestic workers’ struggles draw together what Nancy Fraser (2005) calls demands for ‘recognition’, ‘redistribution’ and ‘participation’. By a ‘politics of recognition’, Fraser means demands for acknowledgement as equal, legitimate and valued members of society. By a ‘politics of redistribution’, she means demands for equal access to economic and material resources allocated to different members of society. Finally, by demands for ‘participation’, she refers to the vindication of equal access to a political voice and the capacity to influence public decisions that affect people’s lives. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2020) point out, it is difficult to separate these different aspects of struggles for social justice in political projects led by multiply marginalized groups:

There is a vast literature documenting how disenfranchised groups tackle the issue of social justice on both fronts and view cultural empowerment (race, gender, sexuality) and economic redistribution (class) as inseparable. Out of necessity, women of colour integrated their claims for equality, recognition, and redistribution. Separating them was practically or analytically impossible when racism and sexism always structured the specific form of class exploitation that they face. (Collins and Bilge, 2020: 128)

Nira Yuval-Davis further emphasizes the specificity of demands made by multiply marginalized groups when arguing that ‘the politics of
Intersectionality can encompass and transcend both the ‘politics of recognition’ and the ‘politics of redistribution’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 155–6). Along the same lines, in this section we suggest that domestic workers’ groups are able to pursue a specific kind of intersectional politics capable of transcending the dichotomy between recognition and redistribution. This may be done by addressing the combination of legal and institutional, as well as socioeconomic and cultural, fields simultaneously.

**Equality beyond rights**

The demand that domestic labour be recognized as a decent form of work, deserving equal labour rights, was central to all the domestic workers’ movements that we met during our fieldwork. It has also been extensively described in the literature, in relation to several movements active within their countries and at the international level. For instance, Bridget Anderson (2010) describes the importance of this demand in relation to the migrant domestic workers’ organization Waling Waling in the UK:

> A key feature of organizing and campaigning was Waling Waling’s demand to be recognized as workers. This assertion, that they were workers, worked on several levels. First, it asserted the dignity and value of their work, for themselves, employers and the wider public. They were not ‘helping’ but contributing socially and economically to households and wider society; they were not ‘girls’ but women (and men) who were often sustaining extended families back home. It also asserted their legitimacy as public actors, their right to be heard and to be treated with respect, and it was accompanied by the demand that this labour be recognized as a route to formalized citizenship. (Anderson, 2010: 64–5)

As we saw in Chapter 3, such a demand is also central to the kind of activity and language developed by international organizations involved in the global governance of domestic work, above all the ILO. As such, it lies at the core of C189 as well as of mobilizations that took place in each of these nine countries in relation to C189’s ratification, and to other legal reforms over the last decade.

Nevertheless, the focus on campaigning for legal reforms should not obscure other forms of action, in particular the concurrent engagement in cultural battles to improve the social status of domestic workers in society. Indeed, while organized domestic workers were fighting their battles in the legal field, they were also putting forward awareness-raising campaigns and engaging in outreach work.
For example, ATRH representatives in Ecuador designed an awareness-raising campaign related to domestic work in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour. They also gained public visibility following meetings with Rafael Correa in the presidential palace in 2015 and they were able to take advantage of such visibility to spread their message.

In Taiwan, one of the first initiatives in which the National Home-Based Workers’ Union was involved was a mock ‘migrants’ referendum’ launched in 15 locations across the country during the last two months of 2017. This was the first organization of migrant caregivers in the country, founded in 2016–17. The migrants’ referendum initiative was organized by TTWA, an organization promoting the rights of all migrants in the country and which had been increasingly vocal on issues of care. The ‘referendum’ included three questions: whether migrant caregivers should be protected under the Labor Standards Act, whether foreign workers should be able to freely change employers and whether the government should abolish the private employment brokerage system and replace it with a nation-to-nation mechanism. This initiative enjoyed wide resonance and attracted a lot of media attention by using an alternative, tongue-in-cheek method to open space in the public debate for the serious issue of the denial of labour and political rights for migrants.

