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**Articulations of Injustice and the Recognition –  
Redistribution Debate: Locating Caste, Class and Gender in  
Paid Domestic Work in India**

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**Abstract**

Based on primary research conducted with the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement in Bangalore, India, this paper locates the injustice that a group of dalit women domestic workers identify as structuring their lives, and assesses the strategies that the group employs in resisting and dealing with such injustice. In analysing the injustice as well as the claims for justice, the paper draws on Nancy Fraser's framework of recognition and redistributive justice, viz., the use of culture and economics as analytical categories in locating primary harms, and an assessment of claims-making in terms of transformation and affirmation. At the heart of the paper is the disjunction [distinct from Fraser's argument on the displacement of redistributive claims making and the reification of recognition and identity politics] between recognition and redistributive politics as one between caste and class, and what this means for the articulation of a dalit feminist politics in Bangalore.

**Keywords:**

Paid domestic work in India; Dalit feminist politics, Recognition and redistributive frameworks of justice, Nancy Fraser, Perspectival dualism, Caste, class and gender in India

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## 1. Introduction

This paper engages with Nancy Fraser's framework of perspectival dualism (Fraser, N, 1997a) in analysing the difficulties and the tensions in the articulation of a gendered caste politics in Bangalore.<sup>1</sup> The larger context in which Fraser makes her claims about a perspectival dualism are what she terms the *problems of displacement and reification* which she argues have accompanied the shift in the grammar of political claims making, viz., that struggles for the 'recognition of difference' are increasingly *displacing* redistributive politics, and that they tend to *reify* group identities (Fraser, N, 2000, p 108). I use her framework for a perspectival dualism with the understanding that there is a *disjunction* between cultural and economic aspects of justice claims, in the context of caste and class struggles in India, which pose particular difficulties for the articulation of a *dalit* feminist politics (Chigateri, S, 2004). Whilst *dalit* politics in general and *dalit* feminist politics in particular conceptualise caste as a 'bivalent collectivity' to use Fraser's terms, I argue that there are several instances, and the context of paid domestic work is one, where there is a *disjunction* between the cultural and economic aspects of justice claims. In this paper, I use Nancy Fraser's framework of justice in order to uncover the difficulties that such a disjunction poses for the articulation of a *dalit* feminist politics. I do so through an analysis of the politics of the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM), a group engaged in organising groups of paid domestic workers in the city of Bangalore, India.

Drawing on primary research conducted in Bangalore between May 2001 and March 2002 with 25 *dalit* domestic workers from the KDWM, the paper analyses both the conditions and the nature of paid domestic work in Bangalore, as well as the articulations of injustice and the discourses employed by the domestic workers movement to deal with such injustice. The KDWM (which has, since the research was conducted, been reincarnated as the Domestic Workers Union) was the Bangalore unit of the larger Domestic Workers Movement (DWM), which was formed in Mumbai in the mid 1980s. In Bangalore, this group was started by Sr. Celia whose agenda was to mobilise domestic workers in Bangalore, and distinct from the agenda of the DWM, to unionise them. At the time that the research was conducted, the strength of the KDWM in Bangalore was about a 100 members drawn mostly from two slums in the east of Bangalore. Whilst the group was not formed by the domestic workers themselves, the discourses of the domestic workers themselves as well as by the DWM and Sr. Celia, provide insights into the terrain of caste, class and gender politics in Bangalore, as well as the difficulties with the claims making of the group in terms of a transformative and affirmative politics of recognition and redistribution.

In the first part of this paper, I engage with the debate between Sharmila Rege (Rege, S, 1998, 2000) and Chhaya Datar (Datar, C, 1999) on *dalit* feminism to locate the debate on recognition-redistribution as an issue of pertinence to *dalit* feminist politics. The heart of the debate is on whether or not *dalit* standpoint feminism can encompass both '*cultural*' and '*material*' aspects of injustice. This debate also provides the context for an engagement with Nancy Fraser's framework of justice. In the next part of the paper, I lay out Fraser's framework through her early work on her framework of recognition and redistributive justice (Fraser, N, 1997a). Her framework relies on the use of culture and economics as *analytical* categories in assessing the injustice that communities identify as structuring their lives. The use of culture and economics as

analytical categories then allows for a conception of recognition and redistributive claims for justice as analytically distinct realms of justice claims, and for Fraser, the struggle is to hold onto the equal importance of both realms. Her analysis of affirmation and transformation, which flow out of the kinds of recognition and redistributive claims that progressive politics engage in, provides a means of assessing the strategies that groups employ in dealing with the injustice that they experience. Her framework of affirmative recognition, affirmative redistribution, transformative recognition and transformative redistribution then provide analytical tools for assessing what Fraser claims can sometimes result in the recognition-redistribution dilemma in the politics of groups that experience both cultural and economic injustice.

