

New initiatives in organizing strategy in the informal economy
-- Case study of domestic workers' organizing-- *Executive summary*

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1. Introduction: Domestic work— strands in the debate: The women's movement internationally has underlined the struggle against the invisibility of women ; women's work, sexuality, needs, power, capacities and abilities, autonomy and much more. An important aspect of this was the critique of housework or domestic labour and the almost complete equation of women to domestic labour. The conflict between the employer and the employee of domestic work is in the public sphere of employment relations; the conflict regarding the gender division of labour is in the private sphere.

The modern context: With a decline in employment in the agricultural and industrial sector, almost all new employment is opening only in the service sector. Due to globalization, for the vulnerable sections of women from poorer backgrounds and poorer economies domestic work seems to be the last resort, globally as well. This fact reinforces sexual division of labour within the world of work and of race, caste, class, poorer economies apart from gender as well.

2. General scenario of women workers in the context of globalization:

There is a much greater acceleration in processes of informalisation of work in last two decades. Women are the majority of workers in the informalised economy. Some of the **issues of serious concern** both to the women's movement and to the labour movement are: Quantity, quality and lack of employment; issues of the working poor; Pauperization and vulnerability; Migration, trafficking and sex work; Increase in the service sector and of women in this sector; Impact of political, ethnic and other conflicts on women; Privatization and loss of control over natural resources; Globalization of cultural practices through consumerism; Organizational strategies and new alternatives.

3. Women Domestic Workers In India: In India, in ancient times, domestic work was largely performed by serfs belonging to the so-called lower castes who were denied access to education (especially denied to women), the shudras. **Statistical profile:** Any reliable data about domestic workers in India is not available. According to the 1991 census, there were 5.76 lakh women (58% of the total workers in this sector) engaged in the domestic services industry. An important invisible aspect of domestic workforce is child labour. Education: Most domestic workers are illiterate or semi-literate. A survey in Pune found that most of them above the age of 30 were illiterate. **Reasons for taking up domestic work:** These have been outlined as follows: Economic; Single earner families; It is considered work in safe environment; Non-marketable skills; Flexible working hours. **Law:** In 1959 a bill entitled the Domestic Workers (Condition of Services) Bill was introduced but it is yet to take the shape of an Act. The domestic workers have no legal status.

4. Organizations working with Domestic Workers – a brief sketch

Attempts at organizing domestic workers going on for several decades now involve: Forming trade unions; Providing services; Running employment schemes; Attempts at legislative provisions and rights and Combining some of the above functions. The type of organizations involved in the effort have been: 1. Church-related organizations, 2. Other NGOs, 3. Existing Trade unions, both national and local and 4. Women's organisations. **Legal efforts** by domestic workers' organizations: Despite repeated incidents of abuse of various types coming to public notice, a legislation has been scuttled for several decades. In the year 1994, several trade unions and NGOs in Maharashtra came together to campaign for and demand legislative protection. **Issues for organizing** domestic workers in several parts of the world have been: Union issues; formation of co-operatives; credit and savings groups. Vocational training; Social

activities; Employment exchanges; support services; A place to congregate; Crèche; Legal and general advice; Support in disputes with employers and in familial disputes.

5. Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana, (Pune City Domestic Workers' Organization): Pune is the second largest city in the state of Maharashtra and also a well-developed industrial city. There has been an increase over the years of educated women occupying jobs in these industries and services. These same development processes give rise to increased joblessness, migration, displacement of entire households, communities, villages and also increase the number and proportion of women coming into informal employment. In Pune city (population 3.5 million), number of domestic workers is estimated to be in the region of 60,000 out of these 45000 work in main city as per the 2001 census.

The Domestic Workers Movement in Pune: Establishment of the organization: In 1980, one long-time domestic worker was terminated by her employer on the basis of absence due to illness and some domestic problems. The action of the employer infuriated the other domestic workers in the area. They went on a spontaneous strike against the dismissal. Lack of any improvement in wages even when inflation was raging had already raised their tempers and the above incident added fuel to the fire. After striking work, activists who were part of the left-oriented trade union and women's organizations helped them to get organized into a team and then into a trade union. Thus was born the Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana.

In the initial phases of the strike and organizing, women domestic workers would have meetings every day. Often 500 – 600 women came for the meetings. The Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana raised demands that were immediately important for women. Marches were organized highlighting these demands. Wage increase of 30-40% for all, and the demand for one month's pay as bonus once a year was realized in most cases.

In subsequent years there were strikes of domestic workers in various parts of the city. Strikes took place from 1980 to 1996, almost every year in different parts of the city. A great deal of progress could be secured due to these collective actions. Rate cards delineating different rates for different types of work were agreed upon with employers. In addition, the organization led marches and gave memorandums to Government officials and leaders. The Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana joined hands with a large organization of unorganized workers and now have been involved in campaigning and movements on a massive scale at the state as well as at the national level.

Other Achievements of the Movement

Survival and vibrancy: The survival and vibrancy of the domestic workers organization itself is a very major achievement. One of the reasons for the relatively few ebbs in the movement has been the novel strategies adopted by the Sanghatana. It is an entirely membership based organization, with all the resources coming from the domestic workers alone. The membership of the Sanghatana is over 3,000 and its reach is about 20,000 people. The membership fee is Rs. 10/- per year.

Establishment of the Toiling Women's Front: The Sanghatana has been of the firm view that it is only the toiling sections of women who can carry the true message of women's liberation. It is through their participation that the Sanghatana has been able to run a women's counseling centre in Pune, which has so far handled over 15,000 cases of problems within the family. This strategy is important, as while workplace issues may be pressing at times, they may not be so all the time. The organization then has different rationale for different times and often they can be mutually reinforcing.

Fight against Slumlords: Similarly, housing is an important issue and one in which there can be a great deal of exploitation from the landlord or the local mafia. In the early seventies, the domestic workers led a glorious and successful struggle against the power of the slumlords.

6. Strategies of the Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana: Crucial strategies include:

- Strategy of Organizing
- Building solidarity among the domestic workers
- Solidarity with other movements
- Negotiation strategy, both individual and collective
- Assertion of rights and dignity at different levels - attempt to give agency to women in other aspects of their lives.
- Reaching out strategy – harnessing community support
- Media strategy
- Federating
- Networking
- Participating in the wider movement for social change
- Deepening understanding of the activists
- Advocacy and Lobbying
- Connecting with the women’s movement, in urban and rural areas

7. Some Conclusions: some glimpses into the future:

1. Replicability and Sustainability: Particular Circumstances: These include the general political turmoil and radicalization nationally and internationally.

Combination of factors: This combination of factors seems extremely crucial in the sustenance of this movement. These include **affiliation to larger organizations as well as the perspective of the leading organization.**

2. `For` or `With`: One major difference lies in whether the organization works for domestic workers or with domestic workers. And then, with what perspective. What is important is an organization that builds a perspective of active participation and control by domestic workers. This includes the recognition of the different needs of women in the informal economy vis-a-vis the union and the aspect of fluidity of identity of women in this sector.

3. Some future directions:

Domestic workers pervade the homes of all the middle class and upper class people. These are the very people who make laws and implement them. One step in order to begin to deal with these obstacles is to empower domestic workers at least in some pockets, so that they begin to take the leadership of the national level alliance and begin to deal with obstacles that direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious vested interests pose in the consolidation of these organizations and alliances.