

# **Organizing for Empowerment: Exploring the Impact of Unionization on Domestic Workers in India**

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## **Abstract**

This article seeks to illuminate the impact of unionization on a group of domestic workers in the Indian metropolis of Mumbai. We argue that, as a result of being unionized, these domestic workers have been able to initiate a process of personal empowerment or “power within” which has, in turn, led to changes in how they perceive themselves and their place in the world. These changes which have led to an enhanced sense of self-worth and self-efficacy are related to changes that have occurred in the lives of the women at three levels: gaining formal recognition and social citizenship, experiencing changes in the cognitive domain and emotional habitus and the development of collective solidarities. We demonstrate how these changes have unfolded in an iterative and mutually constitutive manner. We also argue that, while unionization and being part of collective movement has driven a process of personal empowerment for the domestic workers, this has not necessarily resulted in a willingness by these women to initiate and sustain collective acts of social action around self-defined concerns and priorities.

**Keywords:** Domestic work; women’s empowerment; domestic workers’ unionization; informal workers; women; India.

## **Organizing for Empowerment: Exploring the Impact of Unionization on Domestic Workers in India**

As in many other parts of the world, domestic work in India is performed under precarious and informal working conditions outside the realm of labor regulation and social protection. Located at the confluence of the structural hierarchies of gender, caste, and class, paid domestic work is one of the most stigmatized and lowest paid occupations in India (Gothoskar 2013; Neetha 2009). The development literature has shown that with the turn to neoliberal reforms in most parts of the world from the late 1980s onwards, there has been a concomitant increase in the global informal sector due to the policies of market liberalization (Agarwala 2013; Chun and Agarwala 2016). Similar continuities can be seen in India where since the launch of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, informality has expanded and reproduced, contributing to the further immiseration and precarity of informal workers (Kerswell and Pratap 2016; Hensman 2011; Breman 2013).

Domestic workers are difficult to organize and mobilize due to the structural barriers inherent in domestic service. They are often involved in casual, fragmented and part-time activities which are conducted in physically dispersed and isolated private homes (Kabeer et al. 2013; Neetha and Palriwala 2011). Yet, in spite of these obvious challenges, domestic workers have been organizing and unionizing globally (see Blofield 2018; Bonner 2010; Burja 2000; Boris and Nadasen 2008; Nadasen 2015). In this article, we analyze the impact that unionizing has

had on a group of domestic workers in the Indian metropolis of Mumbai. Whereas scholars have shed some light on important aspects of precarious worker organizing in India (see Agarwala 2016; Hill 2010; Jhabvala 2013; Narayan and Chikarmane 2013; Gartenberg 2017), the literature in this field is still quite limited. This is even more so with respect to research on the mobilization of domestic workers in India, with a few honorable exceptions (see Devika et al. 2011; Eluri and Singh 2013; George 2013; Gothoskar 2005; Menon 2013; Moghe 2013).

There has been scant focus on changes that occur at a micro-level in the lives of domestic workers – that is, in terms of workers’ consciousness, subjectivities, and relationships with one another – as a result of unionization and the impact that these changes might have on the ability of women domestic workers to enhance their own capabilities and agency. In order to do precisely this, we turn, in this article, to conceptual resources from development studies, feminist theories on empowerment and social movement studies to show how domestic workers within the context of unionization, have been able to initiate a journey of transformation in their ability to experience an enhanced sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. We argue that the process of acquiring a greater sense of self-efficacy and personal empowerment is related to changes that have occurred in the lives of women post unionization at three levels: gaining formal recognition and social citizenship, experiencing changes in the cognitive and emotional domain and the development of mutual solidarities. Yet, at the same time, we indicate that while unionization and being part of a collective movement has generated a process of individual or personal empowerment, this has not necessarily resulted in the development of collective action that is initiated and sustained by the domestic workers themselves.

## **Methodology**

This article is based on ethnographically oriented fieldwork carried out in Mumbai in 2013 and 2014 by the first author. The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews,

focus group discussions (FGDs) and participant observation. The domestic workers were identified through a snowballing technique wherein after first contact was established with a couple of workers through the union, these women in turn, introduced the first author to other workers in their network. Only those domestic workers who were part of this specific union were interviewed as the aim of the study was to analyze the nature of changes, if any, that had occurred in the lives of the workers post-unionization.

29 interviews were conducted with 22 individual domestic workers in Mumbai (seven of whom were interviewed twice), and seven with trade union office bearers and volunteers in Mumbai. In addition, four FGDs with domestic workers were held. Of the 22 domestic workers interviewed, 13 were migrants from different districts in Maharashtra and three were migrants from other Indian states. The remaining had been born in Mumbai. 18 of the 22 women interviewed had joined the union within five years of its establishment in 2005, and two had been members since 2011. Two of the workers did not remember when they had joined the union. Among the 22 women interviewed, six were leaders of their areas<sup>1</sup> whereas the rest of the women were ordinary union members. The first author also conducted participant observation in the five months that she spent with the trade union in Mumbai, during which time she attended staff meetings, meetings held in the slum communities where the domestic workers lived (area meetings), and meetings of domestic worker leaders at the union headquarters every month (leaders' meetings). The names of the domestic workers, the union staff and the union have been anonymized in this article.