In the third part of the paper, I lay out the context of paid domestic work in Bangalore by analysing both who performs such work, as well as the nature and conditions of work. In the fourth and fifth sections, I draw on Fraser's framework of justice to analyse the discourses of justice and injustice amongst *dalit* women domestic workers in Bangalore. I argue that a politics of affirmative recognition amongst domestic workers' groups, because of the ways in which it elides particular aspects *cultural* injustice, does not necessarily attend to the injustice of 'a division of labourers' that Ambedkar has famously categorised as the condition of *dalit* communities (Ambedkar, B, 1936).

## 2. Dalit Feminism and the Dichotomisation of 'Culture' and 'Economics'

In her ground-breaking essay entitled, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of "Difference" and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint' (Rege, S, 1998, pp 39 – 46), Sharmila Rege laid the ground for future engagements on caste and gender by arguing for a revisioning of feminist politics through a *dalit* feminist standpoint. Locating her standpoint feminism within a nuanced critique of 'difference' speak, which she argues, renders *dalit* women's voices as another 'different voice' amongst many, Rege calls for a shift of focus from 'difference' to the social relations which convert difference into oppression. Distinguishing between a narrow 'identitarian' politics based difference and a difference that is historicised, or rooted in the 'long [...] history of lived struggles', she argues that a *dalit* feminist standpoint emerges from the practices and struggles of *dalit* women, and that whilst non-*dalit* feminists cannot speak as or for *dalit* women, they can re-invent themselves as *dalit* feminists, thereby transforming themselves as 'individual feminists' into 'oppositional and collective subjects' (Rege, S, 1998, pp 41- 45). I have discussed elsewhere (Chigateri, S, 2004) the theoretical moves that Rege makes in her conceptualisation of *dalit* standpoint theory. In this paper, I want to specifically engage with her debate on *dalit* feminism with Chhaya Datar that ensued upon the publication of this article.

In a response to Rege's proposition for a *dalit* feminist standpoint Chhaya Datar (Datar, C, 1999, pp 2964-2968) argued that a *dalit* feminist standpoint cannot be understood as a *standpoint*, as only 'those who regenerate both natural and societal resources can claim a standpoint' (Datar, C, 1999, p 2964). For Datar, it is the eco-feminist trend which centres reproduction in all its three dimensions, that can be called an alternative standpoint (Datar, C, 1999, pp 2964, 2968). According to her, the *dalit* women's movement, with its focus on a cultural revolt against brahminical

symbols, cannot aspire to a revisioning of society without also talking of the 'materiality of the majority of *dalit*, marginalised women who lose their livelihoods because of environmental degradation' (Datar, C, 1999, p 2964). Datar, therefore, attempts to complicate the focus on culture, which she attributes to a *dalit* feminist standpoint, by implicating the materiality of the 'industrial, technological paradigm' (Datar, C, 1999, p 2964).

In a counter to Datar, Rege (Rege, S, 2000, pp 492-495) clarifies some of her positions on *dalit* feminist standpoint. She suggests that there is no contradiction between the *dalit* feminist standpoint and a feminist environmentalist position which holds that 'the linkages between gender, caste and class, structure the organisation of production, reproduction and distribution - as also the effects of environment change on people' (Rege, S, 2000, p 492). In drawing out her argument, Rege criticises the dichotomy between the material and cultural which equates the material to environmental degradation and brahminism to the cultural:

Brahmanical patriarchies and caste-specific patriarchies are material in their determination of the access to resources, the division of labour, the sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour [...] Further [...] endogamy also structures and maintains the redistribution of resources. Datar's contentions about anti-caste movement being cultural revolts is debatable for such a contention on one hand views brahmanism and the struggle against it as located in cultural symbols and over-looks the caste-based character of capital accumulation and labour and of reproduction in the broadest sense of the term. A dichotomisation of injustices into socio-economic and cultural [...] assumes a divide as if between a politics of redistribution and recognition. Such an opposition overlooks the fact that caste is cultural without ceasing to be material and a brahmanism in its production distribution and effect is economic. (Rege, S, 2000, p 493, 495)

What is at the heart of the contention between Rege and Datar, in terms of providing a more encompassing standpoint, is a debate about whether or not a *dalit* standpoint feminism can account for 'economic' injustices. Through this there is a tension set up between a politics of recognition and a politics of distribution in the question of whether or not a *dalit* standpoint feminism can account for both. This is rooted on the one hand, in the history of caste, class and feminist movements and what specific injustices each of them is understood as addressing (see Chigateri, S, 2004). On the other hand, it is related to *how* we are to deal with a politics of distribution and politics of recognition *together*, in this instance, for a *dalit* feminist politics.

Whilst recognising along with Rege that a dichotomisation between the 'cultural' and the 'material' which equates the material to environmental degradation and brahmanism to the cultural is problematic because of the assumptions it makes, amongst others, about the materiality (or lack thereof) of brahmanism, I argue that in order to comprehend the ways in which 'caste is cultural without ceasing to be material', we have to address the cultural and economic aspects of caste head-on. In order to do that, I argue along with Nancy Fraser (Fraser, N, 1997), that we have to analytically distinguish between the two types of (in)justice so that neither of them is subsumed by the other. This also allows for an interrogation of the nature and extent of both the *cultural* and the *economic* aspects of injustice in every instance. To this

end, Fraser provides a framework of perspectival dualism which she suggests, attends to the tensions between a politics of recognition and a politics of distribution by using culture and economics as analytical categories.

