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Naila Kabeer , Kirsty Milward & Ratna Sudarshan
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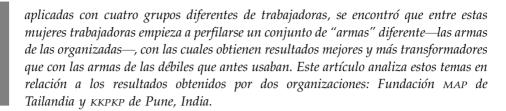
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Naila Kabeer, Kirsty Milward and Ratna Sudarshan

This article focuses on the challenges facing organisation among the hardest-to-reach working women in the informal economy. What gives some of them the impetus and courage to organise? What is distinctive about the strategies they draw on to transcend their structurally disadvantaged position within the economy? What barriers do they continue to face in their efforts to address the injustices of the economic system? Through analysing the organisational strategies used in different contexts and for different sets of workers, we can start to see a different battery of weapons among these working women, which serve them better and more transformatively than the weapons of the weak on which they previously relied: the weapons of the organised. This article discusses these issues specifically in relation to the experience of two organisations: MAP Foundation, Thailand, and KKPKP, Pune, India.

Cet article se concentre sur les défis que doivent relever les organisations parmi les travailleuses les plus difficiles à atteindre dans l'économie informelle. Qu'est-ce qui donne à certaines d'entre elles l'élan et le courage de s'organiser ? Quelles sont les caractéristiques distinctives des stratégies dont elles s'inspirent transcender leur position structurellement défavorisée au sein de l'économie ? Quelles sont les barrières auxquelles elles continuent de se heurter dans leurs efforts en vue de lutter contre les injustices du système économique ? En analysant les stratégies organisationnelles utilisées dans différents contextes et pour différents ensembles de travailleurs, nous pouvons commencer à voir une batterie d'armes différente parmi ces travailleuses, qui se révèlent pour elles plus utiles et plus transformatives que les armes des faibles sur lesquelles elles comptaient précédemment : les armes des organisés. Cet article traite de ces questions précisément en rapport avec l'expérience de deux organisation : la MAP Foundation, Thailande, et KKPKP, Pune, Inde.

El presente artículo se centra en los retos enfrentados a la hora de organizar a las mujeres trabajadoras de la economía informal a las cuales resulta más difícil acceder. ¿De dónde sacan algunas de ellas el impulso y la valentía para organizar? ¿En qué radica lo distintivo de las estrategias empleadas para trascender su posición estructuralmente desventajosa en la economía? ¿A qué barreras siguen haciendo frente en sus esfuerzos por encarar las injusticias del sistema económico? A través del análisis de las estrategias de organización utilizadas en contextos diferentes, que fueran

aplicadas con cuatro grupos diferentes de trabajadoras, se encontró que entre estas mujeres trabajadoras empieza a perfilarse un conjunto de "armas" diferente—las armas de las organizadas—, con las cuales obtienen resultados mejores y más transformadores que con las armas de las débiles que antes usaban. Este artículo analiza estos temas en relación a los resultados obtenidos por dos organizaciones: Fundación MAP de Tailandia y KKPKP de Pune, India.

Key words: women workers; informal economy; organisation; rights; collective action; strategies

Introduction

What gives some women workers in informal work the impetus and courage to organise? What is distinctive about the strategies they draw on in order to transcend their structurally disadvantaged position within the economy? And what continues to hamper their efforts to address the injustices of the economic system? They require fairer distribution of resources, recognition of the value of the work they do, and respect for themselves as workers, and a voice in all decisions which affect them as workers and citizens of states whose prosperity depends on them. This article focuses on the challenges facing organisation among the hardest-to-reach working women in the informal economy. It is an adaptation of the introductory chapter published this year in our new edited book on women informal workers organising (Kabeer *et al.* 2013).

Who are the women working in informal work? They are mostly to be found in casual, geographically dispersed, isolated, part-time, irregular, and often home-based, activities. They are located on the invisible margins of urban informal economies, or in remote rural areas. They are often self-employed. Many are in direct competition with each other – for work, for orders for their products, for space to sell their goods and services. Many of these women are located at the intersections of different kinds of inequality: class, race, caste, occupation, and legal status, so building shared identity and interests represents an even greater challenge. Not surprisingly, there is little in their working conditions that lends itself to self-recognition of their status as workers, let alone social recognition.

