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of collectivization: labor NGOs,  
neighborhoods, apartment complexes*

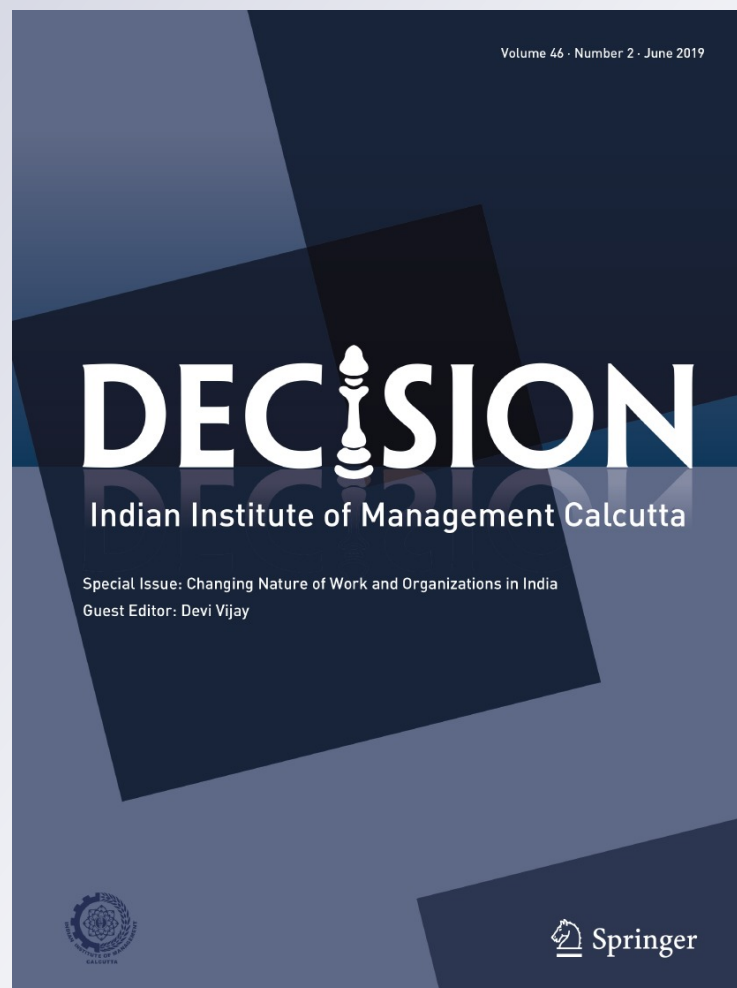
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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Domestic workers and the challenges of collectivization: labor NGOs, neighborhoods, apartment complexes

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**Abstract** This paper is a critical commentary on the organizational challenges for collectivization of domestic workers (DWs) who constitute a core part of India's informal economy. Building upon field research among DWs working in a mega-city and in multiple homes, we explore three challenges—the transformation of labor NGOs to 'unions,' the 'place' of the union and the 'place' of the worker in organizing DWs. While the first challenge deals with the form of the collective that best enables the transformation of subjectivity and consciousness of DWs from 'servant' to 'worker,' the latter two emerge from the structure of work of DWs—the fact that they are dispersed among multiple employers, and the possibilities offered by large apartment complexes for DW unions to work in concert with the state to guarantee worker rights.

**Keywords** Domestic workers · Labor NGOs · Informal sector workers union

## Introduction

Domestic workers (DW)<sup>1</sup> are a core part of India's informal economy and a segment of workers who have become visible increasingly as a global migrant workforce. They are a part of the large 'informal' sector of urban economy and society in India. According to the NSSO data, over the last two decades, the DW population<sup>2</sup> has emerged as the second-largest urban informal workforce (Chen and Raveendran 2012), next only to 'home-based workers' (artisans and petty commodity producers). The NSS

<sup>1</sup> There are other terms that are in use in popular discourse to refer to DWs. We use the term DW in our research to refer to the workers who are the subjects of our study, since this is what many of the workers and the collective organization (the union) itself use as their self-representation. Further, almost all the other terms that are frequently used to refer to DWs (almost always by others) are problematic in some manner or another. These include 'domestic help,' 'maids' and 'servants.' Part of our research therefore attends to language and the context of use of such terms by the workers, employers and the general public. We will treat DW therefore as a category of work and workers that is historically and ideologically produced within the political economic and socio-cultural contexts of work and labor in a society.

<sup>2</sup> For this study, the term 'informal' is taken to mean any work that is "unregulated and unprotected." Thus, any worker (self-employed or waged) doing informal work is an informal worker, and the increasing trend in the ratio of informal to formal work is the *informalization* of the economy (cite). Most estimates of the workforce in India place informal sector workers at around 92% of the workforce (NCEUS 2007).

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68th round (July 2011–June 2012) estimates that 41.3 lakh workers work in the households of others, and an overwhelming 27.9 lakhs of this total are women.<sup>3</sup> An increasing number of studies are emerging about DWs around the world including the phenomenon of international migration of DWs for work.