Another example comes from Spain, where the topic of domestic workers’ rights was brought to wider public attention in a 2016 speech given at a TEDx event by Rafaela Pimentel Lara, of the domestic workers’ grassroots collective Territorio Doméstico. This group was created in 2006 and is composed of around 30 to 50 domestic workers, most of them of Latin American origin, whose repertoire of action includes public performances and the use of irony, art and theatre. In her interview, Rafaela Pimentel Lara elaborated on how forms of communication like this may help to reach people and sensitize public opinion on a ‘tough’ topic:

‘So we said, this must be made visible, turning it around, making it entertaining, and that we also may have fun, since it is already tough enough. Thus in Territorio Doméstico we started to bring it up, with theatre sketches, with our “catwalks” [pasarelas], our radio programmes … and the songs, to change the lyrics of traditional songs and say what we were living, not having papers, the domestic work, the care work, all that was happening to us as women, for being Black, migrant women, poor women … This was around 2008, 2010, our first public performance. We always opted for performances because everyone takes part and is visible, it makes things lighter, and we do it in a very powerful way, people are impressed … We did cabarets, world dances,'
Lastly, in Colombia, UTRASD was involved in the social communication activities promoted by Andrea Londoño, from the non-profit organization Bien Humano Foundation (one of the union’s main allies), within the framework of an awareness-raising campaign related to domestic workers’ labour and broader human rights. Activists from UTRASD took part in short videos posted on their specially dedicated websites and social media platforms, illustrating domestic workers’ daily lives and working conditions. The core message behind these interventions, aimed at improving domestic workers’ representation, is described here by Claribed Palacios García, one of the leaders of the group:

‘God, we have to raise the alarm to the government, to the state! [We have to say] that we are here – domestic workers! – that we also exist and that we are also Colombians … Our message? [Domestic] workers, give value to your work and do not wait for others to do so. We do it right, but we do it at the right price too. The point is: I do my job well and I demand decent treatment. Because domestic work is not a favour: domestic work – as Convention 189 states – is work.’ (Claribed Palacios García, UTRASD, Colombia)

Palacio García’s words evidence the way in which demands for social inclusion are being conveyed through the imperative to recognize ‘domestic work as work’, having the same value as any other job and, therefore, deserving of the same rights. Such a quest for equality is thus to be understood here not only in legal terms, but also at the level of social, economic and cultural life.

From the point of view of organized domestic workers, the idea that ‘domestic work is work’ guides their desired social transformation, casting off a rhetoric of obedience and dependency in which the best that workers can hope for is to receive favours as a reward for being at the service of a benevolent wealthy household (Marchetti, 2016a). This resonates with the spirit of C189, which Palacios García invokes to reinforce her views. From the point of view of organized domestic workers, the ideal of ‘decent work’ promoted by the ILO naturally means labour rights, but also human dignity, social recognition and the possibility of enjoying fair living conditions. For this reason, while the focus on labour rights may rightly be seen as a cornerstone of domestic workers’ movements, it does not fully represent their struggle. Rather, domestic workers seem to define their struggle as
something that goes beyond legal rights, as Rafaela Pimentel Lara explained in her interview:

‘We make claims in which we also connect migrations, feminism, not just domestic work. On the issue of rights, we demand them, but we are not focusing just on the issue of rights, otherwise we do not dig into the history of the problem. We believe that this is not just a matter of rights; here you have to dismantle a lot of stories, a lot of stuff, you have to go in depth into the matter and this cannot be achieved with rights only … So my struggle is not just about rights, I go beyond the right of the domestic worker because I want to go to the root of this situation.’ (Rafaela Pimentel Lara, Territorio Doméstico, Spain)

In conclusion, domestic workers’ organizations that promote the motto ‘domestic work is work’ are demanding significant transformations to the national legal framework, changes to labour laws in particular, but also radical socioeconomic changes capable of improving the conditions of domestic workers more generally. This would mean breaking away from the tendency to think of domestic work as an activity to be undertaken by people at the lowest strata of society, that is, those deemed inferior due to their intersecting gender, race and class positions and who lack access to material resources and social respectability. Finally, the demand for domestic work as decent work also singles out the reassessment of domestic work as a legitimate object of public intervention, thus pushing for its increased visibility in public policy and within the political agenda.

