# The State and Labor in Transnational Activism: The Case of India

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**Abstract:** This article examines the relationship between the state and informal workers' transnational labor movements. Using the case of the Self-Employed Women's Association, I illustrate how Indian informal workers are launching an alternative labor movement that addresses their unique conditions by simultaneously privileging the central role of the nation state and leveraging the power of the transnational arena. Indian informal workers use three types of transnational activism to generate new forms of integration with the Indian state. Doing so helps them increase informal workers' visibility and integrate their issues into government agendas. To attract state attention, informal workers' transnational efforts focus on local issues and a commitment to empowerment. These findings highlight the potential for Southern leadership in transnationalism and the role that democratic political structures play in shaping transnational labor efforts.

**Keywords:** *India; informal workers; labor; labor movements; transnational activism*

Whither the nation state in global labor movements? Recent scholarship on globalization has nearly converged on the notion that the state's role in contemporary social movements is declining. At the national level, labor scholars critique this decline, arguing that since the 1980s, the forces of globalization that have increased capital mobility and competition and decentralized global production have neutered the state's capacity to enforce labor rights and are

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thus undermining the existence of national labor movements (Castells, 1997; Held et al., 1999; Tilly, 1995; Western, 1995).

At the transnational level, labor and other social movement scholars take a more optimistic view, arguing that since the 1980s, globalization has created more porous borders, improved communication and technologies, strengthened the relevance of international institutions, and given rise to multinational corporate employers. These aspects of globalization have enabled workers to maximize their political leverage by avoiding direct communication with their neutered state and instead joining hands with transnational actors. Transnational actors can ensure more decent labor conditions by binding states to international treaties and regulations and pressuring states with popular norms of universal human rights. Transnational labor networks can also bypass the state altogether and instead pressure employers by targeting consumer behavior. These strategies of strengthening labor by coercing or avoiding the state and turning instead to transnational advocacy networks and movements – a strategy that Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink famously termed 'the boomerang effect' – is especially relevant to workers operating within repressive states, states that have committed to a neoliberal agenda of unfettered markets, and states that have turned labor against the promise of corporatist relations (Caraway, 2006; Evans, 2010; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; McGrath-Champ et al., 2010; Murillo and Schrank, 2005).[1]

But what happens when a nation state does not fit these conditions and a local labor movement continues to focus on its nation state as the main target of its demands? The existing scholarship has a blind spot toward such conditions. Scholars either assume that labor movements in these countries have no interest in transnational activism, or they highlight only the small minority of labor movements in these countries that bypass the nation state to target transnational actors. In doing so, the existing literature provides little insight into the role that *varying* domestic political structures play in shaping transnational labor strategies and relations with domestic states.

This article examines the case of Indian informal workers to highlight an alternative approach to transnationalism that involves the vast majority of a nation's workforce and privileges the central role of the nation state. Indian informal workers have launched an innovative labor movement that addresses their unique conditions by simultaneously seeking leverage from the Indian state and the transnational arena. Understanding their diverse strategies could yield important insights for the world's mass of informal labor.

Moreover, India provides an interesting lens through which to examine transnational labor efforts because it does not fit well with the conditional political context of the boomerang effect. First, with its sustained system of democratic rights and tradition of social activism, India does not suffer from a 'blocked state–society relationship' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 12). Second, although the Indian state has been liberalizing its economy since 1991, Indian activists have kept the Indian state from releasing the market from all regulation and even attained from the state employment guarantees for rural workers, health care for poor workers, and welfare provisions for informal workers (Agarwala, 2008).

Third, although Indian labor has failed to establish corporate relations with the Indian state, there is little evidence that Indian labor is moving away from corporatism as an ideal model (Chibber, 2003).

Contrary to recent scholarship which argues that transnational activism enables labor to coerce or escape the nation state, I find that Indian informal workers use transnational movements to generate new forms of interaction and integration with the state. I highlight three areas in which Indian informal workers use transnational activism to help strengthen their relationship to the Indian state. First, transnational efforts enable informal workers to restructure the constraints faced by the Indian state by going to the same international level as those constraints. Second, informal workers use transnational linkages to establish relations with branded knowledge brokers in the North, which arms state officials with sophisticated data that can justify their attention to informal workers. Finally, informal workers create frames that appeal to a range of transnational social movements so that they can work themselves into nearly all state-sponsored social agendas. Although Indian informal workers target local- and national-level governments for domestic affairs, their transnational efforts primarily target the national-level government.

