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FINDAS
The Center for South Asian Studies,
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies
東京外国語大学　南アジア研究センター

FINDAS International Conference Series 1

Women's Work in South Asia in the Age of Neo-liberalism

Edited by
Toshie Awaya and Maya Suzuki

Center for South Asian Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (FINDAS)

Literature, Social Movements, and Gender Issues in South Asia

The purpose of the Center is to deepen the understanding of structural changes in contemporary South Asia, using as axes the historical, political, social, and literary analyses of social movements as well as the perspective of gender. Regarding the targeted fields of research, we aim to become a repository of documentation within Japan through further systematic and conscious augmentation of the documents and historical materials in the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) collections.

Through the first phase during FY 2010–14 of our research activities, it became clear that the dramatic changes in personal awareness and gender relations on an individual, family, and community level have been brought about by structural changes in modern India accompanying economic liberalization and globalization. We also realized that complexity and variability of the issue of identity have been increasing, and that it would not be possible to understand the lively form of democratic politics that characterizes India without the vigorous objections of groups until now positioned on the social periphery. In the second phase FY 2015-19, along with focusing on the changes in human ties—particularly various aspects of social movements as well as aspects of emotions and sensitivities that support them—and further expanding the region of focus to South Asia, we will emphasize taking the lead in building a theory through consciously organizing comparative research with other regions, including China, Southeast Asia and Islamic nations. While the "politics of emotion" has recently gained attention, by no means has this deepened in the area of South Asia studies. Concerning South Asia, experimental studies and the positing of new theory in this field will serve as an effective opening to understand modern contemporary India. Furthermore, comparative research with other regions will also contribute to the understanding of global structural transformation.

Research Unit 1:
Practice and Theory of Crisscrossed Social Movements: With Emphasis on Human Ties and Sentiments
Research Unit 2:
Social Transformations and Literature

FINDAS International Conference Series 1

Women's Work in South Asia in the Age of Neo-liberalism

Edited by
Toshie Awaya and Maya Suzuki

Assisted by
Naoki Takahashi and Mayu Takada

The Center for South Asian Studies (FINDAS)
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

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PREFACE

The Center for South Asia Studies (FINDAS) at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) has been pursuing collective research focusing on the issues of social movements, literature, and gender for the past eight years. During this time, we have organized several international workshops, such as those on women's participation in politics (quarter system), dalit feminism, comparison of Indian "untouchables" to Japanese *burakumin*, and so forth. Our latest workshop was a one-day meeting on "Women's Work in South Asia in the Age of Neoliberalism," held at TUFS in January 2017. This volume grew out of that workshop.

Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana began their important essay of the early 1990s entitled "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender" with the sentence "Suddenly 'women' are everywhere." Indeed, as economic dynamism and development in South Asian countries have been getting more and more attention in recent years, women have become one of the focal points. The images of South Asian women in today's globalizing economy are, however, contradictory. For instance, compare those garment factory workers who lost their lives in Rana Plaza, on one hand, to several CEOs of multinational corporations, on the other.

If we look at our own country, the present Abe government makes an appeal to women by saying it wishes to establish "a society in which women shine" (which reminds us of the earlier "India shining" slogan of that country's Bharatiya Janata Party). However, Japanese feminists or anyone with a little political sensibility can easily detect that the Abe regime is merely trying to encourage women to work informally and part time rather than as stable and secure full-time workers. They are reacting to the circumstances of declining birthrate and shrinking national revenue; the gender equality/justice issue is only a secondary concern.

It was against this background that we thought it high time to get together to explore contemporary situations of South Asian women in the context of the global economic dynamism triggered by neoliberalism. At the same time, this workshop aimed at

appreciating their aspirations and agency so that the lives they live are not conceived of as completely constrained and determined by economic logic.

We are very much aware that it is extremely difficult to define neoliberalism. Everyone has her/his own concept or image. In our view, it is important to examine any element that is considered a landmark of neoliberalism, such as a market-centered economy, informalization, deregulation, emphasis on free choice and individual responsibility, and so on. Furthermore, we believe it is essential to approach each of these aspects from a gender perspective. Our international workshop, "Women's Work in South Asia in the Age of Neoliberalism," was our attempt to do that through focusing on women's work.

We cannot ignore the fact that women's work is embedded in historical, sociocultural, and political situations. Neoliberalism works in a different way. Every paper in this volume is based on each scholar's long-term engagement with a particular field that gives us rich information. We hope these papers will not only become the first step toward comparative studies on women's work in South Asia, but will also provide the insight of a common thread relating gender ideologies in the ongoing march of the neoliberalist economy and thereby deepen our understanding of present and future social transformations and the changing nature of gender relations in South Asia.

We are deeply indebted to all the speakers for submitting their revised papers within the scheduled time-limit, as well as the commentators and participants in the workshop. Our hearty thanks also go to those graduate and undergraduate students who made the workshop successful.

FINDAS is part of the area study project of the National Institutes for the Humanities (NIHU). In addition, we were provided financial support for this workshop from the Diversity Research Environment Realization Initiative. We would like to express our deep gratitude to both agencies for their support.

April, 2017 Toshie Awaya

Photos

Opening

Opening Address: Toshie Awaya

Chairs: Kensaku Mamiya, Kyoko Niwa

Misako Kanno

Rie Kage

Seika Sato

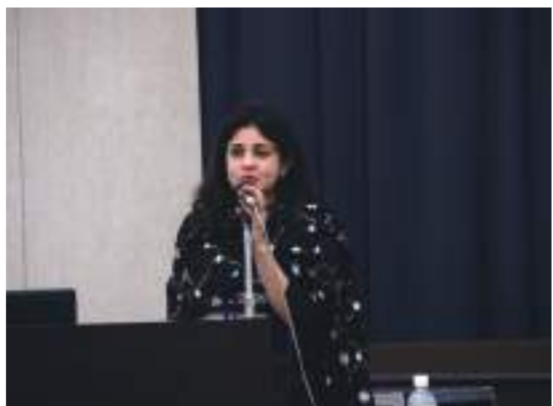
Morning Discussion

Morning Discussion 2

Lunch Break

Neetha N.

Dina M Siddiqi



Nida Kirmani

Hanako Nagata

Momoe Makino

Afternoon Discussion

Afternoon Discussion 2

General Discussion

General Discussion 2

FINDAS International Workshop

"Women's Work in South Asia in the Age of Neo-liberalism"

Date： January 8 (Sun), 2017

Venue: Large Conference Room 303,

Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

【PROGRAM】

9:30 - 10:00 Registration

10:00 -10:10 Opening Addresses: Toshie Awaya (Director, FINDAS Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)

Chair: Kyoko Niwa, Kensaku Mamiya (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)

1. Misako Kanno（Tokyo University of Social Welfare) (40 min)
   "Dynamics of Working Housewives in Contemporary Rural Uttar Pradesh"
2. Rie Kage　(Saga Women's Junior College) (40 min)
   "Causes and Consequences of Return Migration in Sri Lanka: A Case Study of Female Unskilled Migrant Workers"
3. Seika SATO　（Teikyo University) (40 min)
   "'Self-employed' Workers in the Age of Neoliberalism: Men and Women Street Vendors in Kathmandu"

Lunch (12:10-13:10)

4. Neetha N. (Centre for Women's Development Studies) (40 min)
   "Nuances and Overtones of Paid Domestic Work in India"
5. Dina M Siddiqi（BRAC University）(40 min)
   "Unions or NGOs? Organizing Labor under the Neoliberal Gaze"
6. Nida Kirmani (Lahore University of Management Sciences) (40 min)
   "Earning as Empowerment?: The Relationship between Paid-Work and Violence in Lyari, Karachi"

Tea Break (15:10-15:30)

Discussant: Hanako Nagata (Ibaraki University) (15 min)
Momoe Makino (The Institute of Developing Economies) (15 min)

General Discussion (16:00-17:00) (60 min)

Conference Dinner (17:30-19:30)

2017 FINDAS International Workshop

Women's Work in South Asia in the Age of Neo-liberalism

新自由主義時代における南アジアの女性労働

January 8 (Sun), 2017, 10am-5pm

Venue: Large Conference Room 303, ILCAA, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

東京外国語大学　AA研　大会議室 303

Welcome Address: TOSHIE AWAYA (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)

1. Dynamics of Working Housewives in Contemporary Rural Uttar Pradesh
MISAKO KANNO (Tokyo University of Social Welfare)

2. Causes and Consequences of Return Migration in Sri Lanka: A Case Study of Female Unskilled Migrant Workers
RIE KAGE (Saga Women's Junior College)

3.'Self-employed' Workers in the Age of Neoliberalism: Men and Women Street Vendors in Kathmandu
SEIKA SATO (Teikyo University)

Lunch (12:10-13:10)

4. Nuances and Overtones of Paid Domestic Work in India
NEETHA N. (Centre for Women's Development Studies)

5. Unions or NGOs? Organizing Labor under the Neoliberal Gaze
DINA M SIDDIQI （BRAC University）

6. Earning as Empowerment?: The Relationship between Paid-Work and Violence in Lyari, Karachi
NIDA KIRMANI (Lahore University of Management Sciences)

Tea Break (15:10-15:30)

General Discussion (16:00-17:00)
Discussant: HANAKO NAGATA (Ibaraki University)
MOMOE MAKINO (The Institute of Developing Economies)

Conference Dinner (17:30-19:30)

主催：東京外国語大学　南アジア研究センター　(FINDAS)

Dynamics of Working Housewives:
A Case Study of Social Welfare Workers in Rural North India

Misako Kanno
(Tokyo University of Social Welfare)

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s in India, the development of women has been extensively promoted. Poverty alleviation and economic development through agricultural land reform and improved farming techniques have been major issues in rural India. However, since the 1990s, the government and international organizations have focused more on the topic of "women." Several types of "women's programs" including those focusing on maternal and child health, female education towards "Education for All," and micro credits to alleviate the "feminization of poverty" have been introduced nationwide.

The implementation of these women's programs resulted in the hiring of a large number of women who were educated up to the high school level as field workers to assist in the programs. In the 1980s, girls' education became popular among upper- and middle-class households to improve their possibilities for marriage, well in advance of the national education reform of the 1990s. Parents from the upper and middle classes tend to send their daughters to high school so that they can marry into a good family with better properties or incomes. Many of these educated women became employed as field workers in social welfare projects and participated in several welfare policies such as those related to poverty alleviation, birth control, maternal and child health, and increased education by domestic and international organizations in the public and private sectors.

Although considered an opportunity for women, who are mostly excluded from the market economy by sociocultural restrictions on earning an income for their daily expenses, the compensation for their labor seems unfair. In other words, housewives are targeted for the role of servants in the smallest units of administrative organizations and are paid low wages. Thus, this situation requires that we question whether participating in public society and improving economic status is indeed a good opportunity for women or merely another type of exploitation. This study examines middle-class women in rural

Uttar Pradesh (UP) working as social workers from the viewpoint of the "housewifization" advocated by Maria Mies, while locating them in the rural labor market by analyzing ethnographical data.

2. Housewifization and "intimate labor work"

Compared to other areas in India, rural north India (including UP) is extensively marked by patriarchal societies with strict gender norms. Here, socio-cultural restrictions on working in public spaces for married women, especially from the upper- and upper-middle castes, are evident. In this case, why are these women allowed to engage in occupations related to social welfare in positions such as public health workers, teachers, and social workers? This can be explained through the argument of the domestication and "privatization" of women along with renewed gender norms developed by Hindu nationalists since the pre-independence period. These have assigned fixed gender roles to women as caregivers and protectors of their families, as well as certain nationalistic gender ideologies such as devotion, dedication, and affection to others (Fruzzetti and Perez 2002). Social welfare activities can be considered an embodiment of the gender roles and ideologies bestowed on Hindu women. Actually, these activities are an extension of women's roles as they routinely engage in their daily lives and thus, are inherently accepted by society as jobs filled by women.

Boris and Parrenas designated labor work that encompasses a range of activities including household maintenance, personal and family maintenance, and sexual and emotional contact as "intimate labor," defining the concept as "labor with any type of physical touch or emotional closeness, or personal familiarity, or close observation of another, or knowledge of personal information" (Boris and Parrenas 2010, 1-2). They also explain it as the "unpaid responsibility of women," which includes the nonmarket economy or low-paid work done by lower classes or racial outsiders. Social work in India, a field in which mostly educated middle-class women are working, cannot be precisely categorized as intimate labor. Nevertheless, both activities are needed to respond to the physical, intellectual, and affectional states and other emotions of those who use these services. Female workers necessarily commit to the personal matters of village women during fieldwork, such as birth control, family health, sexual relationships with their spouses, the education and/or marriage of their children, and care of older family

members. These issues have been discussed and solved within family units and create emotional ties and dependencies between workers and clients. Hence, they can be located in the arena of intimate labor.

A series of social welfare programs have provided employment opportunities to women who engaged in unpaid domestic work as housewives, making women's economic contributions to households possible. As Mies revealed, since the introduction of the capitalist economy, married women became more responsible for unpaid housework including agriculture and manufacturing-related work; therefore, the status of women rapidly declined (Mies 2000). Given this trend of housewifization, the social welfare programs that created women's work opportunities in rural communities played a role in improving the status of women in their households and society.

However, job opportunities for women must be closely related to activities in the domestic or intimate arena. According to Boris and Parrenas, a common factor of intimate labor is the low wages. Although social work differs from unskilled manual labor such as peasant or construction jobs mostly assumed by laborers in the lower class, social work is also physically demanding. For example, health workers and social workers go door-to-door in many villages, meeting women and checking their economic and health status. In other cases, teachers working in rural areas teach and take care of schoolchildren every day for long hours, usually in dark classrooms without air conditioning facilities. Despite their hard work, they do not get sufficient compensation (at least the informants in my research complained about their salaries), health insurance, paid leave, or pensions. This limits women's economic roles to supplementing their household incomes. Considering this argument, it is likely that the government and international organizations have taken advantage of the given socio-cultural roles of women as caregivers and the image of devoted and dedicated wives and mothers, full of affection for others, to utilize educated middle-class women as convenient personnel. This can be viewed as the feminization or housewifization of social welfare work. To understand the nature and significance of social work from a gender and feminist viewpoint, in the following sections, I examine the status of female workers and their perspectives on their work by analyzing ethnographical data.

3. Profile of the focus area

This chapter focuses on female social workers in the rural area of Chandauli district, eastern UP, who mostly belong to the socio-economic upper or middle classes and were educated up to the 10th grade (high school) or more during the 1980s and 1990s. In Chandauli district, which is adjacent to Varanasi province and located near the border of the state of Bihar, 80% of the population is comprised of farmers and 37% of the households live below the poverty line. The rural middle class differs from the one in urban areas in terms of lifestyle and family structure. Unlike urban areas, upper/middle-class women assume many household chores including economic activities such as farming and harvesting as well as traditional family maintenance such as arrangement of rituals and ceremonies.

On the other hand, these women also enjoy modern lives and ways of thinking. The development of transport in recent years means they can easily access Varanasi by bus or taxi within a couple of hours. Varanasi, one of the most historical and cultural cities in India, has developed manufacturing and tourism industries. This combination of traditional and modern factors in one place influenced the surrounding provinces socio-culturally and economically. Not only do villagers in this area visit Varanasi for shopping and sightseeing, but they also send their children to private schools or migrate there for better employment. Middle-class women in this area have a strong interest in education for their children and enjoy their changing lifestyles while utilizing modern consumer goods and appliances including mobile phones. Household chores have been simplified through the use of home appliances and cooking utensils including gas cooking stoves and outsourcing various types of "housework" (e.g., polishing rice, milling flour, making cow dung fuel, etc.).

The recent spread of these consumer goods, outsourcing services, and education has increased the value and meaning of cash income more rapidly in rural societies, where self-sufficiency was once the main economic activity. Those who once possessed wide farmlands have begun to sell them as necessities such as shopping, medical and education fees, and wedding expenses have increased. Thus, they are required to get jobs to compensate for the financial shortage of sustenance.

These recent changes in their lifestyles and economic activities could be another reason why women attempt to financially contribute to their families. Ironically, the

simplification of domestic work, which has generated more leisure time for women, has also brought the necessity of cash, pushing them to engage in economic activities outside their homes. Consequently, women have been forced to assume more burden and responsibility than before.

4. Social welfare work in the study area

Since the introduction of Education for All in the 1990s, informal education, non-formal education, and school education for women and children spread throughout the country. Simultaneously, the Anganwadi program was initiated as a childcare program for preschool children, and many village women were employed as teachers or teachers' assistants. Unlicensed schools were also established in this region, because of insufficient government-licensed schools, offering education at inexpensive fees and employing educated women as part-time teachers. In addition, in this region, some programs (e.g., micro credit, maternal and child health, income generation, and awareness programs to empower poor women in the lower classes) were implemented by a Christian NGO named Mahila Chetna Samiti and a government organization called Mahila Samakhya (MS). These programs employed women with high school or higher education as social workers, while women with five to eight years of education were employed as supplementary personnel. A MS report indicated a serious shortage of personnel: more than 50% of posts were vacant, because of low salaries[1], absence of social security measures, and other attractive options in the market for educated women (Matthai 2014).

Family planning is another activity conducted in this area by the State Innovation in Family Planning Services Project Agency (SIFPSA) launched by the UP Government in cooperation with USAID. According to the state government, more than 20,000 women were employed in 2012 as public health workers in charge of children and maternal health, as well as family planning. Under this program, they are required to regularly visit each household in their designated areas. During these visits, the female worker monitors various aspects of the health of women and children, provides information related to health and family planning, advises and motivates women to adopt appropriate health and family planning practices, and delivers other selected services. These visits are also

[1] According to an MS report in 2014, the salary of social workers at the field level is Rs 4500 per month.

important for enhancing the credibility of services and establishing necessary rapport with clients.

The table below shows the status of male and female frontline workers and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANM) employed by the state government in 2012, indicating the shortfall of workers against the required numbers. The state government increased the number of these workers in accordance with the rapidly increasing population of UP, but failed to hire the required number. This could be attributed to an insufficient number of educated women or cultural restrictions imposed on them. Interestingly, it also shows a large gap in the number of male and female workers, highlighting a significant shortfall of male workers, who represent only 8% of the required number covered at sub-centers. There seem to be at least two reasons for this: men are less interested in taking up the post, which is perceived as a feminine job, or men seek different job opportunities to obtain higher salaries and better social security.

Table 1: Health and Family Planning Personnel in Uttar Pradesh, 2012

Particulars	Required	In Position	Shortfall
Health Worker (Female)/ ANM at Sub-center & PHC	24,213	22,464	1749
Health Worker (Male) at Sub-center	20,521	1729	18,792
Health Assistant (Female)/ LHV at PHC	3692	2040	1652
Health Assistant (Male) at PHC	3692	4518	------

Source: Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India[2]

[2] https://data.gov.in/keywords/female-health-worker

Table 2: Number of Female Health Workers and ANMs at Sub-centers and PHCs

2005			2012		
Required	In position	Shortfall	Required	In position	Shortfall
24,181	18,146	6035	24,213	22,464	1749

Source: Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India[3]

However, a comparison of the number of health workers and ANMs in 2005 (see Table 2) reveals that the number of workers increased in the following seven years. This is likely because of the expanding employment market as the level of education of middle-class women increased and a gradual decrease in the restrictions on local women engaging in public activities, as the programs established credibility among local people. Briefly, social welfare work has become widely accepted as feminine work in society.

5. Case studies on social workers

During my fieldwork, which I have been conducting since 2003, I met several workers who were engaged in family planning and health programs, teaching at public and private schools, and involved in women's empowerment programs. Through informal conversations and interviews, I found that their stories on how they started working and why they continued to work in the field varied. In this section, I describe the stories of five workers from different programs to understand the meaning of their social work.

Case 1: Sangeeta [Health worker]

Sangeeta worked for a family planning and health program under SIFPSA and is a *Thakur* woman in her late 40s[4]. She received ten years of education up to high school, and married when she was 18 years old. Her husband does not work because of a mental disorder; therefore, she takes care of various types of work to maintain the household, including supervising the tenant farmers working their 25 *bighas* of land. She had two daughters, and when the eldest married, Sangeeta and her husband sold their land by the piece to gain cash to prepare for the wedding ceremony. At the time of the survey, their

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3 https://data.gov.in/keywords/female-health-worker

4 The age provided for informants was the age at the time of the survey, which was conducted in 2012.

second daughter was studying at a junior college in the nearest city to the village, and they were anxious about her marriage, because of a lack of income and property. Sangeeta worked only during campaigns for polio vaccination, immunization and nutrition for mothers and infants, and promotion of contraceptive use or sterilization to villagers. Since her job as a health worker was irregular, she also taught sewing classes and tailored sari blouses and *salwar kameezes* at home to earn cash, in addition to renting a room at the house her parents-in-law built for them.

She used to awaken at 4:00 or 5:00 am, wash the dishes, bath, wash her clothes, cook breakfast and lunch, and prepare so that she could leave her home at 9:00 am. The Primary Health Centre (PHC) was a five-minute walk from her home. She stayed at PHC on immunization campaign days and helped nurses who vaccinated villagers, while visiting around the village and meeting villagers individually to consult with them on contraceptive use and sterilization or childcare and health during pregnancy. Clearly, these tasks were exhausting and painstaking despite the low wages[5], but the income from SIFPSA was necessary for sustenance. At the end of each day, it was difficult to balance economic activities and housework.

Case 2: Swami [Social worker]

Swami, a social worker in her late 30s, is a *Thakur* woman educated up to the high school level and working for MS as a social worker. She had been widowed six months before the survey, which I conducted in 2012, and had just returned to work from her period of mourning for her husband, who was killed in a traffic accident. She has three children (two boys and one daughter), all of who were living at her in-laws' house; the oldest one was aged around 10 years. She was still in mourning, but told me that she decided to continue to work for MS rather than resign. She usually visited ten villages in rotation, and met with group members to discuss issues such as saving money, health, education, and domestic violence. She attended block-level meetings every month, in addition to staff meetings at the block office every week and province office every month. She had good relationships with her colleagues, who visited her to comfort her during her mourning period.

[5] Sangeeta earned Rs 800 per month.

Widows are considered bad omens in this area; thus, they live modestly while wearing plain saris without accessories and are not allowed to participate in joyous occasions such as wedding ceremonies and the birth ceremonies of male children. However, Swami had participated in the MS programs for several years and had many ideas on how to improve the rights and status of widows. In addition, she had young children and had to raise them, rather than stay at home. As such, for Swami, working for MS as a social worker was a way to ensure sustenance and raise her children more independently while living with self-dignity as a human being, rather than as a widow.

Case 3: Sadna [Teacher of non-formal education]

Sadna is a *Thakur* woman in her late 30s educated up to the high school level and working as a teacher in the girls' education program conducted by MS. She married into her husband's family after graduating from high school and had two small children. Her father-in-law had already passed away. Her husband was a schoolteacher and owned enough land to cultivate rice, wheat, and vegetables for the family's own consumption. An acquaintance persuaded her to become a teacher in the MS program. While not eager, she decided to take the job. Before leaving to teach at 9:00 am every morning, she finishes all the household chores such as cleaning rooms, washing the dishes used the day before, and preparing breakfast and lunch. She leaves her small children with her mother-in-law until 2:00 pm, when she returns home. Her husband reluctantly agreed to her working for MS, because he wanted her to stay at home and take care of their children and his elderly mother. He told me that women going out to work in a rural society, where their seclusion is still widely accepted, is not a good idea. He also said that he wanted her to care for their small children and do the housework properly. MS workers had much work other than teaching girls, which tended to keep them busy. For example, they attended staff meetings at each block and district office at least once or twice every month.

