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# **Domestic Workers Around the World: Organising for Empowerment**

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**Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)**

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Exploited, Undervalued – and Essential: The Plight of Domestic Workers**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In some countries domestic workers have a long history of organising into trade unions. However, their unions have always struggled to achieve scale, have an impact and, for many, to survive. Over the past few years, in response to global changes in the labour market as well as continued high exploitation, domestic workers' organising has shown signs of revival- a revival that utilises both traditional and different organisational models and strategies. Alongside this there is a renewed interest and concern by trade unions, non- governmental organisations (NGO), researchers, development practitioners and governments in the situation- or plight- of domestic workers. This has found expression in the placing of a Discussion on Decent Work for Domestic Workers on the agenda of the International Labour Conference (ILC) of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) with a view to adopting an international labour standard (Convention and/or Recommendation) on domestic work in 2011. This in turn is stimulating further organising by domestic workers, supported by the trade union movement especially for international and national legislative changes, the formation of new alliances, campaigns by NGOs and other formations, increased research and supportive activities by a range of organisations. It is a moment of opportunity for domestic workers to organise for empowerment.

This paper is work in progress, drawing its information and ideas primarily from the organisations and networks that WIEGO is working with globally as well as recent reports from the ILO (ILO, 2008; 2009; 2010). Recognising that there is no easy route to building powerful organisations or to the empowerment of domestic workers, nor is there one organisational model or strategy that will serve all situations or overcome all problems, the paper aims to present concrete examples of the different ways in which domestic workers are organising, provoke discussion, and provide a basis for further sharing of ideas on ways that domestic workers can strengthen their position, leading to personal and organisational empowerment.

The paper is in four sections. Section 1 discusses domestic workers within the global context of increasing informalisation of work, and the changing labour market for domestic work. It also briefly explores domestic workers within the global trade union movement. Section 2 identifies and begins to analyse different models of domestic workers' organisation from local to international. Section 3 presents ideas on how models and strategies intersect and gives examples of strategies employed by different organisations. Section 4 examines the concept of empowerment and suggests that a multi faceted approach, with some key elements, is required to facilitate the personal and collective empowerment of domestic workers, and to change the balance of power in their favour. It concludes by emphasising the importance of democratic, member based organisations, preferably "adapted" unions or proto unions<sup>1</sup>, as the primary vehicles through which domestic workers can represent and speak for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "adapted" union is used to denote a union that has adapted to the needs and circumstances of domestic workers by taking on a non- traditional form and/or is using different strategies. A proto union operates like a union but is not recognised in law as a union.

## 2. DOMESTIC WORKERS ORGANISING: GLOBAL CONTEXT

### In the workforce

Domestic work accounts for 4-10% of total employment in developing countries and a growing 1-2.5 % in developed countries (ILO 2009: 6). This translates into tens of millions of workers, the vast majority being women from the poorer sections of society. Rural poverty has increased in many countries occasioned by structural adjustment programmes, devastation of the agricultural sector and economic crises. This has pushed many women and girls into the domestic labour market. There is a pull factor too, as demand for domestic services increases due to demographic, social and employment changes. A growing proportion of women work outside the home, at the same time as public provision of household and care services is in decline and family support less available. Affordable, low paid domestic work frees up women to work and fills the gaps in care facilities. Increasingly international migrant domestic workers fulfil these roles, with women migrating from the poorer to the more affluent developed or developing countries. (WIEGO nd)

In South Africa domestic work represents about a quarter of women's informal employment, although not all domestic workers in South Africa can be considered informal workers (Chen et al 2005: 45). On the other hand informal domestic work is likely to be undercounted in labour force surveys as they are unlikely to capture kin members doing work for "board and lodgings" nor undocumented workers from neighbouring countries (Lund with Budlender 2009).

Despite having an employer and their formal, if limited, inclusion in labour legislation in many countries (ILO 2009) domestic workers form a significant group within the growing informal /inadequately protected global workforce<sup>2</sup>, as laws are ignored by employers and governments fail to enforce them. As representatives to a meeting in September 2008 that saw the formation of the first Interim Steering Committee of the International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN) testified, this situation is widespread. Ernestina Ochoa, of *Instituto para la Promoción y Formación de Trabajos en el Hogar* or Institute of Promotion and Formation of Workers of the Home ( IPROFOTH) and its associated domestic workers' trade union in Peru noted that, "Legislation was passed in 2003 for household workers, but it is discriminatory. It contains very 'wishy-washy' rights, for example 15 days' annual leave instead of one month. There is entitlement to social security but inaccessible in reality"; Vicky Kanyoka at the time an organiser in the Conservation, Hotels, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHODAWU), Tanzania said, "We do have a minimum wage for them (domestic workers), but employers don't respect this. It is hard to get employers to recognise the value of their domestic workers." And from Ida le Blanc General Secretary of the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE), Trinidad and Tobago, "We have a Household Assistants Order which gives provision for sick leave, paid vacations, maternity leave, and a minimum wage; but in reality domestic workers do not enjoy these rights". (IUF 2008)

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<sup>2</sup> Informal employment accounts for one half to three quarters of non-agricultural employment in the developing world: specifically, 48% in northern Africa; 51 % in Latin America; 65% in Asia and 72% in sub Saharan Africa (78% if South Africa is excluded). 60% or more of women workers in the developing world are in informal employment, the figure rising to 84% in sub Saharan Africa (non-agricultural). (Chen et al 2005: 39).

## **In the global trade union movement**

As trade unions come under increasing pressure through the on-going destruction of permanent, full time and protected jobs, and consequent loss of membership and power, they have slowly come to acknowledge the need to organise workers outside of their traditional base. In the developing countries of Africa and Asia in particular, where informal work is, and has been for many years, the norm, there is a stronger move by trade unions to organising informal workers. It is no accident that the largest union of informal workers in world, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), is in India where 93% of total employment is informal, including an estimated 4.75 million domestic workers in 2004-05 (Bhattacharya and Sinha 2010)<sup>3</sup>. It is no accident that the Ghana Trades Union Congress, which operates in a country where 86% of the economically active labour force is in the informal economy, already in 1996 had adopted an organising policy which included a strategy to target informal workers, and to encourage its affiliates to change their constitutions to accommodate informal worker associations (Boakye 2007). However, despite formal acknowledgement by the trade union movement that informal workers are workers and should be organised into trade unions (see ILO, 2002: ITUC Constitution: 3, and other statements/publications at [www.ituc-csi.org](http://www.ituc-csi.org)), practical implementation remains very slow and uneven.