Because their ultimate goal is to attract the Indian state's attention, informal workers' transnational efforts have not veered away from local issues and a commitment to empowerment. On the contrary, informal workers' organizations in India go out of their way to yield voice to their members and appear as links to the mass vote bank of informal workers, who are key pegs in the state's neoliberal agenda. It is this link that attracts state attention. Informal workers' transnational efforts in India's democratic context yield important insights into the prospects of Southern leadership in transnational efforts and the impact of transnational labor alliances on domestic class relations.

## Formal Labor Movements in India

At first glance, Indian labor provides a neat negative case for the literature on labor movements that coerce or avoid a repressive state by relying on transnational forces. Workers operating in non-repressive states (such as India's), so the argument goes, remain nationalist and have little incentive to 'go transnational'. In this way, nationalist strategies are depicted as antithetical to transnationalist strategies.

Indeed, the formal sector union movement in India is nationalist. This movement emerged during India's independence struggle in the late 1800s, and it has since established intricate ties to various levels of the state through unions, political parties, labor laws, and conciliatory frameworks.[2] Although today the formal labor movement only covers 12% of formal workers, it holds a major position in the polity, with every political party (from the extreme right to left) having an active workers' wing.

Indian labor's nationalism, scholars argue, has motivated its resistance to transnational efforts. Some justify this resistance by explaining that Indian unions are suspicious of transnational efforts because they rightly associate

them with an imperialist past. Transnational labor efforts are viewed as a front for Northern labor to implement protectionist policies while undermining the South's competitive advantage in the global market – that is, cheap labor (Sukthankar and Kolben, 2007). Others critique this resistance by arguing that Indian labor's opposition to transnational efforts, such as the social clause in the World Trade Organization (WTO), enables capital to divide and exploit the working class (Hensman, 2010). In both cases, it is understood that although Indian unions have an antagonistic view of the state as a supporter of capital in the domestic context, in the global context, they view the state as their closest ally and protector against North–South power inequities. This relationship to the state is viewed as blocking windows of opportunity that could create transnational linkages.

While the role of Indian formal labor in transnational networks is complex, it would be a mistake to write off Indian labor's role in transnational labor activities. Rather than limiting our examinations to India's formal labor, I argue that we must expand it to include India's *informal* labor.

## Informal Labor in India

Although debates abound on the definition of 'informal' work, this study begins with the definition provided by Alejandro Portes, Manuell Castells, and Lauren Benton (1989), which states that informal work results from economic units that produce legal goods and services, but engage in operations that are not registered or regulated by fiscal, labor, health, and tax laws.[3] The primary difference between informal and formal workers is that the latter are protected and regulated under state law while the former are not. Informal workers usually operate in harsh conditions, with low levels of technology and capital, and no labor rights. They include the self-employed (such as street vendors or domestic staff), entrepreneurs and employees of informal enterprises (such as small, unregistered retail shops or restaurants), and contractors who work through chains of subcontractors for formal enterprises (such as branded clothing, car, and shoe factories). Informal workers operate at home, on the employer's site, or in a third site, such as an unregistered subcontractor's workshop.

Despite early development theories that predicted the demise of the informal sector with economic growth (Harris and Todaro, 1970; Lewis, 1954), informal workers remain the majority of the world's labor force. In India, 93% of the labor force is informally employed (NSSO, 2005). In Latin America, over 30% of the urban labor force is estimated to be informal, and in Africa, the estimate is approximately 80% (Portes and Schauffler, 1993). Particularly striking has been the recent rise in the percentage of informal workers in rich countries, such as the US, Spain, and Italy (Benton, 1990).

While informal labor has long existed in India, its share has increased since 1991 when the Indian government launched its liberalization reforms and absolved employers of responsibility for their employees' welfare (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2008; Kundu and Sharma, 2001). Policies such as lifting industry subsidies, trade and quota regulations, and

license restrictions, have pushed Indian firms to be more competitive by minimizing production costs, increasing labor flexibility, and spatially dispersing their capital. To help firms meet these needs, the Indian government has enabled employers in both the public and private sectors to override the nation's strong labor laws by retrenching formal workers and hiring informal workers instead. By definition and by law, the state does not require employers to extend benefits, minimum wages, or job security to informal workers (Bhowmik and More, 2001; Breman, 2002; Uchikawa, 2002).