Although they form a crucial segment of the informalized worker population in the city, DWs are a relatively neglected population (in labor and citizenry mobilizations, and within policy) as compared to workers in the garment, construction, transportation, restaurant and other informal industries. Studies on DWs (Kothari 1997; Sankaran 2013; Sharma 2016) have established that they are characterized by a very high degree of ‘feminization’ of the workforce, with an ‘invisibilization’ that undervalues their labor (partly due to the work being done within private homes and not in the public space, and also due to the ‘naturalization’ of women’s work). Scholars have also commented upon the lack of legislations that guarantee the welfare of DWs including minimum wages and the need to reconceptualize the home as a place of work (Naidu 2016; Neetha and Palriwala 2011). In general, DWs are also overwhelmingly of ‘low’ socioeconomic status, and with an increasing proportion of migrant workers from different parts of India.

It has been rightly argued that the discourse on *lower* female labor participation rates masks the *increased* domestic work activities in India (Ghosh 2016; Naidu 2016).<sup>4</sup> A number of factors may contribute to this growing presence of DWs within the workforce, each of which requires careful study. Some of these include: the rising incomes of urban middle and upper classes and the increasing ways in which the engaging of a domestic worker has become part of a normalized set of cultural markers for upward mobility; greater female participation in the workforce in urban India due to a complex of factors such as rising cost of living, changing family structures and gender norms; the emergence of ‘housework’ as a

culturally salient category of work that requires attending to in conscious ways (and not simply assumed to be done by women in the household); the existence of a steady supply of working-class women who are willing to do this work.

Official state speech and policies, and socially dominant perceptions in society have been slow to recognize DWs as ‘workers’ in the informal sector. Public debates underplay the fact that DWs play an important role in the economy. This is consonant with the invisibilization of women’s work. The Indian state, despite supporting the ILO convention on domestic workers (ILO convention 189, 2011), has not yet ratified it and has not framed any policy that guarantees protection and rights for this segment of the workforce. Since 92% of the working population in India work in the so-called informal sector (NCEUS 2007), any sustained organization of labor requires the participation of informal sector workers. Collectivization of informal sector workers, although not a new phenomenon, comes with particular challenges (Chigateri et al. 2016; Gallin 2001; George 2013). It is only the persistent struggles of collectives and NGOs working on informal sector workers that have made this an issue of some importance in the public sphere over the last decade. This makes DWs, in cities such as Bengaluru, a very distinct and interesting segment of the labor force of Bengaluru from the perspective of collectivization and organization, and the making of a ‘worker consciousness.’

In the previous paper (Joseph et al. 2018), we developed an empirically based argument focused on the precarity of DWs as workers enmeshed within monetary relations of debt and obligations of a ‘gift’ economy. There, we showed how the struggle for bonus by domestic workers (DWs)<sup>5</sup> in Bengaluru captures the movement of DWs from a ‘servant’ to a ‘worker,’ a potential Freireian conscientization that transforms DWs from subalterns to Subjects of history. Thus, we argued that the ‘act of asking for a bonus is a transformational act for the DW to liberate themselves and become ‘responsible Subjects’ (ibid 45; using Freire’s terms).

<sup>3</sup> These data on DWs in India were given by the minister of state of labour and Employment in replying to a debate in Lok Sabha (27.04.2015; accessed on the Lok Sabha website on Friday, February 17, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Ghosh argues that the low Female Labour Participation Rates are only an apparent phenomenon, since it hides the high rates of domestic duties and allied activities (no. 93 of NSSO) within. Naidu too advances a similar argument.

<sup>5</sup> Although we introduce and use the term ‘domestic worker’ (DW) throughout this paper, we use the term consciously as a category-in-the-making in terms of, both, their legal recognition by the state, and their own consciousness.

This paper is a critical commentary on the organizational challenges for collectivization of DWs, challenges that underlie the above transformations of DWs as Subjects. Our aim here is to provide readers with general insights into key challenges for the collectivization of domestic workers in a particular context (i.e., DWs working in a mega-city and in multiple homes rather than as live-ins). Three challenges are elaborated upon—the transformation of labor NGOs to ‘unions,’ the ‘place’ of the union and the ‘place’ of the worker in organizing DWs. The first section outlines the historical trajectory of collectivization of DWs in Bengaluru noting the ways that a diversity of organizational forms emerges in interaction with each other and engagement with DWs over a period of four decades. Here, we explore the organizational transformation of collectives, from being a conventional NGO to what are called ‘labor NGOs’ (Chan 2012) and the ways that the latter enables the emergence of a *new* form of ‘union’ of DWs quite distinct from the more conventional unions affiliated with established political parties. The next section looks at the ‘lack of a locus’ for organizing of DWs in a way that is analogous to the factory site. This is due to the structural reality of the ‘household’ as a place of work and as a private place. Thus, we contrast the executive meetings with the local area-level meetings held in workers’ residential neighborhoods to see how the ‘union form’ needs to negotiate the everyday life consciousness and needs of domestic workers. The third section notes the emergence of the apartment as a potential new locus for DWs to organize. It highlights the residential apartment complexes as the new ‘factory gate’ for domestic workers and their collectives. Together, these sections give us insights into the challenges of collectivization that need to be addressed in order to enable the transformation of worker consciousness alluded to the above. This paper is based upon our ongoing empirical study that combines ethnographic and quantitative inquiry among DWs in different parts of Bengaluru, India.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In a separate paper, we will engage with the other side of these enabling conditions—the DW as worker. There, we tackle what it means for a DW to think of herself as a ‘worker,’ and how the facts of precarity, patriarchy and informality shape the DW’s sense of ‘worker’.

