Gendering Struggles against Informal and Precarious Work
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Rina Agarwala,

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FROM THEORY TO PRAXIS AND BACK TO THEORY: INFORMAL WORKERS’ STRUGGLES AGAINST CAPITALISM AND PATRIARCHY IN INDIA

Rina Agarwala

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how gender interacts with informal workers’ collective action strategies in the context of contemporary development scripts around economic growth. Specifically, it engages the theoretical debates on the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism as the systems of domination that organize gender and class. Drawing from a comparative analysis of informal workers’ movements in India’s domestic work and construction sectors, I find the relationship between gender and class and between patriarchy and capitalism is being reconceptualized from below and differs by occupational structures and organization histories. For domestic workers, movements assert what I call a “unitary” model of exploitation. Because domestic workers’ organizations entered the productive sphere through a focus on social reproduction, their struggles conflate gender and class to reverse the shame attached to domestic work and increase the recognized worth of women’s labor. Because construction workers’ organizations mobilize male and female workers and began as class-based organizations focusing on productive work, they articulate what I term “a dual systems” approach to patriarchy and capitalism that exposes inequalities between men and women within the sector, such as unequal pay, glass ceilings, and issues of embodiment. In both cases, global development scripts have not only shaped movement approaches, but
also enabled movements to articulate gendered labor subjects in innovative ways. While domestic workers’ unitary model has had more success in increasing women workers’ dignity and leadership, construction workers’ dualist model has attained more successes in attaining material benefits in the reproductive sphere. These findings suggest that debates on unitary versus dual-systems models of exploitation present a false dichotomy and veil the reality that both are necessary for feminist theory, development models, and women workers’ struggles on the ground.

**Keywords:** Informal labor; feminist theory; social movements; patriarchy; capitalism; domestic work; construction; social reproduction

Since the 1990s, scholars have argued that not only does transnational production have gendered consequences, but gendered practices and subjects also constitute global markets (Salzinger, 2004). Drawing from this framework, I turn our gaze from structure to politics to examine how gender interacts with informal workers’ collective action strategies in the context of contemporary development scripts of accumulation. What are the gendered consequences of informal workers’ movements and how have gendered practices and subjects constituted informal workers’ movements?

To frame this analysis, I engage in theoretical debates on the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism as the systems of domination that organize gender and class. I argue this relationship is being reconceptualized from below. Empirically, I anchor the analysis in a comparative study of informal workers’ movements in India’s domestic work and construction sectors to ask how these workers differentially conceptualize and address this relationship. Do organized informal workers address patriarchy and capitalism as a unitary system or as distinct but interrelated systems of oppression and why? How do these conceptualizations at a local level shape informal workers’ movements and capitalist accumulation at a global level? How can these grounded findings (re)inform our theories on the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism (and between gender and class) today?

Informal workers provide a useful starting point for this inquiry. First, informal labor offers an important lens into the changing contours of the social contract framing contemporary accumulation. Drawing from the Regulation School, I define informal labor as that which produces legal goods and services, but operates outside all health, safety, financial, and labor regulations governing the standard employment relationship (SER) (Breman & Linden, 2014; Portes, Castells, & Benton, 1989). State regulation (and the degree to which it is implemented) draws boundaries that distinguish subsets of workers depending on the level of protection they are entitled to. As I have argued elsewhere, this definition does not imply that informal workers (or those omitted from these regulations) are untouched by state regulation. Clearly, states govern informal labor as a relationship to formal labor, the state, and capital. As well, informal workers are subject to a host of regulations and even protections from the state that are
not marked by the SER and are often not classified as “labor” rights (Agarwala, 2013).

What is important for our purposes is that, in many countries, these regulations that target the SER (which protect a narrow subset of workers and create a large mass of unprotected, excluded workers) mark a twentieth-century social accumulation model that is currently being questioned and unraveled. As a result, this definition of informal labor is also in flux. If present-day labor regulations are undone and even the narrow subset of workers lose protections, the distinction between “formal” and “informal” workers would lose meaning since all workers would be unprotected or “informal.” This scenario raises important questions as to how informal (and formal workers) are addressing the current onslaught on (imperfect) twentieth-century regulations. Will workers try to expand existing regulations to include more workers or overturn the model to ensure protections along non-employment related lines, such as “citizenship” or other identities?

Second, informal workers as a class in itself provides ready insights into the mutual dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism over time. Unprotected, low wage, precarious work has always existed, especially in the Global South, and has long absorbed female labor. Informal labor enables workers to simultaneously fulfill productive and reproductive work (at the expense of self-exploitation) in spaces that lie between the public and private spheres.

Third, informal workers as a class for itself provide important insights into how patriarchy and capitalism are conceived and fought on the ground. Many scholars have noted an increased feminization of informal labor (Ahn; Chant & Pedwell, 2008; Chen; Kabeer, 2010). Given that informal work is growing across economies, however, these claims are often unsupported by data. In India, although the share of female workers in informal work is higher than the share of male workers, informal work itself is still predominantly male. Whether the structure of informal work is or is not female dominated, we know that informal workers’ organizations incorporate more female members and leaders and address women’s concerns of reproductive costs more than formal workers’ movements.

Finally, informal workers’ movements provide an important contrast to earlier formal labor movements (especially in the US and Europe) that cemented gender hierarchies by excluding women workers – most famously, through living wages. Informal labor movements, however, have targeted women workers, sometimes excluding male workers. At first glance, this trend fits contemporary development scripts, which scholars argue privilege identity-based struggles against patriarchy over collective struggles against capitalism (Fraser, 2009; Roberts & Soedeberg, 2012). Indeed, at the start of this research, I assumed (wrongly) that informal workers’ movements that privilege gender identities would foment individualistic, “woman-as-victim” approaches to addressing poverty.

But my findings, which draw from interviews with members and leaders of domestic and construction workers’ movements, yield more complex results that differ by sector. I find domestic workers’ struggles assert what I call a “unitary”
model of exploitation. Because domestic workers’ organizations entered the productive sphere through a focus on the reproductive sphere, they articulate an identity that conflates gender and class to reverse the shame attached to domestic work and increase the recognized worth of women’s labor. Because construction workers’ organizations mobilize male and female workers and began as class-based organizations focusing on productive work, they articulate what I term “a dual systems” approach to patriarchy and capitalism that exposes inequalities between men and women within the sector, such as unequal pay, glass ceilings, and issues of embodiment.

In both cases, recent development scripts have not only shaped movements’ approaches, but also enabled them to articulate gendered labor subjects in innovative ways. While domestic workers’ unitary model has had more success in increasing women workers’ dignity and leadership, construction workers’ dualist model has attained more successes in attaining material benefits in the reproductive sphere. Both approaches have the potential to nuance labor movements and capitalist accumulation models in the contemporary era, but they are also each limited in ways I explore in this chapter. These findings suggest that debates on unitary versus dual-systems models of exploitation present a false dichotomy and veil the reality that both are necessary for women workers’ struggles on the ground.

CONNECTING THEORY TO PRAXIS: A DUALIST VS UNITARY SYSTEM OF PATRIARCHY AND CAPITALISM

Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have debated the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. Most concur these systems of power are intertwined in a complex relationship – at times fortifying one another, at other times conflicting. Scholars diverge, however, on the shades of distinction between the two systems. Should we draw a clear line between patriarchy and capitalism? Or are they too interrelated in practice to make such false distinctions, even in theory? These questions are significant for political struggles against domination.

Heidi Hartmann (1979) famously launched what became known as “dual systems theory,” conceptualizing patriarchy and capitalism as distinct systems of domination that interact with one another. Capitalism divides populations into classes based on their relationship to the means of production. The primary mechanism of exploitation is profiting off labor value. The social relationship pinning the system together is the necessary interdependence between classes. Political counter-movements valorize labor and collective action. Patriarchy, in turn, divides populations into sexual subjects based on gendered constructs. The primary mechanism of exploitation is control over sexuality and social constructions of gender. The social relationship reproducing patriarchy is intimate interdependence (within household and family). Political counter-movements fight for individual rights and emancipation.