Domestic workers have proved to be a group of mostly unprotected workers that have been able to garner some support from the trade union movement, focused around their struggle for legal protection and an international convention on domestic work. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), together with the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) of the ILO, responded to mounting pressure from domestic workers and allies such as WIEGO, promoted the inclusion of Decent Work for Domestic Workers on the agenda of the International Labour Conference (ILC). The number of responses from trade unions (and governments) to the questionnaire circulated by the ILO as part of the preparation for the ILC discussion was unprecedented, with the trade unions almost unanimous in their support for the demands of domestic workers and their quest for a binding convention with supporting recommendation (ILO 2010). There also appears to be a new openness to cooperating with and supporting domestic worker organisations as well as working with NGOs.

Whether this support and openness will extend beyond the current campaign, leading to ongoing commitment and support for sustained organisation of domestic workers, and new strategies and alliances, is yet to be seen.

### **3. ORGANISATIONS OF AND FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS**

When domestic workers organise they do so according to their circumstances, resulting in many different types of organisation, purposes and strategies. These are determined by a complex mix of contextual factors. In addition to occupational specific factors, history, politics, legal and policy frameworks, organisational space, trade union organising and approaches, tradition, culture, ethnicity and religion, gender relations and leadership all interact and influence organisational forms, strategies and timing.

The many difficulties in organising and sustaining organisations of domestic workers are well documented (ILO 2008: ILO 2009: IRENE and IUF 2008). At a local level their isolated workplaces, lack of time off, lack of freedom and fear of employers or authorities, especially for live-in and

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<sup>3</sup> Other estimates put the number of domestic workers in India at 20 million (see ADWN 2008) .

migrant workers, mean that the usual organising strategies are often ineffective. This includes an inability to collect dues on a regular basis-important for sustainability. On a broader level, the nature of the work and the fact that a majority of domestic workers are women leads to perceptions of domestic work as not real work, and domestic workers not real workers but “part of the family”, and that their rights and contribution as workers are not recognised. These, together with the lack of legal protection, *de jure* or *de facto*, has meant that the number of domestic workers who are organised as workers is relatively small and that individual organisations are generally small<sup>4</sup>, making it difficult to achieve scale, and the necessary power to have significant impact. However, organising is on the rise, including an increase in broader networking and alliance building. The increased support shown by trade unions, NGOs and even governments, could help facilitate this trend, provided an empowerment rather than paternalistic approach is adopted. By empowerment approach we mean an approach where domestic workers represent, and speak for themselves through their elected leaders, with the support rather than leadership of other organisations

We can identify two **types** of organisations of and/or for domestic workers, representing different ends of a spectrum of organisational models:

- 1) Member based organisations (MBOs), which are democratic and representative with dues paying members, who elect their representative leaders. These would traditionally be trade unions whose primary strategies are solidarity and political mobilisation, representation and collective negotiations/bargaining (broadly interpreted).
- 2) Non Governmental Organisations (non-profit organisations) that support domestic workers whose primary strategies are social/welfare, provision of services and policy advocacy for and/or with domestic workers.

In between are many forms or models of organisation, with different structures and historical developments, and operating at different levels.

### **3.1. Primary organisations**

#### **a. “New” models**

##### *Community Based Organising*

Increasingly evident are non-union, member based organisations as well as those that combine the features and strategies of both MBOs and NGOs in different mixes. Found amongst informal workers and those with little or no protection, they are seen to be filling the representational needs of workers who have been left out of mainstream trade union organising, such as domestic workers. These varied organisations ranging from advocacy oriented organisations to proto-unions (operating like a union but not recognised in law as a union) have been referred to as “quasi unions” (Heckscher and Carré

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<sup>4</sup> Many organisations that WIEGO has had contact with recently have a small domestic worker membership such as *Mujeres Unidas Y Activas* , California, USA), which has 400 active members (Personal Observation, AWID Conference, Cape Town, Nov 2008), the Indonesia Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) in Hong Kong has 2500 members of which 200 are very active (Spotlight on Sartiwen Binti Sanbardi. <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article472> ) , the Commercial, Industrial and Allied workers Union of Malawi which has 400 domestic workers members and the Uganda Hotels and Tourism Workers Union less than 100 domestic worker members (Personal Observation, Nairobi 2009).

2006) where they focus on workplace and employment issues, or as representing an “association model” of organising (Ally 2006), where they may be responding to a range of issues wider than employment. Migrant domestic workers for example may initially seek assistance around their problems as migrant workers, or come together for language, social and solidarity reasons; local domestic workers may form interest groups on the basis of their religious affiliation. Often organising with or through NGOs, community based organisations (CBOs) or religious institutions they develop a form of organisation which may be member based, but without a formal membership mechanism and dues collection system, or may be more akin to a community based, multi- purpose organisation or a non-worker controlled NGO.

The *Mujeres Unidas Y Activas (MUA)* or Women United and Active, in California, arose, like many others in the USA out of community organising. It was formed by immigrant women to provide a support group where they could share experiences and become empowered to collectively fight for immigrant, women and workers’ rights. Women who approach the organisation for support are encouraged to become members and attend weekly meetings. After participating for three to six months they are invited to attend training programmes offered by MUA. MUA’s strategies combine solidarity activities, mobilisation, advocacy and service provision such as legal assistance and training and leadership development (Mercado and Poo 2009).

In Belgium the Association of Philippine Migrant Workers (*Samahan*, meaning unity) was founded by a group of migrant workers as early as 1983. They were supported by a missionary who gave them a house with a kitchen where they could gather and eat together. They set up a cultural group and made a cultural show to inform Belgians about Filipino culture. The group runs many activities, particularly skills training and education such as computer literacy, managing household budgets, leading discussions. In 1998 it set up a cooperative scheme for savings and pensions. It organises information campaigns and has linked up with the trade unions on the issue of the rights of undocumented migrant workers (ETUC 2005: 35).

These various non union forms of organisation play an important role – providing a safe and suitable place for domestic workers to seek advice, have access to information, share experiences and engage in collective activities and mobilisation. They provide the basis for leadership to emerge, member based associations to develop of a more permanent nature and the ability to more visibly advocate for rights, including as workers. However, they are likely to have limitations in what they can achieve – falling outside of the mainstream industrial relations system they have limited credibility with, and access to, those in power; generally being small and localised they do not have the power base to effect wide scale change. So, on their own, they are more likely to focus on city regulations/laws and their enforcement, or state policy rather than national policies. In both our examples, the organisations have felt limitations and have formed alliances or joined up with other organisations to increase their visibility and voice.

### *Cooperatives*

Cooperatives of domestic workers exist in some countries and in some cases form part of a federated structure. This is a relatively unexplored form of organisation for domestic workers, but is however common amongst other groups of informal workers, such as waste pickers/recyclers in Latin America and home based and other informal workers within the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India.