### 3. Nancy Fraser's Framework for a Perspectival Dualism

In her essay entitled, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?' (Fraser, N, 1997a, pp 11-39), Fraser sets out her framework for a perspectival dualism by analytically distinguishing between two conceptions of injustice, socio-economic injustice and cultural or symbolic injustice. She suggests that socio-economic injustice is rooted in the political-economic structure of society and cultural or symbolic injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. She offers examples of both:

Examples [of socioeconomic injustice] include exploitation (having the fruits of one's labor appropriated for the benefits of others); economic marginalization (being confined to undesirable or poorly paid work or being denied access to income-generating labor altogether), and deprivation (being denied an adequate material standard of living). Examples [of cultural or symbolic injustice] include cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own); non-recognition (being rendered invisible by means of the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one's culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions). (Fraser, N, 1997a, pp 13-14)

She further suggests that while these distinctions between injustices are analytical, in practice, i.e. substantively, they are deeply intertwined, resulting in 'a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination' (Fraser, N, 1997a, p 15). However, continuing to distinguish the two types of injustices analytically, she suggests that for each of the injustices, there are various remedies: for economic injustice, a political-economic restructuring, for cultural or symbolic injustice, cultural or symbolic change. While there are various ways in which these are sought to be achieved, she characterises the remedies for socioeconomic injustice as 'redistribution' and those for cultural injustice as 'recognition'. She argues that these distinctions are analytical, whether or not they are *sui generis* concepts of justice.

Fraser then poses a dilemma between recognition and redistributive justice claims. She suggests that claims for recognition tend to promote group differentiation, whereas claims for redistribution tend to call for the abolition of groups, i.e. they undermine such claims for differentiation. Thus, she suggests, 'the two claims stand in tension with each other, they can interfere with, or even work against each other' (Fraser, N, 1997a, p 16). This she calls the *redistribution-recognition dilemma*. Having laid out this schematic, Fraser suggests that collectivities that face this redistribution-recognition dilemma are bivalent collectivities. Fraser elucidates on her account of bivalent collectivities through a thought experiment (Fraser, N, 1997a, pp 16- 23). The logic that she offers in this thought experiment is that we can analytically sift through where one can place the primary harm in each collectivity. Therefore, she suggests that in an ideal-typical situation, we could place the primary harm against the

collectivity of despised sexualities to the cultural valuational structure, thereby proffering the remedy of recognition: revaluation and according positive recognition to gay and lesbian communities. Similarly, with the collectivity of class, we could trace the primary harm of economic injustice to the political economic structure, with the remedy being redistribution, probably resulting in the abolition of the collectivity itself. Fraser then complicates this picture by suggesting that with collectivities such as 'race' and gender; we can trace co-primary harms, i.e. that we can trace the injustices suffered by these collectivities to both the political economic structure as well as the cultural valuational structure. Collectivities such as these, Fraser suggests are bivalent collectivities.

The argument that Fraser makes with her thought experiment is that we can assess the varying degrees to which the injustices of mal-distribution and mis-recognition accrue in various collectivities, in various contexts (Fraser, N, 1998). Also, she suggests that while most collectivities can be analysed as bivalent (Fraser, N, 1998), the degrees to which each type of injustice exists against a particular collectivity is to be determined (Fraser, N, 1999). In her essay 'From Redistribution to Recognition?' (Fraser, N, 1997a) Fraser is also interested in analysing bivalent collectivities to pose the question of the *redistribution-recognition dilemma* as contained in these bivalent collectivities: 'How can feminists fight simultaneously to abolish differentiation and to valorize gender specificity?'; 'How can antiracists fight simultaneously to abolish "race" and to valorize the cultural specificity of subordinated racialized groups?' (Fraser, N, 1997a, pp 21-22). To attend to this dilemma, Fraser elaborates on two broad approaches to both recognition and redistribution, which she calls 'affirmation' and 'transformation'.

She suggests that affirmative remedies are those 'aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them' and transformative remedies are those 'aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework' (Fraser, N, 1997a, p 23). She then links these approaches to justice to recognition and redistributive remedies, thereby providing a framework of justice claims in terms of affirmative redistribution, affirmation recognition, transformative redistribution and transformative recognition. She suggests that an affirmative redistribution corresponds to the liberal welfare state, an affirmative recognition to a mainstream multiculturalism, a transformative redistribution to socialism and a transformative recognition to deconstruction (Fraser, N, 1997a, p 27).

