Global Domestic Workers

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Feminism and Domestic Workers: Different Positionalities, Discursive Convergences

The gap between feminist and domestic workers’ mobilizations still remains wide. Even the most recent wave of global feminism, which has shown a distinct capacity to involve actors that are not traditionally part of the feminist movement, such as *Ni Una Menos* or #MeToo, has seldom involved domestic workers and their cause. This chapter addresses the complicated relationship between the domestic workers’ and the feminist and women’s rights movements. As we have seen, this relationship remains troubled, not only as a theme of reflection for us as feminist researchers, but also for activists in the various countries in our study. Indeed, as we will show in the first part of this chapter, this relationship has received some attention within the emerging literature on domestic workers’ organizing, which suggests that it might be ambivalent and even conflictual, rather than supportive (Boris and Nadasen, 2008; Blofield, 2012; Bernardino-Costa, 2014; Boris and Fish, 2015; Federici, 2016; Fish, 2017; Marchetti and Cherubini, 2019; Busi, 2020).

Building upon this scholarship, in the second part of the chapter we try to make sense of the different positions that feminist and women’s rights organizations took in the strategic field of action of domestic workers’ rights across our nine countries in the years 2008–18. Feminist and women’s rights organizations have often remained marginal in this field; domestic worker activists have generally perceived them as distant, although not in opposition to their cause. In our research we came across a few cases of feminist and women’s rights’ organizations that have contributed in crucial ways to domestic workers’ rights campaigns, such as SEWA in India, Criola, Themis and SOS Corpo in Brazil, and the Awakening Foundation in Taiwan.
In rare cases, new organizations developed from the very convergence of feminist and women’s rights issues and domestic workers’ rights, such as Territorio Doméstico in Spain. Much more frequent, however, were instances of individual feminist or women’s rights campaigners taking an active role in these struggles, such as lawyers, politicians and NGO activists who occupied central roles in the promotion of domestic workers’ rights, as we will show in the context of Colombia, Ecuador and the Philippines. In countries of the Global South, especially the Philippines and India, we often found that an important role was played by feminist and women’s rights activists promoting the protection of informal workers, often as part of global organizations connected to WIEGO, such as HomeNet and StreetNet. This approach, which has been common in many parts of the Global South since the 1990s (McLaren, 2019), has often engaged with issues of domestic workers’ rights by centring their activity on the improvement of the working and living conditions of women in informal work, and their access to political agency.

However, the materials we discuss in the third part of the chapter indicate that, in many contexts, the groups who are active in the field of domestic workers’ rights actually draw upon classic feminist discourses, in particular those related to reproductive labour and the commodification of care. Indeed, activists regularly speak of the rights of paid domestic workers within a broader analysis of the devaluation and unequal distribution of reproductive labour, both paid and unpaid. Further, the activists we interviewed often draw upon contemporary feminist critiques of the commodification of care, especially in countries with an ageing population. Crucially, activists in the field do so by negotiating and elaborating on such discourses, and typically complicating the gender-only analytical dimension that some feminist arguments promote. This reconfiguration of existing frames arguably has the capacity to give much-needed new life to contemporary feminisms (Federici, 2016). In particular, by extending the frame of gendered inequality in reproductive labour and by centring the experience of (poorly) paid domestic work, domestic workers’ rights activists provide a broader view of the unequal distribution of domestic labour across social groups. Moreover, by extending the classic frame on the commodification of care, our interviewees developed a frame that focuses on the exploitation of migrant domestic workers by showing how these migrants pay the price for the crisis of welfare and care provision in industrialized countries.

**Disconnections from feminist movements**

The 2010s saw a resurgence in feminist mobilizations across the globe, with a tendency to emphasize explicit anti-capitalist analyses and demands (Basu,
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2010; Fraser, 2013; Luxton, 2014; Evans, 2015; Winch et al, 2019). This movement has succeeded in actively engaging a broad array of allies in the struggle, from precarious workers’ groups and anti-racism campaigners to environmental activists, united under an anti-capitalist banner.

Within this confluence of struggles, the domestic workers’ movement stands out as playing a central role in highlighting the contradictions of capitalism (Barbagallo and Federici, 2012; Lim, 2016; England, 2017; Teeple Hopkins, 2017). Federici argues that, in the US context in particular, migrant domestic workers’ mobilizations ‘have revitalized the feminist interest in the question of domestic work’ and have positively contributed to questioning ‘the possibility of solidarity among women and the adequacy of the once dominant feminist strategy of “emancipation through wage labor”’ (Federici, 2016: 10). Yet, as Federici and others show, with regard to the relationship between feminist and domestic workers’ movements, this ideal convergence is often contradicted in practice by non-collaboration and reciprocal neglect. This is as true in a time when both movements were strong and enjoying a period of growth, such as the decade 2008–18.

The possible encounters, as well as the potential distance, between domestic workers’ rights and feminist and women’s rights actors have begun to be explored by scholars both at the international level and in different national contexts. Among them, Jennifer Fish’s ethnography of domestic workers’ global organizing identifies the creation of a ‘feminist-labour-activist coalition’ between the then IDWN, WIEGO and international trade unions like the IUF. She sees this coalition as a key factor in the success of negotiations leading to the passing of C189 (Fish, 2017). Fish views the considerable engagement of female politicians, whom she dubbed ‘femocrats’, who ‘used their positions to voice ideologies consistent with the IDWN platform of demands’ (Fish, 2017: 214), as equally critical to its creation.