## Collectivization of DWs in Bengaluru: labor NGOs and unions

Domestic workers have not always been collectivized. A comprehensive report prepared for the UNRISD (Chigateri et al. 2016) details in some depth the processes through which unionization of DWs occurred in India, with a special section tracing this history in Bengaluru (ibid pp. 62–81; also Chigateri 2007). In this section, we refer to the above-mentioned study, and where possible deepen it with our own primary data (interviews, surveys and participant observations with DW collectives). Our findings largely corroborate the above study but also add an analytical piece—the distinction between unions and what we call labor NGOs—that we find significant for the questions raised in this paper.

Interestingly, Chigateri et al. (2016) point out that the earliest DW union happened to be from Bengaluru (1986), although there were other attempts at mobilizing DWs around the country, most notably through the National Domestic Workers’ Movement (NDWM), the Association of Indian Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) and Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). While NDWM (despite the term ‘movement’ in its name) operated strictly as an NGO under the aegis of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI), AIDWA is an official wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and SEWA is an independently organized trade union registered in 1972 and made up entirely of women workers in the informal sector.

This presence of NGOs in the collectivization history of DWs in particular (and informal workers in general) is also visible in Karnataka. The earliest attempts to unionize DWs in Bengaluru were made in 1982 by *Women’s Voice*, an NGO that traditionally worked with women issues. Its founder Ruth Manorama noted the twin difficulties facing anyone organizing informal labor such as DWs—that of registering an all-woman’s union that was also in the informal sector, along with the fact that unions were themselves not viewed in an altogether positive light by the DWs themselves (Chigateri et al. 2016). Nevertheless, through persistence, she was able to register the first union of DWs in Karnataka—the Karnataka Gruha Karmikara Sangha (KGKS) in 1987.

Parallel to the efforts of *Women’s Voice*, was an ongoing effort in different parts of India since 1985 by



the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) led by the Belgian nun, Sister Jeanne Devos (part of the CBCI) to initiate work among domestic workers. In the early 1990s, Sr. Devos commissioned another sister of the congregation, Sr. Celia, to take charge of organizing DWs in Karnataka in 1994. After two decades of work among DWs in Bengaluru, Sr. Celia was able to register the second union of DWs in Karnataka, the Karnataka Domestic Worker's Union (KDWU) in 2003.

During this time, the KDWU managed to bring together different actors in Bengaluru working on DWs. This included two prominent NGOs—the Stree Jagruti Samiti (SJS) and the Foundation for Educational Innovation in Asia (FEDINA). There were some other smaller NGOs too who were brought into this effort (e.g., the Association for Promoting Social Action or APSA; and St. Michaels' convent/home which was a home for unwed mothers, children; and a vocational school for women run by Good Shepherd Sisters). The SJS was working on related issues such as domestic violence, workplace harassment, trafficking, sexual harassment among domestic workers and their children, and FEDINA was working with marginalized populations in the slums and labor issues. According to Geetha, the co-founder of SJS, they initially began organizing domestic workers in earnest around the issue of child domestic workers through a UNICEF project. SJS began to register all the workers with the KDWU. Thus, through the efforts of NGOs such as SJS and FEDINA, the membership of KDWU grew over the years.

However, by around 2010 there were some fissures within the KDWU. This led to many of the NGOs leaving the coalition and working on their own to register independent unions of DWs. This period also saw the entrance of a few other NGOs who began work among DWs, including two central trade unions who historically work only with organized labor. In 2009, both, the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) which is affiliated with the CPM (see AIDWA above) and the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) which is affiliated with the Indian National Congress (INC) began work among DWs in Bengaluru. This led to the formation of a separate union CITU. Consequently, in 2019, there are about ten small and medium-sized DW unions registered according to the data available. (Table 1).

