

**GENDERING STRUGGLES AGAINST
INFORMAL AND PRECARIOUS
WORK**

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POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY VOLUME 35

GENDERING STRUGGLES AGAINST INFORMAL AND PRECARIOUS WORK

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GENDERING STRUGGLES AGAINST INFORMAL AND PRECARIOUS WORK ☆

Rina Agarwala and Jennifer Jihye Chun

ABSTRACT

Gender is a defining feature of informally precarious work in the twenty-first century, yet studies rarely adopt a gendered lens when examining collective efforts to challenge informality and precarity. This chapter foregrounds the gendered dimensions of informally precarious workers' struggles as a crucial starting point for re-theorizing the future of global labor movements. Drawing upon the findings of the volume's six chapters spanning five countries (the United States, Canada, South Korea, Mexico, and India) and two gender-typed sectors (domestic work and construction), this chapter explores how gender is intertwined into informally precarious workers' movements, why gender is addressed, and to what end. Across countries and sectors, informally precarious worker organizations are on the front lines of challenging the multiple forms of gendered inequalities that shape contemporary practices of accumulation and labor regulation. They expose the forgotten reality that class structures not only represent classification struggles around work, but also around social identities, such as gender, race, and migration status. However, these organizing efforts are not fighting to transform the gendered division of labor or embarking on revolutionary struggles to overturn private

☆ We are grateful to Ruth Milkman for our early discussions and joint efforts to organize the Radcliffe seminar. We learned immensely from all the participants of the Radcliffe seminar (Francoise Carré, Pun Ngai, Geraldine Pratt, Georgina Rojas, Sarah Swider, Chris Tilly, and SaunJuhi Verma). We thank Ruth Milkman and Chris Tilly for their invaluable comments and suggestions on this chapter. Finally, we thank Julian Go for his excellent and patient editorial hand through every stage of this volume's production.

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ownership and liberalized markets. Nonetheless, these struggles are making major transformations in terms of increasing women's leadership and membership in labor movements and exposing how gender interacts with other ascriptive identities to shape work. They are also radicalizing hegemonic scripts of capitalist accumulation, development, and even gender to attain recognition for female-dominated occupations and reproductive needs for the first time ever. These outcomes are crucial as sources of emancipatory transformations at a time when state and public support for labor and social protection is facing a deep assault stemming from the pressures of transnational production and globalizing markets.

Keywords: Gender; informal labor; precarious work; collective action; labor politics; domestic work; construction

In recent years, a growing literature has examined not only the resilience of informal and precarious work across the Global South, but also its unexpected rise in the Global North (Bremen & Linden, 2014; Davis, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Lee & Kofman, 2012; Mosoetsa, Stillerman, & Tilly, 2016; Siegmann & Schiphorst, 2016; Standing, 2011). Gender has historically been a defining feature of this unprotected and unregulated workforce. Women continue to be disproportionately concentrated in temporary, casual, seasonal, part-time, and contract work. Recently, men's jobs have begun to resemble those once relegated to women, as traditional forms of employment security, labor rights, and legal protections are eroding across the global labor market. Scholars have rightly argued that these gendered (as well as ethnoracialized and migrant) dimensions of informal and precarious work in the contemporary era reflect the enduring nature of social inequalities (Agarwala, 2013b; Chun, 2016; Fine, 2006; Kenny, 2018; Vosko, 2000; Vosko, MacDonald, & Campbell, 2009).

Although the gendered dynamics of contemporary labor patterns are often discussed by academics and policy makers, they have received significantly less attention when examining *collective efforts to challenge precarity and informality*. This is surprising given the growing literature on informal and precarious workers' organizing efforts at the national and transnational levels (Agarwala, 2013a; Chun, 2009; Fine, 2006; Fish, 2017; Milkman, 2006; Milkman & Ott, 2014; Nair, 2017; Pun & Huilin, 2010; Rosaldo, 2016; Sarmiento, Tilly, de la Garza Toledo, & Gayosso Ramírez, 2016; Theodore, 2015). These recent studies have shown us that the world's informal and precarious workers are *not* standing by as idle victims of intensifying vulnerabilities on a global scale. Although they face formidable challenges under changing structures of production and accumulation, informal and precarious workers are fighting to advance their dignity and their humanity through innovative collective action repertoires and new types of labor organizations – often called worker centers or “alt-labor” in the United States, labor NGOs in China, and informal workers' unions in India. These studies on contemporary collective action efforts among the world's most vulnerable workers have been instrumental in overturning entrenched assumptions of informal and precarious workers' structural inability to organize. While

the effectiveness of these alternative organizing efforts varies widely across countries and sectors, there is little doubt now that informal and precarious workers can and do organize along class lines.

