Caring about Care Workers: Organising in the Female Shadow of Globalisation

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Introduction

Over the past decade, studies of globalisation have insightfully exposed the global re-organisation of production. But much less has been said about it’s “intimate ‘Other’”, the global re-organisation of reproduction (Truong, 1996: 47). In this “female underside of globalization” (Ehrenreich, 2002: 3), women of colour from the global South increasingly labour as reproductive care workers for families in the North. With this gendered and racialised international division of caring labour, globalisation has crafted a “new world domestic order” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Yet, in the mainstream scholarship on globalisation, the female sphere of reproduction is marginalised, and care workers are taken to be “truants from globalised economic webs” (Pratt and Yeoh, 2003: 160).

Far from marginal to globalisation, however, care work is essential for the reproduction of global capitalism. Amongst the most important of these caring jobs is paid domestic work, which remains iconic of the low-wage service jobs that are proliferating in globalised economies (Chang, 2000). Subject to notoriously exploitative pay, abusive working conditions, and debilitating racism and sexism, these “servants of globalization” (Parreñas, 2001) are beginning to challenge the logic that the sector is ‘unorganised’. In a recent proliferation of global organising around the plight of domestic workers, one of globalisation’s most hidden dimensions is gaining visibility, and some of its most vulnerable workers are gaining a voice.

This article analyses this resurgence of domestic worker organising globally to understand the emerging structure of resistance in globalisation’s female shadow. I argue that domestic worker organising is marked by a bipolar structure of representation. On the one hand, an ‘association model’ recognises and utilises transnationalism’s reformulation of the calculus of race and gender, and has pursued a new politics of identity around migrancy. On the other hand, a ‘union model’ has attempted to recover the traditional mobilising identity of class, reconfigured to recognise the significance to the labour movement of gendered care work under globalisation. In this bifurcated landscape, new efforts at ‘organising the unorganised’ have challenged the union-based labour movement, and force a reconsideration of the relationship between ‘organising’ and ‘unionising’.

Organising the ‘Unorganisable’?

With cross-national unionisation rates in the domestic service sector at barely 1% (ILO, 2004), domestic workers are not only unorganised, but widely regarded as ‘unorganisable’ (see Ford, 2004). This is usually attributed to the structural barriers against organisation inherent in the nature of domestic service. Domestic workers labour in isolation, behind closed doors, making general organising, and specifically unionisation, difficult. As Hondagneu-Sotelo and Riegos (1997) argue: “The peculiar exceptionalism of paid domestic work centers on the spatial isolation and atomisation of individual employers, employees, and workplaces” (56). For Bujra (2000) this isolation means that “in structural terms privatized workers are not assembled for exploitation in a context where their consciousness of grievance leads to solidarity with fellow workers” (179). Furthermore, employer ideologies that construct domestics as ‘one of the family,’ and social ideologies that refuse to recognize domestic labour as real work, mitigate against domestics’ understanding of themselves as ‘workers,’ and therefore unionisation. Even when domestics can overcome these ideological mystifications,
possibilities for collective mobilisation based on a worker identity are limited given the “personal nature of the employer-employee relationship”, and “the worker’s extreme dependence on the employer” (ILO, 2004: 43). These features of the paid domestic work arrangement, together with the social and economic vulnerability of domestic workers as a group, make it difficult for domestic workers to exercise their right to freedom of association where it exists, and to advocate for such rights where it does not. “Isolation, dependence, [and] invisibility” (Gaitskell et al., 1983/4: 87) are therefore the patterns of paid domestic work that hinder organisation generally, and unionisation specifically.

As much as the structure of domestic service places limits to unionisation, however, exclusive focus on the conditions that make domestic workers ‘unorganisable’ cast domestics as passive and powerless victims of the structural features of their work. But this construction is untenable in light of the long history of not just organisation, but unionisation, in this sector.

