

# **The moral space and the logic of collective self-organisation of domestic workers in Chennai, India**

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## **Abstract**

Our overarching contribution in this chapter is the claim that a shared “moral topography” (Taylor, 1994) of lower classes can create forms of collective ‘consciousness’ which may lead to collective action. In order to establish that a shared moral topography is an incremental prerequisite for creating practical spaces for self-organisation, the chapter outlines Charles Taylor’s concept of morality, “moral topography”, “moral space and actions” as well as the concept of “identity”. Empirical data show that the moral topography of domestic workers in Chennai (Tamil Nadu, India) is characterized by a shared meaning and collective experiences of injustice. Further empirical evidence demonstrates that due to this common understanding of injustice, domestic workers in Chennai start organising themselves informally and establishing trade unions. Through self-organisation, domestic workers meet a demand for social security which the state fails to provide.

The fieldwork of this qualitative study was conducted within and funded by the European Project FP7-PEOPLE-2010-IRSES “URBANSELF - A North-South-Network on Urban Self-Organisation and Public Life in Europe, India and China” (2011-2014) which was scientifically coordinated by Prof. Dr. Ruediger Korff. We would like to share this academic achievement with him, in honour of and appreciation for years of fruitful and contradictory discussions – including those on administrative and financial issues that sometimes proved to be exhaustive and ‘painful’ – during our joint endeavour, URBANSELF.

## **Introduction – What was URBANSELF about?**

Cities are transformers of development processes (Braudel, 1992; Korff, 2003), and given the ambivalent nature of development, they not only become centres of problems, conflicts and tensions but also form innovative milieus (Hall, 2000). Accordingly, cities continuously create new ways of coping with changing circumstances through social and

pragmatic creativity (Joas, 1996). This requires new perspectives on urban planning and urban governance. Traditionally, expert-based urban planning has defined the 'correct' technical solutions. Yet lately, this technical-rational approach has come under question worldwide, and scholars instead emphasise the role of citizens in problem identification and solution. This alternative approach is not seamless, however. It creates other problems regarding, for example, the extent to which citizen participation is integrated into the planning of the urban future. Usually, citizen participation happens through political representation. Thus, it is politicians or influential political office-holders that decide what plans shall be made, what visions are to be followed and how these should be implemented (e.g., decisions about scarce resources).

URBANSELF - *A North-South-Network on Urban Self-Organisation and Public Life in Europe, India and China* was funded by the European grant programme FP7-PEOPLE-2010-IRSES from 2011 to 2014 and built on existing contacts of cooperative research and knowledge exchange.<sup>1</sup> The objective of URBANSELF was to bring together and integrate competences on urban processes in Europe, India and China with a specific focus on urban self-organisation and how this may contribute to the development and enhancement of public dialogue within and between the three participating areas. URBANSELF intended to strengthen the North-South dialogue and strengthen the role of civil society within Europe, India and China. In the "urban age" (Davis, 2006), cross-border knowledge exchange is particularly significant as urban problems are increasingly becoming global challenges.

Driving transformation in governance, policy and politics has aimed at enhancing the role of citizens and their self-organizing capacities. This has been achieved through the rise of organisations that enable the articulation of interests and concerns as well as the creation of socioeconomic practices. In this process, urban governance had to collaborate with citizen-based organisations. As supporting self-organisation is crucial for such a transition towards real citizen participation, self-organisation has been seen as necessary for urban sustainability. The key objective of URBANSELF was, therefore, to understand these forms of organisation through comparative discussions and to transfer knowledge of existing research on European cities and rapidly growing (mega-)cities in India and China. This then allowed us for empirically founded theoretical conclusions which in turn provided the basis for identifying innovative approaches to urban challenges from an actor-oriented perspective.

## Some conceptual thoughts on urban self-organisation

Self-organisation is an approach which seeks to understand notions of social norming, social learning and social change within communities or groups, and their locally developed forms of organising and acting in response to locally, nationally or globally encountered and constructed problems. Processes of self-organisation fundamentally depend on the prevailing political system and the quality of labour laws. Self-organisation is more likely to be successful in democratic political systems in which labour laws have

<sup>1</sup> See <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/99659/reporting/en>.

a legislative basis. Essentially, self-organisation is a way of representing processes that institutionalise the social relationships derived from a variety of local networks (Atkinson, Hasanov, Dörfler, Rothfuß & Smith, 2017). Thus, it is achieved through encounters – perhaps of a serendipitous nature – that lead to the identification of mutual interests, positions and relations (Mayntz, 2006; Ostrom et al., 1999). These interactions initially generate trust derived from individual relationships. Over time and through further interactions, they transform into collective forms of (moral) trust articulated actions that create “collective intentionality” (Hasanov & Beaumont, 2016) or “joint intentionalities” as Messner and Weinlich (2016: 18) would express it.

