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Precarious Work and the Future of Labour

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Organising Vulnerable Home-based Workers in India

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India is the second most populous country in the world, with 1.2 billion inhabitants. Numbering 586 million, women constitute nearly half of its population (Census of India 2011).[1] Of the country's total workforce, a staggering 92 per cent represent men and women working within the informal economy (NCEUS 2007: 1). These workers lack any recognition or protection under national or international law, often work on the margins, do not have any social security benefits or safety net, and are typically not organised in trade unions or similar membership-based associations. Their 'informal' status facilitates – and is often instrumental in reinforcing – their vulnerability as workers and citizens. Social stratification in India based on gender, religion, region, caste and class causes further complexity. Presenting a global picture of women in the informal sector, Martha Chen (2001: 72) states: 'In India . . . the informal sector accounts for nine out of every ten women working outside agriculture.' Because women are an integral part of the informal economy in general, and constitute a large proportion of the urban poor in particular, a discussion on the ways in which informality and vulnerability affects them is significant and timely. Just as important are their coping mechanisms in the face of such vulnerability.

There are a number of scholarly discussions on women's conditions and exploitation in the informal economy. They point to the glaring disparities in men's and women's earnings, as well as female workers' poor health and nutrition, dismal working conditions, lack of social security, and their exploitation for maximising capital accumulation, all

while they continue to perform unpaid domestic chores. These studies problematise these workers' systematic subjugation by shedding light on the interplay of factors that serve to hinder women's work (Nakkeeran 2003; Bhatt 2006; Gopal 2012; Krishnaraj 2012). Meena Gopal (2012: 302) narrates the case of home-based Beedi workers in the villages of Tamil Nadu, who, despite working in groups 'outside their homes under the shade of the neem trees', are not able to cement their relationships due to competition among them, depriving themselves 'of bargaining power and unity against the employer'. It is in this broad context that the present study is situated. While much has been written about the problems faced by women workers in the informal economy, there is relatively scanty scholarly work that describes the creative ways in which some of these women are collectively responding to the dual challenges of informality and vulnerability. Rina Agarwala (2013: 1) states: 'Informal workers in India *are* organizing, and more research on these movements is desperately needed' (emphasis in the original). In the present study, I attempt to address this lacuna.

This chapter highlights the case of a union of women workers in the informal economy – some of India's poorest – conjuring their collective spirit in their quest for identity and dignity. It attempts to uncover the wealth of information that exists in the gap between strategy and outcome of organising in the informal economy, focusing on the process. It seeks answers to questions such as: What does organising in the informal economy entail? Who are the agents that initiate this process? How is organising in the informal economy different from that in the formal sector? What can the broader labour movement take away as key lessons for new ways of organising?

Although I use the cohort of home-based workers to present the specific ways in which some of the poorest and most invisible workers in urban slums of India are collectively voicing their concerns, this chapter presents the consolidated effort of female workers engaged in different sections of the informal economy to assert their collective identity as women, which has the potential of benefiting all kinds of women workers and their families. While 'issues' help people to come together, and organising is usually around these 'problems' that are of immediate concern (such as harassment at the workplace or poor sanitation facilities in places of residence), I argue that the *process of coming together for each other* has a transformative potential of its own. It enables women to

reimagine themselves as active agents of change, worthy of respect and dignity, rather than passively waiting at the receiving end of handouts based on the generosity of someone else (such as the state, an employer or civil society). This stands in stark contrast to the traditional conditioning of women as individuals whose 'labour of love' in the home is devalued or undervalued and almost always taken for granted. The process of women workers coming together begins a dialectic surrounding their dignity not just as workers, but also as women and as humans.

About Labour Education and Research Network and LEARN Mahila Kamgar Sanghatana

Most of the findings and reflections in this chapter are based on a trade union called LEARN Mahila Kamgar Sanghatana (LMKS), or LEARN Women Workers Union. As a trade union of urban female workers in the informal economy, LMKS has been engaged since 2006 in organising home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors, garment factory workers and rag pickers in three cities of Maharashtra state in the western part of India: Mumbai, Nashik and Solapur.

LMKS is affiliated to, and born out of, a labour non-governmental organisation (NGO) called the Labour Education and Research Network (LEARN). Registered in 2000 (under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, and the Bombay Public Trusts Act, 1950), LEARN's core objectives are to generate research on labour and to use this research to form collectives of workers, especially those in the informal economy. As an NGO, LEARN receives financial support from national as well as international donors, aid agencies and some corporations (in both the public and private sector). It channels these resources to help LMKS run its operations effectively in all three districts.