As early as 1881, washerwomen organised the “Washing Society” to mobilise for higher wages and called a strike to enforce their demand (Van Raaphorst, 1988). Eventually attracting nearly three thousand washerwomen, cooks, and child nurses, and lasting almost three weeks, this act not only defies the construction of domestics “as passive victims”, it also “revealed an astute political consciousness by making women’s work carried out in private households a public issue” (Hunter, 1993: 205-206). In fact, Smith (1999) argues that far from being relegated to the private, domestic workers made the issue of household labour “nothing less than ‘the Great American’ question of the nineteenth century” (855). Van Raaphorst (1988) documents this early history of domestic worker unionisation in the United States and profiles the formation of domestic worker unions like the American Servant Girls’ Association and the Domestic Worker Industrial Union of the International Workers of the World.

More recent history from other parts of the world reveal a similar flurry of organising activity amongst domestic workers. The histories of domestic service in Latin America and the Caribbean demonstrate a tradition of active attempts at unionisation in the sector (Chaney and Castro, 1989; Gill, 1994). And in Africa, domestic workers have, intermittently, organised into domestic worker’s unions seeking to deal with political repression as much as work-related issues (Gaitskell et al., 1983/4; Van Onselen, 1982; Bujra, 2000). Actually, the deep and active history of mobilisation amongst paid household workers in Africa is so at odds with the prevailing construction of the sector as recalcitrant to unionisation that Bujra (2000) is forced to comment, regarding her experiences studying domestic service in East Africa, that

 perhaps least anticipated in this study was the discovery that domestic servants can, within limits, organise themselves as unionised labour, making class-conscious alliances with other workers… Against all the odds, domestic servants here and in other parts of Africa combined to protest their lot, becoming a significant element in the creation of a trans-ethnic and politically conscious urban working class (179-180).

While the documented history of unionism amongst domestic workers is limited, especially in terms of geographical and historical scope, it does reveal that, far from being resistant to organisation, and especially unionisation, domestic workers have organised on the basis of their worker status to form unions. This history challenges the presumption that paid domestic work is “an occupational oddity that defies organization” (Smith, 2000: 47).

But, the most important feature of these unionisation efforts remains, unfortunately, that they are not sustained. Given that domestic work, in many countries, currently represents or historically represented the largest single sector of the female workforce, and given its historical significance as a point of entry into the labour market for women of colour (Glenn 1992), it is indeed interesting that domestic workers
have failed to sustain their unionisation efforts to the same extent as other sectors. Perhaps the failure to sustain unionisation is not as reflective of this sector’s resistance to organising as labour, as it is of organised labour’s resistance to unionising this sector.

In each of the documented histories, the mainstream labour movement’s failure of domestic workers is noted. Van Raaphorst (1988), for instance, shows that in their efforts to unionise, domestic workers could not sustain their activity due, in part, to the indifference of much of organised labour. Although organisations as diverse as the Knights of Labour, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Women’s Trade Union League, attempted to organise domestic workers, organised labour, in the main, opposed the unionisation of domestic workers and provided little to no support for workers’ nascent efforts. Palmer (1989), also writing about the early history of unionism, observes that “domestic workers were not a high priority for unions” (127), and Christiansen (1999), too, documents the exclusion of household workers from the agenda of various labour organisations. Smith (2000), surveying a broader history, concludes that

Although a few domestic service unions had the support of trade unionists, the labour movement largely ignored the many women who performed household work for pay, despite the fact that they accounted for more wage-earning women than any other occupation (67).

While the relationship between organised labour and domestic workers’ unions is under-explored in other parts of the world, where it has been studied, the conclusions remain the same. In Great Britain, it is argued that paid domestic work “has received very little attention…from trade unionists” (Anderson, 2001: 25). In Bolivia, Gill (1994) argues that the “Bolivian labour movement and traditional political parties have ignored domestic workers” (124). And, in South Africa, where the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has actually been highlighted as an exemplary union federation regarding the support for domestic workers (ILO, 2004), domestics had to make the following impassioned plea just not to be abandoned by the federation:

*COSATU...now we are in the dumps and you just leave us like that. You talk about how you are the umbrella and you give us all a shelter. But how come you don’t give the domestic worker a shelter? ....You don’t know what a struggle we have got in the backyards...We cannot [survive] without a union that knows our struggle* (South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union Pamphlet, 1996).

