“I WANT DOMESTIC WORKERS’ RIGHTS:”
MOBILIZING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY OF DOMESTIC WORKERS IN DUM DUM, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Entrusted with children, elderly family members, homes, and valued possessions, domestic workers play a vital role in both the wellbeing of individual families and society as a whole. In spite of this crucial function, however, the nearly 53 million domestic workers are among the most vulnerable groups of workers in the world (ILO, 2013a). Often rendered invisible behind the closed doors of private households and unprotected by national legislation, domestic workers face a variety of hardships—including limited job security, no fixed or minimum wage, no health benefits, no paid leave, and no overtime (ILO, 2013b). This labor exploitation is part and parcel of their struggle to collectivize: on one hand, the poor working conditions and social stratification of domestic workers hinders them from finding ample opportunity to organize, while their inability to properly organize further magnifies their labor exploitation (ILO, 2013b; Neetha & Paliwala, 2011). Furthermore, the difficulty to define domestic work contributes to their struggle to mobilize. With varying duties, ages, number of employers, number of households, and number of hours worked, it is incredibly challenging to form a collective identity (ILO, 2013b; Field Notes). Domestic workers are, however, mostly women and girls (83 percent, or nearly 43.9 million domestic workers), poorly educated, and are migrants or members of disadvantaged communities (ILO, 2013b; Domestic Workers’ Welfare and Social Security Act, 2010, p. 7). Although the UN’s International Labour Organization developed a declaration that seeks to protect domestic workers worldwide, it bears no real legal weight (ILO, 2013b).

The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) reports an estimated 4.2 million domestic workers in India, 90% of which are women (WIEGO, 2013; Durbar Disha, 2013). In the shadows of the social stratification of the Indian caste system, domestic workers here are still
drawn from devalued and voiceless groups and those from the “backward classes” (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011; Field Notes). Historically in India, domestic workers have been excluded from nearly every bill that has passed to protect laborers, including minimum wage, sick leave, overtime, and vacation leave (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). There are examples of women mobilizing around these issues, however, since participation in union and organizational activities in order to curb these debilitating factors and increase their quality of life is difficult, many workers are not even aware of labor rights generally or existing legislation or policies that have been effective in securing their rights (Domestic Workers’ Welfare and Social Security Act, 2010). The diverse nature of domestic work, the social and political realities of India, as well as the difficulty to juggle both familial and work responsibilities contribute to the difficult task of establishing a collective identity (CI) among domestic workers (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011; ILO, 2013b; Field Notes).

Collective identity (CI) has been attributed to successful peer-led interventions seeking to change structural factors of marginalized communities (Ghose et al., 2008). Durbar Disha Mahila Grihasramik Samanwaya (Disha), an organization of domestic workers in Dum Dum, Kolkata, West Bengal, was founded in 2010 to organize local domestic workers to overcome their professional and personal struggles (Durbar Disha, 2013). A peer-led intervention seeking to change structural factors affecting domestic workers locally and nationally (including the legal environment of domestic workers and access to healthcare and childcare, among others), Disha is a community-level structural intervention (CLSI) (Ghose et al., 2008). An understanding of domestic workers’ CI will facilitate efforts to increase solidarity among domestic workers in order to achieve visibility and rights (Ghose et al., 2008; Class Lecture, 5/21/13). This research contributes to our understanding of the role of CI in domestic worker mobilization by describing
the general successes and struggles involved in domestic worker organizing, as well as how CI is
established by Disha leaders, members, and non-member domestic workers. Furthermore, this
research seeks to better understand the demographics of domestic workers in Dum Dum in order
to assist in CI efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Significance of Difficulty Mobilizing

According to the International Labour Organization, domestic workers exist in every single country for which data is available. In fifteen years, the number of domestic workers has soared from 33.2 million in 1995 to a “conservative estimate” of 52.6 million worldwide in 2010 (ILO, 2013b, p. 95). Research carried out by the same organization shows that nearly 30%—or roughly 15.7 million domestic workers—are completely excluded from the scope of national labor legislation in their respective countries, while only ten percent, or 5.3 million, are covered by general labor legislation (ILO, 2013b). This lack of unionization, furthermore, is a fundamental reason for their exclusion from labor laws, particularly in India, since it is difficult to establish national law for varying workers with varying identities and duties (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). As a result, domestic workers’ rights, such as wage fixation and entitlements to various forms of social security, are often overlooked. Although we generally perceive difficulty mobilizing as a stimulus for the resulting problems, the causality cannot be definitively stated, as all of these challenges are cyclical and each contributes to another—in other words, “everything is everything” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Class Lecture, 5/21/13).