Eileen Boris and Jennifer Fish (2015) identify the first steps to include domestic work within the ILO’s field of vision – albeit unsuccessfully, owing to the lack of wider civil society support – as having been taken by what they termed ‘individual labour feminists’ working for governments, trade unions and UN agencies (Boris and Fish, 2015: 537–40). Nevertheless, the mid-2000s were a turning point, with the growing domestic workers’ movement providing the basis for the formation of a coalition with transnational feminist NGOs, governments, international trade unions and human rights NGOs. Indeed, the growth of the transnational domestic workers’ movement appears to have been central to the process of connecting these various actors, doing so by becoming a federation of trade unions, associations, networks and workers’ cooperatives. Although not a women-only organization, this federation explicitly stresses its women’s
dimension, as explained by Myrtle Witbooi, president of the IDWF and one of the founders of the South African domestic workers movement:

‘We launched an International Domestic Workers Federation in 2013 because, even though we had national and international labour laws, we still needed a mechanism to ensure that the voices of workers were heard and to uplift these voices, which is a big role. And then, again, history was made. This federation was for women, and led by women … We started out as 255,000 members and 30 organizations, and today we have over 500,000 members and 62 organizations. At the beginning everybody was watching us, saying we were women and won’t be able to lead, and step by step we have proved them wrong. In five years’ time, we want to reach 200,000 migrant workers and double the number of domestic workers.’ (Witbooi, 2017: 83)

When Myrtle Witbooi clarifies that the IDWF is ‘a federation for women and led by women’, and recounts how ‘everybody was watching us, saying we were women and won’t be able to lead’, she is making important points regarding their political project. In addition to challenging the widespread prejudice that women cannot be leaders, the awareness that ‘everybody was watching us’ refers to other social movements and unions. Witbooi was undoubtedly describing the movement’s autonomy from men – in particular men who dominate other unions. The women she refers to, as working-class, Black, migrant or from other minorities, have traditionally been denied political agency not only by these trade unions and society in general but also within feminist and women’s rights organizations.

This lack of solidarity with domestic workers’ movements shown by other groups, including feminist ones, has been highlighted by comparative studies focusing on the Latin American context (Chaney and Castro Garcia, 1989; Blofield, 2012). For example, Merike Blofield (2012) explored the tensions between domestic workers and what she called ‘professional and elite women’, feminists included, in a comparative analysis of the Bolivian, Chilean, Costa Rican and Uruguayan contexts. She emphasized that many of these women saw their own liberation and entry into the labour market as contingent on finding a low-paid substitute to carry out their chores. According to Blofield, even if this has not meant an explicit opposition to the expansion of rights for this category of workers by feminist movements, it has nevertheless affected feminist movements’ priorities and agendas. Thus, in Latin America, ‘domestic workers’ rights have largely remained invisible and passed below the radar of most feminist movements … Overall, feminist
organizations across the region have been slow to take up the issue, although in some countries individual feminists have adopted the cause’ (Blofield, 2012: 59–60).

Meanwhile, in Brazil, the campaign for a new Brazilian constitution in the late 1980s led to strong alliances between domestic workers’ trade unions and the feminist movement (Bernardino–Costa, 2014). However, a distrust remains between the two movements, which Joaze Bernardino–Costa attributes not only to the significant racial and class-based differences between domestic workers and feminists but also to the ideological differences concerning the very notion of ‘women’s liberation’. Indeed, while (mostly White, upper- and middle-class) feminists tend to think of women’s liberation as linked to emancipation from unpaid domestic work and access to the labour market, for domestic workers’ activists, access to the labour market can remain exploitative and far from liberatory, given the poor employment conditions in the sector (Bernardino–Costa, 2014: 77).

Finally, the fieldwork carried out in Italy by Beatrice Busi for the DomEQUAL project has provided insight into the lack of alliance between the large Italian women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the domestic workers’ organizations that were campaigning for their labour rights over the same period. Her work, along with other recent analyses, has elaborated on the class-based difference between the women in the two movements and it has pointed to the limitations of the Italian feminist movement in relation to women’s labour issues and migrants’ rights (Busi, 2020).

In the following pages we offer a contextual exploration of the relationship between these two movements in the nine countries under analysis by exploring the positions that feminist groups and individuals have taken in the strategic fields of action of domestic workers’ rights in the period 2008–18.

**Different feminist positionalities**

There are a number of elements that can help to explain the variety of feminist positions that emerged across the nine countries in our analysis. Feminist and women’s rights movements are remarkably diverse, with different positionalities coming from institutions affiliated with the state, NGOs or grassroots groups. These differences may determine their more or less intense participation in the strategic field of action of domestic workers’ rights.

Furthermore, across the different countries studied, feminist and women’s rights actors can at times have opposing interests. These interests may depend on whether women’s rights activists delegate care and domestic duties in their private lives, especially in contexts in which there is little public provision of care and these tasks remain mainly women’s
responsibility. We will now briefly explore the social and economic backgrounds of domestic workers and feminist or women’s rights activists across our nine countries.

Starting in the Philippines, it is worth noting that women’s rights organizations were already quite active in the protection of Filipina migrants and in opposition to child labour in the mid-1990s, the period in which domestic workers’ rights rose to prominence in the country. However, according to our interviewees, feminists did not widely discuss the issue of domestic work during those years, and the main tripartite body on domestic work, the TWG (see Chapter 2), itself was not particularly gender sensitive. This is confirmed by the analysis of Mylene Hega, Veronica Alporha and Meggan Evangelista (2017). However, we can identify some of the key figures responsible for the advancement of this strategic field of action as women’s rights supporters. Particularly worthy of mention are Maria Cecilia Flores-Oebanda, founder of the non-governmental organization Visayan Forum, and Rosalinda Dimapilis-Baldoz, Secretary of Labour in the years 2010–16, both of whom were domestic workers in their youth. Also notable has been the role of Ellene Sana, executive director of the NGO Centre for Migrant Advocacy since 2003. Moreover, domestic workers have been a concern for women’s rights activists in the Akbayan and Gabriela party lists, in labour organizations representing domestic workers in the country (LEARN, Sentro and ALLWIES), and in the context of government bodies developing policies on informal labour, such as the Workers in the Informal Sector Council of the Anti-Poverty Commission, part of WIEGO.