Poor working women face a range of difficulties in acting collectively. Shalini Sinha suggests:

one of the most powerful barriers to organising is fear. Women have been brought up in fear of their men, their employers and their communities. They live in constant fear of losing their livelihoods, of starvation, of losing their children to illness and of being thrown out of their houses. (2006, 11)

These women are unlikely to rock the boat by joining groups or organisations which challenge injustice – in particular, from a feminist perspective. They are more likely to self-limit their strategies to the traditional 'weapons of the weak': hidden subversions and resistance undertaken alone (Scott 1990).

Another key challenge is the diversity among women workers in the informal part of the economy. As the International Labour Organization (ILO) notes, 'the needs and problems of such a diverse work force are as varied as the barriers and constraints they face in organising' (2004, 45).

Through analysing the organisational strategies used in different contexts and for different sets of workers, we can start to see a different battery of weapons among these working women, which serve them better and more transformatively than the weapons of the weak on which they previously relied: the weapons of the organised. Today, a growing number of organisations have grown up around the various needs and interests of women workers.

Some of the organisations that have emerged in recent decades to promote collective action among women have emerged in collaboration with, or as part of, mainstream trade union movements.[1] Other organisations supporting poor women in informal work operate outside this mainstream, but may draw support from their association with trade unions or with social movements or non-government organisations (NGOs). It is striking, but not surprising, that most of these organisations have their origins in the efforts of actors that are not engaged in the same livelihood strategies or come from the same class background as the women who are being organised. Given the reality women face of daily struggle for survival and security, in forms of work that are denied social recognition – or even recognition from workers themselves, as discussed in the next section – the likelihood of spontaneous self-organisation among these workers is extremely low.

In this article, we refer in the main to two of the nine case studies featured in the book. The first is KKPKP (Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat), a waste pickers' trade union in Pune, India, which was formally established in 1993. KKPKP now has over 6,000 members drawn from the waste picker community across Pune and its suburbs. It has won important resources and recognition for waste pickers from the municipal government, and made significant contributions to the gradual repositioning of waste pickers as participants in a critical urban service with environmental sustainability credentials. Since 2005, it has been the secretariat of the National Alliance of Waste Pickers in India, a non-institutionalised network of 35 member organisations working with waste pickers, and on solid waste management, at different locations in India. KKPKP has also made alliances across international and national movements engaged in the larger struggle against injustice and exploitation, and working on environmental issues.[2]

The second organisation featured in this article is MAP Foundation, Thailand. MAP is a Thai NGO set up in 1996 to further the rights of migrants from Burma/Myanmar

working across the border in Thailand. MAP works with migrant men, women, and children, but has a special programme for women that is the main focus in this article. About half of the two million migrants from Burma in Thailand are women, and they work in almost every sector apart from fishing and mining. These women are located at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression: as women, as migrants, as informal workers, and as members of persecuted ethnic minorities in their country of origin.[3]

Building a shared identity

Essential to the continuity of organisations and the effectiveness of their collective actions is the extent to which their members share a sense of identity and interests. It may be alien for women workers to consider themselves *as* workers. The geographically dispersed, socially isolated, and frequently casual conditions under which many informal workers operate mean that this shared identity cannot be assumed: it most often has to be built.

Women may see their work in terms of a looser concept – that of family survival or livelihood. They do not necessarily make a clear distinction between their market and domestic activities, or between their roles as workers, mothers, wives, and members of their community. Moreover, they often subscribe to broad social perceptions of their work as lacking value. Organisations use many different narratives about themselves, and do different things, to build a sense of shared identity among members. Processes of identity formation then become the basis of claims making. One important reason for women to be slow to step into a work-based identity is because they have been brought up primarily to think in terms of their domestic responsibilities – and their paid work itself can be seen as a way of discharging these responsibilities.

For many organisations, raising the status of – or reducing stigma around – their work is part of the process of building a shared and valued identity. For waste pickers, sex workers, and domestic workers, this issue is particularly evident. Struggling for the right to be treated as a human being with human rights is in some ways more urgent than – or a first step towards – being treated as a worker with workers' rights. While rag pickers and sex workers experience pervasive stigma around their occupations as a constant issue to be addressed, for domestic workers their social exclusion derives from two sources. One is the general invisibility and low value attached to domestic work, whether paid or not. For women brought up to see this work as a natural part of female identity and destiny, a decision to work in a domestic role in another woman's home will often be seen as a temporary phase; not a primary identity. Relations of servitude in former feudal societies characterised by extreme poverty create worker–employer relations in the same family. In other societies with histories of slavery, racialised internalised norms of inequality also shape women workers' perceptions of their lives, jobs, and destinies in ways which may make them less likely to identify and organise as workers.