The response to the plea was so half-hearted that Grossman (1997) concludes, in general, that “there is insufficient support from the large unions and federations, which appear to give domestic workers ‘third-class status’ within the union movement” (63).

Today, organised labour recognises the need for effective representation of the sector, but defers to the rhetoric that the sector is ‘unorganisable’ to justify the failure of sustained unionisation for domestics. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, in a representative statement for instance, argued that while it is necessary to organise domestic workers, “[t]oday, however, the sector remains largely impermeable to unionisation” (ICFTU, 2002: 2). Cobble (1996) argues that before women employees were unionised successfully, it was claimed that women were ‘unorganisable’. Today, “a new myth...has replaced the old...[T]he old idea that women were unorganisable has now been superseded by the unsubstantiated notion that certain kinds of jobs (almost all of which are female-dominated) are unorganisable” (Cobble, 1996: 336-337). Deconstruction of this myth has never been more possible nor necessary than in the era of globalisation.

Given globalisation’s disruption of standard definitions of employment, work, and organisation, the peculiarities of paid domestic work “no longer seems so anomalous” (Smith, 2000: 48). Despite their marginalisation by mainstream accounts of globalisation, and by the mainstream labour movement, domestic workers in the new global economy refuse to submit to notions that domestic work is ‘unorganisable’. The systematic abuses of, especially migrant, domestic workers in the global economy
has generated an equally systematic response – a “groundswell of domestic worker organising” that, according to one report, represents an “upsurge in activity by domestic worker organising groups, the likes of which has not been seen since the depression” (Press Release, Domestic Workers Rights Partnership, August 6 2001).

An analysis of this contemporary ‘groundswell’ of domestic worker organising and the challenges it poses for the construction of the sector as ‘unorganisable’, reveals that the proliferation of organising efforts for domestic workers globally is characterised by a bifurcated structure of representation in which an ‘association model’ that involves primarily non-union-based migrant, women, and labour organising, competes with a ‘union model’ that seeks to overcome organised labour’s historical failure to represent domestic workers.

Organising Domestics: The ‘Association Model’

In 1995, Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic worker in Singapore, was executed after being convicted, most argue falsely, for murder. The execution generated a massive response, as various organisations representing migrant women participated in protests and denunciations of what they saw as a wrongful conviction and unjust execution. The level of protest in the Philippines was even compared “to the ferment preceding the fall of the Marcos dictatorship” (Bakan and Stasiulis, 1997: 4). In the same year, Sarah Balabagan, a fifteen year old Filipina working in the United Arab Emirates, was sentenced to death for killing her employer in self-defense as he raped her by knifepoint. Again, global organisations were activated, with transnational associations like the Gabriele Network playing specific advocacy roles (Chang, 2000), and various other migrant domestic worker groups lending their voice to the protests. The response following both these incidents confirm the resurgence of domestic worker activism globally, and are symptomatic of the systematic features of this contemporary mobilisation: nontraditional organisations mobilised around the injustices of migrancy, rather than traditional national unions organised around class exploitation.

Domestic workers have always been amongst the most exploited workers. They are channelled into paid domestic work on the basis of several axes of differentiation – race, class, and gender – which are reflective and generative of social stratification more broadly (Glenn 1992). Globalisation has transferred these historical realities of paid domestic work to a global circuit, compounding domestics’ existing dimensions of vulnerability with compromised citizenship status (Parreñas, 2001). The codification of citizenship as a marker of inequality under globalisation, and the reinscription of gender in transnationalism has been so powerful, that gendered migrancy has framed a politics of identity that now dominates domestic worker organising globally.

As a result, domestic worker labour organising today is primarily through an ‘association model’ - a non-union-based model of representation in which migrant, ethnic, women’s, human rights, legal advocacy, and non-governmental organisations mobilise, and on a wider range of issues than just employment. In North America, Asia, and Europe (the three main regional geographic constellations across which care resources are transnationally relocated), this model of representation dominates domestic worker organising, where female and immigrant identities have become the basis for mobilisation.

