

“Slaves No More”: Making Global Labor Standards for Domestic Workers

ON JUNE 16, 2011, HOUSEHOLD WORKERS WORLDWIDE won the first international set of standards that acknowledged their right to decent work. The International Labor Organization (ILO) approved Convention 189, a treaty-like document that extends labor protections around wages, hours, and overall working conditions to domestic workers¹, following ratification by nation states.² As Sofia Trevino from Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, a feminist NGO at Harvard University, recalled, “It took years of organizing to get to this moment.”³ South African Myrtle Witbooi, chair of the International Domestic Workers Network, defined the meaning of the event thus: “Our dream became a reality, and we are free — slaves no more, but workers.”⁴

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1. We follow the terminology agreed by worker groups despite their reservation that the word “domestic” reinforces conflation with labors of love, because it is the term deployed in legal systems. IRENE (International Restructuring Education Network Europe), *Respect and Rights: Protection for Domestic/Household Workers* (Tilburg: IRENE and Geneva: IUF, August 2008); organizational report.
 2. See Helen Schwenken, “From Maid to Worker,” *Queries* 7, no. 1 (2012): 14–21.
 3. Sofia Trevino, *C189: Conventional Wisdom*, directed by Jennifer N. Fish, Rachel Crockett, and Robin Ormiston (Norfolk: Sisi Sojourner Productions, 2012) DVD.
 4. International Domestic Workers Network, “A Message from Myrtle Witbooi, IDWN Chair,” *IDWN News*, October 2011, http://www.idwn.info/sites/default/files/publications/IDWN_Newsletter_2011.pdf.



International Domestic Workers Network leaders celebrate the passing of Convention 189 with Juan Somavia, ILO Director General, June 16, 2011. Courtesy of WIEGO.

Deliberating on global standards for domestic workers was not an entirely new issue for the International Labor Organization (ILO), a holdover from the League of Nations that, as a specialized agency of the United Nations, passes conventions and nonbinding recommendations and assists governments to implement such regulations. Unique among UN agencies, the ILO is tripartite, with national delegations consisting of government, worker, and employer representatives.⁵ Following WWII, when sociologists and policy makers alike predicted the end of domestic service, the ILO surveyed member nations on the plight of household workers. It understood domestic work as part of the problem of an expanded movement of women into employment and sought solutions to what was looming as a crisis of care and household maintenance.⁶ The initiative

5. See Gerry Rodgers, Eddy Lee, Lee Sweptson, and Jasmien Van Daele, eds., *The ILO and the Quest for Social Justice, 1919–2009* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Carol Riegelman Lubin and Anne Winslow, *Social Justice for Women: The International Labor Organization and Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

6. See Lewis Coser, "Servants: The Obsolescence of an Occupation Role," *Social Forces* 52 (1973): 31–40; and International Labor Organization, *ILC Proceedings*, 30th Session, 1947: 592, Archives, International Labor Office, Geneva,

fizzled out in the early 1950s; and in subsequent decades the study of the conditions of domestic workers failed to galvanize any action.

Why did it take over sixty years for domestic workers to gain recognition under the ILO? What accounts for the apparent global sea change that has legitimized a prototypical form of feminized labor, hidden in the household and involving familiarity and intimacy—prime reasons that domestic work long stood outside of public scrutiny and legal regulation? When we first posed these questions, our common commitment to the grassroots organizing of those with the most at stake in this process—domestic workers themselves—made us wish to claim that their agency had made the difference. But this initial impulse proved too simple, we found, as we began to probe the interplay between local struggles, transnational networks, and institutional action. In explaining how organized domestic workers and their NGO and trade union allies used the ILO process for recognition and rights, we came to see how the rules of the ILO and available cultural representations shaped the agency that domestic workers wielded, even as workers seized these procedural and discursive tools for strategic ends. What we discovered was both more contingent on the presence of workers and more determined by structure than our own proclivities might have predicted, underscoring the complex interaction between social movements and global institutions.

This article is a product of collaboration between two interdisciplinary feminist scholars, one specializing in textual and archival analysis and the other in ethnography. It comes from our puzzling over the kinds of changes in the global political economy, national laws, feminist activism, and worker self-determination needed to achieve international standards for domestic workers. We compare two moments in which the ILO considered domestic worker protections: the early post-WWII period, when labor feminists raised the question, and the last half-decade, when the first transnational network of domestic workers won a convention. We draw on archival remains and ethnographic analysis, approaches that together allow for an understanding of temporality, while capturing the affect of the present that is less fully available through the historical record. Through joining these methods, we uncover the processes

Switzerland. Hereafter “ILO Archives.” All ILC Proceedings are archived at the ILO Archives.

by which proponents engaged an international bureaucracy to expand labor standards. We focus on the prominence of transnational advocacy networks in framing ILO debates on household workers and their role in securing the convention, with simultaneous attention to the interplay between networks, nation states, and international organizations.⁷

Multiple factors account for the transformation of domestic work from invisible labor to the celebrated subject of global deliberations. Institutional barriers, ideological blinders, and representational limits overdetermined the mid-twentieth-century failure to bring forth a worldwide instrument on the rights of domestic workers. So did the disinterest of governments, indifference of unions, and ridicule of employers. Few nations included domestic work in their labor laws and the sector remained mostly unorganized. Moving away from protective labor legislation, Western feminists were less interested in improving a low-waged occupation dominated by women of color and ethnic minorities than in seeking equal rights legislation. In the 1950s, they focused on obtaining ILO conventions on equal remuneration and nondiscrimination rather than on procuring standards for domestic workers.

In the decades leading up to the 2011 convention, substantive shifts in the global political economy transformed the context in which domestic workers and their labor and feminist allies operated. The most important of these were the reorganization of the global economy itself, the increased influence of Global South nations through the United Nations, the intensification of transnational feminism, and the expansion of informal economies—all well-documented topics beyond the scope of this essay.⁸ Significantly, domestic work did not wither away, although transnational migrants came to dominate this ever-growing sector. As of 2010 the ILO estimates a domestic workforce of nearly fifty-three million women and men, nineteen million more than fifteen years earlier,

7. See Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

8. See V. Spike Peterson, "Rethinking Theory: Inequalities, Informalization, and Feminist Quandaries," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 1 (2012): 5–35; Valentine M. Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Millie Thayer, *Making Transnational Feminism: Rural Women, NGO Activists, and Northern Donors in Brazil* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

accounting for some 7.5 percent of women's labor across the globe, with larger percentages in specific regions.⁹ This increase underscored the need for ILO standards.

Neoliberal economic policies since the 1970s created transnational exchange relations that hinge upon the migration and "trade" of women workers to provide emotional labor and household reproduction for a global care chain, part of a distinct rise in feminized service economies.¹⁰ With both families and nations drawing on women's labor force participation, migrants had become "the oil in the wheels," as Tanzanian trade unionist Vicky Kanyoka reminded the ILO's International Labor Conference (ILC) in 2010. "It is our work in households that enables others to go out and be economically active... it is us who take care of your precious children and your sick and elderly; we cook your food to keep you healthy and we look after your property when you are away."¹¹ In other words, the contributions domestic workers make to social reproduction, as well as to the global economy, justified the ideological and ethical rationale for what advocates touted as a long-overdue need for international labor standards.