Avoiding a worker identity may also be provoked by preferring to locate commercial activities in the realm of family caring responsibilities, for which women are likely to receive some degree of social credit for fulfilling – and more so in social contexts where 'working women' in whatever kind of work are often considered morally dubious.

It is a longer process still to work with women workers to a stage at which they come together around shared interests. Some organisations need to convince women that prioritising their interests as workers will actually benefit them in ways which outweigh risks. What will be the costs of formalising women's status as workers? Some aspects of informality may suit women: a degree of flexibility around work arrangements, such as the ability to take days off when they needed to rather than on a regular, predetermined day; or the possibility of getting additional payments in kind, for example second-hand clothes, or loans from employers – a practice rooted in patronage-based employer–employee relations.

Organisations cannot assume that women will see their interests as workers as more strategic for them to organise around than other interests they possess – as migrants, for example. An example of this is the experience of MAP Foundation (Pollock 2013), introduced earlier. MAP found that it had to work with the multiple identities that Burmese migrant women and men travelling to Thailand for work considered important in their lives. Their identities as workers did not provide a clear organising principle, because the kind of work most migrants do is a chance issue based on which border area they make their crossing into Thailand. Their identities as 'garment workers' or 'fish-processing workers' were therefore not ones which they related to strongly. It was therefore necessary for MAP initially to work with and across other identities, such as ethnicity, which had more resonance in the women's lives. It is significant that when MAP Foundation consulted Burmese women migrants about how best to use the funds they had been provided with to work on gender issues, it was around questions of their different ethnic identities that women chose to first come together, to get a better sense of what united them as migrants in Thailand as opposed to what divided them as Burmese citizens. The violence they experienced – as migrants and as women – emerged as one of the first issues migrant women were willing to organise around.

The resources of 'soft power': culture, discourse, and information

Another important area to explore is the kinds of resources drawn on by organisations to support women workers to confront the power of capital. Most organisations working to support and further the rights of poor women in informal work are interested in shifting structural constraints sufficiently to increase the 'room for manoeuvre' for their membership so as enable them to gain greater recognition for their work, fairer returns to their labour, and greater security of livelihoods.

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In place of the more confrontational tactics traditionally associated with the trade union movement, these organisations working with women often seek to achieve their goals through the exercise of 'soft power', drawing on the resources offered by culture, discourse, information, and communications. Organisations have been skilled at choreographing actions around recognised cultural symbols and references to subvert or appropriate their meaning. For example, domestic workers in Karnataka organised 'broom worship' rituals on the occasion of Vishwa Karma puja when tools of ('male') work, such as vehicles, are worshipped. Since brooms are considered archetypically 'unclean', this action was perceived as particularly provocative (Menon 2013).

Along with cultural politics, the use of symbolic objects and events to influence the way work and workers are seen can be used to considerable effect to achieve important organisational goals. In an appropriation of a custom to challenge attitudes and beliefs about the worth of the work of rag pickers in Pune, India, the organisation KKPKP (Narayan and Chikarmane 2013) subverted the ritual of Rakhi Bandana. This is a ritual in which sisters tie thread bracelets on their brothers' wrists to symbolise their bonds, including brothers' duties. Rag pickers in Pune decided to tie a giant 'rakhi' all around the municipal building, to emphasise that rag pickers make a large contribution to municipal work to take care of the environment, but get little in return from the municipality. For KKPKP, it was important to shift public – and self – perceptions that waste pickers were simply people who rummaged in the waste. They drew on a variety of discourses – economic, professional, environmental – to argue that their members were performing a valuable service in the waste economy, collecting and trading recyclable commodities, and that theirs was a far more efficient and sustainable method than other alternatives on offer.

Over time, KKPKP's activities have shifted the idea of waste pickers to that of a service provider within a professional business model located within the new economics of waste.

For KKPKP, environmental discourses have helped to steer and shape the organisation. For members of KKPKP, articulation of waste pickers' roles as environmental managers, recyclers, and re-users of waste products have shaped spaces to develop new ways of working in these roles in the changing economy, rather than being sidelined by the new entrepreneurial private-sector initiatives which also draw on 'green' discourses. It has been active in protesting the inclusion of incinerators for fuel generation in the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), as these incinerators compete for the same waste that waste pickers can recycle.