The UNITY Housecleaners Cooperative is Long Island, New York's first domestic workers housecleaning cooperative. To become a member, workers must complete a four-week course covering the essential components of running a successful cooperative and a training class on housecleaning skills. Ten percent of the money earned by each member is contributed back to the cooperative to help cover operating expenses and build a self-sustainable organisation. UNITY Housecleaners has a broader agenda and their members also organise to improve working conditions for **all** domestic workers. They are part of Domestic Workers United (DWU), a New York based organisation that has successfully campaigned for the New York City Domestic Worker Bill of Rights legislation. They are also part of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)- see below. ([www.workplaceprojectny.org/programs-and-campaigns/women](http://www.workplaceprojectny.org/programs-and-campaigns/women) ).

The National House Managers' Cooperative in Korea was initiated by the Korean Women Workers Associations United (KWWAU). It is described as a social corporation in partnership with KWWAU. The organisation has around 700 members and sub-members whose status is defined according to her investment. It has adopted a collective decision-making mechanism that includes regular meetings. The organisation runs a job placement service and skills and confidence building training. It has set up clubs to organise member activities and it publishes a community newsletter (Committee for Asian Women 2004; IDWN 2009 (b)).

The primary strategy of a domestic workers' cooperative is an "economic development strategy" being focused on providing jobs/work for domestic workers who sell their services to households. Importantly, in our examples above, the cooperatives have not only an economic purpose but also have an organising, social and political agenda. They both are governed by democratically elected committees and are committed to empowerment through self-governance as well as skills training and through mobilisation and action. As noted above the UNITY Housecleaners Cooperative is a member of Domestic Workers United and the National Domestic Workers' Alliance, and is active in their campaigns, whilst the National House Managers' Cooperative was part of a recent workshop in Hong Kong planning regional and international activities in support of an ILO Convention on domestic work.

Domestic workers' cooperatives act as placement services with a difference, having democratic structures and a political and social purpose. They could provide an alternative to the burgeoning and exploitative placement services for domestic workers. As the main objective of domestic workers' cooperatives is to provide jobs for domestic workers they may be met with suspicion from traditional trade unions. They may be perceived as being a front for labour brokers or undercutting or undermining labour standards. There is a real basis to this suspicion as cooperatives in sectors such as waste management, have sometimes been used as a front for businesses to avoid labour standards, or to acquire government financial support in a number of countries.

#### **b. "Traditional" models**

There is a long tradition of domestic workers organising into trade unions, sometimes starting as an association and then gaining recognition as a trade union where the legislation permits. The two main organisational models are unions with only domestic worker members, and unions with domestic worker members forming one sector within the union, each with different strengths and weaknesses.

### *Domestic workers within a trade union*

The case of the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotel, Education Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers' Union (KUDHEIHA) is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it has managed to rapidly revive its domestic worker membership; secondly it has successfully built on support provided by union-linked organisations; thirdly it has a supportive and proactive male leadership that has provided practical organising support.

KUDHEIHA was founded as a domestic workers' union in 1952, being registered first as an association in 1956 and as a trade union in 1958. At the end of 2008 its domestic worker membership was almost non-existent being a mere 10 members- the bulk of the membership being in the hotel and catering trade. But by November 2009 the union had over 10 500 domestic worker members. What made the difference? There were two external triggers combined with a male leadership of the union that enthusiastically supported a new organising drive amongst domestic workers. Externally, the union entered into a partnership with the Solidarity Centre of the AFL-CIO to support organising domestic workers and around the same time the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF) Women's Project Coordinator and the International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN) Africa Regional Coordinator encouraged the union to organise domestic workers, and ran a workshop for domestic workers to stimulate this. This was itself stimulated by the employment by IDWN of an Africa Regional Coordinator to mobilise and organise around the struggle for an ILO Convention. In Uganda too domestic workers were founding members of the Uganda Hotels and Tourism Workers Union formed in 1959. In the early days domestic workers were able to mount a national strike. But by 2009 the union had less than 100 members. The (male) General Secretary recently committed to taking the organisation of domestic workers seriously and to supporting the campaign for an international convention. (Personal Observation, Nairobi 2009; IDWN 2009 (a))

With this model domestic workers can gain legitimacy through being part of a recognised trade union and have access to government and negotiating forums –directly or indirectly. They can share in the resources and infrastructure of the union through cross subsidisation. This of course depends on the support and commitment of the union leadership, as well as the strength of domestic workers in making their voices count. On the other hand, unless there is an explicit commitment by (male) leadership, domestic workers have to fight for space to be heard in most mixed sector unions. The fact that they are women, doing “women's work”, together with the challenges in organising domestic workers such as scattered workplaces, low financial contribution and their exclusion from the mainstream industrial relations and collective bargaining systems all contribute to their second class status within the union, making it difficult for leadership to emerge and for domestic workers to represent themselves. This can be a disempowering rather than empowering model.

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), India, provides a different version of this “sector within a union” model, with domestic workers being one of the union's more recent organising focuses. SEWA only organises women who work in the informal economy, particularly own account workers. This opens up the possibility of overcoming some of the disadvantages above whilst retaining and extending the advantages. The advantages of organising in unions of informal workers is that they can set up more innovative structures and programmes that are less patriarchal and more open to change than traditional unions. The advantage of organising as women is the confidence this

brings and the blossoming of women leadership. Certainly this seems to be the case with SEWA which has strong women leaders at all levels of the organisation. It is not only a union engaged in struggle, but has set up many sister organisations – cooperatives in particular, including a cooperative bank- all governed by its women members. On the other hand it may prove difficult to be taken seriously by unions or government, and to gain access to those with influence and power. SEWA has struggled for many years for recognition, not only with government but with the trade union movement in India and internationally. (See [www.sewa.org](http://www.sewa.org); personal observations 2004-2010). A first breakthrough in this struggle took place in 1983 when the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF) accepted SEWA into affiliation which gave SEWA recognition as a legitimate trade union centre and acceptance of self employed workers as workers with a rightful place in the trade union movement. Over twenty years later, in 2006, SEWA became an affiliate of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), and later that year of ITUC, the new international confederation born out of the merger between ICFTU and the World Confederation of labour (WCL). This gives SEWA a voice in the highest trade union body, with SEWA General Secretary being elected as one of ITUC's Vice Presidents at ITUC's 2010 Congress. ([www.ituc-csi.org](http://www.ituc-csi.org)).

### *Domestic workers' unions*

There are many examples of domestic workers' self organised unions, including the South African Domestic, Service and Allied Workers' Union (SADSAWU). These are usually the result of domestic workers' struggle to organise themselves, sometimes with the support of an NGO or a trade union federation.