In the 2000s, a convention for domestic workers gained traction because of organizing among national groups and their ability in turn to form a transnational movement, facilitated by human rights and feminist NGOs and international labor federations. The resulting coalition drew on the ILO's ideological emphasis on "fair globalization" and "decent work" to place domestic work on the ILC agenda in 2010. The commitment of key players within the ILO, with their political capital and knowledge of ILO bureaucracy, proved vital to advancing a domestic

9. International Labor Organization, *Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection* (Geneva: ILO, 2013), 2.

10. See Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: New Press, 1998).

11. Statement of Vicky Kanyoka, *ILC Proceedings*, 99th Session, 2010, page 8/41. See also Diane Perrons, "Gendered Division in the New Economy: Risks and Opportunities," *Geojournal*, 56 (2002): 271, 273; Barbara Ehrenreich, "Maid to Order," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 85–103; and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadow of Affluence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

workers convention. Over the preceding decades, employer representatives had become increasingly hostile to any labor regulation; however, convention supporters overwhelmed this opposition through a politics of affect linked to human rights claims.¹²

The same globalization undergirding the mounting demand for domestic labor also spread new avenues for networking and activism, often enhanced by digital communication.¹³ Thus, forty-five years after the last major conversation on domestic labor within the ILC, a world-wide network of domestic workers — part of the growing transnational exchange among feminist NGOs and labor union women — joined global union leaders and gender and labor rights advocates to take an active role in ILO deliberations, indeed to shape them through an unprecedented intervention in the convention-making process.¹⁴ This global dialogue on women's paid labor within the private household developed from and further fueled a transnational activism not possible in 1950, when a handful of labor feminists pushed for international standards without much support from trade unionists or governments. Belonging to both a renewed internationalism among trade unions and a broader transnational feminism, today's domestic worker movement illuminates the promise and difficulties of advocacy across borders when the struggles of the "poorest of the poor" move from the periphery to the center of international debates.¹⁵

WHY NO CONVENTION AFTER WWII?

In the years following WWII, advocates for domestic workers were unable to overcome the obstacles inherent in the organization of the ILO. From the start, the ILO has consisted of three parts, any of which can impede

12. For the politics of affect, we draw inspiration from Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 79 (Summer 2004): 117–39.

13. See Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai, eds., *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

14. See Suzanne Franzway and Mary Margaret Fonow, *Making Feminist Politics: Transnational Alliances between Women and Labor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); and Valentine M. Moghadam, Suzanne Franzway, and Mary Margaret Fonow, eds., *Making Globalization Work for Women: The Role of Social Rights and Trade Union Leadership* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011).

15. In referring to "advocacy across borders," we pay homage to Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*.

action: the International Labor Office (Office), staffed with civil servants and professional experts under an elected Director-General; an elected Governing Body; and the annual ILC, where country delegations pass conventions drafted by the Office in consultation with committees of experts. Rather than setting its own agenda, the research-oriented division on women (whose name and institutional location shifted over the years in relation to finances, politics, and personnel) fulfilled requests by more powerful units under the Director-General.¹⁶

The ILO's tripartite structure — that requires all delegations and most committees have government, employer, and worker representatives — served as a major barrier to introducing policy recommendations centered on household labor. Delegations remained country based, with worker and employer representatives appointed from national “peak” organizations, as if the categories of “worker” or “employer” were unified. In practice, these delegates disproportionately have come from male-dominated sectors of the economy. Even if the Office drafted proposals, one of these constituent groups had to introduce an initiative. Ultimately, a majority of the delegates had to recognize domestic labor as work and its workforce as fitting into accepted structures of employment.

The timing of the initial proposal was inauspicious. The issue of domestic worker standards appeared with the dawn of the Cold War, which turned the ILO into an ideological battleground between capitalist and communist states over the meaning of worker rights. The emergence of newly independent and decolonizing nations led the entire United Nations to questions of development — and domestic labor appeared as evidence of underdevelopment, as residual, nonmodern labor. European nations remained reluctant to extend labor standards to “nonmetropolitan” regions, as the ILO was apt to refer to colonial areas. In this context, advocates from Western Europe and the United States framed domestic work more in terms of conditions facing urban, industrial nations in the Global North. When it came to Asia, Africa, and Latin America, they condemned

16. Eileen Boris and Jill Jensen, “The ILO: Women’s Networks and the Making of the Woman Worker,” in *Women and Social Movements International*, ed. Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2013) at <http://wasi.alexanderstreet.com/View/1879476>.

practices classified as “life servitude,” including “quasi-adoption.”¹⁷ Until the 1970s, the Eurocentric posture of the ILO combined with racial and national hierarchies to generate conventions that reflected global power relations and reinforced racial categories and privileges.¹⁸

Unlike the early twenty-first century, when domestic workers demanded recognition, after WWII women “experts” pushed the ILO to consider standards for household employment. These Western-oriented labor feminists from government bureaus, universities, and trade unions, along with international middle-class women’s associations with their observer status at the United Nations and its agencies, dominated the discourse on domestic work.¹⁹ They framed the occupation in negative terms as “low standard,” a special case within female difference, outside of the industrial mainstream and thus apart from general labor protections. Its isolated location impeded worker self-organization. The nature of the sector

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17. Frieda Miller, “ILO Meeting of Experts on Employment of Domestic Workers,” 1951: 7, typescript, 2, box 68, Office of the Director, General Correspondence of the Women’s Bureau, 1948–1953, folder “Domestic Work,” RG 86, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. Hereafter, “NARA.”
 18. We are indebted to Susan Zimmerman for laying out this point in her “Night Work for White Women, Bonded Labour for Women of Colour? Contentious Traditions and the Globalization of Gender-Specific Labour Protection and Legal Equality Politics, 1926 to 1939,” in *New Perspectives on European Women’s Legal History*, ed. Sara Kimble and Marion Röwekamp (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2014).
 19. “Draft Resolution Concerning Domestic Servants,” *ILC Proceedings*, 20th Session, 1936: 639, 740; Ulla Wikander, “Demands on the ILO by Internationally Organized Women in 1919,” in *ILO Histories: Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World during the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jasmien Van Daele, Magaly Rodríguez García, Geert van Goethem, and Marcel van der Linden (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 67–89; Carol Miller, “‘Geneva — the Key to Equality’: Inter-war Feminists and the League of Nations,” *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 2 (1994): 219–45; Sandra Whitworth, “Gender, International Relations and the Case of the ILO,” *Review of International Studies* 20, no. 4 (1994): 389–405; Nora Natchkova and Céline Schoeni, “The ILO, Feminists and Expert Networks: The Challenges of a Protective Policy (1919–1934),” in *Globalizing Social Rights: The International Labour Organization and Beyond*, ed. Sandrine Kott and Joëlle Droux (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 49–64.

justified their intervention “to raise the status of the service by improving conditions of work and by organizing the occupation.”²⁰

At the beginning of postwar deliberations on domestic workers, the ILO’s Correspondence Committee on Women’s Work recommended action as part of its general report on employment. Among suggested measures to upgrade domestic work were vocational education, minimum standards through model contract and legal regulations, inclusion in social insurance, and organization of home helps (what we in the United States call home care) under public auspices or through cooperatives.²¹ The 1948 ILC subsequently approved a resolution, submitted by British worker delegate Alfred Roberts, that the conference address as early as its 1950 meeting “the status and employment of domestic workers.”²²

Instead of discussing working conditions, a subsequent 1951 ILO Meeting of Experts on Women’s Work focused on lack of labor supply. Noting that women were fleeing from service, it considered “practical steps which would lighten the household tasks of women workers.” These wage earners, it assumed, would leave the home for other workplaces and thus require social services to meet family responsibilities. Socializing reproductive labor through childcare centers and canteens, as were available during WWII, would replace the private work of the home, but some families still would require household workers.²³

The women experts assembled a complicated portrait of domestic labor. They deployed discourses of exploitation and protection, but added languages of efficacy and modernization—achievable through institutionalized venues such as home help services. They also realized the worth of domestic work. On the one hand, private household workers produced value; it was “by its nature one of the most socially important

20. International Labor Organization Governing Body, “Seventh Item on the Agenda: Status and Conditions of Employment of Domestic Workers,” 8–11 March, 1950: 1, box 68, folder “Domestic Workers,” RG 86, NARA.