She then suggests that within this matrix of justice claims, some are amenable to resolve the recognition-redistribution dilemma. Therefore, an affirmative recognition, and an affirmative redistributive justice claim are not necessarily in conflict. Similarly, transformative redistributive and transformative recognition claims are also well-equipped to deal with the recognition-redistribution dilemma. Fraser, in this context, also sets up the affirmation as a surface approach and transformation as a deep approach. It has been suggested that in her later works, Fraser has moved away from such a strong 'illiberal approach' (Feldman, L, 2002; Zurn, C, 2003; also see Fraser, N, 2000, 2001). Therefore, the appropriateness of a deconstructive approach to cultural injustice or a multiculturalist approach cannot be made theoretically and a priori (Feldman, L, 2002, p 414). However, I suggest that, for our initial purposes, the normative content of the deconstructive and socialist approaches to the injustices of

misrecognition and mal-distribution serve as useful analytical tools to assess the normative as well as the strategic bases of the claims for justice that groups make.

#### 4. The Context of Paid Domestic Work in Bangalore

Most of the women at the KDWM that I interacted with were both *dalit* and domestic workers. Specifically, all 25 of the domestic workers that I met were *madiga* or *dalit* Christian women, living in the slums of Doddkunte and Karianapalya in Bangalore. Sr. Celia of the KDWM suggests that most of the women involved in domestic work are '*dalit*' women although she is unsure about exactly which communities they belong to (interview, KDWM office, Bangalore). Having said that, it is very difficult to assess, especially given its unorganised nature, either the numbers of domestic workers in Bangalore or the communities that they belong to. The estimates however, are that there are about 400, 000- 500,000 domestic workers in Bangalore, 25% of who are girls between 10-16 years (Kumar, M, 2002; Menon, G, 2006). In a study conducted by Women's Voice and the Bangalore Gruha Karmikara Sangha (Bangalore Domestic Workers Union) which covered close to 1000 women domestic workers in 12 slums across the city, it was estimated that over 89% belonged to the Scheduled Caste communities (Balakrishnan, D, 2004). This is reiterated by Parvathi Raghuram's study (Raghuram, P, 2001) on paid domestic work in NOIDA, Delhi, where she delineates the caste based division of labour that paid domestic work entails. Domestic work is also a highly gendered field of work, especially in the urban areas in India (Sharma, K, 2003; Social Alert, 2000; Srinivas, L, 1995).

Domestic work in Karnataka is yet to be given full recognition as *work* by the law<sup>2</sup>. This has meant that domestic work, like much of the work in the 'informal' sector in India, falls outside the purview of legal regulation. There have consequently been no regulations in relation to the conditions of employment, nature of employment, employment benefits, in regard to holidays, bonuses, security of employment, pension benefits, disability benefits, maternity benefits, insurance, etc for domestic workers. It was only recently, on the eve of May Day in 2004 that the Government of Karnataka issued what was conceived as a 'pioneering' notification, which fixed minimum wages for domestic workers in the state at Rs. 160/- a month for 45 minutes of work a day<sup>3</sup>. This notification has come under a lot of criticism, with domestic workers' groups and unions arguing that such a low minimum wage does not constitute a 'living wage'. A survey conducted in June 2005 by the Stree Jagruti Samiti, which also mobilises women domestic workers in Bangalore, with a specific focus on adolescent girls, highlights the complete inadequacy of the minimum wage fixed for domestic workers. According to the findings of the survey, the minimum wages were not high enough to cover food, housing, medical and educational expenses, for the domestic worker's family. It found that the average expenditure per month of a domestic worker's family living in a slum was Rs.5189 (Rs.173 per day) of which Rs.1959 (Rs.65 per day) was for food, Rs.1221 for school fees, Rs.817 for repayment of loans, Rs.555 for rent, Rs.293 for health care, Rs.279 for electricity, Rs.185 for transport, Rs.54 for water and Rs.62 for other miscellaneous expenditure. The survey also found that each domestic worker, on average, has 2.8 employments, and earns a total per month of Rs.1167 (Menon, G, 2006; Chamaraj, K, 2006).

The complete inadequacy and under-valuation of the work that domestic workers perform is reflected in my interactions with domestic workers as well. At the time that the research was conducted, the average pay per month from each house that the women worked in was about Rs.300 per month. Even at a conservative estimate, the rate of pay was at an appalling Rs.5/- per hour; many times, they worked for less. Further, all the terms of conditions of employment amongst the women that I met were ad hoc, verbal contracts, constantly open to revocation. Many of the women worked on average in two houses everyday, most times Sundays included, for 2-3 hours in each house. There were no weekly holidays in many cases, though some of them had negotiated a day off. They did not have paid sick leave or the option to take leave in any other event and had to rely on the generosity of their employers in the events of festivals, illness, births or deaths (focus group discussion on paid domestic work, KDWM office, Bangalore). According to Social Alert, the inadequacy of pay, the long working days, no regulations in relation to rest or holidays, arbitrary dismissals characterise the nature of domestic work worldwide (Social Alert, 2000, p 8).

