Unions and Labour NGOs

The Structural Conditions for the Success of the Domestic Workers' Union

RAJESH JOSEPH, BALMURLI NATRAJAN, ROSHNI LOBO

In Bengaluru, domestic workers have organised with many organisations that are broadly of two forms—DW unions and labour non-governmental organisations—with discrete yet intertwined histories. The paper looks at the trajectory of these organisations from the perspective of the struggles and visions of the leadership of these organisations. The degree of "organicity" of a DW union (namely the participative and leadership capacities of DWs) is deeply shaped by the co-dependence between labour NGOs and DW unions. This, in turn, is a direct result of the precarity and conditions of work in the informal sector.

A version of this paper was presented at the XIIIth International Conference on Labour History.

Research for this paper was supported by the Azim Premji Foundation Research grant. The authors would like to thank all NGO leaders, domestic workers, animators and union leadership who participated in their study. All the views and opinions expressed here are of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the institutions they represent.

Rajesh Joseph (*rajesh.joseph@apu.edu.in*) teaches at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Balmurli Natrajan (*natrajanb@wpunj.edu*) teaches at William Paterson University, New Jersey. Roshni Lobo (*roshni.lobo@apu.edu.in*) is with Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

The domain of the "care economy" has been debated seriously since the 1990s. More recently, domestic workers (DWs) have been argued to be part of the global care economy (Giles et al 2014). In an insightful work, Duffy (2011) contrasts two ways of conceptualising care and maps their overlap. Some studies view care work through a "nurturance" lens that focuses on how it is "relational," such as in caring for infants, children and the elderly. On the other hand, an older tradition of study (inspired by many Marxist socialist-feminists) views care work as "reproductive labour" rather than "nurturing labour" segment of the care economy. In March 2024, a policy brief of the International Labour Organization (ILO) made the case that DWs are care workers in order to define, affirm, and afford protections for DW rights (ILO 2024). It was observed that DWs form at least 25% of all paid care workers in the world, a category that includes nurses, teachers, doctors, or personal care workers. Hired mostly by private households, DWs provide both direct and indirect care services—directly taking care of the elderly and children and indirectly through cooking and cleaning of households. Paid DWs are a core part of India's informal economy, especially in the urban sector. Over the last two decades, they emerged as the second-largest urban informal workforce in India (Chen and Raveendran 2012), next only to "home-based workers" (artisans and petty commodity producers). An estimated 53 lakh women are domestic workers (PLFS 2023–24).[1]

As care work becomes increasingly commodified, the number of DWs increases (Marchetti 2022). Key drivers here are rising incomes of urban middle and upper classes, changing family structures and gender norms that allow middle-class women to work outside the home, and a cultural shift that makes employment of DWs a marker of upward mobility. This makes "housework" a culturally salient category of work that cannot be assumed to be done as unpaid work by women in the household, backed by the existence and availability of a steady supply of low socio-economic status women who are willing to do domestic work in other people's homes. Our earlier work brought out the "reproductive" care aspect of domestic work referred to above with reference to how organisers underscore the productive aspect of domestic work by noting, "… if you do not go [to work] then their [your employers'] productivity and income suffers" (Natrajan and Joseph 2018: 5).

Although they form a crucial segment of informalised labour in the city, DWs are neglected (in labour and citizen mobilisations, and within policy) compared to workers in the garment, construction, transportation and other informal industries. Studies have established that domestic work is characterised by a very high degree of "feminisation" and "invisibilisation" that undervalues the work because it is done within private homes, and "naturalisation" as women's work (Kothari 1997; Sankaran 2013; Sharma 2016). Scholars have also commented upon the lack of legislations that guarantee the welfare of DWs, including minimum wages, and the need to reconceptualise the home as a place of work (Naidu 2016; Neetha and Palriwala 2011). In general, DWs are also overwhelmingly of "low" socio-economic status, and with an increasing proportion of migrant workers from different parts of India.

In previous papers (Joseph et al 2018, 2019), we mapped different struggles of DWs in Bengaluru as part of their transformation from "servant" to "worker" in the context of a diversity of forms of collectivisation of DWs in Bengaluru. We highlighted the emergence of labour NGO*s*—as an organisational form of DW collectives that reflected the challenges of organising DWs (see Chan [2012] for an early use of the concept of labour NGOs in China). Our work echoes the findings of other scholars working on India who have noted the diverse organisational forms that DW collectives take including what they note as "unions affiliated with NGOs" (Agarwala and Saha 2018; see RoyChouwdhury [2005] for an early study that noted how NGOs and unions operated within the garment export industry to organise workers in their residential neighbourhoods).