Our fieldwork shows that feminist activists supporting informal workers have also played an important role for domestic workers’ rights in the case of India, in particular with SEWA, which has been a central actor in the struggle for domestic workers’ rights in the country and has been active within the PDWR, a platform which many actors engaged in the movement. SEWA was founded in 1972, with a clear women’s rights programme and a link to the Gandhian civil rights movement, and it eventually became part of the ITUC. As we mentioned in Chapter 3, SEWA was already involved in the process of ILO C177 for home-based workers, passed in 1996. The latter is a central convention for informal women workers and is considered to have prepared the ground in some respects for C189. Moreover, our participants testified to the role played by other influential feminist and women’s rights NGOs that have engaged in struggles for domestic workers’ rights since the late 1990s, in particular Stree Jagruti Samiti in Bangalore and Jagori in Delhi. In the decade 2008–18 their work included providing support in setting up domestic workers’ trade unions, some of which are united under the National Domestic Workers’ Federation. Also important was the public advocacy of organizations fighting against human trafficking, such as Shakti Vahini.
In the case of Ecuador, Rafael Correa’s government established a preferential relationship with ATRH as a domestic workers’ organization representative of working-class women’s interests, although it excluded other women’s rights movements or civil society organizations. As our interviewees clarified, grassroots feminist organizations were mainly engaged in an oppositional dynamic vis-à-vis Correa’s presidency during his second and third mandates (2009–17), particularly in response to his conservative approach to reproductive rights. Thus, the prominent role of Correa’s government in supporting ATRH has prevented the deeper involvement of feminist grassroots organizations in the campaign for domestic workers’ rights. A similar situation continued from 2017 under the government of Lenín Moreno. Yet, during the same decade individual feminists were present and active in many of the state and non-state organizations supporting the cause of domestic workers. Among them was Gina Godoy, the feminist congresswoman from the ruling party Alianza País, who advocated for the ratification of C189 in the debates at the National Assembly during the campaign for ratification in the years 2011–13.

In the case of Brazil, the domestic workers’ rights movement and the feminist and women’s rights movements have developed an ongoing long-term relationship. This support was seen by our participants as deriving from the fact that feminists and domestic workers fought together in the struggle against the dictatorship in the 1980s, and for the new Brazilian constitution that was ratified in 1988. Our data also demonstrates the importance of alliances between domestic workers’ organizations and the feminist and Black feminist movements during the decade under analysis. In particular, some feminist organizations, such as Criola, Themis and SOS Corpo, were present and directly engaged in the campaign for the constitutional reform that had been promoted by FENATRAD since the late 2000s (PEC das Domésticas). These are feminist organizations that have been working since the 1980s (SOS Corpo) and early 1990s (Themis and Criola) to promote women’s rights and social justice and to fight against gender-based violence and discrimination. Criola specifically focuses on Black women’s rights and Black feminism, while SOS Corpo and Themis focus on the intersections between sexism, racism, socioeconomic exclusion and poverty, homophobia and other forms of discrimination. Also central during this period was the involvement of Senator Benedita da Silva, Afro-Brazilian feminist organizer and politician, and former domestic worker, who was the rapporteur on the PEC reform.

In Colombia, the 2010s saw not only the resurgence of domestic workers’ organizing but also a noteworthy process of convergence and coalition building between individual feminist and women’s rights defenders during the Ley de Prima campaign (2013–16). Indeed, the main allies of organized...
domestic workers in this campaign all identified as feminists – namely the activists of the Bien Humano Foundation and ENS, such as Andrea Londoño and Sandra Muñoz, and the Green Party congresswomen, Ángela María Robledo and Angélica Lozano. Further, all of these participated in the National Committee for the Care Economy, a nationwide platform composed of gender-sensitive institutional and non-institutional actors. It was created in 2010 with the aim of monitoring the implementation of the National Law on the Care Economy, approved that same year. This law gave full recognition to the social and economic value of unpaid care and domestic work and laid the basis for its financial and economic measurement in official statistics as a portion of the national GDP. As we have shown in previous work (Marchetti and Cherubini, 2019; Cherubini et al, 2020), the strategy of the coalition campaigning for the Ley de Prima was to extend the debate on the care economy as understood in that context, expanding its original scope to include paid work. This was pivotal in allowing for the convergence of domestic workers and the aforementioned women’s rights activists.

The relationship between feminism and domestic workers’ mobilizations is particularly intertwined in the case of Spain. Here, the new wave of mobilizations for domestic workers’ rights that took place in the late 2000s and 2010s found common terrain with grassroots feminist groups organizing around the issues of care and social reproduction, work and precarity and migrants’ rights. Such convergence is evident in the work of the migrant domestic workers’ organizations created in different parts of the country in those years, in particular Territorio Doméstico, SEDOAC, SINDIHOGAR/SINDILLAR and Nosotras, as well as in the nationwide platform for domestic workers’ rights known as Turin Group (which we described in Chapter 2). As can be gleaned from the views expressed by our interviewees, feminist support for domestic workers’ demands has become increasingly conspicuous in the mobilizations for the ratification of C189 that have taken place between 2011 and 2018, as well as on the occasion of the first domestic workers’ national congress, organized in 2016. Notably, these years of intense organizing for domestic workers’ rights also correspond to large social justice mobilizations, known collectively as the 15-M movement, and to the rise of political forces that partly institutionalized this movement, such as the Podemos party. It is no coincidence that the proposal for the first EU resolution on caregivers’ rights, approved in 2016, was promoted by a Podemos party member, Tania González Peñas, together with the Greek MEP Kostadinka Kuneva.