Further the women were responsible, upon negotiation with the employers, for gendered household chores such as cleaning the house (sweeping, mopping and dusting), washing utensils and clothes, and cooking in some instances. The added responsibilities were shopping for vegetables, caring for children, the aged, disabled etc. Though most of the women said that they worked for an average of 2-3 hours in one house, the agreement was more in terms of the jobs that had to be completed ensuring a never-ending flow of clothes and utensils. The conditions and the nature of employment meant that many of the women suffered work-related illnesses such as back pains, leg pains, colds, and fatigue. This is apart from the verbal abuse inflicted by the employers (focus group discussion on paid domestic work, KDWM office, Bangalore). In the next few sections of this paper, I shall analyse the meanings that are attributed to domestic work and transformative strategies, in terms of caste, class and gender. Central to this analysis is Fraser's framework of locating primary harm, as well as her matrix of recognition, redistribution, transformation and affirmation.

## **5. Culture and Economics in the Context of Paid Domestic Work: Locating the 'Primary Harm'**

To begin to comprehend the conditions of employment of domestic workers, we have to comprehend the socio-economic conditions in which they live. The links between the economic constraints that lead women to such work is highlighted time and again in relation to domestic work. For instance, Social Alert suggests, 'most domestic workers are women or girls for whom domestic work is a means of survival rather than a personal choice' (Social Alert, 2000, p 8). This aspect is highlighted by Lakshamma, when asked how she came to do domestic work:

Before, what we would do: eat, look after the children and sleep. Now that the children have grown up...for all the children, fees, light bill, for people coming and going, (Narsamma: If he had a government job, we could manage) if we got Rs.5000-10000 (per month), we could manage, but on coolie of Rs.60-70 [for a day]... on, 60-70 rupees, what life can we live, how are we to look after our children, how do we educate them, how do we pay

their fees, the light bill? Barring water, no, we have to pay for water as well...everything you have to buy to eat. On this wage, what are we to do? (Interview in the Karianpalya slum, Bangalore, 2004)

To begin to unravel the conditions of domestic work using Fraser's categories, the injustice of economic marginalisation and deprivation amongst the domestic workers is indeed severe. When Lakshamma says that if they got Rs.5000-10000 per month she would manage, the injustice that she identifies is the inadequacies of an economic order that does not allow for her needs to be met with the wages that are earned. However, while Lakshamma attributes it to the situation of her community, Narsamma's reading of the situation, 'if he had a government job, we could manage' can be understood in a number of ways. One of the ways this can be understood is by recognising the mal-distribution of 'government jobs' within her community. It is because her community, specifically the men, suffer from the injustice of maldistribution of jobs that the women are forced to work as domestic workers. Inherent to this understanding is the notion that it is the man's responsibility to cater to his family's needs. This emasculation of the *dalit* male for his incapacity to provide for the family is made more explicit when she asks, 'if he was earning properly, tell me, would I be doing this work?' (Focus group discussion on work, Interview at the KDWM office, Bangalore, 2004)<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, while Narsamma identifies that the injustice lies in the mal-distribution of government jobs, this statement is also loaded with the perceived stability of government jobs, the value of the work that she does, as well as what she expects women and men to do. Therefore, she locates the remedy for the injustice, not in breaking the bastions to the paid work that women do, but in breaking them for *dalit men*. If the men had jobs that were more stable in terms of wages, security of employment, pensions, etc, this would translate into stability for the household. Further, domestic work is not something she has chosen to do, it is something that she is forced to do because of the constraints of her situation. The gendered nature of the work she does, or the purported value of the work she does, are not necessarily contested. What she and other women do contest, is an association of domestic work as intrinsic to their communities:

Narsamma: We are not people who have gone out to work. We are not people who have done domestic work. In our towns/villages as well. We might have done odd jobs here and there...harvesting work...we have done that. But we did not understand what difficulty was. Now, being married, having children, caught in this family life, for that child something, for this child, something else, the wages are not enough. That is why, only after coming to Bangalore, I have learnt domestic work. (Lakshamma: same with me) Before that I did not know what domestic work meant.

Question: In the villages, no one goes for domestic work?

Narsamma and Lakshamma: No.

Narsamma: In our area, nobody did that.

Lakshamma: If they are poor, they (the rich) have fields, they do their work ...like that.

Narsamma: If I am to tell you, I have started domestic work only in the past five years. After marriage, I never went. All of us. Even after I got here, I did not go. It is only now, (Eshwamma: Because of difficulties at home) because the children are growing up, there are difficulties. We did not go for any work...Earlier, we used to do our own house work. It is only after coming to Bangalore, coming here that... (Interview in the Karianpalya slum, Bangalore, 2004)

To reiterate, there are several moves that the women at KDWM make. Working outside the house is not necessarily something they value. If they could have their way, if they did not face so many economic constraints, if there was not such acute mal-distribution, then they would not *choose* to work outside the house<sup>5</sup>. Further, the women dissociate themselves from domestic work. It is not work that is traditional to their communities. If they have worked outside the house, they argue, it has been in the fields. The underlying reading is that while field work, in other people's fields, is also a sign of poverty and hardship, such work has more value than the work that they do now. Some of these arguments find resonance in Vijay Prashad's study of the social history of the *balmiki* community in Delhi who work as sweepers for the Delhi Municipality. He argues that the *chuhra* community (who form the *balmiki* community now), were involved in various other occupations before some of them migrated to Delhi where they were constructed as a community of sweepers. He argues further that amongst the *balmiki* community, 'the historical narrative of their oppression reveals that there is little sense of being inherently menial, since their condition is historical and can therefore be overcome' (Prashad, V, 2000, p 27).