This paper analyses the relationship between DW labour NGOs and the DW unions, and the impact of this relationship on the consciousness of DWs and the movement for DW rights. It is based on a three-year field study (2016–19) among DWs, labour NGOs and DW unions in four parts of Bengaluru city. The methods used were a combination of participation observation, archival research, interviews, and a survey of 200 DWs across four residential areas of the workers. The first section provides the context for our focus on labour NGOs and DW unions, and the next explores the driving factors and key actors who shape the character and form of the DW unions.

Organisational Histories

There is a pattern in the historical trajectory of DW collectivisation in Bengaluru: a few pioneer NGOs begin work among DWs in the 1980s, over time a coalition forms among multiple NGOs, enabling a thrust to unionise DWs, followed by a period of fusion, and then fission of DW collectives and unions. NGOs (some faith-based, others secular) first focus on DWs to work on issues such as child labour and violence against women. At some point in their work, the leadership of some of these organisations articulate a case for the unionisation of DWs—specifically by taking up the issue of DW as labour—although not all of them take this turn. This transformation from an NGO (typically focused on welfare issues) into what we call a labour NGO with the potential to facilitate the formation of a DW union (with a clear objective to organise and conscientise DWs as "workers") is a key struggle in the collectivisation of DWs. This pattern differs from the trend noted by Agarwala and Saha (2018) wherein established unions focused on organising male DWs in the 1950s and is more in line with the findings of Chigateri et al (2016) who note the presence of NGOs in forming the early unions among DWs in Bengaluru. Our work shows the need to appreciate the unique challenges of organising DW due to their workspace, which is the individual household, the informality of their work conditions, and the diversity of their labour arrangements. Again, we have noted this challenge in an earlier paper where we argued that it was the residential apartment complex gate, which could operate as the quintessential factory gate for full-fledged organising of workers but noted too how this was fraught with difficulties (Joseph et al 2019: 106–8).

DWs exist within a diverse set of labour arrangements, which poses a unique challenge to collectivisation efforts (Chen 2011). Some DWs work as "live-in" workers (with room and board), but more often they work in multiple homes. Some are paid piece-rates while others are paid a time-based salary. The focus of our study is DWs who work in multiple homes. When organisations seeking to collectivise DWs enter the low-income residential areas where DWs live, they enter an already contested space where various civil society organisations interpellate DWs to ideologically produce them as subjects in different registers. In their everyday lives, DWs are thus enmeshed within the practices of organisations that range from the overtly religious (religious sects, church groups), to charitable trusts (supporting education, health, child rights, women empowerment, etc), and rights-based groups (women's rights, Dalit rights, housing, etc), to social entrepreneurial business (microfinance) who jostle among themselves for the same "client base."[2] Thus, organisers of DWs face the reality of the intersectionality of class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other identities when they enter the residential areas of DWs. It is in this context that it becomes difficult for the NGO to switch from a largely welfare approach to a rights-based mobilisation approach, wherein constructing "worker consciousness" is key to fighting for worker rights. We find that many NGOs do not actually make this transition to a labour NGO. Given the challenges noted above, only a few conventional unions venture into the residential neighbourhoods of DWs to organise them.

NGOs who began working in DW residential areas in Bengaluru quickly realised that the problems of DWs are unique and need special attention. One such NGO, Fedina, which was mobilising workers into self-help groups (SHGs), realised that women were repaying their loans from their merger incomes. This reality spurred the NGOs to work for increasing the wages of DWs. Another NGO, APSA, realised that they had to create a space for women to speak as DWs apart from the normal SHG issues, as most of the members were DWs and the NGO was frequently called to intervene in the police station when DW members were accused of "stealing" by their employers. As NGOs, they mobilised DWs to find their voice and representation in Bengaluru.

Since the adoption of Convention 189 on the rights of DWs by ILO on 16 June 2011,[3] many NGOs and unions in Bengaluru

joined the struggle to make the Government of India sign the convention. Despite supporting the convention, the Indian state has not yet ratified it and has not framed a policy that guarantees protection and rights for DWs. Nevertheless, the most important impact of collectivisation (both before and after the signing of Convention 189) was on the consciousness of DWs as workers with rights, and related struggles over structural/organisational aspects of the labour NGOs and the DW unions.

Consequently, nine out of the 12 unions registered officially with the Karnataka government's Labour Department registered themselves after 2011 (Table 1). Importantly, this does not mean that these unions did not exist before 2011. Indeed, many of these unions existed in diverse forms before 2011, but their main spokespersons were the leadership of the labour NGOs. It is thus arguably true that the ratification of the convention acted as a catalyst, leading many NGOs to realise that the only way to organise DWs was to form a registered DW union.