Liberalization policies have also increased the supply of informal labor in India. As more people join the informal labor force, more household members are being pushed into the labor market because the wages for informal work by principal breadwinners are seldom sufficient to sustain a family. During the 1990s, most new entrants into the labor force turned to contract or self-employed work because that is where most employment growth has occurred (Oberai and Chadha, 2001).

Since 1991, the Indian state's rhetoric on informal work has become increasingly favorable. In 1969, the Indian government strove to ensure 'secure, state-protected employment for all Indian men' (National Commission on Labour (NCL), 1969). By 2002, however, the Indian government promoted the growth of informal employment as 'the primary source of future work for all Indians' (NCL, 2002). This shift reflects similar trends taking place at the international level. During the late 1990s, the World Bank and the ILO reversed their exclusive focus on formal workers to explicitly promote informal work as a beneficial option for those squeezed out of the labor market (ILO, 1999; World Bank, 1995, 2003).

Such strong state support for unprotected labor in India and elsewhere, combined with the shrinking share of the world's formally protected workers, has spurred labor scholars to conclude that state–labor relations are fraying, and labor movements are plummeting in number and political influence (Crowley and Ost, 2001; Przeworski, 1991; Tilly, 1995; Western, 1995).

## Informal Labor Movements in India

Contrary to these assertions of the demise of workers' movements under globalization, recent scholarship has shown that informal workers are launching alternative movements to challenge neoliberal policies. The evidence draws from service workers in South Korea, street vendors in Mexico, and immigrant workers in the US (Chun, 2009; Cross, 1998; Fine, 2006; Gordon, 2007; Milkman, 2006). I have written elsewhere about Indian informal workers' movements that *strengthen their relationship to the state* (Agarwala, 2006, 2008, forthcoming).[4] Here, I want only to highlight the innovative social contract these movements are forging with the Indian state. That this is happening under neoliberalism is unexpected and important.

Rather than fighting unregulated, flexible production structures and demanding traditional work benefits (such as minimum wages and job security) from employers, Indian informal workers are using their power as voters to demand

state responsibility for their social consumption or reproductive needs (such as education, housing, and healthcare). As a result of this strategy, which relies on tripartite institutions called 'Welfare Boards', unregulated, informal workers are pulling the state into playing an even more central role than it did in formal workers' movements. On domestic matters, they are targeting the state and national governments. Moreover, informal workers are forging a new class identity that connects them to the state through their social consumption needs and attains state recognition for their work, even in the absence of employer recognition. To attain the attention of elected state politicians, informal workers utilize a rhetoric of citizenship rather than labor rights. To mobilize the dispersed, unprotected workforce without disrupting production, informal workers are organizing at the neighborhood level, rather than the shop floor. Given the unregulated nature of their work, it may seem ironic that informal workers are trying to strengthen their relations with the state. Yet this movement is developing across states and industries in India – thereby reflecting the state's interest in informal work. These movements also reiterate that the definition of informal workers applies to the circumstances of their work, and *not* to their politics (which may indeed be 'formal' or officially registered).

## Transnational Movements for India's Vulnerable Workers

Informal workers' movements at the domestic level invite questions on what they are doing at the transnational level. Are Indian informal workers as nationalist and anti-transnationalist as Indian formal workers?

Indian scholars have highlighted the transnational efforts of one subset of informal workers who operate as contractors for formal companies. Specifically, they focus on anti-child labor movements in the garment and rug industries. As with India's formal labor movements, these movements present nationalist and transnationalist strategies as mutually exclusive. Unlike the formal labor movements, however, they distance themselves from the state to embrace a solely transnational identity.

First, the anti-child labor movements in the apparel and rug industries rely less on state-linked institutions, such as unions, and more on institutions that have no historical or intended links to the state, such as human rights groups, private churches, and journalists. Partnering with these groups reiterates the anti-child labor campaign's distance from the state and its non-nationalist proclivities. This strategy mimics non-labor transnational movements. For example, the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (or 'Save the Narmada River Movement') designed to address the human relocation and environmental impact of the Sardar Sarovar hydroelectric dam on the Narmada River, partnered with academic institutions that can disperse objective 'facts' to the public and to international power-holders (Rodrigues, 2004). Similarly, transnational development efforts among Indian immigrants in the US rely on Hindu religious organizations that can tap into immigrants' longing for their home country and their fear of losing their 'culture' in their host country (Varshney, 2001).

