

The Plight of Domestic Workers

Confluence of Gender, Class and Caste Hierarchies

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Domestic work has increasingly become part of the global division of labour and inextricably integrated within it. While migration for domestic work is an opportunity, in the absence of social protection, it also renders such workers more vulnerable. This essay takes its cue from how the feminist movement has approached the contradictions within domestic work and the various problems that domestic workers face. It throws light on the multiple hierarchies that the domestic worker is confronted with, as also the peculiar problems that the Indian domestic worker confronts. It explores a whole lot of different aspects of the domestic employer-employee relation within the context of the near absence of state intervention and the lack of legal protection. It also delves into the attempts that some trade unions, NGOs and church-affiliated organisations have made to bring protective measures and organise domestic workers to win labour rights.

In terms of social production and reproduction, domestic work is, unarguably, crucial work. There is no doubt that without the work of cooking, cleaning, washing, caring, child-rearing, etc. being performed, there is less likely to be any life on this planet. It is also evident that, by and large, it is women who are involved in doing this work. Domestic work, including care-work has been analysed by several scholars in terms of the global division of labour, the gender division of global labour as well as the “emotional labour” it embodies. Apart from the invisible and undervalued state of the work, its integration into the global division of labour makes for more complex levels of exploitation.

There are several strands that may be incorporated into the concept and politics of domestic work, generally as well as in its position in the current phase of globalisation. We will look at these strands separately and then try to weave some of them together.

Domestic work is part of the global division of labour and inextricably integrated within it. There is a substantial body of research on this aspect. Hochschild,¹ Ehrenreich,² Parrenas³ and several scholars look at both the gendered nature of domestic work and at the manner in which it is embedded in the global capitalist system.

Hochschild⁴ looks at nannies or childminders from the third world migrating to the first world. She calls it the “globalisation of mothering”. She goes into the “global care chain” which is a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. Hochschild raises interesting issues in terms of the upward “displacement” of attention and love in the hierarchy of wealth and power, which raise the question of how to bring about an equitable distribution of care. There is a great deal of literature that talks about the displacement of love of the domestic and care workers from their own children to other children in wealthier homes. “It makes us wonder, is there – in the realm of love – an analogue to what Marx calls ‘surplus value’, something skimmed off from the poor for the benefit of the rich?”

Both Hochschild⁵ and Parrenas,⁶ as well as other scholars, have looked at the case of domestic workers from the Philippines in greater detail and to some extent Sri Lanka, as the case there is much starker. However, most of the observations of these scholars are equally applicable to rural-urban migration of domestic workers in several countries, including India or even to non-migrant domestic workers.

To go back to some of the research on domestic workers migrating from the Philippines, since the early 1990s, 55% of the

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migrants have been women. Next to manufacturing in the electronics industry, their remittances make up a major source of foreign currency in the Philippines.⁷ Some scholars have described this migration as “globalisation from below”.⁸

Parrenas talks about how the state participates in this entire scenario. The state in fact advocates the making of its nationals – the heroines of the Philippine economy – as objects of globalisation. Overseas contract workers are “manufactured products” of the Philippines, placed in the same category as electronic goods. As a source of foreign currency, the commodified body of overseas workers is a central component of the gross national product of the country. As unprotected nationals, migrant Filipina domestic workers experience a de-subjection in globalisation. These women domestic workers then are no longer subjects and distinct individuals with their own set of characteristics, emotions and subjectivities. They are commodities of the state whose production generates surplus value for both the sending and the receiving nations at the cost of their abject vulnerability as nation-less citizens. In globalisation, the distinctions between the flows of labour and goods are consequently diminished in the hands of capital.⁹

On the other side is the creation of demand for this “globalised mothering”, broadly speaking. Just as global capitalism helps create a third-world supply of mothering, it creates a first world demand for it. In the United States (US), for example, the past half-century has witnessed a huge rise in the number of women in paid work – from 15% of mothers of children aged 6 and under in 1950 to 65% today. American women now make up 45% of the American labour force. Three-quarters of mothers of children 18 and under now work, as do 65% mothers of children 6 and under. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has also reported that the average number of hours of work per week has been rising in the US.¹⁰

Even in Scandinavian countries like Norway, that have a relatively highly developed welfare system with increasing provision of public childcare and a strong public normative emphasis on gender and social equality, the system of paid domestic work seems to be on the rise. Despite 84% coverage in public childcare, *au pair* (French term for migrant domestic worker) immigration has increased greatly in recent years, especially from the Philippines. Norwegian families seem to be increasingly choosing to employ an *au pair* in a society where employing domestic help is generally unacceptable. Families do this by claiming to “not outsource care”, professionalising the relationship, calling it “micro aid” and emphasising the fictive family relationship. This practice seems to lower the threshold Norwegian families would otherwise have for employing domestic help and challenges Norwegian norms of social and gender equality.¹¹ “Outsourcing” of domestic work and care work was not part of the day-to-day life in countries like Norway for several decades now. At one level, this could be a result of the general prosperity of the society, where workers were not available for domestic work at cheaper rates. With increasing migration at a global level from the global south to the global north, that reality seems to be undergoing serious changes.

A chilling description of the care-chain drawn up by Hochschild is as follows:

The care in the chain may begin with that which a rural third world mother gives (as a nanny) the urban child she cares for, and it may end with the care a working mother gives her employees as the vice-president of publicity at your company” in all cases where women continue to perform caring roles.¹²

Migration: Vulnerability and Opportunity

This “care chain” enables some migrant women domestic workers to challenge gender roles or familial oppression.¹³ According to a very recent study by the V V Giri National Labour Institute and UN Women on migration of women workers, mainly domestic workers from south Asia to the Gulf, despite the conditions of vulnerability faced by the migrant female workforce from south Asia, the increasing feminisation of Gulf migration has had positive impacts on several regions of south Asia. At the macro level, increasing remittances by female migrants have reframed the development narratives (e.g., in Sri Lanka and Nepal). The empowering aspects of female migration are also evident at the local or micro level in the labour sending regions where subtle but important changes are taking place in the gender balance of power both at the household and societal levels.¹⁴

However, according to this study, regulatory regimes have adopted often contradictory policy measures, simultaneously encompassing restriction, protection and promotion of migration. The complexity of the migration processes, the contradictory pressures of the regulatory regimes, and the ambiguous position of women migrants with regard to their vulnerability at the workplace and changing gender roles at home have posed several new challenges for both state and non-state institutions. These range from the emergence of new institutional actors to new instruments and measures adopted by existing institutional actors.¹⁵

Some of these instruments and measures help women workers to access their rights as workers, for example, the programmes of several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments that aim at rights education before workers begin the migration process. Yet others seriously threaten worker security and safety, though often the objective of the instrument or measure is supposedly to protect workers.