Narsamma, Lakshamma and Eshwamma of the KDWM therefore point to two things: one is the injustice of mal-distribution amongst their communities living in the slums of Bangalore, which compels them to work outside their homes, and the other is to the injustice of misrecognition that they suffer, because they belong to a certain community; a misrecognition that they are *meant* to do domestic work. However, while distancing themselves from domestic work, as I have mentioned earlier, they are not necessarily contesting the value of the work that they do. They are contesting their permanent association with that work. When there is 'a never-ending flow of utensils and clothes', it seems as if the employers expect the women to do the work because that is what they (are meant to) do.

The stories about the symbolic re-washing of utensils by employers, the serving of food in different cups and plates and the offering of *tangala* food (food kept overnight) attest to the symbolic violence inflicted on domestic workers. The fact that the women who clean the house are not clean enough could be read as the underlying sentiment of such violence against the women. It is also an understanding that the work is dirty, that drives the employers to inflict such violence on the women. The understanding of the work as unworthy is echoed by Narsamma's employer when she asks her for a raise. She tells her:

Is it a government job? We have to give you a raise in salary from time to time?  
Is this the government, you think? (Interview in the Karianpalya slum, Bangalore, 2004)

Narsamma's employer alludes to two things when she tells her that she cannot give her a raise, both of which imply that domestic work has no value. One is that there are no rules, legally or socially, for domestic workers. Further, she probably alludes to her own inability to pay: while the government can afford to pay its employees, she cannot. What this means, however, is it is the domestic workers that bear the economic costs for the undervaluation of their work. Her employer cannot/ will not pay, and if she does, it is a mark of her generosity. Domestic workers are not workers, entitled to norms of pay or bonuses or holidays. They should be grateful that they are employed at all. Does this then call for a remedy of recognising domestic work as work?

The employers of domestic labour show little respect for the work of domestic labour. The women who do this work echo this negative valuation in so far as they distance themselves from it, naming it as work that they only undertake through necessity. However, the understanding of domestic work as valueless is not endorsed across the board, by all the women. While there is a sense that it is not work that they would prefer to do, underlying the indispensability of their services is an understanding that the employers cannot manage without them. This is especially so when they do chores apart from sweeping and swabbing, cleaning clothes and utensils. Lakshamma for instance worked as the cleaner and the cook in a school run for disabled children. She often articulated her indispensability in the school, 'how would they manage?', as well as her own compassion for the students.

So far I have identified several issues that face the domestic workers' movement. The women identify the injustice of mal-distribution as a defining feature of their lives. This mal-distribution is understood in terms of the denial of access to resources, for instance government jobs, low wages, lack of holidays and bonuses etc., and the economic conditions of living in the city. In Narsamma's account, the mal-distribution amongst *dalit* communities is connected to a gendered understanding of the roles of men and women. She does not necessarily contest the cultural assumptions of the gendered roles that they should perform. Therefore, the injustice is in not being able to perform such roles, not so much that they should not be performed. While the women do not necessarily subject the gendered understanding of domestic work to scrutiny, they rally against the misrecognition of domestic work as intrinsic to their communities. Again, the women have an ambivalent relationship with the value of the work they do: while they see themselves as indispensable to their employers, this indispensability is underscored by the perception that their work is not recognised as such by the employers.

## **6. Recognition and/or Redistribution? Analysing the Claims Making of the KDWM**

Lakshmi Srinivas, in her analysis of domestic work across cultures, has suggested that domestic work has been characterised by its low status, exemplified by its position only a little above 'prostitution' and begging in the occupational hierarchy. Analysing this relegation of status, she suggests that it is because:

[Domestic work] is associated with women, does not call for any particular or identifiable skills, is considered drudgery [and] involves cleaning which is influenced by ideas of pollution and purity. (Srinivas, L, 1995, p 270)

Lakshmi Srinivas therefore places the injustice of misrecognition of domestic work in terms of its performance by women, the kind of work it entails, and its association with pollution and purity (also see Raghuram, P, 2001). One of the discursive underpinnings of the domestic workers movement, on the other hand, has been a critique of the injustice of mal-distribution, understood in terms of the exploitation of the workers, of which a re-valuation of the work that domestic workers do is an integral part. Therefore, the strategies employed by the KDWM as a group are to seek redistribution as well as recognition, as workers in a particular type of employment. The women at KDWM, however, are ambivalent about the value of domestic work, while being more emphatic about questioning their association with domestic work. In such a context, it is important to pick through the various strategies employed, to examine whether there is a redistribution-recognition dilemma in the context of domestic workers in Bangalore city.