As we can see, the historical trajectory of DW collectivization in Bengaluru is one in which few pioneer NGOs begin to work among DWs, a coalition forms among multiple NGOs over time enabling a thrust to unionize DWs by some visionary leadership, a period of fusion and then some fission of DW collectives and unions. We see how NGOs enter into the domain of domestic workers. Some of these are faith-based organizations, while others are secular NGOs who work on issues impacting domestic workers such as child labor and violence against women. At some point in their work, the leadership of these organizations articulates a case for the unionization of DWs, although not all of them take this turn. It is this transformation from an NGO into a labor NGO that facilitates the formation of a DW union that is a key struggle in the collectivization of DWs.

One key factor at work here is the fact that DWs exist within a diverse set of labor arrangements (see Chen 2011) which poses a unique challenge to DW collectivization efforts. Some DWs work as 'live-in' workers (with room and board) but more often as workers working in multiple homes. Some are paid piece-rates for each kind of work they perform, while others are paid a salary. The focus of our study is DWs who work in multiple homes. When organizations seeking to collectivize DWs enter the low-income residential areas where DWs live, they enter a space that is already a contentious place, one where various civil society organizations seek to *interpellate* DWs (i.e., ideologically produce them as subjects in different registers). DWs, in their everyday lives, are thus enmeshed within the practices and subject-producing actions of organizations that range from the overtly religious (sects around particular deities, church groups), to charitable trusts (supporting education, health, child rights, women empowerment, etc.), or rights-based organizations (women rights, Dalit rights, housing, etc.), to social entrepreneurial business (microfinance) who jostle among themselves for the same 'client base.'<sup>7</sup>

Thus, organizers of DWs face the reality of the intersectionality of class, caste, gender, ethnicity and other identities when they enter the residential areas of DWs, a context in which 'worker consciousness' is only one among others. We find that many of the

<sup>7</sup> Most of the microfinance and social entrepreneurs now call their 'target' groups or 'beneficiaries' as clients.

**Table 1** The organizations working with domestic workers in Bengaluru. *Source:* Interview with organizers

S. No	Name of the union	Name of facilitating organization	Started to work with DWs	Union registered in
1	Bangalore Gruhakarmikara Sangha	Women's voice	1982	1984–1985
2	Karnataka Domestic Workers union	Individual driven	1994	2003
3	Domestic Workers Rights Union	Stree Jagruti Samiti	2004	2009
4	Manegelasa Karmikara Union	FEDINA	2004	2014
5	Akhila Karnataka Domestic Workers Trade Union	Karuna Domestic Workers Welfare Trust	2007	2012
6	INTUC Domestic Workers Union—Bangalore	INTUC	2007	
7	Bruhath Bengaluru Gruha Karmikara Sangha	APSA	2009	2014
8	Bengaluru Jilla Manekelasagarara Sangha	CITU	2012	2013
9	Birds Domestic Workers Union	BIRDS	2014	2018
10	Bangalore Domestic Workers Trade Union	National Domestic Workers Movement	2016	2017

NGOs do not actually make this transition. Such a situation allows us to distinguish between three kinds of organizations working with DWs—the *conventional NGOs* (who tend to define themselves as exclusively working for ‘welfare rights’ for DWs, and who therefore focus entirely on demands from the state), the *older-style trade unions* usually affiliated to political parties (who are less apt to work within the residential areas of DWs, and preferring to facilitate to get state schemes/welfare) and the *labor NGOs* (who are the most creative, combining the nimbleness of an NGO with a clarity of the need to foreground the DW as a part of a laboring class worker with rights, while not reducing their subjectivity to any simplistic singularity). It is the last kind of organization, the labor NGO that gives rise to innovative and effective forms of unions (see RoyChowdhury 2005). While the ‘worker’ disappears in the kind of work that conventional NGOs do among DWs, and the ‘worker’ appears mechanically as the only subjectivity in the approach of older-style trade unions, it is only within the labor NGOs that we see the development of a notion of the ‘worker’ in relation to (at times in tension with) other identities (such as woman, wife, mother, particular caste or ethnic or religious identity).

Such a trajectory of DW organizing is necessary to grasp in some depth to understand the contemporary dynamics of DW collectivization in Bengaluru. In a separate paper, we explore the key driving factors—

interpersonal (e.g., leadership personalities), conjunctural (e.g., particular modes of organizing DWs, differing perspectives on the need and form of the union itself) and structural (e.g., the demands of domestic work and the composition of the workforce). In the next section, we explore one such structural feature of domestic workers that shapes any attempt to organize or collectivize them. In the rest of this paper, we use the word ‘union’ to refer to those labor NGOs that are facilitating the kinds of unions that seem most effective in the lives of DWs.

### The ‘place’ of the union: dispersal and visibility of a collective

In the formal sector where the ‘union’ is recognized by the employer and the state law, the union office is located either inside or outside the factory gates. It is very much visible to the employer, the employees who may be its members, and the state. In the domestic work context, the work place of DWs is the ‘private individual home.’ Unlike the formal sector worker union, any collective of DWs faces the fact of multiple employers for each DW. Who then does the DW union identify as the collective employer of all DWs?