Self-organisation could also be regarded as a form of cooperation. Cooperation can be conceptualized as horizontal (i.e., among actors having the same social position) or vertical (i.e., among actors from different social positions). Messner, Guarín, and Haun (2016) have identified seven factors that make cooperation on a global level more likely: reciprocity, trust, communication, fairness, mechanisms of enforcement, reputation and we-identity. Similarly, on the micro level self-organisation might be more likely to emerge when facets of these factors are fulfilled in one or the other way. A constituted ‘we-identity’ can be regarded as the joint moral framework that creates the basis of self-organisation. This is not to say that self-organised collectives act ‘anarchical’ as they have to institutionalise some of their procedures, though they always try to uphold a certain ‘fluidity’ and openness of social processes and internal innovation to prevent a “social death” (Atkinson, Dörfler & Rothfuß, 2018). This process of self-organising is often connected to the concept of charisma. With the rise of an organisation, the charisma of the founder(s) is stabilised and routinised (or “veralltäglich”, see Weber, 2000) and incorporated into the organisation. Enhanced coordination and cooperation allows for differentiation and specialisation within the organisation, which in turn strengthens the potential for strategically pushing certain interests (Castells, 1983).

On the urban sphere, self-organisation is crucial for the functioning of cities and the creation of coping strategies. Self-organisation provides multiple benefits and reduces costs for the people as well as the administration. For instance, through self-help, housing is provided, especially in specific informal quarters of the Global urban South where the weak state is not able to deliver this service. In addition, recycling and waste treatment is organised informally and the city is supplied with cheap resources for informal trade, food production, labour, etc. (Korff and Rothfuß, 2009). This improved social cohesion results in an increase in social control which translates into less external control. The self-organised, functioning community is itself a resource (or social capital) for its members that provide mutual support, and thereby, economic and social security. Social capital is increasingly taken into account, but as a personal asset.

Against these perspectives on social capital, there is a need for research on social capital as a “collective property resource” (Ostrom, 1991). In fact, social capital is produced through the ability of collectives to create new patterns of social relations and patterns of organisation – that is, through social creativity. Thus, in self-organisation social capital is maintained as collective agency through a process by which a socially cohesive collective maintains itself (Rothfuß and Korff, 2015). Neighbourhood, joint working and collective activities are means through which multicultural tolerance is established. Multiple social relations and interdependencies amongst inhabitants de-

veloping out of work, trade, neighbourhood, kinship or friendship become stabilised through organisation. This is particularly the case when the addressed problems require collective action. In such cases, self-organisation is connected to territorial definitions and demarcations of a collective, defined as a “locality” (Korff, 2003). Localities neither resemble administrative districts, nor closely knit communities. What defines a locality are the local organisations that have the capacity to define and maintain spatial boundaries (Berner & Korff, 1995).

## “Moral space” – Our theoretical entry point

Our focus on the geographies of ‘doing ethics’ situates our theoretical approach as part of the ‘moral turn’ in human geography (Valentine, 2005; Smith, 1997). Moral geographies are commonly divided into meta-ethics, descriptive ethics and normative ethics (Matless, 2000). This refers to the ways in which the connection between humans and their social environments mirror and (re)produce moral conduct (Philo, 1991). Moral geographies shed light on the closeness to and distance from people in existential need as an important intersubjective parameter in the moral philosophy of care (Korf, 2006; Barnett and Land, 2007). Assumptions in moral geographies are often conceptualized as the plural of a given moral rule or ethical principle, and socially approved codes of conduct (Setten, 2004).