In her analysis of the master-servant relationship, Lakshmi Srinivas (Srinivas, L, 1995) has pointed towards its origins in slavery and serfdom. The associations of domestic work and slavery continue to be made, because the language of slavery is an evocative mode with which the Domestic Workers Movement combines the two simultaneous pulls in the ways in which it constructs the issues of domestic workers (Passanha et al, no date). One is the language of rights of workers; work contracts, just wages, increments, work hours, rest, leave, medical benefits, maternity benefits, pensions and bonuses are all part of this language of redistributive justice (Passanha, et al, no date p 20 and Sr. Celia, KDWM, interview, 2004). Recognising domestic work as work is intrinsic to this conception of redistributive justice. The other is the injury of misrecognition, because underlying the whole framework of redistributive justice is an injustice that centres on the dignity of domestic work, as well as of domestic workers. Therefore, apart from the redistributive justice demands, Sr. Celia of the KDWM suggests that one of the foremost issues facing domestic workers is dignity:

[...] if they get their dignity, definitely they will demand their salary...since they think they are nobody...they can't afford to not work, they go for any salary...that is why I say it is not about income generation training...give the people their dignity...you give them training for dignity, they will demand their right. (Sr.Celia, interview at the KDWM office, 2004)

The Domestic Workers Movement therefore argues that, apart from redistributive justice claims, it stands for an upholding of certain values. Firstly, 'all domestic work has dignity: it is an indirect participation in production, it contributes to the quality of life; [and secondly] the personal dignity of each domestic worker' (Passanha, et al, no date, p19). This the DWM hopes to achieve through a process of activist intervention that empowers domestic workers through leadership training and group solidarity; crisis intervention and counselling; helping in formal and non-formal education; providing a space and occasion to meet each other and networking with other domestic workers organisations and support groups (Passanha et al, no date, p 20).

The use of the language of dignity in naming the misrecognition of domestic workers can be read as recognition of the work that domestic workers do, as women and as people from a particular caste/class. By constructing the work as useful and integral to the economy, the DWM, as well as its sister body the KDWM, argue for a politics of recognition of the work that domestic workers do. That is the basis on which they argue for a differential valuation of the people that do the work; they are doing useful work, they should have dignity. This, supplemented with adequate wages, better working conditions and organisation would seemingly transform the conditions of domestic workers.

However, I want to bring out the many tensions that exist in articulating a politics of transformation. When asked whether it was due of the meanings of the work (as dirty) that there was discrimination against domestic workers, Sr. Celia brings out the dilemmas that are attendant upon the naming of the injustice in relation to domestic work and how one may envision transformation:

It is because from the very beginning, the nature of the work is considered as dirty work. I need work you know. If I work in the bathroom also, if people dignify me, I will go and do. That is why I am saying that education is the most important thing to change. If all children have learnt BA, BEd, they can equally apply for the jobs, you know. Other people also like teaching jobs, isn't it? (Sr. Celia, Interview at the KDWM office, Bangalore, 2004)

A transformative politics of recognition and redistribution has to deal with several issues: an understanding of certain types of work as dirty, a division of labour that sustains the performance of such work by women of certain castes/class and a cultural valuation principle that determines that cleaning is women's work. Does recognising the work that *dalit* working class women do as useful, transform the meanings of work as dirty? Does it transform the meanings of women's work? Does struggling for better wages, working conditions, etc. transform the division of labour in gendered and in caste/class terms?

Sr. Celia starts her account with the misrecognition of domestic work as dirty work. However, she also makes a departure from an understanding of domestic work as useful work. In her account, domestic work is considered dirty work and people do the work out of necessity. Therefore, in Sr. Celia's conception, it is not *necessary, useful work, but work born out of necessity*. People have to work to survive. But if given an option in an occupational hierarchy, would teaching not be better? Should *dalit* communities not have the options to teach as well? Therefore, the underlying argument that she makes is that articulating something as *useful does not address the issue that it is done in dire need*. I would suggest that the differing pulls in the domestic worker's movement point to a stark recognition-redistribution dilemma between a transformative redistributive politics that seeks to provide a *choice to dalit* communities in the work that they do, and an affirmative recognition politics that seeks to *affirm* the work that they do as useful. The underlying tension, therefore, is that a cultural re-valuation of domestic work as useful work is difficult without the simultaneous disruption of the 'division of labourers' (in Ambedkar's famous words). That is to say that it seems difficult to articulate a transformative strategy of a

disruption of a division of labour in gendered terms as well as in terms of caste/class relations, without being seen as in conflict with an affirmative politics of recognition.