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<sup>1</sup> Area leaders are those domestic workers elected by the other workers who live in their neighborhoods /areas and function as the leader of the entire area or slum community.

It has been suggested that snowball sampling can lead to sampling bias due to the possibility that the participants will end up sharing the same characteristics/ traits, social conditions/ networks and everyday experiences (Cohen and Arieli 2011). This is especially unavoidable when the selection of the initial participants are not sufficiently heterogenous. At the same time, this sampling method is very commonly used in qualitative research, given that the objective is not generalization but instead thick descriptions, interpretations and explanations (Maxwell 2013). This article is based on qualitative ethnographic research and, consequently, achieving a representative sample was not a primary objective for us. More specifically, we focused on the views of the participants and sought to examine and understand how our participants actively create meaning and interpret their own situations, experiences and lifeworlds. However, we have attempted to capture as many of the facets of this as possible by ensuring that the initial participants we recruited were relatively heterogenous in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics, employment situations, and their relationship with the union. Also, by triangulating data collection methods such as interviews, FGDs, observation and informal conversations, we have been able to record and analyze the narratives regarding the impact of unionization from multiple sources. This adds to the credibility of the data collected and has helped to minimize bias. We acknowledge that we might have obtained competing narratives of the trade union if we had interviewed non-members, but this was beyond the scope of this particular study.

### **The Context of Paid Domestic Work in India**

Informal workers in India are involved in precarious and vulnerable work with limited access to decent working conditions, universal social security coverage and legal protection ( Neetha and Palriwala 2011). Domestic workers are a particularly vulnerable group, in the Indian context, as they lack access to the statutory and legal measures of the existing national level

labour laws because they do not qualify as “workmen” and the private residences where they work do not qualify as workplaces or “establishment” as defined in these laws (Neetha 2009). Due to this, they cannot claim work-related benefits such as maternity leave and social security nor can they demand rights for decent working conditions, minimum wages, hours of work, weekly holiday, paid leave and so on (John 2013). As a result, the terms of employment with their employers is not based on a written contract but on oral agreements and negotiations with employers are heavily dependent on the personal relationship between the workers and their employers (Bhattacharya and Sinha, 2009; see also Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007). This was true for the participants of this study too.

Ensuring fair and equal labor standards of all workers has increasingly become an important goal for policy-makers, state institutions, activists and civil society organizations. Policy instruments such as the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Decent Work Agenda has renewed the spotlight on the importance of improving the lives of people through their work. Specifically for domestic workers, the ILO’s Convention C189, adopted in 2011, is seen as a very important tool to promote fair and decent working conditions and labor protection for domestic workers globally ( ILO 2011a ; 2011b; 2013). However, the Indian state has not yet ratified this convention and has historically, been apathetic to implementing legislation to regulate this sector and ensure that domestic workers have access to the same legal and social protection as other workers (Chigateri et al. 2016). Although domestic workers in India have been brought under the ambit of some national and state level legislations, due to the non-implementation and weak enforcement of these legal statutes, these workers do not have any real access to the conditions necessary to attain decent working conditions for themselves. However, even in the absence of legally guaranteed rights, domestic workers, especially those who have been unionized such as the participants of this study, do practice forms of agency aimed at securing their welfare and interests at the workplace (see Barua et al. 2016).

Research within development studies has become increasingly more preoccupied with interrogating the links between improved working conditions for people and human development and scholars have argued that mobilizing workers, particularly those working in the informal economy, is a critical means towards achieving social justice and sustainable developmental gains (Selwyn 2016; Agarwala 2013). Selwyn's theory of labor-centred development posits that "collective actions by laboring classes can generate developmental improvements for themselves and their communities" (Selwyn 2016: 1035). He argues that laboring classes, when allocated primary agency, are capable of becoming agents in their own development by using their labor power to further their interests and agendas and build new collective resources, rather than those of capital (ibid : 1046). However forging such collective action, especially in the case of domestic workers, is a difficult process and the organization and mobilization of domestic workers, both in India and globally, have posed certain unique challenges owing to their structural positions and the conditions under which they labor (Neetha and Palriwala 2011; Kabeer et al. 2013; Blofield and Jokela 2018).

### **The Dynamics of "Power Within"**

One of the most important thinkers on the issue of women's empowerment is Naila Kabeer who defines empowerment as the "process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (1999: 437). Crucially for our argument here, Kabeer focuses on the importance of what she calls "empowerment from within" – that is "the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their *sense* of agency, or 'the power within'" (2001: 21). The process of "empowerment from within" involves reflection, analysis, and assessment and provides women with alternative vantage points from which to view their lives and situations. This, according to Kabeer, enables women to question "what has hitherto been taken for granted so as to uncover the socially constructed and socially shared basis of apparently individual problems" (Kabeer 1994 : 245). This process of conscientization,

according to Kabeer (1994), leads to cognitive transformations based on women acquiring new awareness and analysis about their rights, entitlements, the cultural norms and belief systems that underpin their subordination and the injustices associated with their structural positions, which in turn, give rise to new political subjectivities and forms of consciousness based on a language of rights and citizenship ( Kabeer and Kabir 2009: 331). These cognitive changes can be transformative in their impact as they aid in the building of voice or “the capacity to question, dissent, persuade, influence and challenge” ( ibid: 331). Later in this article, we analyze the nature of the cognitive changes that occurred in our study participants, as a result of newly acquired awareness and insights about their conditions, through participation in union activities. This process resulted in the strengthening of the ability of the women to reflect on and question their previously held assumptions and ideas which in turn, motivated them to respond to the dominant hierarchies that structured their lives (Kabeer and Kabir 2009). By doing this, we seek to deepen and extend Kabeer’s notion of “the power within” by providing an understanding of what specifically constitutes personal empowerment at the individual level in the lives of the domestic workers as based on their own accounts of their experiences.