Second, rather than demanding that the state hold an employer accountable for labor welfare, anti-child labor movements in India pressure consumers to hold employers accountable. The state is virtually absent from their movement repertoire. In the rug industry, activists argue that the Indian state has done all it can by enacting laws prohibiting child labor. Progressive labor laws have been extant in India since its independence in 1947, but Indian and foreign businesses have consistently ignored these laws. Indian activists have thus written off the Indian state as a viable avenue of change. Recognizing the export value of carpets, they instead work with non-governmental groups in Germany and the US to spread a consumer morality that refuses to purchase products made by exploited labor. While this effort has been lauded for creating the first Southern-initiated and -run monitoring organization, Rugmark, it has also been critiqued for the unsustainable and unaccountable impact of consumer-targeted programs (Chowdhry and Beeman, 2001; Seidman, 2009).

Third, transnational labor efforts among vulnerable workers in India employ a language of 'human rights' that depicts its targeted population as exploited, vulnerable, and helpless. Class identities and struggles for power are absent from these movements. Such strategies have garnered international support from the public and multilateral institutions, but they do not target the Indian state. By drawing on the power of moral outrage for human rights, these efforts have been accused of labor philanthropy, rather than labor empowerment (Brooks, 2005, 2007; Rodrigues, 2004). In addition, by shifting attention away from the state, they have failed to alter the local structures constraining the state and have been critiqued for shifting attention away from issues of poverty and livelihoods.

These transnational efforts have exposed the deplorable working conditions facing a subset of Indian workers and have enjoyed several successes. However, they tend to be limited to a particular pocket of the working population – namely, children. What, if anything, is the remaining majority of informal workers doing to utilize the power of transnationalism? What role, if any, does the Indian state play in these transnational efforts? Given the state's role in forging alliances and securing welfare for informal workers in India, it is reasonable to assume that the state may play a central role in informal workers' transnational efforts. The existing literature does not give us a theoretical or empirical foundation on which to understand this potential.

## Transnational Movements Among Informal Workers: The Case of the Self-Employed Women's Association

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) provides an ideal starting point for our examination of informal workers' transnational efforts in India. SEWA is a membership-based organization and a movement for (adult) informal women workers. In 1972, SEWA was registered under the Indian Trade Union Act of 1926. Because its members are unprotected workers who do not enjoy the legal or economic means to strike, SEWA initiated an innovative organizational strategy that combined the power of unions with the security

of cooperatives, an idea inspired by Indian independence movement leader Mohandas Gandhi.[5] In 2009, SEWA had a membership base of 631,000 in its home state of Gujarat, and 1.3 million across India. While SEWA is a leading actor in India's informal workers' movement, it does *not* represent the entire movement. Its strategies, however, provide an insightful case study for our examination of informal workers' transnational efforts.

Since the late 1990s, SEWA has been participating in three areas of transnational activities. First, it has initiated transnational advocacy networks for subgroups of informal workers. HomeNet South Asia is a transnational network of home-based workers' organizations, UNIFEM,[6] and academic researchers (from Harvard University and the Global Labour Institute in Geneva). It aims to increase home-based workers' visibility in the public sphere, security from protective laws, and economic rights. Using newsletters, an updated website, and regional workshops, the network maintains close communication across continents. Its main target for ensuring protective legislation for home-based workers throughout the world is the ILO. In 1996, the ILO passed Home Work Convention 177, which aimed to give home-based workers equal rights to formal workers. Since then, HomeNet has pressured national governments to ratify and implement the convention through local legislation. HomeNet also works to build local grassroots organizations. Recently, HomeNet organized a network for rural home-based artisans that links local embroiderers to international designers and retailers.