Domestic Workers’ Mobilization Efforts

Globally, domestic workers are affected by the lack of labor rights and laws to protect them. There are, however, worldwide efforts to organize domestic workers in order to advocate
for their rights, including the International Domestic Workers’ NetWork (IDWN) and Women in Informal Economy: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). IDWN is a coalition of domestic worker organizations and trade unions from around the world that aims to bring domestic workers together in order to educate and advocate for labor rights of domestic workers (IDWN, 2013). WIEGO focuses on organizing around women’s issues generally, including domestic work. Created in 1997, WIEGO aims to bring member-based organizations, professional agencies, and researchers together to form a productive network (WIEGO, 2013). These two agencies are part of a movement that works to advocate for labor rights of domestic workers.

In 2006, members of the movement from around the world gathered in the Netherlands for a conference to discuss the needs of domestic workers. Attendees determined a need and demanded the United Nations’ International Labor Organization (ILO) to create a convention addressing the rights of domestic workers. The ILO responded shortly after with C189 – the Domestic Workers Convention (C189) (IDWN, 2013). C189, adopted on June 11, 2006, calls for the protection of domestic workers from abuse and unsafe work conditions, employment protection through contracts, and addresses many of the other labor rights issues domestic workers face. To date, eight countries have ratified C189: Bolivia, Italy, Mauritius, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Philippines, South Africa, and Uruguay. C189, however, is currently not enforced in any country (ILO, 2013c).

Although the global organizations provide a voice to advocate for the broader implementation of polices to protect domestic workers, the local country-specific organizations are the main support for the women and their day-to-day issues. National organizations in India like the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) and the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)—along with local organizations like Disha, Parichiti in Kolkata, Astitva in
Dehradun, the Kashtkari Gharkamgar Sanghatna in Thane, Stree Jagruti Samiti in Bangalore, Sangini in Madhya Pradesh, and other on-the-ground community organizations—provide women with protection, access to various services, and a forum to advocate for the rights and dignity of domestic workers throughout India (Sharma, 2012). Parichiti, which works primarily with women commuting to and from work on the train, for example, holds meetings and information sessions for women at the railway station (Parichiti, 2013).

The primary goal for most of the local organizations is to advocate for increased labor rights for domestic workers. There has been a more recent push toward specifically unionizing domestic workers, but collectivizing around specific issues of injustice is not new for Indian women or domestic workers. In 1959, a hunger strike was coordinated by the All India Domestic Workers’ Union based in New Delhi. This one-day “solidarity strike” led to the introduction of two private members’ bills in Parliament (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011, p. 113). This is one of the visible efforts of the mobilization of domestic workers throughout India.

**Exclusion from Indian Labor Laws**

Even with global, national, and local efforts to protect domestic workers, they have repeatedly been excluded from major national acts including the Workman’s Compensation Act of 1923, the Weekly Holiday Act of 1942, The Industrial Dispute Act of 1948, the Personal Injury Act of 1963, the Maternity Benefit Act of 1963, and the Gratuity Act of 1978 (NDWM, 2013). Interestingly, since the home is not viewed as an industrial workplace—and domestic work is completed in the home—the Minimum Wages Act of 1948 established that domestic worker wages fall under the purview of individual states (Policy framework for domestic workers, 2011). As a result, labor laws do not apply to domestic workers on the national scale (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011).
Despite several attempts to write legislation establishing the rights of domestic workers, this marginalized community continues to be exploited. In 2008, both the National Commission for Women and the National Campaign Committee of Unorganised Sector Workers drafted bills (WIEGO, 2013). Instead of passing either of these policies, the national government enacted the Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008 (Policy framework for domestic workers, 2011). According to critics, this legislation falls short of necessary human and worker rights. Among other inadequacies, the act merely enables the central and state governments to establish “social security boards” with no follow-through required or expected, rather than establish social security benefits or a minimum standard for working conditions (Sankaran, 2009; Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008).

Successful Mobilization Efforts

In an attempt to mitigate the problems faced by domestic workers, the Ministry of Labour and Employment convened the Taskforce on Domestic Workers in December 2009 with the mission to design a national policy addressing workers’ rights for domestic workers. The decision resulted from a recommendation of the National Social Security Board (Final report of the task force on domestic workers, 2011; Policy framework for domestic workers, 2011). The Taskforce produced a set of recommendations in 2010, which the Indian government adopted, but has not yet implemented (Final report of the task force on domestic workers, 2011). Other attempts were made, including the Domestic Workers Welfare and Social Security Act 2010. Proposed by the State Commission for Women, the act establishes workers’ rights for domestic workers across India except for the state of Jammu and Kashmir (Domestic Workers’ Welfare and Social Security Act, 2010). In addition, the Union Cabinet announced in June 2011 that the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna scheme would be extended to provide domestic workers with
health insurance. The National Social Security Fund for Unorganised Workers will be responsible for providing the necessary funds (Extension of Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana to the domestic workers, 2011).