Sadna seemed happy teaching and caring for the girls from poor households, and had a good relationship with other female colleagues at MS. However, she worried that her husband did not agree with her working outside the home, and felt an inner conflict between caring for her family and continuing her job. She told me that she intended to prioritize her husband's will if he continued to oppose her.

As indicated in the cases of Sangeeta and Swami, social welfare work was likely crucial for their sustenance, and Swami and Sadna enjoyed good connections and relationships with their colleagues or group members or students. However, it seems that the job opportunity did not always bring gender equality within their households. In Sadna's case, working outside for any reason other than the need for extra income was considered an immoral activity, because it gives women an opportunity to enjoy staying in the public sphere while not fulfilling the important roles of mother and wife. In the future, Swami's case could also be perceived as immoral, since she was working as a widow. Another worker, a Brahman widow whose husband died of cancer, was also working at MS to raise her three children. She was actively engaged in an activity to empower widows while wearing a colorful sari and full accessories. She was accused by her in-laws of losing her dignity as a Brahman woman, and was forced to leave her in-laws' house. Thus, while a financial safety net, engaging in social work could be a risk in terms of social relations and cultural norms.

Despite the risk, some workers tried to attain their wish to work, while negotiating the patriarchal situation by balancing their activities and local gender norms.

Case 4: Madhu [Social worker]

Madhu, a *Thakur* woman in her 40s with ten years of education up to the high school level, was employed in MS as a teacher of adolescent girls when I met her in 2003. She started working for a Christian NGO, Mahila Chetna Samiti, which provides micro credit to rural women. When the MS program closed the education program in 2004, she became a social worker helping poor women by implementing saving programs in several villages. She married when she was 18 years old and had three children—two daughters and one son. The eldest daughter married five years ago. Her husband's father used to own land of 50 *bighas,* but it was divided and given to his four sons, which meant it was not big enough to supply their own food. He twice attempted to operate his own business (running a public telephone facility and operating a CD/cassette shop at home), but both failed. Apart from supervising peasants working on their land, he engaged in support activities for a local politician almost voluntarily, and once stood as a candidate to become a block panchayat officer, but lost the election. At the time of my fieldwork in 2012, their son

was studying in Mumbai while staying with Madhu's older sister-in-law, and the youngest daughter was studying at high school.

Madhu visited villages daily and had meetings with group members to supervise their savings and share information regarding programs and services provided by the state government, such as MGNAREGA[6], pensions, and food programs. She went around the village calling group members to attend the meetings. She also attended vocational training for poor women with group members, and ran regular meetings at block offices near Varanasi or Delhi.

When she started this job, she promised her husband that she would do the housework properly. She said that "he thankfully accepted my wish to work as a teacher, and so nice of him, he even takes me to school by motorbike when he has time." She gets up at 4:00 or 5:00 am, sweeps and polishes the floor, washes the dishes, baths, washes clothes, and cooks breakfast and lunch before preparing herself to leave her house at 9:30 or 10:00 am. She returns home at around 4 pm, and then starts cooking dinner after resting for a while. Her second daughter sometimes helps her, but Madhu does most of the household chores. She frequently complained about back and knee pains due to the hard work, but did not want to stop working outside, both because she needed an income to sustain their family and she did not want to stay at home.

Case 5: Usha [Teacher at an unlicensed school]

Usha, a *Thakur* woman in her mid-40s, was employed as a teacher at an unlicensed private school. She was married to a man who was 15 years older than her and who had lost his former wife to cancer. They had three children by the time she was 16 years old. Her father-in-law had already passed away before her marriage, and she took care of her husband, mother-in-law, and three stepchildren (two sons and one daughter) who were all married at the time. She had a son of her own, and he was working in Varanasi after completing an engineering course at a college in Varanasi. She regretted that she had to give up her education when she married, and convinced her husband to support her

[6] Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act began in 2006, and provides at least 100 jobs with wages to people below the poverty line in a fiscal year.

continuing education after the death of her mother-in-law. She was attempting to achieve a master's degree when I met her for the first time in 2003.

While taking the master's course, she was employed with SIFPSA as an assistant to an office manager, but after completing her contract in 2009, she applied for the post of schoolteacher and obtained her current job. As the school starts at 9 am, Usha wakes at around 6 am, gets dressed, has a cup of *chai* and a light breakfast, and goes to the elementary school, which is about a 10-minute walk from her house. Usha was in charge of schoolchildren from first to third grade and taught Hindi, math, and social science. She returned home at 3 or 4 pm, and rested until dark while taking care of her grandchildren. Her daughters-in-law did all the household chores including cooking, cleaning, washing, making cooking fuels, and preserving rice and wheat harvested from their own land. They strictly kept *purdah* (Women's Seclusion), staying at home the whole day and never stepping out of their house alone. Usha's first stepson was working in Chennai as a factory manager, and they received sufficient remittance from him to recently install a modern kitchen with gas stove and construct a new bathroom so that they did not have to go to the field to use the toilet. Her husband, who works at a hospital as a guard, reluctantly agreed that she take classes and work outside the home, but he was ultimately happy with Usha's decision, as she earned enough to sustain them when he he developed heart disease and had to resign from his job. When I interviewed her, she expressed her respect and gratitude towards her husband, saying, "I could enroll for education and obtain my job because my dear husband kindly let me do so."

On the other hand, she complained about the working circumstances under which she teaches and cares for students from morning until afternoon in a small, old classroom without air conditioning, which causes serious headaches during the hottest season. In spite of her efforts, the salary is extremely low; however, she did not quit her job, because she did not want to stay at home to do chores as a housewife.

In spite of the low wages and hard work, these women enjoyed working as teachers or social workers, and were determined to continue working. They also respected their husbands by expressing a sense of praise and gratitude for "letting them go to work," rather than insisting on their contribution to the household economy or ability to balance domestic chores and economic activities. In other words, they were attempting to repeatedly recognize their faithfulness and deference towards their husbands through

their narratives, occasionally as if they had never gone beyond local gender norms, despite being engaged in activities in the public sphere. This is assumed a strategy to negotiate with patriarchy, in which they (un)consciously emphasize their identity as Hindu women to dissolve the contradictions between Hindu wife/mother and working woman.

6. Concluding remarks

As seen above social welfare-related work (such as health workers, teachers, and social workers) is located between the intimate and public spheres, and is one of the few job opportunities that local married women facing imposed gender restrictions can engage in relatively easily. Social work contains two antithetical traits: first, it confines women to expected gender roles and an image of women on the one hand, and on the other, makes it possible for women to connect with others beyond existing gender norms. Second, it improves women's status and increases decision making in the household through economic independence, while also increasing the burden on women by adding work other than housework while their economic status remains secondary in the household. Female workers presumably do their work by balancing these traits while accepting what is beyond their control and pursuing possibilities to achieve what they want and benefit from.

Here, the problems are limited job opportunities and low salaries, which prove that women are assigned to activities described as "service," "volunteer," "dedication," and "devotion" by the government and other organizations providing welfare programs. Ironically, women's organizations use these images of social workers to make ends meet on a meager budget, since their first priority is the most subjugated women in lower strata rather than middle-class social workers. As Mies defines the concept of housewifization, the costs that primarily need to be covered by the public or private sectors providing the programs are externalized to these workers as if their labor is a "natural resource" freely or cheaply available like air and water. Mies also suggests that housewifization means the process of disorganizing or atomizing women workers to deprive women's political and bargaining power. However, the situation of social workers differs from her suggestion, which is argued from the viewpoint of a civilization movement by proletariats during the industrial revolution in western society. Female social workers in rural India

have also been deprived their bargaining power not because they are isolated or disorganized, but because they are exposed to the Hindu gender ideologies contoured and reinforced during the pre/post-independence period. Social welfare work is precisely appropriate for middle-class women who should praise the images of ideal Hindu wives, who ascribe to self-sacrifice, devotion, chastity, and benevolence. This is because it requires hard work for society while earning a modest salary, which restricts women in terms of the household economy. In fact, the overwhelming shortfall of male workers indicates that society perceives these jobs as feminine.

Nevertheless, the increase in vocational opportunities and options widening the lifestyles and working patterns of rural women causes another problem for them. Essentially, the increased options add further responsibility to women's decisions and make their lives more complicated and difficult than what is accepted as normal in the lives of rural women. The female workers analyzed in this chapter have to justify their decisions by comparing the sense of pleasure and satisfaction from achieving social connection to others and economic independence and contribution towards bettering the lives of others to the sense of anxiety and suffering in body and mind due to hard work and the socio-cultural risk of violating gender norms. It is characteristic of rural women like Madhu and Usha to attempt to perform their roles as modest and faithful wives and caring mothers by stressing their gratitude towards their husbands or responsibility to raising their children. The most important concern for women in rural society is being a good mother or wife, regardless of whether they are housewives or working women. However, women's lifestyles are increasingly diverging from fulfilling the role of good wives and mothers to advancing their own careers in urban areas.

Recently, the situation in rural areas has been changing, as the younger generations of women—especially among who are the daughters of the social workers discussed here—received better education than their mothers. Some of these women are able to obtain better job opportunities (such as manager or officer), although the option is still limited. Furthermore, their status in their households is increasing faster than it did for their mothers in terms of household economy. Therefore, we need to keep monitoring society's evolving situation.

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Causes and Consequences of Return Migration in Sri Lanka: A Case Study of Female Unskilled Migrant Workers

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, many Sri Lankan workers returned from Kuwait after the outbreak of the First Gulf War. There were unexpected numbers of female domestic workers among the group of returnees, and this news was received with widespread astonishment by Sri Lankan politicians and society in general. The rapid rise of female international migration had emerged by push and pull factors from situations and conditions both domestically in Sri Lanka and abroad. The major external pull factor was the drastic expansion of demand for female live-in domestic workers in the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. There was also a negative external factor among other labor exporting nations in South Asia, which stimulated female migration from Sri Lanka. Most South Asian governments have not positively promoted female workers' unaccompanied migration since the beginning of open door policies in the Middle East, because of cultural and Islamic values towards women. Consequently, foreign employment agencies and the like have encouraged the migration of Sri Lankan women as domestic workers to meet the large demand from the Gulf States. Since then, many Sri Lankan women, on average 80,000–100,000 annually, have migrated to the Gulf as domestic workers. However, after the discovery of such large-scale female migration, Sri Lankan society has gradually come to view the phenomenon negatively based on the values of the culture towards women, especially among the Sinhala Buddhist elites. The government emphasized the protection of Sri Lankan workers abroad and reformed the migration policy from 2006 to promote male migrants and skilled and technical workers over female domestic workers.

This paper examines data and information obtained from a questionnaire and interview survey on 522 female returnees engaged as domestic workers (90%) and garment workers (10%) in the Gulf region. The study was conducted in H. prefecture in South Province,

Sri Lanka between 2007 and 2009. In addition, the research discussed women's reasons for migration and return, possibility of re-migration, and present living conditions after returning, focusing on female migrant domestic workers, who are considered the major female migrant group. To understand the views of Sri Lankan female workers on migration, the study conducted a follow-up survey in 2014 and 2016 with the country's return to stability after the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War (2009). The survey examined the changes in respondents' views correlating to the changes in Sri Lankan migration policy and the changing situation and structure in the societies of Sri Lanka and destination countries.

Return Migration and the Contribution of the Study

The actual situation of returned migrants remains a largely unknown chapter in the migration process in general. Most migration studies focus on policy, social, and economic impacts from the perspectives of the developed and industrialized nations of immigration. Few studies on returned migrants have been conducted in the origin countries in terms of their living conditions, integration in the labor market, and so forth. This is a meaningful study for labor-exporting countries, which regard foreign employment policy as part of their economic development strategy, to grasp the causes and realities of return migration and make suitable amendments. We must consider the factors that encourage returnees to return and their reasons for returning, because they may have successfully reached their goals or may have failed in the migration process. The assessments and improvements of foreign employment promotion measures are necessary to understand return migration (Wang and Fan, 2006; Cassarino, 2015: 257; Wahba, 2016). It is also an acute measure for policy making that we conduct empirical surveys of returned migrants to understand their contribution and reintegration into society (Kuschminder, 2013). The timing and conditions of their return is also a matter for consideration. Gmelch (1980) defines return migration as the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle. It must be distinguished from circular/repeat migration and re-emigration. Alternatively, King (2000) defines return migration as the process whereby people return to their country or place of origin after a significant period in another country or origin. For the United Nations, a return migrant is an individual who has been abroad for at least 12 months.

This study targeted female returnees from abroad. Over 90% of the targeted female returnees had engaged as live-in domestic workers in households in the Gulf region of the Middle East. They went abroad for work, expecting employment opportunities on arrival alongside the opportunity to save money, which they cannot expect to do in their homeland. Therefore, we hypothesized that once the women had reached their goal and were content with their savings, they would decide to return to their home country wherein they would re-integrate. In most Asian nations, unskilled foreign workers are governed and controlled by restrictive rules and regulations. Asian nations receiving unskilled foreign workers have implemented policies making it difficult to access citizenship. In general, host countries in Asia set limiting and discouraging measures on unskilled foreign workers; thus, migrant women decide to return sooner or later based on their own internal reasons or encouragement from the external migration policy of the host country. Foreign workers can be viewed as a "hard to find" population in such receiving countries. In addition, there are restrictions on conducting interview surveys on foreign workers in receiving countries in Asia. Thus, it is easier for researchers to access returnees in their countries of origin. As such, this survey collected information from female returnees, such as on their reasons for migration and return and whether they succeeded or failed in attaining their goals. Consequently, this study can reach conclusions regarding the benefits and costs to developing countries of policies encouraging female unskilled labor migration.

Female Labor Force Participation under the Export-oriented Economic System

The institutionalization of foreign employment promotion measures commencing in the 1980s has led to the infiltration of migration into Sri Lankan society[1]. Under the impact of a neoliberal global economy, an international "migration-friendly" environment has been constructed in Sri Lanka. Social transformation within the country was evident after the market-oriented policy reforms initiated in 1977. The government commenced

[1] Specifically, the following measures were taken: 1) the establishment of diplomatic offices and embassies in countries in the Middle East, 2) consignment of foreign employment promotion services to the private sector, 3) legislation of the Act of Foreign Employment in 1980, 4) setting of a target of 100,000 employment opportunities in the Middle East, and 5) establishment of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment in 1985 (Kage, 2014: 157).

the promotion of an export-oriented economy, privatization of state companies, domestic and foreign investment, establishment of free trade zones, and promotion of free trade.

The export-oriented policy was promoted under the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA), and the apparel industry became a major leading industry handling the exports of world-famous brand items (Dheerasinghe, 2003: 34). In the apparel industry, 70–80% of workers are women (Arai, 2006: 35; Karunaratne and Abeysekara, 2013: 13), who are typically young and of rural origin (Hewamanne, 2010). The export-oriented policy provided opportunities for the labor participation of Sinhalese women. The business operators of this female-dominated industry conducted personnel management based on traditional gender roles to develop effective production systems and profit expansion. Female workers operated sewing machines to stitch bits of fabric together to produce ready-made clothes. However, female factory workers have limited opportunities for promotion and increases in pay compared to male workers. Furthermore, the values of South Asian societies dictate that fathers protect their unmarried daughters. After they are married, the role of protector devolves to the husband, and to the sons when women are in their old age. Thus, conditions of employment for women workers are based on the expectation that they are not the sole breadwinners (Kotikula and Solotaroff, 2006: 3–4; Hewamanne, 2010). In the case of export profits from the apparel industry in Sri Lanka, the local content ratio is quite small, as Sri Lanka needs to import intermediate goods such as materials and parts and capital goods such as machineries without setting an import tax. Therefore, the actual amount of foreign exchange from apparel exports is of a similar value as the labor income for Sri Lankan workers, irrespective of the trend for an increase in export value.

In Sri Lanka, the free trade policy resulted in an excess of imports over exports. Domestic products lost their own market when the country's traditional industries and agriculture were damaged after cheap and high-quality goods entered the country. Sri Lankan products, excepting traditional export items such as tea, could no longer compete in international markets. Consequently, the country was economically weakened compared to the situation from the late 1970s. The free trade policy encouraged the development of a female dominant industry, which caused a problem in terms of male youth unemployment. In these economic circumstances, while the export values of apparel products increased steadily, workers' wages remained low, especially for female

workers. Unemployment and rural poverty emerged among the male youth and distorted politics, contributing to the riots and armed conflict in the 1980s[2].

Tea is a traditional Sri Lankan export item and has been internationally competitive since the British colonial era (1802–1948). In those days, foreign companies and plantation owners developed an organized production system spanning planting, harvesting, processing, transporting, marketing, and export. However, the profits from tea production did not trickle down to the locals, because the investors were British or other Europeans and labor was provided by Tamil workers from India. Owners used their profits and invested only in this sector, while Tamil workers remitted to India. After independence (1948), the government placed the tea industry under state control, and distributed a plot of land for tea cultivation to the male heads of Sinhalese households. Since the British colonial era, tea plantations have employed both male and female Indian-Tamil workers at low wages. Since then, this sector has also been characterized by a strong gender division of labor. Only women pluck tea, while men are responsible for other physical work, machine operation, and watching and monitoring other workers (Kotikula and Solotaroff, 2006).

Most Sri Lankan export items are made by hand by female workers at a low cost. However, the labor participation rate of women is still low[3]. Sri Lankan women continued to work and support export industries during the conflict and riots. Moreover, women entered the international labor market to support their families.

The international migration business spread with the institutionalization of foreign employment in the 1980s under the export-oriented economic system. This is the main cause of the feminization of international labor migration. The underlying theory of the foreign employment business considers labor as a trade item. As such, the labor force became an export item and target of international markets for business. Foreign employment agencies emerged in various business fields, offering opportunities for

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[2] The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) was a conflict fought on the island of Sri Lanka between Sri Lankan military and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The JVP insurrection (1987–89) was the second armed revolt conducted by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna against the Sri Lankan government.

[3] Labor force participation rates in the first quarter of 2016: male 75.5%, female 36.3%. Economic active population by region: Sri Lanka (male 63.3%, female 36.7%), urban (male 66.3%, female 33.7%), rural (male 63.2%, female 36.8%), estate (male 55.8%, female 44.2%) (DCS, 2016).

foreign employment and dealing with contract-related procedures. These are rare skills and competencies, providing agencies with a strong power advantage vis-à-vis their clients. Most international migrant job seekers can only depend on their agency. This imbalance of skills and information between the parties creates the preconditions for the possible exploitation of job seekers by their agents. Furthermore, in the sphere of international relations, Sri Lanka does not have powerful diplomatic cards in economic terms. Therefore, the country has limited negotiating power in terms of protecting its citizens working abroad.

Consequently, Sri Lankan female migrant domestic workers are categorized in the lower strata of workers, as influenced by the nation and gender order as well as by the host countries' low job ranking for paid housework. According to the SLBFE annual reports, most complaints are from female migrant domestic workers, who accounted for half of all out-foreign employment workers from 1995 to 2007. In addition, remittances from countries in the Middle East where they work accounted for 50–60% of the total annual remittance inflows in Sri Lanka, where remittances constitute a share of 6–10% of the GDP and 50% of total export earnings. The labor export strategy is an important means of ensuring and maximizing foreign exchange earnings. However, wages for female domestic workers remain equivalent to the minimum wage in host countries.

Recognizing the risks of sending female domestic workers, the government raised the minimum age of women seeking employment as domestic workers to 21 years. In addition, they banned the migration of mothers with children aged less than five years. After the cessation of armed conflict in 2009, the government promoted male migration to ease the pressure of unemployment on former soldiers (Kage, 2016).

Profiles of Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Rural Villages

This study conducted a questionnaire and interview survey on female returnees in rural areas[4] (including some fishing villages) in H. prefecture in South Province from October 2008 to March 2009. For the purpose of analysis, this study extracted data on 500 returned domestic workers from countries in the Middle East. Participants were aged

[4] According to the Census Statistics 2012 (CBSL, 2016: 1), the resident population share by region is as follows: urban 18.2%, rural 77.4%, estate 4.4%.

from 21 to 66 years. Over 90% of the population in the research area was Sinhalese Buddhists[5], although some Muslims residing around the fishing ports and shopping town were included. The results of the sample survey were as follows.

Regarding the average income of female returnees' households, about 65% were below the public poverty line in H. prefecture[6]. In the research areas, job opportunities and sources of income were rice cultivation, coastal and offshore fishing, construction, transportation, carriage, shop owners, stall keepers, food processing, and so on. As seen in Table 1, the occupations of 80% of the primary income earners (father or husband) were farmers, daily wage laborers, and other self-employed jobs. The government classifies their occupations as self-employment[7]. Just 10% were engaged in the formal sector, worked for private companies, or were government employees. Surprisingly, 7% of female returnees responded that during their childhoods, their mothers were also migrant domestic workers in the Middle East.

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[5] According to the Census Statistics 2012 (CBSL, 2016: 1), the population share by ethnicity is as follows: Sinhalese 74.9%, Sri Lankan Tamils 11.2%, Indian Tamils 4.1%, Moors (Muslims) 9.3%, others 0.5%. The population share by religion is Buddhist 70.1%, Hindi 12.6%, Islam 9.7%, Protestant and Catholic 7.6%, and others 0.0%.

[6] Percentage derived from applicable households in terms of their average monthly expenses in 2006/07 using the standard values of expenses of the official poverty line in H. prefecture.

[7] According to the Central Bank (CBSL, 2015: Table 53), the employment situation in the fourth quarter of 2014 was as follows in terms of occupations: Government 5.3%, private 41.9%, manager 2.3%, self-employment 31.8%, and unpaid family worker 8.6%. Our research area indicates a higher share of self-employment than the average for Sri Lanka.

Table 1 Employment and social status of returnees' households in rural villages (rate of response %)

	Female returnees	Husband	Father*	Mother*
Farmer	1.4	26.6	42.2	24.0
Wage laborer	3.0	22.6	31.2	25.6
Other self-employed	12.0	30.4	17.2	5.8
Private sector	4.4	5.0	2.2	1.0
Public sector	1.0	6.6	4.4	1.2
International migrant	0.4	1.8	0.0	7.0
Housewife	75.8	0.0	0.0	33.6
Unemployed	0.6	1.4	0.2	0.0
Retired	1.4	1.8	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Kage (2014: 154).

Note: The employment and social status of their fathers and mothers were during the female returnees' childhoods.

The number of years of female returnees' average schooling was 8.1 years[8] (see Table 2). No female returnee had attained education at the tertiary level. In addition, the percentage of female returnees who were illiterate and elementary school dropouts increased with age. At the time of the survey, 75.8% of female returnees responded that they were housewives. The other female returnees worked as sewing machine operators in apparel factories in the free trade zone as daily wage laborers or small-scale storeowners.

[8] Compulsory education in Sri Lanka is for children aged from 5 to 14 years for 10 years (Liyanage, 2014: 117). According to a hearing survey in H. prefecture in 2008/09, 4.2% of female returnees had never studied.

Table 2 Education attainment of female migrant domestic workers in rural villages by age group

	All age groups	By age group				total
		20s	30s	40s	50–66	
Not educated (%)	4.2	0.0	14.3	47.6	38.1	100.0
Grades 1–4 (%)	8.4	0.0	16.7	42.9	40.5	100.0
Grades 5–10 (%)	53.2	9.8	28.2	37.6	24.4	100.0
O/L passed (%)	28.0	15.0	37.1	27.1	20.7	100.0
A/L passed (%)	6.2	9.7	29.0	35.5	25.8	100.0
Total schooling (years)	*8.1*	*10.2*	*8.8*	*7.5*	*8.1*	-

Source: Kage (2014: 152).