In examining the work participation of women in the rural areas of developing countries, Bina Agarwal (2012) makes a strong case for micro-level studies to counter conceptual biases. Summarising her article, Padmini Swaminathan (2012: 5) writes:

> Agarwal points out that the inability to learn from insights provided by micro-level studies, combined with biases that underpin national level statistics which generally form the basis for development policies, not only means that coverage and comprehension of women's work is impaired but also that

> the conceptualization of many schemes to help the poor is misdirected.

This is a micro-level study that analyses the work of the LMKS in the context of informal organising. It offers a direction to informal organising, but may also prove useful to certain sections of the government whose purpose is to promote labour welfare and decent work.

Contextualising home-based work

In 2002, at the 90th International Labour Conference, the International Labour Organization (ILO) passed a resolution expanding the scope of the definition of informality. This definition was accepted the following year by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians. Chen (2012: 8) sums up the components of the new definition thus:

> There are three related official statistical terms and definitions which are often used imprecisely and interchangeably: the *informal sector* refers to the production and employment that takes place in unincorporated small or unregistered enterprises . . . *informal employment* refers to employment without legal and social protection – both inside and outside the informal sector . . . and the *informal economy* refers to all units, activities, and workers so defined and the output from them. Together, they form the broad base of the workforce and economy, both nationally and globally (emphasis in the original).

In 2007, the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) presented its authoritative and eloquently written *Report on the Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector*. It states:

> At the end of 2004–05, about 836 million or 77 per cent of the population were living below Rs.20 per day and constituted most of India's informal economy.[2] About 79 per cent of the informal or unorganized workers belonged to this group without any legal protection of their jobs or working conditions or social security, living in abject poverty and excluded from all the glory of a shining India (NCEUS 2007: 1).

It is in this context that we must examine home-based workers in India. Specific to this chapter are the urban home-based workers toiling in the slums of three cities of Maharashtra.

According to the ILO's (1996) 'C177 Home Work Convention', home-based work is work carried out by a person in his or her home or in other premises of his or her choice, other than the workplace of the employer, for remuneration, and which results in a product or service as specified by the employer. In my study, I use the term 'home-based work' to include both piece-rate workers and own-account workers. The former are end workers in a long value chain, whereas the latter have much shorter backward and forward linkages. As an example of piece-rate workers, home-based embellishment workers engage in 'job-work', wherein a middle-person delivers stitched, pre-embroidered garment pieces and provides materials for hand-sewn embellishment, specifies the pattern to be done on the garment, and picks up the completed order the same day or the next day.[3] Neither the worker nor the middle-person is aware of the end employer or end customer with whom the garment will eventually end up. This applies to the tens of thousands of items made in the slums for a larger supply chain. On the other hand, individuals who run a home-based mess service, which serves cooked meals to clients within the slum area, manage their own finances, buy their own ingredients and have a direct link to their end customers.

HomeNet South Asia (2015) estimates that women constitute approximately 80 per cent of around 50 million home-workers in South Asia.[4] The ILO (2013: xii) states that home-based workers constitute 18 per cent of the urban workforce in India. A study conducted by WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) indicates that in 2011–12, over 16 million women workers in India were engaged in home-based work and 7.34 million of them were in the urban areas (Raveendran, Sudarshan and Vanek 2013: 4).[5] Clearly, home-based workers constitute a huge and dispersed workforce. They live and work in challenging circumstances, earn paltry sums for their work and face several occupational hazards. The work itself tends to be monotonous, labour-intensive and isolating – especially so if done alone and not in a group.

One aspect of home-based work that distinguishes it from other informal economy trades, such as street vending or rag picking, is its

relative invisibility. The work is undertaken at home or in common community spaces within the workers' low-cost urban settlements. As a result, home-based workers remain unseen and ignored by representative forums such as local trade unions or national trade union federations. With the exception of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) at the national level, and smaller initiatives by membership-based organisations at the local level, home-based workers are relatively invisible, under-researched and largely unrepresented. Trade union federations have largely ignored workers in the informal economy in their bargaining agendas. Organising initiatives in the informal economy function more or less independently of their formal counterparts and vice versa. In addition, unions of informal workers such as LMKS do not necessarily wish to replicate the functioning of heavily factionalised and fragmented formal sector trade unions and union federations with their exclusionary principles.