This conceptualization of two distinct systems fits well with the influential framework of “intersectionality.” At the individual level, scholars highlighted how people experience the reciprocal interconnections between distinct social
relations of domination (i.e., patriarchy and capitalism) and identity (i.e., gender and class) (Crenshaw, 1989). At the meta-level, scholars detailed the formation of each system of domination autonomously, while also exposing their interrelations. As Barbara Risman (2004, p. 443) wrote, “While various axes of domination are always intersecting, the systems of inequality are not necessarily produced or re-created with identical social processes.” At the historical level, French material feminists illustrated how the interrelationships between gender and class (and race), as well as their corresponding systems of domination, continuously reshape and “co-form” one another over time (Arruzza, 2016).

By the 1990s, dual-systems approaches had raised critical questions as to why interactions between systems of oppression take place to begin with. Scholars also critiqued dual-systems approaches for absolving classical theories of capitalism (of both the Marxist and neoclassical varieties); theories of gender relations simply needed to be added on to unchallenged, sex-blind theories of capitalism (Young, 1997). Finally, critics blamed dual-systems approaches for paving the way for postmodern approaches that foregrounded discursive, cultural, and ideological elements of gender oppression, while ignoring material aspects.

As an alternative to dual-systems theory, Marxist and socialist feminists recently articulated a unitary theory by reviving the concept of “social reproduction” as a key explanation for gender oppression and its relationship to capitalism (Arruzza, 2016; Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Ferguson, 1999; Fraser, 2016). Social reproduction refers to the centrality of the work of maintaining and reproducing human life, which in turn reproduces the entire system of economic and social relations. This work is performed within the family, by the state, and in the market; it can take place with and without pay. In all cases, it implicates male and female labor in different ways and has reproduced women’s oppression across time and space. On one hand, “social reproduction,” highlights that households operate through a “distinct set of dynamics [from the market]” motivated by the “impulse to meet human needs” through contradictory relations of domination and intimacy. On the other hand, “social reproduction” emphasizes that households (and the labor within) form the material basis of life and are thus “as much a part of the ways people co-operate to meet their daily and future needs as is the market” (Ferguson, 1999, p. 6). “Social reproduction” thus forces us to rethink classical conceptualizations of capitalism.

Despite the theoretical heft of unitary theories, empirical studies on gender and labor under contemporary capitalism continue to illustrate patriarchy and capitalism as distinct, interrelated power systems (even when they deny dual systems at a theoretical level). For example, scholars explaining state-led industrialization in the Global South highlight capitalism’s appropriation of patriarchy to attain not only women’s unpaid reproductive labor (i.e., social reproduction), but also women’s low-wage productive labor in factories (Beneria & Roldan, 1987; Moon, 2005). Scholars of finance capitalism highlight how liberalizing states appropriate patriarchy and feminist movements against patriarchy to bolster capitalist logics, which in turn exacerbate inequalities across class; among lower classes, patriarchy has enabled capital to subsume social reproduction within the market through paid care work (Fraser, 2016). Perhaps most puzzling
for proponents of a unitary systems approach is the resilience of patriarchy in socialist economies, which raises the question of whether social reproduction may operate autonomously from capitalism after all (Wang, 2016).

How can we better connect the rich theoretical discussions around patriarchy and capitalism, and the key link of social reproduction, with empirical realities? Ferguson (1999, p. 1) argued that the concept of social reproduction “can provide a coherent theoretical underpinning to an anti-capitalist feminist coalition politics.” But politics rarely waits for a coherent theoretical underpinning. Politics erupts from people’s lived experiences. As Ferguson (1999, p. 12) herself points out, “Gender and class are series of layered experiences.” So perhaps we should turn the arrow around to ask: how might people’s existing struggles better inform our theoretical underpinnings?

METHODS

To examine the gendered implications of informal workers’ struggles, I focus on two industries in India: construction and domestic work. Indian construction has its own industrial classification, and domestic work is a subset of the “service” sector. Both industries represent growth sectors for employment, reflecting India’s new capitalist model, which (in contrast Europe, North America, and East Asia) is not being fueled by manufacturing.¹ Jobs in the growing sectors of construction and low-end services are notoriously precarious, unprotected, and unregulated by twentieth-century employment standards. These sectors also hold significance for gender. India’s construction industry is male-dominated, although its share of female workers (approximately 30%) is higher than in most countries. India’s domestic work sector is female-dominated, although its share of male workers was historically higher than in other countries.

I use organizations as a point of entry to informal workers and their movements. First, I compiled an inventory of all workers’ organizations across the two sectors. Of the 70 construction workers’ organizations, 80% are unions; of the 69 domestic workers’ organizations, 83% are unions. Our research team then conducted 45 interviews with the leaders, staff, and members of the most influential organizations, covering 16 domestic workers’ organizations and 13 construction workers’ organizations. The organizations in the interview sample included unions, NGOs, cooperatives, and two international organizations. The interviews with organized workers in construction were supplemented with seven site visits that comprised focus groups and informal conversations with unorganized construction workers.² In addition, we conducted 11 interviews with government officials, national labor organizers, and activist professionals (including labor lawyers and academics). Interviews were held in person and lasted between one and five hours.

Interviews with domestic workers took place in the capital city of New Delhi and the financial center of Mumbai; interviews with construction workers took place in New Delhi and the technology hub of Bangalore. These cities were selected as sites of recent economic growth and significant worker organization. They were also the sites of earlier studies (by Agarwala on construction in
Mumbai and by ISST on domestic work in Bangalore), enabling a comparative analysis across time.

CONSTRUCTION AND DOMESTIC WORK: DEFINITION, COMPOSITION, AND STRUCTURE

Indian construction and domestic work operate under different structures of production and gender dynamics.

Domestic Work

As in many countries, domestic work has not been legally recognized as "work" in India, so its definitions are hotly debated. Generally, domestic workers in India are defined as those employed by private households to perform service tasks in and for the household, such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, elderly care, gardening, security, and driving. They are officially categorized as "self-employed" workers, even when hired through a placement agency that profits off their labor. Indian domestic workers’ movements have fought to identify the recipient of their services as "employers," but domestic worker employers are not registered and are thus as informal as the workers. Unlike most informal workers, domestic workers have direct and daily interactions with their principal employers.

In 2004, the Indian government’s National Sample Survey (NSS) counted the employer’s household as an enterprise and specified paid domestic work as an occupation for the first time. Based on the NSS (which many activists claim undercounts the sector), domestic workers constitute 1% of the labor force (or 4 million workers) (Bhattacharya & Sinha, 2009). Since 2004, the share of female domestic workers has risen to nearly 80% (Neetha, 2009). The lack of rigid entry requirements in domestic work has made it a viable employment option for poor, uneducated, rural migrant women (Rao, 2011). Their desperate need for employment is reflected in the increasing social heterogeneity of domestic workers. Although domestic workers in India were traditionally Hindu and Dalit (members of the lowest rung of India’s caste hierarchy), from 2008 to 2011 the share of middle caste members increased to 30%, and the share of Muslims and Christians has also increased.

Some domestic workers “live-in” the worksite (i.e., the employer’s home) and tend to be young (in their teens or 20s), unmarried, female, recent migrants. A large portion of their income is paid in housing and food. These workers are especially prone to abuse, and organizations have been less successful in reaching them. Other domestic workers “live-out” of the employer’s home in their own homes (in a slum or informal settlement) and commute daily to work for one or several employers in return for a wage. Live-outs tend to be older (over 30), married, migrants. Due to their accessibility, they comprise the majority of organization members.