**Naming domestic work**

The cultural politics carried out by these groups also takes shape through interventions in public discourse at the level of language use. Indeed, most activists and organizations engage in debates over the choice of name when addressing domestic workers (and their employers). The leaders of ATRH in Ecuador, for instance, seem to be particularly keen on language issues. They often express their preference for the term trabajadora remunerada del hogar (paid household worker), instead of other common local expressions such as doméstica or empleada doméstica (literally, ‘female domestic’ or domestic employee) that they perceive as derogatory. This preference guided the organization’s choice of its own name, as well as specific proposals made during the discussion on the reform of the labour code in 2015–16. As their president explains:
'The idea to build the Asociación de Trabajadoras Remuneradas del Hogar was with the aim of defending the labour rights of the so-called *empleadas domésticas*. I mean, this term is quite discriminatory: since then, we demand that the rights of the *trabajadoras del hogar* be respected … For instance, in the creation of the new Labour Code, we already have a proposal … The current code speaks of “domestic service” … We believe that if the term is written like that, “domestic service”, we are the object of discrimination, like servants, like servitude … And all these kinds of names or nicknames that we were given at some point … Well, thinking back a little, we do not feel at ease with this term, *empleadas domésticas* … For this reason, we are *trabajadoras remuneradas del hogar*.‘ (Maximina Salazar Peñafiel, ATRH and SINUTRHE, Ecuador)

Such a militant, critical process of choosing the right name for this new identity reflects a collective effort to resignify domestic work. As such, the name has broad cultural implications, related to the reframing of domestic work as work, and far-reaching consequences for the relationships between employers and workers, as well as for the latter’s sense of self.

Language disputes are important in Brazil and Colombia, too, where we often observed a critical rejection of the terms *patrão/patroa* and *patrón/patrona*, respectively, to identify employers, due to the sense of authority and consequent subordination they convey. At the same time, the activists in these contexts mostly made use of the terms *trabalhadoras domésticas* and *trabajadoras domésticas* in their accounts. These are preferred to other common terms such as *empregada doméstica* (domestic employee) in Brazil, and *muchacha* (girl), *empleada de servicio* (servant employee) or even *mi empleada* (literally, ‘my employee’) in Colombia.

In Spain, organized domestic workers agree on refusing colloquial phrases referring to helpers, such as *la chica que me ayuda en casa* (meaning ‘the girl who helps at home’), and terms perceived as derogatory such as *chacha* (an abbreviation of *muchacha*, ‘girl’). Moreover, most organizations prefer the terms *trabajadoras de hogar* or *empleadas de hogar* and reject the adjective *doméstico/a*, as in terms such as *empleada doméstica*, *servicio doméstico* and the like. The aforementioned group Territorio Doméstico is a partial exception, since it chose to use the term ‘domestic’ in order to invert its meaning and turn it into a source of pride and terrain of resistance.

In the Philippines, the question of language has also been of central importance for domestic workers’ organizations, but dealing with this issue has led to different results. Organized domestic workers oppose the
many traditional terms used there to describe this social category, loaded as they are with derogatory, infantilizing, colonial and essentializing ethnic stereotypes. In fact, some of these terms refer to women from the Visayan region, such as *Inday* (‘woman’ in Visayan dialect) and *Bisaya* (woman from the Visayan region). Others use the language of former colonizers, such as *muchacha*, while others refer to somebody who helps out, such as *katulong* (helper). To emphasize their distance from these terms, organized domestic workers coined the word *kasambahay*, meaning ‘companion of the house’ in English. Interestingly, the term was introduced in the early 2000s by the domestic workers’ organization most active at that time, SUMAPI, supported by the anti-trafficking NGO Visayan Forum. They preferred to introduce a new word rather than adopt the English phrase ‘domestic worker’ or similar terms. The idea was to avoid emphasizing the conflict with employers, while nevertheless insisting on employers’ responsibility and a sense that change can be achieved only with their cooperation. Notably, *kasambahay* indicates a close relationship to the family, while implicitly clarifying that it signifies something other than being part of a family. The choice of this word has been debated and has been a cause of contention among domestic workers’ organizations and their allies. Indeed, some of our participants were ambivalent about this choice, because while most people do not mind the fact that it implies the idea that the domestic worker is considered close to the family – this is seen as a good thing – they regret that it does not connote a relationship of employment. For instance, Ellene Sana, from the Center for Migrant Advocacy, reflects on this in the following extract:

‘In fact, in the Philippine context ... most of the domestic workers, particularly those under the age of 15 to 17, are usually the relatives of their employers. So sometimes the employers would think that they are actually doing these people a favour. “I allow them to work or help out with house chores but in return I send them to school, etc.” This has become the culture here, for example the word coined for domestic workers is “kasambahay”, meaning you are somebody who is a *kasama* (somebody who is considered part of the family) in the house; *kasama* doesn’t connote work and it doesn’t connote a relationship, like the employee–employer relationship. Maybe some would assert that in Filipino culture, that’s the way we treat them – they are not others, we treated them like relatives. So during mealtimes everybody expects to sit around the table. But this is not the case. We expect them, the domestic worker, to do the housework first, then later on to find time to have their meals. Or like
when the family is going on vacation, they [the workers] are not automatically included. This is where the risk is – when you treat somebody working for you as a non-worker.’ (Ellene Sana, Center for Migrant Advocacy, Philippines)