Additionally, these studies on informal and precarious workers' contemporary movements have helped correct popular arguments that labor movements have been replaced by "new social movements" or "identity-based movements" in the twenty-first century, by showing that labor and ascriptive social identities (such as gender, race/ethnicity, and migration status) are *mutually constitutive*, not mutually exclusive (Chun & Agarwala, 2016). Labor movements, therefore, are not being replaced, but rather evolving. The world's most vulnerable workers are pushing the boundaries of previous forms of labor organizing and crafting new political imaginaries around gender and other social identities. For example, in striking contrast to formal workers' unions, women have been leading voices in struggles against informal and precarious work (Agarwala, 2013b; Milkman & Terriquez, 2012). This is the case even when the workers involved are predominantly male. In addition, informal/precarious workers' struggles in the North and South have especially (but not exclusively) targeted domestic and international migrants, as well as members of subordinated racial and ethnic groups (Agarwala, 2014; Chun & Agarwala, 2016).

Given the existing literature, much of which has been written by the contributors to this Special Volume, it is our contention that the scholarship on informal/precarious work is ready for a new generation of analysis. To this end, this Special Volume focuses analytic attention on the significance of gender in challenging and supporting informality and precarity. The project begins with a (seemingly) simple question: what role (if any) does gender play in shaping contemporary labor organizing efforts among informal and precarious workers? It foregrounds existing struggles in five countries— the United States, Canada, South Korea, Mexico, and India — to explore *how* gender is intertwined into informal/precarious workers organizing efforts, *why* gender is addressed, and *to what end*. We utilize a gendered lens, not simply to direct attention to the struggles of women workers — though we argue that women's leadership is a critical feature that merits further inquiry — but also to examine how gender operates as a complex set of practices, logics, and institutions that constantly reshape relations of exploitation and domination within the multiple layers of people's labor and everyday lives (West & Zimmerman, 1987). We hope here to highlight workers' efforts to expose gender's power to determine people's work, employers' production decisions, and state labor regulation — a power that is too often hidden from public acknowledgment.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

Recognizing how workers interact with other dimensions of social difference, such as gender, demands an intersectional optic on power (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2013). Therefore, at the start of this project, we hypothesized that informal and precarious workers adopt intersectional approaches to class politics, emphasizing that the roots of economic

subordination are as much about class inequality as they are about social discrimination along lines of gender (as well as ethnicity, family, and migration status). This includes an emphasis on wages and working conditions, as well as on issues concerning social reproduction such as child care, education and housing, and citizenship rights (Chun & Agarwala, 2016).

Drawing from this starting point, three of the contributors of this Issue (Ruth Milkman, Jennifer Jihye Chun, and Rina Agarwala) organized a seminar in 2016 at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study to further explore the relationship between gender and collective action strategies among informal and precarious workers in different country contexts.¹ To help isolate the gender effects on workers' collective action, we narrowed our focus to two sectors that divide along gender lines: domestic work (which is predominantly female) and construction (which is predominantly male). We also focused on the subset of informal workers who are collectively organized. As we have argued elsewhere, although organized informal workers currently represent a fraction of the world's informal workforce, they are significant because they provide an important lens into the prospects of organizing the most vulnerable workers, as well as the future of labor organizing the world over. Finally, to capture the variation in approaches, effectiveness, and connections to gender, we invited scholars with expertise in different countries spanning the Global North and South. In doing so, we hoped to catalyze a global conversation on labor and gender, while still taking seriously the need for in-depth contextual and historical analysis at the national and subnational levels.²

The Radcliffe seminar gave us a rare opportunity to begin exploratory discussions around our central question about the relationship between gender and informal/precarious workers' politics within a cross-country comparative frame. Drawing on our previous work, as well as our new research in the two sectors of interest (i.e., domestic work and construction), we presented our initial findings. Some of us had just returned from the field, while others were still completing fieldwork. Our analyses were far from final.

Nevertheless, the Radcliffe discussions exposed distinctive patterns of similarity and difference across country histories and political economies. The discussions also made it potentially clear that our central question was anything but simple. In several cases, the relationships between gender and labor had to be explored alongside the power dynamics of other identities, such as race, ethnicity, and/or caste. In other cases, informal/precarious work could not be divorced from the specifics of a workers' migration status — be it domestic or international. In still other cases, gender and work dynamics were tied to historical legacies of colonialism, as well as a country's contemporary position in the global hierarchy of wealth — both of which informed a nation's politics of transnational production and economic growth strategies. With each of these additive layers came increased nuances in family structures and welfare regimes, which in turn shaped the gender dynamics of work and politics.

By the end of the Radcliffe seminar, we all agreed that employing a gender lens to explore how informal/precarious workers grapple with their multiple social identities in their labor organizing efforts deserved deeper investigation.