One such policy is that of restricting the age at which women may be allowed to migrate, insistence on male guardian’s consent and temporary blanket bans. In the early 1990s, Bangladesh, India and Indonesia imposed a minimum age restriction. Currently, Indonesia’s minimum age requirement is 22 years, but in Pakistan it remains 35 years. In 1998, Bangladesh banned women from migrating as domestic workers; four years later, the government was urged to remove the ban. The Indian government’s balancing act between protective considerations and economic imperatives is mapped in the annual report of National Commission for Women (NCW) (2006-07).¹⁶ In 2001, NCW was asked by the labour ministry and Ministry for Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) to consider greater “flexibility and fewer impositions of age restrictions”. NCW’s concern was

that minors not be allowed to migrate for work, as young adolescents (15-16 year olds) could easily pass off as 21-year olds. It then recommended the above-30 age restriction.¹⁷

It has been argued that the emigration ban denies women their agency, equal status as citizens and the opportunity for economic and social empowerment. Moreover, it is too blunt a protective instrument and will further drive women's migration underground. It has also been observed that such restrictions further increase the vulnerability of the women. Illegal migrants account for a very large proportion of migrants all over the world and constitute one of the most disadvantaged sections. This is even truer of illegal women workers. This is because when women need to migrate, they do the entire round of agents and recruitment agencies. If women have to migrate they get passports done in any which way. Women negotiate in whatever manner it is possible to in their situation and try to turn it to their advantage by attempting to refashion illegal or illicit routes or methods of migration into licit ones. This is not always to their advantage, however.

The basis of much of these restrictive instruments is the confusion between migration and trafficking and often the thin line that separates the two. This is reflected in the definition of trafficking in the UN Protocol on Prevention of Trafficking (2003) that fails to distinguish between trafficking and consensual migration. It is also based in and in turn fuels the protectionism and the racism of the "developed world". It also exposes the patriarchal class and caste bias of the Indian state, where only women from a certain socio-economic background are faced with these restrictions while younger women from affluent backgrounds and all men are free to explore greener pastures.

The Feminist Movement and Domestic Workers

Domestic work has been a major issue of debate in the women's movement right from its inception. How does one evaluate domestic work? Is domestic work productive or unproductive? Does domestic work produce surplus value? What is the bargaining power of women when they are involved in domestic work? Is the slogan or demand of "wages for housework" politically correct? Does it give value to domestic work? Or does it merely confine women to domestic work and strengthen the sexual division of labour? Or does it give tools into the hands of women to change their conditions of work and life?¹⁸

The women's movement internationally has underlined the struggle against the invisibility of women – women's work, women's sexuality, women's needs, women's power, women's capacities and abilities, women's autonomy and much more. Different phases of the women's movement over the last centuries can be marked as underlining some of these invisibilities and devising strategies to expose and counter them.

Women's work, sexuality and autonomy have been important pillars of the current phase of the women's movement that began in the 1960s and 1970s the world over. An important aspect of this was the critique of housework or domestic labour and the almost complete equation of women to domestic labour. Domestic labour, in a sense, is one of the links between the personal and the political in the lives of most women.

In a way, it has the potential to unite women, as domestic work is an inevitable part of their lives irrespective of what else they do or whatever other occupation they are involved in; ultimately it is the woman who is responsible for seeing that it is done. On the other hand, domestic work divides women by pitting them against each other not as women, but as employers and workers. The differences in their class, caste, and ethnicity are underlined and reinforced in the domestic work one set does for another.

Also how does one incorporate the situation that this social labour in the guise of domestic work and its nexus to the economy are lost in the system of individualised, privatised and isolated nature of the activity? In the bargain, domestic work itself is rendered invisible and conveniently projected as a "labour of love", a natural attribute of women, an intrinsic need and aspiration emanating from the very depths of the female being.¹⁹ Because it is "natural" to do this work and because no social labour is spent on training the workers of domestic work and because it is women who do it, it is undervalued or not valued at all. How does one insist on evaluating it? How does one insist that women who do it are recognised and at the same time give women the option not to do it? How does one point out to the immense skills needed in the execution of domestic work? How does one value the skills involved in the work?

What about men doing "women's work" in their paid employment, like relatively better-paid chefs? And what about the work typecast as "women's work" also being generally low-paid? What strategies would bring out these contradictions and the gendered discrimination that women face in their work – paid and unpaid?

Another framework that looks at women's work and specifically care work is the macro-structural tradition. Patricia Fernandez-Kelly's pioneering ethnography of Mexican *maquiladora* workers argues that factory management capitalises on local discursive formations of gender and labour that allow for further exploitation of female workers.²⁰ According to Fernandez-Kelly, the logic of capital, in its quest for increasing accumulation of capital, works in conjunction with patriarchal notions of docile and naturally dexterous female workers to ensure a steady stream of cheap female labour. Elson and Pearson²¹ and Wright²² have made similar arguments, noting that both local and global markets prey upon pre-existing discourses of "nimble fingers" or "disposable women" to justify a low-paid, flexible, and above all, feminised labour force. According to Grossman, the service sector counterpart to the discourse of "nimble fingers" might be "caring hearts", a trope of femininity that genders certain labour as female, and justifies the low wages paid to healthcare providers, food service workers, retail workers and other personal service jobs.²³

It is important that this element is explored further given the changes in the structure of global labour markets, where manufacturing employs a far lesser proportion of the global workforce, with the "service" sector increasing in numbers and proportion as well as the "self-employed". Within the service sector too, there is a greater polarisation of different types of "care work" being portioned out to workers with

certain characteristics that pertain to their class, caste, ethnicity and gender.

These were some of the debates that raged in the women's movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s and continue even today.

Contradictions within Domestic Work

The conflict between the employer and the employee of domestic work has several strands. At one level, the work that the domestic worker performs is not for the woman of the household, but for the entire household itself. However, as within the household the man is not considered responsible for the housework and only the woman is supposed to be doing it and is responsible for it, it seems as if the contradiction and the conflict is between two women.

While the contradiction and conflict between the woman employer and the woman employee or domestic worker is in the public sphere in the realm of employment relations, the potential or real conflict regarding the gender division of labour in the house is between the man and the woman. And this is often in the realm of the private.

However, the implications of this private contradiction play themselves out in the public sphere as well. By and large, this so-called private conflict structures work in the public sphere as mainly a male domain. Even in the public sphere, there is a structuring and rigidity in the division of labour. It is more a division of labourers, where those in the lower rungs can never hope to move out of that labour, which is what the caste system dictates. For women the stigma associated with the labour, even as it matches that of the men in their castes, is doubly so because the public is also a male space. Women who enter it, enter male spaces and have to pay for that transgression. Every new sphere is defined as a male or female sphere, depending upon the nature of the work, its closeness to domestic or women's work and the skill levels needed for that work.