21. “Report of the Correspondence Committee on Women’s Work: Meeting on the Post-War Employment of Women,” 8–13 July 1946, in ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 99th Session 1946: 70–71. All ILO Governing Body Minutes are archived in the ILO Archives.

22. “Proposed Resolution Concerning the Conditions of Employment of Domestic Workers,” *ILC Proceedings*, 31st Session, 1948: 109–10.

23. ILO, “Meeting of Experts on Women’s Work,” Geneva, 11–15 December, 1951, 8, in WN 1002, 01/1951 to 12/1955, ILO Archives.

of all occupations.”²⁴ As Florence Hancock from the British Transport and General Workers Union, one of the few women delegates to the ILO at mid-century, reiterated, domestic workers were “essential to our comfort and well-being.”²⁵ On the other hand, this residue form of production needed upgrading to resemble modern conditions of employment.

Though scattered unionization of domestic workers occurred during the 1930s, women experts generally ignored worker self-organization as a means to improve labor standards. Hancock was nearly alone in mentioning unionization. She felt an ILO convention could have a boomerang effect, “encourage[ing] them [domestic workers] in their fight for improved conditions and [it] will certainly give them added status internationally.”²⁶ Despite evidence to the contrary, the overarching belief that domestic workers were unorganizable persisted.²⁷

Women experts did not necessarily lack interest in this issue. The concerns of experts, who themselves were employers of household labor, entered into the equation with talk of shortages of, and, more crucially, a paucity of trained workers. Even the trade unionists among them were not accountable to domestic workers, but rather took it upon themselves to speak on their behalf. However, the presence of a class within a class, often divided by race or ethnicity, should not deny the ways that some women’s organizations, notably the YWCA in both its US and world branches, sought to bring workers and housewife employers into dialogue and fought for upgraded conditions.²⁸ The British were particularly active through the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women’s Organizations associated with the Labor Party and the Trade Union Congress. Indeed, British labor feminists led ILO deliberations, along with the director of the US Women’s Bureau, Frieda Miller.²⁹ Hancock

24. “Report of the Correspondence Committee on Women’s Work,” July 8–13, 1946: 70.

25. *ILC Proceedings*, 36th Session, 1953: 281.

26. *ILC Proceedings*, 37th Session, 1954: 297.

27. Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen, “Domestic Workers Organize!” *WorkingUSA* 11, no. 4 (December 2008): 413–37.

28. Letter from Marion V. Royce to Madame Thibert, Feb. 11, 1946, in WN 1001/04, ILO Archives.

29. Letter from Mary Sutherland to Dr. Fairchild, Sept. 25, 1951, in WN 8-3-25; Memo from the Chief of the Women’s and Young Workers’ Section to the Executive Secretary of the Washington Branch, Nov. 15, 1950, in WN 8-3-61, both in ILO Archives.

and Roberts, who represented Britain on the ILO's Governing Body, pushed the question of domestic workers, but Roberts was unable to obtain enough support from other worker delegates in the early 1950s to sustain the issue. Without the workers, there wasn't much hope with the employers.³⁰

Advocates battled over major discursive and ideological constructs about domestic labor. Government delegates regarded these jobs as apart from the real world of work, that is, industry, commerce, and agriculture.³¹ Not only were there no organized employers to bargain with, employer delegates long claimed that international regulation did not apply because domestic work just wasn't "a matter in which international competition is likely to arise." They asserted, "The Employers' representatives only represent employers in industry and commerce, and the question of domestic servants do not concern them."³² For Western Europeans, the personal relationship between servant and employer allowed for individual settlement of conditions, making labor standards unnecessary.³³ But communist nations also downgraded domestic labor. The Polish government delegate argued, "In countries in which the economic system was not a capitalist one, the question of the status of domestic workers was of no practical importance." More important for these male delegates were the issues of collective bargaining, equal remuneration, unemployment, and higher standards of living.³⁴

Delegates from Asia and Latin America similarly insisted that domestic workers were "part of the family system." As a Chinese (Taiwanese) government delegate claimed, "If the employer's own conditions were unsatisfactory the servant could hardly expect to be treated any more favorably" for being "part of the family." Fernando Yllanes Ramos from the Mexican Employer's Association similarly argued, "Where domestic workers were part of the family it was difficult to see how there could be a collective agreement between a family and its domestic workers."³⁵

30. Letter from Florence Hancock to Frieda Miller, Nov. 4, 1952, box 68, folder "Domestic Workers," NARA.

31. *ILC Proceedings*, 29th Session, 1946: 180; ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 110th Session, 1950: 29.

32. *ILC Proceedings*, 20th Session, 1936: 465.

33. *ILC Proceedings*, 37th Session, 1954: 564–65.

34. ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 110th Session, 1950: 30.

35. ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 117th Session, 1951: 32.

This one-of-the-family mantra justified exclusion of domestic workers throughout the world.

The very abjection of domestic workers constituted another reason why no recommendation emerged. Domestic work represented “the most exploited” and unorganized form of labor, “through no fault of their own but because of the character of their work” that led to the postponement of discussion of their conditions, the Italian government delegate stressed in 1950.³⁶ Repeatedly, delegates and advisors to the ILC referred to exploitation, specifying long hours, subminimum wages, and low status. But despite some understanding that such workers deserved protection, delegates went on to pass standards that either excluded domestic workers or made it easy for national governments to do so.³⁷

Some of these men did not take household employment seriously because they associated the labor with the organization of domestic life — and the unpaid housewife. The contradictions in their discourse are palpable. British employer delegate Sir John Forbes Watson denied that such workers were any longer, if they were ever, exploited. If the ILO would consider standards for household labor, he claimed, “the most appropriate experts would be mothers with larger families rather than theorists with preconceived ideas as to how the intimate affairs of the family should be organized.” Others sought to interject the servant question — how to obtain better workers — into what was to be a focus on the conditions of labor.³⁸ Male-dominated trade unions also continued to find “the subject matter ... strange to them.” US labor feminist Pauline Newman, a member of the Committee of Women Experts, noted, “they just don’t realize its importance or relationship to the labor movement as a whole.”³⁹ Even governments generally favorable to worker rights lumped improved conditions for the housewife with standards for the domestic worker. Thus Sweden recommended an employer representative to the Expert’s Meeting on Domestic Work on the basis of her being

36. ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 110th Session, 1950: 35.

37. See, for example, *ILC Proceedings*, 29th Session, 1946: 179, 181, 458; *ILC Proceedings*, 32nd Session, 1949: 501, 515; *ILC Proceedings*, 36th Session, 1953: 170, 405; and ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 110th Session, 1950: 38.

38. ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 112th Session, 1950: 80–83.