The Hong Kong Domestic and General Workers' Union (HKDGWU) organises local domestic workers who are generally in casual, insecure jobs with multiple employers. Most fall outside the ambit of protective labour law due its restrictive provisions: workers have to be employed continuously by the same employer for four weeks or more and to work at least 18 hours per week. Hong Kong has many migrant workers' organisations and support NGOs, including those of /for migrant domestic workers, but local domestic workers did not have their own organisation. The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) Training Centres provided the platform to reach out to domestic workers and to organise them into the union, which was formed in 2000. The centres which provide skills training and run a placement service play an important ongoing role in providing a point of contact, a meeting place and the basis for local branches of the union. The union tries to accommodate not only the work related needs of its members but also to help provide for some of the social needs through making personal contact by phone regarding forthcoming activities, holding social activities such as picnics and generally building a "warm and home-feeling atmosphere". (ADWN 2008; Hong Kong Domestic Workers General Union nd)

The stories told by domestic workers' unions are often similar: difficulties in growing and keeping membership; the lack of finance and resources for running and sustaining organisation, and in some cases the struggle to get support from trade unions. As Vicky Kanyoka, IDWN Africa Regional Coordinator and former organiser in the Conservation, Hotels, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHODAWU) Tanzania said, domestic workers' unions, where they exist, are small and weak, and do not contribute much money to the union movement. "*So unions are often not interested in us.*" (IUF 2008)

### c. Changing Models

Organisations are not static, and the tendency to move from either a small member based group, CBO or group within an NGO into a trade union is evident in a number of cases. Once domestic workers form or join an organisation their horizons expand, knowledge increases, confidence grows and a need for a more powerful and independent organisation is felt. There are a number of examples of migrant worker or faith based groups seeking out trade unions to join, or seeking to become trade unions in their own right. The *Tunas Mulia* Domestic Workers' Union in Jogjakarta, Indonesia started out as a religious study group meeting in mosques. The domestic workers involved wanted to take up issues of their rights as workers and decided to form a union. Now they are busy assisting domestic workers' groups in four others cities to form unions. The Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union (IMWU) in Hong Kong grew out of a self organised group, the Indonesian Group of Hong Kong. Members felt that the group was not strong enough and decided to become a union so that they could be officially recognised and have a more political agenda of promoting labour rights (IRENE and IUF 2008: 52, 57). In the Netherlands a group of migrant domestic workers, the Trusted Migrants group, almost all of whom were undocumented, looked for a trade union to join up with. *Bondgenoten*, an affiliate of the FNV (Dutch trade union federation), accepted them into the union as a group and as individual members. In order to make it easier for the union to "cope" with migrant domestic workers, *Bondgenoten* has made it a policy that they will only accept this category of workers if they are at the same time part of a self-help group. The union is committed to fully integrating them into union structures. It has allocated them into the cleaning section of the union where they have a seat on the committee. (Personal communication, Karin Pape 2010)

In other cases CBOs or NGOs start out providing services and advocating on behalf of domestic workers. This leads to initiating organising amongst domestic workers who then feel the need and have the confidence to form an independent organisation. In the Philippines, the Visayan Forum (VF) is an NGO supporting and campaigning for domestic workers, while SUMAPI (meaning "join") is an association of domestic workers themselves. SUMAPI was initiated by, and organised through, VF as early as 1995. The Association continues to work in partnership with the Visayan Forum and others to campaign for legislative change, provide skills training and other services and to build sustainable relationships with employers. It reaches out to domestic workers in parks, schools, churches, communities, villages and engages in recreational as well as work related activities (ADWN 2008).

Independence is sometimes difficult to achieve as it is not always easy for the NGO to let go, or for the new union/association to become self sufficient and independent. This is what Basilia Catari Torres of the National Federation of Household Workers of Bolivia (FENATRAHOB) had to say about the development of her organisation:

We are a women's organisation, organised by women household workers, and not managed by an NGO. They give us solidarity and we grew through their help, which we very much appreciate. But we manage ourselves. Our weak point is our financial situation; our resources are always very limited. However, everyone always does what she can, and it is this solidarity by many individuals which makes our organisation strong (IRENE and IUF 2008: 43)

### **3.2. “Secondary” Models**

Commonly local organisations of informal workers such as vendors or waste pickers/recyclers, find the need to link up with other organisations locally, nationally and internationally in order to increase their power base, to gain wider recognition and visibility, to build united positions, to bring in allies and support and to gain access to those in power at higher levels in order to effect change to laws, policies etc. Domestic worker organisations are no different in wishing to federate or form alliances.

#### **a. National organising**

In some countries domestic workers have succeeded in creating national federations of domestic workers unions or networks/alliances consisting of a variety of organisations of or for domestic workers. In other countries the process is just beginning. In India, with a long history of organising domestic workers, there is as yet no national organisation or even alliance that can speak for domestic workers with one voice. With a few exceptions, including the National Domestic Workers’ Movement (NDWM), a Catholic church based NGO with regional organisations in several states, domestic workers’ organisations are generally scattered and localised encouraged by the federal nature of government. At present there is no national legislation covering domestic workers but some states have enacted limited legislation. However, many different groups are advocating for change and lobbying government including unions, women’s organisations, NGOs and recently the Government appointed a task force to look into a national policy on domestic work. At a 2009 WIEGO/ILO meeting organisations noted that their primary need was for a national network or alliance of domestic workers organisations that could unite the different organisations around a common positions and common campaigns on national legislation and on the ILO Convention (Personal communication, Shalini Sinha 2009).

#### *Union federations*

In Brazil there is a long standing organising tradition and many unions and associations of domestic workers. Domestic workers unions have come together to form the main organisation, the National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD) which promotes the visibility of domestic workers. Founded in 1997 it has 35 union affiliates (ILO 2009: 78), some of which engage in formal collective bargaining at a State level.

In Hong Kong, there are an estimated 250 000 domestic workers, a majority being migrant women. They have formed trade unions and associations based firstly on their nationality (sending countries) and thereafter on their identity as migrant workers and/or migrant domestic workers. In a recent move, and despite difficulties, the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, with two migrant NGOs, the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMC) and the Coalition of Migrant Rights (CMR), initiated a process to bring all domestic worker unions, irrespective of nationality, together into one federation – the Federation of Asian Domestic Workers’ Unions in Hong Kong (FADWU). Presently 6 unions are involved organising local, Indonesian, Filipino, Thai and Nepalese domestic workers. The Federation was officially launched in November 2010. The campaign for an ILO Convention has helped to highlight the common interests of migrant and local domestic workers and the need for urgent cooperation amongst unions as well as with the various NGOs and networks within Hong Kong, and more broadly in Asia. In Indonesia the *Tunas Mulia* Domestic Workers’ Union, together with the

advocacy network *Jala PTR* plan to form a national federation of domestic workers' unions (Tang 2009; personal communication, IP Pui Yu 2010).