Whatever work women are engaged in, in the public sphere, the sphere of domestic labour is hers alone. She may reduce the burden of it by hiring the labour of another woman or do it herself. That is the autonomy she has. This is the arena where the domestic worker enters the world of the household and the gender division of labour within.

Domestic Work and Multiple Hierarchies

Domestic work is, in many senses, residue work. This is more so in postcolonial countries, where resources and employment opportunities have been limited. Especially when resources are limited, women are deprived of those by the family and by society. The postcolonial structure of politics and the economy also puts constraints on the social spending that needs to be put into health, education, other basic facilities and social infrastructure. This, together with the pre-existing hierarchies and political structures of caste, class and patriarchy creates a situation where there are large numbers of women who are forced to consider marriage as a "career" and life option. Marriage as a career emerges in the context of the state's neglect of female education and skill development, which then

become private aspirations/burdens of girls/women within families depending on their class position.

Moreover, within the family, it is the boys and the men who not only get precedence over girls and women in terms of resources on education and training, but all income-earning resources and capital that belongs to the family is reserved for the men. The only possible resource women have access to is the gold that is often just dead capital with an "emotional value".

Control over women's sexuality, labour, mobility and fertility are the pillars on which marriage and the family exist and sustain themselves in much of human history, as we know it. This control is often achieved by confining women to their homes and putting the responsibility of the entire household labour or domestic work on women.

In the Indian context, caste and ethnicity criss-cross with class and gender to further complicate the relationship with domestic work. Women of poorer households and "lower" castes have never been confined to their homes; the family cannot afford that. However, their sexuality, mobility and labour are controlled by the limited options they have for working outside. These options are limited by the resources spent on them which confine them to occupations and work that is supposed to be "women's occupations", the skill for which is not acquired by spending social or family resources, but by her own body at the expense of her own time and free labour. Women "acquire" these skills whether they want to or not, by merely possessing women's bodies and due to the way femininity is constructed in patriarchal society. This is the reality of domestic work, whether done outside one's home or inside it. Besides, domestic work can be picked up later in a woman's life cycle when other choices become even dimmer.

Another point of contention has been the position of the woman vis-à-vis housework. Women who are involved in domestic work in their homes are likely to value it differently from those who employ other women to do the work. Women from the middle and upper classes and in the context of India, upper caste, are the ones who employ women from the more disadvantaged class and caste to do the work in their own homes. These women, who employ other women from relatively more disadvantaged backgrounds, have a more complex attitude to domestic work itself.

At one level, domestic work has been defined as an exclusive female domain of work. Domesticity has been the arena in which certain sections of women have been confined for a long time historically. In fact, control over women's mobility and women's sexuality was imposed through twin controls – firstly, through control over women's access to work outside and secondly through the work inside the house being defined as her exclusive terrain.

Women Domestic Workers in India

In the context of India, till just half a century ago, the sign of being upper caste was the exclusion of women from paid work. In fact, when lower caste or class men aspired to a higher position, one of the first initiatives was withdrawing "their" women from outside or paid work. The women from the so-called lower castes and class were not so excluded, because

the households could not afford to survive without the participation of all the members in economic activity. Here too however, the work in the house, domestic work was almost the exclusive responsibility and burden of the woman.

It was only in the 20th century, due partly to the initiative of social reformers and partly due to British policy of wanting middle-level functionaries in the administration and to the gearing of education to that end, that women, mainly from the upper castes and classes, began to be involved in education and then in paid middle-class jobs. This was also helped by the process of industrialisation that was underway, prior to which the feudal order perpetuated bonded agrarian labour and unpaid household labour within the family. More and more women were gradually getting involved in paid outside work without men in the upper classes and castes sharing in the work inside the home. Thus began the proliferation of the category of domestic workers. Earlier, this was a small section in the employ of the nobility and the British.

Historical Overview

In India, in ancient times, domestic work was largely performed by the serfs of the landlords. These domestic workers were mostly from the so-called lower castes, the shudras. They were deprived of any means of production they could call their own. They lived by, and were supposed to live by, the sweat of their brow. The varna system ensured that they served those who were higher in caste as compared to their own status.

Later, as Indian society stratified by caste and class, it organised personal services, including domestic help, through the Jajmani system.²⁴ It was a common practice for royalty to buy domestic workers. For example, the Peshwas, the erstwhile rulers of Maharashtra, who were eventually defeated by the British, bought Kunbi women to wash their clothes and do other household work.²⁵ Women from the shudra and ati-shudra castes were brought in by the Peshwa State as agrestic slaves; their caste status determined the type of service that the women were supposed to provide.²⁶

One description of the situation of domestic workers in ancient India goes as follows: "They were served inferior food, subjected to corporal punishment and were thrown out when they were old and could work no longer".²⁷

The advent of industrialisation and urbanisation began to bring about changes in the economic, social and political structure of society. This also entailed changes in the lifestyles of people, including changes in gender relations and roles. Women, especially of the upper castes and middle and upper classes, began to get into education in a big way and also into outside employment. This however did not change the sexual division of labour within the home.

At the same time, there emerged a section of people, including women, who had less and less access to any means of production or survival. These were largely people from the lower castes and classes. They had no access to education or training that could open the doors to the type of employment opportunities that were available, especially in the postcolonial newly industrialising economy.

Thus the access of men and also of a small section of women of the upper castes/classes to educational and employment opportunities and the denial to men and especially women of the lower castes/classes, creates an ideal situation whereby the women and some men from the lower castes/classes are available for work at the homes of the upper castes/classes. This is ideal also because there is then some postponement of addressing the entire question of the sexual division of labour at least in these homes.