In the United States, the Domestic Workers Association of CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles) remains one of the most successful domestic worker organisations on the west coast, and is an association that mobilises based on the strength of workers’ connections around gender, on “[w]omen’s relational identities and group orientations” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Riegos, 1997: 71). While the association is focused on the upgrading of work, it achieves this, in part, through reliance on cultural events, and by mobilising around workers’ other identities. Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA), also in California, and defined as a “support group for Latina immigrant domestic workers” (Chang,
is focused quite specifically on organising ‘immigrant’ women. According to Chang (2000), both represent models of “nontraditional labour and community organising among immigrant women and women of color” (Chang, 2000: 202). Based less on traditional forms of labour organising, the ‘association model’ focuses on providing advocacy and representation through more broad-based organisations that are critically oriented to migrant women workers.

On the east coast of the United States, as well, there has been a proliferation of similar organising of domestic workers. The Domestic Workers Rights Partnership is a coalition that combines at least eight of the most organised advocacy groups for domestic workers in New York City, ranging from ethnic to worker advocacy groups. The partnership is primarily focused on worker’s rights, but is not union-based. It includes community and non-governmental organisations, as well as human rights and non-union labour advocacy groups. As a result, the partnership is defined by a constituency activated by migrant worker identities, and the activities of the partnership go well beyond the scope of employment, advocating sometimes on non-work-related immigration matters. Such non-union-based associational labour organising is, of course, not surprising in the United States, where a weak labour movement has been displaced by stronger ethnic organisations and associations of immigrant workers and workers of colour over many sectors for some time (see Cranford and Ladd, 2003). But, domestic worker organising is dominated by this model of representation globally as well.

In Canada, where the labour movement has been historically stronger, the ‘association model’ is a dominant strategy for organising domestic workers, working as much on immigration and citizenship issues as on traditional workplace-related matters. The Association for the Defence of the Rights of Domestic Workers is one of the most active, an organisation seeking legislative change to improve the conditions of domestic service. It’s model of organising is seen as the only one available for the sector: “at this moment, the only thing we can do is to reinforce organisations of the household workers, like this association” (Elvir, 1997: 155). Another major organisation in Canada remains INTERCEDE, the Toronto-based organisation that has campaigned in coalition with other advocacy groups for broader based bargaining, as well as for changes in immigration policies that affect the citizenship and labour rights of workers (Fudge, 1997). Focused primarily on immigrants, INTERCEDE reflects the importance of migrancy as a basis of mobilisation and action, and of the salience of citizenship not only as an axis of inequality but as a mobilising construct around which workplace-based claims are made (see Fudge, 1997).

Domestic worker organising outside of North America, too, is primarily migrant-based non-union labour organising through an ‘association model’. In Asia and the Middle East, especially where there is limited local capacity, non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) in association with other groups have become the main organisers of domestics, not unions. In Lebanon, for example, domestic worker organising is dominated by NGO’s that have organised primarily based on migrant identities and advocate on workplace-related issues in tandem with more broad-based issues relating to immigrant rights (Jureidini, 2002). Similarly, in India, Battacherjee (2002) reports the displacement of unions in labour organising by NGO’s who have taken on the burden of organising foreign domestic workers. And in Indonesia, the same is evident as well (Ford, 2004), where the largest and most vocal organization mobilizing domestic workers, Solidaritas Perempuan, is an NGO rather than a traditional union (Silvey, 2004). Ford (2004) therefore concludes that “advocacy for overseas migrant worker rights in Asia and the organization of foreign domestic workers have largely been the province of non-union bodies” (101).

