

FOLLOW THE WOMEN: NEW FORMS OF ORGANISING?

SEGUINDO AS MULHERES: NOVAS FORMAS DE ORGANIZAÇÃO?

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ABSTRACT

In the face of globalised neoliberal capitalism and the allied rise in precarious working, there comes an increased focus on the position of women at work, including migrant women. Women have long been familiar with the conditions of precarity, and their vulnerability calls for increased protection through collective solidarity and trade union organising. Yet they are just the workers that traditional ‘pale, male, stale’ unions designate as difficult to reach and uneconomic to organise. In reality it is the rigidity of bureaucratic masculinised labour unions which are insufficiently flexible and cannot or will not respond to the needs and work patterns of 50% of the workforce. So, it falls to women themselves to find other ways of organising while at the same time pressing traditional unions to respond to their demands. Social movement unionism, especially in the global South shows how this can be done. And at local level, there are increasing examples of women organising in their communities, in ethnic and religious enclaves. In this paper key issues are examined and examples shown of women’s organising, such as the International Domestic Workers Federation; the first global union organisation in the world run by women. A women’s vanguard can be seen to lead the way in new ways of organising.

Key-words: Precarious working. Women workers. Trade unions. Collectively organising.

RESUMO

O capitalismo neoliberal globalizado e o consequente aumento do trabalho precário têm chamado a atenção para o trabalho das mulheres, particularmente das mulheres migrantes. As mulheres enfrentam uma situação de precariedade e vulnerabilidade, exigindo maior proteção por meio da solidariedade coletiva e da organização sindical. Entretanto, os sindicatos majoritariamente ocupados por homens consideram que as mulheres – sobretudo migrantes – são de difícil acesso e organização. Na realidade, é a rigidez dos sindicatos burocratizados e masculinizados e sua insuficiente flexibilidade que impede a construção de respostas às necessidades e formas de trabalho de 50% da força de trabalho. Portanto, cabe às próprias mulheres encontrar outras formas de organização e, ao mesmo tempo, pressionar os sindicatos tradicionais a responder às suas demandas. O sindicalismo do movimento social, especialmente no Sul global, mostra como isso pode ser feito. E em nível local, há exemplos crescentes de mulheres se organizando em suas comunidades, a partir de enclaves étnicos e religiosos. Neste artigo, são examinadas questões-chave e alguns exemplos de organização de mulheres, como a *International Domestic Workers Federation*: a primeira organização sindical global do mundo dirigida por mulheres. A vanguarda feminina pode ser vista como líder em novas formas de organização.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho precário. Trabalhadoras. Sindicatos. Negociação coletiva.

INTRODUCTION

Rapacious globalised neoliberalism is increasingly widening the gaps between rich and poor, workers and the wealthy as traditional labour markets have become fragmented, organised labour attacked, work places atomised, precarious working the norm, the gig economy increasingly experienced under electronic control and surveillance, and solidarity has in many places given way to individualism and isolation.

At the same time there is an irony that the strong focus on precarious work/ing has come so late. For women workers from the industrial period onwards, these have almost

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always been their patterns of work, and there is little that is new in their experiences of low pay, low status, insecure work, their skills unrecognised or described as 'natural' because they replicate women's domestic role. The vulnerability of such women calls for increased protection through collective solidarity and trade union organising. Yet these are just the workers that traditional unions designate as hard to reach and uneconomic to organise. In reality it is the rigidity of bureaucratic masculinised labour unions which are insufficiently flexible and cannot or will not respond to the needs and work patterns of 50% of the workforce in the 21st Century.