Domestic workers’ organizations are nearly all exclusively female.
Construction Work

Unlike domestic work, construction is recognized under India’s classification scheme as its own industry, with multiple occupational subdivisions within. As a result, builders can access industry-specific loans, workers are recognized and defined, and data on the sector have been well-documented. Construction workers are defined as all those under the industrial classification of “construction,” spanning a range of tasks, genders, castes, and places of work.

Today, construction constitutes 11% of India’s total economic output and employs 41 million workers (or 10% of the labor force) and 44% of India’s urban informal workforce (CIDC, 2012; Jayakrishnan, Thomas, Raom, & George, 2013), making it the second largest employer in India after agriculture (Devi & Kiran, 2013). Eighty percent of construction employment is informal; in the residential sector, 99.41% of the jobs are informal (NCAER, 2014, p. 20).

Unlike in domestic work, the principal employers in construction (i.e., developers) are legally registered and regulated entities. In some cases, construction employers are public entities, but unlike in domestic work, individual state officials who are enforcing labour laws are not the direct employers. Informal construction workers in India are categorized as “sub-contracted” or “casual workers” and are hired through chains of middlemen. Therefore, unlike domestic workers, they rarely interact directly with their principal employer. Instead, their daily interactions are with sub-contractors with whom they often share kinship networks. Depending on their position in the labor hierarchy, sub-contractors are sometimes viewed as employers and other times included in construction unions.

Women comprise 30% of India’s construction workforce and operate at the lowest rung of the labor hierarchy — carrying materials, fetching water, and manually cleaning and mixing cement. In some cases, they are hired to do moulding and roof work; in the rarest cases, women become masons. With increasing mechanisation (especially in large infrastructure projects), women have been pushed out of the industry (Madhok, 2005), oftentimes turning to domestic work.

As in domestic work, some construction workers live and work on construction sites. They tend to be rural migrants who are brought to the city by a sub-contractor to work on a specific project, such as multistory buildings, office parks, shopping malls, and public infrastructure projects (such as metros and highways). These workers may live on site or in a nearby labor camp and may be paid-in-kind (with housing and basic amenities). Unlike domestic workers, on-site construction workers usually migrate with their families (although many are now arriving as single men). Others, reside “off-site” in a local slum or informal housing settlement and sell their labor at a marketplace to a sub-contractor that hires them on a daily basis. These workers, who live with their families, are hired for local projects, such as house repairs, small roads, and some multistory buildings.

Construction organizations are predominantly male but include a substantial share of female members.
WHEN LABOR ORGANIZERS RE-CONSTITUTE GENDERED LABOR SUBJECTS

Development scripts refer to reigning ideologies and prescriptions for accumulation, and they provide an important context for our examination of informal workers’ struggles and gender. Since the 1990s, development scripts purported by the Indian government and by multilateral organizations (such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank) have highlighted the increasing vulnerability of women workers. These scripts have been critiqued for acknowledging individual precarities and gendered imbalances, but failing to suggest systemic changes to the economic structures that created the vulnerabilities in the first place (Roberts & Soedeberg, 2012).

My own findings suggest these scripts also had an unintended consequence of enabling informal workers’ organizations to rearticulate gendered labor subjects in ways that highlight the complex relations between patriarchy and capitalism for the first time. In other words, although recent development scripts have privileged “single axis” gender speak to exclusively focus on patriarchy, organized informal workers have used these scripts to link gender to class (and thus patriarchy to capitalism) by increasing recognition for feminized occupations (such as domestic work), as well as the inequality between men and women within mixed occupations (such as construction). By doing so, local informal workers’ movements have the potential to reshape labor movements and related development scripts in ways that national governments, feminist movements (that have not focussed on labor), and labor movements (that have not focussed on gender) have long failed to do.

Development Scripts on Gender and Capital

Women’s productive and reproductive labor has long been acknowledged as a key node in global development scripts. In the 1970s, “women in development” (WID) scholars put forth the “efficiency hypothesis” arguing that women’s participation and visibility in the paid, productive sphere would increase their power and overall accumulation (Boserup, 1970). Development programs followed these prescriptions. But “gender and development” (GAD) scholars critiqued them for attacking patriarchy without questioning capitalism or its relationship to patriarchy (Beneria & Sen, 1997; Fernandez Kelly, 1994). With more women in the productive sphere, who will conduct the (often unpaid) reproductive work? How will men (in the public and intimate spheres) react to increased women’s productive work? Moreover, market structures rely on class and gender inequalities, so women’s incorporation into markets merely sorts them into the bottom of class and gender hierarchies with low-paid, low-prestige, precarious work.

Rather than addressing GAD scholars’ sound critiqued, development programs in the 1990s and 2000s folded feminist demands for women’s empowerment into the increasingly popular development scripts of individuality and self-sufficiency to justify the promotion of women as productive laborers, and as
investors and consumers (Fraser, 2009). Women were thus (re)discovered as an underutilized resource that could support a new regime of finance capitalism and address the looming economic crisis. These trends created political space and resources for development organizations to emphasize a gender frame that was devoid of connections to capitalist exploitation and the material conditions of inequality.

In the process, the original WID goals of gender equality became distal as women were overtly incorporated in the lower ends of production. As well, capitalist markets continued to be absolved of responsibility for gender and class inequalities. In addition to blaming gender inequality on women’s exclusion from the market (of the WID variety), development scripts in the new millennium blamed non-market forces (such as cultural injustice) and imperfect markets (such as lack of information, access, education, and health care). The World Bank’s 2012 *Word Development Report on Gender Equality and Development* highlighted the need to empower women in material terms but suggested no changes in the economic structures that disempowered them in the first place. There was also no mention of capital’s growing power to constrain governments’ ability to redistribute resources and finance social provisioning. As Adrienne Roberts and Soedeberg (2012) write in their scathing critique of the report, these efforts “depoliticise and normalise high levels of socioeconomic inequality, brought about by market-led development promoted by neoliberal states by deflecting responsibility and blame away from markets [and market actors, such as banks] toward poor state policies and cultural and normative attributes of the poor.”

How did these recent development scripts affect feminist movements? Veronica Schild (2015) reminds us that feminist movements were never a homogenous mass of passive victims to “neoliberal forces.” They were always heterogeneous and constantly contesting the so-called “cunning of history.” In Latin America, Schild argues, many feminists opposed the failures of development and democracy through militant movements that were anti-dictatorship, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist. In their struggles for autonomy, socialist and radical feminists were joined by Catholic feminists motivated by liberation theology, who used popular education to raise consciousness and promote inter-class solidarity, especially among indigenous movements.

These efforts were, however, eventually appropriated by NGO-led participatory approaches that incorporated women into anti-poverty programs to take care of their own families (rather than rely on state assistance) and into flexible, low-wage work to support their household’s reproduction and fuel capitalist accumulation. By the 1990s, Schild says a new “feminism of the possible” had emerged — a pragmatic liberal women’s politics with an agenda of cautious democratization, operating within the limits set by local and international capitalist relations. Upper-class women emerged privileged and empowered, while poor women remained marginalized. Since the 1990s, therefore, development scripts gave rise to a new crop of feminist practitioners who were actively seeking out the patronage of so-called “neoliberal” powers by foregrounding struggles against patriarchy and downplaying connections with capitalism. We know
the (sound) critiques of these approaches: they privileged cultural struggles over material struggles; individual, identity-based rights over collective, class action strategies. I will not reiterate these here.

Instead, I seek here to understand the unintended opportunities that recent development scripts have opened for gender to become an organizing tool for labor and to highlight the connections between patriarchy and capitalism.

**Recent Development Scripts and Feminist Opportunities**

At the most basic level, our interviews with informal workers’ organization leaders highlighted their focus on “gender” or “women’s rights and issues” in utilitarian terms — gender now opens doors. Since the 1990s, (in India and elsewhere), “gender” has become a more valorized identity than “class” or “labor.” This has created a window of opportunity, not only for organizations that view gender along a single axis devoid of connections to class, but also for organizations committed to addressing the gender and class concerns of women workers.