39. Letter from Pauline Newman to Mildred Fairchild, Aug. 7, 1951, in WN 8-3-61, ILO Archives.

a mother of five children.⁴⁰ A perception that domestic workers were no longer needed, thanks to modern appliances and men's greater participation in housework, confused the issue even further.⁴¹

Support for a domestic worker convention came from the Women's and Young Workers Section of the Office, but the very presumption of representation by labor feminists and women reformers met with opposition. Male trade unionists and employers often dismissed the women experts. A response by Britain's Sir Joseph Hallsworth captures this defensive reaction: "There were, within the workers' organizations, enough people who were familiar with the conditions of employment of women to make it unnecessary to have recourse to so-called experts who might have no trade union experience and might represent nothing but their own theoretical views."⁴² Mexico's Ramos insulted these "so-called" experts, calling them "persons who meddled in an amateur fashion with other people's interests," a display of misogyny that suggests the ingrained sexism that such professional women still faced in the post-war years.⁴³

Without strong backing from governments, competing agendas pushed domestic workers off the ILO calendar. But so did the century-long disagreement between feminists over women-only labor legislation, which shaped the early interaction between the ILO and the United Nations' new Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The ILO postponed discussion of domestic work because the United Nations requested it to take up equal pay.⁴⁴ It made this substitution in order to keep women's economic rights in its portfolio, rather than having the gender-first/same-treatment feminists of the CSW determine terms for wage-earning women.⁴⁵

40. Memo from S. Thorsson to Chief of Women's and Young Workers' Section, Feb. 22, 1950, in WN 8-3-1001, "Ad Hoc Committee on Experts on the Status and Condition of Employment of Domestic Service," ILO Archives.

41. Malvina Lindsay, "Global Kitchen Revolution: Who Will Do the Work?" *Washington Post*, January 23, 1952.

42. ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 99th Session, 1946: 31.

43. Fernando Yllanes Ramos statement, in ILO Governing Body, *Minutes*, 117th Session, 1951: 32.

44. Letter from Mildred Fairchild to Miss Elliott, Jan. 1, 1949, in WN 8-3-25, ILO Archives.

45. Eileen Boris, "Friend or Foe? The ILO and the UN Commission on the Status of Women," in Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehtker, and Susan Zimmermann,

By 1953, the labor feminists had failed. Mildred Fairchild, the former Bryn Mawr professor of social investigation who headed the women's section, reported to her friend Frieda Miller, who had presided over the expert meeting on domestic workers: "Because of the attitude of the Governing Body, I think the Director-General is inclined to believe that we probably cannot and should not attempt to press this subject before the conference." Latin American countries and India stood in the way, believing "that any attention to this question was absurd." But, as we have seen, European nations were not on board either. Under budgetary limits, the ILO's Director-General was not willing to push domestic work without fuller backing. The ILO could prod but it could not move too far ahead of its member states.⁴⁶

The devaluing of domestic labor did much to take it off the ILO's agenda, but we could rephrase that claim as the overvaluing of male-dominated occupations and the desire of women to enter them molded the policies of nondomestic workers toward household employment. Gaining equality for women in relation to men might also have appeared more pressing (and progressive, given the association of protective laws with exclusion of women from better jobs) even among those who would still fight for upgrading female-dominated work. Equal remuneration was legible to employers and trade unionists in ways that household labor was not. It fit into standard employment paradigms as well as rights discourse — and it also impacted the women in various UN and ILO committees, who worked within a male-dominated workplace and shared their own experiences with unequal pay.⁴⁷

Domestic workers were simply not a priority. The ILO, under Director-General David Morse, a labor lawyer who came out of the New Deal, embraced technical assistance to "developing" nations and broad worker rights conventions, not the upgrading of household labor.⁴⁸ Despite

eds. *Women's ILO: Transnational Networks, Working Conditions, and Gender Equality* (London: Palgrave, forthcoming 2016).

46. Letter from Mildred Fairchild to Frieda Miller, April 25, 1953, in WN 1001-07, ILO Archives.

47. On standard employment, Leah F. Vosko, *Managing the Margins: Gender, Citizenship, and the International Regulation of Precarious Employment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

48. Daniel Roger Maul, "The 'Morse Years': The ILO 1948–1970," in *ILO Histories*, 365–400.

requests by the Second African Regional Conference in 1964 and the 1965 ILC for an investigation into the conditions of domestic work, other issues had greater salience, such as relieving the double burden of women workers with family responsibilities and moving women into “development.” It took nearly two years for the Office to transmit a questionnaire on domestic labor to member countries. Justifying the delay, Elizabeth Johnstone, then coordinator of women’s work, explained: “We want good replies, and there is no particular urgency about getting them. The subject matter of the questionnaire is delicate, complex and difficult in any event.”⁴⁹

Finally in 1970 the Office issued a report. Despite unreliable and poor data, and in spite of variations between North and South, East and West, it concluded, “domestic service in private households remains a forgotten sector,” with workers “overworked, underpaid and underprotected.” What could be done? The ILO reiterated its post-WWII recommendations: training, standardized conditions, model contracts, and social security coverage. It was willing to call “on the public conscience” to improve conditions, but not convene a second meeting of experts as the first step toward an international instrument, a procedure recommended five years before.⁵⁰

However, focus on the informal sector and the household as sites of income generation, abetted by feminist scholars inside and outside of the ILO, was widening conceptions of what counts as work. This definitional expansion, while necessary, remained insufficient to generate change. It would take nearly thirty more years, when confronted with

49. Elizabeth Johnstone to Dr. Amar; Amar to Johnstone, minute notes, Feb. 2, 1965, and also July 1, 1965, in WN 8-3, Jacket 2, 8/1964-3/1976, ILO Archives; Johnstone to H.R.D., C.W.L. S.I.D., minute notes, Jan. 31, 1966, and following correspondence, especially Oct. 10, 1966, Feb. 14, 1967, April 26, 1967, in WN 8-3-1003-01, jacket 1, 1/65 to 10/1967, ILO Archives; *ILC Proceedings*, 49th Session, 1965, “Resolution Concerning Conditions of Employment of Domestic Workers,” 511–12, and “Fifth Item on the Agenda: The Employment of Women with Family Responsibilities,” 638–49, ILO Archives.

50. ILO, “The Employment and Conditions of Domestic Workers in Private Households: An ILO Survey,” *International Labour Review*, 102 (October 1970): 391–92, 399, 401.

renewed concerns over the situation of migrant workers, for the ILO to again research the unregulated condition of domestic labor worldwide.⁵¹

During the last third of the twentieth century, the ILO itself went through a number of changes. It attempted to adapt to the twists and turns of global politics, including Cold War posturing and human rights battles over apartheid and Palestinian territory; restricted institutional capacity when the United States briefly withdrew in the 1970s; declines in industrial unions, the emergence of the service sector, and relocation of industries; the rise of neoliberalism through market ideology, financialization, and structural adjustment; and the unraveling of social democratic welfare solutions to capitalist globalization. It investigated domestic work in specific locales: in 1993, for example, the ILC recommended placing domestic workers under the labor law in post-apartheid South Africa.⁵² In approving Convention 177 on Home Work in 1996, it set a precedent that home-based employment deserved coverage under labor standards. Just as it took a coalition of feminist advocates, researchers, ILO staff, unionists, and industrial homeworkers led by the Self-Employed Women's Association of India to win Convention 177, it would require a similar transnational network to consider household labor as employment.⁵³

STRUCTURAL PRECONDITIONS

The 2011 victory of domestic workers illustrates the significance of transnational networks and activist practices forged in more localized struggles and applied to an international campaign. As International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) chair Witbooi proclaimed during

51. Adelle Blackett, "Introduction: Regulating Decent Work for Domestic Workers," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 23, no. 1 (2012): 1–45; Adelle Blackett, *Making Domestic Work Visible: The Case for Specific Regulation* (Geneva: ILO, 1998); Patricia Weinert, "Foreign Female Domestic Workers: HELP WANTED!" working paper, International Migration for Employment, World Employment Programme, March 1991.