In addition, organisations support women in informal work to confront the power of capital need to collect and disseminate information, to educate their own members, and to advocate for change.

A number of organisations have drawn on the collation and dissemination of information as a means of educating their members. Most of the organisations covered

by the book on which this article draws placed a great deal of emphasis on promoting the education and awareness of their constituency. A labour inspector, impressed with the ability of women workers to orientate the trade union to their demands, told Ben Selwyn (author of a case study on women and trade unions in North-East Brazil): 'When you have better information you are better placed to speak up for and fight for your rights' (Selwyn 2013, 65).

Information has also been used to engage in advocacy as well as to back up claims. KKPKP, for instance, sought to quantify the waste pickers' contribution to the local economy, initially on the basis of simple extrapolation methods and later on the basis of more formal research in collaboration with the ILO (Chikarmane *et al.* 2001).

Communications and media featured in other ways in promoting efforts to organise isolated and dispersed workers. In Thailand, for example, MAP experimented with a number of different methods for reaching out to migrant domestic workers. These are mostly full-time live-in workers who are not entitled to regular days off, and are therefore difficult to make regular contact with. MAP arranged for contact points at festival sites where domestic workers might attend, arranged a phone line and a PO Box address to make the organisation accessible, but eventually found broadcasting a phone-in programme on local radio was the most effective route.

The practicalities of everyday life

Given the precariousness of informal livelihoods, the meagreness of the returns and the over-riding preoccupation with the exigencies of survival, it was essential that organisations proved their relevance to workers' concerns in the context of their everyday lives. Many of the strategies deployed by organisations aim to make practical gains. The argument made by KKPKP that waste pickers provided a valued service to the community was directed at the municipal government in a process of eliciting certain policy responses from them.

For organisations to retain the loyalty of their constituencies, they had to provide forms of practical support which had more immediate and visible returns and that would give their members the breathing space to take on longer-term goals. KKPKP set up a number of co-operative scrap shops, the profits from which are shared by its members. It also set up a credit co-operative which looked after its members' savings and provided them with loans and ran a 'gold loan scheme' which allowed members to pawn their jewellery to the union at lower interest rates relative to money lenders.

However, where women do not necessarily relate to work as work because there is no clear-cut boundary between the various activities they must undertake in order to keep themselves and their families going, the practical support offered may straddle their identities as mothers, wives, and members of their community. The way that the organisations sought to make themselves relevant could have been on any one of these fronts. For women in rural areas whose livelihoods depend on natural resources, such

as land, water, or forest, and who do not have a common work place, the issues that bring women together may relate to child-care or drinking water or domestic violence. Moreover, where women do not see themselves primarily as workers, giving value to their problems as mothers and household managers is likely to increase their loyalty and motivation in being members of the group. In the case of MAP Foundation, it was the violence that women experienced as migrant women that first brought them together as a group and it was much later that they began to organise around their rights as workers.

Making the law work for workers

The law has proved to be an important resource for the organisations of informal workers because it allows them to invoke the power of the state to uphold the rights that have been granted by the state. A number of the organisations discussed in this book put considerable emphasis on training their members on legal rights – as women, as workers, and as citizens. MAP Foundation used the issue of workers' health as a relatively uncontroversial entry point to reach out to migrant workers, but subsequently expanded its training activities to cover labour rights, women's rights, and access to education. Its aim is to provide migrant workers with knowledge about how they could use Thai law to protect their rights. It has a legal team to provide support to migrant workers across Thailand.

One of the first opportunities to test this strategy related to the rape of two migrant women by Thai rangers. MAP encountered resistance and difficulties along the way, including lack of co-operation from the local Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Pollock 2013). Despite these barriers, it succeeded in getting the rapists convicted, and subsequently used this experience to develop a set of guidelines to assist women to get justice in cases of sexual violence.

One other important finding that emerges from the MAP experience is that giving workers knowledge of the law and their legal rights as workers led to a decline in reliance on strikes in order to achieve their demands in favour of recourse to the law. Whereas previously, making legal complaints has proved time-consuming and often fruitless, MAP provided members with information, not only about labour laws, but also about legal mechanisms for arbitration. It was a group of women workers from a knitting factory who were first to attempt to navigate these mechanisms rather than go out on strike. While they did not succeed in getting their full demands, their partial success proved to be a moment of revelation: 'migrant workers could go to court, migrant workers could deliberate on the verdicts they received and make their voices heard. The courts had to listen to migrants, the employers had to go through a legal process' (Pollock 2013, 266).