Note: O/L refers to General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level, and A/L to the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level.

Regarding their migration experiences, the first female domestic worker in this study first headed to the Middle East from the surveyed areas in 1980. On average, they had 2.1 migration experiences: 36% migrated once, while 64% migrated more than twice. The average duration of stay abroad was four years. Of the female returnees, 47% stayed abroad for 4–10 years, and 30% stayed for more than 10 years. The major destinations for domestic workers were Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. About 70% of the women left their husbands and children at home when they migrated the first time, while 17.8% responded that they were single at the time of the first migration. The single migrant women remitted money for the education of younger brothers and sisters and to support parents. In addition, 7.6% of the women indicated that they had migrated for the first time after being widowed or divorced.

Reasons for and Consequences of Migration

Based on the survey, we identified economic problems as the main reason for female migration. Table 3 provides the reasons for migration. The purpose of building a house was the most frequent response. Sri Lankan traditional housing is constructed

from natural materials such as fermented mud mixed with cow dung and palm leaves for the roof. Traditional and semi-permanent houses are fragile in heavy rain and a symbol of rural poverty. Building a house with durable and artificial materials such as brick, tiles, and cement demonstrates an improvement in social status. In the survey, 30% of the women responded that they first migrated because they wanted to build a house. This response rate increased when they re-migrated. However, in reality in Sri Lanka, only 2.5% of the women could confirm that their remittances were used by their families at home to construct a house (see Table 4). About 70% noted that their families had used remittances to purchase items for daily living consumption. This tendency increased during the second migration. For the second migration, few women indicated that their reasons for going were to save money to establish a business or in general. As the number of female migrations increased, we found that husbands tended to become dependent on the remittances of their wives. At the time of the survey, 26% of the women lived in a completed house, while 65% had already started living in a house under construction. To successfully construct a house through remittances, the assistance of the in-situ family is essential, especially the cooperation and support of the husband. It was mentioned in the survey that if the husband is a carpenter, the house could be constructed on a smaller budget and in a shorter timeframe. Remittances were used to purchase objects for the bathroom and kitchen, as well as taps, furniture, fans, audio sets, televisions, and washing machines. Upon their return, the women tended to bring home electrical appliances for the house and liquor for their husbands from the airport's duty free shop. Table 5 shows that the condition of female returnees' roofs at their houses is on par with H. prefecture and better than the Sri Lankan average. In December 2004, wide areas of the coastal regions in H. prefecture were affected by the tsunami disaster, during which time domestic and international aid agencies provided housing to the victims. In female returnees' households, the level of ownership of home electrical appliances exceeded the average in Sri Lanka.

Table 3 provides the undocumented reasons for migration, for example, divorce or separation, maintaining living standards, introduction to migration by a mother or sisters, and escape from the JVP uprising. When we examine the relationship between the reasons for the first migration and frequency thereof, women migrated twice on average for the following reasons: to construct a house, medical costs, influenced by friends and

their own curiosity, and introduction from mother and sisters. The women aiming to construct a bathroom and kitchen migrated once on average. However, women who aimed to maintain their living conditions or invest in a business during the first migration migrated four to five times on average. In addition, those wanting to support their families, or were divorced or separated from their husbands, or wanted to provide for the education of their children during the first migration tended to migrate two and a half to three times on average.

There were many similar stories regarding the decision-making process for female migrants: women mostly migrated because they wanted to support and cover the education expenses of their children. At the time of the first migration decision, mothers noted that they did not have enough milk for their babies or enough food and clothing for their growing children. Furthermore, some mothers first decided to migrate to protect themselves and their children from alcoholic and abusive husbands and escape poverty. These were the major reasons for female migration. In many cases, the remittances of female domestic workers were used for daily consumption, the education of a child and/or a younger brother and sister, and debt repayment. In this sense, we conclude that international labor migration is an effective strategy to directly reduce poverty. However, the interviews determined that the social costs fell on the family left behind at home. In total, 85.9% of female returnees who left their children behind reported that their child's study performance and attendance at school worsened after their migration (Kage, 2014: 226). They noted that migrants' children had difficulty concentrating on their studies, because of loneliness and other negative emotions due to the lack of a parent; falling into bad company; the increased burden of domestic work and caring for younger brothers and sisters; wasting remittance money on purchasing clothes, accessories, and cosmetics; or becoming a victim of sexual abuse. In this survey, we noticed many negative impacts on children's healthy development among migrant families.

Table 3 Reasons for migration (Response rate %)

	1st Migration	2nd Migration
Constructing a house	30.8	51.7
No income	28.0	10.1
Difficult economic situation	8.5	6.4
Education for children	7.4	15.2
Debt repayment	6.2	1.7
Bereavement or divorce from husband	5.0	2.4
Friends' influence and own curiosity	3.6	1.0
To save money	2.6	5.4
To purchase land	2.4	1.4
No job	2.0	0.3
Many children to support	1.4	0.7
Medical costs	1.2	0.3
Business investment	0.4	0.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Kage (2014: 159).

Table 4 Uses of remittances (Response rate %)

	1st Migration	2nd Migration
Daily consumption	69.0	82.6
Savings	29.0	36.0
Debt repayment	3.5	-
House building / reform	2.5	1.1
Education and child support	2.3	1.7
Purchasing land, durable goods	0.7	-
Medical costs	0.5	1.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Kage (2014: 245).

Table 5 Comparison of average living and housing conditions: female returnees' households, H. prefecture, and Sri Lanka (non Distribution rate %)

	No permanent roof (Palm leaves, etc.)	No toilet facilities	No home electrical appliances
Female returnees' households (2008/09)	4.8	5.2	13.6
H prefecture (2009/10)	4.6	1.8	29.3
Sri Lanka (2009/10)	14.0	2.5	33.1

Source: Female returnees' households, Kage (2014: 179); Sri Lanka and H. prefecture, DCS (2011).

Reasons for return

Table 6 shows the relationship between the reasons for return and frequency of migration. The item "expiration of employment contract period" means that returnees had not encountered serious problems while working abroad and returned after their employment contract expired. The item "expiration of residential period (change of workplace)" means that returnees could work until the date of return, but changed workplaces, because the first employer claimed to have changed the new worker to an agency in the host country. There was a more than 50% probability that female domestic workers worked in the Middle East until their contract expiry date and returned without serious problems, and around a 10% possibility that the family at home asked the migrant worker to return. Many family problems were reported, indicating that wives and/or mothers working abroad can seriously affect the family at home. For example, the effects of wives' migration include husbands' having extramarital affairs, husbands becoming alcoholics, illness, forcing kids to play the role of a wife, and domestic violence or murder. Most husbands expected their wives to play the role of caregiver to them and the children. However, when these caregivers were lost, the family tended to encounter problems. Migration by mothers seriously affects the children, as indicated by the many sad stories regarding those left behind. These children tend to be more rebellious, play truant more often, perform acts of wrongdoing, and drop out of school. Furthermore,

daughters elope, and some children become ill and depressed. Often, these family matters are the reasons for return. In addition, other family matters reported included death of a family member, loss of a child's caretaker, the 2004 tsunami disaster, or the murder of a family member. However, as mentioned, the most common reason female migrants returned was problems arising from their children.

Table 6 Reasons for termination of employment contract and return (Response rate %)

	1st (n= 498)	2nd (n= 318)	3rd (n= 145)	4th (n=40)	5th (n=13)	6th (n=4)
Expiration of employment contract period	53.4	50.0	53.1	57.5	38.4	50.0
Expiration of residential period (change of workplace)	5.8	8.3	11.0	5.0	7.7	-
Family in Sri Lanka	9.2	12.1	10.3	10.0	-	25.0
Problems at the workplace	25.6	23.2	21.3	22.5	53.9	25.0
Overwork/Too much work	*4.8*	*3.8*	*4.1*	*5.0*	*15.4*	-
No wage/deduction	*4.8*	*4.8*	*3.4*	*7.5*	*15..4*	-
Illness/accidents	*4.0*	*4.8*	*4.8*	*2.5*	*7.7*	-
Claims from employer	*4.0*	*1.9*	*2.1*	*2.5*	-	*25.0*
Abuse/disrespect	*3.6*	*4.4*	*2.8*	*2.5*	*7.7*	-
Sexual harassment	*3.2*	*2.2*	-	-	*7.7*	-
Bad relationship with employer	*1.2*	*1.3*	*4.1*	*2.5*	-	-
War (Gulf War, conflict, etc.)	5.0	2.5	2.8	2.5	-	-
Others	1.0	3.9	1.5	2.5	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Data is from the questionnaire and interview conducted in H. prefecture (2008–2009). n is the number of effective responses.

Note: “Expiration of residential period (change of workplace)” means that the woman changed workplaces and worked for the duration of stay, because the first employer replaced her at the agency. There were some cases of deportation and repatriation after women faced “problems at the workplace.”

Furthermore, the rate of occurrence of problems at the workplace causing their return was over 21%. Table 7 shows female migrant domestic workers' working conditions in the Middle East. All women who returned reported that their employers assigned work tasks depending on their demands. Most of the women who returned mentioned that they did not have any days off during the week, and around 10% responded that they did not have a private room to sleep in, but had to sleep in the kitchen or living room. Almost 20% said that they were always hungry, because their employers did not provide enough meals, providing only instant noodles or roti such as flour as staple foods. The Sinhalese eat rice as a staple food, so they do not manage well without rice. Problems regarding sustenance is a serious issue for workers.

Table 7 Experience of working abroad: working conditions (rate of respondent %)

Question	Conditions	Response rate
Work task	Employer's demand	100%
Breaks during working	Yes, I had	35%
	No break	65%
A day off in the week	Yes, I had	7%
	No day off	93%
Sleeping arrangements	Private room	80%
	Kid's room	8%
	Aged, patient room	1%
	Kitchen, living room, no room	11%
Leisure time a day	1–4 hours	23%
	5–8 hours	64%
	9 hours or more	13%
Meals	Yes, I had enough	82%
	Not enough	18%

Source: Kage (2014).

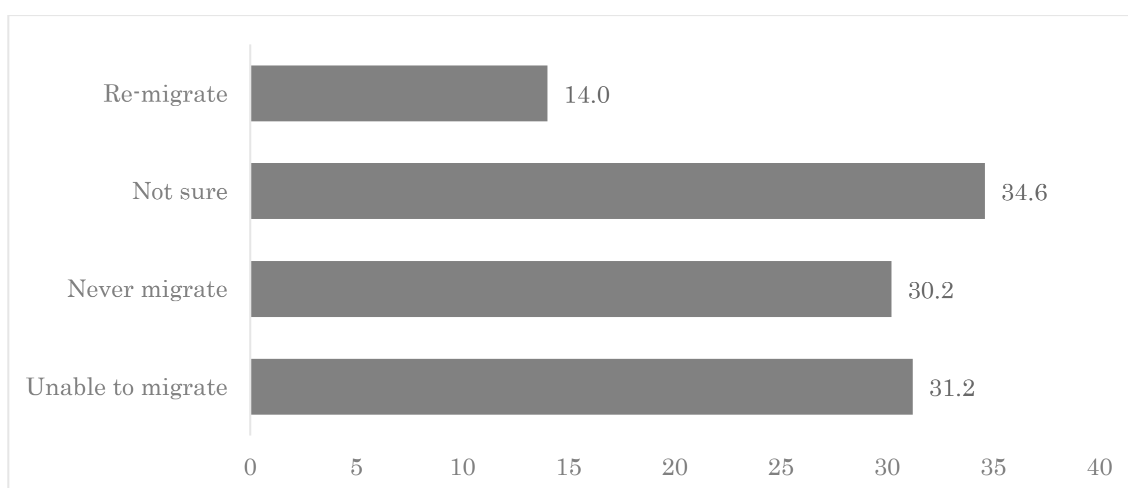
We conclude that sending female domestic workers abroad is risky for the migrants and their families, because 50% of returnees responded that they returned in the middle

of their work contracts. As such, the hypothesis that the probability of success is higher for well experienced migrant domestic workers should be rejected in the case of unskilled female migration.

Changing Attitudes towards Work

Based on the survey findings, migration can be risky for unskilled women. At the time of this research, which was conducted between 2008 and 2009, some female returnees recognized the high risk of migration and negative impacts on their husbands and children. However, most belong to the group of poverty households in Sri Lanka. When considering their poor living conditions, unemployment, and their children's education expenses, foreign employment as domestic workers in the Middle East remained a means of escaping the problems at home. This survey also questioned the possibility of re-migration. Female returnees responded that they would re-migrate (14.0%), were not sure (34.6%), would never migrate (30.2%), or were unable to migrate because of age and illness (31.2%) (see Figure 1). The younger generation tended to indicate that they would re-migrate, while the older generation responded that they would never migrate. Many of their children did not want their mothers to migrate abroad as domestic workers.

Figure 1 Willingness to re-migrate as a domestic worker to the Middle East in 2008/09 (rate of response %)



Source: Kage (2014: 163).

After the conflict ended in May 2009, the economic and social situation of Sri Lanka has drastically changed. The Sri Lankan government accepted China's development scheme in 2006, and began constructing infrastructure such as the international port, international airport, international cricket ground, and roads in the broader areas of H. prefecture. In association with these changes, the number of guesthouses and small-scale hotels, shops and retailers, cars and machinery maintenance and repair shops, and home electronics shops increased in the city center of H prefecture. The distribution rate of car owners also increased, such that traffic jams were generated on main roads during peak times. Moreover, the opportunities for employment and income generation increased, as did the wage rates in H. prefecture.

In 2011, the government implemented compulsory measures to set the minimum age for female migrants at 21 years, and banned the migration of mothers with children aged less than five years. I conducted a follow-up interview survey in H. prefecture and other parts of Sri Lanka in 2014 and 2016. The follow-up survey identified some changes in the perspectives and willingness of female migrants and their families. During the conflict era, young women in rural areas tended to view working as machine operators in the apparel industry in the free trade zone as a good employment model. However, after the conflict ended, the new generation of young women tends to not want to work in a factory; rather, they prefer to be fashionable shopkeepers in stylish shops in the city center. It seems that the young generation does not want to go on a life like their mothers' working abroad as domestic workers. Therefore, they do not choose to migrate as domestic workers, as long as Sri Lanka remains at peace and continues its economic development.

Concluding Remarks

Even as changes in the social and economic structure and opportunities for women's social advancement increases, Sri Lankan women live within the strong gender values of South Asia. In the export industry sector such as the tea industry, apparel industry, and international migration, the female labor force has contributed to the economy of Sri Lanka and provided care services in international markets, because they accept low wages and generally work hard. This study focused on female migrant domestic workers, and considered social and economic perspectives after the neoliberal open market regime.

This study examined the causes and consequences of international labor migration, finding changes in the perspectives and willingness to consider foreign employment as domestic workers alongside social and economic changes at home and in the destination country. When the political situation of the country stabilizes and the country develops, the push factor reduces the forces causing migration. The follow-up survey also found that Sri Lanka has begun receiving foreign labor. Today in Sri Lanka, this phenomenon is evident in the construction sector, factories in the apparel and electronics industries, and tea estates, and consequently, labor shortage issues have emerged. It is claimed that some Sri Lankan business managers have started employing foreign workers or seasonal migrants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Kage, personal communication, Prof. O. G. Dayaratna Banda, University of Peradeniya, August, 2016). However, the labor participation rate of Sri Lankan women has not yet reached 40%. In my view, Sri Lankan women still bear a large share of the burden associated with housekeeping in the family. Even though women may be engaged in professional jobs, they are also expected to play the role of a good wife, mother, and daughter. In this time of change in the industrial structure from agriculture to the service industry, women have been an important source of labor in society, and are expected to play a key role in producing the next generation. Thus, contemporary women in Sri Lanka seem to be tied to gender values requiring them to take concurrent responsibility for double roles—workers and mothers—in their lives.

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"Self-employed Workers" in the Age of Neoliberalism
Women and Men Street Vendors in Kathmandu

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I. Introduction

For decades, starting with the much-cited Hart (1973), "street vendors" have been at the heart of the debate on "informal sectors/economies." We can safely assume that this occupational group has somehow been deemed to be a quintessential figure in informal economies themselves.

However, the image emerging out of that bountiful accumulation of arguments is in fact far from clear. Street vendors, now ubiquitous and integral to the landscapes of almost every city and town worldwide, elude any neat description or evaluation; Are they the epitome of proliferating urban poor just trying to earn a living by any means? Or are they shrewd small entrepreneurs who are quick to exploit lucrative opportunities? Are they improving their lot or are they stuck at an economic impasse? What are the overall effects of their activities? Are they providing an essential service to the public or are they making urban lives more difficult? Are their activities contributing to "economic growth," or are they detrimental to it? And how should we view them, after all—in positive terms or negative ones (cf. Bromley 2000)?

Different characterizations or evaluations might apply to different cases, but the extensive variance in views on street vendors shows that their image is in deep flux and thus hard to fix (presumably in any place or case).

Broadening the view to encompass the larger field of informal economies, arguments surrounding the theme have also been unsettled, perhaps because, even before "informal-ness" has been clarified and diagnosed, new waves of "informalization" are seemingly underway in the current age of neoliberalism (cf. Mies 1986[2014]; Standing 2014). Instead of "informal work" being gradually replaced by formal employment, formal employment has been at least partially replaced by informal/casual employment, or even by a chain of contracts, where the concept of "employment" is abandoned altogether. Thus, more and more working people are left unemployed and have no other choice but to become "self-employed." This fate is not only befalling lower-end working people, but also workers from all walks of life, including the so-called "creative class." Those in relatively

favorable positions may still be *formally* in formal employment, but their working conditions may not be very different from those of people who create their jobs for themselves. It is as if nobody can afford to work as required by their employers anymore; they have to be "creative" and act as if they are employers themselves.

At present, there is an upsurge in "informality," even though we do not know what it is. Obviously, it is not something that is just subsistent, pre-modern, or pre-capitalist; it is something we need to grasp in relation to the ongoing mainstream capitalist economy. Instead of being expelled by the drive of capitalization, it rather appears somehow symbiotic, collateral, or complementary to the system. Or, it could be another kind of capitalism itself, even possibly an alternative to its present form.

The present paper will not try to tackle the above queries on informal economies head on, but will treat their primary players, street vendors, in the hope that we get to understand more of them and informal economies through the endeavor. We explore those queries on street vendors through the reality of the streets of contemporary Kathmandu, Nepal, putting female vendors at the center of our focus[1]. Here the scope of the study is reframed as "self-employed (N. *swarojgar*) business workers (N. *byapar sramik*)," in accordance with the way that many street-vending women and men in Nepal[2] currently identify and organize themselves as an occupational group[3]. This is the label employed by the trade union that organizes street vendors in Nepal[4]. The union incorporates not only street vendors, but also some small business owners (retailers in [semi-] fixed establishments), though the fact remains that the majority of its members consist of those trading on the street[5]. Why they would identify themselves in this way is actually an important part of this study; we will get to see the importance of this question as the arguments proceed and get to the question itself toward the end of the paper.

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[1] The research on which this study is mainly based was originally planned and executed as part of a larger research project on the works and lives of women in Nepal. The project is centered on fieldwork in Kathmandu carried out on and off since the late 00s, including semi-structured interviews with women from various classes/ occupational backgrounds conducted from late 2011 through early 2012. The 52 female street vendors who were subjected to the semi-structured interviews were one of the focused occupational groups for the study.

[2] A notable feature of the "self-employed workers"/ street vendors in Kathmandu in terms of gender is the approximately even composition of men and women. Street vending in contemporary Kathmandu can be regarded as work that is mostly without conspicuous gender segregation or gender-specific features linked to the work *in itself*. Gender as a theme has received more specific attention in the scholarship on street vending, because the occupation is frequently populated by a disproportionate number of women in many parts of the world (cf. Hansen et al. 2013).

[3] Henceforth its slightly abbreviated form (the "self-employed" or "self-employed workers") will be used in the paper.

[4] Established in 2003 as *Nepal Sadak Vyapar Sramik Sangh* (N. Its English name is *Nepal Street Vendors Union*), whose name was changed into *Nepal Swarojgar Vyapar Sramik Sangh* five years later (literally translated as "Nepal Self-employed Business Workers Union." They have not changed their English name including "street vendors," to this day). The union is an affiliate of *StreetNet International* from Nepal, a networking body for organizations of street vendors worldwide.

[5] Though in its leadership, small business owners in [semi-] fixed establishments tend to be disproportionately represented.

II. "Self-employed work" in Kathmandu

1. The work

A central feature of the work is that it is pursued (mainly) "on the street." They are people who trade, if not literally on the street, in those places somehow *like a street* in that they are nobody's private property but belong to the public.

"Self-employed workers" can be differentiated by the type of place they use for the trade. The majority literally occupy a piece of land on the street regularly but temporarily. They bring, lay out, and trade their goods (or services) on the street, and then take them back to their home or rented storeroom nearby at the end of the day. There are also those in small numbers who sell their goods by peddling on the street.

Still others engage in business at makeshift stalls in hawker centers, scattered here and there in bazaar districts across the city, set up on public land. While they can be required to evacuate at any time if any policy change sets in, the environment for the business there is worlds apart from that on the street in terms of stability and comfort. Some centers/stalls even have shutters that enable stall-keepers to store their goods after they call it a day. Otherwise, they move their goods back and forth just as those trading on the street do.

A tiny minority of "self-employed" workers actually ply their trade at rented fixed establishments, thus they do not count as "street vendors" in any meaning of the word. Those who get involved with "self-employed workers" are only a fraction among the fellow off-street retailers. Those involved in the organization usually have some connections with "the street," either currently (they may trade on the street as well as running a regular shop) or in the past (they may have started up as a street vendor).

What is being sold on the street by "self-employed workers"? The answer is *just about anything that can be carried on a person's back*[6]. That includes food and drink (a variety of snacks or beverages pre-packed or prepared on the spot, fresh vegetables and fruits, etc.), apparel (from underwear to jeans to jackets), media products (newspapers/books/DVDs, etc.), and other miscellaneous goods for everyday use (from ear picks to stuffed bears to smartphone chargers), as well as services ranging from shoeshine to fortune telling.

When do they engage in the trade? The answer is, it depends on where they trade, who they are, or

[6] Merchandise that is very costly, if easily carried (such as jewelry or high-end smartphones), is an exception, for obvious reasons.

how much they aspire to earn. On the street, the norm is that you trade when you have customers. While the prime time is in the evenings from around 5:00 through 7–8:00 (except for groceries), vendors generally try to stay in business throughout the day, 7 days a week, if nobody (municipal authorities or police) disturbs them. Recently, more and more areas with a concentration of vendors have been designated as off-limits in the daytime; in those areas, vendors have no choice but to trade in the evenings only[7]. In hawker centers or other fixed establishments, businesses are generally open throughout the day.

While many vendors say that they try to stay in business as long as they can (longer working hours are one positive way to make sure you catch more customers), prolonged observation shows that their working hours/days are quite flexible. Some female vendors find the limited working hours rather convenient for them to coordinate their domestic burdens with their work, but both women and men can be observed taking time/day off when necessary. Consequently, while working routines are overall patterned around business prospects and municipal regulations, their details turn out to be determined by the more minute circumstances that individual workers want to accommodate.

The work, as with all other work, is carried out not only by the workers themselves, but also by other stakeholders. Apart from indirect stakeholders such as pedestrians, nearby business owners or residents, customers are one of the main stakeholders on whom these workers depend, and wholesalers are the other. They also need space where they can lay out and sell their goods or services (if they do not peddle), thus the "landlord" who owns, administers, or controls the space (municipal or law enforcement authorities, for the street) emerge here as the third and definitive stakeholders. The authorities' intervention in the use of public space currently appears to be the most imminent issue for these people to tackle. That will lead us to the next and final point of this section.