This is a major challenge to any collectivization effort or bargaining for DWs. Individual employers and individual homes can invoke the rights of a private

citizen in far easier ways than factory owners. Such an ambiguous situation raises the debate over whether the individual home is a private space or ought to be considered a workplace (since it has employment, and hence some form of production, within). It is a central point of contestation for the state. Consequently, two issues become salient, a strategic one, and a conceptual one. Strategically, any effort in collectivization by organizations of DWs pushes them to seek workers at their 'living spaces' rather than their workplaces. Underlying the strategic issue is a conceptual task of locating DW work within the context of capital accumulation and labor processes, and in turn conceptualizing the 'household' itself.

Taking the strategic issue first, we see that as DWs are spread throughout the city, labor NGOs do not have a single 'union' office. The dispersal of the DW makes it necessary to claim spaces that may legitimize their struggle. Thus, labor NGOs have devised an organizational model (Fig. 1), in which they strategically conduct 'area-level' meetings every month in different DW residential neighborhoods, and complement this with 'block-level' and 'Executive committee' meetings.

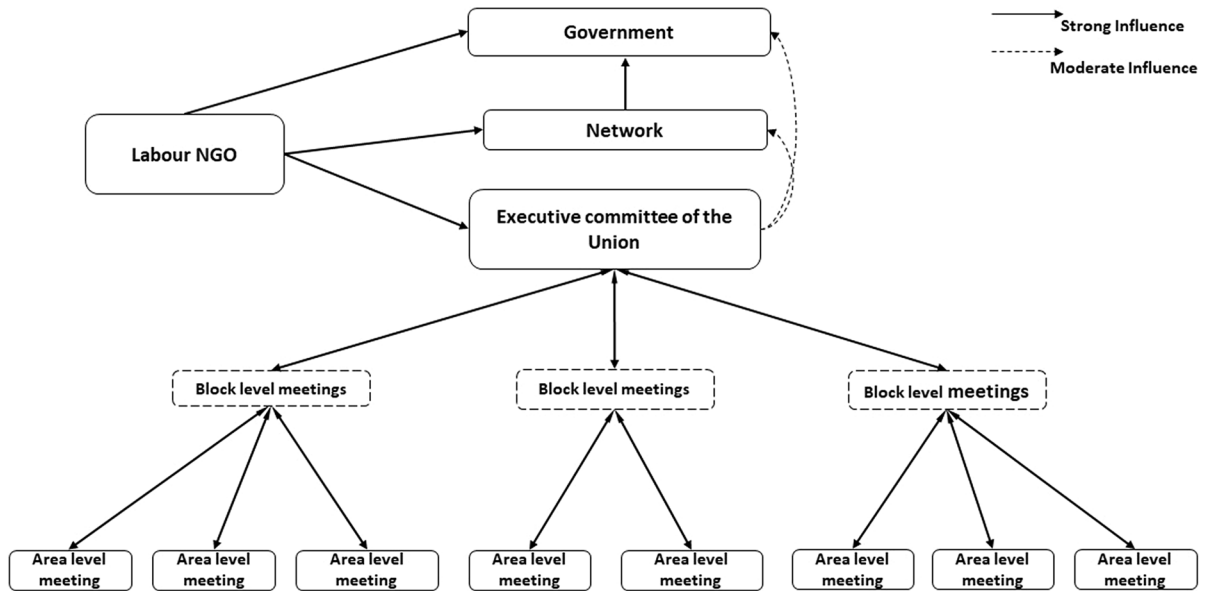
The Executive Committee meetings are typically called by the labor NGO. They are conducted once or twice every month depending on the issues taken up. The general body of the union, comprising all the members of the union, elects the members of the executive committee. It is here that the labor NGO's influence on organizing DWs into a collective is exercised most significantly. In most of the unions, the area-level leaders (from areas where the union is active) represent the Executive Committee. And, it is the labor NGO that influences the choice of these leaders. Thus, most Executive Committee members are 'selected' rather than elected. The labor NGOs select the members according to leadership traits displayed by the individuals in the area level (such as the level of interest shown and perceived capability to represent the workers' issues at the area level). We capture the labor NGOs' work of 'influencing' through the solid arrow lines in the figure. Labor NGOs exercise their influence not only in shaping the Executive Committees of the DW unions but also almost entirely act as advocates of DW with state officials. They are the ones who articulate the three core demands of DW unions—minimum wages, weekly offs and yearly bonus (see Joseph et al.

2018). The Executive Committee members represent the union to the state's Labour Office with these demands and thus lobby the government to legislate policy that recognizes the collective rights of DWs.

Complementing the Executive Committee are the area-level field activists. It is in the executive meeting that the *plan of action* is discussed, and this communication is taken down to the area-level meetings by the executive members and activists representing the area. In the area meetings, the executive member is supported by one of the field activists who call for the meetings. This arrangement makes the lines of communication easy as decisions in the Executive Committee meetings are communicated to the DWs through the area-level meeting. This works the other way too in many cases when the area-level members give feedback to the Executive Committee about any important issue which they feel ought to be taken up in the executive committee. These issues are in the nature of taking a concern to the state's labour department or pertaining to cases that needed to be dealt legally. We capture this work of area-level committees by a dotted line in the figure.