Success on the state level is also visible due to mobilization efforts and some states have recognized domestic workers in formal legislation. Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli have all implemented a minimum wage act that includes domestic workers (WIEGO, 2013). West Bengal—the state where Disha operates—is not included. In most areas, domestic workers are paid based on the tasks they complete, with each task having its own monetary value. Cleaning tasks such as washing utensils, laundry, dusting, and sweeping for example pay between 100-400 rupees per month (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). Most part-time domestic workers only perform one set of tasks and need to work in more than one household daily in order to supplement the extremely low wages (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). The average minimum wage established by legislation in these six states is 124.84 rupees per day (Policy framework for domestic workers, 2011). Unfortunately these rates are still very low and many women have to continue to work in more than one house per day to make a livable wage (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011).

Though the minimum wage acts are helpful and necessary, they do not address the many other workplace violations that domestic workers face. Maharashtra, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu have all taken further steps to ensure the rights of domestic workers (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). The Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act of 2008 (MDWWBA) establishes a board consisting of state-nominated employers, domestic workers, and State Government officials (MDWWBA, 2008). According to this Act, every domestic worker over the age of eighteen is eligible to pay a fee and register for the benefits. Benefits of this Act for the domestic
worker include the following: immediate assistance in case of an accident, financial assistance for children of the domestic worker, assistance with medical treatment for domestic worker and children, maternity benefits, assistance for legal heir for funeral expenses of the domestic worker, and other benefits decided by the board (MDWWBA, 2008, 10.b.i-vi). Other noteworthy state acts are Kerala’s Artisan and Skilled Workers’ Welfare Fund and Tamil Nadu’s Manual Workers Act (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). In spite of these successes, West Bengal and many other states across India still lack formal legislation to support the rights of domestic workers.

Challenges to Mobilization Efforts

Despite the development of many organizations aiming to collectivize and advocate for labor rights, a majority of domestic workers are still not connected to a local union (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). As explained above, the lack of support from national and local governments has proven a huge challenge to domestic worker unions. Presently, the trade union movement is applied primarily to formal employment and as a result, current trade union laws protect only “formal” employees. Domestic workers—along with 80% of the workforce population in India—unfortunately, are considered “informal” employees (Ahn & Ahn, 2012). Additionally, lack of support from employers is another roadblock in mobilization efforts. Domestic workers’ low wages allow for more people to hire them at a low cost, which is why many employers do not support unionizing and the increase of wages (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). If employers are not supportive, domestic workers may be hesitant to join an organization for fear of losing their job (Field Notes).

The heterogeneity of domestic workers and their work also plays a prominent hindrance in organizing efforts. The inconsistencies in working hours, long working hours, and the lack of wage fixing have all been used as justification for the lack of regulation of domestic workers
(Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). Also, it is difficult to maintain and/or expand membership in organizations when domestic workers are responsible for multiple families, including their own, each day (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). A majority of Disha members interviewed indicate that expanding membership is the best method to strengthen the organization. However, over half of non-Disha members interviewed indicate that one of the main reasons why they are not a member is lack of time. Given how busy the women are, they must feel that membership is worth what little spare time they have.

**Frameworks of Organizing**

Many of the organizations working tirelessly to mobilize domestic workers do so using a rights-based approach, which places a premium on achieving legal rights of domestic workers and often sees the law as the ultimate validation and goal (Class Lecture, 5/28/13). Implementation of laws and rights of domestic workers, therefore, is often a rallying point and mobilizing tool for many organizations. This approach, if used as the sole mobilizing tool, is flawed. Since rights are universal—and people and communities are full of complexities—rights ultimately further marginalize and oppress already marginalized communities (Menon, 2004; Class Lecture, 5/28/2013). If laws are implemented and enforced to regulate working hours, for example, it may actually limit domestic workers’ “right” to work more than the regulated hours and make a livable wage (since many of the minimum wage acts suggest such low amounts).

Also, rights are granted by institutions that exist in an inherently unjust system, therefore, when laws are implemented they create more state control and more of the same injustice (Menon, 2004; Class Lecture, 5/28/2013). Government officials propose laws and grant rights that are just enough to address the bare minimum of issues domestic workers face, but without creating real change or justice. Chatterjee (2008) discusses this point that the civil society (government and
middle class) gives the political society (peasant class) entitlements that are not rights and are neither permanent nor secure (p. 58). As Menon (2004) addresses, the movement needs to not only change the laws of society, but the beliefs of those that create and enforce the laws.