A characteristic and significant feature of home-based work is that there is no formal employer-employee relationship. An employee 'going to work' in her office or to a factory shop floor or a bank has several indicators of official identity. The principal employer is known to workers irrespective of their employment status (permanent, contract, temporary, casual, trainee). This is not the case for the home-based worker tied into a value chain. She is not aware of the end employer, which is ultimately to her disadvantage. Writing about the lace makers of Narsapur village, Maria Mies (2012: 59) states:

> The political-economic function of the separation of the sphere of production from the sphere of reproduction and the definition of women as housewives seems to be to create a readily available and disposable labour power whose day-to-day reproduction as well as its unemployment will not be the responsibility of either the capitalist, or the farmer or the . . . merchant.

In addition to remunerative home-based work, these women perform all domestic chores and look after their families' needs, their children's education and the cleanliness of their homes. However, this work is neither counted nor valued, and is almost always taken for granted. This devaluation also extends to the remunerative work that the women

perform within their homes. Field findings indicate that most home-based workers and their families consider their work a pastime activity done to kill time, frequently referring to it as 'timepass'. Thus the workers hardly consider themselves as workers and earning members contributing to the household. The consciousness of being a worker is completely missing – it does not surface even in trying times when all other family members are rendered unemployed, and remunerative home-based work becomes the shock absorber and the 'employer of last resort'. In the face of the cruel politico-economic and financial system invariably favouring the rich, an interlocking of factors such as age, gender, religion, caste and class contributes to the overall vulnerability of home-based workers. Organising this huge workforce is therefore not merely significant, but also the need of the hour.

Home-based workers of Maharashtra: A short profile

The women workers whom I met and have interacted with over the years are engaged largely in low-paid manufacturing and services (Gartenberg 2011). The manufacturing tasks include embellishing, assembly and finishing work in various industries, such as electrical components, garments, footwear, trinkets, costume jewellery, food processing, utensils and electronics. Services such as *bhishi* (home-cooked meals service), women's beauty parlours and *mehendi* (henna) painting are also part of home-based work. For the most part, women engaged in low-income home-based work are from lower socio-economic groups, live in slums or low-cost housing settlements, and belong to the lower castes. In the case of cities such as Mumbai, many home-based workers are women who arrived in the city as newlyweds with their husbands who work there mostly as informal labourers in construction or as taxi drivers, among other things. Most often, their point of origin (the village) tends to be a constituent of one of the distressed states of India, where barriers created by caste-based employment do not permit any social or economic upward mobility. The younger workers are second-generation migrants, the children of these individuals. In all cases, irrespective of generation, the home-based workers earn very small sums for their work, especially those workers remunerated on a piece-rate basis.

Although the nature of employment in manufacturing work is different from that in service work, with each trade having problems

specific to it, both types of labour face several similar issues. While workers engaged in manufacturing find the piece-rate payments very low, those in service work may face payment defaulters. Both kinds of workers experience inadequacies in their physical environment and the lack of access to their citizenship rights. For a trade union in the informal economy working for either group, it is therefore imperative to approach all organising issues at the level of specific trade, individual health and family well-being, community access to resources and lobbying for citizenship rights. Organising through LMKS clearly demonstrates this holistic approach.

The LMKS organising process

The LMKS organising process is semi-structured at best, in that the activists know roughly what to look out for and address while they 'go to the field'.[6] Usually the activists go in pairs to an area, and mostly this pairing is loosely based on their area of residence. They all wear their LMKS identity cards around their necks. In the Solapur branch of LMKS, the activists also wear identical sarees to indicate that they belong to the same union. They walk through various residential and commercial areas of a slum and look around to identify the different kinds of tasks performed by women, including remunerative work (*identification phase*). These areas may or may not be known to the activists.

As regards home-based workers, this method of organising works best because the activists are able to meet and talk to workers at their place of work (that is, their homes or common community spaces) while they are working. LMKS activists make themselves comfortable in any of these areas. I have been part of meetings in a variety of locations, such as a member's home, on a path created by a series of lids covering the gutters in a tiny bylane of a slum, on a raised platform at the entrance of a raincoat factory, and at the side of a road available equally for vehicular, animal and human thoroughfare. An informal setting sets the tone for an equally informal interaction, which works even better if the activists and the workers speak the same language. It is also a space for enrolling new members and renewing old memberships. In addition to asking the workers about their work and lives, activists can also observe the conditions of work, workers' posture and other occupational safety

indicators while at work, workers' physical and cultural environment, and so on (*interaction phase*).

