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Women Workers and the Politics of Claims-Making in a Globalizing Economy

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Understanding Gender-Egalitarian Policy Change in Asia

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Acronyms

ADWN	Asian Domestic Workers Network
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
AMC	Asian Migrant Centre
AMCB	Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body
BAYAN	New Patriotic Alliance
BIGUF	Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Union Federation
CCMA	Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CMW	International Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
COLSIBA	Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Sindicatos Bananeros y Agroindustriales (<i>Coordinating Body of Latin American Banana and Agro-industrial Unions</i>)
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
COSIBAH	Coordinadora Sindicatos Bananeros y Agroindustriales de Honduras (<i>Coalition of Honduran Banana and Agroindustrial Unions</i>)
CST	Central Sandinista de Trabajadores (<i>Sandinista Workers Central</i>)
CUT	Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (<i>Unified Workers' Central</i>)
CWGI	CEDAW Working Group Initiative
EPZ	Export-Processing Zone
EU	European Union
FENATRAD	National Federation of Domestic Workers' Associations
FNV	Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (<i>Dutch Federation of Trade Unions</i>)
FTZWU	Free Trade Zone Workers' Union
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GVC	Global value chains
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
HKCTU	Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions
IDWN	International Domestic Workers' Network
ILC	International Labour Conference
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMA	International Migrant Alliance
IRENE	International Restructuring Education Network Europe
ITGLWF	International Textile Garment and Leather Workers Federation
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
IUF	International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association
KKPKP	Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (<i>Trade Union of Waste Pickers</i>)
KOPUBUMI	Consortium for the Defence of Indonesian Migrant Workers
MCN	Mexico City Network
MEC	Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas "Maria Elena Cuadra" (<i>Movement of Working and Unemployed Women "María Elena Cuadra"</i>)
MFA	Migrant Forum in Asia
MWC	Migrant Workers Convention
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NASVI	National Alliance of Street Vendors India
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSVP	National Urban Street Vendors Policy
OFW	Overseas Filipino worker
PVC	Phillips–Van Heusen
PIT-CNT	Inter-Union Assembly of Workers–National Convention of Workers

PMC	Pune Municipal Corporation
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SC	Solidarity Centre
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association
SEWU	Self-Employed Women's Union
SITRATERCO	Sindicato de Trabajadores de La Tela Railroad Company (<i>Labour Union of the Tele Railroad Company</i>)
SUTD	Sole Union of Domestic Workers
SwaCH	Solid Waste Collection and Handling
SWACHH	Solid Waste Collection Handling
TLA	Textile Labour Association
TNC	Transnational corporation
TUC	Trade Unions Confederation
TWC2	Transient Workers Count Too
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	Women on Farms Project
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Summary

The paper analyses the evolving politics of claims-making by women workers in the Global South in the context of a globalized economy. It addresses the following questions. What kinds of claims are prioritized in relation to women workers? Who is making these claims? To whom are they addressed? What strategies are pursued to advance these claims? Which claims are heard and acted on—and which go unheard?

The paper considers three categories of women workers: those working in global value chains, those working for domestic markets and those working as cross-border migrants. It also distinguishes between claims made by, with and on behalf of women workers. The analytical framework weaves ideas on the politics of gender-equality claims-making with work on the politics of recognition, redistribution and representation and analysis of the strategies deployed by transnational networks.

Claims relating to workers in global value chains have been largely made on their behalf by anti-sweatshop campaigns led by Northern-based organizations, including trade unions, church groups, student activists and concerned consumers. The claims are largely addressed to the transnational corporations that drive these value chains, although their demands may include pressure on the states in which these corporations are headquartered.

Claims relating to women working for domestic markets, primarily in the informal economy, tend to be made by organizations of women workers themselves, often with the support of locally based NGOs. The claims are largely addressed to the state, although as these organizations come together in international networks, they have also begun to pitch their claims to institutions of global governance, particularly the International Labour Organization (ILO) as well as international trade unions.

Claims relating to migrant women workers tend to be made by locally based NGOs, sometimes made up of migrant workers themselves, in both sending and receiving countries. While the claims are largely addressed to the governments of these countries, they have also been picked up by the emerging international networks of migrant workers and pitched to international institutions.

The right to organize and to engage in collective bargaining is one of the most controversial rights when it comes to workers, particularly in global value chains. The assertion of this right frequently causes capital to cut and run in search of a cheaper and more docile labour force, and in turn, the fear of losing capital makes it harder for states to side with workers. States appear more responsive to some of the claims advanced by domestic workers' organizations, but here too they appear to be more responsive to some claims (the extension of social protection to marginalized groups) than others (eliminating exploitative practices at work).

The paper highlights the importance of “framing” within the strategies drawn on to make claims by, with and on behalf of women workers, because beyond the resources they are able to mobilize, the ability to put claims in compelling narratives determines their effectiveness in mobilizing wider support and resonating with those who have the power to act on those claims. It also argues that the construction and consolidation of associational power has to be factored in as a strategy in itself, particularly when it comes to women workers in the informal economy who are largely overlooked by the trade union movement.

Women workers have organized in a variety of different forms, including trade unions, associations and cooperatives. Those supporting their claims have at times opted to work alongside the trade union movement and at others set up independent women's organizations. But given the patriarchal culture that persists in many mainstream unions, the paper argues that an autonomous organizational space is critical for women workers. It would allow them to develop an "oppositional consciousness" that challenges inequalities that have been taken for granted in their lives, to identify their own priorities and to craft alternative strategies for making claims that are better suited to their distinctive experiences and constraints. Given the globalized terrain within which the politics of claims-making is now playing out, there is an urgent need to develop conceptual tools to understand labour activism that is no longer confined to national boundaries.

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