The rights-based approach is also problematic because as Menon (2004) and other Indian feminists suggest, “the law is not enough” (p. 5; Class Lecture, 5/28/13). Even when laws and conventions are officially enacted, the implementation of those laws rarely fully protects domestic workers. Welfare boards, for example, are not required or expected to be militant enforcers of the few formal legislative acts that do exist and as a result, benefits of formal legislation are primarily on paper only (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011). Furthermore, the 2008 Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act does not have any “enforceable or justiciable social security entitlement for unorganized workers” (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011, p. 116). In addition, many times the proposed laws do not meet all of the needs of the domestic worker or have serious limitations. The Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act of 2008 and draft national policy (Domestic Workers’ Welfare and Social Security Act 2010) for instance, state that maternity benefits are limited to only two children. Also, as seen in Karnataka, laws and rights are not forever and can be revoked at any time (Menon, 2004; Neetha & Palriwala, 2011).

The lack of enforcement and limitations of legislation are essential reasons why mobilization is so important. However, the movements need to be more than just advocating for rights and implementation of laws. A holistic, bottom-up, community initiated and organized, approach is needed to create real change in the lives of domestic workers in India and around the world. Many times, movements that are centered on rights and implementation of laws are dismantled after a law is passed and the movement dies down (Menon, 2004). Many of the global and national organizations such as the International Domestic Workers NetWork and the
National Domestic Workers’ Movement, who work to organize domestic workers on the ground, function under a “top-down approach” with a pre-determined need not identified by the community. However, as seen in Durbar, mobilization is successful when the need is determined from within the community and the community works to address their problems (Class lecture, 5/28/13). An organization trying to collectivize domestic workers is not as effective as a collective of domestic workers organizing on their own and forming a collective identity. Within the community it is also important to include all parties related to domestic work, including employers. Though trade unions tend to exclude exploitative employers, Durbar proves that the inclusion of madams and clients in their mobilization efforts can have positive outcomes for community members, including reducing HIV prevalence among sex workers (Ghose et al., 2010). Problems arise when workers and employers see each other as the enemy (Ratnam, 2007).

Gaps in Literature

More research is needed in two main areas. First, it is necessary to study the effectiveness of labor laws for domestic workers once they are in place. Determining if the implementation of minimum wage laws and welfare board legislation positively impacts the lives of domestic workers and improves their current work conditions is invaluable information for the organizations advocating for the betterment of domestic workers’ lives. Second, more research is needed surrounding the importance of forming a collective identity and how to use aspects of that mobilization process to help establish a similar model. Results from these two research questions will help with organizing and improving working and living conditions for domestic workers.
Disha

Disha represents a collective of nearly 400 dues-paying domestic workers in West Bengal, India. Peer-led, Disha members vote on five leadership positions every year—president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, and group leader (Field Notes). Disha’s vision is to “build a world where all marginalized communities live in an environment of respect, rights and dignity” and where “hopes for a new social order where there is no discrimination by class, caste, gender or occupation and all individuals communities live in peace and harmony as global citizens” (Durbar Disha, 2013). Disha aims to collectivize and unionize domestic workers while providing crucial supportive services to members. Services include: legal counsel, contractual mediation between workers and employers, mediation with family members, connection to government benefits, child-care center, and a monthly healthcare check-up (Field Notes).

Disha and Durbar

Disha was founded with support from Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (Durbar), a 65,000-strong sex worker collective located in West Bengal, India. Active in the local sex work community since 1992, Durbar has built up a strong foundation of community support and resources and has established numerous successful interventions, including healthcare clinics, a savings and banking co-operative, a boarding home for children of sex workers, and a support group for HIV positive sex workers (Ghose et al., 2008; Ghose, 2012). Durbar reached out to the domestic workers in Dum Dum, Kolkata upon the realization that they share both personal and professional struggles as low-income women in professions that are not seen as legitimate “work” (Field Notes). As a result, Durbar allocated resources to Disha—and continues to do so—including money, staff (Professional Program Manager and Capacity Building officers), and interns. Since Durbar has a firmly established connection with community resources and has
grown into one of the most successful collectives in India, Durbar acts as an organizational model for Disha (Ghose, 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**

Since Durbar acts as a parent organization to Disha—a successful model for organizing marginalized female laborers—and has proven to understand and tap the local resources in Kolkata, we draw on Durbar’s previous CI research and its foundation in social movement theory. Ghose et al. (2008) studied Durbar’s successful peer-led HIV intervention under the framework that CI formation is a key aspect of collective action and community mobilization. Using Taylor and Whittier’s (1992) boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation (BCN) framework of CI mobilization, Ghose et al. (2008) establish that Durbar’s successful mobilization of CI among sex workers in Sonagachi, Kolkata influenced health behaviors like condom use. Disha, in its relative infancy, has struggled to create a unique collective identity outside of Durbar (Field Notes). This paper, therefore, seeks to understand Disha’s collective identity in terms of the BCN framework in order to help Disha increase membership and member participation, successfully mobilize, and overcome the numerous obstacles facing domestic workers.

