Global Domestic Workers

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Published by Bristol University Press

Marchetti, Sabrina and Daniela Cherubini.
Global Domestic Workers: Intersectional Inequalities and Struggles for Rights.
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Conclusion: Intersectionality in Action

Domestic workers globally, and in particular in the nine countries considered in this book, still experience high levels of exploitation, discrimination and exclusion from labour rights and legal protections, as compared to other workers. They also suffer forms of social stigmatization due to widespread representations of domestic work as a demeaning and ‘dirty’ activity, while their work fails to be recognized as such in society at large for its association with women’s allegedly naturally caring and altruistic disposition. Moreover, domestic work is largely performed by people, mostly women, who belong to the most vulnerable social groups in each context, such as internal and international migrants, ethnic-minority and racialized women and low-caste and poorly educated women.

However, domestic work has become an object of governance, conflict and negotiation involving several actors. Despite being traditionally seen as ‘unorganizable’, domestic workers have been increasingly engaged in collective organizing via unions and other mutual aid groups. This self-organization has succeeded in heightening their visibility and garnering the attention of NGOs and other movements. This transformation accelerated in the years 2008–18, the period corresponding to what we have called the ‘C189 process’.

The struggles for domestic workers’ rights during this period can be interrogated with regard to how transformations of intersectional inequalities occur in a global context. By exploring these questions the present book has identified central themes that emerge not only in relation to domestic workers but also potentially for other multiply marginalized groups worldwide.
The relationship between global rights and local struggles

The first theme considered the apparent incommensurability between what can be identified as a global right and local practices. A global right may or may not be embraced at the level of local struggles. Domestic workers’ rights represent a good case in this sense, for the C189 process represents what Fligstein and McAdams (2012) call an external shock to the strategic field of action of domestic workers’ rights, impacting the field at the national level in different ways depending on local contextual factors.

Rather than assessing the C189 process in terms of success or failure, we have instead explored the variations of the C189 process which national adoption gave rise to. We have therefore looked at the main actors, their goals and the interpretative frames they used. These elements supported our interpretation of the way in which the C189 process is practically reflected in each country’s struggle, in relation to the wider socioeconomic, political and cultural elements of each national context. Thus, we have clustered our nine countries according to four types of impact. It is hoped that this classification may aid in understanding similar cases of the relationship between global rights and local struggles.

1. Ecuador and the Philippines showed a strong synergy between the ILO, national governments and civil society actors, including domestic workers’ groups. The state was quick to ratify C189, and legislative measures were adopted on the basis of its requirements. Domestic workers’ organizing was promoted. Other civil society actors were also responsive to the ILO campaign and, as a result, the campaign has exceeded institutional confines. C189 has therefore encountered a suitable cultural and political environment at the local level.

2. In Colombia and Brazil we found the combination of a vibrant dynamism at the level of civil society with the involvement of the state and other institutional actors. The C189 process was embedded in a wider process of transformation taking place within the country, involving domestic workers as one of the key target groups, although not exclusively. Demands by domestic workers’ groups explicitly went beyond C189 as such, advocating for more radical changes to the conditions of domestic workers at the legislative, social and economic levels. Although C189 was the exogenous change that gave a boost to this field of struggle, an awareness of the legacy of past experiences is vital to understanding developments in these contexts, since domestic workers’ organizations were already a reality in these countries, alongside a long-standing tradition of workers’ struggles, Black liberation movements and women’s movements.
3. In Taiwan, India and Spain there was a high degree of involvement of domestic workers’ organizations, civil society groups more generally and the ILO (with the exception of Taiwan in the last case). Yet this cannot compensate for the lack of government support. Domestic workers’ rights were opposed not only by employers’ interests but also by the conservative parties dominating Parliament and opposing egalitarian reforms, as well as by brokers who acted as market intermediaries and whose private interests were favoured by the status quo. Indeed, domestic workers were perceived as minority subjects (lower-caste and ‘tribal’ people in India, and migrants and undocumented people in Taiwan and Spain) whose interests were seen as being at odds with those of society as a whole.