What kind of problems or difficulties do they face in this trade? Working on the street, basically without any protection from the heat, cold, wind, and rain, is quite tough anywhere. In contemporary Kathmandu, where the level of air pollution is increasing and infrastructure available in public spaces (such as public toilets or clean running water) is insufficient, it is all the more challenging just to sit on the street.

However, the most urgent problem that all street vendors, by far the majority of the "self-employed," would mention first and foremost is the securement of a space for their trade[8]. Long-timers invariably

[7] A protest against these municipal decisions was staged for months by the union of self-employed workers in 2014; this action bore no fruit for the street vendors.

[8] Actually, this is arguably the most urgent problem faced by street vendors worldwide, though concrete circumstances or

talk of the days when they had to run away carrying their goods if they saw municipal officials coming down the road[9]. Officials would try to chase them away and confiscate their goods, and as a rule were extremely rude to them, not only verbally but also physically. Their actions made vendors’ working environment extremely precarious and their work very difficult in those days, as they recount.

After vendors became organized, they successfully won some concessions from the municipal body: the random chasing away or confiscation of goods generally ceased and harassment against vendors mostly stopped. That does not mean the problem itself was solved; the discontinuation of random interventions by authorities was won by striking deals with them that would limit the time (and place) of trade in central shopping areas. Given that shorter working hours (and smaller or unsuitable areas for trade) can directly affect vendors’ business prospects, the union has naturally been making efforts to turn the deals to their favor, though so far their efforts have borne no fruit[10].

The bulk of the above-mentioned problems are not shared (or shared only to far lesser degrees) with those “self-employed” who operate with a roof over their heads (in hawker centers or fixed establishments). As a matter of fact, they have already solved these problems for the most part, if not for good[11]. If so, a fundamental question arises here: why are these off-street retailers participating in the community of street vendors in the first place? To rephrase the question: why would “proper” street vendors incorporate off-street retailers into their organization? We will get back to this question later.

2. The people

Having looked at the work itself, let us now turn to the background of the people who engage in this trade, mainly (but not solely) looking at data from semi-structured interviews with female street vendors.

To street-vend or become “self-employed,” no particular age range seems to be required. Men and women of all ages are found in this trade[12]. In terms of marital status, all female interviewees turned

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environments and thus concrete issues differ from place to place. For a detailed account of a case from Mumbai, see Anjaria (2014: Chaps. 3 & 4).

[9] A female vendor talked of the misery she faced in her endeavor to run away from an official, not knowing which to grab—her merchandise or her baby, whom she had to bring to her “workplace” with her.

[10] Instead of making working hours or places for street vendors longer or favorable, the municipality is even trying to designate some main districts “street-vending free,” and move vendors into a newly planned hawker center on the outskirts of the city. The union has been fiercely opposing this proposition, saying that the proposed space is too meager in its potential to attract customers and not large enough to accommodate all the vendors operating in the districts.

[11] Disputes with “landlords,” public bodies or others, are always possible in theory.

[12] Among the 52 interviewees, ranging from 23 up to 77, the average age was 38.8.

out to be married[13], a fact explained by another shared characteristic: their birthplace. Out of 52 women, 49 were from a rural area outside of Kathmandu Valley[14]. The general tendency of rural-born (and under-educated) women in Nepal to get married at a relatively young age underlies their uniform marital status. Speaking of their male counterparts, they were also from rural Nepal and married to the best of my knowledge, though some younger vendors were still single[15].

Like many other rural-born women in Nepal, the level of the interviewees' educational achievements was not high overall, although it was quite varied, ranging from "non-literate" to college-level education. Under 40% studied through middle school, and only around 15% acquired SLC (school leaving certificate). One can see that their educational level restricted their job choice; for many, formal employment is out of reach[16]. However, one should also note here that the level appeared relatively high in this occupation compared with other informal jobs, such as construction or domestic work (Sato 2011; 2013). The educational achievements of male street vendors were not so impressive either, though the overall level was presumably a bit higher than their female counterparts.

Coming from outside of Kathmandu, most of them live in rented room(s)[17]. Only a handful owned a house[18]. The state of things was not different for male vendors either[19].

Turning to years of experience in this line of work, this particular dataset on women showed an average of 13 years (ranging from less than a year up to 30 years). We can safely assume that long-time street vendors are no exception, even considering that the sample was perhaps disproportionately slanted toward long-timers because of the method of sampling used (they were approached mainly through their connection with union officials)[20].

We should bear in mind that there *was* a group of vendors that was disproportionately *under*-represented among the interviewees: those who engage in the trade rather casually, on and off. They get into the trade when the business environment appears favorable and get out of it if things go wrong;

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13 A total of 8 out of 52 women had been separated from her husband, by his death or otherwise.

14 Those three women born within the valley were also from rural (or only marginally and recently urbanized) areas.

15 The rural background of these people mean they generally do not get to vote in Kathmandu electorates. Their "denizen" status could limit their means to effect political leverage as an occupational group (cf. Chatterjee 2004).

16 You could have a chance for formal employment (at least) if you have a SLC in hand, but only if you have the right connections.

17 One or two rooms for the family (with a shared bathroom) seems to be the norm, but occasionally you find a family occupying a flat on their own.

18 Three respondents reported that they came to own a house in Kathmandu. By March 2016, I heard at least another three women from among the interviewees had acquired or were in the process of acquiring their own house in the city.

19 There is one male vendor who has reportedly made quite a fortune from this trade and came to own more than one house in the city (and is still in the on-street trade).

20 Rover (2014) found a similar picture for street vendors in other countries.

thus, they are most likely not interested in occupational organization and dare not have any substantial contacts with it. Street vending is, for such people, no more than a way to make (extra) money; they have (or cannot afford *not to have*) other options for living. Among them are those who are actually not too badly off and can afford to live without engaging in this trade; they get into it only if it seems lucrative. Others are those who are so badly off that they cannot afford to stick to it if the business deteriorates slightly—they have no choice but to turn quickly to other ways (usually paying even less than street vending when it runs well, such as domestic work, home-based work, etc.) to make ends meet.

Supposing that these particular interviewees were relatively well-established street vendors, the almost uniform way they talked about how they got started is quite impressive; what they said in brief is that they started this because it looked easy. Their universal "starting-up" story goes like this: they got to know something about the trade through communication with their relatives, friends, acquaintances, or just through their experience shopping on the street; they calculated it would be easy for them to do, so they started it. All of them realized its difficulties later on and some changed the site used for trade or switched their type of merchandise afterwards, but they have stayed in the business all the same. These stories show that even seemingly incidental decision making can lead to long-lasting occupational lives.

This leads to the question: what had they been doing before starting this job? In their village they invariably engaged in farm work, while after moving to the city they either engaged in other informal work (carpet weaving, domestic work, construction work, sewing, etc.) first and then switched to this job or started the trade directly.

Earnings from this trade are hard to estimate (not only for the researcher, but more often than not for the vendors themselves—generally one does not see vendors keep any account book on the spot; and they may not do that anywhere else, either), so is the exact extent of their contributions to their households' livelihood unless they are the sole breadwinners. In many cases, however, it can be safely inferred that their contributions are indispensable. When asked how much they make via this trade, many simply answered that they can manage to meet the basic needs of their family ("enough to eat and dress [N. *khana launa pugi rahecha*]")[21]. If asked what they spend their earnings on, they mentioned essential household expenses such as food, cooking gas, rent, children's school tuition, etc.

What are the other economically active members of these households (e.g., the husband and

[21] Many would add to that, saying "but unable to save for the future."

possibly grown-up children—especially sons) doing then? In 20 cases (out of which 18 were the respondents' husbands), the vendor's family member(s) were also engaged in this trade (either jointly or separately). In 14 cases (out of which 10 were the respondents' husbands), her family member(s) were staying abroad to work, mostly in Malaysia or the Middle East (plus two in Korea). Most other husbands were engaged in some other informal work if not between jobs. Those with formal employment (police officers, teachers, etc.) were found to make up a small minority among these families.

3. The experience

How do these people experience street vending, then? How do they evaluate it, and what are their prospects?

Asked if they were satisfied with the job, most respondents answered in positive or somewhat positive terms (nearly 90% answered either "yes" or "so-so"). Asked if they would continue to pursue this trade in the future, their answers were an overwhelming "yes" (49 out of 52). Do they evaluate their work positively, then? How can we comprehend their evaluation or experience of the work?

As we listened to their stories, it soon became apparent that their expressed positive prospects should be taken tentatively. Many did make it clear right after their answers that the prospects *are* conditional; they said they would stay in the trade on the condition that the environment allows them to do so. Actually, many of them anticipated that the conditions would not remain good in the future. The condition they considered crucial is the attitude of the authorities toward the use of public spaces/streets. Many feared that the authorities may stop letting them use the street, if not altogether then at least on the scale they do at the moment. It is only reasonable to suppose that this negative anticipation toward the future may well erode their commitment to the trade. This concern was widely shared, irrespective of vendors' gender.

The evaluations of various aspects of the trade were also mixed for many. The positive traits mentioned almost inevitably entailed negative ones on the other side. Positive factors included, firstly, the lack of physical toil (of an acute kind, anyway)[22], although many did not fail to mention that sitting outside, constantly exposed to emissions, can lead to health problems in the long run.

Secondly, many of them expressed some satisfaction in being able to make a living and educate the

[22] Some would mention moving the goods back and forth to the site for business as a difficulty they face in their work. They would hire porters for the task if they could afford it/were willing to pay.

next generation using what they earn from the business, although the objectively realized standard of living may vary greatly. Certainly, long-timers occasionally bemoaned the fact that they are still on the street after all these years, not being able to establish their business on firmer ground by, say, renting a fixed stall. Nonetheless, they knew that they cannot afford to remain dissatisfied with the job, much less quit, unless they find better ways to earn. Thus, they would say they are (sort-of) satisfied and will stay on as long as possible.

Thirdly, the work was generally evaluated highly in that it is "of one's own (N. *aphno*)"; that is, free from direct supervision or control by powerful others (employers, management). As already mentioned, a number of the vendors have engaged in other informal work such as carpet weaving, domestic work, etc. They said they would not go back to such jobs as they are lacking in freedom and coercive in nature: "If the job is of one's own, you can afford to get sick, at least." They also mentioned the meager amount of money they would earn compared to their earnings from street vending: "You can get nowhere by doing the job for others."

Of course, running one's own business means that they are also *free* of all the protections or security that being employed would entail[23]. At the same time, they are far from completely free from the interventions of powerful others, the most notable being the municipal or law enforcement authorities; they could not coerce vendors into work but could prevent them from pursuing their work by forcing them to evacuate the space.

Fourthly, many of the vendors, especially those intimately involved in union activities, pointed out that their occupational self/social esteem has been dramatically boosted ever since the union made way for their organization. Before that, they said they were ashamed of their own work; running a business under the open sky was deemed not respectable in general, even in their own mind. Not respecting their trade themselves, they generally would try not to associate with their fellow workers, either. Customers, authorities, pedestrians, or nearby residents acted against them accordingly and vendors could do nothing but accept others' behaviors silently. With the organizing drive in this field, as well as the general trend of democratization in Nepal, the situation changed, as they recounted.

Now they state they are not ashamed to say that they do business on the street; they are now aware that they are doing nothing wrong; it is their right to work and earn their living and it must be respected. They mingle and support each other, gather for the programs or events of the union, and act collectively

[23] As all the wage jobs that these respondents had engaged in were informal, none of them had ever enjoyed any of the protection or security that *formal* employment entails.

if necessary. Other stakeholders as a rule came to behave themselves around street vendors, too. Among others, the authorities who had chased them away ceased to do so and do not disturb them anymore, now that a deal was struck with the vendors' organization.

However, did their low self-esteem really go away? Eliminating negativity appears to be actually quite difficult. The difficulty derives partly from the fact that their newly acquired self-esteem is resting on a rather acrobatic and even paradoxical affirmation of one's way of being. The affirmation goes: "We are entitled to pursue our work to live, but we are poor people who cannot rent the essential means of production, so occupying the street for the business is justified." Their claim on the street and its legitimacy rest on their acceptance of their unfavorable situation that they *are* poor, while many of them are actually striving to leave the situation behind through their day-to-day struggles.

On the other hand, some vendors, if a minority, are said to have amassed enough to get off the street, achieving the status of middle-class in terms of monetary condition, but continue the street business. In this sort of case, while the vendor rose out of poverty and should be proud of that, his/her claim on the street is not rightfully upheld anymore; how will he/she respond to someone claiming his/her place on the street, if the person is truly without any other means to earn a living? Precisely by gaining economic confidence on the street, the vendor's rightful claim and thus their confidence in this occupation by extension will inevitably be eroded.

Let us quickly consider the emotional side of the matter; how does it feel to engage in this trade? What is the state of mind of a working street vendor?

Apparently, it is difficult to generalize on this sort of matter. Perhaps all we can do is just suppose that the mixed evaluations reviewed above translate into the simultaneous or interspersed presence of negative and positive feelings in each vendor—the coexistence of sorrow and joy, disgust and thrills, disappointment and hope, etc.

That said, I here present the words of a long-time female street vendor, whose "half of the life has just been expended on the street", in her own words[24]. Looking back on her work and life, she stated: "When you come to think of that, in a way, (engaging in) this work is like getting addicted (N. *nasa lageko*)." She went on: "Like getting addicted, once you plunge in, it's difficult to get out." By using the metaphor of "addiction," she seems to convey the mixed feelings of pleasure and danger, exaltation and helplessness, that one may experience practicing this trade. There is this stimulus =

[24] At the time this story was narrated (March 2016) she was 39 years old, a mother of 2, and had 23 years' experience in this trade.

pleasure/exaltation (money flowing in, at any instant) that is difficult to let go, on the one hand, and it is intertwined with, and actually made possible by, that stimulus = danger/helplessness (spending money, investment). We should also pay attention to the peculiar sense of time conveyed through the metaphor of “addiction”: time that is ephemeral as well as persistent, feeling like an instant and also like a prolonged period. Another ambiguity highlighted by the metaphor is something lying between willingness and compulsion. Admittedly, nobody forced her into the trade—but did she really have other options, either when she plunged in or thereafter? Yes, she did choose the trade, but only because no alternative presented itself.

Recently, she and her husband bought a piece of land in a suburb of the ever-expanding megacity and began building a house there. I asked: “Are you going to move there once the house is completed?” She replied, “No, not really. Here is the place for me to earn my living. (But) what will happen in the future, who knows?”

4. Diverse realities, ambiguous identities: Why do they call themselves “self-employed”?

Let us summarize the argument so far and get to the question we posed at the beginning of the paper: Why do they call themselves “self-employed workers”?

One thing that is clear from the above arguments is that the realities these “self-employed workers” are living out are far from uniform, but rather diverse in terms of their work environment (the majority pursuing their trade on the street, but not necessarily), class-standings (the majority are definitely working-class, but there are some who attained middle-class status), position of this job in their livelihood (a substantial/integral part of the livelihood of many, but not all), or the level of commitment to the job (many are willing to continue but there are others who feel differently). While you can picture the “core” of self-employed workers as street vendors who are working-class, making this trade a main source of their livelihood, and quite committed to this job, there are also those who show some distance from this picture: those who operate their trade off the street (generally financially better off than the “core”) or those who engage in street vending on and off and dare not (or cannot) stick to it (economically speaking, either better off than the “core” or extremely poor).

To put “core” street vendors’ experience of the work in a nutshell, they generally think positively of the trade, but have many reservations. The work is in a way easy, but entails its own difficulties; you can live on it, but not really a good life; they value the fact that they can operate on their own, but an essential condition of the trade (= the street) is at the discretion of powerful others (the authorities); they are proud street vendors, but they more often than not are striving for the firmer off-street

economic ground, etc.

The emotional consequences of this overall positive (but in many ways reserved) evaluation can be the mixed, elusive, and not easily articulable feelings for the job. Exact feelings may well vary from vendor to vendor according to individual circumstances or backgrounds, but the feel of ambiguity is presumably the one thing shared by most of them.

Now let us ask: why do they call themselves "self-employed workers"?

As a matter of fact, the not easily commensurable diversity among "self-employed workers" was an expected result of them choosing this label during their organizing efforts. Why did they choose it, then? The label was chosen, on one level, as a part of an organizational strategy, one of the founding members and the current chairman of the union explained. They chose it thinking that the choice would broaden the potential organizational base; not delineating target groups narrowly as proper street vendors, but also incorporating those who have connections with street vendors in one form or another, expands the scope of membership. Another motive behind the choice was the not particularly positive image attached to "street vendors" in general. Employing the more positive label, one free from any negative connotations, could be effective for expanding membership *from within* street vendors proper, too.

From the viewpoint of strategic organization building, one cannot deny that the label can also have the reverse effect; that is, a negative one. The inclusion of people from varied environments, classes, and so forth makes it difficult to build shared agendas for the whole group. Notably, the inclusion of those trading *off* the street can blur what they actually stand for. As already mentioned more than once, an imminent and important issue for street vendors is the securement of space for the trade = the street, while this is not an issue for those who trade in secure places.

Seen on the level of organizational strategy, the inclusion of off-street retailers can have a different negative effect. While the union membership consists overwhelmingly of those trading on the street, it was observed that its leadership is differently composed; off-street traders are actually disproportionately represented. This is in a way understandable; those off-street traders would participate in the organization presumably because they are interested in trade unionism, the labor movement, "class struggle," etc., and have resource to invest in it (time, energy, skills, or knowledge) in the first place. Understandable as it is, one cannot overlook its possible effect; given that kind of leadership, "proper" street vendors might start to wonder whether the union is actually organized of, for, or by "themselves," especially when the organization fails to secure what it should have: the street.

On the level of practical organizational strategy, the decision's effect appears not entirely favorable.

It has both costs and benefits[25].

It is my contention that the query for the label "self-employed workers" should be answered on the "expressive" level rather than, or alongside with, this practical level; the mixed effect for the organization could be expected when they employed it, after all, if not universally then at least by those who were thoughtful enough. They took up the label all the same, presumably seeing some *other* value in it; that is, I would argue, the value in that it is expressive of some essential aspects of the reality or identity lived out by street vendors, those they regard as worthy of being highlighted.

What this phrase "self-employed business workers" conveys, on one level, is that they work on their own; they are fundamentally "free" individuals, who chose the occupation and work for themselves. As we saw already, this is one feature of the trade they value highly. Thus, it is understandable that they chose a label conveying that feature.

On another level, the phrase conveys essential ambiguity in terms of the class positioning among these people, and that ambiguity is arguably something they do not denounce but *embrace*.

"Self-employed worker" literally means "employer" *cum* "worker"; two class positions embodied (or sublated, as it were) in one person; thus, the category can accommodate people of quite a wide range of economic standings. That is exactly what one finds even among those on the street, and still more among "self-employed workers" as a whole. While many of them are nothing more than poor laborers, quite a few aspire to climb the class ladder, and a few, if only a few, are known to have actually achieved that— possibly even gaining the status of "proper" employer.

The diversity (or disparity, to put it more plainly) in terms of the economic standing of these people is presumably taken to be something *that gives them hope*, instead of something that might jeopardize the possibility of their collective action. The disparity within makes it difficult to build shared agendas, but nonetheless, the label appeared as something suitable/desirable for them, expressing their essentially ambiguous class positioning and thereby sustaining their potential for upward mobility in the future. The label is, for them, something that attests to the fact that economic upward mobility *is* possible.

[25] The current chairman once stated that they should perhaps not have employed this strategy in the first place.

III. Concluding remarks

We have delineated the diverse and ambiguous realities lived out by street vendors /"self-employed workers," including their actual diverse/ambiguous class standings and their views on that.

Getting back to the arguments on street vendors or informal economies in general that we touched on at the beginning of the paper, the above picture suggests the possibility that the unsettled nature of the accumulated arguments actually corresponds to the facts on the ground—or at least, to those on the ground in Kathmandu. We also mentioned the global trend where informal economies do not seem to be fading away, but rather are in a resurgent phase. What can we say about that based on the case of Kathmandu?

As we have seen, while the "street vendor core" is rather stable and it seems quite possible that most of them will stay in the trade for years to come, it is also probable that some will leave the street, either through quitting the trade for another, by becoming successful enough to secure their own fixed establishment, or just by retiring. On the other hand, in Nepal (as in many other parts of the world), the rural-urban migration flow will not decrease and available formal employment will be no match for the demand; thus, the gap will require people to engage in some form of "self-employed work." While the work does not have to be street vending, at least some of them will find their livelihood through that trade.

Thus, while the faces on the street will more or less change constantly, the occupational group itself is going to last into the foreseeable future, as long as no drastic measures to clear them away are taken by the authorities. How many of them will continue then, what the concrete features of the trade will be, how those engaging in the trade will experience it, and how the "informal economy" at large will transform itself (as well as the formal, presumably mainstream, economy) in the process—are all questions that remain open at the moment.

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Nuances and Overtones of Paid Domestic Work in India

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century domestic work has been acknowledged as an important sector of female employment the world over calling for policy interventions. However until 1970s the sector was seen largely as one of the third world problems or identified as a phenomena of preindustrial society, likely to disappear with development and industrialisation. It is now fairly an accepted understanding that the sector is not to disappear though explanations for its continuation differ. Unlike the earlier understanding that it is women's entry into paid work that has increased the demand for paid domestic work, it is now well acknowledged that it is the unequal economic situation arising out of globalisation that has led to a surge in domestic workers.

Though domestic work is not a new phenomenon in India, what one understands as paid domestic work today is not an extension of the earlier feudal based system were the rich and dominant class had 'servants'. Loyalty, obligation and patronage governed the feudal relation where caste and gender decided the tasks assigned. Lower castes men and women undertook most of the cleaning tasks. Cooks were mostly upper caste men, though widowed women were also sometimes kept. With the new system of paid domestic service which is prevalent across urban and rural contexts, the nature of work, workers and work relations have changed rapidly, though one may see extensions of feudal practices in the everyday organization of modern system of domestic work[1].

Economic changes leading to increased inequality marked by agrarian distress, indebtedness, and rural-urban migration have encouraged the growth of paid domestic work, as it produced an affordable class of employer and a surplus of unskilled workers. It is interesting to note that the feminised growth in paid domestic work has happened

[1] Migration to foreign countries to take up domestic work is not significant as there are state regulations and restrictions such that women below 30 years of age are banned from migrating outside the country for paid domestic work.

during a time when there is an overall decline in female employment in the country. The rest of the paper is divided into three major sections. The second section gives an overview of work, work and work relations in the sector highlighting some of the challenges in paid domestic work. Critical analysis of policy interventions, through a detailed analysis of one the key regulation of the sector is attempted in Section 3. Section 4 provides a methodical account of the mobilisation initiatives underlining some of the challenges. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. An Overview of Work, Workers and Work Relations

Because of the limited data sets that are available for intense enquiry and due to the highly informal nature of employment relations, it is difficult to arrive at a definite macro profile of the sector. However, the available data provides broad contours which offer useful insights into the sector and the emerging social and demographic characteristics of the workers.

Estimates of the number of paid domestic workers in India, whatever be the source of data, have shown a huge increase over the last decade with a clear trend towards feminisation. The NSSO data for 2004-05 showed a dramatic increase in the number of women engaged in domestic service of about 4.25 million. The latest NSSO data (2011-2012) estimate is 3.9 million; of which male domestic workers are 1.3 million and female domestic workers are 2.6 million. In the context of reported anomalies in 2004-05, if a comparison is made between 1999-2000 and 2011-1, it is clear that domestic work shows more than four- fold increase over the ten year period. The share of female workers has also remained very high whatever be the variation across agencies on the number of workers.