In Taiwan, our interviewees informed us that the feminist NGO Awakening Foundation visibly engaged the issue of care work needs, with particular reference to long-term care provision for the elderly, which became
Awakening Foundation had been stressing the importance of women’s emancipation from the family care duties ascribed to them in Confucian culture. It also supported the proposal for the Household Service Act, first formulated in 2013 by a network of migrants’ rights organizations led by TIWA, to protect both Taiwanese and migrant caregivers.

Two other countries in our study, Italy and Germany, share the characteristic of having ageing societies where households tend to meet care work needs for their elderly by privately employing migrant caregivers, as we described in Chapter 2. However, the circumstances facing domestic workers migrating to these destinations differ in significant ways from those in our other case studies. Italy in particular represents an interesting context in which the feminist movement had an immense impact on society and the improvement of women’s rights during the 1960s and 1970s. The International Wages for Housework Campaign of the 1970s received popular support in both countries, with a focus on promoting the valorization of unpaid reproductive labour (Toupin, 2014; Picchio and Pincelli, 2019; Busi, 2020). The more recent Non una di meno movement against gender-based violence has also contributed to a resurgence of activism focused on care work and a broader public debate around women’s issues. On 25 November 2017, the Non una di meno movement was kick-started in Italy by a large demonstration for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The movement identified the gendered division of reproductive labour as one of the root causes of women’s exploitation and social vulnerability. According to Busi (2020), this may represent a favourable framework through which to build an alliance between the movements. In Germany, two notable initiatives have been the Care Manifesto, started in 2014 by a group of critical scholars, and the Equal Care Day initiative, launched in 2016, both calling for a global politics of care work justice and an equal distribution of caring commitments between men and women. However, so far these initiatives have not had notable repercussions on campaigns for domestic workers’ rights.

On the whole, we found a large variety of positions were taken by feminist and women’s rights actors, both collective and individual, in the strategic action field of domestic workers’ rights across our nine countries for the period 2008–18. In most countries we found that a crucial supporting role in the domestic workers’ cause was played by individual women bringing feminist and women’s rights perspectives into their political and professional careers as public officials, lawyers and NGO activists, among others. Women such as Rosalinda Dimapilis-Baldoz in the Philippines and Benedita Da Silva in Brazil are exemplary in demonstrating the crucial supporting role that can be played by policy makers in these countries. They do so by overcoming
the cultural stigma traditionally attached to domestic work and choosing to speak openly about their experiences of having done this form of labour in their youth.

Meanwhile, at the collective level, as we saw in Chapter 2, countries such as Spain, India, Brazil and Taiwan have all seen large mobilizations in support of domestic workers during the decade under study, and it is only in these countries that feminist and women’s rights organizations engaged with issues that specifically affect this sector of society. Brazil, Spain and India all have long histories of domestic worker organizing, dating back to the 1930s, while more recent anti-racist and migrants’ rights movements (in Brazil, Spain and Taiwan), as well as informal workers’ mobilizations (in India), have become important new allies in struggles for domestic workers. However, as we saw in Chapter 3, the state did not support the policy changes being demanded by domestic workers’ rights activists in Taiwan, Spain or India.

The situation looks rather different in the next section, where we turn our attention to the discursive frames that are employed within the strategic field of action of domestic workers’ rights. We are led to a remarkable conclusion for all the countries in our study: that some of the most recurrent discursive frames in the campaigns for domestic workers’ rights are actually based on feminist arguments appropriated and modified by domestic workers and other actors.

**Expanding feminist discursive frames**

As an issue that encompasses several social justice concerns and that has its origin in the experiences of multiply marginalized subjects, the improvement of domestic workers’ rights and conditions has been framed in different ways across time and place. At times it has been framed as a women’s issue, and at other times as a labour, migrant, human rights, caste or racial issue. Scholars in many contexts have already identified the narratives employed in the field of struggles for domestic workers’ rights as an important object of analysis. Jennifer Fish identifies gender equity, human rights and economic justice as complex, yet compelling, discursive frames on which domestic workers’ rights activists have centred their communication strategies to promote C189 (Fish, 2017: 163). These three frameworks evoke the language of the ILO, which since the 1990s has promoted a conception of decent work that is able to combine an emphasis on human rights with a concern for the living and working conditions of labourers, especially when addressing highly gendered and ethnicized sectors, non-standard jobs and low-skilled informal workers. Particularly important in this process has been the passing of C177 in 1996 (Boris, 2019), which was promoted by a network of political actors that remobilized after the passing
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of C189, such as WIEGO. The ILO has since extended its work on informal labour through Recommendation 204 ‘concerning the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy’ – which explicitly includes domestic workers in its definition of the informal economy and ‘calls on Member States to pay special attention to domestic workers as one group that is especially vulnerable to the most serious decent work deficits in the informal economy’ (paragraph 7i). Domestic workers’ organizations have called upon the political and moral responsibility advocated by the UN discourse on equality and human rights in order to promote the improvement of women’s and migrants’ conditions (Boris and Fish, 2014; Garofalo Geymonat and Marchetti, 2017; Marchetti, 2018). This has been seen by some as a reflection of the kind of actors involved in the coalition that has been promoting domestic workers’ rights at the global level. Lorenza Fontana (2020), in discussing C189, stresses the connection between the labour/human rights framework used by the Convention and the unique coalition that was mobilized in Geneva. This brought to the negotiating table not only the traditional ILO constituencies (employers’ representatives, workers’ organizations and governments) but also domestic workers’ rights organizations and human rights NGOs (albeit without voting rights), representing a broad coalition of labour organizations, social movements and community groups (Bonner and Spooner, 2011; Blackett, 2012; Johnstone, 2012; Boris and Fish, 2014).