Despite unions’ struggles against class-based exploitation, several union leaders said they highlighted their attention to gender and downplayed their attention to class to attain the attention of certain publics. One Field Coordinator of GKS-Gurgaon, a union of domestic workers, explained when they speak with Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) (i.e., communities representing homeowners, who are also domestic work employers), they used their sister organization, *Nari Shakti Manch*, an NGO that organizes women, addresses sexual violence, works with families, and organizes at the neighborhood level. The union never spoke directly with the RWAs. The Field Coordinator described this approach of focusing on women’s rights (and downplaying gender connections with class and collective, union-based struggles) as a “soft approach” that was essential to attaining employers’ attention.6

Similarly, organizations’ early efforts to attain state attention for domestic work targeted agencies concerning women and children, which were swelling in number, rather than labor, which was being hallowed out by India’s liberalization reforms. In 2008, several organization leaders partnered with the National Commission of Women to try to enact a comprehensive legislation on domestic work. When the Child Labour Act was passed in 1986, organizations worked with the Child Welfare Committee to include domestic work into the Act. Addressing gender along a single axis was a purely strategic decision that did not reflect organizations’ own understanding of gender as intertwined with class; indeed all these efforts addressed issues of women workers (and thus fought to address the domination of patriarchy and capitalism). But in an era where state entities addressing class/labor struggles were being neutered (and even eradicated), development scripts enabled organizations to turn to another set of state entities to address their concerns.

Among construction organizations, the growing number of development projects targeting women has gone so far as to create a perception that women construction workers have it better than male workers. Male members of *AKKKU*7
spoke resentfully about support groups that provide loans only to women. Indeed, microcredit programs targeting women as a pathway to improved children’s health and education have proliferated throughout India. One male member joked, “No one gives loans to men!” He also pointed to women having more employment options than men. When explaining the drop in women construction workers, one member noted, “There are other alternatives for them [women] now, they can work at homes or offices [as domestic workers], and they opt for that because it’s easier.”

If recent development scripts gave informal workers’ organizations the opportunity to mobilize gender, how did organizations then translate this into mobilizing gendered labor subjects in each industry?

Building Recognition and Reversing Shame: The Unitary Model of Domestic Work

Domestic workers’ movements in India illustrate how women workers articulate a unitary model of exploitation. More than in construction, domestic workers’ unitary approach has yielded successes in attaining women workers’ recognition and leadership.

Domestic worker organizations in India are proliferating. Our inventory includes 69 registered domestic workers’ organizations, and nearly all mobilize only women workers. At first glance, we might attribute this trend to global development scripts that privilege women’s rights over collective action by class categories. Interestingly, however, we find that 83% of Indian domestic workers’ organizations are operating as unions. Although some have not yet attained legal registration as unions, they are all organizing around a membership model, employing a rhetoric of workers’ rights, and fomenting class identities. Most of them became unions recently, in preparation for the 2011 ILO Convention on domestic work, where only unions were allowed to participate. For the first time in India, these domestic workers’ organizations are now forming a national-level movement to demand data and protective legislations to regulate domestic work. They are also exposing the connections between class and gender, as well as patriarchy and capitalism, in ways never done before. At their root, these struggles aim to reverse the shame attached to domestic work and increase the recognized worth of women’s labor.

Indian labor unions have long failed to organize female domestic workers. In 1959, Indian domestic workers launched a 26-day hunger strike across a few cities, and in 1972, they organized the first union of domestic workers, Gharelu Kamgar Sangh (GKS). But these early efforts organized male workers. It was not until the 1980s that organizations targeting female workers emerged among domestic workers. Importantly, although Indian domestic workers’ organizations today are converging toward a union-based model, almost none began as labor groups. Rather most Indian domestic workers’ organizations, even left-oriented ones, began as NGOs or committees addressing issue areas (such as housing and urban poverty) and identity politics (such as gender).
This history raises an important question: if labor movements have tended to ignore women workers’ needs, why do non-labor groups address women workers’ needs? Our interviews with domestic workers’ organizations indicate that their early focus on issues of social reproduction in the private sphere enabled them to access, hear, and mobilize women workers in ways that traditional unions that target the workplace could and would not. In other words, social reproduction emerges as a key mechanism exposing the links between patriarchy and capitalism.

The Pune Zila Ghar Kamgar Sangathana, the domestic workers’ union affiliated to the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) did not emerge from CPM’s federation of unions (CITU\textsuperscript{10}), but rather from AIDWA\textsuperscript{11} (CPM’s women’s wing), which tried to address poor women’s issues in the home. Kiran Moghe, President of the Pune union, explained the advantages this gave them, “At AIDWA, we were taking up normal civic issues — water, sanitation, PDS, violence […] That is usually what women’s organizations work in.” This gave AIDWA an “advantage” claimed Moghe, “We are [...] where they [women workers] are. Because these are the people you can contact only if they are home, you can’t contact them at their workplaces, unlike most other workers. So that was, I would say, our comparative advantage.”\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, Santosh of GKS-Gurgaon recounted how they first began organizing women dealing with housing issues, not workers. This was a common trajectory for many domestic workers’ organizations.

In some cases, a women’s organization was set up while the domestic workers’ union was emerging, because the union work exposed issues that women’s groups could better address (such as domestic violence). Here too, leaders credited their success in setting up the domestic workers’ union to leaders’ work in the women’s organization. As Medha Thatte, General Secretary of Pune’s Shehar Molkarin Sangathan (affiliated to Lal Nishan, The Communist Party of Maharashtra), explained, “Because she [the union’s founder] had the experience of dealing with women’s issues, in 1985 we got Shramik Mahila Morcha registered.”\textsuperscript{13} In other cases, organizations remain a woman’s organization and refused to identify as a labor organization, as in the case of Jagori. Their attention to domestic work was an accidental consequence of their attention to women’s rights because so many women they met were dependent on domestic work. Since they did not feel they had the capacity to deal with informal workers’ issues, they focused on invisible work (including paid and unpaid household labor) as a violation of women’s rights and referred paid domestic workers to other unions, such as Domestic Workers’ Forum (DWF) of Chetanlya. They also assisted other organizations, such as Chetanlya, in conducting rescue operations of young, female migrant live-in workers.

Accessing women workers through the reproductive sphere has not been a strategy limited to those working in paid reproductive work (such as domestic work). As Jean Jenkins (2012) found, garment and textile workers’ unions in South India also experienced a similar trajectory of starting as non-union, women’s organizations examining civic issues and then coming into contact with
women’s productive labor issues, thereby articulating a more unitary identity with patriarchy and capitalism.

The next question is: how did recent development scripts (that privilege individual, identity-based rights around gender) enable struggles against patriarchy to fold in material struggles around capitalism? Our interviews with domestic workers’ organizations indicate that because women’s groups’ entered issues of productive work through the lens of social reproduction, domestic workers’ unions today build identities that conflate gender, class (and caste) identities much more than other labor groups, thereby articulating a unitary model of exploitation under patriarchy and capitalism.