Unlike many other countries, this upsurge has been driven by an increase in 'part time' workers, though the number (and demand) for full time workers is also on the rise. Most 'part-timers' undertake same or multiple/heterogeneous tasks in different households. While 'part-time' is from the point of view of the employer, their aggregate daily hours of work across all employer households tend to be equal to or greater than that of a 'full time' worker in a factory or construction site (as defined by 'normal working hours' under labour laws). Most urban middle class households prefer part-timers due to a variety of reasons; the most important being the possibility of engaging cheap labour with no

responsibility, easy hire and fire. This system frees the employer from the responsibility of boarding and lodging and allows employers to hire according to their budget. It enables the employer to keep an array of workers if required to carry out different tasks which are fragmented; where caste and other demographic characteristics are also considerations. Thus, often workers from lower castes are employed in cleaning tasks, while workers from upper castes are hired for cooking.

While the increase in the number of domestic workers across all sub-categories - housemaid/servant, cook, and governess/babysitter - is noteworthy, it is the all-encompassing housemaid/servant that shows the maximum increase, accounting for 92 per cent of all female domestic workers. This reflects the nature of tasks often assigned to these workers such as sweeping, mopping and other cleaning tasks. Child care and assistance in cooking and other odd chores are often subsidiary tasks which are expected from every domestic worker when demanded. Such tasks never form part of the negotiation, though multi-tasking is expected from every worker to meet any contingency. The current terminology -- 'maid' -- has thus come to denote an omnipresent all- in-all entity, who is expected to possess all the 'natural' skills including high levels of social competence.

The macro data shows that a large proportion of domestic workers are between the ages of 31-40 (33.3 per cent) and 41-50 (22.6 per cent). The share of those above 50 years also stood higher at 17 per cent. Currently, married women account for 55 per cent of domestic workers, followed by widowed or divorced/separated women (30.4 per cent). The age and marital profile highlight that more than the unmarried and younger age cohorts it is older women (for whom possibly other employment opportunities are few) who take up domestic work. The naturalisation of house work in a women's life by marriage is also another factor that would explain the increased presence of older women in this sector.

Most domestic workers have little formal education. About 54 per cent were "illiterate," and 83 per cent had less than middle level schooling, an indication of their poor socio-economic backgrounds. The most interesting pattern, also evident in many micro level studies, is the presence of high proportions of women from all social groups, clearly bringing out the gendered understanding of this work more sharply than any other occupation. The category of OBC accounted for the highest proportion (32.4 per cent) followed by SC workers (31.2 per cent) and upper castes (28.4 per cent). Across all castes,

migrants account for the largest share of domestic workers, with the supply of workers maintained through a regular flow of distress migrants from varied and shifting rural origins (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). In this context, the migration of tribal women to urban centres to take up domestic work is an important development that needs special mention.

Micro level studies show that irrespective of the profile of workers and nature of domestic work, the employment and conditions of work are highly informal with low wages. The details of work, the wage structure and service packages are very complex and variable, making it problematic to arrive at a uniform wage rate for domestic work even for a specific locality (Neetha, 2009). Apart from the variation across larger divisions (such as cook, cleaner, and baby-sitter), wage rates vary within categories depending on the nature of contract and other specificities of work and the worker. Further, personal relations are crucial in setting the terms of the contract – be it entry into work and conditions of work such as wages, leave or other entitlements. Domestic workers may support practises that are rooted in feudal patronage based employee- employer relations which entitles them to additional payment in kind, access to loans, used clothes, utensils, appliances and gifts on festivals. Extra wage benefits are critical to the survival of the workers which explains the prevalence and continuation of non-wage relationships in a big way.

The employer-employee relationship is a complex one and is viewed as one of domination, dependence and inequality. Given that the market for domestic work is segregated with differential services and wage rates, households across classes are employers of domestic workers though middle class is the largest employer. Domestic work spheres, the homes of employers, as increasingly acknowledged, are not spaces of love and sympathy but locations of bargaining and negotiating. Interactions between social and economic groups do not always undermine, but often enhance the boundaries that divide them, especially when it is a highly privatised space. Also, this is an area of work where the employer and the employee are mostly females. Marked by exploitative relations, intimacy and shared gender concerns sometimes coincide. As a home is the site of work, relations between employer and employee are often not limited to work but spill over as larger support systems.

3. State regulation: Piece meal and Half-hearted

State regulation has been almost absent and a cursory look at the long list of various attempts to regulate the sector clearly reveals a neglect (Neetha and Palriwala, 2011). Domestic workers are excluded from the coverage of many core labour laws[i] as they do not qualify under definitions of 'workmen', 'employer' or 'establishment' as defined in these laws (Shankaran, Sinha & Mahadev, 2007). There are three fundamental issues that are important from the perspective of state regulation. Firstly, the heterogeneity and diversity in domestic work relations and practices make it difficult to establish it as one occupation. The intimacy and personal discretion further makes it difficult to quantify and standardize it. The most critical issue is that of workplace being private homes which makes it difficult to intervene posing major challenges for monitoring and regularization. Apart from these, the possibility of large scale loss of employment opportunities of domestic workers is also a frequented anxiety shared by policy makers. However, there have been intensified efforts by activists and unions to introduce legislation at the state and national levels. Some state governments have opted to include domestic workers under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948[ii]. After much lobbying, domestic workers were brought within the ambit of the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 and Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act, 2013. Welfare boards exist in a few states that partly address some of the social security dimensions though actual operation and coverage is an issue. In select states domestic workers are included under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) in 2011 which provides for limited health insurance cover. To get registered under RSBY, domestic workers have to get verification from two out of the four authorized agencies such as the police, employers' resident's welfare associations, the employer and unions. Thus, RSBY after so much of fanfare is now understood as a program that did not have much success except in few states where some inroads are made in some pockets with continuous efforts of organizations working among domestic workers. Recently, since October, 2016 domestic workers in two states, Delhi and Hyderabad are extended limited medical facility under the ESI scheme, again with discriminatory and exclusionary clauses. Thus, while several piece meal extensions are attempted, there remains an absence of comprehensive, uniformly applicable, national legislation that guarantees fair terms of employment and decent working conditions to these workers.

An ongoing effort in the sector is the proposed national policy on domestic work which was drafted in 2012, after much pressure and lobbying from national and international organization. This did not get the clearance of the then government. The fate of this policy, is still unclear, despite its revision in 2015 and the statement of Labour Minister in Rajya Sabha, in March 2016 which says that the matter is `under active consideration'. The present government has, however, reinforced its predecessor's stand of not ratifying the ILO (International Labour Organization) convention that forms the rubric for protection of domestic workers.

Among all these arbitrary interventions, one of the most important state interventions has been the inclusion of domestic work in the list of scheduled employment under the Minimum Wages Act as it recognise private households as workplaces. On the basis of the analysis of the minimum wages of domestic workers in select 3 states, namely Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala, an attempt is made to analyse the legal intervention in terms of addressing some of the key issues of the sector.

3.1 Extension of Minimum Wages to Domestic Workers: Designed to Fail

Karnataka was the first state to notify minimum wages for domestic work in 2004, Andhra Pradesh notified in 2007 and Rajasthan in 2008. The role of unions/ organisations working among domestic workers was instrumental in bringing the sector under Minimum Wages Act, 1948 in these states. In all these states there has been intense campaigning by unions/organisations pressurising political leadership and bureaucracy which ultimately resulted in the notification of minimum wages.

All the state notifications define domestic work in terms of tasks undertaken. The tasks listed in the notification vary across states though at the overall level some uniformity exists. Domestic work is defined in terms of the traditional gendered understanding of house work such as cleaning, cooking and basic care. However in Kerala, driving, gardening or private security guards are also listed in the notification under the list of tasks. Distinctions in a given occupation between skill categories -- skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled is common in notifications on minimum wages. However, the notifications on minimum wages for domestic workers are not explicit on the skill embodiment. No task in the domestic work notification schedule in any of the states are classified as skilled which means that none of the processes that come under the list of domestic work are

worthy of being classified as skilled work. This also means that no matter how many years of work that the worker may put into undertaking these tasks, such work will remain unskilled, so that the workers experience in these tasks are not worthy of consideration. The Kerala notification differentiates general care tasks and specialised care demanding technical expertise (the category of home nurse), with marginally distinct wages for these categories. This move, though apparently acknowledging levels of skill, results in only a negligible wage difference and thus effectively leads to an overall deskilling and devaluation of this category of workers.

The duration for which minimum rates are fixed further reveals the states' regressive approach. Minimum wage rates for domestic work are fixed either daily or hourly as against monthly wages, which is the general norm. Though, on the one hand, wage differentiations across duration do take into account the part-time nature of domestic work, on the other hand, it allows employers to pay workers on an hourly basis leading to increased work intensity. Thus, part time workers who work in multiple houses are at the risk of both self-exploitation and exploitation by their employers. As the payment is on an hourly or daily basis, employers could also conveniently deny weekly rest days. Further, there is a lack of appreciation of the existence of live-in workers and their work specificities by defining the wage rate in terms of 8 hours of work and by ignoring the issue of over time completely or of casually providing for overtime wages.

Table 1. Details of legally stipulated duration of work, tasks, year and wage rates – State wise

States	Rates fixed for duration	Tasks listed in the notification	Latest Minimum Wage Revision	Latest Minimum wage
Karnataka	Per day – 8 hours	Washing the clothes/ Washing the utensils/Housekeeping and looking after the children /and other work	April 2011	DAILY - (cleaning and cooking) 218.93

				DAILY - (cleaning and cooking with child care 223.93
Andhra Pradesh	½ hour; 1 hour; 1½, 8 hours	Cleaning of vessels/washing of the clothes/sweeping and swabbing floor/baby sitting /care of old or infirm persons/kitchen shopping/taking children to school and back/other household chores	Jan,2012	8 hours – 4521- monthly DAILY - 214.38
Kerala	1 hour; >1 hour &<5 hours; 8 hours; monthly	Washing clothes; Washing utensils; Sweeping and cleaning house premises and moping; Shopping of vegetables and items related to cooking; Cooking assistance; Taking care of children and taking them to school; Taking care of elderly, disabled etc.; Cooking; Any other household work; Driving of personal cars; Gardening and assistance; Home nursing; Working as security/ watch man	August 2015	DAILY - 195 (cleaning and helpers in cooking) DAILY - 201 (cleaning and helpers in cooking and care work) DAILY - 213 (cooking) DAILY –

				219 (live-ins)

Source: Gazette Notifications of Various States, Government of India

Wage rates as prescribed by the Act do not suggest any clear method of the calculation followed, though minimum wages are to be notified taking into account the skill component of the tasks as well as the requirement of the worker and his/her family to maintain themselves. This arbitrariness in terms of fixing the minimum wage rates for domestic work has been pointed out by various organisationsiii. There has been variation across states in the minimum wage which defy explanation.

Andhra Pradesh has same minimum wage rates for all tasks. Karnataka has two separate wage rates, with higher wage rates for housework with child care. However, cooking is missing from the list of tasks. Kerala differentiates wage rates for various tasks under domestic work in accordance with the social understanding of the hierarchy among domestic tasks, though the rates do not differ much across these tasks. Cooks, live in workers, security guards and helpers engaged in gardening activities share the same minimum wage but it is higher than that of cleaning and care workers. Drivers, gardeners and home nurse (day time) have equivalent wage rates. However, the difference in wage rates between the highest paid task and the lowest paid task on a day for an hour is just Rs. 2. This makes it clear that more than the monetary differences in wages it is the social understanding of a given task that the notifications are exemplifying.

The task based differentiations in minimum wages are more complex than suggested when the social profile of workers performing these tasks are analysed. As discussed earlier, there exists a considerable degree of segregation in terms of tasks along caste lines in all the states, though the degree to which such notions exist vary not only between states but also by rural/urban distinction and local parameters. Cleaning tasks are considered to be one general task – though sometimes cleaning utensils and washing clothes are considered better in terms of status compared to sweeping and mopping floors. The over representation of lower castes' in cleaning operations is well documented (Raghuram, 2001; Neetha, 2009) which is true for all states. But in many states, they are also undertaking cooking tasks, though to a much lower extent. The presence of upper castes is reportedly the lowest in sweeping and mopping though some combine these tasks

with cooking. Interestingly, wherever the wage rates are differentiated this social hierarchy is reproduced.

3.1.1 Other Working Conditions

The disinterest and half-heartedness of the state in accepting domestic work as work and thus in extending labour rights to these workers are evident not only in terms of definitional issues and rates but also in specifying basic conditions of work such as working hours, overtime and so on. The Act enables appropriate governments to (a) fix the number of hours of work which shall constitute a normal working day, inclusive of one or more specified intervals; (b) provide for overtime rate wages, (c) provide for a day of rest in every period of seven days; (d) provide for payment for work on a day of rest at a rate not less than the overtime rate.

In all the notifications, specifically or otherwise, normal working hours for a day is defined or assumed as a maximum of 8 hours. In Kerala there is direct mention of 8 hours as the normal working day while in other states, since the rates are given for an 8 hour schedule, there is an inbuilt assumption of 8 hours. In the context of a growing number of live-in workers who constitute about 10-20 per cent of domestic workers[iv], the assumption of an 8 hour normal working day shows how alien are the interventions from the realities of the sector.

But in the case of part-time workers who have multiple employers, the worker will always be working for less than the stipulated regular working time of 8 hours under one employer. But, when the working hours across various houses are put together, the worker may have to work for more than the normal working time of 8 hours. Since the selection of the number of households and timing is an individual decision, regulating the working time for part-time workers is an issue. The legislation in all the states have conveniently ignored this specificity of the sector, by mechanically extending the provision as in the case of other informal sector employment. The only way to prevent the worker from working above normal hours is to ensure an adequate income, which could be achieved through better hourly wage rates. However none of this seems to be of concern in the states, as the wages are fixed at such low levels.

As regards rest intervals, none of the notification makes any provision for any break and assumes that the worker works continuously. Domestic workers' non-worthiness to

claim rest intervals is definitely an outcome of the social understanding of house work as light, natural and trivial. Further, except in the states of Karnataka, there is no mention about wages over and above the 8 hours of a normal working day, namely over-time wages. Yet another issue involving overtime provisions is the maximum limit to permissible overtime hours. All the notifications are silent on this issue, confirming the prevalent understanding of house work as gentle and natural.

Even in the state where overtime wages are specified, the calculation of overtime and its payment is a problem for the part-time worker who works in different houses, about which the regulation is completely silent. Over time wages are payable if a worker is made to work for more than 8 hours. But in the case of part time workers with multiple employers, the question arises as to under which employer or set of employers the overtime rate is to be applied. Moreover, a normal practice prevalent in the employment of part- time domestic workers is the practice of assigning more tasks than what was agreed upon in the initial contract. These tasks are not well defined and could vary from cutting vegetables, folding clothes, shopping, to washing a child and supervising the child, and so on, all of which finally extend the hours of work in a particular household. Furthermore, on days when there is extra work (on account of guests, functions, festivals etc), the amount of work would increase and exceed the normal working time. Even when workers do extra work in just one particular household on a given day, their total working hours get extended. Whether she is then eligible for over time is an issue that must be debated. Though it is possible to identify the employer responsible for overtime work, the way over time wages are understood in the Act is not of any help. Since domestic work arrangements are different from other sectors of informal employment a mere extension of these provisions is nothing but a half-hearted response of the state.

On the whole, in states were protection under minimum wages are extended the intervention is characterized by ambiguities not only in wage rates but also in extending minimum rights to these workers. Assumptions about house work underlie the many problems with the minimum wage act provisions.

3.1.2 The Mockery of Enforcement

There are specific notes under the minimum wage notification of domestic workers that directly affects its enforcement, which are rooted in the non-recognition of the home as a

workplace. Every employer under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 is required to maintain registers and records of workers, giving particulars of employees, the work performed by them, the wages paid to them, the receipts given by them and any other required particulars. However, in all the states the notification clearly specifies that employers are exempted from the maintenance of registers and records.

Yet another issue is the restriction on inspection in the context of domestic work. While labour inspectors are free to conduct inspections for any violations of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 in general. In the case of domestic work, restrictions exist in all the states. Thus, in these states the notification itself did not provide for implementation mechanisms such as regular inspections and regulations for the maintenance of a wage register by the employer. These provisions in the Act adversely affect the spirit of the legislation and reflect the half-heartedness of the state in addressing the issues of domestic workers. Without any records, should there be a minimum wage dispute, the worker is left to prove his/ her employment contract, which is simply an impossible proposition given the socio-economic conditions of these workers. There has not been much attempts to disseminate the coverage of the sector under the Act which is critical to its enforcement (Neetha, 2015). Thus, the rates largely remain on paper, with very few workers or employers being aware of the existence of such legislation and many workers get wages lower than the statutory rates.

4. Organising Domestic Workers: NGO-isation, Expansion and Diversification

The lack of proper unionization is a critical factor in their marginalisation as workers and exclusion from labour laws, the violation of national legal norms in their wage fixation, and the absence of entitlements to various social security benefits. Only a small fraction of domestic workers in the country are unionised or in touch with associations. It is often acknowledged that organizing is difficult due to the system of employment and the specific profile of workers which defines their social and political vulnerabilities as well as because of the familial responsibilities for part-time workers and the issue of isolation among live-in workers. However, the space that domestic workers have now acquired in policy and academic discourses, and in feminist writings, owe a great deal to the organized movements that have been taking place in various parts of the country.

Organisations with varied perspectives are into organising domestic workers or domestic workers are represented by organisations with varied political positions and social understanding. The current phase of organisational setting is marked by the presence of NGOs, civil society organisations, community or religious organisations, women's movement or by labour unions. Some of these current organisations have a long history in the sector while few have very short organisational experiences or have diversified into the sector from other areas of intervention or interest. The political visibility of the sector in the wake of the ILO convention on domestic work, has been important in the entry of new organisations, as well as some of the existing trade unions into unionising domestic workers.

Earlier attempts or initiatives towards organizing domestic workers were not only sporadic and haphazard but also outside the usual understanding of a trade union. Given the struggles for survival and the poor social and economic conditions that these workers represent and given the location in the forms of work that are denied not only of social recognition but also of self-recognition, the likelihood of spontaneous self-organisation of domestic workers are practically non-existent. Most organisations of domestic workers have their origins in the efforts of people who have a different class background to that of domestic workers who are being organised. Many earlier movements/organisational attempts around domestic work were led by religious organizations or NGOs with very specific areas of intervention. Partly due to the gender composition of the workforce in the sector as well as due to the nature of work that the workers undertake all early organizers of domestic workers were also women.

The organizing history of paid domestic workers can be divided into two phases – an earlier phase of sporadic initiatives largely by individuals or organizations and the latest phase of increased activism and networking both at national and international level. The phase which extend till the middle of 2000 is not marked much, by any discourse around the concept of domestic work or its gendered nature or employment relation. The personal relation of work or its feudal nature or systems of hiring practices was rarely a subject of direct interest. The first notable attempt at organizing domestic workers can be traced to the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) which is now active in almost all states in the country, which has a federated structure. The origin of NDWM could be traced to the efforts of the Church to address the issues of Christian girls who took up

paid domestic work in cities after migrating from tribal areas. Though the organization is present in many states, the strength as well as activities differ drastically such that no comparison can be made across the various states.

In the first phase of organisational trajectory, though the target group was domestic workers, sympathy and charity overwhelmed their intervention in the initial years, limited to the personal private domain of the individual worker, leading to intervention largely in form of demands for welfare programmes as vulnerable poor. Conditions of work if a concern was limited to issue of low wages, the discussion of which was not pitched in any labour market issues of the sector. The organizations largely facilitated/supported them in accessing state schemes such as PDS, housing and livelihood programmes and other welfare programmes such as pension, children's education or health issues. Alongside facilitation to access state programmes, some organisations also had designed individual schemes to support workers though the scale of such interventions and direction vary across organisations across time. Organizations which had links to Christian missionaries because of access to resources both in terms of human and financial resources did support the workers in dealing with their day to day tensions and difficulties. Placement services offered by many organizations to its member domestic workers was one of initiative to address some of the issues of the sector. Organizers of this period were largely outsiders who did not share much social or economic identity with the group that they were organizing. Since these organisations were all designed, monitored and regulated from above and the workers engagement was limited to membership and accessing benefits, membership fluctuated considerably across years depending on the schemes and benefits with huge turn over with old workers leaving and new workers joining. The sector because of its specific employment characteristics never had any luck in the larger discussions around informal sector employment and thus was largely outside the realm of any trade union involvement.

With the increased visibility around domestic work attributable to international developments there has been upsurge in the number of organizations working among domestic workers. Organisations with varied perspectives have initiated efforts to unionise domestic workers in recent decades. Alternative styles of organisational politics have emerged, though highly region specific and somewhat sporadic. This phase was also inspired in the beginning by the macro data of the NSS in 2004-05 showing a massive

increase in the number of domestic workers. The political visibility of the sector both in terms of the campaigns around bills on social security for the unorganised workers and sexual harassment, alongside the international visibility in the wake of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention on domestic work, have been central in making existing trade unions finally open their doors to these "non-workers". With the renewed interest in the subject, the character and nature of organization saw a massive change with many NGO led organisations registering their union of domestic workers. Thus in many cases , there are two wings to some of the earlier organisations such as the NDWM; a union and an association - the union dealing with issues of labour rights and labour welfare and the association taking on with the NGO agenda and general welfare schemes. Many associations also run their own self -help –groups with support from state governments or other financial agencies.

This period also saw many existing trade unions organizing workers in the sector. Now all the central trade union are actively engaged in the sector though there are differences across states in terms of their importance and successes. The period also saw new forms of organizing efforts and strategies and women's movement involvement is noted in many states.

4.1 Challenges of Mobilising and Unionising

One of the critical issues that confront the sector both in terms of organising and regulation is the definition of domestic work. What constitute domestic work or domestic workers is still an area of conflict and diverse interest persists which has intensified since the ILO convention. ILO definition of domestic work clearly bring the policy formulation oriented definition where a "domestic worker" is defined as "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship". Domestic work thus may involve a range of tasks, including cooking, cleaning the house, washing and ironing the laundry, general housework, looking after children, the elderly or persons with disabilities, as well as maintaining the garden, guarding the house premises, and driving the family care. (Domestic Workers Convention 2011 (No.189), Article 1)

The employment relation based definition as above however, is not shared by many activists as it is assumed to hamper homogeneity in the profile of domestic workers and their interests. The understanding of domestic work among activists and organisers of

domestic workers in the national contexts is more or less uniform. Domestic work is commonly defined as house work performed for the private household such as housekeeping (cleaning tasks & cooking), child care and other personal care and all workers irrespective of the nature of engagement -part time, full time, live-in or live out workers are domestic workers. The other categories of domestic workers such as gardeners, personal drivers and 'watchmen'/guards are not treated as domestic workers in this understanding as their profile and employment relation differ substantially from that of the larger category of workers, who undertake routine household tasks.

Though workers' rights have taken a central stage in terms of issues with many organisations actively engaged in some of the fundamental concepts and issues such as definition of work, work place, under valuation of house work, the continued prevalence of patronage make workers less likely to identify themselves as workers and organise on a work-based identity. As discussed, NGOs are now compelled to get their association of domestic workers registered as trade unions as in many states as only registered unions can only register workers in the state sponsored welfare schemes. The change in position of the central leadership of NDWM on the demand for registering unions that came from many states such as Karnataka, Andra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu needs to be seen in this background. This fear that workers could leave organisations as they cannot represent or register workers have led to registration of many unions in different states since last 10 years.