The linguistic innovation promoted by the Filipino activists is reminiscent of a similar process that took place in Italy in the 1960s, with the invention of the term collaboratrice familiare, abbreviated colf, which translates as ‘family collaborator’ (originally only in the feminine), or else ‘woman (or man) who collaborates with the family’. The term was introduced in 1961 by domestic worker activists coming from a Catholic tradition of organizing (ACLI), who needed a new term to substitute the words most clearly linked to a tradition of servile relationships, such as la donna (the woman), la domestica (literally, ‘female domestic’) or la serva (the female servant), then in common use. To do so they did not draw on the concept of employment or the identity of the worker, but instead chose a term that puts the family at the centre. At the same time, the term also describes a specific role vis-à-vis the family and marks a distance from it. As someone who works together with the family, the colf is not exactly part of the family. In this form, the term entered into daily and institutional language.

We argue that what is at stake in these language disputes is something more than the visibility and recognition of a new category of workers. Although this is a first and very important step, the work around the issue of language entails a radical challenge to the entire socio-cultural construction of domestic work. It also confronts the system of intersecting power relations in which it is immersed, and which it contributes to reproducing. Vindicating the use of dignified language while refusing the demeaning vernacular terms used to name domestic workers is a way of seeking legitimacy for the new identity being created by the movement both within society at large and in the eyes of domestic workers themselves. Through the use of innovative words, these movements question the internalized representations of domestic workers as performing ‘dirty’ work, often associated with social stigma and shame. These internalized ideas tends to constitute an additional barrier to domestic workers’ organizing, as Geeta Menon from the Domestic Workers Rights Union observed in the case of India:

One of the major hindrances to organising was that many women had not told their families that they were working as domestic workers. There is a shame, a stigma in working as domestic workers. This stigma comes from their caste locations as well as the notion that they go to houses where there are ‘other’ men. It also comes from a societal notion of housework, which is largely
devalued, gendered, and called women’s work. This further affects perceptions of domestic workers. (Menon, 2017: 115)

From this viewpoint, the affirmations that ‘we are domestic workers’ and ‘I am a domestic worker’ advocated by these activists (under different guises in local languages) appear in a new light. Firstly, by embracing these statements, participants in domestic workers’ groups reject the subordinate social position they hold in societies in which home-based care and domestic work is considered a demeaning activity, performed by low-status people. Secondly, by affirming these statements they may also be seen to be opting out of the ambivalent positions of identity that they occupy within their employer families, that is, those of intimate, yet subordinate, subjects. As has been extensively described in the literature, domestic workers usually hold this ambivalent position in the relational and physical space of employers’ households. This is not only because they are expected to serve the family’s needs (like other members of the family, due to their gender and age) but also due to class and racial hierarchies, and the differential immigration status that often defines their relationship with their employers (Parreñas, 2001; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Brites, 2014; Marchetti, 2014). Their work and their relationships within these households are portrayed as a sort of extension of ascribed roles and obligations related to social reproduction (caring, cooking, feeding, cleaning, serving and so on) that are especially attributed to gendered, minoritized, racialized subjects. At the same time, the deployment of what is perceived (often on both sides) as care and love may foster the creation of intimacy with employers and care receivers. Nevertheless, such intimate bonds often do not erase but, rather, reaffirm the hierarchies between employers and employees, leading to what Valeria Ribeiro Corossazc (2015: 107, 119) has called ‘inequality within intimacy’. Through their collective claims over language, organized domestic workers refuse these ascribed attributions of social roles and to some extent dissociate themselves from the idea that they are part of their employers’ families, something they often formerly identified with prior to the process of subjectification we have described. On these novel grounds, they seek more egalitarian relationships with their employers.