## 7. In Conclusion

There are several interesting dimensions to using Nancy Fraser's framework in analysing the strategies and discourses that *dalit* groups use in their identifications of injustice and their claims for justice. It is important to affirm that *dalit* politics historically has conceived of caste as a bivalent collectivity, as it is precisely against a conception of class without the symbolism of a *caste* based division of labour that Ambedkar locates his understanding of caste as a division of labourers. Whilst *dalit* politics has in part been about imbuing the symbolic violence that attends a caste based division of labour, I have argued elsewhere (Chigateri, S, 2004) that it is also important to locate the *disjunctions* between the cultural and economic aspects of injustice *within dalit* politics, as well as in instances that are not *framed* as problems of caste. Therefore, in the context of domestic work, in order to uncover both the absences in the claims making of the KDWM in cultural and/or economic terms, as well as the nature and extent of the cultural and economic aspects of injustice, it is useful to use 'culture' and 'economics' as analytical categories. Further, as Fraser has argued in her rejoinder to Iris Marion Young's criticism that she presents an opposition and a dichotomy between recognition and redistribution, *analytically* distinguishing between culture and economics does not entail either an opposition or a dichotomisation between recognition and redistribution, rather it is a means of holding onto their equal importance, as well as assessing means whereby they can truly work together (See Young, I, 1997 and Fraser, N, 1997).

Using culture and economics as analytical categories allows one to unpick in the discourses of the groups the nature of the injustices that *dalit* domestic workers identify as structuring their lives. There are both cultural and economic dimensions to domestic work: the nature of work, the conditions of employment, the meanings of the work, its gendered associations both in terms of who performs such work as well as the kind of work performed, its performance by women from particular communities; all of these form part of the matrix of domestic work. The identification of the injustice that domestic work is not valued as useful work is one part of the matrix of injustices that such work entails. The dissociations that the women at KDWM make from their permanent association with this work, their ambivalence in relation to the value of the work, as well as the argument that their entry into domestic work is related to the emasculation of the *dalit* male-head of the household, who has not been able to provide for the family are also important aspects of the context of domestic workers that the KDWM must take into account.

The DWM and the KDWM as a group, in relation to the injustices that the women domestic workers identify, have sought to re-value work, in terms of understanding domestic work as useful, productive work. This entails both affirmative recognition and redistribution: transforming the nature and the conditions of work. However, these do not necessarily address either the transformation of it as women's work, or as work performed by women from particular communities. The affirmative recognition and redistributive strategies that the DWM and KDWM offer for *dalit* domestic workers are inadequate for a politics of transformation, which would entail a disassociation of domestic work with *dalit women*. This is particularly important for

there to be a meaningful articulation of caste as a bivalent collectivity, of domestic work as requiring both recognition and redistributive justice and most importantly, for the articulation of a *dalit feminist* politics in relation to domestic work in India.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article draws on the paper that I presented at the Human Rights and Global Justice Conference held at the University of Warwick, 29-31 March 2006. One of the themes of the conference was a critical consideration of the recognition/ redistribution framework for considering a wide variety of rights and social justice concerns in relation to gender, class and other social inequalities. To that end, this article foregrounds and evaluates the recognition-redistribution debate in relation to a gendered caste politics. The larger context of the paper is my doctoral research on *dalit* feminist politics in Bangalore. This research examined the politics of three *dalit* groups in Bangalore, the *Dalit* mathu Mahila Chaluvali (DMC), the Karnataka Domestic Workers Movement (KDWM), and the Madiga Reservation Horatta Samithi (MRHS). It analysed the contested terrain of *dalit* politics in Bangalore, by examining the ways in which *dalit* groups avowed, disavowed, rejected, invoked *dalit* identity, and what this meant for the articulations of a *dalit* feminist politics in Bangalore (Chigateri, S, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> The central Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Bill, 2005 and the Karnataka State Unorganised Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Work) Bill, 2001 which do recognise domestic work as work are yet to be translated into enactments (see recent Labour and Minority minister's assurances, Deccan Herald <[www.deccanherald.com/Content/Sep222007/national2007092126611.asp](http://www.deccanherald.com/Content/Sep222007/national2007092126611.asp) > 22 September 2007).

<sup>3</sup> In January 1992, unions in Karnataka had managed to get domestic work included in the list of scheduled employments under the Minimum Wages Act. This was arbitrarily removed in 1993, and was pushed back into the Schedule only in 2004, on the back on campaigns by unions and domestic workers' groups (see Labour file, 02 June 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Along with Raka Ray, I would argue that this is an instance where Narsamma claims and appropriates an 'idealised femininity' as her own, denying her employers the monopoly of being 'bhadrak', which in this context would entail 'being protected and staying at home'. Ray argues that such appropriations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity go along with a '[redefinition of] what it means to be a good man or a good woman, bringing these definitions closer to the lives they lead' (Ray, R, 2000, p 692).

<sup>5</sup> This perspective was not held across the board amongst the *dalit* men and women I met in the other group, the DMC. Whilst the predominant perspective was that *dalit* women carry heavy burdens of responsibility by working both 'inside' and 'outside' the house, the critique of a caste based division of labour was made along with a critique of a gendered division of labour in several instances.

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