Sixty per cent of workers worldwide are now in the informal economy (mainly women and young people) (THOMAS, 2015). These practices give the lie to big ambitions of governments which in all seriousness espouse gender equality (GE). For example, in coming out of dictatorships in the 1980s and 90s, the new progressive governments in both Brazil and South Africa developed constitutions which put GE at the centre of their political projects (LEDWITH et al., 2011). Their trade union movements did the same, and while some important changes were made, such as gender mainstreaming and affirmative action, these left the core structures and cultures of traditional patriarchal hierarchies relatively untouched. Historically, trade unions have seen women as 'difficult to organise'; not fitting into institutional frameworks which favour workers who are full time, trained, skilled, and male. Generally, traditional trade unionism has failed women, who although they make up increasing proportions of memberships, are not adequately represented in leaderships – potentially an important driver for change. Neither are women's interests, which while enshrined in plentiful documents and policies on equality and diversity are often lacking in effective implementation in practice on the ground.

So while continuing to press traditional unions to respond to their demands, it falls to women themselves to find other innovative and additional ways of organising. Researchers, mainly feminists, continue to present examples of women at the grassroots especially, organising in their local communities, in ethnic and religious enclaves, as well as jointly working with trade unions - although not always in harmony.

In this paper I first survey the prevailing landscape of women's work and organised labour, setting out the underlying and historical reasons for their subordination. I weigh this discussion against the context of a dual and linked crisis; of traditional trade unionism, coupled with a crisis of masculinity. My examination takes place through a feminist lens and addresses a masculinised hegemony and its practices, feminised challenges to the ruling patriarchal cultures and structures and the possibility of a women's vanguard for future worker solidarities.

1. WOMEN AND WORK

In modern times steady increases in women's participation in paid work now makes them half of the global workforce. Yet their subordinate and precarious position remains shaped by patriarchal cultural codes affixed through masculinity. These are familiar cross-culturally, internationally, designating women's domestic role and tasks of unpaid work as caring, cooking, cleaning, with the men of the household taking priority at home and in accessing the labour market. The gendered social processes involved – social interactions, structure and culture and the 'internal mental work' whereby women see themselves as secondary (ACKER, 1992) - together construct and affirm men's masculinity and dominance and women's subordination. These divisions are normalised and carried into the workplace where occupational gender segregation, gender inequality in access to benefits and pay have been routine, across sectors. What is different now is that the impact of globalisation on 'men's' work means that for the first time, for many men, their experiences replicate that of

women. Women have been, and continue to be, in precarious employment. What has changed is the shrinking core of full time, permanent positions and the expansion of the periphery of precarious work, with women still central, but also at an intersection with migrant workers.

Globalisation's harvest – fractured labour markets, dismantling of stable structures, the financial shock, has led to a levelling down whereby millions in emerging and affluent market economies have become the flotsam. Large-scale economic restructuring is accompanied by a crisis of masculinity as the dismantling of traditional work and union structures and cultures undermine and challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity and male superiority. Cast adrift from the known, where workers, especially men – the 'unencumbered worker' - were in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements made with local employers with whom they were familiar, these workers have found themselves of a new, unfamiliar status - the new precariat according to Standing (2011:6). What Standing does not say, is that this is the status that the majority of working women have always known. The shock for men may also partly account for research findings that younger trade union men seem to be more sympathetic/supportive of gender agendas and workplace equality and diversity initiatives, now that they experience work precarity, insecurity and lower pay and so share the need for these support systems with their female colleagues and partners (HEERY, 2006). This turbulent moment of hybridised crises – of work, of masculinity, of trade unionism - offers opportunities for gender transformations, even while occupational gender segregation continues, albeit in new forms.

Thus in their paid work, women continue to reproduce their domestic roles, especially in the 5 Cs of caring, catering and cleaning, plus clerical and cashiering (BRITWUM et al. 2012). Since this labour is normalised as 'natural'; what women 'do', it attracts little concern for training and qualifications, and is deemed low-skilled. Actually when broken down into its constituent parts and made transparent, women's work can be seen to be highly skilled. In the UK a 1980s landmark case evaluated a female cook's job, finding it of equal value with those of more highly paid male 'craft' shipyard workers (HASTINGS, 2004). The court's evaluation found equivalence between the work of the cook and her male colleagues in relation to core skills and responsibilities, knowledge and physical demands. The case was hotly contested and although Julie Hayward was supported by her trade union, it took 10 years of legal wrangling for her to finally win her case.