**METHODS**

**Sample**

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 55 Disha members (including 5 Disha leaders) and 25 non-Disha-member domestic workers. One Disha member and 2 non-Disha-members did not complete the interview, therefore a total of 77 domestic workers were interviewed regarding their relationship with Disha. Interviewees were randomly selected by the Disha Program Manager and consisted of domestic workers from Bidhan and neighboring
colonies in Dum Dum, Kolkata. All participants identified as female. Participants ranged in age (from 18 to 75), marital status, work experience, and number of children they had, which allows us to believe this sample is a good representation of domestic workers.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Questions were established by the authors in conjunction with the Durbar research team and the Disha Program Manager. Interviews were conducted in Bengali by the Durbar Program Manager or Durbar research assistants with authors present. The Durbar researchers wrote down participant responses in Bengali during the interview and orally translated into English for the authors. The interviews were then translated into English and transcribed for textual analysis. Authors coded transcribed interviews individually, met and discussed codes, and decided to use the BCN model as a coding framework.

![BCN Model](image)

(Ghose et al., 2008)

**RESULTS**

The results of the interviews indicated several strengths and challenges to building collective identity among the domestic workers in Dum Dum. Using the BCN framework as a tool to analyze the data, we identified strengths in Disha’s efforts to establish a collective strength, improve work conditions for members, and negotiate its purpose to the out-group. Research shows that Disha leaders and members can further strengthen the organization by improving recruitment practices, creating more opportunities for members to become engaged, and politicizing Disha’s efforts to fight for domestic worker rights.
Additionally, our research captured the demographics of domestic workers in Dum Dum, Kolkata. Research shows that domestic workers living in Dum Dum are on average 38 years of age and have been working as domestic workers for 14 years. Considering the multitude of job duties that domestic work entails, it is no surprise that 21% of women have three or more job duties to complete each day and 44% have two. Of these tasks, cleaning the house is most common (65%), followed by washing dishes (64%), and cooking (39%). On average, domestic workers in Dum Dum work more than seven hours per day and over 50 hours per week for an average salary of 13.678 rupees per hour. As noted previously, this daily wage of 101.56 rupees can be compared to the minimum wage of 124.84 rupees per day established by legislation in six states. Regarding holidays, 47% of Disha members receive at least four days off each month whereas only 28% of non-members have four holidays each month and 42% of non-members have zero holidays each month. Lastly, 33 women expressed a need for support, which may be tied to the fact that 64% of domestic workers in Dum Dum do not have job security.

**Strengths**

**Boundaries.** Per Taylor and Whittier’s BCN framework, the use of boundaries—most often established by marking in-group members from out-group members—is one way a community builds a collective identity (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Ghose et al., 2008). Disha members have formed a sense of solidarity with other domestic workers versus the dominant society: “we have developed our own voice,” says Member 11. Similarly, Member 10 expresses a perk of Disha membership is that domestic workers as a whole “become united, which helps raise our voice” (emphasize added by authors).

Another strength of the organization is its ability to balance the incentives and financial burden of membership. Among non-members, 70% see the value in membership and 87% of
those sampled are willing to pay the membership fee of three rupees per month. In order to establish an in-group of domestic workers, it is necessary for Disha to create solidarity among members through the provision of benefits and services.

Boundaries are also formed by members creating out-groups of institutions they feel victimized by, and as such, Disha members have formed a collective identity around feeling alienated from educational institutions that discriminate against themselves and their children (Ghose et al., 2008). Members express a desire for training and educational services since their status as domestic workers—and their subsequent lack of wages and free time—alienates them from receiving additional education. One Disha member says simply: “If we could have some educational programs it would be better” (Member 6). Members suggest: a night study center, nurses training, financial-related trainings, arts-related trainings like dance and embroidery, and other unspecified trainings.

Similarly, numerous members express desire for educational and cultural services for their children, implying that their children do not have access to quality education. Member 45 says one of her biggest hopes from Disha is, “if we can get some financial support for the children’s education” because on her small salary, she cannot get her child access to quality education. Other members discuss a lack of access to general education as well as dance and art classes. Additionally, several members express the desire for a mid-day meal program for their children.

Although domestic workers are entitled to several welfare services, the navigation of the various systems can be incredibly confusing. As a result, domestic workers—both members and non-members—have formed a collective identity around the relative alienation between domestic workers and the welfare system. Numerous women identify Disha as a positive source
to help them gain access to entitlements such as voter cards, Permanent Account Number (PAN) cards for bank accounts, voter ID cards, ration cards, the SASPFUW scheme, and medical services. As a note, the SASPFUW (State-Assisted Scheme for Provident Fund for Unorganised Workers) was introduced as a social security scheme for laborers in the informal sector in 2001 but does not yet include domestic workers (West Bengal Department of Labor, 2009).