After the constituting of the colonial state and structuring of the education and employment situation as per its needs, there began the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. Close to these processes followed the green revolution. The hallmarks of the green revolution were the adoption of new production techniques and a quantum leap in agricultural production. This benefited only the owner-cultivators at the expense of the small farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, the poor landless workers and women. The tenancy laws that were enacted freed the richer tenants, the Marathas in the case of Maharashtra, to become capitalist farmers. The poorer tenants were not able to fully exercise their rights. Combined with modern commercial agriculture, these changes progressively ruined the living conditions of the poorer sections dependent on agriculture, with a consequent loss in land rights.²⁸ These changes also resulted in increasing mechanisation and a reduction in the need for agricultural workers. For example, a case study of Tamil domestic workers showed that the majority were agricultural workers. Low wages, recurrent droughts and accumulating debts drove them from their villages as work was available for only for a few months a year. All the women domestic workers who had small holdings had sold or mortgaged them to pay for the train fare to Delhi.²⁹

With the advent of market forces, traditional communities like adivasis and nomadic tribes have been alienated from their forests, lands and commons. The capitalist economy disrupted indigenous patterns of living, compelling migration. Tribal women, responsible for providing food, fuel, fodder and water were displaced and no longer had access to these natural resources. They were then forced to shift to urban centres where their lack of exposure to urban life and lack of access to skills and education forced them into paid domestic work. Often they were preferred as domestic workers, as a contractor put it: "They are docile and more dependable".³⁰ In Patna, the majority of domestic workers are girls from the Santhal, Munda, Oraon and Khadia tribes.³¹ There have been several cases of women being trafficked from rural areas to work as domestic workers or sex workers in cities and in other countries as well. However, given the abysmal conditions in several rural areas the line between migration and trafficking may be very thin. Often it is the parents or husbands of young girls who send/compel/sell young girls to agents from urban areas.³²

A significant proportion of this female workforce comprises single women. The low social and economic status of the occupation adversely affects their marital prospects. Women who return to their villages after working in cities as domestic workers report that they are looked at with suspicion and marriage proposals are turned down.³³

Besides gender, caste, class, the single status of the women, etc, language also plays a role in the demand for domestic workers from the weaker sections of society. For example, an employer in Delhi, when interviewed about her preference for Tamil migrants, stated: “A Tamil domestic worker, with her limited vocabulary and lack of fluency in Hindi or English, is less likely to answer back or argue for long”.³⁴

This has also been said about domestic workers who migrate to other countries and do not know either English or the local language. Total control and subservience is what some employers seek. On the other hand, migrant domestic workers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines are preferred by some employers because of their knowledge of the English language, so that the domestic worker is able to communicate better especially with the children of the employers.

The Domestic Employer-Employee Relation

This also brings out the dynamic nature of the relationship between the employer and the domestic worker. In the literature on domestic workers over the years, it is interesting that the discourse spans terms and phrases like “slave-like conditions of domestic workers”, “domestic workers being part of the employers’ family”. Part of this discourse seems to be changing and in some cases the relationship is becoming much more straightforward in terms of employer-employee. This could possibly be a “professionalising” of domestic work or of the employer-employee relationship in domestic work. This could be the laying bare of a relationship that was couched in terms that were in the familial terrain. Or an assertion that a service had been commodified and should be accepted as such, rather than a denial that is detrimental to the more disadvantaged in the relationship. This could also be seen as a gradual democratisation of certain segments of the labour market; a nascent stage, rather than a radical shift, but one where there is a discernible shifting of borders and boundaries. However, due to the very nature of domestic work and the relationship between the employers and workers, there is also an attempt at harking back to a relationship of an earlier period. Similar experiences have been narrated by young migrant women workers in Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka.³⁵

According to the survey by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI),³⁶ in Tamil Nadu 29.26% of domestic workers were widows, widowers, separated or divorced. This is partly due to the patriarchal structure of society that imposes serious restrictions on women’s mobility and autonomy. This is especially true of young single women. Domestic work in private homes enables them to earn for supporting parents and siblings or save for a dowry in an occupation that is supposedly in controlled conditions.

Domestic labour is the only avenue of employment because unlike men, women do not have contacts that can inform them of vacancies and vouch for them. Nor are they in a position to introduce other women to other professions. Nor do they have the knowledge or means to register at employment exchanges like male members of the family.³⁷

Precisely because domestic workers are employed in the “private sphere” of the household, and due to the fact that their work is deemed subservient, there is a resistance to recognising the domestic work relationship and appropriately regulating it. The cumulative result is that these workers experience a much greater degree of vulnerability.³⁸

Interestingly, up until a few decades ago, domestic work in the urban areas used to be the domain of male workers. In Maharashtra, they were called *Rama-gadi*. Men were supposedly preferred, since they could work both inside and outside the house. They could also be utilised for accompanying the family members (usually young girls) to outside-the-house visits. Women’s mobility was much more restricted then. However, the influence of city life and the opening of some avenues for men in formal employment led to preference for non-domestic work by male workers, for example, peons in offices and educational institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. In several cases, the migrant male workers shifted from domestic work to formal sector work. This enabled them to get a steady income and hence they were able to get their wives to the cities. The wives were then initiated into domestic work. New employment avenues due to ongoing development activities also raised the level of wages being demanded by the male workers. The male counterpart (either husband or father or brother) did not object to payment of lower wages since it was seen as additional income and more decent than working at the construction site. The increase in cases of crimes also went against male domestic workers. A national survey of the city of Mumbai shows that in Mumbai almost 90% of the domestic workers are female. In the case of Delhi the share of female workers is currently 54%.³⁹

Domestic Workers and the State

The current phase of globalisation has seen some significant changes in the relationship between the three actors in the industrial relations system – the state, the employers and the employees and their trade unions. Trade unions of workers in the organised sector have documented how they have been at the receiving end of these changes with the employers being on the offensive and capital mobility being the unchallenged reality. Labour legislation that was the result of decades of struggles of workers has been blamed for bringing rigidity in the labour market, as argued by the *World Development Report, 1995* of the World Bank.⁴⁰ What has not been rolled back by changes in laws has actually been reversed in practice.

On the other hand, the last decade has seen the beginning of changes for the unorganised 93% of the workforce. The “unorganised sector” has been without any semblance of protection for the last several decades. There has been a systematic denial of any rights whatsoever. Laws like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2006 and the Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008 (UWSSA) have been enacted in the last decade, laws that claim to give rights to unorganised sector workers.

As we are discussing domestic work and workers, we will only confine ourselves to legislative initiatives that pertain to domestic workers.

The UWSSA covers a range of occupations and workers ranging from home-based workers to self-employed to domestic workers and more. The one point common between the NREGA and the UWSSA is that the financial as well as moral responsibility and burden is entirely with the State, with none whatsoever shared by employers.

The reason given is that vast sections of workers that work in myriad types of work, in industries or services, may not have an identifiable employer. The result is that the entitlement of workers in the UWSSA is as citizens and not as workers. It could very well be an Act that targets the poor in an anti-poverty scheme rather than an Act that bestows rights to sections of workers.

By the erasure of workers and their being subsumed in the ranks of the poor, there is also an erasure of the histories of struggle. It is historically important to document that the outcomes of workers' struggles have benefited all classes of people and citizens – an eight-hour working day, benefits such as entitlement to healthcare, education, other forms of welfare outside of wages and, most importantly, a right of people to their lives apart from the dictates of capital, whether in the form of paid leave or a paid weekly off. Also, at one level, the rights discourse, while it is empowering in a situation of overall marginality and makes claims of addressing the State, also erases classes in a society and the division of labour, where some keep labouring while others can enjoy leisure due to the possession of diverse forms of capital.