Further, a local government job evaluation scheme jointly agreed in the 1990s with the trade unions, addressed hitherto unidentified and undervalued aspects of typical women's jobs, such as emotion work with clients (BOLTON, 2008-9). To illustrate: demands by clients on care workers [with plenty of experience but little training or qualifications] involve some similar skills to those required of doctors, who after a long period of training, enjoy high pay and status, especially in developed economies, where traditionally doctors have been male. Yet even in such a high status occupation as medicine, women's roles and pay are generally subordinate to men's. And where such professions are feminised, as in the former Soviet Union countries and today in central European countries like Poland, women's earnings are low. In the UK it can be no accident that the increase in women entering the profession goes hand in hand with the government's recent assault on the pay and conditions of 'junior' hospital doctors.

Women have habitually worked in public sectors, especially those which provide social services, healthcare, schooling, transport, local and central government. These are also the sectors which are most highly unionised. Women make up between 60% and 78% of such workforces in 22 out of 25 OECD countries for example [Rubery and Figueirido 2014]. These patterns apply especially to working class women, but are also replicated by those who are

more highly educated and who work in politics, the professions and management. In most economies senior leadership roles at work, and in unions, are filled by men too.

Additionally in their domestic role of primary family carer, women are the main users of these services. So in assaults on public services by neoliberalism and globalisation women are the main losers. In the UK under austerity since 2010, for example, it is estimated by the Women's Budget Group that 86% of the burden of austerity had fallen on women [Stewart 2017, Bennett 2016].

These gender characteristics can be seen perhaps most clearly in the largest female dominated sector worldwide: domestic work – while by its very nature and especially in private households, remains below the radar. Here patriarchal and familial cultural codes remain strong and continue to shape women's lives even when they migrate [Yilmaz and Ledwith 2017]. Over 80% of all domestic/care workers are women, comprising a significant part of the global workforce in informal employment, and around half of migrant workforces.

Women and pay – the gender pay gap

The subordinate position of women in paid work is starkly illustrated by the gender pay gap, underpinned partly by the old but resilient ideology of the male breadwinner and the family wage. Worldwide the pay gap comes in at 59% having widened in the past four years and estimated to take 170 years to close! [Treanor, 2016. Samans and Zahidi 2016]. Across the European Union, while individual countries vary considerably, women's gross hourly earnings in 2016 were on average 16.2% below those of men, with variations between full and part time working. The gap was found to be much lower for young employees, widening with age [eurostat 2018]. In OECD countries the mean gap was 14.1% [OECD 2017]

In Brazil in the 1990s and 2000s with economic expansion, and under the progressive constitution and Labour Party [PT] government women had rapidly increased their labour market participation, filling jobs in the expanding education, health and commercial services. Men were mainly in manual and technical work and dominated management. Even in a progressive expanding economy, gender divisions remained, with the gender pay at 70% overall [Ledwith et al 2012]. As the trade union confederation CUT's women's group leader put it: 'a woman's wage is just a 'plus' in the household income' [Ledwith et al 2012].

In 2018 in the UK, the gender pay gap has been laid bare through recent legislation compelling employers to publish data about gender pay equality and inequality. Shockingly some of the biggest discrepancies have been revealed to be in the public sector, despite a long tradition of being a 'good employer' with strong unions. Although women and their unions have for years been campaigning for equal pay in all its forms, we hope that their struggle has been given impetus by the new data coming to light. Within UK trade unions themselves though, it was revealed that several had pay gaps above the national average of 18.4%. Unite, the UK's biggest trade union, had a median gender pay gap of 29.6%. The teachers' union NASUWT, revealed a pay gap of 42.7%, while at shop workers' union Usdaw, the figure was 33.5%. None of the major unions reported a pay gap in favour of women. [Guardian:2018]