### *Mixed alliances*

In the USA, important pieces of labour legislation do not apply to domestic workers such as the National Labor Relations Act which provides for representation and collective bargaining for private sector workers<sup>5</sup>. This has meant that domestic workers have been excluded too from formal union organising. Organising of domestic workers has concentrated largely on migrant domestic workers through community based organisations. In 2007, the National Domestic Workers' Alliance (NDWA) was formed during the United States Social Forum. About 50 domestic workers of many nationalities working in the USA, and from 12 organisations of differing type shared experiences, including those of organising models, campaign victories and challenges. On the first day they decided to form the NDWA with the aim of collectively bringing public attention to the plight of domestic workers; to bring respect and recognition; improve workplace conditions and consolidate the voice and power of domestic workers as a workforce. The benefits of national organising are summarised by organisers of alliance members:

The coming together of these organizations has exponentially increased the capacity, visibility and influence of domestic workers as a sector in the social justice movement. Organizations in Miami, Chicago, San Antonio, and Baltimore are reaching out to begin a process of organizing domestic workers locally, and seeking the support of the National Alliance. In addition, other sectors, including the labour movement, are beginning to recognize the strategic role this workforce plays in rebuilding the labour movement. (Mercado and Poo 2009)

The NDWA now lists 33 organisations of or supporting domestic workers as members on their web site ([www.nationaldomesticworkeralliance.org](http://www.nationaldomesticworkeralliance.org)). Interestingly, a positive relationship has already been forged with the AFL-CIO, and especially around support and campaigning for an ILO Convention. The NDWA has been invited to be part of the USA worker delegation to the ILC in June (Personal communication, Karin Pape, February 2010). Surprisingly for a country which has not yet extended representational and collective bargaining rights to domestic workers, the US Government has indicated support for a convention coupled with a recommendation (the trade union position). Given the influence of the USA, this sends out a very important signal.

### **b. International organising**

Organising at international level – regionally or globally- has an important place in raising the visibility of domestic workers and making their concerns heard. It extends the sharing of experiences, the knowledge base and helps build solidarity, more effective campaigns and can facilitate engagement in international negotiations such as those at the ILO.

### *Regional*

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<sup>5</sup> Coverage for specific other pieces of labour standards legislation varies. The law on minimum wages applies differently across different categories of “domestic” workers. For example, home care attendants are not covered by the minimum wage law whilst some categories are covered (Personal communication, Françoise Carré 2010).

In Latin America, despite the difficulties that domestic workers have in sustaining their organisations, the regional organisation, *Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar* or the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers (CONLACTRAHO) has been in existence for over 30 years. CONLACTRAHO has member organisations in thirteen countries in the region as well as one in Canada and an organisation of migrant workers in Europe. It is a democratically structured organisation which holds regular congresses to elect its office bearers who are accountable to the member organisations. It therefore has the features of an MBO. However, its member organisations are a mixture of trade unions, community based organisations with domestic worker members, advice centres amongst others. CONLACTRAHO promotes collaboration with trade unions because “household workers’ groups cannot do it alone”. It aims to strengthen the organisation of domestic workers in each country and works to increase their visibility, combat discrimination, exploitation and marginalisation, as well as to increase their capacities and skills. (IRENE and IUF 2008: 40).

In Asia, as noted above, trade unions have tended to organise either local workers or migrant workers and not both, or they focus on child domestic worker issues. In 2005 the Asia Domestic Workers Network (ADWN) was formed to link up local adult domestic workers unions and support organisations in the region. The Network is committed to leadership and decision making by women domestic workers and therefore implemented a two tier membership system, with differing rights for member based organisations and NGOs. This system is being revised and the Network intends to recruit only unions/MBOs in future (Personal communication, Ip Pui Yu 2010)

Founding members from Indonesia felt that there was little attention paid to local domestic workers. The formation of the Network was facilitated by the Committee for Asian Women, an NGO having unions, labour support and women’s organisations amongst its members, and which now continues to act as the Secretariat for the Network. ADWN supports the self-organising efforts of domestic workers and encourages network building, advocates for legislative changes, mobilises and campaigns on issues, mobilises support locally and across the region for the cause of domestic workers, extends solidarity with other Asian domestic worker struggles, and builds capacity through training and exchange visits. ADWN currently comprises local adult domestic worker unions and associations (MBOs) and NGOs supporting domestic workers. In its two tier membership system, self organised, democratic domestic worker organisations are called “regular” members with full rights to stand for election, hold office and participate in decision making; NGOs are called “associate” members and have participatory but not representative rights. This has led to some interesting debates around which organisations qualify. For example, when SEWA sought membership of the Network as a regular member, their status was queried as they are not a domestic workers organisation but have domestic workers as a sector in their union. The issue was resolved in favour of SEWA. (ADWN: 2008)

In 2008 a second domestic workers’ alliance was formed in the region- the Asia Migrant Domestic Workers’ Alliance (ADWA), this time for migrant domestic workers with its secretariat based in the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA). The formation was led by a coalition of NGOs operating in the region together with the Alliance of Progressive Labour (Philippines). It is described as a joint Asian regional platform to promote the rights, welfare and empowerment of migrant domestic workers. Whilst this is a mixed alliance, recent information is that only union/MBO representatives sit on its steering committee, again showing a commitment to leadership by domestic workers of their organisations.

The domestic workers' unions and networks, migrant and other networks, women's organisations, trade union federations and others have now formed a broader alliance in the region to jointly campaign for an ILO Convention on Domestic Work. As part of this campaign, they jointly celebrated May Day 2010 as the "Asian Domestic Workers' Day", and actively gathered signatures for a Declaration supporting a Convention for domestic workers. (Ip Pui Yu 2010)

In Africa, as yet there is no established regional network. Where domestic workers are organised they are, as far as we know, most commonly a sector within a services union or less commonly a self organised domestic workers' union. There are also a number of NGOs supporting domestic workers and advocating for their rights, with child labour often a focus, as well as many local faith based groups. At an IDWN Africa Regional Workshop, the unions and support organisations recommended that they form an Africa Regional Network and set up a committee to take this forward (IDWN 2009)

Regional organising whilst not having regional legislation to tackle provides a vehicle for mobilisation and campaigning across a region, valuable information sharing and support for each other, and developing common policy approaches that can be taken up in different countries and internationally. However, it requires considerable financial and human resources. The regional organisations and alliances in Asia and Latin America have the support of NGOs and some union federations. In Africa, this is still lacking and the regional network has yet to get off the ground.