In our attempt to explain what specifically comprises “the power within” or personal empowerment, we draw on key concepts from social movement theory. In particular, we draw on strands of movement theory that have emphasized the importance of emotional factors in driving processes of collective organizing and popular mobilization. In the 1990s, a significant turn in social movement studies prompted scholars to emphasize the role of emotions in collective action and movement politics. Suggesting that emotions are an inherent part of culture along with cognition and morality, these scholars have drawn our attention to how emotions suffuse numerous processes of collective action (Jasper 2011). Within this context,

these scholars also pointed out how the process of cognitive liberation<sup>2</sup> is not simply cognitive in an intellectual sense but is an emotionally laden process which leads to transformations in not just what people know but also in what they feel ( Jasper 1998: 415-416).

Social movement theorists have pointed out how transformations in the *emotional habitus* lead to new forms of personhood and subjectivities that can have far-reaching consequences on the ability of subaltern groups to experience empowerment and individual agency (Gould 2009: 32). According to Gould, the term emotional habitus refers to a social group's "collective and only partly conscious emotional dispositions, that is, members' embodied, axiomatic inclinations towards certain feelings and ways of emoting" (ibid.: 32). A group's emotional habitus based on its feelings can determine the generating or foreclosing of political horizons which Gould describes as the "attitudes within a social group or collectivity about what is politically possible, desirable and necessary" (2009:3,32). In this sense, a social group's emotional habitus, based on a certain emotional pedagogy, shapes how members feel and express their feelings and over time, these same emotional displays and practices, stabilize and reproduce this habitus (39).

Gould argues that the emotional habitus is neither given nor static and can change leading to the emergence of new affects and emotions and what she calls "new emotional taken – for-granted" (ibid.: 39). Being part of social movements, she points out, can give rise to changes in the emotional habitus of members, as a result of the ongoing interactions and inter-personal relationships, that members forge with each other and with the leaders of movements, which leads them to consider alternative interpretations and insights about their own positions and place in the world. Especially in the context of subaltern populations who have struggled with

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<sup>2</sup> Cognitive liberation is a term developed by Doug McAdam, which he defines as "A transformation of consciousness within a significant segment of the aggrieved population. Before collective protest can get under way, people must collectively define their situations as unjust and subject to change through group action" (1982: 51).

feelings of inefficacy, helplessness and hopelessness for most of their lives, being part of a collective movement engenders counter-spaces in which members experience “rich and textured counterfeelings” which is a critical factor in the development of a changed emotional habitus ( Gould 2009:210,134). We show, in the empirical section below, how this process has unfolded for our study participants, where being part of a trade union and having access to new ways of thinking , seeing and being and the understanding that the injustices they were subject to were neither inevitable nor natural and that an alteration in their circumstances was possible, led to significant changes in the previously held emotional habitus of fear and deference , to give way to a new found sense of personal efficacy, courage and assertiveness.

Developing a collective identity and a sense of solidarity among members of a subaltern group can be an important facet in the enhancement of personal empowerment. A sense of solidarity and belongingness generates affective ties to other group members on the grounds of a common membership, which in turn motivates participation and helps to build individual commitment to the larger cause (Jasper 1998). Jasper distinguishes between two types of collective emotions that are created in social movements – *reciprocal emotions* which “concern peoples’ ongoing feelings toward each other. These are the close, affective ties of friendship, love, solidarity and loyalty...” and *shared emotions* which are emotions that are held by a group outwards towards opponents or objects of protest (ibid.: 417). Collective emotions, especially reciprocal ones, help to build the “pleasures of protest” which encompasses the pleasure of being with other people one likes and undertaking collective activities together with these people (ibid.: 418). The satisfaction of action, assertion of dignity and the emotional energy generated by coming together as one become a motivation as important as the stated goals of the movement (Jasper 2011).

### **Engendering Empowerment: Striving for Self-Worth, Dignity and Citizenship**

### *Origins and Growth of the Trade Union*

The trade union of which the domestic workers are members was established in Mumbai in 2005. This is a formally registered trade union that operates in 22 districts of Maharashtra with a total membership of approximately 55000. In Mumbai, the number of domestic workers who are part of this union is 11000. The union has very limited funds for its functioning and the main source of its funds are the membership fees paid by domestic workers ( which at the time of doing fieldwork, was less than a dollar per annum) and a grant given by domestic workers of seven United States Dollar when the union has helped them to obtain ration cards. The honorariums paid to the union organizers come from the All India Trade Union Congress, a union affiliated with this one. The domestic workers became members of this union mainly through word of mouth and contact made with union volunteers when they visit the different slum communities where the workers live.