Through interaction, the women move to possible strategising, where activists solicit members' work-related details and problems, followed by possible resolution strategies from the members themselves. Although most women are quiet and shy in the beginning, they open up gradually and come up with ideas for their own issues (*strategising phase 1 – membership level*). This process is very powerful as it helps to plumb the intensity of the issues at hand, with the group 'sharing the burden' rather than an individual having to deal with it alone. In addition, discussing issues becomes a prompt for members to examine their own lives for similar experiences and to muster the confidence to voice them in such group brainstorming sessions. When necessary, the activists take notes in their notebooks. For their part, illiterate activists make 'mental notes', relying on their sharp memories. Upon their return from the field meetings, they enlist the help of their literate counterparts in the union to write their narratives (*taking field notes*). This is also an important indicator of cooperation among female activists in informal trade unions. While the illiterate activists proceed confidently in their interactions with members – discussing and resolving their problems, strategising with them, implementing their action plans and learning from them – they need not feel incapacitated by their lack of reading and writing skills, because their fellow trade unionists are available for completing the associated documentation.

The core group of activists meet once every week to discuss past field meetings and the members' grievances. The group goes through the brainstorming sessions, approaching the issues from different points of view based on a combination of activists' individual subjective positions and their exposure to information about laws, religious/caste taboos confronting the victims, and so on. Employing group consensus, the activists devise appropriate strategies and action plans to include collective negotiation with a host of stakeholders, such as family members, neighbours, key community members, employers, middle-persons, city councillors and other elected representatives, government officers and departments of the state machinery. For issues that stand out and affect all members and informal sector workers in general, demonstrations are planned (*strategising phase 2 – activist level*). These meetings of the core

group also allow for discussions on prospective collaborations with like-minded organisations.[7]

The central focus of any field interaction, meeting, discussion, suggestion or action is the benefit to individual members. The clarity on this aspect in the minds of the activists promotes a healthy, critical cognitive process that leads them to stand by the worker's side in her times of acute need, so that she feels fully supported by a union made up of women just like her. This support could mean negotiating on her behalf or with her, and perhaps approaching the right organisations that could help with her specific issue (*implementation phase*). For instance, in cases of domestic violence, the activists take the concerned victim (not necessarily a member) to an NGO providing free legal aid and associated counselling. In cases of dire financial emergencies, activists might make small contributions from among themselves to help out. They may go to the hospital for a member's health issue and connect with the hospital social worker to redirect special help for the member. Once this happens, the member feels confident to repeat the process for someone else in the future, either by herself or by leading the person to LMKS. This snowballing process ensures the sustainability of LMKS efforts.

Over the years, word of LMKS work and activities has spread, mainly through the members themselves, who go to visit their relatives or friends in far-flung areas outside the main city and mention the work of LMKS. Activists get phone calls from women residing in such areas and the same process of organising is repeated. Phone calls also include rescue or distress calls, usually in cases such as domestic violence, family feuds, stalking or sexual harassment, and so on. Calls may also be made in cases where domestic workers are dragged to police stations for being falsely accused of theft by their employers. Cellphones feature prominently as informal organising tools for women to connect with each other, as a trust-building strategy ('You know you can call me any time'), as well as for networking with different individuals and organisations. They also help the activist to have an independent life of sociability outside the frame of her family and extended kinfolk. For a group that is not entirely computer literate or Internet-savvy despite the world's massive social networking buzz, cellphones serve as a means to communicate, interact and create a larger world of shared collective identity.

Organising home-based workers the LMKS way

The organising process of LMKS has been customised to address the unique situation of home-based workers. Even though the production processes of most company products are fragmented, with workers at various levels of skill sets spread out in different geographical areas, this very fragmentation also ends up clustering certain parts of the process. For instance, in the Amrut Nagar slum of Ghatkopar suburb in central Mumbai, one finds different sets of workers in the same lane working on different parts of the same necklace thread, until the finished product is completed at the end of the lane. Each completed set of items from one home is sent to the next worker's home for subsequent value addition. The process is repeated until the product is completed. In this sense, the lane itself becomes an invisible conveyor belt.

It must be borne in mind that this picture stands in contrast to formal sector organising, where workers in a corporation automatically assume the consciousness of being a part of a trade union in that workplace. It is not unusual to find the company's name incorporated in the name of the union. Informal organising, on the other hand, is not born on the factory shop floor and has no direct company allegiance or employer identity. Worse, informal workers, such as the home-based workers discussed here, do not even have the consciousness of being workers (see the idea of 'timepass' mentioned above). The concept of a workers' collective is therefore entirely new as well. The LMKS is very different from formal sector unions in that it uses community and neighbourly relations among people, their working conditions, the available urban infrastructure and civic amenities (or the lack of them), workers' domestic issues and their family's well-being as issues around which to devise a collective identity. An additional yet integral binding factor is the fact that remunerative work exists in the area for most women (as home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors, and so on), which LMKS uses to reinforce their 'shared identity', making it possible to bring them under one umbrella of 'women workers in the informal economy'.