Such a situation on the ground alerted us to the spectrum of organisational forms working among DWs—conventional NGOs who work within the DW residential neighbourhoods focusing on demands from the state (for example, better protections, access to state welfare programmes), conventional trade unions usually affiliated to political parties who organise workers but run into difficulties with DWs as their workplace (private households) and their employers are not easy to access, and labour NGOs who operate as a hybrid form working within the residential areas of DWs (like conventional NGOs) but organising DWs into unions and attempting to engage with employers while also making demands on the state (Joseph et al 2018: 102–03). The DW union, thus spawned by the labour NGO, is different from the conventional trade union in that it is not affiliated with a political party and relies on the labour NGO (henceforth, when we use the term "DW union," we mean this entity affiliated with the labour NGO).

Table 1: The Organisations Working with Domestic Workers in Bengaluru**

Sl No	Name of the Union	Name of Facilitating Organisation	Started to Work with DWs*	Union Registered In*
1	Bengaluru Gruhakarmikara Sangha	Women's Voice	1982	1984–85
2	Karnataka Domestic Workers Union	Individual-driven	1993–94	2003
3	Domestic Workers Rights Union	Stree Jagruthi Samiti	2004	2009
4	Manegelasa Karmikara Union	FEDINA	2004	2013
5	Akhila Karnataka Domestic Workers Trade Union	Karuna Domestic Workers Welfare Trust	2007	2012
6	INTUC Domestic Workers Union-Bengaluru	INTUC	2007	
7	Bruhath Bengaluru Gruga Karmikara Sangha	APSA, Bengaluru	2008–09	2012
8	Bengaluru Jilla Manekelasagarara Sangha	CITU	2012	2013
9	Birds Domestic Workers Union	BIRDS	2014	2017
10	Bengaluru Domestic Workers Trade Union	National Domestic Workers, Movement	2015	2016

* Interview with Organisers, ** The table is updated to 2018. Post-COVID-19, some of the NGOs have minimised their programmes on DW because of fund constraints.

This next section traces the relationship between the labour NGOs and the DW unions. They each have their own identity in terms of organisational names, legal structures and governing bodies, but in practice they have an interdependent relation characterised by symbiosis and contradiction which at times expresses itself as conflict.

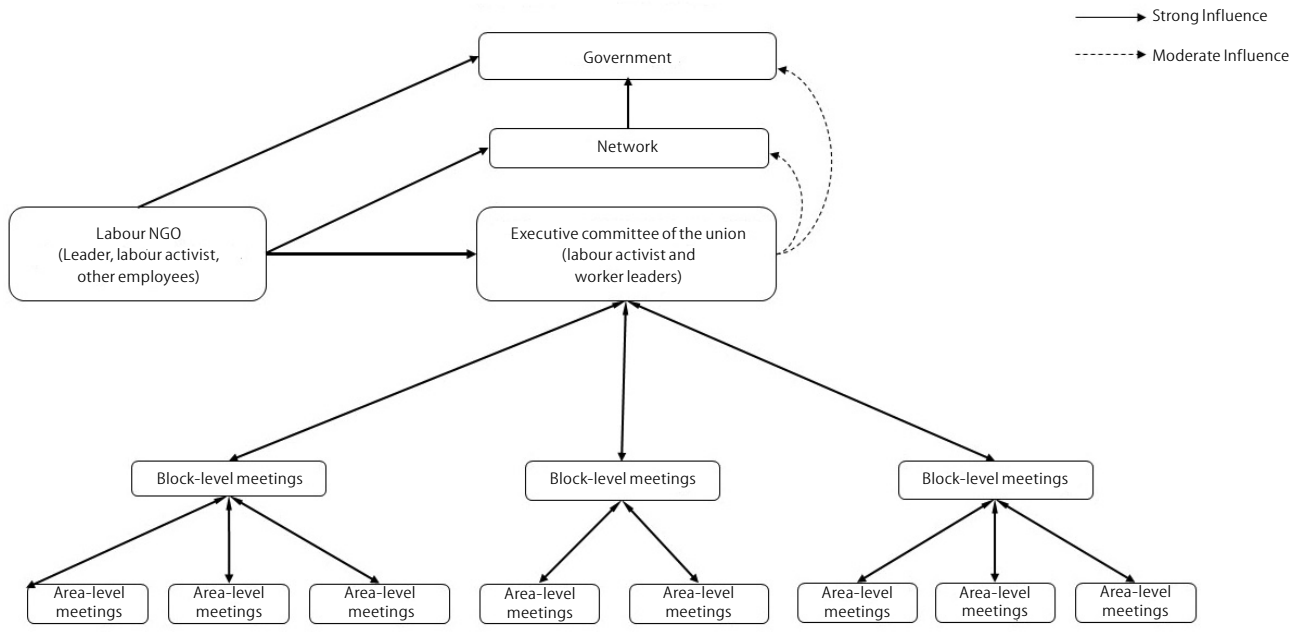
Labour Activist: Structural and Cultural Bulwark of DW Unions