Even when domestic workers are members of 'unions' their engagement with issues and the extent of their commitment with the cause of workers' rights are limited. This is often accentuated due to the fact that the organisations that they are part are seen as external to their life and most organisations that represent workers have their origins in the efforts of people who have a different class background. Many newly formed unions though after years of working among domestic workers still are run effectively by non-workers and workers see themselves as beneficiaries like in any other social security programmes. The disengagement by many of the organisations even now, sometimes complete or at varying levels, with work place issues and conditions of work have added to the disassociation of domestic workers from the larger debates on worker's rights. Though the inclusion of domestic workers in many existing and new welfare programmes/ schemes have attracted traditional trade unions into the sector, their

operations are also sometimes limited to enrolment and provisioning of such schemes. The specificity of the sector and its issues, largely of women and workplaces being homes, is surely going to take a long time in such unions spearheading these workers.

While at the state level many organisations are still caught up with issuing identity cards and provisioning social security or welfare schemes, at the national level the prime engagement was on the issue of a national policy on domestic workers. Though some groups also have allied with Dalit organisations and women's groups on specific issues, there is a lack of effective alliance which have contributed negatively to them being an effective pressure group (Chigateri, et. al 2015). The thrust on welfare schemes at the ground level and policy at the national level with poor alliances or networking have negatively affected the formulation and development of a collective consciousness among the workers, which is essential for organisational efforts to sustain. The discussions around the draft national policy and the various stages of its evolution to the present form and the uncertainty that surrounds the policy even now are all indicative of the poor organisational base of the sector. Though there are many changes taking place at the organisational level, creating class consciousness and identity among the workers would remain a challenge given the intersectionality of the sector with other axes of inequalities such as gender and caste.

5. Summing up

Domestic work is a highly personalized and informal service and given the poor social and economic status, it is difficult for workers to contest her/his employment conditions. What makes matters worse is their engagement in housework which is socially devalued. These specificities of the sector must be taken into account if any legislative interventions are to benefit these workers. Discussions abound, interventions are few and arbitrary reiterating the apathy of the state in providing legal protection to domestic workers. Though these interventions have helped in bringing some change in terms of accepting domestic workers as 'workers', the actual wage situation and other conditions reflects its continuing devaluation. Existing interventions are not only arbitrary but also unenforceable. There has been no consensus on the definition of a domestic worker, an employer, and wages, the mode of delivery of welfare benefits, and the criteria for determining minimum wages or working conditions.

Unless support mechanisms and welfare provisions are brought in gradually to replace workers dependence on employers, it is impossible to break away from all patronage based relations, which is negatively affecting workers mobilisation. In an overall context of employment crisis, workers do have to ensure employment and this is sometimes ensured at the expenses of lower wages or poor conditions of work. There is a need to acknowledge these larger issues and its vicious nature in all the interventions in the sector be it formulating policies/regulations or organising workers.

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Notes

[i] Domestic workers are not included in the central list of scheduled employments under the Minimum Wage Act of 1948. Domestic workers are excluded from core labour laws such as Payment of Wages Act (1936), Workmen's' Compensation Act (1923), Contract Labour (Regulation and Prohibition) Act (1970) and Maternity Benefit Act 1961. Since household is not identified as an industry domestic workers are outside the purview of these Acts.

[ii] The Act legally grants a minimum wage for workers in activities listed in the "employment schedule" of the government which is periodically revised.

[iii] For details of this please see Domestic Worker Productivity: A Rationale, Stree Jagruti Samiti, 2005.

[iv] There are no accurate estimates of their number as they mostly go unaccounted since they stay with their employers.

Unions or NGOs? Organizing Labor under the Neoliberal Gaze

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This paper examines the prospects and limits of conventional modes of organizing labor in Bangladesh's garment industry. The title alludes to the specificity of the labor rights regime in the country, in which the lines between advocacy by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on behalf of workers frequently bleeds into and is occasionally indistinguishable from the activities of some trade unions. In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse in April 2013, what could be called NGOised trade unions took on increasingly vocal and visible roles. The professionalization of the trade union model, I suggest, brings with it limitations thrown starkly into relief when we situate "the new trade unionism" within a longer history of labor activism in Bangladesh. Through a close reading of a notable workers' uprising in May 2006, I argue that fundamental contradictions and constraints remain untouched by the legal and other reforms made after 2013. Among other things, the discourse around reform effectively sanitizes worker resistance by invisibilizing structural barriers. I conclude that without bodily resistance -- the literal occupation of public spaces and streets as well as factories – possibilities for meaningful change are minimal given existing political and legal infrastructures. Finally, I challenge culturalist explanations of why women in the garment industry are not more active in organizing themselves. I argue that dominant constructions of poor Bangladeshi women as passive and/or uneducated and so unable to recognize their own interests, displaces the political through cultural tropes that disguise relations of power.

A Note on Neoliberal Governance and its Sentiments

Neoliberalism itself is a much-contested category. My concern here is not with debates around definition or the specifics of normative prescriptions that go under the sign of neoliberalism. Rather, my analysis is informed by what I call neoliberal sentiment -- the discursive parameters and commonsense produced and promoted by neoliberal modes of governance. Here I approach governance as "a discourse to manage and promote the

social stability fundamental for capital's accumulation," a process that relies critically "on the networked active participation and self-management of non-state actors such as NGOs and other civil society groups as well as business (Massimo de Angelis 233-234)."

Among other things, neoliberal governance in the transnational realm relies on a language of democracy, equality and rights. By this logic, if the market is ultimately moral, then multinational corporations and their affiliates cannot be *seen* to be exploitative. In this context, the absolute horror of Rana Plaza as it unfolded in real time constituted a moment of acute crisis by exposing the underbelly of the global supply chain and potentially unleashing "market-unfriendly" sentiments.[1] The sheer scale of the damage ensured that Bangladesh and its garment- producing infrastructure would be subject to global scrutiny. Further, the industrial disaster threatened to undermine the powerful narrative of the market as site of female empowerment for women in the South.

In the circumstances, it is instructive that the collapse of Rana Plaza, a multipurpose multi-storied building that housed several garment factories, was widely understood predominantly to be the outcome of (a lack of good) governance, corruption and negligence as well as the greed of an individual factory owner. It goes without saying that implementation and oversight are shockingly poor in Bangladeshi factories, and within the construction industry. Regardless, no one associated with the numerous other commercial ventures housed in Rana Plaza lost their lives. Sensing imminent danger, these establishments shut down operations. Clearly, more than shoddy buildings and inadequate inspections were at stake. This line of inquiry cannot be easily accommodated in straightforward governance narrative.

Neoliberal sentiment is gendered; echoing its imperial originals, this framing makes women and girls central to the process of development. Correspondingly, female empowerment – of the girl child, of the laboring woman and so on – is invariably an individual endeavor. We see this in the many NGO efforts to empower Bangladeshi garment workers through training on legal literacy, as well as on improving bargaining and

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[1] The title of a report issued by the Center for Business and Human Rights at New York University, *Business as Usual is not an Option*, captures the general mood of those associated directly or indirectly with the industry, from buyers and intermediate brokers in the global commodity chain to governments, labour advocates and multilateral organizations (Labowitz and Baumann-Pauly, 2014)

leadership skills. While such training is undeniably valuable, the premise underlying the approach (of teaching people to be responsible for their own fates) relies on the assumption that "the problem" is individual rather than systemic. Among other things, collective movements that mobilize for structural change in the long run are easily discredited in this environment.

Curiously, formal trade unions – at least those that fit within certain parameters – are no longer automatic objects of disparagement and mistrust in policy circles; indeed, some mechanism for collective bargaining appears to be a pre-requisite for attracting foreign investment in Bangladeshi Export Processing Zones. It is not incidental that unions have the potential to contain as well as promote labour militancy. Among other things, the situation calls for an interrogation of the broader political context that informs *processes* of union formation, including the extent of bureaucratic discretion in determining membership and agenda. It is equally critical to situate the new international desire for unions in shifting ideologies of neoliberal governance. The push by the United States and the European Union for some form of collective bargaining in EPZs signals a shift in the representational forms of transnational governance and registers of power

An implicitly modernist narrative arc that structures mainstream accounts of the post Rana Plaza period — of individual 'tragedy' in the global South that spurs legal reform and improved oversight through the application of external/Northern pressure — obscures critical ground realities. The persuasive power of this narrative depends upon the active forgetting of the past in which workers have secured meaningful change only after embarking on direct action through, often violent, street politics.

The Made in Bangladesh Label: A Race to the Bottom?

A set of serendipitous conjunctures, some related, led to the spectacular rise of the apparel export industry, which soon established itself as a central engine of the national economy, in terms of employment, foreign exchange revenue and multiplier effects. In 1984, 385 factories produced for the global market (Shahidur Rahman). Since then, by one estimate, the average growth rate from FY 1983-84 through FY 2009-10 was as high as 20.1 per cent (Yunus and Yamagata 2014). Accordingly, the number of factories registered with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers' Association (BGMEA, established in 1982) went from 3480 in FY 2000-01 to 4296 in FY 2013-14

(BGMEA 2015).[1] Although several Export Processing Zones (EPZs) were established near Dhaka and the port City of Chittagong, currently only 257 of all enterprises are based inside EPZs.[2]

The industry's increasing significance to the national economy can be gauged by the fact that from the mid-eighties until quite recently, total exports and garment exports grew more or less at the same rate (Yunus and Yanagata 2014). During FY 2013-2014, RMG exports totaled US $ 24.5 billion. In the third quarter of 2015, apparel exports accounted for 82 per cent of total export earnings (Bangladesh Bank 2015). At the global level as well, the industry made its mark. By 2010, Bangladesh was already the second largest exporter of garments in the world, behind China (BGMEA). It has continued to hold on to this position despite predictions to the contrary following the 2008 recession and competition from other low wage economies such as Myanmar and Ethiopia. Until December 2013, Bangladeshi workers earned the lowest wages in the world – around BD TK 3000, which is roughly $38. The new minimum monthly wage of BD TK 5,300 (just over $66) represents a 77 per cent increase. Notably, the government's decision to raise wages came after worker protests shut down around 100 factories in Ashulia, Savar, in November 2013 (Arun Devnath 2013).

The industry employs an estimated 4.2 million workers today, of whom 60 - 80 per cent is female.[3] Feminists, as well as owners and policy makers frequently hail garment work as initiating a silent revolution in gender relations, offering a critical site of female empowerment (Azim 2005; Siddiqi 2009). To the rest of the world, Bangladesh's garment sector is known primarily for its feminized labour force, represented either as victimized sweatshop workers in need of rescue or as active subjects emancipated through entry into capitalist modernity (Siddiqi 2014).

The phenomenal success of 'garments' is often recounted as the story of heroic individual entrepreneurs risking their financial futures for the sake of the nation (see the BGMEA website). Alternately, it is 'a story of leaks, unintended consequences, and increasing returns' (Easterly quoted in Mahmud p. 6). In this paternalist re-telling, it is Daewoo's business expertise, shared with a select group of Desh Garments employees who then 'leaked' this secret knowledge to others that is ultimately responsible for global success. The condescension here is hard to miss. As it happened, converging national and global factors under wrote the remarkable expansion of the sector in its first two decades.

Along with changes in international trade agreements, the nascent garment industry benefited greatly from a complex interplay of shifting 'local' and global policy prescriptions. By the early eighties, the socialist policies of Bangladesh's first post-war government had been replaced by the unreserved embrace of open market policies. The militarized regimes of General Zia (1975-1981) and General Ershad (1982-1990) favoured and enabled this distinct ideological shift. Around the same time, international financial institutions actively endorsed structural adjustment policies, 'free trade', and export oriented industrialization as pathways to economic development. Southern nations were compelled to liberalize trade policies in order to compete in the new regime of globalization. Bangladesh's extreme dependence on donor funded development pushed the nation toward market liberalization. The 'structural adjustment' upon which International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank loans were conditional ensured that the country's macro-economic policies leaned heavily toward privatization and trade liberalization. With the closing of jute, sugar and other mills, investors in the apparel sector were prime beneficiaries of state support for the export economy.

The resurgence of 'free market' ideologies and neoliberal approaches to development also corresponded to the emergence of the global factory. By the 1980's, rising wages and labour-protective legislation prompted many Northern corporations to relocate manufacturing units out of the United States and Europe to Asia and Central/Latin America. Multinationals in search of ever cheaper labour established post Fordist, 'flexible' assembly line production across national borders. This relentless search for increasing returns effectively *cheapened* labor as Southern economies vied with one another to attract multinational corporations, in what has been called a race to the bottom.

The global factory also brought about major shifts in the international division of labour. A predominantly female, 'third world' migrant labor force characterized the new global assembly line. As such, the emergent proletariat was raced, classed, and gendered in ways that reflected older colonial and imperial divisions of consumption and production, as well as of wealth and inequality. Labour precarity – high turnover, job insecurity, and casualization– marked work in export factories in Bangladesh as elsewhere. Bangladesh was well-placed to compete in this environment, which relied on a specific presumptive labor subjectivity of 'third world women' – docile, nimble fingered and willing to work

for very little. The seemingly elastic supply of young, female rural migrants, and the lowest labour costs in the world made the country an appealing destination.

Last but not least, the unfolding effects of the 1974 Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) enhanced Bangladesh's competitiveness as a manufacturing destination at a critical juncture of the industry's formation. The MFA, meant as a temporary measure, imposed quotas on yarn, garments and textile exports from 'developing' countries to 'developed' economies. The idea was to ease the passage into 'free trade' of older industrialized economies by giving them time to adjust to low cost, low wage imports from the global South. Designed as a protectionist measure for Europe and the US, the MFA inadvertently helped 'emerging' economies such as Bangladesh (Bannerjee 2014). Established manufacturing countries such as South Korea found their access to markets in Europe and America blocked. In an effort to bypass MFA rules of origin, they began to outsource the 'Cutting and Making' of garments to nations such as Bangladesh which were not subject to the same strictures. The quota regime proved to be a boon to Bangladeshi investors and the government, which dispensed licenses liberally to those it wished to patronize. It is no small irony that until the MFA expired in 2004, the specter of other countries' lost manufacturing opportunities underwrote the Made in Bangladesh label.

In short, any analysis of labour organizing in Bangladesh must keep in mind the conditions of precarity under which the garment industry 'took off,' the nation's place within global political-economic structures and the predicaments of producing for an export economy in a "race to the bottom." I should note here that economists and policy makers differ markedly on the meanings and implications of what constitutes a race to the bottom. According to Wikipedia, it is a socio-economic phrase used to describe government deregulation of the business environment or taxes in order to attract or retain economic activity in their jurisdictions. The implication of this ostensibly neutral but avowedly "free market" framing is that the situation will lead to sustained economic growth which in turn will improve the lives of all citizens, including workers (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_to_the_bottom).[2] This formulation does not address

[2] See Yunus and Yamagata (2014) for a different perspective on the prospects of Bangladesh's apparel export industry in lifting the national economy.

questions of who bears the cost of deregulation designed to attract or retain economic activity. If retaining competitiveness calls for slashing wages and living standards for workers, as it invariably does, then the long-term prospects for worker well-being for workers are not necessarily positive.

Bangladesh's exclusive 'comparative advantage' is its cheap(ened) and relatively unskilled female labour force. Paradoxically, what is an advantage for the national economy can actually be fatal for the union or individual worker demanding increased wages and improved working conditions. If low labor costs are central to being globally competitive then labor repression can be justified as a valid 'cost' of maintaining the nation's competitive edge. This line of argument becomes even stronger in a place like Bangladesh where the economy is inordinately dependent upon the apparel export industry. Labor resistance can be recast as sedition, as action that directly challenges the nation interest.

Colonial Legacies and Capitalist Presents

First formed under conditions of colonial rule, the appropriation of labour unions into political movements laid the foundations for a peculiar mode of politicization and extreme partisanship in postcolonial Bangladesh. Unions associated with the two main industries in British India, jute and textiles, quickly became part of broader anti-colonial struggles. Given their power to mobilize large groups of workers on the streets, labour unions became 'key organizations on the national political stage' (Rahman and Langford 2012).

A related but different legacy of the anti-colonial struggle, one rarely taken into account in analyses of contemporary labour mobilizations are the particular registers of public protest, 'of breaking the law peacefully,' that are deeply embedded, across the political landscape 'as a set of possible languages of political expression and dissent' (Blom Hansen 2008: 3). These possible languages include gheraos, blockades, sit-ins and hunger strikes, all modes of protest invoked by the labour movement in Bangladesh at various moments in recent history. If the idea of breaking the law peacefully seems counter-intuitive today, the institutional memory remains strong.

Pakistan's first military ruler, General Ayub Khan, introduced factory-level unions to counter what he saw as undesirable communist inroads as well as to extend his regime's hegemony over the working class. The Pakistani state's hostility toward communism and

progressives/leftists in the labor movement represented a critical feature of the country's evolving Cold War alliance with the United States. After a formal ban on the Communist Party came into place in 1954, progressive workers and organizers were forced underground. Political and union leaders found themselves under mass arrest during the martial law period. It was during the early stages of the Cold War, soon after independence that the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the US based AFL-CIO first became active in East Pakistan. The AFL-CIO practiced 'Cold War Trade Union Imperialism', consolidating anti-communist trade union movements, long before its formalized overseas front the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) was set up in 1968 (Rahman and Langford) 2014: 174). AAFLI was originally targeted at labour in Vietnam, soon expanded its operations to include the Philippines and other Asian and Pacific countries. By the 1990s, it supported unions in approximately 30 countries in Asia, the Pacific, and the Middle East, with resident representatives in Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Turkey (Sims, 1999: 59).

East Pakistan's labour movement was further divided by the ideological differences between the two opposition parties, the Awami League (AL) and the explicitly left-leaning National Awami Party (NAP) at the forefront of the struggle against West Pakistani economic and cultural hegemony in the 1950's and 1960s. Both NAP and the AL sponsored their own trade union federations. As in the anti-colonial period, union activities became subservient to the immediate needs and strategies of the party and the nationalist struggle. Workers were as involved as students in the mass upsurges of 1968-69, the strikes, blockades and torch processions that ultimately forced the military to call the first parliamentary elections in Pakistan's history.

The Awami League government of newly independent Bangladesh should have been labour friendly. It espoused explicitly socialist values, nationalized key industries and enacted several pro-labour laws. Unfortunately, geo-political and other considerations not entirely within its control soon compelled the new government to dispense with much of its socialist inclinations (Siddiqi 2010). Nationalization effectively politicized labour unions further. The result, among other things, was an increasingly authoritarian bent that eventually rendered the polity into a one party state. All trade unions – regardless of individual ideology – were forcibly incorporated into the ruling party's labour front. The more progressive voices were silenced or forced underground.

A bloody coup in 1975 ushered in 15 years of military rule during which time free market policies geared toward economic growth were consolidated. General Ziaur Rahman initially banned all union activity, but later rescinded the ban with severe restrictions. He also directed each political party to set up its own labour front, effectively diluting the impact of any independent militant unions (Ross 2014: 11). In a bid to secure political legitimacy, General Zia soon established his own political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whose labour front was set up in 1979. Sensing the power of organized labor, Zia is said to have bought off labour leaders from the right as well as the pro-Beijing left (Rahman and Langford).

Zia initiated the privatization of state enterprises, a process his military successor, General H. M. Ershad carried forward. The large-scale retrenchment that followed weakened the labour movement greatly. Against the odds, and in response, existing private sector unions formed Sromik Kormochari Oikya Parishad (Workers Employees Unity Council) or SKOP. This proved to be a decisive and critical moment of rupture for the labor movement. Despite mounting considerable resistance, SKOP was not able to generate pro-labor policies. Continuing privatization resulted in a steep decline in unionization from which the country has never recovered. As unions affiliated with the ruling party spent their energies competing over political patronage and resources, state repression – by the police, army or increasingly by paramilitary forces – of independent labour became the norm.

The restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1990 did little to shift the prospects of improved workers' rights since both the AL and BNP, which alternated in power until recently, embrace similar ideologies of free trade, open markets and export oriented development. Currently, the government has as an 'Open Door' policy with respect to foreign direct investment (BEPZA). Whatever their other ideological conflicts, both parties concur that economic policy should be geared toward growth, in this case, toward securing the stability and expansion of the garment industry, whatever the implications for workers' rights.

Rahman and Langford remark that the national political context in which the industry took off in the 1980s was not exactly propitious for labour organizing (2012). It was not only that party interests always trumped those of workers but the very idea of what

constituted workers' interests seemed to have been set aside. According to one study, the majority of Ready Made Garment (RMG) owners in the 1980s perceived unions as undesirable because they [owners] were still 'at the formative phase of their manufacturing businesses', and could not afford to be distracted by 'unreasonable' demands or 'unnecessary interruptions', by labour leaders who 'might try to pursue their own selfish agenda *in the name of workers' participation*' (Khan 2001: 169, italics added). Here we see owners deploying popular negative associations of unions to undermine genuine claims of labour. This was the phase of globalization when Southern nations were compelled to liberalize trade policies, as conditionality for loans but also to stay competitive under new global conditions. States desperate to retain foreign direct investment actively suppressed, often brutally, worker resistance and protest. Bangladesh was no different.

Trade Unions in Contemporary Bangladesh: Beyond the Numbers

The general impression that unions in the RMG sector are weak or non-existent is not entirely accurate. On the contrary, the bewildering array of garment workers' federations is difficult to keep track of at times. In 1996, S. I. Khan recorded the existence of five registered federations and ten unregistered ones. Of the five registered, one was inactive; of the 10 non-registered organizations, one was active full time (Khan 2001: 178). The fluid, often shadowy and somewhat indeterminate nature of federations renders the problem of numbers difficult to resolve definitively. It is possible however to get a sense of scale. A recent newspaper story lists nine 'leading' federations of garment workers, though there is no elaboration of the criteria used for inclusion into the category. According to this list in the middle of 2014, the number of individual unions was 142. This is in contrast to the ILO figure of 437. In either case, the numbers constitute a tiny proportion of the labour force of around 4 million working in over 4000 factories.

Curiously, this list excludes Garment SramikOikkya Forum (Garment Workers Union Federation) and Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Unity Council (BGWTUC), two small left wing federations that were critical to the 2006 mobilization. Instead, the editorial to which the list of federations was appended expressed serious concern regarding recently registered trade unions which, it pointed out, were overwhelmingly affiliated with a single US based NGO, the Solidarity Center. Acknowledging the need for legitimate unions, the editorial observed that the Center's accountability was to a foreign organization, 'with

motives that do not align with our national interests.' This line of argument is not too far from left progressive critiques of the current spate of internationally sanctioned monitoring and organizing around the garment industry. Questions of accountability and national sovereignty have been paramount in relation to the much-lauded Accord on Fire and Safety (Siddiqi 2015). Yet when such an analysis comes from an avowedly liberal newspaper, owned in part by industrialists with ties to the ruling party, the question of 'national interest,' always an opaque category, becomes even more fraught. Whose nation and whose interests are served when the rhetoric of nation appears to be pitted directly against the interests of labour?