KKPKP successfully used the fact that municipal governments in India have constitutional responsibility for waste management to demand medical insurance for waste pickers and for earmarking of spaces across the city for scrap sorting. It was able to combine its knowledge of the law with the numerical strength and tenacity of the organisation, and familiar trade union tools of protest with less familiar 'cultural appropriations'. It has also mobilised as part of a waste pickers' network for the inclusion of waste pickers in social protection measures offered by the 2008 Unorganised Sector Workers' Social Security Bill. At the same time, the organisation's leadership has been aware that work focused on legal and policy issues needs to succeed relatively quickly in tangibly affecting the lives of the waste pickers, if it is to justify the effort and energy it can consume.

Engaging in politics and policies

Not surprisingly, the focus on rights, and the building up of citizenship as well as worker identities, have led a number of organisations to engage more closely in political and policy processes in diverse ways. For KKPKP, the absence of a direct employer–employee relationship led to a focus on government as the duty-bearer in relation to rights of informal workers. This was facilitated by the fact that municipal government is constitutionally bound to take responsibility for waste management. On the basis of the organisation's efforts to quantify the contribution made by waste pickers to the urban economy, it has succeeded in gaining a number of concessions for its membership, such as government endorsement of the waste pickers' union identity card, effectively authorising them to pick waste and recognising their eligibility for medical insurance schemes, the costs of which should be borne by the municipality.

Dealing with inequalities

Divisions between workers: caste, race, gender, and legality

That gender inequalities divide workers is of course one of the main reasons why women have been so poorly represented within the mainstream trade unions, and why other kinds of women's organising has evolved. These inequalities have not disappeared, and continue to affect the ways in which men and women interact around struggles by women workers. For instance, men's interests in maintaining certain benefits associated with gender inequality means that any support for women's activism tends to disappear when women appear to threaten men's interests within or outside the home.

Of course, gender inequalities are not the only ones that divide the identities and interests of workers. Organisations that seek to build shared identities and collective interests among women workers have to meet the challenge of dealing with the

various other hierarchies that divide workers from each other. In some cases, divisions stem from the organisation of work. Within the waste collection sector in Pune, for example, there are many different kinds of tasks, with different social and material implications: there are itinerant buyers who use pushcarts and are mostly men; female itinerant buyers who use baskets. The worst off are those who collect scrap from dumps or landfills who are nearly all women; bin collectors are slightly better off and will have established rights over certain bins.

Inequalities between local and migrant workers have provided a divisive factor in certain contexts. In Thailand, MAP is explicitly concerned with this issue among Burmese migrants. One response has been to carefully negotiate and challenge the negative identities attributed to migrants, such as 'alien' status and the association of migrants with specific cross-border political issues. MAP's Women Exchange programme is directly concerned with building bridges across ethnic identities amongst women who, through migration, found themselves with various issues in common. MAP has also worked with Thai organisations to raise the profile of migrant workers and recognition of their contributions as workers, and encouraged linkages to Thai workers' unions, such as exist.

KKPKP has experienced tension over the years between 'old' and 'new' migrants to Pune. Most waste pickers were migrants at some point, but KKPKP's original constituency were 'old' migrants who had been in the area for several decades. Hostility within the organisation towards more recent migrants, drawn in by pressures in other states such as the 2000 Gujurat earthquake, was, however, carefully circumscribed by the issue of membership legitimacy and effectively dealt with by charging membership dues – to be paid in installments – from the time of KKPKP's inception, instead of from the time of enrolment.

Organisations also have to acknowledge – and deal with – class divisions between women within them. The non-wastepicker activists involved from the outset in KKPKP have consciously tried to disperse leadership, partly by developing a deliberative, discursive organisational culture, and partly structurally, by vesting decision-making in the interactions between a Governing Board and a large number of members of the Representatives Council of waste pickers. Nevertheless, their situations bring into focus the tension between the need for strong and visible leaders – 'organisation icons' – for the purposes of wider visibility as well as for organisational focus, and the need to avoid 'concentrations of power'.