Other narratives have been adopted by domestic workers’ groups in particular national and regional contexts (Chaney and Castro Garcia, 1989; Agarwala and Saha, 2018; Moore, 2018). For example, Agarwala and Saha (2018) show how the domestic workers’ rights movement in India tends to adopt a discourse focusing on the exploitation of time and the lack of respect for personal dignity perpetuated by employers in the household. Domestic workers’ rights activists have addressed both their employers and state institutions in demands for dignity, recognition and emancipation as women and as workers, in ways that modify classic anti-capitalist arguments. This in turn resonates with the frameworks employed by movements of other informal workers with whom domestic workers have developed important links. Shereen Ally (2009) and Jennifer Fish (2014) explain how, in the midst of the South African democratic transition, expanding domestic workers’ rights in the country was successfully framed as integral to the wider process of ‘defining features of the new nation’ after the end of apartheid (Fish, 2014: 233). By contrast, in European public debates, especially since the 2000s, Bridget Anderson (2010) and Helen Schwenken (2003) have referred to two competing ways that domestic workers’ struggles have been framed – namely, in terms of trafficking and in terms of rights. In ageing countries, authors have interrogated the recurrent discourses on
care needs or care deficit, which, as stressed by Anderson (2014), may result in the recruitment of foreigners and therefore come into conflict with a nationalistic discourse that pushes for restrictive migration policies (Sarti, 2007; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Van Hooren, 2010; Triandafyllidou, 2013; Romero, 2018).

In our research we have explored the role that discursive framing plays in the relationship between domestic workers’ movements and feminist groups in a range of different countries. We found that in many of our case studies activists promoting domestic workers’ rights are framing their struggles within narratives that echo some classic feminist discourses, in particular those involving anti-capitalist critiques of inequality. In so doing, they utilize and modify these discourses in order to incorporate experiences of domestic workers that these discursive frames did not originally foresee, having been primarily interested in the unfair distribution of labour between men and women. Therefore, they expand these discursive frames in what could be described as an intersectional way, enlarging their scope to include racialized, low-class, migrant and other minority groups in ways which few feminist movements have achieved. In other words, they expand the scope of each of the discursive frames they mobilize – originally tied to labour, migration, gender or caste – blurring the limits that were traditionally established among them within their own national contexts.

The valorization of reproductive labour

Analysing the discursive frames mobilized within struggles for domestic workers’ rights within each of the nine countries reveals a recurrent perception of the fundamental connection between the need to improve the conditions of domestic workers, on the one hand, and the need to valorize reproductive labour more generally, on the other. The concerns voiced by workers we spoke with included the professional consequences of an unequal distribution of reproductive labour between men and women, as well as the commodification of this form of work (Folbre, 2001; Boris and Parreñas, 2010). They also affirmed the imperative that societies begin to recognize the value of work being done largely by women, particularly – but not exclusively – within the home and family. Feminists have often historically organized campaigns demanding the recognition of these activities’ value, both as social goods and in terms of their economic contribution to society. By implication, they have highlighted and denounced the exploitation of this form of labour within patriarchal and capitalist societies. Tasks performed by women inside their households have been emphasized as constituting ‘work’, deserving the same recognition as any other form of work (Sarti et al, 2018). Whether or not they explicitly acknowledge the origin of their arguments
in feminist critiques, activists for domestic workers’ rights also often clearly affirm the value of unpaid forms of reproductive labour, thereby challenging the general lack of social value assigned to tasks connected to caregiving and housekeeping, while simultaneously demanding improvements in their salaries, labour protections and contract rights (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 1975; Delphy, 1984; Pateman, 1988; Picchio, 1992).

Contemporary domestic workers’ rights activists are now expanding on and modifying these classic feminist arguments in favour of acknowledging the social meaning of reproductive tasks and their contribution to the economy, to include the experiences of domestic workers. This broader framework encompasses the experiences of discrimination and exploitation faced by both paid and unpaid, formal and informal workers – as women and as members of low classes, low castes and ethnic and racial minorities.

In our study, Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, India and the Philippines were the countries in which we found these discursive reframings of feminist arguments most clearly represented. They also happened to be the places in which employers overwhelmingly occupied markedly superior ranks within local social hierarchies, and in which the labour force was overwhelmingly made up of racialized, lower-class women working almost completely in the informal labour sector. An example of the application of these novel analyses to concrete political demands relates to the historical process of implementing C189, at which time domestic workers’ organizations demanded that their labour be recognized as work ‘like any other work’ in terms of its labour rights, protections and social and economic value; as well as ‘work like no other’ in relation to its unique and essential contribution to the well-being of both individual citizens and their families, and to national economies and society as a whole (Blackett, 2019).

One of the points that many of the activists we interviewed based their analyses on resonates well with the classic argument that feminists have used in their campaigns to recognize the value of unpaid reproductive labour; that is, the differentiation between a ‘favour’ and ‘work’. It is an argument that subtracts reproductive labour from the field of personal relationships and positions it within the realm of objective value. Claribed Palacios García, a leader in the domestic workers’ organization UTRASD in Colombia, describes the importance of according domestic workers proper payment and treatment in the following words: “Since I am doing my job right, I demand to be paid and be treated with dignity. Domestic work is not a favour. Domestic work – as Convention 189 says – is work” (Claribed Palacios García, UTRASD, Colombia).