The foundational insights of scholars such as E A Ramaswamy (1977) on the importance of member participation for any theory of union formation continue to be relevant. They remind us of the importance of focusing not just on form but on the actual dynamics of leadership emergence and membership participation. As he famously put it, "without participation these forms will be merely empty shells" (Ramaswamy 1977: 470). Ramaswamy's urging to focus on the conditions that enable leadership to emerge from the ranks resonates even more with the conditions of informal sector workers such as DWs, whose precarity needs to be viewed as a determining factor in the existence of a union.

As a preliminary insight, it is useful to note how many organisational forms are viewed in personalised ways. Thus, many unions gain their identity from the names of the leaders of their respective labour NGOs. This is evident from the language used by two key segments of people who generate the public discourse around DWs—activists who mostly hail from the middle classes but have self-consciously built the labour NGOs as a means to organise DWs, and the DWs themselves. The name identification varies depending on who is making the reference to the union. Thus, within the world of activists, the DW unions are mostly referenced by using the name of the labour NGO or its leadership. For instance, unions are known as "Geetha's group" or "Ruth's group" or "Sister's group" (referencing the leaders of labour NGOs by the name or the form of address in the case of nuns of a catholic order).

On the other hand, most DWs refer to their union by the name of the key DW labour activist—the most prominent leader figure from within the DW communities, living in DW residential neighbourhoods. In our study, 3 out of 12 labour activists were themselves working as DWs. Labour activists are groomed by labour NGO leaders to work in residential neighbourhoods as this is the only site where recruitment can take place. Given the fact that each DW works in isolation within separate workplaces (the employer's homes) and the difficulties of organising on the premises of residential apartment complexes, any cultural work of consciousness raising and recruitment to unions takes place largely within the everyday life flows of DWs in their neighbourhoods. While labour activists are on the payroll of the labour NGO, they are the cultural link between the labour NGO and the DW union. In contrast to the labour NGO leaders who are usually graduates from prominent universities (many times specialised in social sciences, including social work), most labour activists are not professionally trained (either in any formal field of development) or even university graduates. In most cases (in our study), they

Figure 1: Structure of Union



could read and write but either had very little formal education or had completed high school (Class 10). However, as DWs live in mixed linguistic areas, labour activists are almost always fluent in multiple languages. In the Bengaluru neighbourhoods where our study was conducted, this meant fluency in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. Kannada, being the official language in Karnataka, was critical for transacting with state officials.

Labour NGOs and DW unions are interdependent. The labour activist plays a crucial role in creating the identity of DW as a worker, which is part of a multilayered identity. In doing so, they play a dual role—that of working for the labour NGO and of crafting and representing DWs as members of a union. In this sense, the labour activist is an important actor shaping both, the structure of labour NGO–DW union relations, and the culture of DWs, especially their consciousness as workers with explicit rights. They are the critical communication link between the labour NGO leader, who is usually the founder-convenor of the labour NGO, and the DW union. As seen in Figure 1, the work of labour activists[4] links up through the executive body meetings of the unions to the labour NGO and the state. Key responsibilities include organising DWs for a protest or a march to the state labour department to articulate their demands for rights, mobilising workers to increase union membership, renewing membership, and conducting activities of the union in the area allotted to them. In most of the cases, the labour NGO leaders actively encourage activists to educate themselves.