A large amount of domestic worker organising in Asian receiving countries is concentrated in Hong Kong, where the large numbers of mainly Filipina migrant domestic workers are representative of an explosion of migrant workers. The Asian Migrant Centre is an NGO that remains amongst the most important centres of domestic worker organising anywhere. And, it is representative of the ‘association
model’ of organising domestics in Hong Kong. Of the more than 2,500 organisations and associations organising overseas migrant workers in Hong Kong, only three – the Filipino Migrant Workers Union, the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union, and the Asian Domestic Workers Union – are formally registered as unions (Ford, 2004). The thousands of other groups organise on a wider range of identities and issues than traditional union organising would.

In Europe, organising foreign domestic workers is also based on the ‘association model’. The UK-based Kalayaan, a coalition of migrant support organisations, has been amongst the most active agencies campaigning intensively for the protection of migrant domestic workers. Mobilising workers primarily on the basis of their compromised citizenship status, Kalayaan has, like its Canadian counterparts, actively sought structural change through legislation that targets both worker and immigrant rights, while at the same time offering a range of services for migrant domestic workers, including amongst others, legal services, English classes, and services for finding emergency housing. The organisation also functions as part of the Respect Network that has adopted a 10-point charter of women domestic workers’ rights, many of which have political implications extending beyond the workplace. In many ways, the export of previously national patterns of domestic work to a global plane has translocated workers to more resource-rich environments and has thereby facilitated this proliferation of organising efforts.

The result has been an inflammation of domestic worker organising, but not necessarily always domestic worker unionising. Organised labour has therefore had a mixed relationship with the ‘association model’. While some unions have joined forces with other organisations to create associations representing domestic workers, others have remained distant, viewing such broader associations as a substitute for, rather than a complement to, traditional labour organising.

**Organising vs. Unionising?**

In the debate on the legitimacy of non-union forms of organising in the sector, some argue that non-union models of labour organising are to be encouraged. Abu-Habib (1998), for example, argues that NGO’s, in particular, are more aptly suited to fill the representation gap for domestics: “local and international NGOs and women’s groups and networks need to take a stronger position on this issue… the abuses faced by women domestic workers are serious and we should address them in the NGO community” (56). Others argue that non-traditional forms of labour organising may be more suited to the specificities of paid domestic work than traditional unionism. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Riegos (1997), for example, argue that “neither traditional union organising, nor service-provider models can accomplish the upgrading of the occupation” (75). Others do not privilege either form of labour organising, arguing that both union and non-union based forms expand the availability of representation for these vulnerable workers. For Ford (2004: 105), the debate is important given “[t]he empirical evidence about the extent and depth of non-union labour organising that is occurring around issues concerning foreign domestic labour” Does this proliferation of non-union forms of organising then enhance or constrain the possibilities for union-based organising in the sector? That is, do alternative forms of labour organising complement unionisation efforts, or threaten them?

In some cases, the ‘association model’ has been actually been pivotal for enhancing the role of unions in this previously marginal sector. The role of the Asian Migrant Centre, an NGO, in the establishment and expansion of more than a few unions, including the relatively successful Indonesian Migrant Workers’ Union (IMWU) in Hong Kong, is notable. As is the role of two UK-based associations, Waling Waling and Kalayaan, in supporting and expanding the domestic worker unionising activities of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).

But, a representative case study of the ‘association model’ in action suggests that unionists’ misgivings
about this emerging model of representation deserve consideration. The case of Domestic Workers United’s successful advocacy for New York City Local Law 33 suggests that domestic worker organising can sometimes be at the expense of their unionisation. Domestic Workers United is arguably one of the most active groups organising domestic workers in New York City. While the campaign for Local Law 33 was successful, and represented a victory for workers, it was not, as Hyde (2004) demonstrates, a victory for traditional union representation. Unions competed with an association of legal advocacy groups, law school clinics, ethnic or immigrant advocacy groups, and even public entities such as the New York State Attorney General. In this “tetralogy of representation,” as Hyde calls it, unionisation was threatened, not enhanced. This type of organising potentially defeats the purposes of the collective organisation of workers, since it does not empower a group of workers to take ownership of their own sustained representation. “The advocacy groups are self-designated”, argues Hyde, generating a system of representation that is often not self-sustaining beyond particular advocacy campaigns. As a result, the ‘association model’, while not always seeking to substitute for union-based organising, can at times undermine the cause of unionism. This produces a rather deleterious equation, in which the organising of domestic workers may actually undermine their unionisation.