These arguments around the valorization of reproductive labour challenge implicit gender-based assumptions about the natural disposition to care attributed to women, which prevent us from seeing domestic workers as
‘real workers’ because their activity is considered to be an extension of family duties. These interlinked arguments are briefly but poignantly described by Tania González Peñas, supporter of domestic workers’ rights in Spain and a member of the political party Podemos. González Peñas makes the connection between domestic workers’ rights and a broader demand to valorize domestic and care duties:

‘It is important to give more rights to these workers, first of all, because it is a job which is necessary and therefore ought to have more dignity. Secondly, because domestic work is part of the care activities needed to support our society … And thirdly, it is also an economic question: to invest in the care economy can produce wealth and social benefits for everybody.’ (Tania González Peñas, Podemos party, Spain)

This last macroeconomic aspect – the care economy that “can produce wealth and social benefits for everybody” – is developed by a number of the activists we interviewed. Lourdes Albán, activist and member of the Ecuadorian domestic workers’ organization, ATRH, explained the success of their campaign for the ratification of C189 by expanding on feminist discourses in relation to the care economy. She depicts domestic workers as pillars of society, recognizing their vital role in ensuring the well-being of Ecuadorian families, and demands more socio-economic rights for them and their households. In her words:

‘We made them [the politicians] see that we support the country, that we are also part of the economy of the country, part of the economy of the families of Ecuador. In the same way we want the country to help us get ahead with our families, so that we feed our families … And that is how we achieved unanimous ratification in the National Assembly.’ (Lourdes Albán, ATRH, Ecuador)

With a different nuance, Sandra Muñoz, of the non-profit organization ENS, a key supporter of domestic workers’ organizing in Colombia, talks about the escalation of actions and events in support of the ratification of C189. Muñoz, who identifies as a feminist, tellingly uses the concept of ‘indebtedness’ in her key argument:

‘They [domestic workers] have begun to carry out a lot of actions and complaints that put Colombia in the hurricane as a country that has a social debt with the issue of gender, with women, with domestic workers. An issue that hurts everyone: it hurts
the analysts, it hurts the congressman, the president. It hurts everyone because everybody has domestic workers.’ (Sandra Muñoz, ENS, Colombia)

The language of debt is used here in order to express the need to recognize the social value of domestic and care work, both on a personal level, as a debt owed to individual domestic workers exploited by the elites, and on a national level, as a debt owed to the most historically exploited sectors of society. This use of language reflects postcolonial discourses that represent the illegitimate appropriation of land, labour and resources from one class by another as historical injustices that demand reparations. Sandra Muñoz’s quote highlights some of the ways in which the discursive frame of the valorization of reproductive labour, which in its most classic feminist versions is based on gender, can be utilized for the advancement of domestic workers’ rights in ways that intersect with class-based and racialized discourses. Indeed, by stressing that the debt is owed to ‘some women’ and not all women, Sandra Muñoz’s interview resonates with intersectional feminist analyses, notably that of the racial division of reproductive labour (Nakano Glenn, 1992), which have thoroughly examined the issue of the unequal distribution of domestic work between women.

Himaya Montenegro, leader of the Filipino domestic workers’ organization, UNITED, argues that the contribution that paid domestic workers make to the well-being of the middle classes should represent a source of personal pride for workers:

‘It is difficult to compare [with other work sectors] because, until now, although domestic work is recognised as work, we still feel the very low regard for us paid domestic workers. What we are doing to raise our self-esteem is to tell each other to be proud of what we do, that domestic work is a dignified job. We tell other paid domestic workers to remember that we are the force behind the good income that the employers have, because without us, they will worry about who will look after their houses, their children, their properties.’ (Himaya Montenegro, UNITED, Philippines)

In her discussion of the dignity of domestic work she also raises the important issue of class differences between women when she implicitly refers to the delegation of unpaid domestic work to paid domestic workers. This issue is also very common in the discourses of activists in other countries in our study where class deeply intersects with race, such as Brazil, and with caste, as in India.
Indeed, many of the arguments developed around domestic workers’ rights display a tension between two objectives. The first goal is to stress the commonalities between women in their position of responsibility over the sphere of reproductive work, with the aim of inserting domestic workers’ labour rights within a general demand to change the understanding of reproductive labour. The second is to simultaneously visibilize the elements of inequality and conflict between women in order to highlight the exploitation of domestic workers enacted by their (female) employers. This tension is described by Maria Betânia Ávila, founder of SOS Corpo, a Brazilian feminist organization that, as we have seen, has played a crucial role as advocate for domestic workers’ rights. She says: “Domestic work is considered a woman’s job, that men take advantage of but simultaneously neglect. Within the relationship of paid domestic work it is the mistresses who enact the same neglect towards other women as working subjects” (Maria Betânia Ávila, SOS Corpo, Brazil). A similar set of contractions is expressed well, in another context, by Sister Lissy Joseph, organizer of the NDWM in India, the largest platform for domestic workers’ rights in the country. She emphasizes how gender and caste taken together act as principles behind the devaluation of reproductive labour:

‘Mainly housewives are the employers. Their own lack of dignity is also playing on the life of other women workers. And all sorts of myths are there. [For example] that certain classes of communities are coming [to Delhi] and certain types of work, cleaning and dusting have to be done by the lower castes. You know, all this discrimination is also there. Workers not having dignity.’ (Lissy Joseph, NDWM, India)

It is important to point out the form of devaluation denounced in this narrative, in which the lack of recognition afforded to women’s reproductive labour results in paid domestic work, the individuals who perform it and, in fact, entire social groups being devalued and seen as undignified. The employers, as women, also suffer from this lack of recognition which, in Joseph’s view, is in turn negatively reflected in the lives of their employees. She also refers to the beliefs (“myths” in her words) related to cultural prescriptions about the distribution of different cleaning tasks between distinct caste groups, as is still practised in India today. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum (2009) explain this, speaking of a ‘culture of servitude’ that characterizes India, where a demeaning representation of domestic workers as ‘others within’, separated from the rest of society, results from their association with stigmatized bodily functions and care needs.
It is important to note how domestic workers’ rights activists across a wide spectrum of contexts try to reach out to women employers on the basis of ‘sisterhood’. However, employers’ response to sisterhood is often limited to denouncing cases of extreme and obvious physical or sexual abuse of domestic workers, rather than embracing the struggle for domestic workers’ rights. This is made clear in the words of Geeta Menon, activist from the Domestic Workers Rights Union in Bangalore, who also belongs to the feminist organization Stree Jagruti Samiti:

‘The strategies to organise residential or live-in domestic workers have evolved by trial and error. These workers are the most difficult to organise and getting information about their numbers or contacting them is sometimes impossible … Attempts have also been made to create a forum with employers, who have shown more concern as of late for what domestic workers suffer. The sisterhood solidarity is evident in cases of domestic violence, or when neighbours ill-treat workers. But when it comes to workplace issues like wages, leave, etc., they mostly remain silent.’ (Menon, 2017: 114)

In spite of the limits stressed by Geeta Menon (‘they mostly remain silent’), the number of actions directly aimed at encouraging individual employers to act as ‘good employers’ has increased in many of the countries under study during the decade in question. This is the case for two ongoing global campaigns initiated in 2015, ‘My Fair Home’,9 organized by the IDWF and ILO, and ‘Decent Work for Domestic Workers Rights Begin at Home’10 organized by the ILO and its employees. While arguments that aim to create alliances with employers may sound contradictory from a labour perspective, they may be better read as attempts to engage with the complexity of the positioning of domestic workers as women, and more specifically as women who perform a particular kind of labour for their female employers – namely, domestic work. In fact, these cross-class initiatives, often relying on the voluntary participation of employers, have long been part of the history of the domestic workers’ rights movement (Boris and Nadasen, 2008; Agarwala and Saha, 2018).

Taken together, all these different uses of the feminist discursive frame valorizing reproductive labour demonstrate the variety of ways in which activists recurrently speak of the rights of paid domestic workers with a broader perspective in mind, focused on the unequal distribution of reproductive labour and the lack of value afforded to it – both paid and unpaid. Importantly, activists complicate the exclusively gender-oriented analytical framework that some feminist arguments tend to reproduce.
By forcibly extending the classic framework of gendered inequality to the field of domestic work, and by putting the experience of (poorly) paid domestic work in particular at the centre of their analysis, domestic workers’ rights activists provide a broader view on the unequal distribution of reproductive labour.

The transnational commodification of care

Feminist critiques of the transnational commodification of care and the exploitation of migrant domestic workers have become particularly relevant following the economic crisis of 2008 (Sarti, 2007; Boris and Parreñas, 2010; Triandafyllidou, 2013; Romero, 2018). This is partly due to their simultaneous connection to what Joan Tronto (2013) identifies as two kinds of deficit: a deficit in democracy and a deficit in care. These analyses represent another related, but distinctive, feminist framework that we saw being utilized to promote domestic workers’ rights in Italy, Spain, Germany and Taiwan in particular. Our interviewees in these countries – international destinations for nannies and caregivers to the elderly – emphasized the importance of promoting domestic workers’ rights in terms of the expansion of care needs, and the absence of state support for women entering the labour market. In the perception of our interviewees, the need to import foreign workers into this sector was linked to the crisis of care and the failure of welfare systems to support their ageing societies (Cangiano and Walsh, 2014; Shire, 2015; Williams, 2018). Activist discourses around domestic workers’ rights were therefore determined in part by macro-level trends in global mobility and migration.

It is worth pointing out that a number of the actors who have emerged in the field of domestic workers’ rights in these contexts between 2008 and 2018 represent the needs of care receivers and employers. Their discursive frames also partly tap into the arguments in favour of the commodification of care. Such is the case for the EFFE, created in 2013 and bringing together thinkers and experts from the sector, as well as some domestic workers’ unions and employers’ unions from various European countries. Its Manifesto for the Recognition of Household Services, Family Employment and Home Care in Europe, published to coincide with the 2019 European elections, declares:

The current crisis challenges the European social and economic model at its core. The crisis highlights the silent disruptions that have occurred in Europe over the past few decades, and reveals the weaknesses in our social model. ... In the face of these challenges, ... EFFE is proposing a social innovation model for the benefit of all fellow European citizens and becoming a key political negotiator.
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for public authorities and European, national and local institutions. It focuses on household services, family employment and home care. At the crossroads of European economic and social issues, this economic sector represents an exceptional growth potential, as well as a key development opportunity for the economic, social and solidarity-based European society we are calling for.11

In its campaign, EFFE reclaims the family-based model of care as a progressive alternative designed to include migrants. Indeed, in the context of nations with ageing populations in which migrants now represent the large majority of the workforce responsible for domestic work, major trends in global mobility and migration are impacting on the way activists talk about domestic workers’ rights. As they frame their struggle within larger social issues, using critical tools of feminist analysis, our interviewees show an original capacity to expand feminist critiques of the commodification of care by putting the lack of rights afforded to migrant domestic workers at their centre.

Such a critical interpretation of the commodification of care will not in itself necessarily imply a link to the recognition of migrants’ rights. In fact, feminist analyses of the commodification of care, even when they include the rights of domestic workers, do not necessarily make explicit the issue of citizenship rights. This is exemplified by the case of the Peng Wa Ru Foundation in Taiwan, a women’s rights organization promoting good jobs and professional opportunities for unemployed women through paid domestic work. According to some of our interviewees, the foundation, which adopted a feminist perspective on the commodification of care in trying to recuperate non-market-driven care practices, mainly addresses Taiwanese caregivers and seems to favour a national workforce over foreigners.