As in other fields, the lines between unions and NGOs in garments are frequently blurred in the Bangladeshi context. Several NGOs provide legal support and training on national and international labour rights to workers. They run the gamut, in terms of founding ideologies, funding sources and programmatic approaches. Longtime Bangladeshi NGOs such as INCIDIN Bangladesh and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), offer programs for garment workers as part of a broader agenda for the promotions of social justice. NGOs founded exclusively to deal with labour issues, such as The Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) and the Awaj Foundation operate on a somewhat different register. Executive Director Kalpona Akter who set up BCWS in 1991 makes clear that her organization eschews any form of street protest A 'close partner' of the Washington DC based, AFL CIO affiliated Solidarity Center, BCWS offers training on labour rights and union formation, in addition to running a day care center for the children of garment workers (Solidarity Center 2012). The Awaj Foundation, which according to its website currently has over 37,000 members and 37 full-time staff helps settle 'thousands of disputes' regarding wages, overtime, holidays and maternity leave in hundreds of factories. Awaj founder Nazma Akter was originally a member of BIGUF, a federation closely associated with AAFLI in its early days. Kalpana and Nazma, both former garment workers themselves, are perhaps best known outside of Bangladesh. In contrast, the much smaller and radical Garment Sromik Shonghoti (Garment Workers Solidarity), a non-registered organization, does not accept foreign funds but engages in long-term worker mobilization. The Shonghoti coordinator, award winning photographer Taslima Akter has, with the help of colleagues, painstakingly documented the lives of the dead and the missing in Rana Plaza.

The question of why more garment workers 'fail to mobilize' given their large numbers has preoccupied scholars and policy makers across the political spectrum. It is tempting to attribute the lack of formal labour mobilization to the particular characteristics of the workforce. Most workers are young female migrants from rural areas with little formal education, minimal or no experience of industrial labour and shaped by a 'culturally embedded deference to male authority'. While such features are no doubt disadvantageous in specific situations, they do not seem to have prevented the numerous spontaneous protests and wildcat strikes typical of the industry from its inception. In other words, a culturalist analysis, relying on tropes of deference, industrial inexperience and lack of knowledge provides a partial and ultimately inadequate explanatory framework.

Explicitly left wing commentators attribute low rates to several factors including, 'fierce owner opposition,' state-sanctioned repression, high labour turnover and lack of industrial experience as first generation workers (see, for instance, Ross 2014: 11). Others look to institutional culture as well as specifically gendered life cycle issues that might dissuade female workers from organizing formally. The garment workers to whom Mahmud spoke reported feeling isolated, with no external support when they raised their voice in protest. They had little incentive to go further. These workers saw themselves as temporarily in the workforce (before marriage or childbirth) therefore lacked what the author calls professional ambition. Mahmud reports that the workers had not absorbed the need for industrial regulations and discipline; at the same time they faced unprofessional conduct from management, which had yet to acquire a culture of accountability (Mahmud 2010: 9-10).

Mahmud also remarks that conditions of easy entry and exit, combined with informal and personalized recruiting techniques, also discourage collective action, with both employers and workers taking advantage of the possibility for high turnover. Finally, Mahmud argues that poverty and the lack of alternatives compels workers to accept exploitative labour conditions. The analysis, although useful in highlighting key issues, does not offer a sense of how these different factors should be weighted in relation to one another.

Informality is a recurring theme in the literature on Bangladeshi workers. Ahmed and Nathan (2014) remark that high rates of turnover (with attrition rates between 5 and 12 per cent) indicate that it is relatively easy for garment workers to move from one workplace to

another. The rapid expansion of the industry, the authors suggest, has increasingly opened up more exit options for workers, allowing them to have greater 'voice' than in the past, a suggestion echoed to a certain extent by Mahmud. In their words, the ability to switch jobs, "reduces the pressure to remain quiet about the negative aspects in any job, or, […] in Hirshmanian terms, the possibility of exit gives more voice (Ahmed and Nathan 2014: 15):

The relationship between the right to exit, voice and agency may be less straightforward than theorized by Ahmed and Nathan. In the first place, high turnover is not new but has characterized garment work from the outset. Ironically, high turnover is cited as one reason for the non-sustainability of plant level unionization (Khan 2001: 174). Second, as we will see, the right *not to exit* (through unfair dismissals, or lodging of false criminal cases, for instance), rather than ease of exit is generally of more concern to workers. The pressure to remain quiet appears to be related to the relative ease with which dismissed workers can be replaced by others.

A study early on in the industry's growth foregrounds reasons for low levels of unionization that continue to have resonance today (S. I. Khan, 2001). Drawing on data collected in 1996, Khan mapped the ways state and capital – in elaborate collusion with each other – systematically deployed bureaucratic power in addition to violent forms of policing to suppress attempts to organize labour. Rahman and Langford's research, as well as my own experience, bears out the relevance of the issues raised by Khan (Rahman and Langford, 2012).

Moshrefa Mishu, Taslima Akter and others have remarked in conversations that plant level unions are rarely sustainable, financially or otherwise, without some form of external assistance. Individual units tend to fall inactive after an initial period of action, often as a result of harassment and intimidation (or alternately through "inducements" by management to refrain from action).[4] The expulsion or dismissal of unit leaders on charges of 'misconduct', threats of physical violence by hired thugs and lodging false cases have long constituted standard retaliatory responses from management (Khan 2001). Most workers cannot afford to fight legal charges or even to pay union dues regularly. Federations ensure some kind of financial sustainability in the circumstances.

Until the 2013 reforms, unions registration required at least 30 per cent worker representation of an enterprise, approval from relevant state authorities and were subject to cancellation at any time by the Registrar of Unions (with the permission of the Labor

Court). Thus the Directorate of Labour, which supervises the process, wields enormous power, exercised as much through inaction and stalling tactics as through direct action. Such power also renders the DoL open to influence from all kinds of external actors.

Khan reports that the DoL routinely refused registration to independent left leaning unions, even if their paperwork was in perfect order, including proof of 30 per cent support at the workplace (Khan, 2001: 197). Thus, the culling of radical voices happens at the source. Should such applications slip through, their initiators would confront a host of other obstacles. Close ties between the DoL and factory owners/management enabled the latter to obstruct any effort at union formation. A 'working relation' with the Directorate of Labor, as well as placing 'spies' in the workforce itself, secures an elaborate and efficient network of surveillance. Khan found that DoL employees routinely tipped off owners about pending or newly accepted applications. Individuals responsible for initiating the effort, along with those who signed on in support of unions, were invariably subjected to retaliation by the management. Reprisal took many forms. Most obviously, workers marked as trouble-makers would be summarily dismissed, and their names circulated and publicized to enable blacklisting as a whole.

Intimidation and physical torture are other routinized modes of dealing with worker 'unrest' or efforts at unionization. Most factory owners maintain private security forces, which have close ties to the police. Labour leaders demanding back pay or better treatment find themselves threatened with violence or faced actual beatings (Khan ibid). It continues to be common practice (and public knowledge) that factory owners hire local *mastan* or thugs to rough up and intimidate workers they perceive as difficult or outspoken. This often takes place with the active cooperation of the police or paramilitary forces. Labour leaders also find themselves saddled with numerous false cases. Suffice it to say, none of these strategies is exclusive either to the garment industry or to Bangladesh.

More striking perhaps are documented cases of owners choosing to close down factories following a successful union drive rather than face the prospect of negotiating with unionized workers (Rahman and Langford 2012: 176). Closing down factories is, or should be, an expensive proposition. The extraordinary antipathy toward unions this indicates deserves further exploration. S. I. Khan notes that the first generation of factory owners maintained a strong grip on management and labour relations by taking 'advantage' of informal labour recruitment practices and work place policies (Khan 2001: 168).

Practices in question include recruiting workers without appointment letters, and authorizing supervisory staff to hire and fire semi-skilled casual workers. Here I can only speculate but perhaps it was the fear of a more formalized management structure -- the potential loss of conditions of control on which low labour costs hinged-- that explains the extent to which some factory owners went to avoid unions in their own factories.

Discharging workers recruited 'informally,' that is without a formal appointment letter, is relatively simple since in the absence of documentary evidence of employment, workers cannot contest arbitrary dismissals. Even if documentation is available, owners were/are able to draw on the language of the law itself to dispense with 'troublesome' workers. My conversations with workers reinforce Khan's finding that the vague and open-ended category of 'misconduct' under Section 18 of the Employment of Labor (Standing Orders) Act 1965 offers a legal way to dismiss individuals deemed undesirable by management (Siddiqi 2004 and 2015). Last but not least, one of the major reasons for worker protest is the delayed payment of wages, sometimes for months at a time. Workers who are sacked are rarely compensated for back wages and overtime. The near-certainty of not being paid arrears becomes another factor that discourages workers from speaking out, voicing concerns or organizing.

The absence of a space for the legitimate voicing of grievances is the other side of numerous spontaneous, demonstrations, blockades, sit-ins, marches and destruction of factory property seen in the garment sector as early as the 1980s. The Sparrow apparel strike of the mid-eighties was one of the first sustained actions of this kind (Interview Lovely Yasmin). By the mid 1990s, Khan noted an increasing trend of 'physical assaults, gherao, demonstrations, rallies, work stoppages, and lay-offs' (Khan 2001: 171).

In contrast to this reality, an aura of celebration surrounds news of the increasing number of plant-based unions, the proliferating programs to train workers on legal literacy and the reform of the labor law ostensibly to ease union formation. In this (neo)liberal telling, modern labour subjectivities (of individuals armed with knowledge of laws and their rights), were waiting to be called into being. Workers are now able to exercise citizenship rights, some newly formed, because they have finally acquired the requisite self-hood. In this account, the absence of the modern worker who knows and demands her rights signals the failure of the elite/state/NGOs to produce a culture of liberalism – including that of appropriate managerial accountability -- in which such subjectivities seemingly flourish

(see Vijay Prashad 2015). Recalling a mode of developmentalism rooted in colonial hierarchies, this construction erases the agency of Bangladeshi garment workers and their rich history of resistance. In stead, the focus on individual consciousness renders invisible the structures of power through which some accounts are privileged while others are dismissed.

May 2006: Reservoirs of Discontent Spilling Over[5]

From late May to the end of June, 2006, Bangladesh's garment industry experienced protests on a scale not seen earlier. In the course of just a few days, workers from around 4000 factories in and around Dhaka city went on a wildcat strike, took to the streets in demonstrations, participated in sit-ins, and blockaded critical highways in support of their demands. The Bangladeshi state responded in full force, sending in police in riot gear armed with tear gas canisters and rubber bullets, and the feared paramilitary force, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). The Ashulia-Gazipur area around Dhaka that housed the main EPZs, as well as parts of the capital, turned into combat zones. The protests spread to workers' neighborhood where pitched battles with police and private security forces took place. When the movement showed no signs of abating, the government brought in the Army to 'restore order.' Massive, unprecedented and virtually leaderless, the movement quickly became a source of concern and, alternately, of hope.

Events unfolded in a predictable pattern, with the expression of grievances in one factory spreading to others. In early May, workers at S.F. Sweater Factory in Gazipur began protesting non-payment of wages. Management retaliated by having two workers arrested and firing others. The small, left wing Garment Sromik Oikkyo Forum/Garment Worker's Union Federation (GWUF), which had already been organizing workers at the factory, helped organize a protest on May 19. Management responded by locking the striking workers in and cutting off power and water supplies. The workers fought their way out, took over the adjacent highway, and were joined by colleagues from other factories. This time, the police used real bullets, killing a worker, and injuring 70 people, including journalists. News of the killing prompted outraged workers from surrounding factories to pour into the streets. The leaders of GWUF announced a dawn to dusk strike in Gazipur for May 23. The Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Unity Council (BGWTUC), another small left wing federation, announced its support for the strike. BGWTUC, had been

mobilizing workers at Universal Garments who were owed three months back wages. They had planned a 'grand garment workers rally' on May 23. The convergence of two unrelated calls to action drew thousand more workers to strike on May 22 and 23.

At this juncture, the protests moved much beyond the remit of the small federations and issues with which they were originally. What happened next can be seen as the breach of 'reservoirs of discontent' that had been building up over the years. Moshrefa Mishu of GFUW remarked that 'workers had no choice but to go on the street. The violence in Ashulia was an expression of long-simmering resentment/long-suppressed grievances. There was no option but this was a fluid movement incorporating all kinds of people and groups.' Kalpana Akter of BWSC, whose organization formally eschews any kind of 'agitation' recalled a similar sentiment. In her words,'we couldn't control the workers' rage because their resentment had reached such a point. Let me tell you the story of a simple, ordinary woman, around 29 or 30 years old. She came to the office boiling over with anger'. 'I just threw a brickbat in the glass pane of a factory. They kicked me out without paying the 14 days wages I was owed. So today I went and threw a brick at the factory'. 'This was the only way their anger and frustration could be expressed' (Kalpana Akhter, interview).

On the first day of the strike, factory 'security staff' attacked the workers of Universal Knitting Garments. The latter went to neighboring factories, asking for support. A several thousand strong procession of workers quickly assembled, as clashes ensued with police armed with real bullets. Unidentified forces set two factories on fire. Five buses were torched and $2 million dollars worth of clothing destroyed. In solidarity, garment workers shut down the industrial areas of the capital Dhaka. Nine separate protests rallies were held on May 23. Mass demonstrations demanded an end to repression, release of arrested workers, higher minimum wages, weekly time off, overtime pay for extra work. As clashes with security forces continued, 16 more factories were set on fire and 200 vehicles destroyed. Many owners opted to shut down production temporarily. The government called in the Bangladesh Rifles from their border control duties to help contain the 'unrest.' A reported 3000 armed police, members of the feared paramilitary force RAB and soldiers had been deployed by the end of the day. The authorities arrested the labour leader Moshrefa Mishu and filed 19 charges against her. Detained for 4 days, she was threatened with death 'by crossfire' during her time in remand.

Despite the violence and associated danger, the protests drew in 'common people', passersby as well those in the immediate locality whose lives were disrupted. The details of an eye witness account are telling of a potentially dangerous class solidarity in the making:

> The day the 'riot' broke out I had been on my way to the office. It is not new, these agitations here in my locality (lot of RMG factories are situated here)…I have been witnessing this from a year or more… What struck me most was how this sort of happening readily unified street vendors, rickshawallas in one single angry 'mob', which was throwing stones, crashing cars, setting fire on big Volvo buses. If it's sort of an anarchy, I am for it with some fears inside….' Eye witness testimony 26 May, 2006 in Garment Workers Revolt p. 2).

When it became clear the standoff would be impossible to resolve through the 'routine' application of force, the government finally persuaded the BGMEA members to sit down with the striking workers. It arranged for garment workers to be represented through SKOP, with the government as a third party. The resulting tripartite talks led to a 'historic' Memorandum of Understanding on June 12, 2006, a seeming victory for labor. The BGMEA accepted all union demands which included: issuing appointment letters for all workers; increase in minimum wages; weekly holiday; maternity leave; withdrawal of all cases against workers; the right of trade unions to represent workers. The formation of a Minimum Wage Board was another significant outcome of the agreement. However, the government conceded to BGMEA's demand for the formation of a security force exclusively for the industry.

Complications arose immediately. SKOP had less than neutral credentials in the eyes of many garment workers, who worried it would side with the government and BGMEA. The proliferation of federations– across the ideological spectrum – rendered the question of who could best represent workers interests necessarily fraught. Fault-lines were exposed in the debate around why the new minimum wage was eventually settled at only Tk. 3000 (US$ 38), much lower than the subsistence wage of Tk. 5000 (US $63) that most workers had demanded. Mutual suspicion and accusations of complicity surfaced immediately. Rahman and Langford contend that 'collaborationist' unions affiliated with BGMEA acted

to undercut the workers' initial demand. Long time left wing political workers and labour leaders as well as those affiliated with international labour movements, agree with this assessment.

Ultimately, few factories bothered to implement the terms of the agreement, perhaps with the knowledge that the state would remain indifferent at best. This was a reality to which workers were accustomed. It is difficult to cultivate or sustain faith in bureaucratic and legal proceduralism when numerous past agreements have been ignored with impunity. Disenchantment with the system is inevitable. Other more 'violent' waves of demonstrations followed, most notably in 2010. '2010 was even more massive. Because what they learned from 2006 was not about organized movements but a negative lesson: *If we block roads or destroy property, our demands will be heard*' (KalponaAkhter, italics added).

Left wing labour activists see 2006 as a point of no return, one that established a degree of continuity with later protests and that showed the power of collective action (Zonayed Saki, Gono Shanghati Andolon, 2016). In the long run, an intangible but fundamental gain of 2006 lay outside the legal realm. The sheer scale of events secured garment workers public recognition as a constituency with legitimate rights, as a force to be contended with. It also displaced in the public imagination garment owners as the central actors whose interests were to be protected at all costs, 'challenging their previously unquestioned ownership rights' over the fate of the industry (Rahman and Langford 2014).

One rarely noted fallout of 2006 was the consolidation of surveillance of labour activists by state intelligence units in the name of protecting national interest and security. In other words, it is not only hired thugs or the police that labour organizers must fear. During the 2010 protests, three prominent labour leaders, including Moshrefa Mishu and Kalpona Akter were detained for a month. In 2012, Kalpona's colleague Aminul Islam 'disappeared'. His tortured and mutilated body was found in a ditch several months later. Three years later, there are no signs of solving the mystery behind his death. It is widely assumed that Aminul was abducted and murdered by the paramilitary RAB. In addition, the government has set up Industrial Police which has sanction to 'control' workers in the EPZ when and as needed.

Back to the Future? Beyond the 2013 Amendments

Faced with the worst ever industrial disaster in the country, the Bangladeshi government rushed through passage of the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2013 less than three months after the collapse. Hailed as pro-worker by mainstream commentators, the amended labour law– among other things –appeared to remove extant barriers to freedom of association, setting trade unionism 'free,' as the country's leading English language newspaper proclaimed proudly (*The Daily Star* July 15, 2013).

Indeed, the number of registered trade unions rose dramatically in the following months. By December 2013, 96 new unions sought registration from the Directorate of Labour (DoL), compared to only two in the previous two years (ILO 2014). Within just over a year, the garment sector had a total of 464 trade unions, up from 132 in 2012 (ILO 2015). With respect to union formation at least, the amended labor law seems to have 'paved the way to improve conditions, workers' rights' (ILO, 2014a). At an orientation program on Freedom of Association for leaders of such unions, an ILO representative declared, 'The formation and registration of new trade unions is the sign of a new era of collective bargaining and freedom of association in Bangladesh which can act as a catalyst for change in other industries' (ILO, 2014b).

It should be evident from the foregoing discussion that until recently, unionization efforts have been met with definitive state and capitalist violence. Much of this violence is openly sanctioned by the state. The 'problem,' as I indicated earlier, is not one of a pre-modern labour subjectivity waiting to come into its own, of workers needing to be educated into their citizenship rights as enshrined in the law. The question is who mobilizes, and under what conditions? The title of a recent Human Rights Watch Report, *Whoever Raises their Head Suffers the Most* aptly evokes the fear of reprisal that discourages labour mobilization (HRW 2015).

In light of the analysis above, how should we read the increase in unions since 2013 and the amendments to the labour law?[6] What are the implications – of control over union actions and agendas – when the process of union formation is top down, not to mention under the gaze of key global players? Under what circumstances would these unions constitute a social force that operates at a level of scale beyond the factory, and would be able to link up with other movements? The answers appear glaringly obvious in some ways.

Key provisions of the 2013 amendments of the labour law leave the discretionary power of the bureaucracy intact. Under the new amendments, the registrar for trade unions can deny workers the permission to unionize if the official is unsatisfied with the petition. 'This provision has angered workers and labour rights activists alike, given the country's infamous history of corruption. The registrar, they worry, may end up catering to powerful businessmen and denying workers their union elections' (Hossain 2013). In addition, as in the past, it is evident that radical left wing unions find it almost impossible to obtain registration. The general impression is that only unions formed with the help of externally funded NGOs (the implication being that they are shorn of any militant agenda, are deemed reasonable/pliant) tend to get approval. According to a sociologist studying post Rana Plaza union conditions, many leaders of newly approved unions are already disillusioned. They come with high expectations but find that they possess little actual power.

The trope of *dalal*/double agent is a recurring one in labour narratives of unionization, not surprisingly given the account of surveillance, spying and retaliation noted earlier. Most independent labour leaders see the new unions as company shops, working in the interests of capital. Paradoxically, the amendments have actually made it less cumbersome for owners to dismiss workers accused of 'misconduct'; they can do now without payment. If past practice is any indication, this provision will be used even more to target union activists.

Finally, the government reserved the right to prevent any demonstration or strike it deems 'disruptive' to the community or harmful to the 'national interest.' Suffice it to say, what counts as the national interest or as disruption is open to the logics of power. As one commentator observes, 'Since the rise of Bangladesh's garment industry in the late 1970s, every decent-sized demonstration has been declared disruptive. Even the 2006 labour unrest – which, after decades of industrial growth, led to the formulation of the country's minimum wage – was identified by the government as an international conspiracy to destroy the country's garment industry' (Emran 2013). The issue of national interest is especially complex because it can be mobilized by those on the right in the language of anti-imperialism. Further, the notion of a conspiracy invalidates labour voice and agency.

The post Rana Plaza period has seen more continuities than ruptures. What then of workers' rights? Perhaps it is time to ask, following Vijay Prashad, if – under prevailing conditions – conventional trade unions are the best form to capture the discontent of

workers and to transform their lives? (Prashad 2015:189). It may be time to turn to a broader social movement for change.

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[1] There is some discrepancy among sources on the actual number of factories at present. Some of this can be attributed to a general lack of documentation of small enterprises, especially if they are subcontractors lower down on the commodity chain. Questions of categorization also produce discrepant figures. As of writing, the exact number is the subject of considerable contention between the BGMEA and the Stern School of Business at New York University. In a recent study, the latter concluded there were over 7000 factories, a figure considerably larger than other estimates. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the issue in detail here. It appears the dispute is primarily around the inclusion of certain subcontractors who may or not be producing for the global market. See Dhaka Tribune “BGMEA Slams New York University Study on Bangladeshi RMG Workers.” December 21, 2015. http://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2015/dec/21/bgmea-slams-new-york-university-study-bangladesh-rmg-workers

[2] According to the annual report of the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA), there were 104 garment enterprises, 72 garments accessories enterprises, 40 knitting and other textile products enterprises and 41 textile product enterprises in FY 2012-2013. See http://epzbangladesh.org.bd/files/reports/file_1448276002.pdf

[3]There are differences in the estimate of how many women are employed in the industry. The conventional figure of “90% women” does not capture the heterogeneity of the industry. Knitwear, for instance, which accounts for over 40 percent of apparel export, is produced primarily by male workers.
[4] Section 195 of the Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 (amended 2013) outlaws numerous “unfair labor practices.” For example, no employer shall “dismiss, discharge, remove from employment, or threaten to dismiss, discharge, or remove from employment a worker, or injure or threaten to injure him in respect of his employment by reason that the worker is or proposes to become, or seeks to persuade any other person to become, a member or officer of a trade union.”
[5] The phrase is Vijay Prashad’s (Prashad 2015: 183).
[6] On a related note, Sanchita Bannerjee’s comparative research makes an important intervention by delinking the abstract concept of “improved labor conditions” and “worker empowerment.” She argues that one should not assume that better labor conditions automatically translate into an empowered workforce. She also concludes that change and improvements stemming from top-down programs, though they may be initially effective in improving basic standards, do not help in furthering coalitions with labor groups and institutionalizing their role in policy making (Bannerjee 2014).

Earning as Empowerment?: The Relationship between Paid-Work and Experiences of Domestic Violence in Karachi

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Introduction

Based on extensive interviews in one of Karachi's oldest working class areas, Lyari, this paper explores the relationship between women's engagement in paid work and their experiences of domestic violence. The research includes interviews with women engaged in domestic service, in the public and private education sector, in the field of health, in the service sector and in short-term and seasonal work in factories or small-scale industries. The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of engagement in paid work with women's ability to negotiate and resist violence at the hands of their husbands and other family members. The findings demonstrate that engagement in paid work does not necessarily insulate women from domestic violence, but it often does provide women with a strengthened 'bargaining position' within the household (see Agarwal 1997; Kandiyoti 1988). However, this depends on the nature and conditions of the work itself along with their situations within their families.