### *Global*

It is useful here to examine in more detail the International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN).<sup>6</sup> Firstly, this emerging Network provides an unusual, and probably unique, model of international organising. The global union federation, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF) agreed to provide an organisational base for, and facilitate the development of, a "mixed" network of domestic workers' unions, associations and supportive organisations without requiring affiliation by all the unions involved. Secondly, early on in its development the Network saw the need to provide a direct voice for domestic workers, both within its internal operations and externally in negotiating and advocacy forums. Its union and association members have therefore insisted on moving towards a worker controlled network and taken steps to ensure that domestic workers are directly represented at the ILC and other forums.

In 2006 the Dutch trade union federation, FNV, hosted the first international conference of domestic workers' organisations and supporters. The Conference was initiated by the Netherlands based NGO, IRENE, in conjunction with an international steering committee that included FNV, WIEGO, the Asia and Latin American domestic workers organisations amongst others. The Conference took a resolution to explore the possibility of establishing an international network. The idea was for an open network which would include domestic worker unions and associations and NGOs

who agree to work for the common aim of achieving the rights of and respect for all domestic/household workers. The decision-making structures behind such a network should comprise a majority of representatives from domestic/household workers' self-organisations. (IRENE and IUF 2008:28)

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<sup>6</sup> This account is based primarily on my personal observations as a member of the Steering Committee representing WIEGO for the first international domestic workers' international conference in 2006, member of the Interim Management Committee prior to the formation of the network, and as technical advisor to the IDWN currently.

Whilst agreeing to an open network, throughout the Conference domestic workers emphasised the importance of speaking for themselves, and agreed with the sentiment expressed by a domestic worker from Peru who said, “We are tired of hearing others speak in our name” (IRENE and IUF 2008: 14). The idea of a loose network rapidly changed when domestic worker representatives at a first international meeting, asserted themselves strongly and insisted on moving towards a worker led structure, with a steering rather than advisory committee, and with clearly defined technical support roles for WIEGO and the IUF. The second meeting of the “Interim Steering Committee” was held in Geneva during the 2009 ILC. The group was there for on – site training on ILC processes to enable them to inform and educate domestic workers and allies in the regions, and to be well prepared for the 2010 discussions. During their meeting they drew up ideas for a constitution and tried to marry the idea of a democratic member based organisation with the need to be more inclusive of allies and support organisations. They suggested a structure similar to that adopted by the ADWN i.e. unions and associations of domestic workers to have regular status with full rights in the organisation, and NGOs/ support organisations to have associate membership with limited rights..

Another sentiment expressed at the Amsterdam Conference was the importance of linking with the trade union movement. Following the Conference, the global union, IUF, led by its Equality Officer agreed to provide an organisational base for the network, with the status of a self funded project reporting to the Executive Committee. What is interesting about this decision is that the IUF agreed to a non traditional structure being part and parcel of the organisation, without insisting that all of the unions involved should become IUF affiliates. This is the first time that such an arrangement has been entered into by a global union federation.

At the Conference too delegates strongly supported the idea of an ILO Convention, but had noted that to get this on the agenda of the ILO would take up to ten years. In the event, by the next year (2008) the Governing Body of the ILO had agreed to place decent work for domestic workers on the agenda. This provided the impetus for the Network to take off. It also made it even more strategic that the IDWN be part of a global union federation, providing legitimacy and access to information and to ITUC and ILO processes. The IUF supported by WIEGO was able to secure funding to support network development and the campaign for an ILO convention. This has allowed for the engagement of an international coordinator and three regional coordinators; regional mobilising and organising activities; domestic worker representatives to attend the ILC both for training and engagement in the negotiations; a dedicated web site and so on. The Network is still underdeveloped in its membership base and has not formally been launched with a constitution and clear membership procedures. It has recently drafted an invitation letter and developed a membership form, but for now it is concentrating primarily on organising and mobilising around the campaign for an ILO Convention.

There is a tendency when moving from local to global in the organisational chain, of top down organising and increasing distance between leaders and members. Leaders may be “empowered whilst members are disempowered. There is also the real danger of shallow, undemocratic organisation- without lasting power or ongoing sustainability. On the other hand, as we are seeing through the activities of the IDWN and others in the campaign for a ILO Convention, international activity can itself be a powerful tool for mobilising and organising locally, and for directly developing and empowering women domestic worker leadership, and indirectly their members. It allows for building of broader alliances with supportive organisations and mobilising financial, organisational and human resources, under the leadership of domestic workers. Without a global organisation that has direct representation by domestic workers and has legitimacy within the trade union movement- however inadequate the level and depth of representation- there is a danger of a disempowering

process where, once again, male trade unionist (or those from other organisations) dominate the discussion and continue the (well meaning) patriarchal and patronising approach that domestic workers are well used to.

#### 4. ORGANISING STRATEGIES

Organising models and organising strategies are inextricably linked. For example, a representation and collective negotiations strategy assumes a membership base, representative leaders and democratic decision making- hence associated with trade unions and other member based organisations. Organisations use multiple strategies but may have one or more that can be considered as primary strategies as tentatively captured below<sup>7</sup>.

Primary Strategy	Type of Organisation
Grassroots organising and base building	Unions, Associations, CBOs, cooperatives
Collective negotiations and representation	Unions, Associations
Economic and livelihood development	Cooperatives
Policy, legal and rights advocacy	NGOs, CBOs, networks, alliances
Mobilisation and campaigning	Networks, alliances, unions
Social , welfare, training	NGOs, CBOs

##### Grassroots organising and base building

As illustrated in examples above, some of the most innovative organising strategies and tactics are employed right at the base. Organisations have responded to the organising challenges, including multiple identities (worker, immigrant etc) and found different ways to reach out and draw domestic workers in; to make them comfortable and overcome fear and lack of confidence; to develop leadership abilities and practical skills such as computer literacy, or child care training. Migrant workers are far from home: the solution? Bring them together through social activities and to deal with legal and other migrant related problems. Some religions impose limitations on meeting outside the home, as do some employers: form a religious discussion group. Domestic workers have little free time: speak to them in the parks whilst pushing prams, in training centres, in the church. Domestic workers fear to be seen talking to a union organiser: let domestic workers organise other domestic workers. Domestic workers are considered unskilled and their work undervalued: provide training in job skills and also education for personal growth such as leadership training or computer skills. Domestic workers are not able to negotiate with their employer: name and shame employers by demonstrating outside their homes. And so on. All these different activities and approaches provide the basis for further organising, growing the membership and moving towards democratic, member based structures and related strategies. The support of activists and NGOs is often critical to the

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<sup>7</sup> Ideas are based on work in progress on organisational forms and strategies for WIEGO by Françoise Carré.

success of such strategies, but as noted above it is important to recognise and support the move to independent worker controlled organisation.