Harassment, abuse and violence against women

In 2017 we saw also the rise of the //Me-too campaign with women speaking out, often for the first time, about sexual harassment and abuse in their workplaces and other communities. As with the gender pay gap and other gender inequalities, this is something that working women have long experienced. Now it is becoming better publicised, and the links with women's pay and conditions at work are more public. For example in South Africa the Statistician General's 2013 report on National Gender Equity showed that the wage gap

between men and women continued to cause concern, with poorly-paid women still most at risk of poverty and violence. In addition, the interaction between race and gender placed black African women at a particular disadvantage [Ledwith and Munakamwe 2015].

1. GENDER AND TRADE UNIONISM

Since trade unions are rooted in the workplace, it is no surprise that the way they are organised derives from the same heritage as the traditions of work and of working class patriarchy, underpinned by hegemonic masculinity (LEDWITH, 2012). They too are based on male privilege, which in the global north is also entrenched in a white race identity. In the UK there has only ever been one black union leader – a man. Similarly in Brazil. Although organised labour is characterised by its espousal of democracy [representative] delivered through electoral systems, the gendered and racialized social processes involved generally veer towards delivering cadres of ‘stale pale male’ leaderships especially at senior levels. Even in public sector unions with female dominated memberships, this is frequently the pattern. In relation to women, the historical mechanisms of traditional unionism involved strategies of demarcatory closure and power (LEDWITH and COLGAN, 2002). These have extended to ‘other’ racial groups, to ‘despised’ sexualities, and in the early days to particular skill levels, especially unskilled workers. The ‘winners’ were the ‘aristocracy of labour’. More recently migrant workers have posed dilemmas for unions; should they exclude them, set up special sections or integrate? All these approaches have been applied, and indeed migrant workers have also set up their own self-organised groups as part of wider community solidarities (JAMES and KARMOWSKA, 2012).

Challenges over time from these outsider groups have led to more open and inclusive forms of union recruitment and membership, especially at grassroots and middle level structures, but barely at all at the top (LEDWITH 2016; KIRTON, 2015; LEDWITH et al., 2012). This is despite rafts of policies espousing equality, diversity and inclusion, the development of self-organising within unions, and the appointment and election of officers and organisers to make these measures work in practice. Structures of privilege remain, based as they are on informal hierarchies of gender, race and sexuality, where interacting social systems of organisational gender politics (ACKER, 1992) are deeply hidden and difficult to identify and challenge. The rigidities shown in the gender relations and divisions of once mighty unions have surely contributed to their inability to resist both direct attacks from neoliberalism and to their weakened positions in the new digital and gig economies.

So now, as globalisation and technological change drives a crisis of established and traditional work, it simultaneously drives a crisis of organised labour losing power, particularly in the global north.

Across most developed nations, membership has almost halved since 1985; from 30% of workforces to 17%, although collective bargaining remains important and new forms of collective organisation and bargaining are emerging to meet the challenges posed by new forms of work (OECD, 2017).

In varying degrees, organised labour struggles in many of its traditional strongholds. Labour markets and workforces have changed dramatically since union membership peaked – in the UK three decades ago. Over the last 40 years the British trade union movement has fallen from the strongest in the developed world to a movement facing a fight to remain relevant (TAIT, 2017). The last year has seen the biggest membership drop since records began – 4.2%. In more resilient cultures such as the Nordic countries the decline has been more recent and slower. What worked before is largely irrelevant in a labour market increasingly structured around subcontracting, franchising and small workplaces, characterised by increasingly borderless, agile and fluid employment relationships. Unions

are acutely aware that the type of workplaces they traditionally organised – large-scale, static workforces on directly employed contracts – are being replaced by more fragmented, dispersed and precarious employment models where multi-unionism leads to competition and confusion rather than cooperation and collaboration (CARBERRY, 2017:14).