The overarching goal of the union is to demand pension for the workers from the state and the establishment and running of the Domestic Workers' Welfare Board.<sup>3</sup> In order to achieve these goals, the union undertakes “collective bargaining” activities with the state which comprise peaceful protest through rallies and demonstrations in order to force the state to give attention to the issues and problems of domestic workers, building visibility for the issue of domestic workers both from within the system and outside and creating awareness about the issues of paid domestic work within the larger civil society. At the same time, the union also works to address the practical needs of the domestic workers such as helping them to obtain ration cards

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<sup>3</sup> The Domestic Workers Welfare Board is tripartite structure which comprises representatives from state, the employers and domestic worker groups. Although this welfare board was established in Maharashtra in 2008 , it was dissolved in 2015 after the present Bharatiya Janata Party led government in India came to power in 2014.

and bring about reforms in the public distribution system (PDS)<sup>4</sup>, opening bank accounts for them, helping in the school admissions of the women's children, taking up cases of false accusations of thefts against the women by their employers, intervening in cases of sexual harassment and working with the husbands of the women to create greater awareness with regard to equality and cooperation within the household.

The organizing model promoted by the union enables the coming together of poor and marginalized domestic workers who are otherwise highly dispersed and isolated, to organize around the common problems and issues that they face. The process of creating awareness among the domestic workers with regard to their worth and value as workers, legal rights as workers and the building of a collective worker identity is an ongoing activity in the union which takes place within the frame of the monthly meetings held with the union members. There are two types of meetings held every month: one is the leaders meeting which is held in the office of the trade union and attended by the domestic worker area leaders, office bearers of the union and the organizers and volunteers of the trade union.<sup>5</sup> These meetings are an important interface where the union organizers and volunteers of the union elicit the participation of the area leaders in planning for future union events while at the same time, also convey information about impending union activities and events, discuss issues and problems pertaining to the different areas (as reported by the area leaders in these meetings) and reinforce the ongoing

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<sup>4</sup> In India, ration cards (issued under the Indian Public Distribution System or PDS) are used primarily by the poorer sections of the population to purchase subsidized foodstuffs (wheat and rice) and fuel (kerosene) from fair price shops which are known as ration shops. The poor also use these cards as proof of their identity.

<sup>5</sup> The office bearers of the union are the President, Secretary and Treasurer. While the President is a domestic worker, the other two posts are held by two of the senior organizers of the union. The senior organizers of the union are the three All India Trade Union Congress members who established the union in 2005. The volunteers, three in number, who form the next level in the chain of command of the organization, are mainly responsible for implementing the different programmes and activities of the union. However, the senior organizers are also closely involved in implementation of union activities and spend a great deal of time in the field working directly with the domestic workers.

process of creating and strengthening awareness of the rights and entitlements of the domestic workers. The second type of meeting are the area meetings which are held in the different slum areas where the union members live and which are attended by the members who live in the different areas, the area leader of that specific area and one of the senior union organizers and union volunteers. These meetings are used as a forum to strengthen awareness in the women about their identity and rights and entitlements as workers and discussion is generated around the issue of challenging and questioning social and cultural beliefs which construct domestic work as less respectable or dignified than other types of work. The area meetings are conducted and led by the organizers and volunteers of the union. We now turn to a discussion of our empirical material to show the changes that have occurred in the lives of the domestic workers after they were unionized.

### **Gaining Recognition and Social Citizenship**

Engendering worker identity has been a key part of the mobilization efforts of the trade union. The transition from “servant” to “domestic worker” is seen as key to instilling a sense of worker consciousness and in raising the status of and reducing the stigma around domestic work. This process of identity building and formation which in turn forms the basis of claims making is particularly relevant in the case of domestic workers who have struggled for recognition as citizens and as workers with legally recognizable rights all their lives.

On joining the union, the first thing that the union does is issue identity cards to the new members with their photograph and address. These cards are an important strategy for cultivating worker identity and play a very important symbolic role for the union members as defining their role as members of a trade union, i.e. a legally defined workers’ organization. Assistance is given in opening bank accounts for the workers where they are able to start saving

small amounts of money, obtaining ration cards<sup>6</sup> which enables them to access subsidized grains under the PDS and in obtaining other documentation such as voting registration cards and so on. In addition, the workers at the time when the fieldwork was conducted were also helped to register with the state Domestic Worker Welfare Board<sup>7</sup> and get the welfare board identity card which gave them state recognition as workers for the first time in their lives. Asha and Shikha who have been members of the union since 2005 and 2011 respectively elaborate below:

*When I joined this organization, we had nothing concrete with us. We left our village so they cut our names from there. And here too, we had nothing to prove our identity. In school, they ask for our child's ration card. Where could I go? So I talked to people there [in the union] to give us ration card... so they gave us ration card. So... the organization has helped us to stay in Mumbai.*

*We have many facilities due to this union. We have ration card because of it.... If we have ration card, then we have our world! We have a big proof. So wherever the people in organization go, we go after them united.... We have many identity proofs from it. And we will be getting many more slowly with time.*

These words are very revealing in that they underscore the importance that domestic workers attach to having state sanctioned documents that give them the ability to formally prove their identity and access state benefits and services. These changes in the relationship of the workers

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<sup>6</sup> The union helps the workers to get the ration cards which are issued by the state. Research from other parts of India and the world has shown that helping domestic workers meet their practical needs such as obtaining official documents which in turn help workers to access state services and benefits is not uncommon (see Menon 2013; Kabeer et al. 2013).