SEWA is also an active member of StreetNet, a transnational network of street vendors. StreetNet formed in the late 1990s to increase the visibility of street vendors' contributions to urban economies, attain local licenses for street vendors, and incorporate street vendors' representation in urban development policies. Finally, SEWA helps lead Women in Informal Employment, Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). WIEGO is a transnational research policy network that was founded in 1998 by SEWA, Harvard University, and the ILO. WIEGO aims to increase information about the size, composition, and contribution of informal workers, facilitate policy dialogues, and strengthen member-based, grassroots organizations of informal workers. Recently, WIEGO has increased attention and policy protections for waste collectors and domestic workers.

The second area of transnational activity in which SEWA has engaged is organizing informal workers in countries outside India. To date, SEWA has initiated efforts in Turkey, Nepal, Burma, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and, most recently, Afghanistan. SEWA organizers from India travel to these countries and help local workers form new organizations by training them in organization structure and governance, teaching them to collect data on local informal work, and facilitating their linkages with government officials. In Afghanistan, SEWA set up a vocational training center in 2006 and trained 1040 local women in informal trades, including electricity, food processing, and sewing. Since then, SEWA has helped these women organize into 22 women's groups and a federation, which was registered as the Baagey Khazana Sabah Association in 2010 under Afghanistan's Ministry of Social

Justice. These groups enable women to hold accounts in local banks. Recently, SEWA has begun training these Afghani groups in computers, accounting, finance, and English. Similar efforts have been made in Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

The final area in which SEWA engages in transnational efforts is within the international trade union movement. In 2006, SEWA became the first union of informal workers to become affiliated with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Since then, SEWA has also received affiliation with trade-based global federations, including the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF).

# The State's Role in Informal Workers' Transnational Efforts

SEWA's transnational activities yield important insights into the relationship between the state and informal workers in contemporary workers' transnational movements. Unlike formal workers' movements, SEWA's nationalism does not prevent its transnationalism, and unlike the anti-child labor movements, SEWA's transnationalism does not mitigate its nationalism. For SEWA, a strong relationship with the state and transnational efforts are mutually reinforcing.

Just as the state plays a pivotal role in domestic movements among informal workers, so SEWA ensures the state's central role in its transnational activities. Keeping the state central to India's transnational activities is essential because under neoliberal globalization, the state has become the only power-holder that informal workers *can* hold accountable. By definition, informal work absolves employers of responsibility toward labor. Holding employers accountable through consumer behavior is an option for workers in retail, but not for the remaining majority of informal workers, such as those in construction, garbage collection, and self-employment. Therefore, even in the democratic context of India, where informal workers have a strong relationship with the government, SEWA utilizes transnational efforts to hold the Indian state accountable. In what follows, I outline three areas that explain the advantages informal workers in India gain from transnational activism.

### Restructuring International Constraints on the State

First, transnational activism is viewed by SEWA officials as a way to go to the same level as the pressures that constrain the Indian state. Since 1991, when the Indian government first began to open its economy to foreign investment and capital, international pressures from multilateral institutions and multinational corporations have been viewed as a powerful force on the Indian government's economic policies. Therefore, to affect national policies on informal workers, SEWA uses its transnational advocacy networks and international union federations to restructure the rules of global capital within which the Indian state operates.

Unlike the typical boomerang scenario, however, SEWA does not turn to transnational movements because its direct links to the Indian state are blocked. In fact, since the 1970s, SEWA has invested heavily in establishing legitimacy within the Indian state. It has served as a key advisor in labor policies, it is a major implementer of state-sponsored development projects, and its founder, Ela Bhatt, has served as a Member of Parliament in the Indian national government.

Rather than coercing or avoiding the state through transnational activism, SEWA uses its privileged position with the state to lend leadership to transnational efforts. Nearly all the advocacy groups in which SEWA participates were co-founded and are now led by SEWA. Transnational movements embrace SEWA's leadership because its experience and successes in attaining state attention in the domestic context lend transnational networks legitimacy. For the formal launch of HomeNet South Asia in 2007, for example, SEWA was able to attract Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to inaugurate the ceremonies. Doing so not only symbolically tied government officials to HomeNet's agenda, but also attracted media attention to HomeNet's efforts.

In turn, SEWA's leadership role in transnational efforts enables SEWA to guide transnational efforts in ways that will speak to the Indian state's constraints. For example, by pressuring the ILO to enact Home Work Convention 177, SEWA (through HomeNet) helped create an international norm of securing home-based workers' rights. This norm could counter the economic and international pressures on the Indian state (some from the ILO itself) to promote the cheap, flexible labor of home-based workers.