The view from old industrialised Europe is that in this crisis labour is weak and divided with little prospect of organising a successful counter-hegemonic movement while (financial) capital is so strongly entrenched in its privileged position (CROUCH and REGINI, 2010). The combination of declining trade unionism and hostile neoliberalism together with the accompanying disintegration of labour market certainties and structures into an electronic and gig economy, sees workers without proper contracts of employment, without workplaces and without the ability to claim rights. Call centres are typical (WOODCOCK, 2017) – and often feminised. This is the new precariat; the new ‘dangerous class’ (STANDING, 2012). Such fragmentation has always been the unions’ Achilles heel and traditional trade unions have mostly been unable to organise these vulnerable workers. In a 2017 report the UK TUC (confederation) leader Frances O’Grady identified the issues as: too few young workers both knowing about and in trade unions, the slow pace of unions’ digital adoption, changing capitalism, changing business models, changed working lives, and above all not having a compelling story of trade unionism for those not already in an organised workplace (O’GRADY, 2017:4). She does identify upswings in union organisation in ‘high-profile’, and less traditional, indeed non- workplaces of workers such as agency workers, drivers in private hire, retailing, technicians in the entertainment industry. But these innovative, agile organising approaches are described as mostly small-scale and on the margins (CARBERRY, 2017:14).

In the global South there is a more optimistic perspective, although it comes with a warning to traditional unions that minimising women’s economic concerns is a particularly pressing problem, as women constitute the majority of workers in the informal sector and export Processing Zones; the very spaces in which conventional unionism is at its weakest (GALLIN, 2001).

Nevertheless this turbulent moment also offers opportunities for gender transformation of labour movements both inside and outside traditional unionism: to keep up the pressure within for real/meaningful democratic representation, especially in leaderships. Outwith the traditions of bureaucratic trade unions, organisations for informal sector women are increasingly evident. So, it falls to women and the other outsiders themselves to find innovative ways of developing solidarities.

Some see social movement unionism in the global South as the crucible of a potential counter-movement to the hegemony of neoliberalism; a new labour internationalism involving coalitions between labour, environmental and social justice interests, alliances with NGOS, women’s movements, consumer organisations and community groups (WEBSTER et al., 2008; MOODY, 1997; WATERMAN and WILLS, 2001).

Thereby transnational organising assisted by WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising) has seen informal sector women connected with unions, NGOs and researchers to advance their cause on multiple spatial levels (WIEGO N/D). (Sutcliffe 2012).

Occupying liminal spaces can be a liberating and empowering force; some of the most vulnerable women have been the ones to come up with the most innovative answers to collectivising fluid, flexible, precarious workers, for example the Indian women’s Self Employed Association (SEWA), female domestic workers’ International Federation (IFDWA), WIEGO, already mentioned. The Global Labour University offers yet another model. Centred on four continents and educating union activists from the global south, GLU alumni research groups have provided international perspectives on a range of labour issues.

The gender and trade unions research group, of over 20 members from as many countries, has presented important case study evidence of women's visibility and voice; 'really useful knowledge' for women organising across wider progressive and radical labour movements (LEDWITH, 2014).