For the next few years, the contributors to this volume deepened their research and presented their findings in conferences around the world. We have commented on each other's chapters, obtained outside reviewers (anonymous and not), and revised several drafts. Still, this Special Volume represents only the start of a conversation that aims to bring gender into discussions on class, ethnicity/race, migration, and politics.

BUILDING A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA

This Special Volume includes six empirical chapters that examine the relationship between gender and informal workers' organizing efforts in domestic work and construction. The chapters all draw from historical analyses, as well as in-depth field research comprising interviews and participant observation with informal/precarious workers, movement leaders, and in some cases employers and government officials.

The range of countries examined here offers different historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts, which in turn helps us unpack varying movement approaches to gender and informality/precarity, as well varying conditions of movement success and failure. Additionally, by including countries across the Global North and South, we offer a comparative and relational lens into contemporary workers' movements. Tellingly, the chapters focusing on the migrant destination countries of the Global North highlight connections with the home countries of foreign migrant workers – such as Filipinos working in Canada (Pratt and Migrante BC), Latinos working in the US (Milkman; Tilly, Rojas-García and Theodore), and Indians working in the US (Verma). The chapters focusing on the Global South focus on a single country, emphasizing within-country migration streams – such as Mexico (Tilly, Rojas-García and Theodore) and India (Agarwala). In South Korea, which falls between the North/South divide in terms of development levels, Chun and Kim note the increasing prevalence of Korean Chinese migrants in South Korea's domestic work sector, but focusses on the organizing experiences of local South Korean domestic workers.

Another useful feature of this collection is the focus on organizing efforts among informal/precarious workers in two sectors only – that is, domestic work and/or construction. Some chapters examine only one of these sectors (i.e., construction for Verma, and domestic work for Pratt and Migrante BC; Tilly, Rojas-García and Theodore, and Chun and Kim), while others examine both sectors within a single country (i.e., Milkman in the US and Agarwala in India). But as a group, narrowing the sectoral span of the studies enabled us to limit the range of occupational and industrial forces shaping movements and highlight the range of political-economy and historical forces (at the organizational and country levels) that also shape movements. As well, featuring two sectors that differ in terms of gender composition enabled us to offer sectoral-level comparisons on the economic malleability of gender across spatial contexts. In this way, the Special Volume addresses scholars' call for more cross-sector comparisons on informal and precarious work (Mosoetsa et al., 2016).

Each of the six chapters in this volume makes insightful contributions, highlighting the distinct consequences of national, international, and sub-national contexts, relations, and histories. Rather than reiterating the central arguments of each chapter, we use this introductory chapter to pool the findings of all six chapters and highlight the recurring themes that emerge around the politics of gender and labor across national context and sector. We hope these themes can inform a more extensive research agenda for a new generation of scholarship on informal and precarious work.

Our inquiry in this chapter is organized by the following questions:

- How does precarious/informal worker organizing vary cross-nationally among countries with distinct political regimes, gender arrangements, trade union structures, and levels of economic development?
- What is the role of gender in structuring precarious/informal work and the collective struggles of precarious/informal workers, and why have organizations of precarious/informal workers been led disproportionately by women?
- How do informal workers' organizations address (or fail to address) the multiple identities of their members – be it class, gender, ethnicity/race, or migrant status?
- What can a gendered lens on informal workers' organizing teach us about the intersection of race/ethnicity, migration, gender, and class and their role in reproducing capitalist relations of domination and exploitation in the current era of global market rule?

Underlying our thematic findings is a call to reconceptualize informality and precarity using a gendered lens. By doing so, we expose the often forgotten reality that class structures and class politics not only represent classification struggles around work and labor, but also classification struggles around social identities, such as gender, race, and migration status.

Our first thematic finding across the six chapters is that informal workers' struggles in both domestic work and construction recognize that gender is a key organizing principle of social, economic, and legal subordination that shapes collective action practices in decisive ways. However, the variation in *how* informal workers incorporate gender into their struggles is greater across sectors than across countries. This finding underscores the pressing reality that gender operates differently in different parts of the economy.

Second, we find that while organizing efforts recognize the roots of gender oppression in workplaces and labor markets, they are not necessarily fighting to transcend, or even transform, the gendered division of labor. Across the countries and sectors featured in this volume, we find that organizations' repertoires and demands often cement the gendered division of labor. Nonetheless, workers' struggles are making major transformations in terms of women's leadership and membership in workers' organizations, and in terms of highlighting gender's relationship to other ascriptive identities in work. This outcome is crucial as it is a source of transformation itself, producing a new generation of movement

leaders who bring their distinct experiences and practices to innovating existing collective action repertoires.