As we have seen in the examples in this section, this may be done in different ways. In some of the countries in our study the focus was on women’s identity as workers: not simply helpers, nor part of the employers’ family. By claiming to be ‘domestic workers’, local activists wanted to replace these representations with a new image, one of workers performing a valuable job and, therefore, as bearers of rights. In other contexts, the idea of being ‘part of the family’ was not entirely discarded, while other traditional representations, such as that of a ‘helper’ deserving some ‘favours’ in return
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for their efforts, were refused. Indeed, in the cases of the Philippines and Italy, through the terms kasambahay and colf, domestic workers’ groups have tried to renegotiate their relationships with the families who employ them under new terms, implicitly recognizing the special character of such an employment relationship (that is, based on care, mutual trust and so on). While they refuse to be seen as inferior members of society and ask to be respected, they nevertheless focus on the ties that bind employers and kasambahays or colf, viewing them as a potentially convenient framework. This approach permits both individual and collective bargaining and the shared assumption of responsibility on the part of employers in what is thereby reframed as a collective struggle for the improvement of the domestic sector.

Empowering domestic workers

Finally, domestic workers’ organizations conduct a number of activities aimed at supporting their members – and other domestic workers – in managing their labour relations as well as their daily lives more broadly. While limited by the financial and material resources they are able to draw upon at different times, to some extent all of these organizations provide legal support and advice for contracts, wages, contributions and access to the social security system, and other related paperwork. These groups often also function as help centres, promoting the establishment of solidarity, friendship and relations of mutual support among their members and their social networks. Examples from our fieldwork demonstrate the resourcefulness of domestic workers’ groups in carrying out these activities. Of interest in this regard was the launch of the mobile application Laudelina by the Brazilian feminist organization Themis, in collaboration with the domestic workers’ national federation in 2018. This app helps domestic workers to calculate salaries and severance pay, to get in contact with other workers, unions and agencies and to become more informed about their labour rights. Significantly, it takes its name from Laudelina de Campos Melo (1904–91), the Afro-Brazilian activist widely considered the first domestic worker unionist in the country (Pinto, 2015). In Spain, several domestic workers’ associations were offering support services to people employed in the sector at the time of our fieldwork, while others had done so in the past. Among them, two examples include the advisory service run by ATH-ELE in Bilbao and the 24-hour helpline offering legal aid run by SEDOAC in Madrid. As we mentioned in Chapter 2, the former is one of the longest-running associations of domestic workers in the country, founded at the end of the 1980s in the Basque Country, while the latter was founded in the 2010s and attracts considerable numbers of workers of migrant origin.
The improvement of the economic conditions of people working in the sector is another significant terrain of intervention. In the Philippines, the domestic workers’ organization UNITED created savings cooperatives to prevent indebtedness and foster mutual aid and solidarity among domestic workers. UNITED is an organization created in 2012 with the support of labour organizations Sentro and LEARN, which in 2017 counted approximately two thousand members and 22 chapters across the country. Notably, such a focus on economic empowerment emerged from an activist study carried out by UNITED and LEARN, involving domestic workers from lower sectors of society. This is how the president of UNITED, Himaya Montenegro, and Verna Dinah Viajar from LEARN explained the process:

A few domestic worker organizers, including Himaya [Montenegro], went to gated neighbourhoods, urban poor areas, and schools (where domestic workers often wait for their young charges) with LEARN researchers to conduct one-on-one interviews with domestic workers. These interviews helped domestic workers network and had a snowball effect, with domestic workers referring their friends and acquaintances to each other and to LEARN. We then did house-to-house visits to create personal relationships with and among domestic workers. After these conversations and discussions with domestic workers, we decided that addressing the economic concerns of domestic workers – primarily due to low wages – was a priority, so we formed a community savings cooperative for domestic workers. The purpose was to help domestic workers avoid debt bondage and to provide them with a mutual aid programme for solidarity and support. Besides this mutual-help initiative, we also offered regular discussions and short seminars on domestic workers’ rights and social protection. (Montenegro and Viajar, 2017: 122–3)

Another example of how self-organizing may facilitate empowerment is provided by the creation of workers’ cooperatives. In Spain, for instance, the domestic and care workers’ cooperative Senda De Cuidados was founded in 2015 in Madrid, thanks to the joint efforts of the members of Territorio Doméstico and the social work cooperative Abierto Hasta el Amanecer. The latter provides professional and capacity-building training aimed at improving both workers’ skills in care work, entrepreneurship and management, and their knowledge of broader topics such as the social economy, feminist approaches to the care economy and women’s labour, self-esteem and gender stereotypes. Workers’ cooperatives are seen in this context as a way to improve control over working conditions through a collective learning process and
a sharing of good practices. As such, they appear to be an effective way to counter both the diffuse nature of this workforce, fragmented as it is due to individual employment relationships within private households, and new forms of exploitation emerging in the market (that is, agencies, including online platforms and the sharing economy).