Although labour activists are on the payroll of the labour NGO, their salaries are minimal compared to the salaries of professionals working in NGOs and the development sector. We found that the best salary for labour activists was just above the minimum wage. This also leads to conflicts among labour NGOs in any particular area due to wage differentials. Hence, there is a constant "poaching" of activists between the different labour NGOs. Again, we found that activists who change labour NGOs do it largely for the higher salary. As Kalai, a domestic worker turned activist, says,

> See, Mageswari[5]… is working in xxx [a Labour NGO]. I have also the same experience, but she gets ₹14,000/- right? Here if I get at least ₹10,000/- that is more than enough. But, I'm paid just 6,000/. I have kids, family. I know they [Labour NGO] do not have money. Many times I have spent money from my pocket [for DW Union or Labour NGO work]. For the last domestic worker's day, I mobilised 40 people, and spent 300/-. [Interview, 12 April 2017]

Such low wages adversely affect the work of organising DWs into a union, as members too need to change their affiliations when an activist switches organisations. As in some of the areas where multiple unions work, this causes huge upheaval. These upheavals are expressed culturally in terms of asking members about their loyalty to a particular union or an activist. It invariably leads to some members joining the new unions, which in turn requires that the union work restarts with a new activist in the new area. The activist bears the burden of renewing members and building trust within the new context. Not surprisingly, this work is time-consuming and sometimes takes up to a year to rebuild union membership.

The quality of work of the labour activist effectively shapes the success or failure of union formation. For instance, if the executive members of the union do not come for meetings, the accountability falls on the activist/animator. It is the activist who ensures that the DWs are called for meetings or training programmes. This relationship between the labour NGO leader and the labour activist is also contentious. Labour leaders attribute failures when few members show up for meetings or other indications of a lackadaisical approach by DW membership, to the labour activist, as negative reactions directed towards union members may be counterproductive. So it is the labour activist on the field who plays the counter-balancing act. All this shows the interdependence of labour NGO leaders

and labour activists but also highlights the critical roles played by the labour activists in the overall structure of both the labour NGO and the DW union.

Figure 1 captures the organisational structure of the DW union and the labour NGO. While the labour NGO enables the formation and operation of the DW union, it is the labour activist who "animates" the DW union through organising block- and area-level meetings of DWs in their residential neighbourhoods. Area-level meetings are conducted every month with the members of the DW union. It is in these meetings that the everyday consciousness of DWs is shaped. This proceeds usually through engaging with everyday "situations," such as conflicts between DWs and their employers, which labour activists (and sometimes labour NGO leaders) must negotiate and/or mediate on behalf of DWs. It is in resolving these disputes or conflicts that labour activists shape the cultural repertoire of DW beliefs, values, and notions of "dignity" (of work), security (at workplace) and worker rights (such as social security).

On the other hand, it is the labour NGO that takes the lead in engaging the public sphere/civil society and the state on issues concerning DWs. These issues are mainly discussed at the executive committee of the DW union, wherein the members are elected by the members of the DW union every year in the general body meeting. Over the last few decades, this has come to be chiefly three demands—for the implementation of a minimum wage for DWs (this varies from state to state),[6] for a weekly day off for all DWs, and for a guarantee of "decent work" conditions as ratified in the ILO convention. Here again, it is the labour activist whose responsibility it is to concretise these issues for the workers, even as it is clear that DW unions depend upon the labour NGOs to frame their own agenda and demands. As one of the labour NGO leaders reflecting on their own roles vis-à-vis DW unions put it plainly, "Even when we look at factory workers, the CITU, AITUC also pushed the agenda for the workers, is not it? It's not that the workers themselves are saying."

But one of the main differences between trade unions in the formal sector and DW unions operating in the informal sector is in how they identify and address employers. In the formal sector workplaces like the factory, employers are easily identified and addressed through collective bargaining. By contrast, collective bargaining is difficult for DW as there is a fragmentation of employers and workplaces. Each DW typically ends up negotiating with her employer in household that is her worksit. Here, the obvious challenge for DW unions is to articulate the fact that there is a "collective employer"—the middle and upper classes whose homes or households are the workplace (equivalent to a factory site) of DWs. As DW unions are able to conduct much of their work of membership recruitment and worker consciousness-building in the area-level meetings with DWs in the residential neighbourhoods, the "collective bargaining" for DWs then may be seen as a dispersed expression of these area-level meetings as it is the individual DW who takes up the bargaining possibilities by addressing her employer.

The labour activists command attention at the area level meetings where much conversation is geared towards a quasi-systematic sharing of the experiences of DWs with their diverse employers, especially in the context of "conflicts" (such as mistreatment at work, or problems with wage payments) and "negotiation" (such as asking for raise, weekly-offs, "advances or small loans that many DWs accrue with their employers, and of course, the annual "bonus"). The ability of the labour activist to animate such discussions with a clear objective of worker consciousness-building is what marks a "good" animator from the mediocre ones. The area-level meetings are then pedagogical moments of learning through sharing and dialogical knowledge-building for DWs. The DWs get a sense of who they are as a collective (perhaps a class of "workers"), but also a road map for "how to" improve their own work conditions and, most crucially, the role of the union in their lives.