The ‘association model,’ where it functions as a substitute for unionising, remains therefore problematic. By organising primarily on the basis of gendered migrant identities, some contemporary domestic worker organising can unwittingly reproduce the logic that domestic work is women’s work and the work of women of colour, and undercuts a consciousness of the structural class dynamics that are important in shaping the institution. In legal reform advocacy, especially the individual case-centered forms of legal aid, the root of the exploitation of this type of work remains unchallenged (see Silvey, 2004). As Constable (1997) summarises: “[t]he problem is that despite the important improvements that domestic workers’ organisations have helped bring about, the overall structural position of domestic workers remains relatively unchanged” (209).

This failure of structural change is complicated by the failure of the ‘association model’ to distinguish between domestic worker advocacy motivated by workers themselves, and the provision of domestic worker services usually by non-worker-established organisations. For example, many of the associations for domestic workers exist in partnership with legal aid and other service-based advocacy groups that mobilise workers, but are not originated by workers. This serves to construct domestic workers as client recipients, instead of building workers’ capacity to be the innovators and engines of their own organising (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997). Some NGOs, established and staffed from outside the community of domestic workers, in their efforts to aide domestic workers, paradoxically construct them as victims and recipients of good will, disrupting possibilities for their own agency (Gibson, Law and Mckay, 2001).

Even when workers are drawn into the daily operations of such organisations, unionists remain legitimately suspicious of the representivity of such non-union labour advocacy organisations. As limited-member organisations whose leaders are not elected nor accountable, the extent to which associational organising truly represents a model of authentic representation for domestic workers is unclear. And, more often than not, the founders and directors of various organisations that attempt to organise domestic workers, however well-intentioned and committed to the sector they may be, are often not workers themselves, nor indeed, from the communities they seek to represent.

In the end, while the ‘association model’ may be useful for expanding the range of representation available for domestic workers, when it functions to undermine rather than enhance the work of unions, this emerging model of representation potentially weakens the collective cause of workers. A competing model of organisation has therefore emerged, one that organises domestic workers as workers, while at the same time creatively adapting existing strategies of union organising to the
specificities of care work in a globalising era.

**Unionising Domestics: The ‘Union Model’**

Globalisation’s erosion of the formal and production-based sectors of national economies has had dramatic consequences for the unionised labour movement. Ironically, however, in globalisation’s shadow lies a workforce that offers the possibility for a contemporary revitalisation of the labour movement. After more than a century of indifference from organised labour, reproductive workers are beginning to turn the attention of unionists. In an emerging ‘union model’ of organising care workers in globalised economies, unions have recognized the opportunities in care work for increasing union density (Gapasin and Yates, 1997; Chang, 2000; Cranford and Ladd, 2003). The result has been a concerted effort to deconstruct the prevailing myth that the sector is ‘unorganisable’ through active efforts to incorporate this predominantly female and immigrant work force into the ranks of the organised labour movement.

Such heightened sensitivity to the concerns of the low-wage service sector, in particular those of care workers, has sparked nothing less than a “labour ‘renaissance’ of sorts” (Smith, 2000: 50). Across the global North, unions have sought to establish effective representation for domestics, and where they have, these workers have responded in ways that reflect their eagerness to be unionised. In this ‘union model,’ domestic workers are being organised on the basis of their worker identities. But unions have had to creatively adapt their traditional labour organising strategies to more effectively represent a predominantly female, migrant, and reproductive workforce.