As a near partner with the Indian state (with regard to informal employment), SEWA's leadership in transnational networks also lends legitimacy to the Indian state. For example, as part of the Indian government's efforts to become a regional leader through development aid, the national government contracted SEWA to assist in post-war rehabilitation efforts in Afghanistan (through India's Ministry of Women's Affairs) and in Sri Lanka (through the Indian High Commission in Colombo). At the regional level, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) contracted SEWA and HomeNet to create the South Asia Business Association for Home-based Workers (SABAH), which now exists in five countries. SEWA has used these opportunities to attain state funding to foster informal workers' movements in the region. In addition, by building strong relations with various national- and local-level governments in the region, SEWA attains international recognition and access, integrates its activities with local development programs, and has become instrumental to the success of local political agendas. SEWA officials view this strategy as essential to their sustainability.

## Utilizing the International Knowledge Broker

Second, a central component of SEWA's strategy to improve informal workers' livelihoods is to increase their visibility and expand people's awareness about their lives. SEWA argues that facts and figures about the size and the

contribution of informal workers in national economies arm state regulators, the public, and formal sector unions with the leverage they need to justify greater attention to informal workers. At the national level, SEWA has an active 'Academy' that conducts quantitative and qualitative research and regularly publishes papers for domestic and international distribution.

At the transnational level, SEWA aims to increase its access to branded international knowledge brokers to further improve its own research capacity and benefit from the recognized capacity of Northern institutions. Research institutions, such as Harvard University and the Global Labour Institute in Geneva, conduct training seminars at the SEWA Academy on the latest statistical methods and participatory field research approaches. In addition, they regularly co-author studies with SEWA, which validates the data in an Indian context and makes it difficult for Indian state officials to ignore or belittle.

This information highlights the potential bargaining power that informal workers hold within national contexts. Evidence of this data's impact in India can be seen in how government officials (at the national and state levels) justify protective policies for informal workers. On economic grounds, government officials constantly repeat the contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) emerging from the informal economy. On political grounds, government officials (who 10 years ago would rarely admit to the existence of informal workers in India) are now unanimous in their quotation that informal workers represent '93% of the Indian labor force'.

SEWA also uses its research capacity and research partnerships to increase the visibility of informal workers among government officials abroad (as evidenced by its work on SABAH) and with formal sector trade unions. While SEWA does not aim to formalize informal workers, it does partner with formal sector unions, as evidenced by its recent affiliation with international union federations, including ITUC, IUF, and ITGLWF.

## Garnering Support from International Social Movements

Third, SEWA's involvement in transnational activism enables it to create frames in the national and global sphere that appeal to a broad range of social movements, including those committed to the environment, women, poverty alleviation, human rights, and labor. To this extent, SEWA's experiences provide important insights into the coalition strategies being pursued by formal sector unions in the West (Tattersall, 2010). In its speeches, public statements, and publications, SEWA fits informal workers into a variety of movement repertoires – as exploited, wronged, poor, discriminated against based on gender, and tied to land and forests. Doing so enables SEWA to insert informal workers' agendas into many social movement agendas. It also enables SEWA to tap into a wider range of resources. Ultimately, the increased support and resources add legitimacy to SEWA, particularly in the eyes of the state.

While this strategy appears to mirror the 'universal human rights' and the 'equality of opportunity' frames used by anti-child labor campaigns, SEWA has

worked hard *not* to make informal workers appear like helpless, unorganized victims. Rather, they highlight workers' empowerment capabilities. Their presence in international forums often includes working members of SEWA who speak through translators. Publications always privilege members' voices. Executive decisions are made in consultation with the Executive Committee, which is membership-based.

Unlike anti-child labor movements, which are critiqued for highlighting issues that concern international partners rather than local issues, SEWA is heavily vested in retaining its perceived link to the mass population of informal workers. This link attracts state attention, which remains the primary target of informal workers' demands. By showcasing members' voices, SEWA convinces the state that it is the state's only link to a mass vote bank *and* a key set of actors in the state's economic agenda. In this way, SEWA fits its own agenda into the neoliberal agenda of the contemporary Indian state.