Recent development scripts have catalyzed domestic workers’ movements in India to launch a “politics of recognition” of feminized occupations that have long been devalued and ignored, even in the earlier era of more state protections (from the 1950s to the 1980s). The concept of “recognition” is often misconceived as a factor of cultural identity politics only; the politics of recognition are thus belittled for their inability to transform material structures. But as Nancy Fraser (1995), who popularized the term most recently, notes, gender is “bivalent” and suffers from symbolic/cultural and material exclusions. Given this, we can extrapolate that struggles for recognition can target both the symbolic/cultural and material realms. Among domestic workers, all the organization leaders and members we spoke with highlighted the need to attain greater recognition of domestic workers’ worth and thus fight the invisibility of their exploited contributions to the household and economy. To overcome their invisibility, organizations not only had to increase their members’ consciousness on the labor value of their work (long seen as something women do for “free”), they also had to overcome the shame attached to poor women who work (usually expressed in terms of sexuality), and reverse the drop in worth associated with work done by a woman (by redefining the occupation as “skilled”). Female domestic workers articulated issues of shame far more than male construction workers.14

Domestic workers expressed that shame was attached to their work in several ways. First, neighbors made assumptions about their sexuality and morality when they worked outside the home. As one NDWM15-Delhi field staff member and domestic worker said, “Our neighbors who work in good government jobs think we are bad women. They say God knows where these ladies are going and doing stuff.”16 Similarly, a member of Delhi Garelu Kamgar Sangathan (DGKS), said her neighbors “look down on girls who go out and work.”17 These narratives reflect the common practice of using sexuality norms to control and discipline women’s mobility and morality; “good” vs “bad” women map seamlessly with women’s “constrained” vs “unconstrained” sexuality. But this trope is overladen with class. Domestic workers’ experiences echo those of young female factory workers in Sri Lanka and poor, educated female nurse migrants from India (Lynch, 2007); Walton-Roberts (2012). Poor women workers are consistently accused of being “bad” (i.e., sexually promiscuous) and must struggle not only against class-based exclusions, but also exclusions emerging from patriarchal disciplinary tactics. This contrasts with the reference to women
workers in “good” government jobs or the high-skilled women workers in India’s elite professional sectors that Swethaa Ballakrishnen (2016) depicts. Skilled women workers are valorized for working in “good” jobs and thus have ways of constructing “respectable femininities,” which allow them to assume a moral superiority.

Second, domestic workers repeatedly spoke of how their work is not viewed as having “value,” because women are expected to perform these tasks for no pay in their own homes. This made it harder to overcome the costs of being accused of doing “bad” work. As one member of DGKS in Delhi noted, “Employers earlier used to feel this [domestic work] is women’s work so it’s no big deal.”18 Leaders also noted that some workers had consented to this ideology. A staff member of SEWA-Delhi noted, “Women themselves don’t give any (importance). If you see, women work three-fourths of the day and rest for one-fourth. Men, on the other hand, rest for three-fourths of the day. Even then if you ask women — what do you do, sister? She will say — ‘nothing.’ And the same women, to help their husbands to get to work will wash their clothes, iron their clothes, cook food for them, everything. She does so much work without any salary and her work is given no importance. So this is a shortcoming in women too.”20

Finally, women’s paid work was viewed as confirmation of an unemployed, unworthy, husband. Patriarchal norms that value husbands’ work socially demote working women as a last resort. Moreover, the shame attached to domestic work has forced uneducated men to choose unemployment over domestic work, thus exacerbating the stigma. As Padmaja Ramamurthi, Coordinator of APSA-Dream School noted, “Women might go over from construction work to domestic work. But a lot of the young men who haven’t gone to school, or they’ve dropped out, they just don’t know what to do if there’s no construction work, so I guess they’re starting to see […] and a lot of them say to me, ‘I wish I’d gone to school, I wish I had studied’.”22

To reverse these depictions of shame and attain greater recognition of domestic work’s worth, organizations spent substantial time building members’ consciousness. One member of DGKS in Delhi was quick to correct these assertions, “We know that we are doing this work for our children, to run our houses. Now work is not seen in a bad light.”23 Although some attributed this shift in attitude to the economic pressures everyone was encountering to work, others attributed the shift to the organization itself. Another member of DGKS explained, “Sir [Head of DGKS] teaches us that till the time you don’t respect your work, no one else will. Earlier we use to be ashamed when someone asked us about our work. Sir used to tell us that you work and earn your money. So we should be proud.”24

Increasing women’s willingness to admit they work outside the home and draw pride from that worker identity is no small feat. Many workers said that the biggest advantage they found from joining the organization has been the membership card. As another DGKS member explained, “It gives us an identity. Women who are not part of the sangathan [organization] can’t fight for their rights because they don’t have backing. When I ask women what proof do
you have that you are doing this work? They say ‘nothing.’ So the sangathan gives recognition of your work. And our DGKS is the only sangathan in Delhi which has been registered with the government [i.e. attained legal union registration].”

Organizations and government programs have also tried to reverse the shame attached to women’s work by redefining it as “skilled” through training programs. But leaders expressed mixed feelings about this strategy. To some, “skilling” exemplifies how development scripts have appropriated feminist goals of empowerment to squeeze women’s labor and further stratify the labor market. Kiran Moghe, Head of the communist CITU union in Pune, noted that skilling only addresses the demands of high-end employers; lower middle-class employers, who are more prone to non-payment of wages, are less interested in hiring skilled domestic workers because they are more costly. As Moghe said: “We will not oppose it [skilling], but we don’t think that is our main agenda. Because that is ok for a certain section of employers […] in Pune City — 10% of employers, not more. The large chunk [of employers] is going to be the lower middle class, who does a little work herself, and at a pinch, if her own economic situation changes, then she will say ‘don’t come from tomorrow’.” Similar sentiments have been expressed in India around multinational corporations having higher labor standards and better work conditions than small, domestic, informal businesses. Even among employers who do want skilled labor, they are often unwilling to pay for it. As one employer plainly acknowledged, “I want cheap skilled labor!”

Finally, domestic workers’ organizations spent substantial energy depicting their members as “female-headed households” and foregrounding their members whose husbands do not work. As Armaity Irani, the District Secretary of the CITU Domestic Workers’ Union in Mumbai explained, “Most of the people seen are those who are affected by husbands leaving them, husbands have died, or [the women] are the only earning members in the family — 50% must be like this […] husbands not doing anything […] so where the husbands lose their jobs, women are working.” By doing so, they re-frame women’s domestic work as essential to the survival of the household economy and thus of huge “worth” and “import.” This strategy echoes findings from Turkey, Mexico, Bangladesh, and other parts of India where women legitimated their paid work by underscoring its role in ensuring their family’s survival (Fowler-Salamini, 2003; Ozygin, 2001). Working in the confines of a home (albeit an employer’s home) in domestic work also helps negate the shame attached to women working in the public sphere.

Domestic workers’ efforts, while impressive on many levels, have also been limited. They have not overturned the controlling norms of women’s confinement. Moreover, household and community members often draw arbitrary lines of “survival necessity”; if a woman is found to be working beyond that line, her work and her body are once again denigrated (Lessinger, 1990; Vera-Sanso, 2000). As a result, the legitimacy of women’s work remains subject to male labor. Finally, framing women’s paid labor as an extension of their household
responsibility can cement the temporary nature of women’s labor and thus curtail investments in building skills or even collective action.

**Narrowing the Gap between Men and Women: The Dualist Model of Construction**

If domestic workers’ movements in India illustrate how women workers articulate a unitary model of exploitation, construction workers illustrate a struggle around a dual-systems approach to patriarchy and capitalism. This approach has yielded less leadership and recognition of women workers but more material benefits in the reproductive sphere than domestic workers’ unitary approach.

Unlike domestic work, construction workers do not face an automatic negation of their labor value (even if it is grossly undervalued and exploited). Construction has long been acknowledged for its contributions to GDP and employment, and construction workers are predominantly male. But development scripts that valorize “gender” have provided an opportunity to expose and address the material and symbolic gaps entrenched between male and female construction workers. In mobilizing women workers, therefore, construction workers focus on women’s unique needs in the productive sphere relative to men, such as unequal pay, glass ceilings, and embodiment issues (such as sexual harassment, access to toilets, and maternity leave). This struggle reflects a dual-systems approach, where patriarchy is expressed as an additive system to capitalism, rather than as part of capitalism.