Third, we find that informal workers' organizations, across countries and sectors, are not embarking on revolutionary struggles to overturn capitalism or question calls for private ownership and liberalized markets. Rather, they are embarking on more reformist struggles for increased regulations within existing socioeconomic systems. In the process, however, their movements are exposing the often hidden forms of domination undergirding hegemonic scripts of contemporary accumulation. In many cases, informal workers' struggles are radicalizing and reshaping these scripts through an emancipatory agenda that has afforded their labor legal recognition for the first time. In the face of widespread rollbacks in labor rights and protections, however, informal and precarious workers face serious constraints in securing the resources and alliances needed to enforce these legal gains. These constraints have undermined workers' ability to build the mass base needed to ensure deep structural change at the national and international scales.

Clearly, informal workers' movements remain at an early phase, and their effectiveness is far from complete. Nevertheless, the themes we detail hereafter highlight these movements' ability to foreground the nuances of the gender and labor relationship across countries and sectors. These themes also remind us of the important role that historical and political-economic structures and constraints at the organizational and national levels play in shaping movement traditions, approaches, and outcomes. Informal and precarious workers' movements are keenly aware that gendered inequalities are not only a consequence of informality, but also a fundamental driver of informality. Poor workers live this reality every day. Their organizations are struggling to expose these interconnections. Whether their struggles represent an initial stage in the long pathway to transformation or whether they will plateau with this stage, only time will tell. In the meantime, we owe them our attention.

Before expanding on each of these themes, let us take a brief methodological look at how we conceptualize gender and informal/precarious work across diverse contexts.

CONCEPTUALIZING INFORMAL AND PRECARIOUS WORK THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

We view this Special Volume as a methodological call to conceptualize informal and precarious work through a gendered lens. As well, we hope to formulate a conceptualization that transcends national boundaries without eclipsing national specificities or cross-national power hierarchies. Doing so is essential to exposing the historically transnational nature of informal and precarious labor and thus foundational to our aim of advancing the global scholarship on informality and precarity.

To date, the varying definitional practices of informal and precarious work within individual countries have hindered systematic analyses of global-level similarities and differences. Part of the problem stems from geopolitical and

historical divisions that have created different terms for capturing similar dynamics concerning unregulated and unprotected forms of employment under globalizing capitalism.

The term “informal work,” which has historically been used throughout South Asia, Latin America, Africa, and (more recently) China, is often credited to Keith Hart’s (1973) soft critique of early Third World development theories, which predicted unregulated and unprotected work would automatically wither away as agrarian economies were replaced by industrial growth under state-managed capitalism (Lewis, 1954). Since Hart’s original findings of a thriving class of self-employed urban workers in Accra, Ghana, scholars drawing from other country contexts have reiterated that informal work persists, even under modern capitalist industrialization (Agarwala, 2013a; Breman, 1996; Portes & Walton, 1981; Siegmann & Schiphorst, 2016). These scholars have emphasized the need to theorize informal work as a structural feature of capital, labor, and state relations, rather than as a temporal feature of developing economies (Breman & Linden, 2014). As Agarwala (2018) has detailed elsewhere, “Informal work is neither a remnant of a feudal past nor an outcome of a neoliberal present. Informal work has always been and will continue to be an essential part of modern capitalist growth.”

Underlying the term “informal work,” which depicts a long-standing feature of countries operating at the bottom of the global hierarchy of capitalist production, has often been a nod to the enduring power relations of imperialism. Therefore, a key point of the term is to conceptually and operationally expose the historical gap (both across and within nations) between the top layer of the most protected and visible workers and the heterogeneous mass of workers below. Although the latter experience various arrangements of work-related vulnerabilities, they share a substantively different position of power relative to the top.

In contrast, the term “precarious work” is commonly used to describe the *dismantling* of wage standards, welfare protections, and labor rights particularly in the industrialized countries of North America and Western Europe that experienced a shift from “state-managed capitalism” in the Keynesian era to “market-based” or neoliberal capitalism beginning in the 1980s (Agarwala, 2018). This shift has exposed workers to intensifying labor commodification, experienced as higher levels of risk and uncertainty in the exchange of labor for a wage (Vosko, 2000). Unlike the term “informal work,” which emphasizes the social relationship to “formal work” vis-à-vis the state and capital, the term “precarity” emphasizes the full strata of varying employment conditions. Some scholars use the term “precarity” to refer to a declining continuum of criteria including employment security, control over the labor process, regulatory protection, income level, and job-based recognition and belonging (Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2003; Rodgers, 1989; Standing, 2011). Others use it to highlight “work as a process” rather than a binary state (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013).

Interestingly, although the term “precarious work” was first popularized in the Global North, in recent years it is also frequently used in late-industrializing countries across Asia, Latin America, and in South Africa, though not without