The area-level meetings are similar in form to meetings of Self-Help Groups (SHG) or Joint liability groups (that many DWs are part of). These meetings are conducted *in the open*, many times *at the doorsteps of members' living spaces*. As discussed above, the labor NGO meetings (many times simply called 'union' meetings by DWs) have to compete with other organizations in the area. Since most DWs are also members of these other groups, it often leads to a dilemma for the women when the timings of a 'union' meeting sometimes clash with that of an SHG or other group meeting. DWs thus have to choose which meeting to go. This in turn poses another issue for the unions—that of the potential *ad hoc* nature of many of the issues that they take up on behalf of the DWs. For, as we found in our study, most of the cases which come to the union happen to actually come from non-members who approached the area-level unions to 'solve their problem' (usually problems related to domestic violence at the DW's home, or the arbitrary dismissal of a DW, or failure to be paid due wages). This becomes counterproductive for the long-term strategic objective of collectivization of DWs, since many of the DWs do not become emotionally invested in the union, preferring to not come back for meetings once their problem was solved. This poses the





**Fig. 1** Structure of union

challenge of membership and persistence of purposeful collectivizing. Indeed, many DWs who were regular and committed union members started complaining to the leadership to not entertain complaints from non-members. As one of them put it about another DW who was not a member:

We [meaning the union] solved the problems...which was in bad condition...and we took so much risk. Now she is simply sitting in the area [during our meeting]. We called her for the meeting, and she didn't come. Next time onwards, we are not taking up the cases [of those] who are irregular in monthly meetings. We have to strictly follow this in our area [Field note entry, October 05, 2016].

As these cases are fought on an ad hoc basis, the larger questions of the employer not paying minimum wages, payment/dues on time to workers, arbitrary dismissal on whims and fancy of the employers, etc. still remain largely unaddressed as systemic and structural issues that define the DW work relation as a worker–employer relationship in the informal sector.

On the other hand, the 'success' of fighting cases for non-members brings legitimacy for the union at the local level. The cases that have a profound effect on members (and non-members) are the ones that happen locally. Most of these cases are of arbitrary dismissals of domestic workers by the employer without giving them their dues. The challenge for the union then is to

show evidence for the existence of a direct relationship between the employer and the employee (a point we pick up in the next section). Any small victory of the union also legitimizes the claim of the DWs to be viewed as 'workers' rather than as 'servants' in their relationship with the employer. These cases are also looked at internally by the labor NGOs as the training ground for the executive members of the unions, the leaders-in-the-making of DWs. In recent times, aided by the notification of minimum wages for domestic workers by Karnataka, the Labour Department has been intervening on behalf of the unions, thus strengthening their hands.

DW 'union' meetings thus are simultaneously a struggle to capture the ideological attention of DWs. They raise interesting issues about collective action (what it is and why it is required), place (where does collective action occur) and visibility (who is it visible to). Conducting meetings in the open makes sense to organizers since it assures visibility to the collective work of DWs who see and hear their own union at work. Indeed, organizers are clear that holding meetings in the open rather than building a union office (a physical office structure) was not only about cost-effectiveness, but more importantly about making the general public, *especially the domestic workers who have not joined the union* become aware of the existence of the union. As one of them put it, 'If we do

it on the street, few workers who pass by they will stop and listen what we are talking about' [Field note entry, September 13, 2017].

Such an organizational strategy (Executive Committees and area-level meetings) allows us to go back to the conceptual issue mentioned above which underlies the strategy. We note that DWs are arguably best viewed as petty commodity producers (producing a service), but *not* as independent producers (such as peasants and artisans) since they use tools provided by the employers. Being proletarianized, DWs fall *within* the circuit of capital and are not 'excluded' (see Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009). They are tied to capitalist production since they work in households of employers who themselves work within the circuit of capital (being either owners of capital or waged workers in capitalist firms). Nonetheless, DWs are not simple waged workers since they are not 'exploited' in the conventional sense of having surplus extracted within the production process (as are factory workers). Consequently, conceptualizing DW as workers requires a more nuanced development of the concept of exploitation and the meaning of a wage relation, a challenge that we take up separately and build upon many others who have advanced our insights into this matter (e.g., Elster 1986; Resnick and Wolff 1989).