Unlike domestic work, informal construction workers have been organizing at the national level for increased recognition and protections since the 1980s. While the struggles have a long way to go, construction workers have attained protective legislations and welfare boards, both of which serve as role models for other informal workers’ movements today (Agarwala, 2013). These struggles, which were launched by unions, focus on exploitation within the employment relationship and fight for workers’ rights. Their greatest victories through the Welfare Boards have managed to attain some redistribution (through state funds and a tax on employers) to de-commodify their social consumption needs in the form of health care, education scholarships, dowry payments, funeral expenses, and some pension. These have important implications for gender and social reproduction and illustrate more success in de-commodifying reproductive labor than domestic workers have managed to do.

At the same time, construction organizations expressed mixed approaches to attacking patriarchy head-on. On one hand, women were often expressed as a resource burden in construction. As one leader explained, “In the large infrastructure projects, there are no women in India. Then the media will come in. And with children and women, there are more facilities that need to be provided (schools, etc.).” Amjad Hasan, General Secretary of Delhi Asangathit Nirman Mazdoor Union (which is part of the Congress Party-affiliated federation, INTUC) corroborated on why state-sponsored “mega projects” are becoming increasingly dominated by single, male migrants: “Many laws have to be enforced if they give women employment. Because then there is Sexual
Harassment Committee, Equal Right Equal Pay, Equal Remuneration Act, crèches […] If a woman is not there, then all this money gets saved. Also, they feel that if a man is alone, he will be able to work longer. There will be no tension, etc.” Hasan went on to explain that single men can be housed together in one room with shared facilities. He also noted that with increased competition and pressure to complete projects faster, these savings are not translated into increased wages for workers. Wages, Hassan noted, have not risen between 2005 and 2016.30 According to a municipal corporation report of the metro project in Bangalore, women’s official work hours are more decent than men’s, because there is an expectation that women need to complete reproductive tasks at home. This was sometimes construed by employers as a burden on their productive work needs.

On the other hand, the effects of patriarchy and women’s unique concerns have been increasingly articulated since the 2000s. Part of this is due to the rise of NGOs since the 2000s, who operate around a service delivery model (that is familiar to recent development scripts) and aim to connect construction workers to their entitled legislative benefits (such as registration in the Welfare Board). These NGOs have addressed female construction workers’ inequality relative to men’s more than earlier unions did.

These efforts usually revolved around exposing and overcoming the discrimination underlying women’s unequal pay and glass ceilings. Although construction work is generally considered “of worth,” female construction workers are not. As one construction worker on a site visit articulated, “The masons get Rs 700, the laborers get Rs 500, and the women get Rs 300 for being helpers.”31 In other words, women are not perceived as laborers, but only as “helpers.” Because the assumption is that women do not (and cannot) do the same amount of work as men, wages are overtly different for men and women in construction. But NGO leaders were clear on their critiques of these assumptions. Kathyayini Kamraj, Executive Trustee of CIVIC32, underlined the worth of women’s work, “Women’s work is equally as hard [as men’s]. Carrying mud on the head or walking with those very dangerous steps and no safety nets and sometimes carrying the baby in the arm you know, but they are paid less because their work is considered less skilled.” Others noted that even when the work is the same, the pay is unequal. As P. Lakshapathi, Executive Director and Co-Founder of APSA, noted, “It is not equal pay […] Even if a woman does more than the man she is paid less.”33

To overcome this perception of low worth, most NGOs advocated skilling, which they acknowledged was more difficult for women than men due to patriarchal norms. As Madhu Sudhan, Chief Co-ordinator of CIVIC in Bangalore, explained, women face a glass ceiling: “The female worker has always been thought of as unskilled and less capable than the male worker. The male worker is unskilled in terms of output for the project, but they [employers] thought that the male worker was contributing more. But the latest studies have pointed out that female workers are providing equal output […] but the industry is still not able to come to terms with that […] a man can work as an unskilled person and after years he may end up in acquiring skills, he may become a skilled worker,
and later on he leads a team of workers and […] becomes a supervisor or a mistri.”

Many NGO leaders also pointed to the correlation between skill, wage, and perceived power. Sebastian Devaraj, Union Co-ordinator of FEDINA, explained, “There are no women in masonry. Almost culturally she is not allowed to touch the stone.” The relevance of this according to Devaraj is tied to wage. Masons earn between INR 450–750, whereas male workers earn INR 300–400 and women workers earn INR 150–250. So becoming a mason becomes a key pathway to higher wages. “We need to culturally break this thing that women are not becoming masons […]. The gender aspect has to be tackled seriously in this. If that can be done, there will be a marked change.”

However, some members pointed out that “if women are too skilled, they are not hired.”

Unlike domestic workers’ attempts to increase the recognition of women’s work as necessary to capitalist accumulation, construction organizations’ efforts to address these inequities mobilized around a dual-systems model that took on the cultural discrimination of patriarchy. To address the glass ceiling women face, several organizations instituted programs to train women supervisors. These programs do not aim to transform relations of exploitation, but rather incorporate women into them. Some organizations complained that skills training programs for women were merely another way to bring women into commodified and controlled labor (albeit at a higher pay level), and thereby detracted from transformative efforts.

Similarly, to overcome patriarchal demotions of women workers, some organizations appealed to class bonds at the household level without engaging their relationship. For example, Gayatri, an activist at FEDINA, explained how they convinced male construction workers to fight for higher wages for women construction workers, “Construction is male-dominated. So even the workers didn't agree initially. They kept saying it’s right that women are paid less, that they cannot be equal to us. ‘How can my wife earn the same as me’ is what they thought and said what the employers do is right. So we tried to discuss it with them. In a household, both the husband and wife work in construction. And if the woman is not getting paid 300 rupees, who does the 100 rupees go to? The owner is the one who benefits. So we should fight for what is ours and it’s our responsibility to make sure everyone, both men and women get what they deserve. So now this mindset has come about among them all.”

While these efforts, unlike skills training workshops, try to alleviate class hierarchies, they assume class struggles can trump patriarchal ones.

Like domestic workers’ movements, construction workers’ movements have faced several limitations. Women construction workers did not fight to overturn the sexual division of labor in the household or expose the necessity of unpaid reproductive work to capital accumulation; rather, they expressed their demands for higher wages in terms of their need to fulfill their reproductive tasks and obligations. As one female member of AKKKU explained, “We want the wages to be higher […] the rations [of subsidized food] are expensive now, it was 1 Rupee for a kilogram of rice before, now it’s 20 or 30 rupees […] We can’t
raise a family if we have to spend so much. We need higher wages.” In other words, women are fighting to manage (rather than undo) their unequal share of reproductive labor.

Embodyment

In addition to addressing women’s unequal pay and glass ceilings, construction workers also raised issues around women’s embodiment. For some, this meant exposing the sexual harassment that women face at work. Although APSA focuses on children, they were more vocal about sexual harassment at work than even domestic workers’ leaders were. Padmaja Ramamurthi, Co-ordinator of the APSA Dream School, pointed to the vulnerable position that women were in on construction sites, “The mistri gives a lot of trouble, many times on construction sites because they feel that women are easy prey, so they ask for favors and [lowers voice] that happens.” Some leaders spoke of age as a confounding factor for women relative to men. As N.P. Samy, President of Karnataka State Construction Workers Central Union (KSCWCU), explained, “Once the woman worker is a little older they don’t get a job. These fellows, because the labor contractors and the masons […] it’s not because she becomes incapable of doing the work […] the major interest is because she is not attractive anymore, sexually.”

Fighting sexual harassment, however, has not been an easy or targeted battle among construction organizations. Some leaders did resort to blaming women, and others encouraged women’s exit from the industry.