At grassroots level, where women mainly live their lives, there are also increasing examples of women organising in their local communities, in ethnic and religious enclaves - and sometimes jointly working with trade unions, although not always easily. Migrant women offer a particularly interesting example here; by definition being both global and local. A recent study found evidence of the difficulties faced by traditional trade unions in organising migrant workers in London, Berlin and Istanbul (YILMAZ and LEDWITH; 2017). More fruitful approaches centred on community organising, sometimes allied with labour unions, but often in informal local solidarities. In Berlin, for example, the women met at their employment agency, where they discussed and compared their pay and their work, and helped one another with translating documents. In all three cities, however, they were often reliant on ethnic community groups and networks for finding work and for mutual support. Based in diasporas and on race, ethnicity, politics and religion, these were significant sites of belonging and identity. But some of the women were critical about the lack of information forthcoming about rights and opportunities for trade unionism. In addition, community patriarchal and religious norms often required consent from male kin to join unions. In turn, union officials emphasised the problem of access because of the privatised nature of the women's work. The women tended to confirm this, saying they knew little or nothing about unions. In London, a handful who did have union experience did not see these as being on their side. Others feared unions would endanger the complicated affective relationships they had as care workers. Practical barriers also became apparent. In Berlin, they needed an address and a bank account to join a union - especially difficult for new migrants. In Turkey, unions did not admit migrants. Traditional unions were not unaware of the problems faced by migrant workers, but as the president of the Turkish union federation DISK pointed out, individualised domestic work with high labour turnover would have any highly structured labour movement struggling. This attitude echoes the experiences of domestic workers' unions in Brazil and South Africa. During my research there, their leaders told me how difficult it was to engage with their countries' main union confederations (LEDWITH et al., 2012). At a practical level this was because of the fluidity of domestic workers' employment situations which meant substantial fluctuation of membership levels week by week, and thus of union subscriptions. This meant that the DW unions were unable to comply with the confederation requirement of a set regular affiliation fee based on stable membership numbers. Looking outwards and internationally what is now the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) has campaigned to demand governments ratify the ILO Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers as well as supporting local in-country action and campaigning. It is now the first global union organisation in the world run by women. In Latin America alone there are 16 affiliates in 10 countries. And by 2016 there were half a million domestic workers organised into 59 affiliates from 47 countries; mostly in trade unions, but other associations and workers coops were also involved (YILMAZ and LEDWITH 2017; CROWLEY, 2017). Across Europe, RESPECT, a network of migrant domestic workers' organisations in the EU supports campaigns for the rights of workers in private households.

These examples expose the limitations of class-based unionism centred on workplace organisation and there has been something of a turn to community organising. (HOLGATE, 2015; WILLS, 2008; MOORE, 2011 for example). As illustrated by the domestic workers discussed above, relations between the two organising models have not always been straightforward, with friction and distrust between hierarchical traditional trade unionism

with its bureaucratic systems of representative democracy, and looser, more horizontal organising models at local level which operate a more participative democracy. In addition, for migrant workers, religious and ethnic communities offer other types of solidarity, although as they have their own ideologies tensions can arise, not least through the strong patriarchal cultures and controls each exhibit towards their female members (YILMAZ and LEDWITH, 2017)].

Community organising has taken on some interesting forms, for example in the USA, where Alvarez and Whitefield (2013) and Milkman (2006) have shown how reaching into communities ‘exploded the myth’ of migrant unorganisability, mobilising by linking up with local communities and migrant networks. The well known case of the Justice for Janitors campaign with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) was built on high levels of migrant and class consciousness among Latin American migrant workers. This SEIU coalition with community groups has been able to organise ‘tough to mobilise’ workers like home care workers, mainly female and minority ethnic groups.

Community organising linked to norms of broad social justice campaigns and demands such as rights for overseas workers or the Living Wage Campaign in London have been successful both in the material aims, in building solidarity across diversity of class, faith, culture and generation (WILLS, 2009), and in seeking to engage members in political action over common concerns. This unity across difference, including between community and trade union, or mutual differentiation, or transversal politics, has enabled the making of solidaristic political and social capital out of internal divisions, turning individuals into active citizens based on a new identity politics (YILMAZ and LEDWITH, 2017).

In the USA, the Workers Lab experiments with and promotes different models and organising strategies that can boost power and pay in those parts of the labour market where it is difficult for the established unions to operate. Workers Lab are currently exploring opportunities to organise with Color of Change in Silicon Valley, and to mobilise high skilled and in-demand software engineers and designers to use their leverage to demand better conditions in solidarity with the gig workers and other contractors. Such a collaborative approach could be developed in the UK and elsewhere to help develop new ideas that promote membership for agency workers and those in the gig economy, and which support worker community alliances (ARNOLD, 2017:19).