A first step in this direction is to make visible how the work of social reproduction that is overwhelmingly carried out by women (the woman employer-supervisor and the woman DW) remains invisibilized (see Rai 2013; Razavi 2013) and remains undertheorized. That this is not an abstracted conceptual issue, but one of the concretely addressing complex social actors in their connections to capital and class is brought out by a frequently heard refrain by organizers who exhort DWs to think about themselves as significant actors in the economy: 'You are playing an important role in the economy because the middle class [your employers] have to go to work. If you don't go [to work] then their productivity and income suffers' [Field note entry, December 21, 2017]. Consequently, the fact that the 'household' is not simply the place of work for the DW, but also a place of production of value (commodities) and subjectivities (identities), needs to be foregrounded in conceptualizing DWs, many of who in our study prefer to view themselves as 'self-employed workers.' For our purpose, we note that the question of subjective identity formation is part of our challenge to develop

methodologies that capture the dynamics in concrete situations of collectivization. We now turn to the third challenge that faces collectivization of DWs—the apartment complex where most DWs increasingly work in Bengaluru.

### The 'place' of the worker: the apartment as factory gate

The domestic work sector is also an increasingly migrant workforce. Most of the DWs in our study are first- or second-generation migrants. This workforce is dominated by Telugu and Tamil speakers in addition to Kannada speakers.<sup>8</sup> More recently, there is an influx of Hindi and other north-Indian language speaking DWs. Bringing cohesiveness to a group as diverse and at the same time trying to focus on the employer and the government policy is a hard task. While our study has yet to explore what such an ethnically diverse DW workforce poses as challenges to collectivization, we elaborate here on a related issue—the fragmentation of the workforce along a different axis.

There is another emerging 'hierarchy' among DWs in terms of workplace. DWs who work in apartment complexes and 'gated communities' are generally paid significantly higher than those working in individual houses. Speaking about the hierarchy, Kalai<sup>9</sup> a DW says:

Few workers get minimum wage. But, *no one* is getting minimum wage in Kothanur. DWs who go far away and work in 'the apartments'—they get above minimum wage. Locally [meaning in Kothanur], there is no respect...this work is seen as degrading work. Sometimes I don't even say what I am working as. If we work in the apartment we get respect. But there few employers behave rudely [Interview 12.04.2017].

Her colleague, Sarasamma added, 'We go out, to work in apartments; *Offissar hage hogutteve barutteve* [trans: we go like officer and come]. In some houses, as soon as we enter they order us saying do this do that; in some houses they leave us, we know what to do, so many years we are working. This is *maryade* [respect]' (Interview 12.04.2017).

<sup>8</sup> Most DWs in our study are from Dalit communities.

<sup>9</sup> Pseudonyms for DWs have been used for DWs.

The extent of the wage gap between apartment complexes in particular parts of the city and others is part of an empirical project that we are conducting. What is crucial here is that an increasing number of DWs *perceive* the apartment and gated communities as holding better employment prospects than working in individual houses (a factor of the perception that the employers in apartments are more affluent and willing to pay more than the individual houses), and to some extent (although this is still an ambiguous one) as also about being treated with ‘dignity.’ This has led to a segmentation between DWs working in the apartments vis-à-vis those working in individual homes. One fallout of this segmentation is that it has become difficult to standardize wages across the domestic work sector. Indeed, any discussion of wages within the union is always contentious as DW members claim that they are better off negotiating their own wages with their employers.

Consequently, since the prevailing wages in apartment complexes are above the Karnataka government fixed minimum wages,<sup>10</sup> the unions have left the wage negotiations to the workers themselves. There is, however, one potential area of organizing for the unions—the possibility of constructing apartment complexes/gated communities *as a single employing entity* by systematically impacting the working conditions within them. One of the main challenges of the DW unions is the fact that although DWs have a direct relation with employers, each DW has multiple employers. However, since all the payments are in cash on a monthly basis for hourly work, most of the legal struggles (i.e., cases of conflict that come to the unions) become a fight to *legally prove* the existing relationship of the DW and the employer. This is because many employers, when confronted with the accusations from DWs about discrepancies in payment, take recourse to the *lack of a contract* that demonstrates employment, with some even denying that the DW worked on their premises.

It is in the course of this struggle for ‘proof of work’ that the DWs who work in apartment complexes have pointed out to the apartment complex *entry and exit logs* as evidence for their claim of employment. Almost all apartment and gated communities maintain such musters/registers for all visitors at their gates. In

this sense, the apartment gates have now been transformed into the ‘factory gates’ for DWs, making DWs isomorphic to formal sector workers who punch in their entry and exit at the factory gate. Some apartments have provided ID cards for all workers working on their premises (ostensibly for their own reasons of security). This quasi-formal arrangement for workers is now transforming itself into the possibility of viewing the apartment complex and its representative—the Resident Welfare Association *as a collective employer* who has an identity. DWs and their unions have begun to use this as collective bargaining tool where each apartment forms norms in their relation with domestic workers working in the complex. Such a focus would resonate with what has already been observed by scholars on the Resident Welfare Associations—that ‘despite little evidence of Resident Welfare Associations influencing the state, there is unmistakable convergence of interests and agendas, towards the new rule of property and capital’ (Kamat and Vijayabaskar 2009: 375).