### **Collective Negotiations and Representation**

Organising almost always leads to a demand from members that their organisation takes up their issues and represents their demands to those in power such as employers, local or national governments and departments. Finding ways of engagement, resulting in concrete gains and a shift in the balance of power, is possibly the most important factor in encouraging workers to join or remain in the organisation.

This strategy is associated most strongly with trade unions, and to a lesser extent with other democratic member based organisations, especially at local and national levels which are the immediate sites of struggle. The fact that domestic workers have no natural employer counterpart for collective negotiations is often cited as the reason for exclusion both from labour law and from trade unions. This applies to other groups of informal/unprotected workers, and finding or creating a negotiating counterpart and engaging in negotiations, is an important and empowering strategy. But the negotiating counterpart does not have to be an employer. It commonly is a local authority, government or government department or “middleman” (intermediary). The ability and opportunity for direct representation by informal workers is mirrored in the demand of domestic workers to speak for themselves, and for direct representation in local, national and international forums that affect them.

In order to deal with the issue of scattered employers, some domestic workers’ unions and union national centres have gone the route of finding or creating an employer bargaining counterpart, and successfully concluded collective bargaining agreements. In France in 1999 the trade unions negotiated the first collective bargaining agreement with the Federation of Individual Family Employers (FEPEM), representing some two million employers. This is renegotiated every year and includes wages, hours, leave, maternity accommodation, training, and applies to full and part time workers. Similarly, the German NGG and the Deutcher Hausfrauenbund (German Housewives League) have a Collective Bargaining Agreement covering domestic workers. Italy too has a comprehensive collective agreement covering domestic workers which unions and employers renegotiate every four years, with wage levels being revised every year. The agreement is recognised by the Ministry of Labour.

We could not find a partner on the employers’ side and so we invented one. In 1974, we entered negotiations with the Federation of Professional Women Housekeepers (*Federcasalinghe*). Since then this organisation has also been recognised as an employers’ association by the Italian authorities (ETUC 2005:29)

A more recent example comes from Uruguay. The Housewives’ League of Uruguay, which was originally created to revalue unpaid domestic work, agreed to act as the employers’ representatives on the newly created tripartite wage board for domestic workers. The National Trade Union Confederation agreed that the National Confederation of Domestic Workers, not yet registered as a trade union, could negotiate on their behalf (ILO 2009: 78). A successful agreement was concluded. There are examples too of voluntary bargaining arrangements on a local level. The trade union *Syndicat Interprofessionnel de Travailleuses et Travailleurs* (SIT), working with migrant domestic

workers (members and non members) in Geneva, Switzerland, encouraged some people (many who are women) from progressive political parties, unions, etc. who employ domestic workers to form an association, and this led to a collective agreement on working terms and conditions (IUF 2008).

On an international level the ILO provides an opportunity for collective negotiations or social dialogue in ILO language. But because the ILO procedures are very formal and the rights to speak and vote are limited to the official tripartite partners in a stylised manner, it is difficult for domestic worker representatives to be full participants in the process. The IDWN has adopted a two-fold strategy to go beyond visibility, advocacy and lobbying at the ILC, and to have a direct domestic worker voice in the deliberations. Firstly, its members have prioritised getting domestic workers' representatives into national trade union delegations to the ILC in 2010 and 2011. Although there is only one official worker delegate per country, that delegate may have two official advisors. They have met with success in a number of countries. Secondly, a delegation of domestic worker representatives from the IDWN will register under the banner of the IUF. Global Unions are officially classified as NGOs, but are admitted into the meetings of worker committees where the worker delegates debate and decide on their positions, and agree upon their proposed text for the instrument. Other NGOs may or may not be admitted into worker delegate discussions and may or may not be given a space to give a formal "speech" in the tripartite negotiating sessions. The IDWN then, although as yet not a fully fledged, democratic, member based organisation, has decided to strive towards a collective negotiations and representation strategy, backed by advocacy, mobilising and campaigning strategies.

To date, there are few domestic workers' organisations that have been able to move from an advocacy and mobilisation strategy to genuine collective negotiations, where domestic workers sit round the table as equal negotiating partners with employers or employers and government together, and having the power to effect change. Even where domestic workers' unions are involved in forums and process that set domestic workers' conditions of employment, it is important to note that they can be there in name but in practice be sidelined. In South Africa, where laws covering domestic workers are held up as some of the most advanced in the world, Shireen Ally notes:

In the process through which the Sectoral Determination was promulgated, the union was excised almost completely as a representative and advocate of domestic workers' collective interests. Understood as "vulnerable" and poorly organized, the Employment Conditions Commissioner substituted state fiat for the processes of collective bargaining between employers and employees that would traditionally negotiate the wages and working conditions of the sector but was not feasible given the structural constraints of the sector (Ally 2010: 155)

However, as we have seen, representation and collective negotiations is an important empowerment strategy to pursue. Possible entry points are developing local employer forums with voluntary employer members or, with a stronger presence, national tripartite forums working with and through national trade union centres, leading eventually to a fully formed, statutory bargaining forum. Government as well as trade unions could facilitate such processes, actively supporting the development of traditional or new forms of domestic workers' unions ("adapted" unions) on the one hand and employer associations on the other, and providing the conditions that would bring them together as equal negotiating partners. They could provide the resources to help build the necessary leadership and skills so that domestic workers could fully represent themselves in the negotiations.

## **Advocacy, mobilising and campaigning**

Many domestic worker organisations concentrate on advocacy as their major strategy. This is often combined with mobilising and campaigning. In some cases an advocacy strategy is a substitute for an inability or reluctance to use a collective negotiation and representation strategy because the organisation cannot claim to be representative of, or to represent, domestic workers; there are legal restrictions; no negotiating forum or negotiating counterpart, or for tactical reasons. Alternatively, it is the preferred strategy of the organisation and its members.

For mixed and broad alliances, which include unions, associations, NGOs in loose formation, these are primary strategies. They focus on raising public awareness and support and directing demands to governments or employers. Common demands are around recognition and legal protection, at state, national and international levels. Currently regional and national alliances are concentrating on the campaign for an ILO Convention. Alongside this campaign are ongoing struggles for recognition and national legislations. In Indonesia, there was a call for workers to march in the streets during a nationwide strike called for May 1-3, 2010 to push for the formulation and passage of a domestic worker law, organised by *Jala PRT*, Domestic Workers Advocacy Network, a network of NGOs, domestic workers unions and activists. Demands include both national demands and a demand that the government vote for an ILO Convention ([www.domesticworkerrights.org](http://www.domesticworkerrights.org))

For domestic workers unions and associations there are advantages in initiating or joining with broader alliances in terms of resources, profile and reach, access to different constituencies, and wider visibility. For NGOs and other civil society organisations it is essential they are inclusive of domestic workers' organisations to ensure that their advocacy and campaigning is authentic, participatory and gives voice to demands drawn up by domestic workers. Working in collaboration with the broader trade union movement is important for legitimacy and for ensuring a worker power base.