These wider social and community groups illustrate three key conditions for successful organising and mobilisation. These are communities of coping, cognitive liberation, and conditions where collectivism is sustainable (YILMAZ and LEDWITH, 2017).

Communities of coping are described as intimate, dense oral-based informal networks in which workers turn to each other for emotional support (KORCZYNSKI, 2003 apud YILMAZ and LEDWITH 2017). Generally women are good at this. For example in my Brazilian research there were women whose experiences of domestic abuse had propelled them into gender activism ‘I saw a couple fighting, I asked the women to come to my house (for succour). My own husband was violent so I sought a divorce. I had difficulty in getting support then and became closer to other women’s battles as a result’ (LEDWITH et al., 2011:191). For migrant workers especially, ethnic enclaves in their host country can provide such a community (YILMAZ and LEDWITH, 2017) as do campaigns for example for childcare, healthcare, and education (ALVAREZ and WHITE, 2013). *Cognitive liberation* is about consciousness raising, which has always been central for women’s and other liberation movements. Early on this was also carried on outside mainstream education, with women’s programmes taking on particular non-hierarchical feminist forms to deliver rights based training, skills and self development. Such programmes have also been a central plank of trade union women’s groups. Perhaps the most problematic is the third condition; *sustainable*

collectivism, since there are so many obstacles to sustainability. Here patriarchal contexts and cultural codes shaping women's domestic and familial responsibilities play a huge part, as do greedy institutions at home and at work and which crowd out activism (FRANZWAY, 2001). Nevertheless community organising and wider networking and collaboration offer powerful ways forward.

2. CONCLUSIONS

So what can be concluded? On the one hand, we can see how global capital has broken down traditional work structures, emasculating male workers, promoting individualism and undermining collective organising. The new sectors of the gig economy no longer fit old trade union occupational and gender divisions. For unions, the greater integration of the problems facing informal sector women into the labour movement agenda is indicative of organised labour moving beyond formal shopfloor concerns and embracing the wider debates of social movement allies. In feminised sectors we can see solidaristic initiatives among women, both within their unions, and outside. We have observed their willingness to break out from the rigid hierarchies and divisions of masculine class based trade unionism to embrace different forms of organising. Marginality is not merely a symptom of oppression, it is also a site of critique, creativity and a launching pad for challenge, change and transformation (LEDWITH and COLGAN, 2002). Women outwith unions altogether are freer to develop innovative organisational models (COLGAN and LEDWITH, 2000). This is reflective of the vitality of labour activism among women particularly in certain parts of the global south, pushing acceptance of their issues into the labour movement and civil society more broadly (SUTCLIFFE, 2012). These are vanguard women.

Feminism also calls for transnational action:

this is the moment in which feminists should think big... Having watched the neoliberal onslaught instrumentalise our best ideas, we have an opening now in which to reclaim them. In seizing this moment, we might just bend the arc of the impending great transformation in the direction of justice – and not only in respect to gender. (FRASER, 2013:226)

Such optimism has to be tempered with the recognition that the weight of globalised capital makes this an uphill task. But feminism has always advocated a long and incremental revolution (MITCHELL, 1966), and in this moment in the twenty first century women both inside and outside labour movements are taking on gendered power, challenging and confronting masculinity. Sustaining this is key. Social Movement Unionism (SMU) also emphasises the need to forge cooperative networks from the local to the international level, enabling a multi-spatial response to the pervasive neoliberal hegemony. Tentatively, SMU offers the possibility of an anti-neoliberal movement that crosses numerous hitherto rigid boundaries, between labour and civil society, the formal and informal sectors, between local/national/regional/international spaces and the global north and south. Optimists see SMU offering a blueprint for the continued vitality of the labour movement in struggles against neoliberal globalisation (WATERMAN and WILLS, 2001). And despite the potential problems such as the re-establishment of neo-colonialism and southern dependency, the increasing prominence of women's economic concerns demonstrates why this trend should continue to be encouraged and pursued (SUTCLIFFE, 2012).

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