52. Rodgers, et al., *Quest for Social Justice*, 30–36, 205–41; International Labor Conference, "Decent Work for Domestic Workers," Report IV(1) (Geneva: ILO, 2010), 87.

53. Elisabeth Prügl, *The Global Construction of Gender: Home-Based Work in the Political Economy of the 20th Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prügl, eds., *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

the initial 2010 ILC deliberations, “this is going to be something that the ILO has *never* seen before.”⁵⁴ By drawing on national movements as a means of developing a collective voice, the IDWN had established a tangible presence that challenged the formal boundaries of the ILO, absent from previous considerations of domestic work. The presence of national domestic worker activists clearly influenced the outcome of the nearly unanimous vote in favor of the convention. These struggles were key but not sufficient: the domestic worker cause required support from professional advocates from allied organizations outside the ILO and from within the ILO bureaucracy itself.⁵⁵ Together, these forces forged pathways for domestic worker activists to influence the ILO structure, and eventually realize Convention 189.

Success depended on the willingness of the ILO to take up this cause. With the Director-General setting the overall program of the organization, the tenure of Chilean diplomat Juan Somavia in this role beginning in 1999 led the ILO to foster “decent work and fair globalization” around “employment promotion; working conditions and social protection; fundamental principles and rights at work; and tripartism and social dialogue.” Somavia encouraged an emphasis on women’s labor, the informal economy, and transnational migration. Feminist Manuela Tomei, director of the Conditions of Work and Employment Programme, played a pivotal role. She compiled the information essential to convention setting and offered justification for action, framing her argument for treating domestic workers like any other workers in terms of Somavia’s decent work agenda. Under her leadership, the Office compiled the 2010 report “Decent Work for Domestic Workers,” which located “care work in the home [as] part of the ILO’s mandate to promote decent work for all” and offered a rights-based approach to revaluing domestic labor.⁵⁶

54. Jennifer Fish, ILC fieldnotes, 2010.

55. Helen Schwenken and Elisabeth Prügl, “An ILO Convention for Domestic Workers: Contextualizing the Debate,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 3 (2011): 437–61; Jo Becker, *Campaigning for Justice: Human Rights and Advocacy in Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 32–55. See also, Celia Mather, “Yes, We Did It!” *How the World’s Domestic Workers Won Their International Rights and Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: WIEGO, 2013), organizational report.

56. Fish, ILC fieldnotes, 2010; “Decent Work for Domestic Workers,” Report IV(1), 11–14.

New institutional understandings of gender further distinguished the early twenty-first century from the post-WWII era. Somavia dedicated the Office to “internalizing” gender equality in “all our technical work, operational activities and support services.”⁵⁷ He established a Bureau for Gender Equality and an institutional gender audit.⁵⁸ The number of women delegates reached 28.5 percent in 2009, less than parity but an advance over their paltry presence in the 1950s. With women making up 35 percent of the professional staff by 2008, the ILO moved closer to reflecting the gender equity that the ILC reaffirmed to be at the center of its overall “Decent Work Agenda.”⁵⁹

This shifting organizational climate facilitated a serious inquiry into the worldwide conditions for domestic work. Although legal standards nearly everywhere protect domestic workers less than other workers, over the last half-century about 70 percent of them gained some coverage, whether through general regulations, special laws, or bilateral migrant-worker contracts between sending and receiving countries. Yet these formal mechanisms often proved inadequate when it came to regulating hours, assuring fair wages, reducing sexual abuse, preventing forced labor, guaranteeing freedom of movement, or offering maternity leave and social security. Furthermore, enforcement was spotty. Fearing deportation, migrant workers were reluctant to report violations, even when entitled to redress. Ip Pui Yu, a Hong Kong domestic worker organizer, captured these tensions between policy and practice when addressing the ILC in 2011: Governments must not merely ratify the convention, she explained; they had “to put what it contains into their employment laws but also into their immigration laws and work permit systems.” Despite such warnings, investigations continue to reveal inconsistent coverage: Japan, Korea, and most of the Middle East still exclude domestic workers from labor standards.⁶⁰

57. Director-General's Announcement, “Gender Equality and Mainstreaming in the International Labour Office,” circular no. 564, December 1999.

58. ILO, *Women's Empowerment: 90 Years of ILO Action* (Geneva: ILO, 1999): 8–10.

59. ILO, *Women's Empowerment: 9–10*; Shauna Olney, “The ILO, Gender Equality, and Trade Unions,” in *Making Globalization Work for Women*, 159–57.

60. ILO, *Domestic Workers Across the World*, v, 43–47, 50–52; “Decent Work for Domestic Workers,” Report IV(2), 1; ILO, “Snapshot ILO in Action: Domestic Workers,” fact sheet, May 31, 2013, http://www.ilo.org/travail/Whatsnew/WCMS_214499/lang--en/index.htm.

Nonetheless, nations recognized the desirability of an international instrument, even if only to deflect political pressures from labor and women's organizations for more robust local laws. Over the previous quarter century, national and regional worker organization expanded, facilitated by feminist and human rights NGOs. 1988 marked the formation of the thirteen-nation Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers, with a branch in Europe, and the Hong Kong-based Asian Domestic Workers' Union, with members mostly from the Philippines and Thailand. These groups and others elsewhere reached out to rural migrants in major cities, many of them undocumented and most from ethnic minority groups. They hung around parks and metros and joined community coalitions, such as the Day Laborers Network in the United States. They not only offered "workshops and capacity building," but also addressed the needs of the worker as a whole person, offering "legal and psychological assistance because many of our sisters suffer from violence by their employers," Peruvian organizer Leddy Momzambite noted.⁶¹ By 2010, the number of nations with domestic worker organizations grew to forty-four.⁶²

These national formations were essential to transnational action. They preceded the global mobilization of domestic workers and would persist as key advocates for state ratification of Convention 189. All of the early states to ratify had a prior history of engagement with domestic worker organizations.⁶³ In 2006 Uruguay, the first signatory, extended protective labor laws, ended barriers to inclusion in social security, permitted inspection of homes, and established a Tripartite Commission on Equality of Opportunity and Treatment in Employment that targeted Afro-Uruguayan women, who disproportionately labored in households. To activate a wage board, the government developed social partners necessary for its functioning: the Housewives League of Uruguay, dedicated to the revaluation of domestic labor, served as the employer. The National Trade Union Confederation permitted the National Confederation of

61. Quoted in Schwenken and Prügl, "An ILO Convention," 444–45.

62. Becker, *Campaigning for Justice*, 52.

63. At the time of publication, the following states had ratified Convention 189: Uruguay, Philippines, Mauritius, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Bolivia, Italy, South Africa, Germany, Argentina, Columbia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guyana, and Switzerland.