4. In Italy and Germany we observed an impasse in the accomplishment of the C189 process and the full promotion of domestic workers’ rights, partly due to a contradiction between a formal adherence by the state to C189 and the lack of a real implementation of C189 principles. These countries did ratify C189, since they believed their national legislation to already be in line with C189 requirements. However, the ratification of C189 ought to have been followed by corresponding policy measures for a full implementation of the C189 principles, which was not the case. Moreover, social movements tend not to mobilize around the issue of domestic workers’ rights in these locations, which is largely seen as a problem concerning (often undocumented) foreign workers, and therefore beyond the concern of the majority of society.

Domestic workers’ rights are fought for and developed in different ways at the local level, all of which ultimately inform the C189 process. Among them, we have emphasized that the effectiveness of the C189 process seems to have been greater in countries where improving the conditions of domestic workers is seen as emblematic of social justice struggles in the country as a whole. Conversely, we found that in countries where domestic workers were easily associated with ‘others’ from foreign countries the campaign remained isolated and issue specific, and it was difficult for activists to build a large consensus beyond direct stakeholders on domestic workers’ issues. Giving more rights to this category of workers has not been intended as a challenge to the structural inequalities in society of which the exploitation of domestic workers is part and parcel.

Making change happen from an intersectional perspective

The second theme we have explored is the way in which groups that organize based on multiply marginalized social positions may make intersectional
change; or, in other words, how intersectional politics may actually be practised on the ground. In the case of domestic workers, this book has shown how, through their efforts to politicize their conditions, activists from these movements selectively attribute different political salience and meaning to gender, class, race, caste, migration status and so on. This varies not only between different national contexts or between different domestic workers’ organizations, but also within the same organization in relation to distinct aspects of its activity, and over time. In particular we found that separating the different elements of groups’ intersectional politics – such as the process of identity making, demands and activities – allows for a deeper exploration of intersectionality as enacted by organizations composed of multiply marginalized people. In particular, it ensures that one avoids the trap of assuming that there should be a coherence between intersectionality in terms of identity making, the formulation of demands and the ways activities are carried out.

We also discussed the general reluctance by domestic workers to engage in mobilizations that concentrate solely on issues of class, race or gender, or with approaches that tend to subsume their struggles for rights and dignity under the ‘universal’ interests of women, migrants, working-class or racialized people. Reacting to these marginalizing structures, activists have set up autonomous groups around the identity of ‘organized domestic workers’. Notably, we have shown how this collective identity emerges as an outcome of such organizing processes, rather than being a well-defined, pre-existing identity which automatically reflected the gender, class, ethnic and racial composition of the sector. In fact, different organizations attribute distinct political salience to the social categories shaping domestic workers’ subordinate positions, and may understand the relations between these categories differently. This demonstrates a creative process of politicization in which the intersecting systems of oppression affecting domestic workers in each local context are differently identified and named by the activists.

To illustrate this process, we have discussed examples from Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador. Brazilian activists – in particular from the national federation FENATRAD – mobilized two kinds of rhetorical devices: firstly, the analogy between today’s racism and exploitation of Black domestic workers, and that which pervaded under slavery; secondly, they established an ideal relation with the legacy of the anti-racist movement in the country. In so doing they have been able to develop a novel identity while simultaneously mobilizing the genealogy of Brazilian movements against the oppression of women and Black people. In Colombia we found that the Afro-Colombian domestic workers’ union UTRASD promoted an intersectional discursive repertoire in which domestic work is understood as at once a gendered, class-based and racialized activity. The specific experiences of Afro-Colombian
women, especially internal migrants and refugees, are central to UTRASD’s self-definition as ‘the first ethnically-based domestic workers’ union in the country’. Ecuador reveals yet another configuration, with race-based discrimination recognized as an additional burden, but not as an intrinsic feature of the social organization of domestic work and of the collective identity promoted by the movement. In particular, the activists of the domestic workers’ association ATRH appear to see the category of ‘organized Ecuadorian domestic workers’ as shaped primarily by the interplay of gender and class inequalities.

If these can be seen as the challenges to the ‘making of intersectionality’ at the level of identity construction, a different scenario emerges when considering the demands and actions of these groups, which can be summarized in the following instances. Firstly, we have looked at awareness-raising activities promoting the slogan ‘domestic work is work’ and demanding improvements to the legal framework, in particular concerning labour laws, but also radical socioeconomic changes which may improve the conditions of domestic workers more generally. These campaigns sought recognition and equal rights for domestic workers: the same demands which are central to the discourses on ‘decent’ work used by the ILO and the other international organizations involved in the global governance of domestic work.