<sup>7</sup> At the time when the interviews took place, the welfare board was still operational, but it closed down in 2015. We do not discuss this development in this article as the fieldwork, on which this article is based, ended in July 2014.

to the state constitutes a fundamental part of their empowerment and ability to exercise agency as it redefines their roles as citizens with legitimate claims to economic and social protection. The symbolic value of being counted as a “worker” by the state apparatus for the first time is a profoundly transformative experience for domestic workers. As recent migrants from the countryside to Mumbai, many domestic workers do not have the necessary documents to access welfare benefits. The union therefore starts its organizing work by enabling the women to prove their identity to the state.

The ration cards, union membership cards and the Domestic Worker Welfare Board cards also give protection to the workers against having to resort to bribes, intimidation and harassment from local authorities such as the ration card shopkeepers and the police. Domestic workers being part of the urban poor operating in the informal economy are especially vulnerable to demands for extortion and bribes from different local agents of the state. However, as a result of being members of the union, corruption mediates workers’ access to the state to a lesser extent and this is integral to the exercise of citizenship.

Scholars have pointed out how in India , informal sector workers are less concerned with transforming their work into formal work but more with improving and upgrading the conditions of their informal work and livelihood options by increasing the security of their base as social citizens from which they can take their struggle forward (see Narayan and Chikarmane 2013; Agarwala 2013). The women of our study attached great salience and importance to obtaining formal documents such as the trade union and welfare board cards which prove their identity as this was the first step in the process of gaining social citizenship and the basis on which they could make further claims on the state for support for various kind. In this sense, these formal changes in the lives of the women, brought about through mobilization, have established the fundamental preconditions for obtaining recognition and in enabling the individual worker to become “legible” as a citizen with rights in the eyes of the state.

## **Cognitive Gains and Transformations in Emotional Habitus**

In terms of cognitive changes, many of the domestic workers spoke about how their participation in union activities had enabled them to acquire new knowledge and to increase their level of awareness about their rights and entitlements. As a result, they had also learnt how to engage with state institutions and personnel in a competent way (see also Kabeer 1994; 2001; 2009). These changes developed in and through different mediums - union meetings, area meetings, taking part in rallies and protests, informal interactions with the staff of the union - and was a long and slow process and occurred through on-going learning, reflection, observation and action. This newly acquired awareness and knowledge relating to their rights and entitlements is a key example of what Kabeer (1994) refers to as the cognitive dimensions of empowerment in her conceptualization of the power within. Wahida, who has been part of the union for two years reflects on the value of acquisition of this knowledge in her life:

*No, earlier I did not understand much. We did not even know how to deposit money in the bank... We did not have that much brain....We are getting to learn new things and now we are getting clever.... we are not educated but we get a lot of knowledge from it [the union], from the things that they tell us and the way they talk. We all changed because of it. We are not the same brainless people that we all used to be in the village...*

Similarly, Shikha, a member since 2011, explains her new found sense of awareness:

*When we move out in the world, then only we would be aware of it. Sitting at home does not make us aware of what is happening in the world outside.....If they [the union] had not been there, then we would not have had any identity. Through them, we got to know about the outside world. We got to know what kind of respect we deserve.*

Several of our study participants also spoke about what they perceived to be their rightful claims and entitlements from the state. We noticed a strong correspondence between what the women articulated their rights<sup>8</sup> were and what the union organizers articulated as the goals and objectives of union programmes. Below Shakti who has been a union member since 2006 elaborates on what she perceives to be her rightful claims and entitlements:

*Our rights are that we should get ration from the ration card. We should get a small house, as we are poor and do house work. So one more right is that we should get pension. Because we work at their [the employers] place... So we demand our rights from the government...I got to know everything after this union came....I have gained a lot of knowledge. I got to know more people, and what the union does, how it works and operates.*

Swati, a 54 year old domestic worker who has been a union member since 2007 explains to us that she has expectations with regard to her benefits from both her employer and rights from the state<sup>9</sup>:

*[My rights are] to take yearly bonus at Diwali from employers. If anything happens to me at their [the employer's] home, then it is their responsibility to take care of me. And they are also responsible for my leave. I should get pension when I become sixty years old. Government should provide medical facilities.*

This emergence of a rights-based consciousness is very significant for the domestic workers. The union's organizing model has provided the collective frame and social conditions within

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<sup>8</sup> While some of these claims such as ration card are legally sanctioned rights that the state has to provide to all citizens, others such as pension for domestic workers are claims but not legally sanctioned rights yet. However, the domestic workers of this study describe these claims as rights that they should get from the state.

<sup>9</sup> Some domestic workers are given certain benefits from their employers such as a bonus on Diwali, loans to meet their needs, old / new clothes, food, money to meet educational expenses of their children and so on. These are not legally enshrined rights but more gestures of benevolence carried out by employers in order to retain the services of their employers and ensure a satisfactory level of service (see Barua et al. 2017).

which the domestic workers have been able to undergo a process of change in their emotional habitus and cognitive awareness (see also Gould 2009). These two levels are inextricably linked as it is only once the women attained an awareness of their legitimacy and worth as workers and citizens and the practical skills and knowledge to engage with different state apparatus that they started to have a greater sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy in their abilities and actions. Here our argument dovetails with the arguments made by Kabeer et al. (2013) in their work on organizing women workers in the informal economy. Cognitions and emotions are thus mutually constitutive in the emergence of a sense of empowerment. Gaining a sense of being individuals who can interact with their surroundings to cause an alteration in their circumstances, the domestic workers demonstrated a significant change in their previous emotional habitus of fear and submissiveness, as reflected in their narratives of an enhanced sense of personal courage and self-worth (see also Jasper 1998; 2011; Gould 2009). These changes in cognitive awareness and subsequent changes in the emotional habitus wherein the women were invested with new feelings of individual and collective strength and efficacy exemplify Kabeer's (1994, 2009) and Gould's (2009) argument that subaltern populations experience changes in how they perceive themselves, their abilities and their emotions when they become part of collective movements that attempt to engender critical consciousness in them relating to their rights, entitlements and sense of self-worth.