**Consciousness.** Communities establish consciousness by making meaning out of their group affiliations, which can be crucial in the establishment of a collective identity (Ghose et al., 2008). The fact that 21 members cite collective strength as a perk of membership speaks to Disha’s strength in empowering domestic workers and establishing a consciousness. In describing a perk of Disha membership, Member 10 says she receives “a lot of support and advice” from fellow Disha members. Similarly, another member states: “If I have trouble at work I can get some help [from Disha]” (Member 3). While all domestic workers are invested in gaining worker and human rights, progress cannot be achieved unless the in-group feels empowered by their collective identity. Research shows that not only do members seek a sense of belonging, but in fact experience solidarity as a member of Disha. Member 4 cites: “I was able to get some help from the Durbar Disha ladies and we were able to solve the problem together.” Similarly, Member 2 says, “They will stand by you in times of trouble” and therefore, Disha makes her “feel more brave.” Additionally, 11 out of 12 non-members recognized the importance of solidarity with other domestic workers.

Some Disha members also recognize and articulate the transformative properties of membership—a key aspect of establishing a collective identity (Ghose et al., 2008). One function of Disha membership is that leadership will advocate to employers on behalf of members. As a result, Disha membership provides: 1) improved working conditions, and 2) a happier outlook on
their work. One member says she joined Disha because “you can get a lot of help if we have different problems” (Member 7). Another member concurs: “I did have some problems related to work when I asked for a bonus and I asked Disha to help” (Member 4). Disha’s ability to effectively demand better work conditions for its members, as well as mediate problems between members and employers results in 60% of Disha members being content with their work, compared to only 50% of non-members.

**Negotiation.** Finally, the negotiation component of the BCN framework marks the communication component of the community, which can also be described as the process of “politicizing” group identity to the outside (Ghose et al., 2008, p. 312). In Disha’s instance, the employers represent the outside world. Disha has proven successful in getting its message out to employers, as 71% of employers support their employees’ membership. One Disha member recognizes, “The employer is quite aware about Disha and is cautious to do any kind of abusive behavior” as a result of membership (Member 30). Another says, “My employer feels good about [Disha] and suggested I become a member of Disha” (Member 27). Additionally, Leader 3 reports that, “My employer says that I am establishing my own organization and my voice will be raised. He also says, ‘please do something for us.’”

Additionally, the leadership reports a strong relationship with the local councilor, club, and colony. Leader 2 says, “The relationship between Disha and the local councilor is quite good. Whenever the leadership pays him a visit, he always lends an ear to the problem.” Disha’s relationship with the local community leaders represents a strength in politicizing its group identity that leaders must continue to foster.
Issues and Challenges

Boundaries. Disha’s struggle to increase membership and member participation is the most important issue to address, which plays out in all components of the BCN framework. Although Disha members have formed a sense of solidarity with other members to some degree (see Results: Strengths section), Disha still has difficulty establishing boundaries. According to Taylor and Whittier (1992), boundaries transpire from upholding the structures and values of the group, which help form a sense of solidarity among members. When structures are affirmed, it allows group members to withdraw from dominant society and therefore build collective identity (Ghose et al., 2008; Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

One structure Disha members have difficulty abiding by is the weekly membership meeting. According to 12 members, member participation is low due to inflexible meeting time and location. Members also note that many members appear to have lost enthusiasm, which affects the morale of the larger group. Additionally, 14 non-members (60%) request that meetings be more frequent, in different areas, and at more flexible times so that they can be involved. Though a majority of community members see value in Disha membership, it is crucial to maintain enthusiasm in order to keep members engaged.

Consciousness. A key function in forming consciousness among movement actors is by articulating a liberating framework narrative (Ghose et al., 2008). Disha, however, has not fully established a social justice framework and many domestic workers find it difficult to explain the purpose of the organization or membership. States one member of two years: “I don’t know much about the organization and don’t feel comfortable bringing in members” (Member 5). Additionally, Member 10 states, “I do not have much clarity” in response to questions regarding what activities Disha should engage in, what issues are important to her, and whether Disha
addresses those issues. A number of other participants had similar responses, while non-members also have difficulty understanding Disha’s message. While 87% of non-members state they are aware of Disha, 24% feel they do not know enough about Disha membership in order to join. Unlike Durbar’s “sex work is work” narrative that succinctly captures their mission and ideals, Disha has no similar mantra (see Discussion: Negotiation section), and as such, women have not internalized a message in order to build consciousness (Ghose et al., 2008; Field Notes).

