

A Critical Feminist Narrative

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Domestic Workers of the World Unite: A Global Movement for Dignity and Human Rights,
Jennifer N. Fish;
Sage Publications;
Pp. 320, Rs. 995 ISBN: 9781479877935.

Jennifer Fish's impressive recording of the movements of the much neglected domestic workers of the world is a major contribution to feminist social science. The book succeeds in literally bringing the margins to the centre in a wonderfully old fashioned manner. Fish's work as a feminist sociologist of labour brings a global perspective on domestic work to the centre stage. Maids, nannies, sex workers, cooks, cleaners, and other service workers in the domestic sphere have not only been neglected by human rights organizations but also in the academia. This book fills that gap and brings to light a long struggle around the world and the way in which many women domestic workers consciously organized themselves, sometimes in association with NGOs, over a considerable period of time.

The ILO in 2013 estimated that almost 100 million workers supply domestic work and care across the world. Many of them are transnational workers and have migrated taking major risks and are invariably exploited by the employers and others. Of these workers 81 per cent are women and this results in exploitation and feminization of the labour across borders. The work of Saskia Sassen and others on global cities shows that the labour of migrant women contributes majorly to the economy of many nations such as Philippines.

Fish's focus is on the way that movements in several cities around the globe have shown that domestic workers need to be supported by the state and the NGOs. The book is based on six years of intensive ethnographic research on the global domestic workers movements from Cape Town, New York, Geneva, Amsterdam, Montevideo to Kathmandu. The documentation of the activism in these cities across the world has involved extensive personal narratives, participation in the ILO policy meetings and following media coverage of domestic workers participation. The author also accompanied Myrtle Witbooi, general secretary of South African national domestic workers union along with her comrade Hester Stephens to the

International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) across five countries to document the movements.

The book begins with the story of Hester Stephens in South Africa who spent 53 years of her life cooking and cleaning and taking care of her employer's family from the age of 15. At 67, she is not really eligible for any benefits or social security and is pretty much on her own unless the employers choose to take care of her. Hester realized that her story was mirrored in the lives of thousands of other black domestic workers whose employability was defined by the apartheid regime as low paid labour. After the apartheid, Hester began working for basic rights, paid leave for vacation, health benefits and linked the problems of domestic workers to the larger framework of the rights discourse. It is interesting that the invisibility of domestics continued even among those organizations that were mobilizing for workers' rights. After 35 years of organizing Hester formed a union and eventually became its president and made a mark in South Africa's historical road to emerging as a democratic nation. Fish uses the life of Hester Stephens to understand the politics of care and domestic work around the world.

In the next chapter, Fish traces the crystallizing of the global domestic workers movements. Chile's Aida Moreno worked with her global sisters in South Africa and China for a meeting on human rights and dignity of labour. It took a huge networking effort for domestic workers policy issues to be tabled at the International Labour Organizations. Domestic workers talked about how sometimes the dog slept on a bed but the domestic worker was not given a bed or bath facilities within the household. Sharing each other's heartrending stories of various forms of exploitation by their employers made them realize that common experiences were bringing their issues from invisibility to visibility. Feminist scholars have often found that integrating issues of gender rights in international institutions is always a challenge because of the culture of male domination. Slowly the domestic worker movement grew through the ILO and its partner organizations by providing strategy consultation and political capital. Fish asserts that the domestic workers' movement stands alone in the global organization of women's movements. Domestic work became linked to other related issues of justice and many women leaders pointed out that they were workers just like any other category of workers. This movement gave form and shape to other forms of resistance. At the ILO, the workers went from being 'kitchen girls' to international policy makers. Feminist theories emerged from the statements of domestic workers, employers and even governments. The traditional public/private dichotomy was completely eroded with the recognition of work in the domestic area as work. The movement became a new ground for transnational women's

organizations. As there is so much of migration within and across borders, international organizations influenced national and local bodies as well.

The domestic workers' cause was championed in various governments and Halimah Yacob, a member of Parliament in the Singapore Government, worked hard to push the case of domestic workers to the centre stage. She used her own position as a leader in the labour government to legitimize the voices of the workers' rights through both the labour and gender discourses. She negotiated with the domestic workers' movements as well as the ILO, and various government leaders. Using her own social location as a Muslim Singaporean MP and her strong ties to the labour movement, she argued for more than 100 million domestic workers and their rights. The recognition of domestic work by the ILO forced national governments to realize the level of exploitation that young women and girls were facing. Convention 189 marked a shift in the ILO policy and focussed on social justice. The ILO now expanded its tripartite dialogue with NGOs, governments and the workers themselves. The challenge the convention faced was to cut across the diversity across the national contexts. Domestic work of all kinds needed to be defined and their work needed to be supported by giving them benefits of all kinds. The value of care labour was finally recognized in the convention and the activists in the movements had reason to celebrate. The dream of social justice and rights was embedded into the ILO's documentation.

Fish ends on an optimistic note and underlines the fact that the ILO guidelines represent a moral compass for those who face the greatest risks of being exploited at their workplaces. The substantive changes proposed in Convention 189 are to be tested on the ground. The movement realized the recognition of the value of paid household labour. Dignity can now be claimed but its realization will come with the implementation in the various contexts of the world. The activist academic has indeed brought to centre the issues of the most marginalised sections in society by weaving in stories from the ground across different continents.

This is a book to be recommended for those doing work and labour studies in Economics, Sociology and Political Science as well as those studying women's movements around the world. It is an easy read but is a true feminist work bringing theory, method and movement together.