Women in low-paid, informal and precarious forms of employment, which are characteristic of the neoliberal economy,[1] do not necessarily experience a strengthened position within the household and neither are they insulated from domestic violence. Rather they face multiple forms of violence and are often exploited within and outside the home. The few women who are able to secure well-paying, secure forms of employment appear to be more confident and more willing to stand up against violence if confronted, but many of these women are also often

[1] For the purposes of this paper, 'neoliberalism' will be used to refer to the decreasing role of the state in regulating the economy along with the opening up of borders in terms of economic trade. While 'neoliberalism' has been critiqued for it lack of precision as a term, I find that it continues to hold some explanatory relevance when it comes to referring to particular economic, social and political processes.

trapped in abusive situations due to a combination of social and cultural pressures. This is reflective of the persistence of patriarchal structures despite a growth in women's employment.

Background: Violence against Women and Employment

As in all contexts, because of a lack of available data, under-reporting due to fear and shame, and varying definitions of 'violence', it is it is difficult to provide a precise figure for the occurrence of violence against women in Pakistan. However, available estimates range from 39% of all married women experiencing domestic violence according to the Demographic Health Survey to Human Rights Watch, which estimates that between 70 and 90% of women have experienced some form of domestic violence.

Definitions of 'violence' vary considerably both within academic and popular discourse. In terms of the academic literature on gender-based violence, violence includes acts that are physical and psychological in nature and operate at the intimate, interpersonal to the societal, macrostructural levels. Gender-based violence is most often targeted against women and girls, although members of the transgender community[2] and some men and boys are also at times targeted. These forms of violence often take place in both the private and public realm and include acts of physical violence as well as threats, coercion, and harassment of any form. Gender-based violence can also include an economic or material aspect, which is often neglected in the literature. This can include exploitation, such as paying women lower wages or denying them pay altogether. This can also include disallowing women control over resources within the household or their own earnings. Also, while gender-based violence has been shown to be a universal phenomenon, the ways it manifests itself must be viewed as context specific.

If the definitions of violence vary greatly within the literature, they are even more varied in popular discourse, which makes research on the subject particularly challenging (see Rajan 2016). Respondents had widely different understandings of what constituted violence, with some reserving the category 'violence', or '*tashaddud*' in Urdu, for only very extreme physical acts and not thinking it noteworthy to include slapping or shoving in their narratives. For example, when asked about the occurrence of violence, one woman stated, 'If you have a normal fight and slap once or twice, you don't call that violence; violence is a very big thing; it is very torturous.'

[2] Members of the *Khwaja Sira* community, who are most often categorized as transgender women, in particular face multiple forms of violence encompassing physical, psychological, economic, and social forms.

Others focused on psychological forms of violence in their narratives such as a lack of emotional engagement or care on the part of their husbands. Several women spoke about the stress that women faced as a result of having to juggle several responsibilities and material deprivation as forms of violence. Furthermore, while research on gender-based violence in the Global South and in Muslim-majority societies often focuses on the 'cultural' aspects of violence (see Abu Lughod 2013), culture itself must be viewed as processual, dynamic and contested (see Sewell 2005).

While violence against women takes multiple forms and includes violence committed in the home and outside, at the hands of family members, acquaintances and strangers, and can occur at the physical, psychological, and structural levels, this paper focuses in on the relationship between women's economic participation and their experiences of domestic violence—violence committed by intimate partners or family members within the home. The purpose of this research is to gauge whether any relationship between the women's involvement in paid employment and their experiences of domestic violence exists and if so, what form(s) that relationship takes.

Research conducted so far in this area has presented multiple and sometimes contradictory findings (Vyas and Watts 2008; Taylor 2015). Much of the research conducted on women's economic participation emphasizes the positive impacts on women's lives (Quisumbing, 2003; World Bank 2012; Kabeer, 2003; Dwyer and Bruce, 1988; Aizer 2010). However, a number of studies actually document an increase in women's experiences of various forms of violence as a result of economic participation including discrimination in terms of organizational patterns the confinement of women to particularly low-paid and insecure forms of work (Cruz and Klinger 2011), harassment and violence at the workplace (and on the journey to and from work (*ibid.;* Sarwari 2015).

In certain instances, violence experienced at home has also been documented as increasing as a result of women's economic activity. Relative resource theory suggests an inverse relationship between men's economic resources and instances of violence against women (Good 1971; McCloskey 1996; Macmillan and Gartner 1999; Panda and Agarwal 2005). In other words, when women start earning more than their husbands, men can at times respond with violence in order to reassert their patriarchal authority. This is especially true in contexts where the cultural expectation that men be the sole breadwinners is stronger (Neville 2014). The contravention of the local gender order caused by women's increased earnings and male un- or under-

employment can sometimes lead to a violent backlash (Jewkes 2002; Goetz and Sen Gupta 1994).

The Case of Women in Lyari, Karachi

Lyari is one of the oldest settlements in the city and began as a fishing settlement in the eighteenth century. The population of the area grew significantly during the period of British colonial rule, when the British began modernising Karachi's port and people began migrating in larger numbers from what is now Balochistan, Sindh and the Kutch region of Gujarat because of the employment opportunities provided by the port (Viqar 2014). Since then Lyari has been shaped by multiple waves of migration of people from across the Indian Ocean region. Although it is often characterized as a Baloch area in popular discourse, the Baloch make up approximately 50% of Lyari's residents. Lyari is also home to a significant Kutchi population, various other Sindhi groups, Punjabis, Pashtuns, Bengalis, and a small number of Urdu speakers, known in Karachi as Muhajirs. It is also religiously diverse including a large number of Hindus and Christians as well as members of the Zikri community, a heterodox Sunni sect originating in Balochistan (Sabir 2008).

Lyari has been the subject of structural neglect since the period before Partition, when some of the city's most polluting areas were located in its vicinity. Since the formation of Pakistan, Lyari has continued to be sidelined in Karachi's urban development with the state giving preference in terms of housing to those who had migrated from India. Since the 1970s, Lyari has been dominated by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and has largely relied on the party's patronage for whatever development that has taken place in the area. The PPP also awarded a small number of government jobs to residents from Lyari, which helped some families achieve a modicum of social mobility. Other families benefited from the out-migration to Gulf countries of male labour during the 1970s and 1980s, whose remittances enabled some to improve their social position considerably. Many of those who benefitted from these trends have migrated out of the area. However, the most of Lyari's remaining residents remain trapped in insecure, low-paid work despite a rapid rise in education levels.

An estimated 22% of women in Pakistan participate in wage labour—one of the lowest rates in the region (World Bank 2014).[3] Most of these women are engaged in agricultural labour, and the vast majority is engaged in the informal sector. According to a survey conducted in Lyari by our research team, the number of women in the paid labour force is similar to the rate at the national level (approximately 20%) while their occupational profiles differed significantly.[4] While the ratio is relatively low, significantly more women are engaged in paid work than in the previous generation when the rate was approximately 10%. Most of the women who reported being in paid employment in Lyari were engaged in low-paid domestic work in neighbouring areas or in the more affluent parts of the city. The second most common occupation for women was teaching, which included employment in government and private schools. The vast majority of teachers, however, were employed in private schools following a boom in recent years in the low-cost, low-quality private education sector (see Heyneman and Stern 2013). These teachers earn significantly less than their counterparts in government schools. However, many young women still chose to teach in private schools because this was considered a 'respectable' job by their families and because they did not travel far from home for work. There were also fewer women engaged in the service sector, sales, healthcare, and manufacturing. Findings revealed that, while increasing numbers of women are engaged in paid employment, the jobs available to them are generally low paid, insecure and in the unregulated informal sector that are the hallmark of neoliberal economies (see Beneria 2001; Beneria and Flores 2005; Menéndez, *et. al.* 2007).

Researchers rightly distinguish between 'economic engagement' and 'economic empowerment'. While being involved in any time of waged labour qualifies a woman as being 'economically active', this does not necessarily translate into 'empowerment'. As Kabeer (2012) argues, market forces often reproduce gender inequality rather than decreasing it. The unfettered market forces that are characteristic of neoliberal economic arrangements can also alter patterns of gender inequality in terms of discriminating against women in terms of wage rates and hiring practices (see Anker *et. al.* 2003;). Furthermore, there is an assumption that economic engagement necessarily translates into women's control over their own incomes, that women have access to social and legal support, and that financial independence, even when it is

[3] The Global Gender Gap Index places Pakistan at 141 out of 142 countries in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity (WEF 2014).

[4] The vast majority of women engaged in paid employment in Pakistan were involved in the agricultural sector.

achieved, will allow women to exit abusive relationships ignoring complex social contexts. However, economic engagement can only lead to empowerment if it leads to a transformation in women's agency and power at the individual and structural levels. More realistically, and as this research reveals, oppression and empowerment do not exist as binary opposites. Rather, women's economic participation has complex impacts on their agency and power depending on the nature of their employment, the power relations within their families, and on the dynamics within their respective communities.

A Note on Methodology

Research for this paper involved a combination of qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. It was supplemented by a survey of approximately 400 residents focusing on trends related to employment and education. Interviewees were purposefully selected in order to reflect the dominant forms of employment engaged in by women in the area. Interviews were carried out largely with women from the Kutchi and Baloch communities who were employed as domestic workers and teachers as these were the most common areas of employment for women. However, interviews with women employed in a range of other professions including sales, healthcare, and manufacturing were also included along with interviews of a few women who were not engaged in wage employment.

Research on gender-based violence poses a series of methodological and ethical challenges, which must be taken into account as findings are being analysed both by the researcher and readers. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, definitions of violence vary greatly depending on the individual, and there may be vast discrepancies between what the researcher and her subject categorize as 'violence'. Secondly, because of the sensitive nature of violence committed within the family in particular, respondents may be unwilling to share such information with people who are previously known to them or who are connected to people in their social network because of the fear of reprisal by family members and the threat posed to women in already fragile social positions. This is also true for women who experience violence in the workplace because of the fear that such a revelation could cost them their jobs. For example, one of the women employed as a domestic worker in the same part of town as my family was afraid that whatever she told me about her employer might be shared with them despite the fact that I did not have any relation with nor have any means of knowing the identity of her employer. They

may also be unwilling to share such information with those who are unknown because of the difficulty in speaking about traumatic and deeply personal issues with strangers. Furthermore, those who are currently in violent situations either within their homes or in their places of employment, may be in a situation of denial as a means of coping. Finally, researchers must tread carefully when asking questions related to violence in order to avoid causing the respondent further trauma as a result of having to re-dredge painful events. This will inevitably affect the nature and depth of findings.

Women in Low-Paid Work

Findings from the research conducted amongst women in Lyari revealed multiple and often contradictory trends with regard to the relationship between income earning and violence, with many women arguing that their involvement in paid work increased pressures within the household and could contribute to the occurrence of violence. Some of the women who were interviewed argued that women's economic activity placed a strain on family relations, which could lead to tensions between husbands and wives over domestic responsibilities, and at times, could also lead to physical violence and divorce. Speaking about the women in her own social circle, Shakeela, who was currently unemployed but who had previously worked in factories and as a teacher, said:

> Because of doing a job women have to face more violence. This is because women have to contribute 10-12 hours in the company or household they are working in if they are working as maids. When they come home they are obviously tired because they are human too, so they aren't able to give time to their children, their husbands or their household chores…so when the husband comes home he expects everything to be ready for him. If he doesn't get his food on time and the woman puts his food on the table after a long wait, he will get angry. This leads to fights and even divorces. The husband says to the wife, "you don't give me time". Women say to their husbands, "the money you contribute towards household expenses isn't enough"….This way they both get hot-tempered and this leads to more fights. Then the woman fights with her tongue and the man with his hand.

According to Shakeela, women's economic engagement was, for the most part, borne out of necessity rather than choice and was the result of their husbands not earning enough to support the family. Many women, including Shakeela, resented having to earn as they also believed in the male breadwinner model. This was exacerbated by the fact that their earnings rarely had an impact on the division of responsibilities within the household. Their husbands still expected them to complete domestic chores and to give them attention. The strains caused by this 'double burden' were frequently reported as leading to conflict and at times, to violence.

Some women also reported experiencing violence as a result of conflicts over the control of their earnings. While most women claimed that they had control over their income, a few women mentioned having to turn their incomes over to their husbands. I met Zainab while I was interviewing her neighbours, a mother and daughter, Naimat and Habiba, at a local beauty parlor run out of their home. Zainab was in her 40s and worked in a school canteen. Her husband was regularly physically abusive, which is why she often spent time at her mother's house as a means of escaping the abuse—a common strategy adopted by women as a means of coping with physical abuse without actually exiting the marriage. Zainab recounted that her husband once hit her with an iron hammer for not giving him the money she had saved for her 'committee'.[5]

While involvement in paid work often placed increased pressures on women, most women did not view their economic activity as the primary reason for the problems their were facing in their marriages. Naimat, who ran a beauty parlor and was in her 40s, said that her husband was not physically violent but that he neglected her emotionally, which caused her a great deal of distress. Her mother, who was in her 60s, was abused by her husband severely throughout her marriage both physically and verbally. She worked as a domestic worker and a local midwife. All three women said that their involvement in economic activity was not the cause of their husbands' maltreatment; they were just cruel. Rather, they claimed their husbands were quite happy that they were earning because it took the pressure off of them for having to provide for the family.

While all three women were involved in low-paid work, there was a difference in the ways that Zainab and Naimat coped with their unhappy marriages as opposed to Habiba, which reflected a generational change. Zainab and Naimat were both willing to distance themselves

[5] Committees are a common, informal savings mechanism in South Asia. In a committee, several people contribute a fixed amount every month, and one person in the group receives that amount per month. This is especially common amongst women who may not have access to bank accounts.

from their husbands in order to cope with abuse, which in Zainab's case was physical and in Naimat's was emotional. Both women felt that being in a stronger economic position would allow them to do this. Habiba, on the other hand, withstood the violence throughout most of her life. She said her only means of coping was to be patient and put her trust in God. She even prayed that she would die first so that her husband would eventually realize her value.

Other women in Habiba's age group also reported patiently withstanding violence throughout their marriages, while women in subsequent generations seemed to be less tolerant. While most women were still unwilling to withdraw formally from their marriages, they were willing to distance themselves from their husbands by moving back to their natal homes either temporarily or permanently. They were also more vocally opposed to the abuse than their mothers' generation. For example, Sakina, who was in her 60s and worked as a domestic servant, said that her husband beat her since they got married. She said the abuse was more severe when she lived in his village because she had no support there. Her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law were also abusive towards her. Sakina said he beat her less when they moved to the city because her natal family was close by, which strengthened her position (Rajan 2014). While her husband did not live with her and her children most of the time, he visited regularly. When I asked Sakina why she allowed him to enter her house despite the fact that he was still verbally abusive and provided the family with no financial support, she jokingly responded that she has become accustomed to the verbal abuse: 'I am not at peace until I hear him cursing me.'

Her daughter, Sahrish, who also worked as a domestic servant, was also abused by her husband soon after they got married. She said that he beat her and starved her while she was pregnant and blamed her sisters-in-law and mother-in-law for turning him against her. She eventually moved back in with her mother in order to escape, and he divorced her over the phone. While she did not instigate the dissolution of the marriage herself, Sahrish's move back to her natal family contributed to her divorce. Hence, there seems to be a change in attitudes taking place between women of different generations as to the acceptability of abuse. In these cases, economic participation did not seem to have an impact on the risk of domestic violence, but the response to violence by women varied in terms of the age of the respondent, with younger women more likely to resist rather than withstand abuse as compared to their mothers' generation.

Most of the women I interviewed who were involved in domestic or other forms of low-paid, insecure employment would prefer not to have to work outside of the home and resented the

fact that their husbands were unable to support them and their families financially. While some recognized that earning also provided them with some level of independence, and while a few women also spoke about the enjoyment of being away from home, particularly if others were taking up the domestic responsibilities, most would still prefer not having to earn if given the option. For many women involved in low-paid, insecure work, the stress of earning while balancing domestic responsibilities was itself viewed as a form of violence.

On the other hand, women whose husbands or sons were earning enough to support their families often enjoyed a particular status. For example, Sakina's sister, Fatima was introduced to me as a 'success story' in her neighbourhood. She worked for most of her life as a domestic worker, but when I met her, she had not been working outside of the home for several years. This was because her sons had started earning enough to support the family, and her husband was also earning as a construction worker. Her sons were proud of the fact that her mother did not have to earn anymore as it confirmed that they were fulfilling their responsibilities as men, and Fatima was proud that the men in her family were able to provide for her and her daughter.

Women in Higher-paid Professions

For the minority of women who were in higher-paying, more secure forms of employment, their involvement in economic activity was framed as a choice rather than a necessity and was often described as source of personal fulfillment for them. However, for those few women who were able to secure such forms of employment, this did not come without a cost. Women who were engaged in work outside of the home before marriage were often the subjects of gossip, taunts, disapproval and scorn within their families and communities. This was particularly true of those women who traveled outside of their neighbourhood to work and who were earning relatively well. This was a cause of great emotional distress for them and for their immediate families, threatening their reputations and their potential to find a partner for marriage. Shabana, who was in her 30s and worked as an advocate in a law firm, was unmarried. She spoke about how her family was never supportive of her education or her career although they happily took money from her. Shabana said that women who left the house for work were labeled in a negative sense and looked down upon within the community:

> Over here, people neither let women be independent, nor do they like independent women, and if some woman tries to survive in her life like this [independently], she is first of all labeled as a little too free, not in a good sense, in a negative sense.

Shabana was previously engaged to her maternal cousin, but her aunt broke off the engagement when Shabana refused to leave her job. Despite the fact that Shabana contributes to her family's earnings, she faces constant pressure from her family to leave her job, stay at home and get married. While earning a decent income may allow Shabana to live a relatively independent life, and while she enjoys her job, the pressure she faces as a result of her family and community's disapproval is a cause of considerable stress for her.

Similarly, I spoke to two sisters, Sadaf and Iqra, about their experiences working in the retail sector. While their mother spent most of her life engaged in low-paid domestic work, these sisters were able to secure higher paying jobs partially because, unlike their mother, they had access to fairly decent education. Iqra, who was twenty-one, had been married for two years and had a one year old daughter. She worked for several years in the retail and sales industry and earned a relatively decent salary before she left her job in order to get married. She married a man from a different caste group, which was viewed as being controversial by her family. Like many women in her community, Iqra quit her job when she got married and became financially dependent on her husband, who earns much less than she did and spends his earnings on himself, and her father-in-law. Since her marriage, Iqra has faced regular physical abuse from her husband especially when he is drunk. She is unable to leave her husband because of the pressure from the community and her family to remain within the marriage. Her uncle is particularly vocal about her remaining in her marriage: 'My maternal uncle told me on my marriage day that now that you are going from this house in a bride's dress, then you are allowed to leave your new house only in your funeral shroud.' Iqra feels even more pressured to remain in the marriage because she defied her family's wishes to marry outside of her community.

Sadaf, who was twenty-five, worked at a large department store in one of the city's fanciest shopping malls. Sadaf has worked her way up the retail ladder and earned far more than anyone in her immediate family and more than the vast majority of the people in her neighbourhood, which may be a source of resentment and envy as she has been able to afford a much higher standard of living for her family than most others in the area. Like Shabana, this also made her an object of a great deal of gossip and scorn, which also caused her and her family a great deal

of distress. In order to protect her reputation, Sadaf agreed to marry one of her cousins. Despite the fact that he was unemployed, he and his family insisted that she quit her job after marriage. For this reason, Sadaf was postponing the marriage for as long as possible.

In some cases, having access to independent income has given women has made the option of leaving an abusive situation more feasible. While one would assume that women with more secure, higher paying jobs would be more likely to exit an abusive situation, this was not necessarily the case as various other factors intervened in the determination of women's choices and constraints. For example, Shakeela was married for many years to a man who was physically and verbally abusive towards her and has one daughter with him. She has worked as a domestic servant for many years and could barely support herself and her daughter with her earnings. While her husband did contribute to the household earnings and did not object to her working outside of the home, he was cruel in various ways. When he refused to allow Shakeela's aging, blind mother to live with them, Shakeela finally decided to leave him with her daughter. She has since been independently and is hiding from her husband for fear that he would take her daughter away from her. Despite the fact that Shakeela earned extremely little as a domestic worker and could barely make ends meet, she chose to leave her husband after years of withstanding abuse.

On the other hand, women with more secure, higher paying jobs often still stayed with abusive family members for complex reasons including social pressures and emotional attachment to their abusers. Aneela worked for several years as a life insurance salesperson and had two young children, a girl and a boy. She was paid relatively well and enjoyed her job. Her husband had been unemployed for several years, and hence she was the one supporting their household financially. Despite this, Aneela said that her husband asserted his authority over her and subjected her to 'mental torture'. She described him as controlling, paranoid and hot-tempered. While it was unclear from her narrative whether he physically abused her or not, Aneela was subjected to constant mental anguish and was very vocal about being extremely unhappy in her marriage. However, she had not left her husband as yet because she was worried that it would affect her daughter's future, particularly in terms of her marriageability. At the same time, throughout our discussion, Aneela emphasized the fact that the most important thing for women was to have access to their own money so that they could stand up for themselves. She gestured towards her bag and told that she carried divorce papers with her at all times and was waiting for the day that she would be able to sign them. Therefore, while social pressure was

keeping Aneela in a violent marriage, the fact that she had access to an independent income may have allowed her to at least imagine the possibility of eventually exiting this abusive situation.

Conclusions

Findings from discussions with women in Lyari reveal a complex relationship between women's involvement in paid employment and their experiences of domestic violence. While most women did not identify a clear link between employment and an increase or decrease the in the occurrence of domestic violence, women's involvement in paid employment came with a combination of costs and benefits. For some women, earning an income provided them with the ability to leave or at least imagine leaving an abusive marriage. However, simply earning an income did not guarantee that women would be able to leave a violent marriage as the social pressure to remain within a marriage was extremely great, particularly if one had children.

Furthermore, while the number of women in paid employment is still relatively low, mirroring the trend in Pakistan as a whole, more and more women are joining the paid labour force every year. However, most of these women are engaged in low-paid, insecure forms of employment, which are characteristic of neoliberal economies. Many women spoke about the pressure of carrying the double burden of paid work and domestic responsibilities as a form of violence in and of itself. Engagement in paid work also often led to increased tensions within the household as men often expected women to continue to fulfill domestic responsibilities even when they themselves were not employed. This could lead to arguments and might also contribute to violent situations. Most of these women would choose not to work outside of the home if they could afford to do so. On the other hand, women in well-paid, secure forms of employment spoke positively about their jobs as being a source of confidence and pride. However, they often faced other kinds of pressures, particularly psychological and emotional stress as a result of disapproval from their extended families or communities. While they may have enjoyed their jobs, this did not come without a cost.

Therefore, women's economic engagement did not guarantee empowerment. While it usually strengthened women's bargaining position within the household, it also came with a variety of costs. The fact that women are entering the labour market in greater numbers at a time when there are few well-paid, secure employment options available to them diminishes the empowering potential of paid employment. For employment to actually be a means of empowerment, it must be well-paid and secure, and the gendered power relations within the

home and the community must also shift so that domestic responsibilities are shared, and women's increased mobility and independence is viewed as being acceptable.

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