Organization leaders also raised concerns about women’s inadequate access to facilities, such as toilets and drinking water. Unlike domestic work, where facilities were present but access was often denied due to employer’s class and caste prejudices, construction sites often do not have facilities for female workers. This not only endangered women’s safety and health, it also undermined their ability to fulfill their reproductive obligations. This stood in contrast to their male counterparts. As Kathyayini Kamraj, Executive Trustee of CIVIC said, “Men can go and defecate anywhere. Women can’t you know. So they’re really in a soup when they live in these tin sheds and they don’t have any facility, drinking water and cooking. They don’t have ration cards, they don’t have gas so cooking itself is a big problem, and to get water, to bathe, to wash […] all that they suffer like anything because those jobs are still their jobs. Men will not be doing all that. Once they finish their work they will just relax with a beedi [hand-rolled cigarette] or […] go and drink. But the women have to look after the children: cook, wash, clean, everything. And the daycare itself is not there so they are doubly, doubly burdened, and very often they are abused by the contractors and their employers.”

In the state of Karnataka, the Women and Child Development Department has allowed daycares to be set up in all worksites with more than 50 employees. This, in turn, has motivated construction organizations to fold reproductive issues into their work.
WHEN GENDERED LABOR SUBJECTS RE-SHAPE LABOR ORGANIZING

Gendered labor subjects present several challenges to labor organizing. Taking on this challenge has not been easy. But in doing so, domestic and construction workers’ organizations are lending fresh approaches to labor organizing more generally. Most importantly, they are acknowledging and addressing the connections between productive and reproductive work, as well as between hierarchies at home, the community, and the workplace. Success in transforming these hierarchies, however, has been limited to date.

Gender as a Hindrance to Labor Organizing

Organizations repeatedly expressed the challenges of organizing women, relative to men. Kiran Moghe, President of Pune Zila Ghar Kamgar Sangathan, the domestic workers’ union in Maharashtra affiliated to CITU and CPM, explained how patriarchy challenges women’s class organizations on the economic and social fronts. “Like any unorganized sector they [domestic workers] are living in constant insecurity of all kinds — slum demolition, water scarcity, and as women: violence, daughters […] This is a problem which is unique to women because every time you are thinking of either work or thinking about home. Men will think about work and not think about home; so within their [men’s] consciousness there is space for a union, some politics. With women it is a big challenge, you have to build it and it is a long process. And then there are all these factors which are pushing them [women] back — they have the economic factor, then the social factor, they have their own domestic factor: their husbands say (taunt), ‘where are you going, you have become a big leader’.”

Leeza Joseph, Founder and ex-Head of NDWF-Delhi, explained that most unions avoid domestic workers because women’s social positions make organizing them so difficult. “It is too difficult to work with domestic workers. It is not an easy job. It is mainly working with women and they have no time. They only have one hour in the afternoon, where they are not working and they have to rush home to take care of the household matters. They are so difficult to organize. We have to constantly and repeatedly go to their houses and convince them. Often our meetings have to be late at night, when they are already very tired. And they don’t want to assert their rights. They don’t even respond to our calls to organize […] They are all illiterate […] The husbands are usually upset about the timing of the meetings that takes the woman away from household duties. And husbands don’t like when women have to travel for the trainings.”

In addition to women’s time poverty due to their second shift, many interviewees expressed that the devaluation of the second shift undermined was a problem for organizing. As a field staffer at NDWM-Delhi and a domestic worker said, “My husband says ‘what is the big deal that you are doing? You are just going to work in someone’s house. Even we go out to work’. But then we are doing more work than they are. We are not only doing work outside but we also
take up the responsibilities at home. More than men, it is the women who do work.”

At the same time, Moghe noted women’s desperation as an opportunity for organization and collective actions, “The challenges themselves ultimately become the opportunities. Because when they get pushed to a point they think there is nothing other than organization or unionization or struggle or collectivity. Ultimately they know that they can’t fight it themselves. So that is when they turn to the collective.”

So how are organizations taking on this challenge of organizing women?

Gender as an Exclusionary Axis

Domestic workers’ organizations argue that excluding men is the only way they can address the multiple power hierarchies women face (at home, in the community, and at work). Leaders argued that men’s presence in the organization undermined women’s leadership, expression, and organization. Because 86% of domestic workers in India today are female, the structure of the sector also demands greater attention to women’s needs. This model was not replicated in construction and may explain why construction workers organize around a dual, rather than unitary, systems approach.

As Ramendra, Founder and General Secretary of DGKS, recounted in 1994, they began a general federation of unions of informal workers called Delhi Shramik Sangatan. “But we had a gender problem. No women were elected to the general body. Rajasthani women would wear their gunghat [veil] to the meetings and said they can’t speak in front of the high caste men […] So in 1996, we started a separate Domestic workers’ union, D-GKS, that is only for women.”

The organization was thus restricted to women to overcome the patriarchal social norms that were interfering with women leadership and voice within the organization. Father Chetan, Program Head of NDWF, expressed similar sentiments, “We are clearly only women. By policy. Domestic workers are majority women. Women are not considered equal. They are always doing backstage work. If we don’t have a clear policy then our struggles will not be fruitful. So we make sure it’s only women.”

As Leeza Joseph, Founder and ex-Head of NDWM-Delhi corroborated, “75–80% of domestic workers in India are women. So we only have women in our organization. We have discussed this [whether or not to include male workers] a lot. But we decided on the gender aspect because women have no voice and when men are present they don’t speak. So we want to empower them first before we bring in men. We have to go step-wise. In our union, the women rule at the moment. If men come they will take over.”

To further justify their exclusive focus on women, organizations have tried to redefine the occupation to exclude male workers. The official classification of domestic work in India, following the ILO definition, includes “work performed in or for the household,” which is done by women and men. However, organizations have targeted their demand for protective legislation to only those workers in the household, as they tend to be women. Most domestic workers’
organizations in India, therefore, focus on the occupations of cooking and cleaning, which are 90% female.

**Gender as a Connector across Social Institutions**

Another way organizations have mobilized women workers (in domestic work and construction) has been to address women’s low positions across social institutions, not only at the workplace, but also in the family and the community.

To do so, organizations not only empowered individual women members, but also worked tirelessly with members of their attached social institutions. As Beenu Jindal, Joint Secretary of DGKS, elaborated, “If you change one person then that is not enough. It is important to change the whole family. If we are associated with the women but her husband and children do not know about the organization she is associated with, then there is no use.”

One domestic worker leader recounted a member who always paid her union dues with money that was stained in yellow. When the union leader asked why the money was yellow, the member explained that she had to hide it from her husband in the pickle jar. This anecdote illustrates the limits even organized women workers face in overturning patriarchal relations in the intimate sphere.

In construction, women members always identified as family migrants. Traditionally, women construction workers migrate with their husbands to conduct the reproductive work post-migration, as well as low-paid assistance to their husbands in the productive sphere. In the rare cases where women worked on different sites from their husbands, they noted their wages were given to them (rather than their husbands) and they sometimes earned more. Despite this, organizations did not focus on encouraging women to work outside the family unit as doing so could disrupt family dynamics.

Organizations also focused on meeting women’s material needs in the reproductive sphere as essential to their mobilization efforts. Even if organizations attained equal pay for equal work in the productive sphere, women remained of unequal worth for unequal work in the reproductive sphere. Moreover, women repeatedly pointed to their reproductive duties to explain their “choice” of work in domestic work and construction. As Sangeeta, Joint Secretary of CITU’s union, *Ghar Kamgar Sangathana* in Mumbai and New Mumbai explained, “Many women are joining [domestic work] because then she can take care of her house along with working; she can take care of her family. Had she gone to an office then she would have had to leave at nine am in the morning and return at six pm […]. Domestic work is also a full day (job) but we can do it at our convenience.”

A domestic worker from SEWA also reiterated that as domestic workers, “We are able to handle home as well as work. If we do that being in a company then our entire salary (for the day) would be cut.” Similarly, a male construction worker on a site visit explained, “They [women] don’t have much work back in the village, and if they don’t come here, who’s going to cook for us? And we have kids, so they come here to take care of them better.”