Thus, DWs formulate strategies for their respective approach to negotiating with their employers. For instance, when asked how they ask for a weekly off, DW Revathi said,

> In the beginning itself I will ask/tell, I will come to work but I want a day off on Sunday as my children will be at home, I have to wash their uniforms, they will ask me to cook something (special) and I need time, (and so) I won't come. I had to ask. Akka, I need once a week day off. She knew my problems. … I have a small child. … She understood and gave: Yes, let her have a day off once a week to spend as a family. [Interview, 17 April 2018]

This strategy, used by most of the DWs, to ask for a weekly off by using their family (mostly children) as a reason, appeals to the "good nature" or "humanity" of the middle-class employers. Most of the negotiation is already gendered as it is almost always between the DW and the women of the household. The success of the campaign for a weekly off may be gauged by how members negotiate the terms of work with new employers. From our survey, we found that 66% of DWs asked for a weekly off and 55% of DWs asked for a wage increase. Further, even the demand for a higher wage is made in a very contextual manner by comparing it to the "prevailing rates" in the area or the apartment block.

In reality, DWs are many times not proud card-holding union members, especially in the context of their places of work—individual households of their employers. In fact, their association with a DW union could be counterproductive as seen in the case of a DW, Revathi, whose union card fell out of her purse in front of her employer. As Revathi put it:

> What happened was, when I got the phone call I took it out and all this fell out like this [pointing to the contents of her purse]. It got scattered in the house. She [the employer] said: What is this Revathi? Photo? I said: I am in the union akka [elder-sister]. That was it. She saw it [the union card] and after she saw it she said that she did not want me to work anymore. [Interview, 17 April 2018]

As we argued in Joseph et al (2019), it is only when DWs ask for a bonus that we see the emergence of something like a "worker consciousness" among them. This is because when they ask for a bonus, the only argument they can use is that they are workers and they have a right to get a bonus. There is no appeal here to the larger moral economy or local contexts referred to above. Nonetheless, DWs strategise in other ways too when they ask for their bonus as a right. From the results of

our survey, 49% of the DWs asked for a bonus. Due to the precarity of their work, the absence of a contract means that employers may terminate DWs according to their whims and at any instance of conflict. A DW responded cryptically and sharply to our question about how they select which of their employers to ask for the bonus by saying, "Employer I do not like." The interpretation here is that DWs select those employers whom they do not mind getting fired by, probably because they were not treated well by those employers. Such kinds of assessment of "risks" and "strategies" are part of the learning within area-level meetings facilitated by the labour activists/animators, as it is here that DWs share their strategies as part of their stories about work.

On the other hand, labour leaders come into their own at the level of the public sphere/civil society of the structure where it is necessary for the DW union to engage in advocacy and lobbying with government departments and officials for particular needs such as identity cards, implementation of minimum wage laws, social security, and representation of DW demands at conferences/meeting with the higher officials. The power and status differential between the labour activists and the labour NGO leaders is apparent clearly at this level, with the former not being able to assume leadership due to the relative lack of linguistic skills and credentials (formal education, class status).

This interdependent nature of the labour NGO leaders and the labour activists within the DW union, wherein each depends on the other's abilities at different levels in the union structure, is noted by a prominent labour NGO leader. Reflecting on the need for labour NGOs and DW unions to emerge as strong organisations capable of self-representation, she says:

> I think we [Labour NGO leaders] should do it [Labour NGO work] for some more time. I do not really know when is the time to [let go] … unless we get a real "educated" breed of domestic workers ... I am not saying by generalising but by and large those who are in the leadership of domestic workers [referring to labour activists or Animators] and those who are domestic workers themselves have attained a certain amount of caste equality, are educated to some level, have support systems. [Interview, 2 March 2019]

The support system talked about here is the family support that is needed, especially from their husbands. DWs, especially (but also some labour activists), have to negotiate within their family before stepping out to do activist work. The reasons for this are a complex of actual opportunity costs and culturally constructed perceptions (many times gendered) by family members who view "activism" as either a male's job or not desirable because it takes women's time away from childcare.[7] Organising, then, is itself something that DW union members need to justify as a legitimate and integral part of their subject position as DWs.

In sum, labour NGO leaders and labour activists are situated in the labour NGO-DW union relational structure in ways that demand a deep, culturally sensitive mutual understanding of their respective roles in the structure and the success of the union. While it is true that it is the labour activist who truly "animates" the DW union and fosters the sense of worker community, crucial for any mobilisation around worker rights, it is also true that the labour activist needs the labour NGO leaders for the larger issue of "security" that prompts women to join the DW union.