While most women and girls sit inside or outside their homes, often in groups, to work on these products, some workers also sit together in common community spaces while performing different tasks on the same items. This clustering of work and workers presents itself as an opportunity for trade unions in the informal economy to organise

workers at their workplaces, within their homes or in public spaces in their residential slums. It must be remembered that slums are not homogeneous spaces, and the various markers of identity, such as region of origin, religion, caste and linguistic backgrounds, are often more divisive than inclusive in these spaces. Therefore, work itself presents the possibility of keeping these differences in the background (if not overriding them in the long run) and of uniting as a group of 'women workers'. In the same slum, one notices North Indian workers from the lower caste sitting beside Maharashtrian workers from the same caste group working on necklace threads. They perform different tasks and are paid differently as well (depending on the value addition they make to the item), but that does not deter them from developing bonds while at work. Further, they often sit in a common open space in the community near their homes, speak each other's languages and talk about a wide range of topics, from local politics, to the new happenings in their community, to their family problems. LMKS finds such a space to be apt for organising.

Community-based organising interventions have a high chance of being successful, which has been proved on several occasions by LMKS. For example, in 2013, one of the LMKS activists – herself a former home-based worker – conducted a series of meetings with home-based workers in an area called Muslim Nagar within Dharavi slum. She talked about these meetings as being a successful attempt at activating existing members in collective action. It is an important case which emphasises the importance of the organising process at the community level.

These members from Muslim Nagar are engaged in embellishing pre-embroidered pieces of ready-made garments with sequins. The garment pieces as well as the materials required for the embellishment are provided by the middle-person. The completed consignment is counted and picked up by the middle-person the next day. In the wedding season or during festivals, the pressure of orders is high and the time between drop off and collection of orders is much shorter, so that the completed consignments are picked up the same day.

The LMKS activist said that she wanted to find out more about the situation of these workers and their payment terms, because one of the members from the area had mentioned to her some problems associated with her work. The activist went to a regular meeting in the area and conducted a short survey. She said:

> I did the survey . . . it gave information about what is the work [that home-based workers do], how much money they make [in doing that work], how many pieces can be made in a day. I realised that the per-piece rate [from the middle-person] was too little, and the payment was heavily delayed.

She understood that the problem needed to be solved, and the first step was to make the members aware that this behaviour was unacceptable and should not be tolerated.

Another meeting in the same area was conducted soon after. The LMKS activist told the group:

> You all discuss among yourselves – this is the piece I have got, it takes this much time to make, and that the money should be paid within [maximum] three to five days. Irrespective of where we get the orders and which middleman gives it to us, we should first discuss this subject and then accept the order, so that our hard work is not wasted. If we [workers] find that the rates are very low, then everyone collectively does not take up the work. Only if *everyone* [in the group of that area] finds the rates feasible, then accept the order. Also [make sure] you do not wait for a week or a month to get your payment for the work; it should come within three to five days [of the completion of your work] so that we are not faced with a bigger problem. We will support you through the union.

After a brief discussion with the group, the activist added: 'And another important thing: if we face some trouble, then the middleman should help us out. If he does not have the capacity of giving us an advance [payment], then why should we give him completed work in advance?'

In reflecting on this particular meeting the LMKS activist said:

> We cannot trust the middleman. We [our members] were getting money very late, and several times the middleman would disappear after collecting the completed order [without paying the workers]. The hard work and hours put in by the worker were wasted. They would get tense about it [non-payment of the work] and this would create a stressful situation at home.

She told us that the same members now engage in at least some discussion before taking up work from any middle-person that comes to their area. However brief it may be, the discussion includes points such as the kind of work to be done on the garment, the minimum per-piece rate, the time allowed for returning the completed order and the middle-person's deadline for payment.