Given the central role women’s reproductive obligations have in their lives, organizations fought for reproductive demands to attract women members.
Babli Rawat, General Secretary of Gharkamgar Molkarni Sanghatana (AITUC’s Domestic Workers’ Union in Maharashtra), began the union in 2005. But after a few years of organizing marches, she noticed a drop in the number of women attending their meetings and marches. So in 2009, they stopped to ask women what were the main problems they faced. According to Rawat, more than advocacy, women listed a series of consumption needs related to running the household. “Our problem is that we stay in rented houses, we don’t have ration cards, we buy cereals in black, we don’t have a bank account, we don’t have the right to vote since we stay on rent […] our husbands drink alcohol: whatever we earn and in salt or wheat or spices, wherever we hide, they steal our money […] our children study in municipality schools where there are 100 children in 1 class; our children are in seventh and eighth standards, yet they don’t know how to write their names. These are our problems.”

Workers also complained of the lack of childcare (many domestic workers locked their children in their rooms when they went to work) and the rising costs of medicine (women repeatedly recounted that if they fell sick the household could not run). From then on, the union changed their program to provide more material goods that could assist women in fulfilling their reproductive tasks and thus attract them to the organization. They fought to attain ration cards (to purchase government-subsidized food) and bank accounts for their 4,500 members. Importantly, the union made all new ration cards and bank accounts in the women’s names.

Providing women with material goods also empowered organizations to increase men’s reproductive labor. Gharkamgar Molkarni Sanghatana (AITUC’s Domestic Workers’ Union in Maharashtra), for example, held meetings where members had to bring their husbands, and leaders spoke about domestic violence, as well as the need for men to be more involved in child-rearing and food provisions. Rawat recalled, “We told the husbands that the union fought to get them ration cards. Now, why can’t they (the husbands) fetch the ration? Is she the only one who eats from that ration?”

**Gender as Necessary but Insufficient**

Although all organizations addressed issues of gender and social reproduction (either through unitary or dualist models), it was never seen as sufficient for overturning class exploitation.

Several domestic workers, for example, spoke of how employers do not like it if they are well-dressed as it blurs the signaled class differences between female employers and female workers. Chaitali Haldar, Coordinator at Jagori, a feminist organization that also works with domestic workers, recounted a case where a worker’s child attended the same school as her employer’s, and the employer ordered the worker to withdraw her child from that school. When the worker refused, the employer called the teacher and ordered the worker’s child to sit at the back of the classroom. Haldar explained the employer did not want her children to feel “insecure” or “get mixed up with” workers’ children. This case
illustrates employers’ need to signal class distinction, even when sharing gender-based reproductive obligations.

One area where gender identities did cross class divisions was domestic violence. Some domestic workers’ organizations attained support for their members from female employers by rallying around this issue. In the AITUC union, for example, two domestic workers stood for the municipal corporation election for the Communist Party of India (CPI). Rawat recounted, “The employers felt very proud that their domestic workers were standing for elections […] The issue that they raised was that women everywhere are facing problems because of alcohol.” In our interviews with women workers, alcohol consumption by husbands was repeatedly blamed for domestic violence. As Rawat explained, “It is not only a problem of women in the slums but also of women staying in high-rises. Some of the employers have told our members, ‘you can at least talk about this problem to others, but if we do, no one wants to believe us and some make fun of us— see that woman has been beaten by her husband. And so we have to hide it.’” In this case, the workers campaigned to close all alcohol shops and bars in the ward, which is possible with 25% of women’s votes as per the state law.

CONCLUSION: SEEING LIKE AN ORGANIZATION

This chapter has tried to highlight the varying ways organized women workers “see” the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. Much of this lens is shaped by the specific conditions and structures of varying occupations, as well as the histories of the organizations. Domestic workers, for example, entered the organizing sphere through social reproduction issues (addressing concerns of housing, slum development, civic amenities, domestic violence, and household relations). Through this work in the reproductive sphere, they were introduced to issues of women’s paid work in the productive sphere (in this case, in paid domestic work). This organizational trajectory has led domestic workers’ organizations to conceive of patriarchy and capitalism as a unitary model of oppression and exploitation, which in turn has led to greater success in attaining women’s leadership and recognition of women’s labor than in other sectors. In contrast, construction workers’ organizations tackled gender inequalities (between male and female workers) through the experiences of productive work. The informal structure of construction work led them to mobilize workers at the home (rather than the workplace) and address their reproductive and social consumption needs through the state (rather than workplace rights through the employer). But this trajectory has led construction workers’ organizations to conceive of patriarchy and capitalism in a dual, interrelated, systems approach. This approach has led to greater successes in attaining material benefits in the reproductive realm than in other sectors. Both approaches have been shaped by and have the potential to reshape recent development scripts. These findings remind us that the ways in which political actors see these connections matter for opening up new political horizons for the broader labor movement, development models, and feminist theory.
NOTES

1. Indian manufacturing has witnessed stagnant job growth in recent decades.
2. We did not conduct focus groups with unorganized domestic workers due to limited access and time.
3. For a more detailed analysis of the occupational and industrial classifications of domestic workers in India’s NSS over time, see Neetha (2009) and Raveendran (2011).
4. Unlike some advanced welfare states, India does not provide public provisioning of domestic work, so the state is never seen as the employer of record.
5. In 2014, the construction market in Indian totaled US$ 157 billion. Infrastructure accounted for 49% of the market, housing and real estate 42%, and industrial projects 9%. According to Deloitte, India is poised to be world’s third-largest construction market by 2025–2030 (https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/in/Documents/about-deloitte/in-about-india-competitiveness-report-2014-noexp.PDF).
6. Interview on December 29, 2015.
7. Akhila Karnataka Kattada Karmikara Union
8. Interview on April 16, 2016.
10. Centre of Indian Trade Unions
11. All India Democratic Women’s Association
12. Interview on December 11, 2015.
13. Interview on December 11, 2015.
14. We did not assess this among male domestic workers, since there are so few in the organizations. Female construction workers expressed issues of shame to some extent.
15. National Domestic Workers’ Movement
17. Interview on December 7, 2015.
18. Interview on December 7, 2015.
19. Self-Employed Women’s Association
21. Association for Promoting Social Action
22. Interview on January 12, 2015.
23. Interview on December 7, 2015.
24. Interview on December 7, 2015.
25. Interview on December 7, 2015.
27. Interview on December 12, 2015.
29. Indian National Trade Union Congress
31. Interview on November 26, 2015.
32. Citizens Voluntary Initiative for the City
33. Interview on March 12, 2015.
34. Interview on April 9, 2015.
35. Foundation for Educational Innovation in Asia
36. Interview on September 7, 2015.
37. Interview on December 2, 2015 (not sure on this date).
38. Akhila Karnataka Kattada Karmikara Union
39. Interview on April 17, 2016.
40. Interview on January 12, 2015.
41. Interview on October 19, 2015.
42. Interview on June 11, 2015.
43. This benefit does not reach domestic workers, since they operate in a single employee system.
44. Interview on December 11, 2015.
45. Interview on November 22, 2015.
47. Interview on December 11, 2015.
48. Interview on November 24, 2015.
49. Interview on December 21, 2015.
50. Interview on November 24, 2015.
51. Interview on December 7, 2015.
52. Although this is decreasing with increased mechanization and a decreasing demand for women's labor.
53. Interview on December 12, 2015.
54. Interview on May 13, 2016.
55. Interview on May 6, 2016.
56. Interview on December 10, 2015.
57. Those who owned homes already had ration cards, but the cards were in their husbands' name.
58. Interview on December 10, 2015.
59. Interview on December 1, 2017.
60. Interview on December 10, 2015.

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