The issue of DW security is one that highlights this end of the dependency. According to our survey data, 46% of workers joined the DW union for "security." This is related to work conditions and relations, especially the not infrequent accusations of "theft" faced by DWs from their employers. This makes DWs very vulnerable to being summoned to the police station. It is here that the difference between a conventional NGO and a labour NGO comes to the fore. As a DW executive member of a union, Sarasamma put it bluntly, "… Sangha [a micro finance NGO working with DWs] people will not come [to help in this case]; they will only come to collect the money. Only we [referring to her Labour NGO] come to support our workers" [Interview, 12 April 2017].

The reason why DWs need the labour NGO leaders for security is further elaborated by another DW, who recalls an instance when they were taken to the police station:

> Women [DW members of the union] who have come voluntarily [to the police station at the behest of their employer accusing them of "theft"] started feeling very insecure because they said that "our husbands are at home, children are coming back now." The police started taking videos. … they [DWs] came to the police station and till 10'oclock were there. They were kept there. And not one policeman is listening to the matter … all the time they [DW] were sitting there they were saying my gosh it's 10'o clock, can I go, can I go you know … the children, husband. … Some husbands came to the police station. … if a woman [referring to the Labour NGO leader] has come with us and we are treated like this what more when she goes alone to the police station in so many cases … [Interview, 2 March 2019]

Given the reality of police indifference or worse, brutality or open discrimination in the experiences of DWs, who are already culturally and economically vulnerable, it is easy to appreciate the importance of labour NGO leaders who are formally educated and middle class but also socially conscious and long-time organisers who enjoy the trust of DWs. The NGO leaders are the ones who are able to get lawyers to defend the rights of DWs and at times, even to quote from the law books to the police. Thus, as a labour NGO leader reiterates, "That's why I am saying … that's where this kind of interlink is necessary. It's not for dependency but it is for this kind …. it has to be for this kind of support" [Interview, 2 March 2019].

Conclusions

This paper has analysed the relations between the labour NGO and the DW union as one of organic interdependence. As informality characterises much of the care economy, it is a primary reason for the exploitative work conditions for DWs. Thus, collectivisation of DWs within the care economy, although not a new phenomenon, comes with challenges (Chigateri et al 2016; Gallin 2001; George 2013). One such challenge is the dynamics of labour NGOs that organise the DWs into a labour unions. As member-based organisations, the DW unions become the ideal structure that can articulate the rights of DWs effectively, far better than any other

organisational form. However, because of their low socio-economic status, DW unions lack the social and institutional capital to engage with the state, especially in dealing with law (for the security of DWs) or in advocating regulatory frameworks. In this context, labour NGOs play an important role in facilitating access to legal mechanisms and in policy-making. At the same time, labour NGOs rely on DW unions to lend legitimacy to their advocacy, particularly when engaging with state and international institutions. This mutual dependence underscores a complex relationship shaped by structural constraints and strategic necessity.

We would be remiss, however, to take this as a fixed or given relation or structure. Scholars have noted with concern the NGO-isation of civil society and social movements as one in which NGOs undermine and co-opt the power of social movements (Lang 1997). For DW unions, this means the union may become more like a project managed by the NGO, operating according to donor priorities and losing touch with workers' interests. However, the reality may be more complex and contingent than a simple (union = good, NGO = bad) formula, as noted, more recently, by some feminists (Alvarez 2009). Much would depend on how DW unions and the labour NGOs build membership solidarities through democratising election procedures (rather than selection of leaders), capacity building of its members in the management of the union, promotion of financial self-sufficiency through membership drives and by reinforcing accountability to their membership base. Further, labour NGOs working on the issues of workers' rights have come under increasing pressure in a political context that has severely restricted the flow of funds to NGOs (Sriram 2020). A nuanced approach to understanding the relations between DW unions and labour NGOs would rest on how well these relations strengthen the workers, and how the unions find ways to articulate their demands independently with the state.

NOTES

1 We thank M K Shravan, Research Associate, for his assistance in analysing PLFS data.

2 Microfinance groups refer to their "target" groups as "clients."

3 The document on C189 can be accessed on ILO website.

4 Labour activists are sometimes called "animators." http://www.publicsphereproject.org/content/community-animators.

5 Pseudonyms have been used throughout the document to protect the identity of the person.

6 Only some states like Karnataka, Bihar, Tamil Nadu have notified minimum wages for domestic workers under schedule employment. The rest of states will now come under the new wage code for the unorganised sector.

7 DW union leaders and labour activists typically need to go out in the evenings to organise meetings since that is the only time when most people are home; yet it is also the time when the children need attention at their own home.