Although non-members recognize the importance of solidarity with other domestic workers, they do not fully understand what it means to collectivize or how it could be done—another problem of articulation. This reflects a problem with Disha’s recruitment efforts if 92% of non-members recognize the need for a collective identity but have not bought into the solidarity offered in Disha membership. The fact that 10 non-members were not able to answer this question also shows that Disha has not effectively explained its purpose or value to non-members. Additionally, research shows that 15 of 21 non-members (71%) would like to mobilize around workers’ rights and four women indicate that trade union recognition is paramount, and yet they have not joined Disha. As one domestic worker expresses, “I would like to bring importance to domestic work” (Non-member 19). It appears these domestic workers have a strong sense of a collective identity, and yet they are not joining a domestic worker collective. Interestingly, one domestic worker explains that she has not become a member because “no one has really said anything to me and it’s been almost two years that I’ve been in this area” (Non-member 11).

**Negotiation.** Whereas employer-employee relations represent a strength of Disha, members’ relationships with their families leave room for improvement. A majority (58%) of members suggest that their husbands and families are indifferent to their involvement with Disha.
Since a majority of domestic workers indicate that they have a family to care for, by improving family members’ views of Disha, domestic workers will show a greater investment in the organization. Buy-in from family members of domestic workers can help keep the movement energized and keep members excited and enthusiastic about what they are mobilizing around. If members lose excitement around the movement, it is harder to articulate the reasons for unionizing and recruit members. Support from family members also improves the collective’s negotiation power with out-groups because these individuals are members of the informal sector in other positions and therefore, can assist domestic workers in gaining legitimacy among other laborers.

**DISCUSSION**

**Intervention Strategies**

**Boundaries.** Again, the use of boundaries—and establishing in-group members from out-group members—can be a very powerful tool in developing CI (Ghose et al., 2008). The first step to reinforcing Disha’s in-group identity is to improve the organization’s recruitment efforts. Members and non-members alike propose three strategies to recruit new members and expand their in-group: go door-to-door in various localities, describe how Disha is working to solve workplace problems, and explain how a collective strength can allow for bargaining with the employer. These are all tactics currently employed by the Disha leadership but it is the suggestion of the authors that these efforts be heightened. Additionally, members and leaders suggest that recruitment efforts should be conducted in new, surrounding localities.

Based on discussions with members and leaders, the authors recommend that a second line of leadership be developed in addition to re-articulating the specific duties of the current leadership positions. One consideration in this decision is that 14 out of 49 members (28.6%)
have leadership aspirations. Since there are only five leadership opportunities in the current structure, it would be advantageous to encourage more members to take a proactive role in the daily operations of Disha. This will increase member consciousness, enable improved recruitment efforts, and relieve stress of the current leaders. This also provides a great opportunity to ensure that new individuals are given a chance to become leaders, rather than rotating the same group of leaders.

This second line of leadership should be modeled after the peer educators at Durbar. The peer educations go door-to-door discussing sexual health to their caseload of 60 sex workers everyday. In addition to creating strong bonds among members, this also allows the organization to keep abreast of new sex workers in the community or any problems that arise with clients or madams (Ghose et al., 2008; Field Notes). The authors propose that this model be applied to a group of Disha members who will be responsible for developing strong bonds with other members and initiating recruitment efforts with new domestic workers in the area. Research shows that members have several suggestions for how Disha can better support domestic workers. Members strongly support a night study center to provide education and training for domestic workers as well as educational and extra-curricular services available to children during the day. Some individuals call for leaders to improve the system to receive entitlements such as ESI cards, ration cards, PAN cards, and voter ID cards. Members also request that medical services such as health check-ups, blood tests, and eye camps be available once a week rather than once a month. Providing these services that are needed by domestic workers is as important, if not more than rallying around labor rights. This not only allows domestic workers to see the value in membership, but further establishes the boundaries of the in-group from the out-group and builds collective identity.
As noted previously, Disha should attempt to increase the number of meetings held while also varying the times and locations in order to improve member attendance and participation. Since members indicate that some have stopped attending meetings and have lost motivation, it is important to increase opportunities for involvement and therefore, foster a sense of community among members. Additionally, research shows that members and leaders feel constrained by the small size of Disha’s office and would prefer a larger meeting space that the organization can call its own. Lastly, in order to strengthen the organization, it is necessary to increase the organization financially, by improving the collection of membership dues and applying for external funding.

**Consciousness.** Building a stronger narrative for mobilization is of the utmost importance for Disha. The narrative, which helps not only retain members but also mobilize them for action, will accomplish Disha’s goals of sustaining members, expanding membership, and fight for workers’ rights. Durbar’s successful “sex work is work” narrative has allowed the organization to build a platform for sex workers from across the country to organize around. Disha should create a slogan similar to Durbar’s or develop another way to clearly articulate membership benefits and its transformative power, along with the strengths and goals of Disha. Although the workers’ rights framework can be incredibly useful in building consciousness it is also important to consider a holistic approach and non-worker related benefits, as well.