Such an arrangement, where it operates, also provides a valid documentary proof for the labor department officials to call upon the employer to negotiate with the DWs. This also helps in bargaining for higher wages or facilities citing the prevailing wages in the apartments. However, it also enables employers to demand the enforcement of particular Resident Welfare Association regulations on DW behavior as a collective group. Even as the apartment gate becomes the factory gate for the DWs, the Resident Welfare Association and meetings in the apartment Club House become sites for employers to address issues of their individual DWs collectively. Such regulations usually reveal class, caste, and gender bias and contempt at work. The recent case in Bengaluru of the Shantiniketan housing complex in Whitefield is a good example. Here, the Resident Welfare Association membership clearly referred to DW as ‘maids’ and ‘help’ (thus constructing them as ‘servants’ in line with long-held traditional and conservative perspectives), imposed restrictions on mobility of the DWs and compromised on their safety by confining their movement to the basement.<sup>11</sup> Another recent case, this time in Noida (near Delhi), represents more clearly the feudal and class elitism of

<sup>10</sup> The 2016 notification on minimum wages is above the market wages.

<sup>11</sup> <http://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/bangalore/others/A-gulf-maid-in-Bluru/articleshow/51960127.cms>.

the Resident Welfare Association members including the nexus between politicians and middle- and upper-class employers. Here, an employer in the apartment complex illegally confined a domestic worker who had gone to get her back wages but was instead accused by the employer of theft. When this DW did not return home, a large group of the DW's neighborhood community entered the apartment complex and demanded her release. This led to a fracas with the security guards and the police being called in.<sup>12</sup>

The point is that these cases are not isolated cases, but are increasingly repeated and patterned in similar ways across India. Over the last 2 years, there have been at least 11 documented cases along the above lines. Even 'enlightened' households with the housing complex are made to comply with a discriminatory rule. One such example came to our notice in a personal communication. An elderly couple who had treated their domestic worker with dignity and supported her children too for many decades protested their own Resident Welfare Association rule to 'frisk all maids and cooks' when they left the apartment complex. They pointed out the stereotyped presumptions underlying the rule and raised questions about why other individuals who too visited the apartment complex (such as tuition teachers, trainers, restaurant employees, the Society's office staff, drivers of delivery vans, personal drivers) were exempt from this rule. Sadly, their Resident Welfare Association overruled these objections.

Finally, such cases also bring out the use of threats of dismissal of DWs, due to the perceived availability of a large army of DWs seeking employment within apartment complexes. This tussle to control DWs *as a laboring population* many times flares up into open conflicts and wider social tensions of caste, gender and neighborhood identities. All these point to the need to recognize that the apartment complexes are not merely made up of individual private homes where the state cannot trespass individual rights. This claim no longer holds true, for apartment complexes are the workplaces for many informal sector and sub-contractor workers including DWs of course but also drivers, gardeners and host of other service providers. The challenge then for DW unions is that as employers

collectivize through their Resident Welfare Association, the scenario resembles the formal sector where owners of capital seek to hire ever more docile (or even subservient) set of contract workers who do not have the backing of unions. Indeed, all the cases above had clear articulations of Resident Welfare Association members against the collectivization of DWs. Apartment complexes and gated communities are better viewed as sites where the claim of being a 'private' place only acts to conceal the fact of employment and generation of value (within households)—both of which come under the purview of state regulations and collective bargaining rights of workers.

### Conclusion

We have highlighted in this paper three key challenges faced by those organizing DWs—the need to transform from an NGO into a labor NGO that facilitates union formation, the challenge of 'place' of the union and the challenge of the 'place' of the worker. Each of these challenges reveals some structural factors that need to be addressed for an effective DW collectivization effort. Thus, the fact that DWs are dispersed across multiple employers makes it imperative for labor NGOs to establish long-term connections between the residential area-level committees of the union and the Executive Committee in ways that make their presence visible and effective at articulating local demands at the state level. Similarly, DW unions face a challenge from Resident Welfare Associations who attempt to 'cordon off' apartment complexes from regulating conditions of work and affirming the rights of DWs as 'workers.'

Viewing these challenges as part of a Gramscian 'war of position'—a cultural battle to be fought in civil society by DW unions—allows us to stress the need to reconceptualize and publicly articulate the fact of the so-called private household as really being also a place of work, a worksite for generating value and subject positions and social relations of production. DW unions thus have an opportunity here to advocate the need to finalize and implement the current draft national policy for domestic workers. This draft policy does recognize domestic workers as 'workers' and focuses largely on the assurance of welfare rights of DWs. However, it also needs to go beyond and

<sup>12</sup> <https://scroll.in/article/843601/in-noida-a-riot-like-situation-over-a-domestic-worker-puts-the-sfocus-on-indias-stark-class-chasm>.

recognize the collective bargaining rights of DWs, especially in light of the fact that apartment complexes are collective employers and households are worksites as argued above. This in turn will strengthen the struggle of DWs for dignity.

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