Secondly, we have highlighted key interventions concerning the use of language both in public discourse and in everyday interactions. Indeed, most of the organizations we studied have engaged in debates over adequate terminology to address domestic workers. Refusing the demeaning terms commonly used in their local languages, they have sought legitimacy for the new identity created by the movement, that is, that of workers performing a valuable job in society. This challenges the representations of domestic work as ‘intimate’ yet ‘dirty’, which are often internalized by the workers themselves. Even in the cases in which the family remains central to semantic innovations, such as in the Philippines with the term kasambahay (companion of the house) and in Italy with colf (collaborator in the family), these new terms challenge the ambivalence of their position within their employers’ families.

Finally, we have looked at the capacity of domestic workers’ groups to carry out empowering activities for their members and for domestic workers as a whole. We have shown how many organizations, besides providing legal support, information regarding contracts and working conditions, and access to professional training, also provide schooling and literacy programmes, education against gender-based violence and for women’s health and well-being. Further, some deliver political and leadership training designed to strengthen knowledge and build capacities that are key to active participation in the public and political sphere, such as collective bargaining strategies.
or public speaking skills. Others aim to improve the economic conditions and bargaining power of their members by creating savings cooperatives or workers’ cooperatives. Depending on the circumstances and opportunities in the field, a number of these activities and programmes were created and delivered autonomously from below, while others emerged in collaboration with allies, both non-profit organizations and public institutions. We have shown how these organizations also function as solidarity and mutual support groups that support domestic workers both in their labour relations and in other aspects of their lives.

To summarize, our research has revealed unique forms of labour and women’s organizing, where the struggle for labour rights goes hand in hand with cultural politics. In other words, the function of these groups transcends a mono-dimensional struggle for labour rights and expands their focus to include broader issues related to women’s experiences, self-esteem and identity, including migration, anti-racism, access to education, political participation, economic autonomy, health, sexuality and personal and family well-being.

The role of feminist and women’s rights activists

The third theme we have explored is that of the role that feminist and women’s rights organizations can play in the struggles for the rights of multiply marginalized women. What we found was that these organizations were generally perceived by domestic workers’ activists as distant, although not in opposition to their cause. We found a few exceptions to this, among feminist organizations explicitly committed to domestic workers’ rights, notably in India, Brazil, Spain and Taiwan. These differences may be explained by context-specific characteristics, especially in relation to the particular history of the feminist movement in each setting. At the same time, we found a number of feminists and women’s rights activists who promoted domestic workers’ issues on an individual basis, in particular as lawyers, NGO activists or politicians, and managed to play a key role in Colombia, Ecuador and the Philippines in particular.

In spite of this marginal involvement at the practical level, we discovered that, at the level of discourse, feminist argumentations are present in this field, with activists for domestic workers’ rights incorporating the classic repertoire of feminist critiques into their own narratives. In particular, activists recurrently spoke of the rights of paid domestic workers within broader feminist and anti-capitalist critiques of inequality and exploitation of women’s work. First, we considered the feminist notion of the valorization of reproductive labour. This was often invoked by domestic workers’ rights advocates when they spoke of their desire to see their compatriots recognize
the value of their work, starting with appreciating the reproductive labour done by women inside their homes and within their families. In other words, as they seek the recognition of ‘domestic work as work’ they not only demand the right to have contracts, better salaries and labour protection but also challenge the devaluation of tasks connected to caregiving and housekeeping more generally. However, they also modify and expand this traditional feminist argument, originally developed around unpaid labour, to include the case of paid workers and their experiences of discrimination and exploitation as women who are simultaneously lower class and from ethnic, racialized and caste minorities. This framing is predominantly used in Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, India and the Philippines, where domestic workers are mostly citizens from disadvantaged social groups employed by privileged women.

Indeed, many of these arguments developed around domestic workers’ rights show a tension between two goals. The first is the need to stress the commonalities between women in their responsibility for the sphere of reproductive work, in order to promote the issue of domestic workers’ labour rights within a general demand to change the understanding of reproductive labour. The second is to simultaneously visibilize the elements of difference and conflict between women, in order to emphasize the exploitation of domestic workers by their female employers. Interestingly, domestic workers’ rights activists across a large number of contexts try to reach out to women employers on the basis of ‘sisterhood’. However, in response, the sisterhood is often limited to denouncing cases of overt and extreme abuse, including the sexual abuse of domestic workers, rather than embracing the struggle for domestic workers’ rights.