Domestic Workers, not yet certified as a union, to represent workers.⁶⁴ The Philippines, the second signatory, was known for its overseas-worker program that critics viewed as more interested in facilitating remittances than protecting Filipina migrants. But united trade union support for labor rights at home, including a “Magna Carta for Household Helpers (*Batas Kasamahay*),” led to action.⁶⁵ In mid-2013, South Africa became the eighth country to ratify the convention; its domestic workers unions, strengthened with the post-apartheid constitution, had provided IDWN leadership.⁶⁶ Thus, while the convention adoption proved a major victory for domestic workers at the global level, it was possible because of the successes and capacities of national domestic worker organizations.

NETWORK FORMATION

The transnational network took shape four years prior to the inclusion of domestic labor on the ILC agenda. In 2006, sixty leaders from trade unions and support organizations gathered in Amsterdam for the first global meeting of domestic workers.⁶⁷ The meeting set the stage to create a united front for domestic worker rights within the ILO. To advance the concrete goal of building a global movement, advocates formed the IDWN in 2008, with a steering committee, a group of seven advisors from six global regions, and a technical support team. That same year, urged by the International Trade Union Confederation, the ILO’s Governing Body announced that it would schedule Decent Work for Domestic Workers as an agenda item for the 2010 ILC. If the delegates decided to move forward, final action would occur in 2011.⁶⁸

64. On Uruguay, see Merike Blofield, *Care Work and Class: Domestic Workers’ Struggle for Equal Rights in Latin America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2012), 106–118.

65. “Decent Work for Domestic Workers,” Report IV(1), 27–28, 41, 61, 74, 78; “Decent Work for Domestic Workers,” Report IV(2), 1; ILO, “Landmark Treaty for Domestic Workers to Come into Force,” September 5, 2012, http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_189191/lang--en/index.htm; Robyn Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

66. Jennifer N. Fish, *Domestic Democracy: At Home in South Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

67. IRENE, *Respect and Rights*, 3.

68. Becker, *Campaigning for Justice*, 52–53.

During the Amsterdam conference, representatives of national movements and organizations shared their own particular histories of domestic service, discovering common struggles. They wove together demands for “respect,” “rights,” and “protection.” Geeta Menon, leader of the Karnataka Domestic Workers Union in India, emphasized the need to reframe domestic work from an institution embedded in servitude to one that considers “domestic workers as workers,” eligible for equivalent legal protections to those of other sectors of the formal economy. She recalled,

In our union, we felt that, unless domestic workers are given a legal identity as workers, their work and relentless toil will go unrecognized. Society must go beyond the gendered notion of housework, lift this work from patriarchal definitions, and look at its economic value, changing the attitude of looking at these women as servants or slaves and start perceiving them as workers.⁶⁹

This appeal became a strategic argument in the organization’s continued lobbying for international standards. Out of this conversation emerged larger concerns for gender, labor, and migrant rights, which activists then translated into tangible policy points in hopes of eventually reaching the ILO.

The IDWN established transparent and shared decision making in an effort to ensure equal representation of domestic worker organizations across regions and nations. It insisted on Spanish and English interpretation in meetings, participation of all delegates in every formal gathering, and an open process for electing leaders. The IDWN viewed creating a “strong democratic domestic workers’ organization” for workers’ rights as part of a larger feminist project to “change power relations in society [and] to promote gender equality and human rights for the benefits of domestic workers.”⁷⁰ This commitment to democratic process would shape IDWN’s demands over the terms of its participation in ILO standard setting.

From its formation, the IDWN forged an intersectional praxis. It maintained critical relations with a range of ally organizations, including

69. IRENE, *Respect and Rights*, 59.

70. International Domestic Workers Network website, “Who We Are,” <http://www.idwn.info/about.php>.

global unions, NGOs, and research institutes. The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco, and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) served as complementary pillars of support. The combination of a global, service-sector union and a policy-research institute on women in the informal economy strengthened the placement of the domestic worker movement within both arenas. These organizations sustained the network in its formative years through funding and technical resources that strengthened the ability to organize internationally. They crucially provided entrée to obtaining NGO observer status within the ILO's conferences.

Both WIEGO and IUF are committed to human rights and social justice on a global scale, and they partnered with each other to advance informal sector organizing. WIEGO was formed in 1997 with the explicit goal of linking three constituencies as a network: worker organizations (cooperatives, unions, and associations), academic researchers, and development professionals.⁷¹ From its association with WIEGO, the IDWN gained a stronger organizational platform that articulated domestic labor as one component of a rapidly expanding and heavily feminized informal economy.⁷² This connection afforded opportunities to build IDWN's organizational capacities through training on policy advocacy.

As a Geneva-based federation of unions from over a hundred nations and dating from 1920, the IUF became the first global union to include domestic work as part of its agenda in the mid-1990s. This union of low-waged service workers in hotels and restaurants, with its history of assisting national movements of informal workers, increasingly supported the progressive priorities of its low-wage and growing female membership.⁷³ It embraced issues such as the double day, care labor, and promotion of female leadership.⁷⁴ Partnering with the IUF allowed the

71. WIEGO website, "Who We Are," <http://wiego.org/wiego/who-we-are>.

72. Martha Alter Chen, "Recognizing Domestic Workers, Regulating Domestic Work: Conceptual, Measurement, and Regulatory Challenges," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 23 no. 1 (2012): 167–84.

73. Peter Rütters and Rudiger Zimmermann, eds., *On the History and Policy of the IUF* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2003); WIEGO website, "International Union of Food and Allied Workers," <http://wiego.org/wiego/international-union-food-and-allied-workers-iuf>.

74. "Decent Work for Domestic Workers," Report IV(1), 78–83.

IDWN to work simultaneously within the labor movement and pressure unions for greater recognition. With the strength of IUF backing, IDWN members countered the exclusion of domestic workers from national labor federations, as well as prevailing perceptions of home workplaces as unorganizable.⁷⁵

By providing in-depth training on the ILO process and space for worker education, self-reflection, public relations, and planning, these organizations ensured that IDWN leaders acquired the knowledge base and capacity to fight for a convention within the ILO system. Extended discussions led the IDWN to identify several effective lobbying strategies. It, in turn, applied activist knowledge, drawn from experiences within both labor and women's movements, to infuse the campaign with "social justice struggle credentials."

Most significantly, IUF and WIEGO facilitated access to the ILC through their own observer status. Observers can provide information in working sessions of the worker or employer committees, but they are not allowed to speak at the formal tripartite discussions. WIEGO and IUF gained two of the thirty-five places available to civil society/NGOs to participate in ILO deliberations. National unions' willingness to appoint a domestic worker to one of the few positions within country delegations might have provided individuals with formal representation. But such inclusion initially appeared unlikely amid the often-strained relationship between domestic worker associations and national unions, coupled with the prevalence of male dominance within unions and competitive claims for such slots. Given organizing goals, such individual participation paled in comparison to the collective agency and persuasive capacities made possible through WIEGO and IUF.

A network of allies, defined as NGOs in the ILO structure, organized in distinct ways to assure that those most impacted would be present at the deliberations—even without formal voting rights and the authorization to speak—thus opening every aspect of ILC policy formation to IDWN members. These NGOs bolstered the strength of the worker group within the ILO through their supportive presence, as well as by providing tangible information, background research, and strategies. They reached out to employers; most notable in this regard was Hand in

75. Boris and Nadasen, "Domestic Workers Organize!"; Fish, ILC fieldnotes, 2010.



Members of the IDWN and allied organizations take to the streets of Geneva during the 2010 International Labor Conference. Photograph by Jennifer N. Fish.