The global and the local

In theory, there should be a mutually reinforcing effect between global and local organisations involved in the rights of women workers, with the greater visibility and capacity for advocacy of global networks and organisations helping to channel resources and information to local actors while local mobilising and identification of

actual experience provides the ultimate legitimacy for global advocacy. The reality is more complex, sometimes contradictory.

At a practical, everyday level, local movements may be unable to spare the time or the people to be active contributors to global processes – or indeed to feel that such interaction is useful at a daily level. It is in the realm of 'policy' that these interactions are usually seen – when the objective is to change the thinking of policymakers, sensitise or make aware bureaucrats, bring national policy in line with international conventions, use the latter to influence national discourse, and so on. But policy is only one part of the equation, albeit an important one.

Much of the work of local movements is oriented towards communities and individuals – changing patriarchal mindsets, helping women to develop a sense of self, teaching children to develop a sensitivity to the 'carrying capacity' equation,[4] and so on. The target for these efforts is not the government or policymakers. Public advocacy does not change the way people behave within their homes (even though this is often attempted!). Women working in precarious activities for little or no pay or in poor, isolated, and remote environments need intensive support over an extended period to break the hold of centuries-old caste- or gender-biased norms. These activities gain little or nothing from being linked to the global workers' rights agenda, because the only strategies that will work are local and contextually developed ones. It may still be the case that a global discourse can inspire such action locally.

KKPKP has an active and fruitful connection with the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers, which has provided solidarity, support, and information about the processes and issues of waste pickers on a broader canvas. Yet it is cautious about what to expect from such alliances, suggesting that the greatest benefit arises from the local-level visibility – and therefore pressure on local or national governments – that can be gained from local action. It also suggests that the practical issue of the difference in the nature and value of waste in India in comparison to other countries influences quite strongly how the organisation can engage with and relate to waste picker organisations at global levels.

The focus of many organisations is, therefore, very much on the local. For some, this may represent a conscious choice in the use of scarce human as well as financial resources in small organisations; being active in international advocacy can be time-consuming, and detract from local action. For others, it may be a choice based on an awareness that too great a focus on the ways in which issues are framed and understood at the global level may actually hamper the evolution of a locally grounded articulation of the issues at stake.

For other organisations, international connections and alliances sometimes represent important opportunites for wider dissemination of issues, as well as for experience of a broader solidarity. Burmese women involved in MAP's Women Exchange in Thailand gained new confidence from their participation in the Panty Power campaign co-ordinated by Lanna Action for Burma, a group of women activists

in Thailand and involving women across the world. The campaign called on women to post their panties – symbolically emasculating men – to the Burmese embassies in their countries as a statement of women's continued engagement with the struggle for democracy in Burma.

Concluding reflections

The efforts of organisations to promote the collective capabilities of some of the most disadvantaged sections of the working poor offer inspiration as well as lessons for those who would like to tackle the injustices of redistribution, recognition, and representation, as these bear on women workers in the informal economy. The failure of mainstream trade unions to represent the interests of these workers is not purely a reflection of the greater numerical presence of men in their leadership and membership, but also the extent to which patriarchal interests have influenced their evolution and shaped their organisation and strategies. In this concluding section, we draw out three broad lessons from our discussion.

One critical lesson that comes out of our analysis is the importance of starting with the local, with the issues on the ground. Trade unions across the world have sought to represent workers through a common set of strategies around a largely economistic set of demands that fall under the rubric of redistributive politics. It is evident from the chapters in the book (Kabeer *et al.* 2013) that organising working women has to straddle both the politics of redistribution as well as of recognition. The politics of redistribution from the perspective of these workers converges with standard trade union concerns with wages, working conditions, and social security.

The politics of recognition, on the other hand, encompasses a much broader set of issues than trade unions have conventionally addressed. For the most marginalised workers (waste pickers, domestic workers, sex workers, migrants) the concern is as much about dignity as daily bread. And as women workers, concerns relate to their particular situation and status, the context in which they work, and the institutions and practices they need to contend with in daily life. Because there are considerable differences from one place to another, particularly in relation to structures of gender inequality, the process of organising, the ways in which groups evolve, the strategies they use, the issues they prioritise, will have a strongly local dimension and are best understood in relation to local contexts. Therefore – as distinct from sectoral trade unions – the representation of women workers' voices in the informal economy tends to have a geographical focus, and develop within, localities. They may subsequently be federated and acquire presence regionally, nationally, or even globally, but the local base is extremely important to understand.