Key lessons

Home-based work is the new wave in the corporate world today. A series of recent articles featured in *The Economist* suggests the proliferation of skilled freelance workers of all kinds 'available at a moment's notice' (*The Economist* 2015a: 15) and a mushrooming of entrepreneurs who make the employer-employee match possible within seconds. The available workers 'get paid only when they work and are responsible for their own pensions and health care. Risks borne by companies are being pushed back on to individuals – and that has consequences for everybody' (*The Economist* 2015b: 7). While white-collar, well-educated graduates and the mainstream media may only now be waking up to this reality, this has been the situation of poor home-based workers for decades, especially so in developing countries like India. Overhead costs, such as a workplace, electricity and storage, were always borne by the home-based worker; her invisible and low status in the society caused her to be paid poorly; and her issues of personal well-being such as domestic violence and isolation kept her vulnerable and voiceless. Bringing her in touch with others like her is therefore the only way to break out of this helplessness-reinforcing deadlock. The organising attempts by LMKS indicate that some of these issues can be addressed directly, and that it possible to articulate one's story in a group without fear. Integrating a cross-section of workers from different parts of the informal economy further strengthens this process. The union identity cards reinforce the workers' shared identity as members of the same collective.

From the case presented above, LMKS presents some other key lessons for organising home-based workers in particular. First, economic relations embedded in social relations are the grounds for organising. The interlocking of religion, caste, gender and patriarchal roles makes it difficult to break out, while unionisation helps to imagine alternatives to this arrangement. The informal norm-setting by the group, as suggested

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by the LMKS activist to her members, is beneficial for all and certainly more powerful than the no-norm situation, which is beneficial to none. It also serves to eliminate competition among workers. Group decisions on topics such as terms of work, payment and deadlines, in addition to complaints about civic amenities and urban infrastructure, have merit in their own right, in that they create spaces for women to interact with each other and articulate their concerns not just as women and as workers, but also as citizens and human beings. Group discussion and decision making also have the latent function of unlearning ideas of low self-worth and fear induced in women through patriarchal conformity. Undergoing this process with others at the same time facilitates an individual's unlearning. Altogether, the organising process serves to build grassroots democracy, a 'working identity' of women, and solidarity within a fragmented workforce. This stands as an alternative to the existing patriarchal, exploitative and invisible structure in which the home-based workers find themselves.

Challenges

Although I speak optimistically in this chapter about the LMKS organising effort and its successful impact in the informal economy, I do not intend to suggest that it is a simple or linear process. In fact, the path of organising in the informal economy is dotted with a number of challenges and obstacles, not the least of which have to do with the deeply engrained ideas of inferiority among women themselves, and consequently their resistance to speaking up. If and when women pass this stage, the resistance from those whom they stand up to is equally grave. There are many categories that might have to be resisted – husband and others in the family, extended kin, the employer, local government agents, the police and several government offices. Worse, women themselves may stand in opposition to female activists ('the bad women'), who deviate from the customary subservience attributed to women and girls and ask others to follow suit. Convincing women to value themselves is perhaps one of the biggest challenges in organising informal workers.

Second, internal dynamics among women activists from diverse religious, linguistic and caste backgrounds cannot be ruled out as an impediment. A group of women who try to collectivise others like them clearly cannot instantly shed their lifelong conditioning of prejudices and

stereotypical ideas regarding members of other communities, with whom they compete in the labour market. Organising presents an opportunity for women to go through a process of questioning ideas to which they had easily conformed not so long ago, and to face the painful discomfort that such questioning brings. This process of building trust among activists, their obvious differences notwithstanding, is a gradual one, and can often take several years of working together. For the most part, however, once trust firmly sets in, as it has in the oldest section of the LMKS in Mumbai, it stays put. The activists sit together to have lunch, look after each other's infants and maintain family contact, despite and through their sporadic, unpleasant fights.

Third, there is the issue of acceptability – by family, kin, neighbours, employer and society. Some of the activists in Mumbai experienced increased instances of domestic violence, mainly from husbands who did not know what to make of their wives' new-found independence and their support group, away from the family's complete control. In one case, when an activist resisted violent attacks by her husband, he cut her union identity card into pieces after beating her up. For activists, keeping their morale high in the face of such resistance is another challenge. Additionally, they are often encouraged by the union to participate in residential capacity-building workshops hosted out of town. In one instance, an activist was flatly refused entry back into her home and made to sleep outside on the streets as punishment for attending a SEWA workshop in Ahmedabad. But the fact that all LMKS activists have continued to be organised and have remained with the union, even while countering the wrath of several individuals and institutions in their sociocultural milieu, sufficiently proves that women workers do value being organised. This is reminiscent of a sentiment echoed in Ela Bhatt's (2006: 9) early impressions of organising women in the Textile Labour Association; she realised that 'a union is about coming together. Women did not need to come together *against anyone*, they just need to come together *for themselves*' (emphasis in the original).