This gives rise to a number of issues, one of the most important being the lack of resources that such a scheme or Act would imply. One example is the Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act, 2008, the rules of which were framed in 2010. The Maharashtra government brought the domestic workers in the state under the Janashree Yojana, which gives them accident and death coverage and provides scholarships for two children. The national health scheme of Rs 30,000 for the family has also been extended to domestic workers.⁴¹

According to the rules, each domestic worker pays Rs 60 per year and Rs 30 as admission fee which is a one-time payment. The budgetary support is Rs 6.5 crore per year. The number of domestic workers who have registered was 1,08,000 till 30 April 2012. The estimated number of domestic workers in the state of Maharashtra is at least 20 lakhs.⁴²

As there is no cess or contribution from employers, the entire sustainability of the provisions of the Act is in doubt as it depends almost entirely on budgetary support, which is unlikely to see a substantial increase given the financial situation of the state as well as the deficit in the political will of the political class. In fact, worker-activists and unionists have pointed this out as an indication of the lack of political will of the government to actually implement such legislations.

The Modern Context

At this conjunction, another aspect emerges in the scenario. Several cities and towns in India have seen a deceleration of industries in the last two decades. The share of industries in

the gross domestic product has declined from 28% in the 1980s to 26% in the 1990s. The share of agriculture also fell somewhat from 31% in 1990 to 28% in 2000. The share of employment in the industrial sector has also declined. This deceleration has been rather steep in the more recent past. At the same time, the ubiquitous “service sector” has been increasing all over the world. In India, services grew from 41% to 46% of the gross domestic product.⁴³ The service sector comprises a wide range of activities from computer-related work to health-related work to entertainment, prostitution and domestic work, and much more.

With a decline in employment in the agricultural and industrial sectors, with large numbers of large, medium, small and tiny industrial units facing closure, especially in the larger cities where real estate prices are soaring, almost all new employment is opening only in the service sector. One section of this service sector comprises of work that entails relatively higher levels of education and training or at least a class/caste background that enables access to the English language.

The second set of jobs is in the fast growing entertainment industry – tourism, bars and hotels, etc. Here, an almost blanket requirement is of young women. This sector seems to be absorbing young women who have, just a few years ago, sought employment in the small and medium scale industries. So again the residue sector is that of domestic workers, mostly poor, disadvantaged, often relatively elderly women from the lower castes and classes. With increasing incidence of loss of other viable livelihood options due to globalisation, this section is even more vulnerable. Domestic work seems to be the last resort of this section of women, globally as well.

Women domestic workers in Mumbai and Pune spoke about younger women who have completed eight to 10 years of schooling also getting into domestic work. This is partly due to the relatively lower levels of pay in the small and tiny enterprises in the manufacturing sector due to the supply chain factors involved, whereby small and tiny enterprises are squeezed by the larger companies. The other reason is the relative flexibility of domestic work in terms of hours worked and the ability to determine timings at work to fit in with children's school schedules or other household chores and responsibilities. This is a way of negotiating shifting roles in the family and labour market.

In Europe, where over the decades, paid domestic work was on the wane till a decade ago, the trend seems to be reversing. Women immigrants from eastern Europe and other poorer economies seem to be available at lower rates and paid domestic workers are slated to be once again a visible category in the not so distant future in most parts of the world.

This global demand for domestic workers, who are mostly women from poorer backgrounds and poorer economies, implies at one level a strengthening or reinforcing of the sexual division of labour within the world of work. There is also a reinforcing of other divisions and hierarchies as well – race, caste, class, poorer economies apart from gender.

The hierarchy between manual and intellectual or at least non-manual labour is also reiterated. The employers of domestic workers are largely involved in some level of non-manual work. They are paid better and they insist on paying the domestic workers less. There is also an implicit rejection of the skill levels involved in domestic work. On the contrary, there seems to be another reinforcing perception – that this low wage of the domestic worker and the lack of benefits and facilities that she has to accept as part of her work are due to the fact that her work is unskilled.

According to a recent study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, occupational segregation by sex – the tendency of men and women to work in different occupations – is a common reason for gender differences in wages. Over the years, however, the movement of women into predominantly male occupations reduced occupational segregation to a considerable degree, as a result of women increasing their representation in previously white-collar and service jobs significantly faster than the increase in their share of total employment. In the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, the movement of women into higher-paying, traditionally-male occupations contributed to the narrowing of the gender pay gap. Thus, in 1970, 69% of men worked in heavily male occupations – defined as 20% or less female – and 45.8% of women were employed in heavily female occupations – more than 80% female. Though these numbers have become less skewed over the years, occupational segregation persists. And so do wage differences.

According to the paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research, after an initial period of convergence, the pace of desegregation of gender-neutrality in occupations has again slowed down. Consistent with previous research, the paper finds that the decline in occupational segregation by sex has been slowing and by the 2000s, the decrease in segregation had become extremely modest.

Most of the reduction in occupational segregation achieved over the period as a whole was primarily due to women entering formerly predominantly-male occupations – particularly white-collar and service jobs – rather than men entering formerly predominantly-female occupations. There was no evidence of similar female gains in blue-collar jobs. According to the authors, a large entry of men into predominantly female occupations is unlikely as long as such jobs continue to pay less. Domestic work, according to this logic, is likely to remain a women-dominated field in the near future.⁴⁴

In the last two decades, most governments have attempted to shrug their responsibilities in terms of the social sector. The withdrawal of the state from the social sector has meant that it is the most underprivileged sections of society in terms of class, caste, race and gender who pay for services provided by the state, by foregoing much needed services or working harder so that their households can avail of these, for example, health-care, care of the ill, of children or of the physically or mentally challenged. This implies a trend towards privatisation of the social sector through domestic workers who, without exception, belong to the most underprivileged sections of society.

The current phase of globalisation has brought forth several contradictions. It is partly the clash between economics and politics at this point in time. While the state is averse to taking on any responsibility, there is the absolute necessity of absolving capital of it. The contradictions of capitalism – with rapacious capital invading land and all natural resources forcing large swathes of people off their land and livelihood, with deindustrialisation of large areas, including entire countries – all this gives rise to situations whereby the state is compelled to respond to the needs and demands of citizens as citizens, after denying them their rights as farmers or workers.

This could be one reason why after over five decades of demanding legislation for domestic workers, it is only in the last decade that there is a semblance of a law, however weak. The weakness of the legislation itself is possibly a balancing act between the two sets of citizenry the state is attempting to respond to – the employers and the workers in domestic work.