Hand, a US association of individual employers of nannies, housecleaners, and personal attendants allied with the National Domestic Worker Alliance.⁷⁶

With access to ILO structures, domestic workers could draw from their own repertoire of activist strategies. Ever pragmatic, IDWN leaders convened with their allies throughout the conference in order to find spaces to assert their collective expression and deploy mobilization tools that had strengthened their own capacities as activists and leaders. Over the course of the two meetings, the observer status of domestic worker unions and associations, human rights organizations, migrant education groups, women's rights advocates, and faith-based parties helped tip the balance of power. By the 2000s, the ILO had become more receptive to the arguments of such civil society actors. Furthermore, as proof of their organizing success, by the 2011 meeting, some IDWN members also obtained voting seats on national delegations, thereby giving domestic workers a formal voice within the ILO power structure. These positions

76. See Hand In Hand website, <http://www.domesticemployers.org>.

concretized the benefits of access and representation generated through the WIEGO/IUF partnership.

ACTIVISM AND ILO POLICY MAKING

Delegates to the 2010 ILC recognized the power that came from domestic worker participation. In his opening remarks, Sir Leroy Trotman, the Trinidadian chair of the ILO Workers' group, observed that because domestic workers were "present in the room," the deliberations would reflect "reality on the ground." Similarly, Workers' group secretary Raquel Gonzales from Argentina predicted "a very lively dynamic" and, indeed, domestic workers displayed an exuberance previously missing from ILC deliberations. Their anticipation over engagement with the ILO process was electrifying. They celebrated the momentum of their cause, declaring that the timing of this convention was "right, just, and long overdue."⁷⁷

As a condition of participation, IDWN members had to abide by ILO procedures, such as the use of formal names and statements of gratitude for being given "the floor" during comment periods. Based on trainings, they conscientiously followed the rules of order at each meeting. Such participation forced all members of the tripartite bodies to recognize their presence. The IDWN displayed domestic workers' realities in ways that made denying their rights seem immoral. In provoking shame through their very embodiment, as poor unprotected migrants, often mothers, they balanced a politics of affect with demands for rights.

In preparatory workshops, the IDWN had strategized on how to represent collectively the face of domestic labor in order to influence the system and strengthen the case for global standards. During the entire extended process — opening statements, workers meetings, gender section meetings, and closing statements — domestic workers echoed four main points: the historical nature of domestic work, the contemporary centrality of domestic labor in the global economy, the moral obligation to redress the continued exclusion of this sector from national laws, and the demand to adopt a convention that would be ratified by all member states. Crucial was the decision to demonstrate that domestic workers experience similar oppression from their daily labor regardless of the diversity of work across regions.

77. Fish, ILC fieldnotes, 2010.

Through consistent messaging, domestic worker representatives drew on the rhetorical appeal and effectiveness of personal testimony to increase the likelihood of passing the convention. Leaders of the IDWN took advantage of traditional constructions of gender by enacting an emotional “women’s story” within the traditionally masculine space of the ILO. The continuing significance of women and gender in development discourses since the 1970s enhanced the legibility of their appeals. Individual narratives, stories of struggle, and highly personalized appeals that drew on discourses of love and care — missing from the earlier 1950 effort — provided rationale for the institutional demands each representative included in public statements. As network leaders explained, “We want to reach the hearts of employers” and “leave the audience in tears.”⁷⁸ The head worker representative to the Committee on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, Halimah Jacob of Singapore, also referenced personal narratives by asking that delegates listen to domestic workers and look “deep in your heart and your conscience” when exercising their vote. At times, government advocates echoed a larger need to recognize social reproduction and the regeneration of society through the labor of household workers.

Members of the IDWN also displayed a collective voice within the 2010 and 2011 ILC beyond the limitations of the prescribed formal channels for (often preapproved) public statements. The holding back of emotions in order to conform to existing procedures remained difficult for most of the members of the network. However, the constraints of the ILO inhibited but did not stop them from adapting social movement strategies to motivate change. They drew on expressive forms embedded in the organizational cultures of unions and women’s movements. They broke into song immediately upon the end of formal meetings, singing “Domestic workers, *need a Convention*, domestic workers, *need a Convention*, domestic workers *in the ILO*.” They deployed visual rhetorical statements of solidarity through shared dress, T-shirt messages, buttons, and campaign colors. The bodies of domestic workers served as a rhetorical tool to strengthen the position of labor within formal institutional spaces. The infusion of song, dance, and physical gestures of solidarity into the proceedings made it difficult for employers and governments to

78. Fish, ILC fieldnotes, 2010.

ignore the existence of domestic workers, while fortifying the strength of the network. These strategies of affect, made present by the IDWN's direct participation, capture a distinct difference in the institutional dialogue between the 1950s and recent conferences. The Convention 189 process not only validated the experiences of domestic workers, but also suggested the power of feminist understandings of the personal for the transnational.

THE POWER OF REPRESENTATION

In the process of making Convention 189, domestic worker organizations, unions, and allies strengthened a global activist network—perhaps their greatest achievement. Bolstered by feminist and aligned NGOs, domestic workers gained the support of women in positions of power within governments and the ILO system. Women delegates and staff drew from the wider awareness-building campaign, as well as their own direct contact with domestic worker leaders, to endorse domestic worker rights during the tripartite discussions. The ILC offered a space for feminist leaders not only to forge valuable relationships but also to demonstrate alignment with the domestic worker cause through public statements, informal consultations, and advocacy work with their own respective delegations. Out of the convention process, a number of global organizations took up the cause of domestic labor, while national ratification efforts moved forward.

But we must question how organizations with more social, political, and economic capital represent the voices of domestic workers throughout international campaigns. The ILO action made domestic work a “sexy topic” among international unions and NGOs, becoming the “cause of the day.”⁷⁹ From migrant and human rights organizations’ focus on domestic workers, the use of celebrity supporters to promote care work, and the “12 × 12” campaign to have twelve nations ratify Convention 189 within a year launched by the International Trade Union Confederation, domestic labor entered the spotlight as the poster-child image of much larger movements to confront global capitalism, reframe labor relations, promote wider access to citizenship, and continue the struggle for race, class, migrant, and gender justice. This fashioning of a domestic worker

79. Fish, ILC fieldnotes, 2011.

cause makes us ask: who speaks for domestic workers and how does that matter in their struggles for dignity, justice, and empowerment?

The IDWN worked within the ILO system as a transnational feminist organization comprised of women from across the globe. Its existence stems from changes in feminist perspectives and organizational actions that have occurred over the last forty years. The UN conferences on women that began in Mexico City in 1975 challenged the hegemony of Western feminism. Postcolonial thinkers critiqued the binary divisions within a global movement for gender equality, exposing the construction of the “third-world woman” as a category of difference. In the 1980s, transnational feminist practice expanded. Stymied by the Reagan administration from advancing a domestic agenda, US feminist organizations reached out to international movements to link relevant causes across geographic boundaries. At the same time, some trade unions exhibited a wider awareness of gender equity and sought to include more women in leadership. WIEGO and the IUF illustrate larger ideological shifts, such as cross-sectorial organizing strategies and cross-class and region alliances, that grew over the past twenty years within both feminist and labor movements.⁸⁰

This change in orientation is welcome but by itself cannot erase inequalities between those with resources and those without. Funding comes from the Global North; US and British universities remain the main training grounds for feminist leadership from the Global South. While grassroots groups at their most creative have maintained maneuverability and independence, and while feminist NGOs seek transparency and at their best serve as facilitators, distortions develop from an imbalance of recognizable knowledge and control over money. The ILO campaign demonstrates the importance of establishing a collective space to align domestic workers and allies for a larger movement-building process. Yet, access to these spaces and determination of the future of the domestic worker movement is still defined by the resources available through granting organizations, predominantly Western, many of which remain prominent narrators of the domestic workers’ story.