Regarding Disha’s collective strength, it is important to ensure that members are in agreement regarding their collective identity. The authors propose that Disha hold an organization-wide meeting at which time all individuals are invited to share their thoughts and feelings on Disha’s collective identity. This is based on research showing that members join Disha in pursuit of workers’ rights (mentioned 16 times), in search of solidarity (mentioned 12
times), to receive help with workplace problems (mentioned 26 times), and to receive services for their children (mentioned 5 times). In order to improve group consciousness, Disha must solidify what it hopes to achieve through mobilization.

**Negotiation.** A key aspect of the negotiation component of the BCN framework is to politicize the group to the outside world (Ghose et al., 2008). Research emphasizes the need for Disha to improve its negotiation in the larger society in order to improve its collective strength. As a result, the authors have collaborated with the Disha Program Manager and leadership toward establishing Disha’s visibility in West Bengal and India. In order to publicize Disha’s activities, the authors have created a website and Facebook page for Disha. In an attempt to broaden Disha’s professional network, the authors are working with Durbar to include information about Disha and a link to its website on the Durbar website. The authors recommend that Disha partake in more advocacy efforts such as rallies in order to publicly protest workplace violations.

Furthermore, successful movements emerge when those movements seize on the current political structural environment (Ghose, 2012). Disha leaders’ strong relationships with local stakeholders such as employers, the councilor, and the club and colony, need to be fostered and expanded. Disha leaders should continue to emphasize these relationships and promote reasons why the organizing of domestic workers is beneficial to everyone involved. In line with the previously mentioned suggestion for more leadership positions in the organization, the authors propose that certain members be tasked with the mission of communicating with local stakeholders as well as publicizing Disha’s activities through its website, Facebook page, and network of domestic worker movements across West Bengal and India.
Research Implications

A key area of future research will be to gather more detail about domestic workers’ sense of collective identity and how that manifests in mobilization efforts. The authors feel that terms such as “workers’ rights” and “trade union recognition” do not necessarily express the actual benefits that domestic workers seek. For example, regarding trade union recognition, some women may seek legitimation as “real work,” whereas others are looking to gain access to social security schemes that are available to those workers recognized by the trade union.

In order to improve Disha’s negotiation with out-groups, more research should be conducted into strategies to politicize Disha’s demands and activities. Researchers can also reach out to local community leaders such as the councilor, police, club and colony in order to assess how Disha is perceived by the out-group. As noted previously, it would also be beneficial for Disha to create a mantra that encapsulates its message, similar to Durbar’s “sex work is work” in order to politicize its mission.

The authors would like to further investigate domestic workers’ relationships with employers. This includes documenting specific instances of harassment or violence. Additionally, it would be useful to analyze employer-employee relations from the employer’s perspective and gauge how Disha can benefit the employers. Some of this information may be useful in garnering more external support and funding.

CONCLUSION

Despite their important role in society and in the employer’s home, domestic workers are consistently exploited and ignored by labor legislation. Due to the heterogeneity of their work—whether it is the tasks, number of hours worked, or the number of employers—trade unions fail to acknowledge domestic work as worthy of labor rights. This heterogeneity also makes it
difficult for domestic workers to collectivize because poor working conditions and social stratification make it difficult for domestic workers to establish solidarity. Herein lies a cyclical pattern where domestic workers have difficulty mobilizing due to their exclusion from the trade union and the trade union will not accept the profession as legitimate because domestic workers have not sufficiently collectivized.

Even though there are approximately 4.2 million domestic workers in India (3.78 million women), they still have not received recognition in national legislation (WIEGO, 2013). This is in part due to the fact that domestic work is part of the informal sector. And yet, numerous national laws protect other informal sector laborers. Some progress has been made toward the protection of domestic workers’ rights in individual states, such as Kerala, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. There is still hope that the Domestic Workers’ Welfare and Social Security Act proposed in 2010 will be enacted and implemented.

The BCN Framework proposed by Taylor and Whittier (1992) provides a useful framework for understanding the collectivization efforts of Durbar Disha Mahila Grihasramik Samanwaya. Since its establishment in 2010, Disha has utilized a community-level structural intervention in order to change structural factors affecting domestic workers locally and nationally. Disha has three primary goals: demarcate boundaries between the in- and out-groups, foster group consciousness, and politicize the group identity through negotiation with the larger community (Ghose et al., 2008). Present research reveals that Disha has successfully established a collective strength, improved work conditions for its members, and negotiated its purpose to the out-group. The authors propose that Disha improve recruitment practices, create more leadership opportunities, and better politicize the organization’s efforts to fight for worker rights in order to strengthen its collective identity.
REFERENCES


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