In their endeavor to promote worth, respect and dignity to domestic workers, the union organizers have attempted to reverse discourses of inferiority and worthlessness that have traditionally characterized domestic workers and the work that they do by emphasizing the valuable contributions the workers make in the social reproduction of their employers and their families and in turn, how this contribution is instrumental in sustaining the political economy of the country (see also Narayan and Chikarmane 2013). This process of conscientization, which played a critical role in the engendering of a changed emotional habitus in our study

participants, is an ongoing activity that occurs both in the area meetings and leaders meeting. While the area meetings are spaces where problems faced by the members living in the different areas are discussed, these meetings are also used to inculcate and reinforce a sense of worker consciousness among the women and to highlight and underline the worth and value of the work that the women do. The senior woman organizer who often leads these meetings spends a substantial amount of time in these meetings in highlighting to the domestic workers how valuable and important the work that they do is. She often uses the symbolism of domestic workers being the backbone of their employer's households, emphasizing that if they did not carry out domestic and care duties in these households, their employers would not be able to hold down their jobs or maintain their families and as such, their employers had a very high dependence on them.

The first author attended five of these area meetings and was able to observe this process of consciousness and confidence building that took place. These meetings, which were suffused with a great deal of informal banter, jokes and laughter also served as an important way by which trust, intimacy and a sense of solidarity between the domestic workers and the union organizer and volunteers was built. This trust and intimacy is an important component in the development of what Jasper (1998) calls *reciprocal emotions* and a culture of congeniality by which activists and those that they seek to represent or work with are able to build affective loyalties to one another and a shared commitment to the goals of the larger movement that they are a part of (ibid.)

The discursive strategies used by the union organizers in these meetings have had a significant impact on the how the women have come to perceive themselves and their work. During conversations that the first author had with the two senior union organizers, they articulated how they seek to empower the domestic workers by creating awareness about the value of their work and the important contribution that they make. This strategy was seen as very important

in that it helped the creation of certain emotional repertoires among the women which did not exist before in terms of enhancement of their feeling of self-confidence and self-worth. These new feelings, which replaced older feelings of fear and acquiescence, are important examples of what Gould (2009) refers to as changes in the emotional habitus. This new emotional habitus seemed to have shaped the women's ability to negotiate and challenge the idioms and practices of inequality deployed by their employers even though the union organizers are firm in their resolve to not openly and directly pit the workers against their employers, for fear that doing so would jeopardize the women's jobs. In spite of this, as we have argued previously, the women had developed ways to negotiate and confront the power relations within which they are embedded, in both covert and overt forms (see Barua et al. 2016). This is reflected in the narratives of the workers – for example Swati and Rina, who are cited below – when they express about how they are not afraid anymore to speak up and confront their employers:

*I did not used to speak earlier. Now when I have joined the union...now people say, Swati speaks a lot. Earlier she did not.... I say [to my employers], I have to go to the meeting. I will come at nine a.m. and will finish your work by three p.m. and will go to the rally. So she used to say - do not work in hurry. Work with patience. I thought everything does not work according to you. Have you bought me? You can look for another maid. I will find another job. The advantage is that [on joining the union], we could not speak against our employers earlier - now we can.*

*... It is like my courage has increased from 25 per cent to 50 per cent after joining the union as I know that someone is behind me. Earlier the fear was there as I was alone. But now I know that if I go ahead and do something, then there will be ten people who will come to support me. .... we will gather courage and will take a stand and will ask the Madam that why do you create a difference between us and you when we both are human beings? Because we work in your house does not mean that you will take advantage of us.*

These emotional and cognitive changes occurred in parallel with the larger struggle to attain recognition and social citizenship through public and collective activities such as participating in mass rallies and protests and encouraging the workers to speak out and assert their demands to the state, police and government officials in ways that the women had not done before. One of the important ways in which the union attempts to promote collective action by the women at the community level is to demand accountability and reforms in the public distribution network and fair price / ration shops in the areas where the women lived. These ration shops, which are supposed to provide subsidized food and non-food items to families living below the poverty line, are plagued by a variety of problems such as delays, poor quality of food, and rampant corruption. The domestic workers, who often bear the brunt of these illegal practices, with the help of the union organizers, resorted to holding the ration shop owners to account by writing their complaints down in the official complaint book present in the shop. The women, on the suggestion of the union organizers, formed themselves into committees in the different areas where they lived and began to visit different ration shops in their respective areas in groups, threatening shop owners with exposure by reporting their corrupt black marketing practices to their superiors. These protests were significant in that for the first time in their lives, the women learnt about the rules and procedures for registering complaints with a state body and developed the ability to confront agents of the state and force them to address their demands. Lata and Shakti who have been union member since 2005 and 2006 respectively elaborate below on this new-found sense of confidence and courage:

*There is a lot of change that has come into my life after joining the union. Like, when the ration keeper sells kerosene in black, I click his pictures and fight with him. I ask him for the complaint book. We did not know all this earlier. Now we know everything.. If he behaves badly with us, then we should note his name and number. If he does not write our complaint, then we should talk to his boss...I learnt that shouting is necessary....*

*I feel all charged up....if I have to fight someone, then I will fight in a proper manner. If someone comes to me and tells me that the dealer is not giving them ration, then I go there. He gives the ration the moment he sees me. I have to do something for the women of this area. I need to do more....if some woman is facing some problem, whether it's harassment by husband or something at work or there's a big fight, we look after all this. And if it does not end there, we take the matter to the police station to end it.*

It is also worth pointing out that not all our study participants reported changes in their self-perception or lives as a result of unionization. Kalpana who has been in the union since 2011 states: "I have not benefitted from the union yet...just my ration card has been made. That is the only benefit. There is no change (in our situation)...these people do rallies...I go in those rallies but I haven't seen any change yet." Observation of the domestic workers as they participated in union activities and discussions with the union organisers and volunteers also made it clear that the domestic workers were still quite dependent on the volunteers and organisers. They still did not feel confident enough to, on their own volition, initiate and undertake strategies of collective action to challenge and transform wider structures inimical to their interests. This is most evident in the failure of the domestic workers to sustain the committees (to regulate the ration shops) that we mentioned above in the different areas where they lived without the support of the union personnel. Although these committees were initiated with the help of the union, the workers were unable to take the work forward on their own. This issue came up for repeated discussion during the leaders meetings that the first author observed and participated in. This failure of developing independent and collective action to mobilize for change was pointed out as one of the biggest challenges and failures of the union by the senior organisers of the union. So while the act of being organized and mobilized has initiated and

sparked a process of personal or individual empowerment and a greater awareness of their rights, this has not necessarily translated into a greater willingness on the part of the women to act independently on these rights and to initiate and sustain a process of collective mobilization around self-defined concerns and priorities.

### **The Power of Collective Solidarities**

According to Elizabeth Hill (2010), trade unions of informal sector workers provide the opportunity and space for poor women to come together and discuss their common problems and issues, thereby re-socializing work and promoting self-recognition and worker identity amongst themselves. This opportunity is particularly valuable for domestic workers who live most of their lives being atomized and isolated from their peers. Drawing on Honneth's theory of moral injury, Hill argues that changes in the structures of feelings, in the case of poor women working as informal workers, occurs when women develop social relations of mutual recognition and respect with each other (2010: 100-102). It is through these inter-subjective relations of support and solidarity that human beings are able to redress and reverse feelings of disrespect and non-recognition that they may have experienced earlier in their lives (ibid.). In our study, we found that a similar process had occurred where by coming together and developing a shared identity around common experiences of difficulties faced, our study participants developed a sense of solidarity with each other which was a powerful experience for many of them. The women spoke at length about how they stand up for each other and provide support to one another at times of crisis and help each other in the process of accessing state benefits and services. Usha, a union member since 2005 elaborates below :

*There are some Madams who falsely accuse maids of theft or things like that. So we go on protest for that. So if it is the worker's mistake, then Didi<sup>10</sup> [the union organizer] says that we cannot do anything more than trying to get you bail. But if she has not done anything wrong, then we go on protest. We fight for her respect, and to get her compensation if there has been any beating up done.*

After joining the union, the women were provided with a safe space where they could openly share about their experiences and the problems that they face, be it with their employers or within their families and communities and also express anger and indignation at the injustices that they have to contend with on a daily basis. This sense of collective identity and solidarity enabled the women to experience both reciprocal and shared emotions within their relationships with each other (Jasper 1998: 417). These spaces of care and support were built up over a sustained period through regular face-to-face interactions between group members and the union staff. Leela, a union member for four years expands on this :

*If we will be united, we can fight for ourselves with the government for anything. It is good to be together. It is better to voice our problems in unity. We are united. We go to any area where there seem to be a problem even if it is not our own area. Our unity is strong.*

The changes in the emotional habitus of the women discussed in the previous section was reinforced and strengthened as a result of having access to the strong network and sense of unity fostered among the union members. The domestic workers felt more prepared to face problems and adversity knowing that their fellow members will support them and come to their help if something untoward was to happen to them. Karuna elucidates below:

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<sup>10</sup> Elder sister in Hindi.