In European countries where many migrant domestic workers live and work, campaigns for the unionisation of domestics have adopted these creative strategies and have been gaining ground. In Switzerland, the SIT (Interprofessional Workers’ Union) has actively organised migrant women domestic workers, abandoning workplace organising for community-based mobilisation, and focusing on both service-oriented advocacy, and worker empowerment (ICFTU, 2002). In Belgium, Filipina domestics have been organised by the FGTB trade union federation, which provides them with legal and administrative assistance. Similarly, in Portugal, the trade union confederation, UGT, has organised various congresses on the issue of immigrant care workers, and its cleaning sector affiliate, the SLEDA, is organising domestic workers on the ground (ICFTU, 2002) by focusing on the specific needs of care workers, rather than imposing models of organising from other sectors on to this one. And, in Great Britain, the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU) has achieved a degree of success in representing and mobilising migrant domestic workers for change by establishing links with community-based organisations, but at the same time privileging worker-controlled models of collective representation.

It is ironically the United States labour movement, a weaker union-based labour movement, that has been at the forefront of the ‘union model’. There, the challenge of care workers has been taken up by unions in creative ways with phenomenal results. In 1995, the AFL-CIO recognized the impact of declining union membership in the ‘new economy’ and launched a program to prioritise organising the unorganised (Delp and Quan, 2002). During the 1990s, there were some significant union organising successes in the previously unorganised low-wage service sector, especially the ‘Justice for Janitors’ campaign. But it was the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 434B’s campaign to organise home-based care workers that was to produce the single biggest organising victory for the US labour movement since the United Auto Workers victory at Ford’s River Rouge plant in 1941 (Stone, 2000). Despite their fragmentation in private homes, with no single employer, and more than one hundred languages spoken by the workforce, nearly 74,000 homecare workers, mainly low-wage and female ethnic minorities, were successfully unionised by the SEIU (Delp and Quan, 2002).
Importantly, the success was based on a dual strategy of innovative organising, and a political focus. Traditional strategies of labour organising, which presume a singular workplace, singular employer, and a male production worker, were abandoned in favour of strategies more specifically suited to the structural features of private care work. Local 434B focused on women’s community lives, and developed dedicated strategies of grass-roots and ‘bus-stop’ activism for mobilizing workers in public spaces. SEIU Local 434B’s success therefore “relied upon novel approaches to the unique structural attributes” of care work (Smith, 2000: 75).

The campaign also pursued political objectives. Rather than establishing services for workers that provide case-by-case advocacy, or pursuing short-term legislative gains – features of a lot of the contemporary organising for domestic workers – the union poured resources into a political campaign that targeted the structural sources of exploitation for this group of workers. David Rolf, SEIU Local 434B leader, argued that this was integral to the strategy: “key to the activism was a political focus” (Interview, cited by Delp and Quan, 2002). This focus on political and structural change remains critical since it has established the ‘union model’ as a model of representation that recognizes the political economy of care work in ways that NGO, community organising and service-based advocacy sometimes does not. Kirk Adams, former AFL-CIO director of organising, confirms that care work “is much broader than an organising issue. It is a policy issue” (Interview, cited in Delp and Quan, 2002)

It was this critical insight that defined Local 434B’s victory. For while this campaign’s success is often defined in terms of the numbers mobilised, it’s real success was the significant advancement of the rights of this group of workers through innovative legislative gains that targeted the basic structure of the work and the industrial relations system. In the same moment, Local 434B’s success was transformed from the success of care workers alone to that of the labour movement as a whole.

Indeed, the ‘union model’ of organising domestic workers is an important parallel model of representation emerging amongst transnational care workers that the mainstream labour movement can no longer afford to ignore. While immigrant workers have been recognised as a significant new element of globalisation’s transition of the workforce (Milkman, 2000), it remains important for the union movement to organise based on categories of workers. The unionisation of care workers is encouragingly being recognised as important not only for the representation of domestics, but for the vitality of the labour movement.

The extent to which organised labour has extended itself to support existing efforts by domestic workers to unionise is far more limited, and signals an important area for further consideration. Smith (2000) highlights various initiatives (for example, hiring halls) that may represent opportunities for the expansion of existing domestic worker unions. Support from more established unions for embryonic efforts by care workers to establish their own unions must remain the goal of this revitalised energy within organised labour for the plight of domestics.