Estimates Regarding Domestic Workers

According to an International Labour Organisation (ILO) document of 2011: “Although it is not unusual to find discrepancies between official estimates and estimates from other sources, the case of India is particularly striking, given the magnitude of the difference.” It notes that the media and the non-governmental organisations cite 90 million domestic workers in India. However, no primary source for this figure is cited. On the other hand, Rajni Palriwala and N Neetha (“Paid Care Workers in India: Domestic Workers and Anganwadi Workers”, UNRISD, Geneva, 2009) estimate 2.5 million domestic workers, using household survey data; but their data excludes several categories of domestic workers. The most comprehensive data source for India is the Employment and Unemployment Survey conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) at the national level every five years. According to data from the 61st round (conducted between July 2004 and June 2005), there were 4.2 million domestic workers representing 1% of total employment. Since the great majority of domestic workers are women, some 2.2% of all employed women are domestic workers (compared to 0.5% for men).

Types of Domestic Workers

Full-Time: The full-time domestic worker may either be living with the employer in his/her dwelling or may be there for the day and returning to his/her house after the day’s work, usually of 10 hours. Under both cases the domestic worker is asked to undertake multiple jobs, both inside and outside the house. Those staying with the employer are considered to be on call 24 hours a day. Only in rare cases are the family members of domestic worker allowed to live-in.

Part-Time: The part-time domestic workers are engaged for either specific jobs or are employed for multiple jobs for a specific time. Such domestic workers have more than two household

employers at a time. Normally after completing the morning shift they return to their houses to take care of their own domestic affairs. Thereafter they return to work for the evening shift. Meals are not part of the deal but could be offered at times.

Single or Multi-function: The domestic worker could be engaged for a single job, e.g., cooking, house cleaning, dish washing, attending to babies/old persons, etc. Part-time domestic workers are usually single function workers while the full-time are multiple function workers.

More often than not, though the part-time as well as single/multiple function domestic workers may not work full time with one employer, their workday is such that in terms of the time and effort, they actually work full-time.

Child Labour: An important invisible aspect of the domestic workforce is child labour. According to the CBI survey, overall, one-sixth of workers were children, with Karnataka having the highest percentage – 30.48%. In Mangalore alone, 43% of male domestics were boys below 15 years. The 1997 Government of Maharashtra survey estimated that 10% of the domestic workers in Maharashtra comprised of children.⁴⁵ A 1994 survey of 200 domestics in Anna Nagar in Chennai found little girls doing the work.⁴⁶ Another study revealed that in Delhi, a 10-year-old girl begins domestic work independently and by the age of 14 is working in at least four homes.⁴⁷ The age of a child makes her/him completely dependent on the employer as they also lack support structures outside the workplace; they are often surrendered by parents to agents and employers for whom they offer obedient, uncomplaining service. In return, they are subject to abuse and harassment and denied wages on the specious claim that they have been “adopted” by the employer concerned.⁴⁸

Issues at the Workplace

Domestic workers from most countries face very similar issues. To begin with, lack of recognition as workers in the legal and administrative framework is the underlying condition of domestic work in most situations. This denies domestic workers even basic rights, like approaching courts for their grievances. No labour laws apply to this category of workers, as we shall deal with in detail a little later.

Extreme insecurity of employment is an important part of the experience of domestic workers. She may be asked to leave work at any time without any prior notice. Often, when domestic workers fall ill or are facing some crisis and cannot go to work for a few days, that is the time, they are informed that they no longer have their jobs. This is the precise time they need their work and the wages very badly. This insecurity is exacerbated by their generally insecure existence. Their work, their place of residence, proof of either work or place of residence is often all connected and that makes their very existence precarious and insecure. Multiplicity of employers is one of the strategies used by domestic workers to protect themselves from employment insecurity.

Another crucial problem that domestic workers have to face is abuse. This includes sexual harassment. It is often said that domestic work is safe work. It can and has turned the exact opposite of that for many women, especially young girls. The workspace of the domestic worker is somebody's home. It is in his/her total control and free whim to do what he/she wants. There have been several instances when women and young girls have been beaten up, raped and even murdered. The abuse of domestic workers is wide-ranging. It varies from denial of dignity, as the Pune and other domestic workers have articulated, to beating, taunting, caste abuse, accusing of theft and so on. This has often taken very serious proportions, especially when the domestic workers are socially vulnerable, as in the case of migrants of young or single women.

The third very difficult area is that of very low wages, cuts in wages and deceit in wage calculations. By and large, the wages of domestic workers are far below minimum wages. There is a tendency to not increase wage levels for years together. Inflation eats into the wages of the women, effectively reducing her real wages. Most of the studies point out that most domestic workers live below the poverty line. Arbitrary cuts in wages for leave taken and even when employers are out of town and there is no work for the domestic workers are some of the reported complaints. For the part-timers, this is also a big issue.

“They did not pay me last month and claimed that they have paid”, is not a very rare complaint.⁴⁹ As a rule, there are no records for the work done or the remuneration given to informal economy workers at least in most countries of Asia. In the calculations of advances taken and wage cuts in lieu of advance, deceit is commonly reported. In case of migrant domestic workers, deceit by agents who arrange work in other countries is also reported.

The fourth aspect is the work itself, which is often very heavy. Domestic work is looked at as something that comes naturally for women and more domestic work seems to be no problem for the giver. Several buckets of clothes to wash, often quite unnecessary, are a common complaint. “They just love to make us work hard, real hard”, says one domestic worker. There is also the tendency to continuously increase the workloads of domestic workers. When the informal agreement takes place, one set of work tasks is agreed upon and as time goes by, the employers continue to ply new tasks on the women domestic workers. Extracting maximum work seems to be a universal employer instinct! Besides, domestic work often involves long hours of work. For full-time domestic workers, who live at the employers' home, there seems to be no limit to working hours. They are often on 24-hour duty. If there are unexpected guests in the middle of the night, if the employer is coming home late or is used to late nights, the domestic worker has to be on call till late. And the day begins as usual, early, as there are often others who need her services in the morning as well. For half-time domestic workers, the wage rates are so low that they have to work in several houses to make both ends meet. Either way long working hours is a common problem faced by domestic workers.