*... if our legs hit a stone, then there is someone to remove the stones. Thinking so, we go there. If I fall down hitting a stone and if no one is around, then no one would pick me up. But we are four of us walking together and then there would be at least one person behind who can pick us up if we fall. That is why we go [to the union].*

For our study participants, a key part of this generation of collective emotions was linked to what social movement scholars refer to as the “pleasures of protest” (Jasper 1998: 417). Because of the feelings of love, friendship and affection that are produced among members of a social movement, participation in such movements can be pleasurable in itself, irrespective of the final outcomes and goals of the movement (ibid.: 415). The pleasure and joy of being with other people and working alongside each other to achieve a common goal or losing oneself in collective rituals such as songs or other collective rituals has been highlighted by scholars as being an important part of what Goodwin (1997: 53) calls the “libidinal economy” of a movement. The women that we interviewed shared their feelings about the possibilities they now had of friendship and support from fellow union members which had been denied to them for much of their lives. Struggling to juggle work and family responsibilities and being always short of time and energy had deprived many domestic workers from being able to enjoy a sense of “fun” and pleasure in their lives. Many of our interviewees shared that, after joining the union, they were able to enjoy a break from the monotonous humdrum of their everyday routines to enjoy themselves, crack jokes, laugh and have fun with other union members as they participated in union programmes such as rallies, demonstrations and meetings.<sup>11</sup> This was something that they saw as adding value to their lives and enhancing their experience of being part of a collective movement. This feeling of camaraderie and the “pleasure of leisure”

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<sup>11</sup> As mentioned above, these forms of collective action such as rallies and demonstrations were not self-initiated on the part of the domestic workers but were organized by the union organizers and the domestic workers participated in and attended these events.

(Cornwall and Edwards 2014: 18) was also observed in informal interactions at the union office and the monthly area and leaders meetings. Below Shikha and Shweta reflect on this aspect :

*Our life was just going to work, coming back, eating and going to sleep. Now that we go outside, we know people and how the environment is...it feels great after joining the union. We get to go out when there is a rally and we can gossip in the rally. That is the only time we get to enjoy. We go with so many women – we gossip, crack jokes and talk. So we feel a little fresh by going outside.*

*We enjoy it [union programmes]...we look after each other and enjoy.... There are so many women to interact with...we get to know more people and every day is a new experience...like we didn't know what a jail looks like but we were arrested in the "jail bharo andolan" [ "Fill the jails campaign" ]. Even I was arrested. It was different. Something should be different in life apart from the daily routine and work. It's like a passion to do something. Not only me but everyone is charged up. So we don't miss such situations... It feels good deep down in the heart.*

## **Conclusion**

The onset of neoliberal reforms in India in the 1990s has contributed to a marked growth in the informal sector and informalization of the formal sector. While the dominant assumption in the literature has been that informal workers are “unorganizable” within the frame of a trade union, we have contributed new insights, in this paper, to show that informal workers such as domestic workers can be organized through a trade union model and that as result of this unionization, subtle yet significant transformations have occurred in the lives and subjectivities of a group of domestic workers in the Indian metropolis of Mumbai. Expanding on Kabeer’s notion of the “power within”, we have argued that the transformations that have taken place in the workers’

subjectivities are related to changes that have occurred in the lives of women post unionization at three levels: gaining formal recognition and social citizenship, experiencing changes in the cognitive domain and emotional habitus and the development of collective solidarities. While there is no linear sequence to these elements and our data has shown that these changes occurred in a relational and iterative manner, the increase in awareness and consciousness of their identities and rights as workers was a critical starting point driving processes of personal change.

Gaining formal recognition and acquiring social legitimacy through state sanctioned documents that enabled the women to formally prove their identity and access state benefits and services as workers and citizens played a key role for our study participants in engendering changes in how they perceived themselves and their place in society. The symbolic value of being counted as a “worker” by the state apparatus for the first time in their lives was a transformative experience for the women and constituted a significant element of their empowerment and ability to exercise agency as it redefined their roles as citizens with legitimate claims to state benefits. Cognitive changes and greater awareness of their rights, entitlements and worth as workers as well as intersubjective interactions and relations with the organizers of the union and with each other were closely linked to changes in the emotional habitus held by the women. The strategies employed by the union organizers to reverse discourses of inferiority and worthlessness associated with domestic workers, participating in union meetings, demonstrations and protests as well as having a safe space where the women were able to develop affective bonds and supportive relations with each other had a significant impact in unsettling the previously held emotional habitus of fear and acquiescence to give way to new expressions of confidence, courage and self-worth ( see also Nilsen 2016: 41).

As we have shown, the changes that have occurred in the lives of the domestic workers have primarily been with regard to their perception of self and their position or place in society. While being unionized has initiated and driven a process of personal or individual empowerment, the “power within” as it were, we have indicated that the domestic workers were far more reluctant to undertake independent acts of collective mobilization to improve their situations and challenge forms of material and social injustice in their lives. Instead, they mainly depended on the organizers and the volunteers of the union to initiate collective and direct action aimed at challenging their material and social exclusion. Further research is needed in order to establish the key reasons as to why collective action among domestic workers is characterized by such constraints. Whereas the union has a very dynamic and charismatic top leadership who possess significant cultural, social and symbolic capital, it is nevertheless clear that the rank and file, namely the volunteers, who are responsible, to a large extent, for the implementation of union strategies have been somewhat less effective and convincing in their efforts. Exploring this further would necessitate an investigation of whether such constraints emanate from the larger structure and frames within which the union has promoted the organizing and mobilization of its members. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that positive changes in self-perception and identity, on the individual level, based on feelings of enhanced self-worth and self-efficacy, underpin the process of developing collective capabilities and agency to act and implement strategies of direct action in the struggle for justice (see Hill 2010). By being part of this union, the domestic workers of this study have been able to initiate the important journey of acquiring the capacity to question, challenge and aspire and to develop the belief that by pushing for their rights, they can, over time, challenge and possibly alter the material and social exclusion that structures their lives at present.

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