## Conclusion

Recent scholarship has argued that globalization has neutered the state and undermined traditional labor movements. At the same time, globalization is credited for enabling the rise of new labor movements that coerce or avoid the nation state by leveraging transnational networks. In India, this literature has depicted nationalist and transnationalist activist strategies as mutually exclusive, thereby explaining formal labor movements' nationalism and related resistance to transnationalism, and anti-child labor movements' transnationalism and related distance from the state. This literature does not take us far in understanding movements representing the majority of India's workers – that is, informal workers – who combine transnationalist and nationalist strategies.

Using the case of SEWA, I argue that informal workers' transnational efforts in the democratic context of India yield critical insights into the ways globalization enables workers to foster new linkages with the state. Doing so is essential for the mass of informal workers operating in the neoliberal context because new structures of production have complicated the option of employer accountability. Unlike traditional formal sector unions and recent anti-child labor movements who fight for employer accountability, Indian informal workers hold the Indian state directly accountable for their welfare. Transnational efforts become a key mechanism through which informal workers assist the state in improving their livelihoods.

Specifically, transnational efforts enable informal workers to restructure the constraints faced by the Indian state by going to the same international level as those constraints. Doing so enables Indian informal workers to use their privileged position with the Indian state to lead transnational labor efforts and use their transnational links to build their legitimacy with the Indian state. Second, informal workers use transnational efforts to establish linkages with branded knowledge brokers in the North. Such linkages lend validity to statistical data on informality, which in turn enables state officials to justify greater attention to informal workers. Finally, informal workers create frames that appeal to a wide

range of transnational social movements to work themselves into nearly all of the Indian governments' social agendas.

Because their ultimate goal is to attract the Indian state's attention, informal workers' transnational efforts have remained focused on local issues and a commitment to empowerment. Informal workers' organizations yield voice to their members, even in the transnational sphere, and they claim to be the state's only link to informal workers, who they depict as a mass vote bank and key actors in the state's neoliberal agenda. By lowering the risk of stressing domestic class relations, strong state–society relations help transnational movements appear less threatening to local populations.

These findings highlight the complex juncture in which contemporary nation states reside. Operating in the context of neoliberal globalization, nation states today must protect their legitimacy among domestic workers and simultaneously foster their economic agenda among domestic and international capital. Informal workers in India have positioned themselves as an important aid in this juncture. They demand state accountability for their welfare, but they also allow the state to continue absolving employers of responsibility for their workers. Informal workers use their transnational activism to enable the state to appear as though it is protecting its domestic constituents, while simultaneously protecting capital's pursuit of profit. To this extent, Indian informal workers' movements represent a social reform movement, rather than a traditional labor interest group.

Finally, these findings hold important implications for Southern leadership in transnational labor movements. Indian informal workers' movements are leading transnational efforts on the subject. Part of SEWA's successes and leadership capacity can be attributed to the democratic context in which Indian informal workers have long been organizing and empowering themselves. This democratic context has ensured that the Indian state did not repress or ignore informal workers' movements, but rather engaged them to retain its legitimacy. These findings raise important questions on the role that varying political structures have on transnational labor strategies and whether it is the level of openness, rather than the level of development, that can predict leadership potential in transnational networks.

## Funding

## Notes

1 'Boomerang' means 'returning to the initial position from where it came'. The 'boomerang effect', therefore, refers to activist strategies that extend to the transnational arena to eventually return and affect the local.
2 For two excellent historical accounts of India's labor movement, see Chandavarkar (1994) and Gooptu (2001).

3 This definition has been accepted in much of the literature (see Cross, 1998; De Soto, 1989; Portes, 1994).
4 For more details about these movements, their relationships to three state governments, and the conditions under which they succeed and fail, see Agarwala (forthcoming).
5 The union is the largest in the state of Gujarat, but has offices across India. The membership fee is Rs.5 per year (US$0.10). The union is governed by elected proportional representation. Each trade elects one representative for every 100 members. These representatives form the Trade Council, which elects an Executive Committee (EC) of 25 members every three years. EC Members comprise the office-bearers of the SEWA union. The President comes from the trade with the largest membership. Each trade has a Trade Committee, which has 15–50 members and meets monthly to discuss trade-specific problems and strategies.
6 UNIFEM is the United Nations Development Fund for Women. Currently, there is also a HomeNet Southeast Asia. The intention is to create regional networks across the world.

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