The fourth obstacle has to do with resource mobilisation and consistent inflow of funds. Organisations require resources to keep going, especially when outreach efforts expand. LMKS charges its members a nominal annual fee; these monies are used mainly for making identity cards for members, travel expenses and small office expenses

like stationery. For its overhead costs of an office space, honoraria for its full-time activists and other miscellaneous expenses, LMKS depends on national and international funding received by its mother organisation, LEARN. Relying on the union's membership dues for these expenses is not feasible, because that would mean reducing the number of full-time activists as well as substantially reducing the overhead costs. This would in turn be detrimental to expanding and sustaining the outreach of the union over time.

Fifth, organisations in the informal sector face a crisis of maintaining functional governance systems, keeping transparent financial records, and meeting cumbersome official requirements of running an organisation. These include, but are not limited to, filing annual income tax returns and foreign fund returns, providing periodic programmatic and financial reporting to its funders (in the case of the NGO), and submitting annual membership returns (in the case of the trade union). In most cases, these tasks are beyond the skill sets and capability of most grassroots activists, despite their enviable potential and outreach in organising, as well as their rich proficiency in resolving problems that most immediately affect the members.

Lastly, there is the uncomfortable subject of risks of all kinds. Here I focus on one of them. Resource mobilisation continues to be a challenge for LMKS, and reporting requirements of the funding agencies necessitate a dependence on LEARN as well as on educated individuals who can assist in NGO management and genuinely support the cause of informal workers' organising. This situation poses an important question: can unions of workers in the informal economy ever become truly independent or must they rely on lifelong help from well-intentioned individuals and agencies to support their activities? This reliance immediately exposes unions to the risk of granting entry to individuals and agencies with vested interests, ready to exploit them as potential target groups for securing personal funding from aid agencies, to employ their mass membership base for dangerously exploitative social entrepreneurial ventures, or to gain free-of-cost assistants for fly-by-night artists and researchers. Who is to decide which of these individuals and agencies are genuine supporters? Or, to put it differently, which of these are not potentially harmful for LMKS, its members and its cause? It continues to be a dilemma. Unfortunately, thus far LMKS

has only found answers to this problem after going through experiences that taught the union that such collaborations were sometimes less than ideal. Not enough shock absorbers exist in the LMKS structure to guard it from these unforeseen, unexpected incursions. This is not to say that as an organisation LMKS is unique in facing such challenges. But given the union's informal nature, it requires much more time and effort to recuperate from even one such crisis than is required for its formal counterparts. Sufficient safeguards need to be devised within the government's labour office that can nurture and promote the formation and healthy functioning of unionising efforts in the informal economy, so that the dependence on individuals to handle the official reporting responsibilities is reduced substantially. These safeguards could include, for instance, engaging accountancy students doing their compulsory 'articleship' period not only to report the accounts, but also to build the capacities of trade unionists in the informal economy to gradually take up part, if not all, of this responsibility.

That said, the topic of challenges facing unions of workers in the informal economy is only roughly touched on in this chapter. It merits another research study altogether.

Reflections

Organising vulnerable workers in the informal economy is different from traditional forms of organising in the formal sector. First, the membership of LMKS constitutes poor women residing in slums and low-cost urban settlements. It is evident that for LMKS, organising is about inclusion. All kinds of women workers in the informal economy are welcome in the union, irrespective of their employment status, age, region, religion, caste and linguistic backgrounds. But the issues that are addressed need not be restricted to the members or to women. Rather, through the women, LMKS manages in its field of operation to encompass and influence the entire gamut of individuals living and working in those environments, such as families, neighbours, co-workers, middle-persons and, in some cases, also employers. The leadership of LMKS, too, comes from within this same base, making it easier for members to relate to their leaders, and strengthening the efficacy and sustainability of interventions and initiatives. Therefore, instead of being a top-down, elderly, male leadership, as is typically the case in formal sector unions, the leadership

in LMKS is categorically grassroots, young and middle-aged females of mixed sociocultural identities representing different levels of education.

The steps followed by LMKS activists in organising are straightforward, and it is possible that any of the phases – identification, interaction, strategising and implementation – may not be uniform in each case or in each area; they may extend or shorten, and may overlap. Informality provides easy access to a diverse group of workers in a host of informal spaces available free of cost, which facilitates informal interactions. Due to a mass membership base, intervention strategies can also backfire, especially when an uncomfortable interaction ensues with powerful men and political heavyweights in the area. Although this prospect is frightening, talking about it to a support group as a victorious story afterward makes it bearable. Gradually, courage to take on more such confrontations is mustered, and the degree of resistance from the other side is often laughed at in afterthought.