In countries where, by contrast, the majority of domestic workers are migrant caregivers for the elderly, we have observed a more frequent use of another feminist frame relating to the commodification of care, which in turn connects to feminist critiques of welfare and the care crisis. In countries such as Italy, Spain, Germany and Taiwan, the way activists spoke about domestic workers’ rights was affected by major trends in global mobility and migration. It is worth pointing out that in these contexts some of the actors that have emerged in the field of domestic workers’ rights, particularly between 2008 and 2018, are those representing care receivers and employers, and their frames also at least partly tap into the argument on the commodification of care. Class differences in these contexts are indeed complicated by the fact that employers occupy a wide range of social positions. These include those with lower incomes, since hiring a home-based caregiver is often the only option, given the lack of state support for the elderly, chronically ill and disabled. In this context, domestic worker activists tend to expand feminist arguments on care and welfare issues by centring the experience
of migrants and arguing that they bear the burden of the scarcity of social provision in the Global North.

It is important to highlight how, in these different applications of feminist frames, domestic worker activists transform and enrich these arguments by adding an intersectional dimension. Indeed, they enlarge the capacity of these perspectives to also include racialized, lower-class, migrant and other minority groups in ways which few feminist movements have achieved. In fact, domestic worker activists tend to expand the scope of the interpretative frames they draw upon – whether these are originally tied to labour, migration, gender or caste – and blur the limits that are traditionally established between them. We have discussed this capacity as a creative force in the domestic workers’ movement which may facilitate the building of alliances with other groups for domestic workers’ sake, while expanding the scope of contemporary feminisms.

Beyond domestic workers

The results of our research invite us to look beyond domestic workers’ struggles and explore the implications they may have for research on other multiply marginalized groups organizing to demand more rights and recognition. In line with previous feminist scholarship on intersectionality and social movements discussed at length in this book, we have argued against the tendency to think of social struggles through a categorical perspective, namely by separating women’s movements from those based on class or anti-racism. To this end, we have discussed the struggles of groups whose experiences of discrimination and paths towards recognition would be difficult to describe on the basis of any of these categories alone. In other words, as their experience of oppression is multidimensional, so too is their struggle to end it. We have also shown that there isn’t a singular way to pursue this path, since the configuration of such dimensions changes from place to place and from time to time.

What are some of the broader implications of these findings for research practice in relation to other multiply marginalized groups and their struggles? Firstly, it is important to always remain open to new interpretations of the complex realities in which these groups live. This may require the development of a deeper understanding of the interconnections between categories of identity, or the identification of new categories which emerge in different situations. This may or may not parallel configurations found in other times and places.

Secondly, it means exploring the ways in which the realities of multiply marginalized groups are reflected in the organizations aiming to represent them. What is the composition of these organizations? What are their
demands? What are their activities and actions? What is their agenda? In addressing these questions, it is important to ask whether some elements of complexity have been lost. One may consider their political activities – both day to day and in the long term – through intersectional lenses. Furthermore, since these organizations are internally heterogeneous, it is important to consider whether the struggle leaves some of their members behind or renders them invisible. This invisibility might be the consequence of a strategic decision to pursue a political goal, or it could be an unintended effect. Indeed, we should not make assumptions about the capacity of organizations to adequately represent the multiply marginalized identities of their members at every level of their political projects.

We also need to be aware of the difficulty these groups may have in making alliances with other kinds of organizations, including feminist, labour and anti-racist movements, all of which tend to focus on single-issue struggles. The relationships with these other organizations can be frustrating, as they may need to compromise with other organizations’ tendencies towards essentialist approaches, hierarchy and simplified views on the complexity of their multiply marginalized realities. Researching organizing cultures among multiply marginalized groups can be helpful in identifying spaces for dialogue and collaboration with other single-issue organizations and in developing a better understanding of how they may work together towards a shared political view. The intersectionality of oppressions which affects the lives of multiply marginalized groups can indeed turn from being an insurmountable burden into being one of the most powerful tools they have towards liberation, both for themselves and for their allies.