These are examples of some of the key strategies of organisations of and for domestic workers. How far are they empowering strategies and what do we mean by this?

## **4. CONCLUSION: POWER AND EMPOWERMENT**

Empowerment is:

a process by which the disempowered can change their circumstances and begin to exercise control over their lives. Empowerment results in a change in the balance of power, in working and living conditions, and in relationships. (*SEWA Leader*)

a process by which individuals and groups gain power, access to resources and control over their own lives. (*Management consultant*)

an approach where domestic workers represent, and speak for themselves through their elected leaders, with the support, rather than leadership, of other organisations. (*Domestic worker*)

Empowerment is about an individual or groups increasing control over their lives and changing power relationships in their favour. Empowerment has different dimensions, personal and collective, economic and social. When domestic workers get organised into effective organisations many have

testified that there is a change in their lives personally and collectively, and that organising is a key to empowerment.

This paper has examined a number of domestic worker organising models and strategies. Whilst there is no clear answer to the question posed by conference organisers “How can it be ensured that organisation translates into empowerment?” we can begin to see that a multi faceted approach to organising domestic workers is required. It must respond to context and circumstances in innovative ways and address different organising levels and dimensions.

In summary, the following are suggested as key elements in organising for empowerment and for beginning to change power relationships in favour of domestic workers:

# **Member based organisations** such as unions with active membership, where domestic workers lead and speak for themselves, through democratically elected and accountable women leaders at all levels- local, national and international. Important too are quasi unions and new forms of grassroots organisation providing for the specific needs of, for example, migrant workers. These can provide the base for domestic workers to build or join more powerful organisations overcoming the limitations such organisations face in challenging those in power. For all organisations a secure, caring, comfortable, supportive, women friendly and sensitive approach is essential.

# **Organising on different levels.** Change happens through pressure at different levels. Organisations at different levels play different empowerment roles. The local level focuses on growing membership and dealing with immediate issues. It provides for leadership, skills and confidence building and personal empowerment. It can focus on economic empowerment through for example the formation of cooperatives. National and international organisations provide for collective power and empowerment through solidarity, broadening learning and knowledge, mobilisation and access to collective negotiations with employers, policy makers and governments. Whilst there is a danger in focusing on international organising with a weak base thus empowering a few leaders and disempowering members, international organising can itself lead to organisational growth and development at the base. The current experience of international organising with a focus on the struggle for an ILO convention appears to bear this out.

# **Strategic organising**, using a mix of strategies appropriate to the level and circumstances. Ideally representation and collective negotiations by domestic workers would be a central pillar. This can be backed by mobilising and campaigning, and based on a strong membership through innovative grassroots organising. Creating or finding a negotiating counterpart and establishing formal and, where possible, statutory negotiating forums that can conclude agreements, is an important strategy with the potential to provide an empowering framework for organising.

# **Support from trade unions.** Although domestic workers strive for independent organisations, they also appreciate and need the support of other organisations. Trade unions are the natural home for domestic workers. But trade unions require political will and a changed mind-set in order to support domestic workers, not only in their struggles for legislative change, but also for practical and sustained organisation building. This means the provision of human and financial resources, including cross subsidisation and assistance with fund raising for example. It should include a commitment to assisting with education, training and leadership development and inclusion of domestic workers as equals in structures, activities and in collective negotiations. It requires a non patriarchal, non

patronising approach and a more open and flexible approach to working with informal and other “difficult to organise” workers currently marginalised by the trade union movement.

**# Support from NGOs, CBOs and women’s organisations** is also important. They are often the trigger and initiators of independent domestic worker organisations, and play a useful role in ongoing provision of legal and training services, of resources, capacity building and access and links to other organisations and to governments. As noted it is crucial that the support is genuine, follows domestic workers’ stated needs and encourages moves towards independent, democratic organisations of domestic workers.

**# Building broad alliances** based on mobilising , campaigning and advocacy strategies around a particular issue under the leadership of domestic workers, to maximise impact and to support representation and collective negotiations strategy can add weight and garner public support on a larger scale than an individual organisation.

**# Enabling legal and policy framework.** The struggle of domestic workers for recognition as workers and inclusion and equality under labour, social protection, immigration laws, policies and regulations is seen as a priority right now by domestic workers’ and supportive organisations. Positive legislation that includes and encourages organising, representation and collective bargaining, can provide a platform for further gains through domestic workers’ agency. The ILO notes, “One of the most important findings in the review of law and practice is that domestic workers’ conditions do not improve unless there is concerted action to improve the legislative framework.” (ILO 2009: 94). Other research undertaken in South Africa, has concluded that legal change and democratisation of the State does not necessarily lead to empowerment but may actively encourage demobilisation, with the State displacing the union as “ articulator, representative, and protector of workers’ collective interests” (Ally 2010: 154). It is true that legislation and an enabling framework, national or international, will not solve the many problems experienced by domestic workers nor lead to immediate increase in power or empowerment. It will not necessarily mobilise or demobilise domestic workers. This is a long term struggle that takes on different forms in different countries. It can however start to change attitudes and practices by providing recognition of domestic workers as workers and by valuing their work. It can provide a channel for challenging exploitation and resolving disputes and provide basic protections that can be built on. Importantly it can legitimise and encourage organising by domestic workers into unions, and facilitate representation and collective bargaining by domestic workers themselves. But to do this requires an enabling, empowering approach rather than a paternalistic one.

Organising is never easy. It is a long and ongoing struggle for all workers. For some workers such as domestic workers, it may be more difficult than for others, and will take many years to attain even a modest level of organisation across the world. However, domestic workers have demonstrated that they can and do organise in many different ways. They have sent out a strong message that they are workers doing valuable work and that they wish to represent themselves in matters affecting their work and lives. Democratic, member based, worker controlled organisations and self representation are thus essential features of “organising for empowerment”, combined with practical, sustained and unconditional support from a range of organisations. For the former, self organised, “adapted” trade union organisations, proto unions or associations, with innovative organising strategies appropriate to circumstances, provide the most promising vehicle, as demonstrated by the number of domestic workers’ organisations that have strived to attain this status. For the latter, trade unions remain the

most important, but not only, allies of domestic workers, having legitimacy as worker representatives with access to those in power. However, they require changes to their attitudes and approaches and importantly a commitment to sustained and unconditional provision of organisational resources, including financial support.

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