These examples also demonstrate that many organizations invest a great deal of effort in training activities of various kinds. Some organizations provide professional training, schooling and literacy programmes. Many of them also provide education on well-being and health, gender-based violence, reproductive rights, family care, women’s rights and migrants’ rights. Domestic workers themselves describe the importance of this aspect of their organizations’ activities. In the words of Claribed Palacio García from Colombia:

‘Among our internal activities, we provide gender-equality training. We also provide training in labour rights, the rights of ethnic minorities … We also have sexual and reproductive education workshops, which are very important because, as women, all these things are going to help us. Because we cannot go on with this mindset that Black women are just there to give birth and to work in a house … So all those programmes are designed with the real needs of our members in mind.’ (Claribed Palacio García, UTRASD, Colombia)

Palacio’s words align with those of other interviewees and with our fieldwork observations. She suggests how all these internal activities draw on an intersectional reading of domestic workers’ realities, and recommends pathways towards their empowerment, partly in the sphere of labour relations but also at the personal, socioeconomic and political levels.

Further, many organizations also provide political and leadership training designed to bolster knowledge and strengthen abilities that are keys to active participation in the public and political sphere. These include sharing information about the way unions function, and training in public speaking. In Brazil, FENATRAD was one of the partners in the national policy initiative Trabalho Doméstico Cidadão (TDC), carried out under the Lula government (2003–11). The TDC plan was promoted by the Ministry of Labour, in partnership with the Secretariat for Policies for the Promotion of Racial Equality, the Secretariat for Policies for Women, domestic workers’ organizations and other institutions. It was aimed at improving domestic workers’ social and professional qualifications and their awareness of their labour rights, as well as strengthening their political participation and their access to citizenship rights. In Ecuador, one of the requests advanced by
ATRH in the 2010s concerned the implementation of training programmes by public institutions after a period in which the Ministry of Labour and the Social Security Institute had provided capacity-building initiatives for domestic workers. These training and empowerment opportunities were either self-organized or created in partnership with non-profit allies (such as international and local NGOs or trade unions).

Learning processes within these organizations are also nourished by the relationships with other unionized domestic workers, and the sharing of practices that characterize their activism. An interesting narrative in this regard comes from Maria Noeli Dos Santos, a veteran Brazilian activist, leader of the Rio de Janeiro domestic workers’ trade union and current secretary of the national federation FENATRAD. Remembering her first experiences in the union, after she moved to the city from the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul in the early 1980s to find work, she recounts the learning trajectory that led her to become aware of her condition of exploitation. Her view then widened to encompass the conditions of other domestic workers all over the country: “When I got to the trade union … They started to teach me, you understand? … They always sat and talked to me … They took me everywhere with them, to teach me, make me see the reality. The reality of each place, each state” (Maria Noeli Dos Santos, SINDOMESTICA Rio de Janeiro and FENATRAD, Brazil).

Rafaela Pimentel Lara, from Spain, further expresses the resulting feelings of collective belonging. She provides examples of how mutual aid practices and reciprocal care define relationships among the members of many of these groups:

‘We incorporate care among us, this is very important to us, from how we prepare the meetings … how we welcome a comrade, the hugs, to the fact of taking care if a comrade is sick … It is important, we call this care, taking care, we share that cake that someone brought, those candies from one’s country … We see this collective as a space for us, a space that we share, a backpack loaded with all the situations that we the women live … Territorio Doméstico actively works in the daily life of each of us, when a woman gets sick, and she cannot work, she has no family to help, we as a collective are there … We put a group of women in charge of going along with those who are going through sickness, heavy situations, this unites us as a group.’ (Rafaela Pimentel Lara, Territorio Doméstico, Spain)

The analyses of these examples are in line with other recent comparative analyses of collective action by domestic workers and informal, unprotected...
and precarious workers (Agarwala and Chun, 2019b; Pratt and Migrante BC, 2019; Tilly et al, 2019). Namely, the activities of the domestic workers’ groups that we studied confirm the ways in which we are confronted by special forms of labour and related forms of women’s organizing, where mobilizing for labour rights and putting political pressure on institutional actors go hand in hand with cultural politics and self-help efforts focused on self-representation, self-esteem and identity. Through this process, these groups touch upon issues that transcend the field of labour and intersect with topics related to women’s experience, migration, access to education, health, sexuality and participation in the public sphere.