The increasing use of machines and gadgets has different impacts on domestic workers in different situations. In some cases, domestic workers lose their jobs because washing machines or vacuum cleaners are brought into the households where they used to work. In some cases, women domestic workers have to learn to wield these machines and take extra care that they are not damaged. This is often said to be a big burden for the women domestic workers. According to one domestic worker, "These days, houses have plastic emulsion paint on their walls. So the employers make us wash and wipe walls almost every second day. You have no idea how our hands and shoulders pain after washing and wiping these walls."⁵⁰

Working conditions of domestic workers generally are difficult. There are no provisions for paid leave for domestic workers. Leave is something that the best of employers grudgingly give them. Paid leave is an even tougher proposition. This is also one work where even national holidays cannot be enjoyed. In fact, during the festival season, when the rest of the world enjoys itself, domestic workers have more work to do – helping with the cleaning and swabbing, special cleaning, etc. Besides, most domestic workers report that due to the nature of work and timings of work the timing for their food is often irregular. Intake of food for the domestic worker is often possible only after the employer's lunch and/or dinner has been leisurely finished. This is a common problem faced by stay-in domestic servants.

Another difficult issue is that of health and healthcare. One of the problems is occupational health problems. The Encyclopaedia of Occupational Safety and Health by the ILO⁵¹ has the following to say about occupational health problems and accidents of domestic workers:

The following sketch of problems of accidents in domestic work is drawn from data from hospital records and detoxication centres, mortality statistics and reports from safety councils, public health departments, police and fire departments, insurance companies and general practitioners. The types of work leading to domestic-work-accidents are: Manual and mechanical tasks, indoor and outdoor duties, taking care of persons, goods, household linen, furniture and other things, cleaning of premises and utensils, kitchen work and commuting in outdoor duties.

Seventy-five per cent of all fatal domestic accidents are caused by falls, fire and poisoning. Another related area is that of occupational diseases. Skin diseases, particularly eczema, are reported among cleaning women. Rheumatic complaints due to repeated immersion of hands in water or working in hot work areas, tenosynovitis such as housemaid's knee; lumbago, backaches are relatively common. There is a possibility of infection from affected employers or their family members and visitors.⁵² Domestic workers do not have any sickness benefits. Their health problems have to be dealt with by the domestic workers on their own as there are no medical or sickness benefits. This results in domestic workers paying a large part of their wages on health-related expenses or alternatively they tend to totally neglect their ailments, often resulting in major illness or even early onset of old age or even death.

Domestic workers are not entitled to retirement benefits either. Domestic workers have to continue to work till as late as

they can manage. The wages are so low that savings are just not possible. And there is no provision for any benefits that they can access once they can no longer work. The Maharashtra Act of 2008 registers domestic workers from the age of 15 to 60. There is an assumption that after the age of 60, women do not need to work for their living, without giving them a right to retirement benefits.

There are some seemingly strange issues that domestic workers have to face. One of them is that they are sandwiched between authorities at their workplace. In almost all the houses there is more than one centre of power, be it husband and wife, or one male against another or daughter-in-law and mother-in-law or between sisters-in-law, etc. The brunt of these power relationships is often borne by the domestic worker as not only is she regarded as a channel of communication, but is also a media to express anger against the other member(s) of the family. The push and pull power game makes the job of the domestic worker difficult and delicate.

Another situational issue, one that has a relevance to the ability of domestic workers to organise, is the contradictory relationships with their employers. As almost all domestic workers come from a caste and class where their peers – relatives, friends and colleagues – also share the same or similar vulnerability, there are often no back-up mechanisms or structures when they are in crisis. When there is an emergency like an illness or a sudden death, there is only the employer she can borrow from, if she does not want to land up in the clutches of the exploitative moneylender. So despite the tension in terms of the work relationship between the employer and the domestic worker, there is also a relationship of dependence at different levels. This often complicates the simple model of the employer-employee relationship that is often assumed to exist between the domestic workers and their employers.

In certain situations there is an increase in the confidence of the domestic workers due to the changing nature of the milieu they work in. With polarisation in society, there is a class emerging that can afford to part with much more wages than earlier. This class is increasing at least in absolute terms. This is also the section that is demanding more minute and detailed services like dusting regularly, using of mixtures and washing machines, cooking food that is global rather than Indian. This creates a section within domestic workers that sees its own confidence increasing and with that its assertion, its exposure to larger canvases and some concept of their rights and self-respect. This has implications for the organisational possibilities of domestic workers. This is further strengthened as information about earlier and contemporary struggles of workers, especially of domestic workers, becomes shared knowledge.

Domestic Workers and the Legal System

The need for granting legal protection to domestic workers was felt as early as in 1959 when a bill entitled the Domestic Workers (Condition of Services) Bill was introduced, and we will come to it. The domestic workers have had no legal status in the eyes of the law up until a few years ago. They did not

come under the purview of the Industrial Disputes Act nor were they eligible for securing benefits under the Maternity Benefits Act, the Workmen Compensation Act or the Equal Remuneration Act. They were not covered even by the Minimum Wages Act. As such, the employers were not bound by any minimum requirements for employing a domestic worker. Consequently, there was no fixed timing nor was there any fixed rate of wages. These varied with time and geographical location.

Before the present legislation in Maharashtra, the domestic workers were not covered by any of the laws applicable to workers. Even now, the situation with regard to domestic workers' legal rights is very unclear. In fact, as there is yet no national-level legislation for domestic workers; they are not covered under any laws that can guarantee them safe, healthy working conditions, sick leave, accident insurance, paid holidays, minimum wages, gratuity, pension, etc.

Legal Efforts by Domestic Workers' Organisations

In tracing the trajectory of the legislative efforts for the protection of domestic workers, a bill recognising domestic workers as workers was introduced in the Indian Parliament on 21 August 1959. As mentioned, the bill was entitled the "Domestic Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill", but it was allowed to lapse. The All India Domestic Workers' Union, Delhi, had in the same year made a representation to the prime minister of India demanding protection for domestic workers under the Payment of Wages Act and the Minimum Wages Act. Another bill introduced in 1972 also remained on paper. The next step was "The House Workers (Conditions of Service) Bill, 1989", which also did not become an Act. Despite repeated incidents of abuse of various types coming to public notice, a legislation ensuring legal protection to domestic workers has been scuttled for several decades.

In the year 1994, several trade unions and NGOs in Maharashtra came together to campaign for and demand legislative protection for domestic workers. The organisations that were part of this campaign comprised a wide range. Some were trade unions with a left orientation, some with a right-wing orientation, some were church-based groups and some were voluntary funded organisations. Some of these include the Pune Molkarin Sanghatana, Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), and SETU, which is a project of Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work, Bombay, House-workers' Solidarity, National Domestic Workers' Movement, the Gharelu Kamgar Sangh, etc.⁵³

In response to the efforts of these unions and NGOs working with domestic workers, the labour minister of the state of Maharashtra appointed a committee to investigate the conditions of domestic workers and enact suitable legislation. Unfortunately, this process did not go any further or yield anything substantial.

In 1998, following a government report on the problems faced by domestic workers that also included some suggestions, in the year 2000, a code of conduct for employers was issued by the Government of Maharashtra.

