

Book Review

Jennifer N. Fish (2017) *Domestic Workers of the World Unite: A Global Movement for Dignity and Human Rights.*

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Reviewed by

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In the last two decades, there has been a deluge of writing across social science disciplines on the issue of paid domestic work. This change was much needed as, for a long time, at the level of both theory and labour politics there has been a dearth of engagement with this occupation due to its peculiar nature: in domestic work, the “employer” is not a profit-making firm but a private household, and the workplace is not a factory or public site but an upper-class or middle-class home. This change can also be attributed to the fact that under neo-liberal capitalism paid domestic work, among other precarious occupations, is one of the activities that has significantly increased in size. As domestic workers – who are overwhelmingly women – in different parts of the world go on making history by gaining labour rights for themselves, one is forced to ask: how have some of the most marginalised workers managed to achieve what, at one point, seemed impossible.

Jennifer N. Fish’s *Domestic Workers of the World Unite: A Global Movement for Dignity and Human Rights* is a timely intervention in this regard. A sociologist with more than a decade-long association with domestic workers’ movements, Fish presents a rich analysis of the making of what she calls the “global domestic workers’ movement” and the movement’s success in gaining recognition for domestic workers in the form of International Labour Organization (ILO) convention C189 on domestic work. Primarily drawing on the “life narratives of domestic workers” across the world, the key question the book engages with is “how workers at the grassroots level used a formal UN system to codify an identity and secure their labour rights” (p. 8). The question of how the workers used a formal body like the United Nations to win a legitimate and legal identity for themselves is a critical one because domestic workers were never considered “workers” – be it in the national labour laws of different countries or the organised labour movements.

The story of the global domestic workers’ movement is presented through seven chapters. The first two chapters trace the history of the domestic workers’ movement from both global and national standpoints. By virtue of working behind closed doors of homes, domestic workers have been seen as difficult to organise. Fish powerfully captures the personal moments of individual domestic workers in which they questioned the invisibility they were subjected to and decided to transform it by organising workers in their local areas. It is these “small” efforts by women domestic workers themselves in different parts of the world that eventually culminated in a “global movement”. Chapter Three shows how these impossible-to-organise workers and the groups representing them managed to find innovative ways to organise and represent themselves before the ILO. Getting a fair representation of the workers’ voices on their prospective rights was key, as the conditions and standards of domestic work were different in different countries. In other words, one could not speak of one homogeneous experience. Furthermore, the obstacles in

organising domestic workers were overcome through innovative ways to build pressure on the ILO and through having solidarities with other movements, especially women's movements, by presenting the interests of domestic workers as inherently linked with those of women in poverty. One of the key strategies that successfully presented the issue of domestic workers as a priority was its articulation as a "human rights" issue. However, the presentation of domestic workers' issues through the discursive framework of human rights involved a price: the NGO-isation of the process. In Chapter Six, Fish engages with how the NGO–union tension manifested in the ILO process for domestic workers. For a long time, Fish notes, national unions did not represent the issue of domestic workers, which created room for the NGOs to step in (pp. 203–208). However, another aspect of this issue is that the NGOs showed interest in domestic work only after the beginning of the process of the convention. One of the key issues of tension was that, by representing domestic workers at the apex labour organisation, "NGOs submerged unions and therefore compromised the central role of labour in the tripartite [model]" (p. 203). Unlike unions, NGOs are not run by the people they work for, and as organisations they avoid playing a politicised role. In other words, the assumption of key roles at the ILO by NGOs, such as Women in Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and Human Rights Watch, was perceived as a threat to the significance of trade unions as the representative of working-class interests.

Finally, the last chapter explores divergent views on the prospects that the ILO convention opens up for care work in general and women domestic workers in particular. The convention then becomes a moment and a means through which the specific end – dignity in domestic work through its treatment as work – is to be secured. The convention certainly has built pressure on various countries to bring domestic workers under the labour laws. However, the impact remains limited as only certain countries, such as Guatemala and Bolivia among others, have ratified it, while countries like India still remain reluctant to do so.

One of the key strengths of the book is that it has been written in a lucid manner and therefore it appeals to a much wider readership, beyond academia. The book quite meticulously presents a compelling narrative of *how* some of the most marginalised workers managed to represent themselves and win rights. Even though the book does not confine itself to a specific theoretical problem, it does draw on and refers to some of the key theories and debates in fields such as development and labour sociology as well as gender studies. In my view, a key contribution that the book makes is in the field of "sources of workers' power" (Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003), as the case of the global domestic workers' movement shows that domestic workers were able to win rights for themselves by drawing on a very specific source of power – what Jennifer Chan (2009) calls "symbolic power".

There is a running theme in the book: how the articulation of domestic workers' rights as human rights made it impossible for the ILO and later the member countries to "deny domestic workers' human rights" (p. 208). Unlike industrial and other organised workers who are central in challenging capitalist accumulation, domestic workers did not have the power to threaten either the states or capital-owning classes by going on strike. Domestic workers, by building alliances with NGOs and women's movements, strategically presented their rights as a broader issue linked with human trafficking, gender-based violence, migration and child labour. It is this strategic framing of the issue that led to the victory, as denial of labour rights to domestic workers would have become a moral failure for the ILO.

Fish's effort to give room to the voices of progressive policy-makers, domestic workers and experts on the topic brings out a nuanced story of the movement. However, the reader struggles to find the author's own voice on a range of key issues. Given that she is a sociologist who has been an ally of the movement for more than a decade, she could have enriched our perspective by

telling us how she situates herself in relation to the different views of her research subjects. What kind of implications does she see of this global victory for marginalised women workers in the informal economy more generally? For instance, the view expressed in the book that the national trade unions had long overlooked the issues of domestic workers, which in turn created the room for NGO-isation of the domestic workers' movement, has far-reaching implications. While it might be true that trade unions did not actively represent the domestic workers during their mobilisation into a global movement, the importance of the larger trade union movement for domestic workers' politics can still not be written off. Evidence suggests that the domestic workers' demand for labour rights has succeeded in those places that had a strong presence of working-class movements led by unions. The states of Kerala and Maharashtra in India are two examples. Thus, the role played by unions in domestic workers' politics cannot be judged solely by the criterion of representation before the ILO.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to understanding the global politics of care work and opens up new and interesting possibilities for future research on paid domestic work.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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