The mobilisation of membership by LMKS is community based and focused on female workers, rather than factory-based mobilisation focused on male permanent workers. In contrast to the traditional formal sector, intervention of informal organising through LMKS crosses the doorstep of the worker's home, problematises the power structures within the family and community, enters into uncomfortable conversations in the private sphere of home and extended kin, and presents a mutually arrived-at conflict resolution. This approach is geared to the benefit of the member as a worker, a woman, a wife and a mother. It also presents itself as an alternative to formal sector trade union organising in which vulnerable workers are often 'talked down to' and left to their own devices while being excluded from the privileged group of organised permanent workers. Moreover, group mobilisation for collective negotiation helps to create informal solidarity among a fragmented workforce and to build grassroots democracy.

The LMKS organising process is unique in that it combines the ideology of the collective power of the trade union with a community-based mobilisation process akin to social work. Thus the conceptualisation of women as social beings in various roles is central to the entire organising process, including approach, interaction, strategising and implementation. Furthermore, the mobilising agents are themselves part of the same socio-economic milieu as those being organised. This

too is an important aspect of the success of LMKS interventions. This is not to write off the merit of non-participant intervention, but instead to emphasise the feasibility of interventions initiated by women worker-activists who represent their constituents, due to the ease with which the latter can relate to the former.

As for the activists themselves, being representatives of the voiceless makes them empowered and famed individuals in their own families and communities. The activists' daily interactions with many different kinds of people, their weekly meetings as a core group, and their capacity-building inputs from various organisations sharpen their understanding of the scale and breadth of issues facing workers operating in the informal economy. Activists' close propinquity to each other in the weekly meetings (over shared meals and cups of tea) exposes them to viewpoints of other trade union activists like themselves, and forges strong bonds of collegial camaraderie and organic solidarity. Lack of literacy, as mentioned earlier, is hardly a hindrance. This also demonstrates that the language of empathy is fundamental for the success of building a strong grassroots movement.

Lastly, quantitative indicators that are 'acceptable' in world of academia, funding agencies and policy-making collectives hardly matter in a space where so much of the change is occurring at the individual's cognitive level. This change has a bearing on the transformations she is able to make in her immediate environment through her group. However, it is important also to bear in mind that this transformation is a result of a group process impacting on an individual's thinking and action. Each group success gives her more confidence; and her ability to take risks on an individual level is also enhanced if she feels reassured that she has a group's strong solidarity to fall back on.

In more ways than one, organising by LMKS is different from and a negation of the older, traditional factory-based unionisation characteristic of the formal sector. It is organising that intends to empower the women at all levels. Activating women's agency at the grassroots is possibly one of the few ways by which home-based workers and other workers in the informal economy can substantially improve their life conditions in a way that they find suitable. An equitable and inclusive structure like that of LMKS provides a platform where concerted collective efforts for such a transformation can take place.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on a paper presented by the author at the International Sociological Association (ISA) XVIII World Congress of Sociology held in Yokohama, Japan, 13–19 July 2014, as part of the RC44 Research Committee on Labour Movements. At the time of the presentation, this chapter was titled 'New Dynamics in Collective Bargaining in the Informal Sector: Impressions from India'.
2. Rs. 20 was approximately US$0.32 at the time of writing.
3. 'Middle-person' is a term used in this chapter to refer to both middlemen and middle-women.
4. HomeNet South Asia, established in 2000 following the Kathmandu Declaration, is a regional network of home-based worker organisations in South Asia. It was formed to give visibility to home-based workers and their issues, to advocate for national policies, to strengthen grassroots and membership-based organisations of home-based workers, and to create and strengthen South Asian networks of home-based workers.
5. Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women in the informal economy. WIEGO believes that all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. It creates change by building capacity among informal worker organisations, expanding the knowledge base, and influencing local, national and international policies. See www.wiego.org (accessed 10 January 2015).
6. 'Going to the field' is a phrase used by the LMKS activists to refer to a broad range of their activities in the community. It includes exploring new areas for membership, informal interactions in existing membership areas (of which their residence could be a part), resolving conflicts at the community level and visits to government offices.
7. These could include a plethora of entities such as hospitals willing to conduct health camps, other NGOs wanting to conduct spoken-English lessons, charitable organisations looking for membership-based organisations to give away donations, or campaigns on various issues such as rights to affordable housing, sanitation facilities, improved access and quality of food grains in ration shops, and so on.

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