With this background in mind, it is revealing to reproduce here a section of the interview with Su-Xiang Chen, member of TIWA, an organization founded by labour organizers in 1999, and which was a key player in the promotion of domestic workers’ and other migrants’ rights in Taiwan. It is worth noting how she connects the issue of migrants’ rights to that of the commodification of (long-term) care, and even goes so far as to say that this process is the main reason that the exploitation of migrant domestic workers is able to persist.

Q: Do you think the labour conditions of foreign workers will be affected by the labour conditions of local workers?
A: That may be true only for the factory workers. Not for the foreign domestic workers. The labour conditions of foreign domestic workers are not related to any other kinds of workers. But their labour conditions are related to the family structure in Taiwan. If
their wages rise or they have one day a week off, the cost also rises. As I said, the families who use foreign domestic workers are not all rich families, some of them struggle to make a living.

Q: So, you think the point of their labour conditions is not the lack of labour rights?
A: No. The point is the long-term care policy.
(Su-Xiang Chen, TIWA, Taiwan)

Shifting our focus to Germany, Bianca Kühl, who identifies as a feminist, is a trade unionist at the DGB (German Trade Union Confederation), a large umbrella organization of trade unions. She shares a frequent cause of concern with us:

‘Regarding the question of elder care, it’s basically inhumane. Nobody can be there for somebody else 24 hours, stand-by time at night, no. It is a system which is not working. But it is so normal in Germany that granny shouldn’t go to a care facility, she needs to stay at home, but we cannot handle the situation either, so we get Eastern European women who leave their families behind. This cannot be the goal.’ (Bianca Kühl, DGB-Berlin, Germany)

The ‘inhumane’ conditions to which migrant domestic workers are exposed are seen as a part of the wider phenomenon of the exploitation of commodified care. This is now being exacerbated by the collapse of public welfare provision, a tension that is particularly acute in countries with a large ageing population, like Germany.

Luciana Mastrocola is a trade unionist at Filcams-CGIL, a section of the one of the largest national trade unions in Italy that represents workers in the service, commerce and tourism sectors. She presents another account of state institutions failing to fulfil their responsibilities to workers by leaving individual households to resolve the crisis in care work by themselves, thereby obliging them to privately employ caregivers. In her view, this does not divest the state of its responsibility to protect these migrant workers:

‘Families are handling something [care for the ageing] of which the state should be in charge. The fact that this care is delegated to another person [the migrant worker] has allowed the state to avoid taking responsibility for that, to acknowledge something like “I should be the one in charge”’. (Luciana Mastrocola, Filcams-CGIL, Italy)
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For many interviewees in ageing societies such as Taiwan, Italy, Germany and Spain, employing a caregiver was seen as a necessity by a whole range of households, including those with lower incomes, in order to face the care work needs of their elderly and disabled members. In other words, they counterposed the possible exploitation of migrant workers lacking rights to the vulnerability of their own families and the dearth of support from the state. This was the case for an activist from a disability rights’ organization in Taiwan, Yu-Ji Liu, who had also been engaging in the issue of domestic workers’ rights in dialogue with TIWA. He emphasized the very high level of conflict between the families of people with disabilities and migrant domestic workers:

‘Take my family as an example, it seems the wage of our foreign domestic worker is not so good. But it still costs us NTD20,000 a month. Raising their salary will be difficult for us, because first of all, hiring foreign domestic workers cannot get tax credits, second, there is no other subsidy from the government, only a living allowance, around NTD4,000 dollars a month. It’s not enough. I think the government makes us [those with disabilities and foreign domestic workers] kill each other.’ (Yu-Ji Liu, Taiwan Association for Disability Rights, Taiwan)

A similar tension is described by Ana Carolina Espinoza, herself a migrant domestic worker based in Madrid, Spain. As a representative of the domestic workers’ union SEDOAC, she insists on the following in relation to migration policies:

‘We must recognise the double standard of the economy of developed countries and of migration politics above all. Because, on the one hand, they want to put a stop [to it] so that not all migrants can enter, [so] that not all foreigners can enter, but on the other hand, they let some of them enter in order to exploit them and it takes years before giving them rights.’ (Ana Carolina Elías Espinoza, SEDOAC, Spain)

Ana Carolina’s words echo Bridget Anderson (2014) when saying that the contrast between a societal deficit of care and nationalist tendencies to suppress the arrival of new migrants highlights the hypocrisy of states that attempt to overcome the crisis in care work by relying on a migrant workforce that is denied its full rights. Here we see the intricate connection between discourses around migrants’ rights and discourses involving the criticism of gender inequalities in the organization of care work. Novel articulations of
these analyses necessitate a new awareness of care work’s significance beyond merely instrumental perceptions of its value as a potential ‘solution’ to the crisis, calling for a more general overturning of gender- and race-based inequalities within society. In fact, it is on the terrain of struggles over migration policy that most claims for migrant domestic workers’ rights are now being played out. In Italy, Germany, Spain and Taiwan in particular, domestic workers’ organizations are campaigning for the liberalization of migration permits, the regularization of undocumented migrants involved in domestic work and additional rights – guaranteed independently of the will of their employers – in support of their residency status (Lutz and Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012; Kontos, 2013; Anderson, 2015).

Here we see a new awareness of migrants’ rights, as an issue of central importance to the global crisis of care work, being developed through a strategic renegotiation of feminist discursive frames. Knowledge about the experiences of migrant women being exploited in the global care market is expanded, while simultaneously recognizing limitations to classic critiques of the commodification of care. By extending pre-existing feminist arguments on this dynamic, our interviewees seem to have adopted an analytic framework that successfully focuses on the exploitation of migrant domestic workers by showing how these migrants pay the price for the devolution of welfare in the Global North, and its attendant lack of social provision for care work.