Secondly, the willingness to be responsive to local context rather than working to a predetermined agenda means that the process of organisation occurs at a much slower pace than with more standardised forms of work. As we have seen, there are many

different elements to the process of organising hard-to-reach groups of women in the informal economy which are not relevant with these standardised forms. It takes time to build social and self-recognition of the value of the work that these women do, to organise them and retain their loyalty, to build common identities and interests across women otherwise divided by location in the economy and the social hierarchy, to become a collective force, and to win the smaller or larger gains that would help give members a stake in the organisation, and the commitment to further change. In terms of pace and scale, organisations that work at the local level and around local issues are likely to be very different from those which emerge under pressure from external agencies, such as the government, donor agency, trade union, or NGO. This does not mean that external facilitation is not needed: organising for change in the kinds of conditions we are talking about does often require an external catalyst, to introduce or nurture ideas of change. But it does mean that groups evolve at their own pace, and around their own evolving agenda.

Thirdly, strategies evolve and change over time. The 'long feedback loop' entailed in efforts to address the most strategic aspects of women's position means that they are unlikely to bring women together in the first instance. But as women come together around the more practical concerns of their daily lives, as their identity as a collective starts to grow and strengthen, they appear to become more willing to take on these more political issues. Thus it may be that initial strategies are more gentle, less confrontational, with continued affinity with the weapons of the weak. Over time, however, as groups become more self-confident and assertive, we see a greater willingness to engage in open conflict, to take legal action against those in power who violate their rights, to use their organisation's clout to influence political and policy processes, and to assert themselves as citizens.

Finally, we have noted some of the tensions and payoffs to collaboration across the local–global divide. This reality requires a careful approach on the part of organisations which are dealing with particularly vulnerable sections of the working poor. In the right circumstances, they have much to gain – eventually in terms of real change in the lives of the women they work with – from an international presence, and global alliances. But international social movements may not always be well-attuned or benign in relation to issues directly experienced and lived at local levels, and caution in negotiating the terms and areas of interaction may well be an astute approach. On the other hand, international social movements and alliances have gained a great deal – and stand to gain much more – from engagement with organisations like these if they are to take issues of recognition, redistribution, and representation seriously. It is the locally grounded practices of organisations in articulating and representing issues as they are experienced in real lives of a considerable section of the world's working poor that can help to inform the trajectories and deepen the perspectives of global movements in ways that can strengthen and validate their claims at representation.

Naila Kabeer is currently Professor of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK. She will be taking up a professorial position at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics from October 2013. Postal address: Gender Institute, LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: n.kabeer@soas.ac.uk

Kirsty Milward founded and co-manages Suchana Uttor Chandipur Community Society, West Bengal, India, and is also a freelance consultant specialising in gender and rural development. Postal address: Uttor Phalguni PO and Village: Khanjanpur Via Sriniketan Birbhum, West Bengal 731 236, India. Email: milward.bose@gmail.com

Ratna Sudarshan is currently Advisor at the Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi, where she was Director from 2003 to 2011. Postal address: B 162 Yojana Vihar, Delhi 110092, India. Email: ratna.sudarshan@gmail.com

Notes

1 There are a number of reasons why mainstream trade union membership has been so much lower among women workers than men. The labour market is gendered, and the traditional focus of unions is on formal workers in male-dominated parts of industry. In addition, working women are disproportionately concentrated in informal activities, and union activity usually takes place in the formal sector; in some contexts, state regulations prevent the possibility of union membership and collective bargaining agreements in the informal economy, and the absence of legal protection and social security in most informal jobs make organised protest a highly risky activity.

2 The experience of KKPKP is discussed in more detail in Narayan and Chikarmane (2013).

3 The experience of MAP Foundation is discussed in more detail in Pollock (2013). An article on the work of MAP in the context of an analysis of the impact of the global economic crisis on the women workers it supports was published in *Gender & Development* (Pollock and Aung 2010).

4 'Carrying capacity' refers to the balance required between the human population of an area and the natural resources available for a sustainable existence. Thus, in a rural eco-system there is an inter-dependence between forests, cattle, cultivation, and people, whereby each contributes to and takes from the system for survival, and if the harmony between elements is broken the entire eco-system becomes unsustainable. The limit beyond which the system cannot survive is called the carrying capacity. Carrying capacity is not fixed; it will vary, for example, with technological changes.

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