REFERENCES

Agarwala, R and S Saha (2018): "The Employment Relationship and Movement Strategies among Domestic Workers in India," *Critical Sociology*, Vol 44, Nos 7–8, pp 1207–23.

Alvarez, S (2009): "Beyond NGO-ization?: Reflections from Latin America," *Development*, Vol 52, pp 175–84.

Chan, C K C (2012):" Community-based Organizations for Migrant Workers' Rights: The Emergence of Labour NGOs in China," *Community Development Journal*, Vol 48, No 1, pp 6–22.

Chang, K and L Ling (2000): "Globalization and Its Intimate Other: Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong," G*ender and Global Restructuring: Sightings*, Marianne Marchand and Anne Sission Runyan (eds), Sites and Resistances, London: Routledge.

Chen, M A (2011): "Recognising Domestic Workers, Regulating Domestic Work: Conceptual, Measurement, and Regulatory Challenges," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, Vol 23, No 1, pp 167– 84.

Chen, M A and G Raveendran (2012): "Urban Employment in India: Recent Trends and Patterns," *Margin J Appl Econ Res*, Vol 6, No 2, pp 159–79.

Chigateri, S, M Zaidi and A Ghosh (2016): "Locating the Processes of Policy Change in the Context of Anti-Rape and Domestic Worker Mobilisations in India," United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Geneva.

Duffy, M (2011): *Making Care Count: A Century of Gender, Race, and Paid Care Work*, Rutgers University Press.

Gallin, D (2001): "Propositions on Trade Unions and Informal Employment in Times of Globalisation," *Antipode*, Vol 33, No 3, pp 531–49.

Giles, W, V Preston and M Romero (eds) (2014): *When Care Work Goes Global: Locating the Social Relations of Domestic Work*, Ashgate Publishing.

George, S (2013): "Towards Recognition through Professionalisation," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 48, No 43, pp 69–76.

ILO (2024): "From Global Care Crisis to Quality Care at Home: The Case for Including Domestic Workers in Care Policies and Ensuring Their Rights at Work," https://doi.org/10.54394/HTVE8572.

Joseph, Rajesh, Roshni Lobo and Balmurli Natrajan (2018): "Between 'Bakshseesh' and 'Bonus:' Precarity, Class, and Collective Action among Domestic Workers in Bengaluru," *Economic & Political Weekly*, 17 November, Vol 53, No 45, pp 38–45.

Joseph, R, B Natrajan and R Lobo (2019): "Domestic Workers and the Challenges of Collectivization: Labour NGOs, Neighborhoods, Apartment Complexes," *Decision*, Vol 46, pp 99–109.

Kothari, U (1997): "Women's Paid Domestic Work and Rural Transformation: A Study in South Gujarat," *Economic & Political Weekly*, WS5–WS12.

Lang, Sabine (1997): "The NGOization of Feminism," *Transitions, Environments, Translations, Feminisms in International Politics*, Joan W Scott, Cora Kaplan, Deborah Keates (eds), London: Routledge, pp 101–20.

Marchetti, S (2022): "Care and Domestic Work," In: Migration and Domestic Work, IMISCOE Research Series, Springer, Cham, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11466-3_2.

Naidu, Sirisha (2016): "Domestic Labour and Female Labour Force Participation" *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 44 & 45, pp 101–08.

Natrajan, Balmurli and Rajesh Joseph (2018): "Domestic Workers and the Challenges of Collective Action in Informal Work," CSE Working Paper, Azim Premji University.

NCEUS (2007): "Report on Commission of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector," National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector.

Neetha, N and R Palriwala (2011): "The Absence of State Law: Domestic Workers in India," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, Vol 23, No 1, pp 97–120.

Ramaswamy, E (1977): "The Participatory Dimension of Trade Union Democracy: A Comparative Sociological View," *Sociology,* Vol 11, No 3, pp 465–80.

RoyChowdhury, S (2005): "Labour Activism and Women in the Unorganised Sector: Garment Export Industry in Bangalore," *Economic & Political Weekly*, pp 2250–55.

Sankaran, K (2013): "Domestic Work, Unpaid Work and Wage Rates," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 48, No 43, pp 85–89.

Sharma, S (2016): "Of Rasoi ka Kaam/Bathroom ka Kaam: Perspectives of Women Domestic Workers," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 51, No 7, pp 52–61.

Sriram, M S (2020): "Civil Society Organisations and Foreign Contributions," *India Forum*, 11 December, https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/civil-society-organisations-and-foreign-contributions.