The 5-point code provided for:

- 15 days' paid leave;
- weekly-off or a day's extra pay;
- travel allowance;
- a month's salary as Diwali bonus; and,
- enhancement of wages with immediate effect.

The code emerged from a 1997 survey of 3,000 domestic workers and focus interviews of 260 workers in Mumbai, Thane and Dombivali districts. The report talked about the similarity between agricultural labourers and domestic workers, both of whom must do the entire household work, with the former doing the same as an adjunct to working in the fields. Neither of these sections enjoys legislative protection. Both have demanded through their organisations to be included in the minimum wages legislation. The report concluded with a call for bringing these two categories of unorganised workers under at least the Minimum Wages Act or to appoint a Board as in the case of the Mathadi and Hamal workers (head-loaders, people carrying loads for business-people, merchants, etc), the scope of which may initially cover Mumbai that has the largest number of domestic workers or that a legislation be enacted covering them along with agricultural workers, washer people, medical shop attendants, and workers in sheds and nursing homes.⁵⁴

As a model of legislation for domestic workers, a few NGOs proposed a bill that (i) accords protection to domestic workers as workers under the law, (ii) covers all disputes relating to them, (iii) improves their conditions of work, (iv) guarantees them social security, and (v) gives them recourse to legal mechanisms.

Organising Domestic Workers

Attempts at organising domestic workers have been going on for several decades now. There were several types of organisations that were involved in these attempts. Given the fact that domestic workers are objectively extremely vulnerable, work in isolation and are almost completely unorganised, various organisations have tried to evolve methods of catering to their needs in different ways.

The main forms of organising efforts have been attempts at forming trade unions, cooperatives, employment and placement services, training and education, provision of legal services, provision of other support services, attempts at legislative provisions and rights and campaigns and several combinations of these functions.

One of the oldest and an important type of effort in helping domestic workers has been attempted by Church-related organisations. The Church seems to have taken a keen interest in the issues that relate to domestic workers. This also relates to their concern of working with the most downtrodden sections of society, people who have much less voice and representation than most other sections. In the Indian context, the Church has worked with dalits (the so-called lower castes and erstwhile untouchables) and adivasis (indigenous people). In Indian society, where the most downtrodden

sections are dalits and adivasis, domestic workers have been found to belong precisely to these sections. There have been several studies and surveys that have brought this out over the years.⁵⁵

National-level trade unions, also called central trade unions, have organised domestic workers for several decades now. The Bharatiya Majdoor Sangh, affiliated to the national right-wing party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, has been active in the south Bombay area and has a fairly large following. The Hind Majdoor Sabha, also a central trade union, has been organising domestic workers. The Communist Party-affiliated unions and their women's wings are also active and have formed unions in small and large towns like in Kolhapur and Pune city and around. The Pune Molkarin Sanghatana is one of the most well-known organisations and has been active since the year 1980. We will discuss the work of this trade union in detail a little later. In Nagpur efforts were made in 1981 to organise domestic workers. The organisation was called Molkarin Sanghatana. The women got together and organised rallies. Joint letters were sent to their employers demanding higher wages. Such efforts did work with some of the employers. In Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata and several cities and small towns domestic workers' trade unions have emerged and are emerging.

There are networks and federations emerging as well. On 3 February 2011 the Maharashtra Rajya Ghar Kamgar Kriti Samiti (Maharashtra State Domestic Workers' Committee) was formed. This samiti is a joint platform of domestic workers' unions affiliated to AITUC, BMS, CITU, HMS, INTUC, NTUI and Sarva Shramik Mahasangh. This samiti aims to raise issues of wages, conditions of work and access to social security. On 16 March 2011, over 8,000 domestic workers marched under the banner of the Samiti demanding that they be recognised as workers.⁵⁶

The main demands of the *Kriti Samiti* are:

- (a) minimum wages indexed on inflation should be fixed for domestic workers;
- (b) workers should be given ration cards and foodgrains at the below-the-poverty-line rates;
- (c) workers should be provided housing units;
- (d) workers should be entitled to a weekly holiday and other leave on festivals and national holidays;
- (e) immediate implementation of insurance and pension schemes under the state provisions for the workers;
- (f) workers should be registered immediately under the Welfare Board and issued identity cards.

These are welcome signs and similar developments seem to be gradually emerging in different parts of the world.

An important process has begun now with the ILO's recognition of domestic workers' rights. On 16 June 2011, the Domestic Workers Convention was adopted at the 100th ILO Conference in Geneva which sought to bring in an estimated 53 to 100 million workers worldwide under the realm of labour standards. The Convention recognises the "significant contribution of domestic workers to the global economy" and says this work is "undervalued and invisible, and mainly carried out by women

and girls, many of whom are migrants or members of disadvantaged communities."⁵⁷

India has a draft national policy which suggests fixing minimum wages for domestic workers by state governments, regulation of placement agencies which supply workers and their mandatory registration under the Shops and Establishments Act. In addition, scaling up and replications of skills training is also a component.

With the adoption of the Convention and the recommendation by the ILO, it is likely that more countries will follow suit. This is likely to give a boost to both debates on the issues related to domestic work as well as to further organising globally.

The Future of Domestic Work

By and large, however, the present situation as well as the future of domestic work and workers is linked to such related processes of globalisation and the globalisation of technology – washing machines, automated kitchens, food processors, more availability of ready-made food, different types of utensils and soaps and detergents used. Some of these new changes are likely to reduce the demand for domestic workers. Some of these changes are likely to demand a different skill-set of domestic workers. Even demographic changes like a greater proportion of aging population would mean a change in the extent and type of domestic workers that may be needed. Then there is also the pressure to keep time and be punctual. Mere working is no longer enough. The work has to be of a certain quality and standard, and time management is an important aspect of it.

Together with these changes, there are changes in the employment scenario. As employment opportunities for this section of women are reduced elsewhere, due to closure of factories or demand for a different type of skill-set, the supply into the domestic worker labour market is likely to increase, further affecting the condition of the labour market.

The decline in occupational segregation by sex has been slowing down. Most of the reduction has been due to women entering formerly predominantly male occupations, rather than men entering predominantly female occupations. This is more than likely to continue given the low wage levels associated with "women's work". This is a double bind of women in domestic work and for domestic work per se.

The demand for domestic workers is likely to fluctuate at the global level too. Immigration legislation is an important aspect of this labour market. However, the demand for domestic workers nationally and globally will be there for a long time to come, so long as there is international migration of better-off families and so long as the wage rates in developed countries remain higher than those in less developed ones.

The supply side of domestic work will be taken care of by migration – international and national – of poorer people and as long as the rural poor, especially the adivasis and dalits continue to be uprooted and displaced with no options or alternatives developed either by the state or society.

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