80. Jean H. Quataert and Benita Roth, “Human Rights, Global Conferences, and the Making of Postwar Transnational Feminism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 24, special issue (Winter 2012); Moghadam et al., *Making Globalization Work for Women*.

**SHE'S NOT JUST
YOUR MAID
HER NAME IS
LITA**

**SHE WORKS FOR HER
FAMILY,**

**AS WELL AS
YOURS.**

She is committed to looking after your family's needs so that she can help hers back home. It's not every day someone undertakes such a responsibility. Show her your appreciation.

**Give her a day off.
Dignity overdue.**

Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) aims to promote respect for migrant workers through education, and secure better treatment of migrant workers through legislation and other means.

TWC2 **NON-VIOLENCE RESISTANCE** **Funded by**

Campaign poster circulated by the Transient Workers Count Too organization in Singapore. Courtesy of Transient Workers Count Too.

These power relations impact the terms of debate. Throughout the campaign for an ILO convention, the question of representation became

more acute. Organizations with deeper resources and women holding positions of authority within the ILO system took up the cause of women deemed “the most vulnerable” in the existing system of globalization. Visual and textual images often reified a construction of domestic workers as exposed, oppressed, and without agency. In order to be heard, the domestic worker movement branded workers as poor, migrant, marginal women in need of protection, much as had an earlier generation of labor feminists. Designing an archetypal domestic worker in the vein of Chandra Mohanty’s “typical third world woman” reinforces the power-laden binary of West and Other, much like representations of domestic workers during the first ILO discussions.⁸¹ These appeals haunted seemingly positive representations, such as a set of photographs (page 439) with personalizing texts that read, “She is not just your maid, her name is Lita. She works for her family, as well as yours.” Familial need rationalizes employment; worthiness justifies work. Projecting authenticity through specific and concrete images of domestic workers proved an effective tool in establishing a moral position that claimed domestic worker rights as central to universal human rights. But emotional connection occurs through the gaze of the observer consuming an object in need of rescue through global labor standards.

Another way to regard this deployment of “difference” is through the lens of advocacy. As the ILO debated the extension of standards to domestic workers, transnational organizations, including the IDWN, strategically utilized the concept of “difference” as a means of lobbying for decent work. In this sense, transnational feminist discourse drew on binary constructions in order to appeal emotionally to a large, traditionally male organization. That domestic worker representatives themselves employed this strategy underscores a generalized belief: constructions of difference make effective lobbying tools to challenge the wider global system that reproduces severe power differentials between women positioned as workers and employers. Yet this imagery of vulnerability contrasts sharply with the postures and voices of domestic worker leaders throughout the ILO process, who exhibited strength and initiative.

81. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1.



IDWN Banner Unveiling in the Palais des Nations Hall of the United Nations. Courtesy of WIEGO.

Although domestic worker organizations gained access to and influence within the ILO system, we must be cautious about how these processes of representation reinforce a hierarchy within social justice, women's rights, and labor movements. What makes the position of domestic worker organizations unique within this larger milieu is the way in which the sector is positioned with one foot in organized labor and the other in the feminist movement. This dual position helped domestic workers generate legitimacy as workers, while also strengthening the case for improving the conditions of feminized labor.

CONCLUSION

Although discourses of exploitation and victimhood persisted in the representation of domestic work within the ILO, the presence of domestic workers themselves in 2010 and 2011 embodied a politics of affect missing from earlier efforts, suspending objectification and enhancing rights. More groups embraced the effort. In 1950, there was, as Frieda Miller explained, "no effective organization of either workers or

employers.”⁸² In most countries, academics, labor feminists, and government researchers constituted the experts on domestic work. Labor representatives to the ILO Women’s Committee came from other sectors, such as railways or textiles.⁸³ The women’s groups with consultative status had carried over from the League of Nations; they were European and urban organizations such as the International Federation of University Women, the World YWCA, and Business and Professional Women International. Sixty years later, a range of NGOs sought to participate in the ILO domestic worker deliberations. Human rights organizations, trade unions, and religious groups dominated, including Anti-Slavery International, Migrants Forum in Asia, and World Movement of Christian Workers. WIEGO and IUF knit together these allies.

This difference in players is not the only factor distinguishing our times. In the early post-wwii years, labor feminists sought better working conditions in order to increase the supply of servants within Western industrialized nations and to eliminate servitude in the rest of the world, the latter as much a “civilizing” as a modernizing project. In the 2000s, domestic labor represented a prototype for the nonstandard employment characteristic of an ever-expanding worldwide informal economy. Concern over the impact of maternal employment on family labor persisted, but moved from a national to a global issue with the prominence of migrant domestic workers. More legal coverage and worker organization within nations joined to new priorities within the ILO to make international action more probable.

Rather than the end of a struggle, Convention 189 marks one step toward decent work and fair globalization. As Manuela Tomei claimed just after its passage, “this is just the beginning of a much longer battle.”⁸⁴ Now it is up to individual nations to make decent work for domestics a lived experience, as this IDWN banner reflected when activists released it after the final vote to adopt Convention 189: “C189 Congratulations. Now the Domestic Work for Governments. Ratify. Implement.”

82. Memo from Frieda Miller to Mr. Zempel, May 11, 1950, box 10, folder 210, Frieda S. Miller Papers, A-37, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard, MA.

83. “List of Persons Attending the Meeting of Experts on Women’s Work,” Dec. 11–15, 1951, for example, in WN 1002, jacket 1, ILO Archives.

84. Fish, ILC fieldnotes, 2011.

But given how few states abide by any international convention, the real significance of Convention 189 might very well come from its use as an organizing device, as seen in the state-level “Bill of Rights” campaigns by the National Domestic Worker Alliance in the United States and the subsequent metamorphosis of the IDWN into the International Domestic Workers Federation, the first woman-led international labor federation for a female-dominated occupation.⁸⁵ Moreover, we cannot discount the transformation in domestic worker consciousness that already has taken place through the ILO process where “as workers and the most oppressed workforce in all countries” they sat “with the big bosses and the technical people of the ILO.” Maids no more, they had become workers. As South African activist Hester Stephens announced, “I feel proud as a domestic worker, and I also believe in our union.”⁸⁶

85. University of California Humanities Forum, “‘The Work that Makes All Other Work Possible’: A Dialogue with Ai-Jen Poo and Premilla Nadasen,” webinar, May 28, 2012, <http://uchumanitiesforum.org/2013/05/28/the-work-that-makes-all-other-work-possible-a-dialogue-with-ai-jen-poo-and-premilla-nadasen>; IDFW, *Domestic Workers of the World Unite: The Founding Congress of the IDWF* (May 2014), organizational report, <http://idwfed.org/files/files/publication/IDWF%20Founding%20Congress%20REV2.pdf>.

86. Quoted in Schwenken and Prügl, “An ILO Convention,” 445–46.