Where this has not happened yet, and existing unions have attempted to mobilise domestics, it has creatively adapted traditional unionism to the specificities of a predominantly immigrant, female, and reproductive workforce. Cobble (1996) argues that the “labour movement as we know it today was created to meet the needs of a male, factory work force. If it is to appeal to women and in particular to the majority of women who work in service occupations, it must rethink its fundamental assumptions about organising and representation” (336). The case of domestic worker organising through a ‘union model’ suggests that traditional labour organising trained on unorganised care workers without due consideration for the sector’s specificity cannot succeed. At the same time, the constant referencing of the specificity of the sector in denying more sustained efforts at unionisation is illegitimate in light of the demonstrated organising potential of these workers globally. Where the union-based labour movement has succeeded in demystifying the presumed status of this group of workers as ‘unorganisable’, they have opened up the possibilities for effective worker-controlled representation of
one of the most important, yet neglected, labour forces of globalisation. In doing so, they have not only enhanced the capacity for worker-directed organising in the highly exploitative care work sector, but they have enhanced the labour movement at a time when globalisation has compromised its vitality.

Conclusion

Domestic workers are rendered invisible by more than just their physical labouring in private spaces behind closed doors. Narratives of globalisation silence their role in the contemporary political economy of global capitalism, and mainstream labour has historically failed to acknowledge their presence as workers capable of unionisation. This invisibility is enforced most potently by the discursive construction of domestics as ‘unorganisable’.

In a powerful challenge to this invisibility, domestic workers have come out of the shadow of globalisation to establish their presence precisely by demonstrating that they are indeed organisable. Globally, a proliferation of domestic worker organising has generated widespread enthusiasm about the possibilities for organising in this sector. But, the structure of representation in this contemporary expansion of domestic worker organising is bifurcated.

An ‘association model’ of organising increasingly mobilises workers based on globalisation’s inscription of migrant identities as the lived experience of exploitation. In organisations, coalitions, and campaigns, this model of representation has therefore redefined the nature and scope of worker representation. In both sending and receiving countries, non-governmental and other non-union labour advocacy organisations continue to proliferate, suggesting a ‘domestics revolution’. However, the extent to which much of this organising represents a strategy for sustained, organic, worker-controlled collective representation is not clear. In fact, in some cases, the ‘association model’ has arguably undermined the possibilities for unionisation.

A ‘union model’, alternatively, mobilises domestics based on their identities as workers, thereby recovering the salience of class in the ‘new economy’. Historically shunned by the mainstream labour movement as ‘unorganisable’, organised labour in the context of globalisation now ironically depends on the once-questioned capacity of domestic workers to unionise. But, rather than simply being incorporated into the labour movement, care work is uniquely positioned to transform unionism to creatively develop more broad-based strategies of organising reproductive workers who are predominantly women of colour. Relatedly, these unionisation efforts need to move beyond incorporation, to active support of domestic workers in their efforts to establish their own unions.

While it is important to disaggregate the different kinds of organising that currently characterises the landscape of domestic worker mobilisation, and to trace the respective consequences of different models of organising for the effective representation of workers, it is actually the simple fact of organisation in the sector that is most critical to this analysis. In the context of globalisation’s unequal re-distribution of reproductive labour, domestic workers have successfully disrupted the construction of their sector as ‘unorganisable’. Now the struggle is to ensure that their efforts at organisation successfully disrupt the politics of reproduction engendered by globalisation.

Notes

1 ‘Care work’ is the work of social reproduction that is required to maintain human life throughout the life-cycle (Truong 1996), or what neo-Marxists in the 1970s called ‘reproductive labour.’

2 In many gulf states, such as Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as in Brazil, and the Canadian province of Ontario, domestic workers are not allowed to form trade unions (ICFTU,
Of the eight affiliated organisations, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education fund (AALDEF) and CAAAV Organising Asian Communities, are the only two that do not explicitly aim to represent workers. The remaining six all represent workers (eg. Workers Awaz, Workplace Project, DAMAYAN, Domestic Workers Association, etc.), but their organisations are all non-union-based.

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