This approach is distinct, as it conceives moralities as continuously constituted through social, material and spatial relations. Within this framework, we examine the contemporary processes of ‘doing ethics’ of domestic workers in Chennai, the relational processes through which moralities emerge in a “moral space” (Taylor, 1989), highlighting the immanence of ethics in daily practices (Lambek, 2010). We intend to hermeneutically understand the moral lifeworld of ‘ordinary people’ who create their own history and geography of ‘tactics’ (i.e., the ‘differential space’ in a Lefebvrian sense) under conditions they have not chosen themselves (De Certeau, 1984; see Rothfuß and Vogel, 2013).

We hereby refer to Charles Taylor’s argumentation that the dimension of morality is not something which simply overlays human action but is rather something which is inherent to the human existence *per se* (Breuer, Leusch, and Mersch, 1996: 184). Taylor’s claim is that human subjectivity has a “moral” dimension because of its non-contingent connection to frameworks of strong value” (Abbey 2004: 43). Taylor defends the thesis “that doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; otherwise put, that the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations” (1989: 27). He postulates that humans always interpret the world that surrounds them and attribute sense to the social reality through their subjective horizon of experiences. Consequently, all human matters can only be described in the context of such a horizon of meanings. Human actions take place within a “moral space”, because all human actions are the result of moral evaluations. According to Taylor, *moral space* is “a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary” (1989: 28). He assumes that humans live in a space of questions to which their framework-definitions are the answers. These

answers allow humans to position themselves within the moral space and decide what meanings things have for them (Taylor, 1989: 29). Moral space is different in each culture, and though it has collective effects within each, it can also be individually interpreted. Indeed, Hartmut Rosa describes Taylor's moral space as a "space of cultural meaning" (1998: 182).

Moral topography describes moral space, its nature, property and conditions. It maps the criteria which help decide how to orient oneself within a given moral space (Taylor, 1989: 28-29). Taylor refers to "knowing one's way around a moral space" as identity; humans who know their identity know what is right or wrong. Hence, the connection Taylor draws between orientation and identity becomes clear (Taylor, 1989: 28). As an inherent part of human existence, morality is interlinked with human actions which means that a normative dimension underlies human actions, practices and structures. Humans always attribute social meaning to their actions. Consequently, they only act if the action makes practical sense to them (see Bourdieu (1998) "sens pratique"). According to Taylor, this sense is characterized by "strong values"; human beings evaluate their actions based on principles concerning how "good" or "bad" something is (Breuer et al., 1996: 184). Taylor further argues that humans position themselves in line with the perceived "good" (1989: 47).

## **Socio-spatial inequality in Chennai**

With 8.7 million inhabitants, Chennai is India's fourth largest urban centre and one of the hot spots of India's automobile and information technology (IT) industry (Government of India (2015a); Government of India - Ministry of Home Affairs (2014). Chennai is also the capital of Tamil Nadu, the most urbanized state of India, with 48.45% of the population living in cities (Sivakumar, 2011).

The country has experienced rapid processes of urbanization since its independence in 1947 (Bohle and Sakdapolrak, 2008: 12). This extreme urban growth has led to increasing inequalities which are spatially expressed and materialized in slum areas. The number of slums is strongly linked to income per person as well as level of industrialization and employment opportunities in a city (Bohle and Sakdapolrak, 2008: 14). As explained in the United Nations Human Settlements Programme report, "slums result from a combination of poverty or low incomes with inadequacies in the housing provision system, so that poor people are forced to seek affordable accommodation and land that become increasingly inadequate" (2003: 10). Though a universally accepted definition of "slum" does not exist, the United Nations Human Settlement Programme identifies the following attributes: lack of basic services (e.g., sanitation facilities, drinking water, waste collection systems, electricity, surfaced roads, etc.), substandard housing or illegal inadequate building structures, overcrowding and high density, unhealthy living conditions and hazardous locations, insecure tenure (irregular or informal settlements), poverty and a minimum settlement size (2003: 11).

Almost one third (28.5%) of Chennai's population lives in slums. Chennai's economic growth and development have mainly been facilitated through the IT industry. As a result of population growth and real estate speculation, land has become increasingly scarce

and many poor people have been pushed to live in slum areas (Bohle and Sakdapolrak, 2008: 15). In their empirical study on Chennai, Bohle and Sakdapolrak demonstrate the wide distribution of slums throughout the city, implying that the middle classes and the poor live side by side. A higher density of slums is located in the poorer north of Chennai as well as in the less secure and marginalized territories along riversides, canals and railways (2008: 15).

The Indian census from 2011 provides a statistical overview of the living conditions of households in Indian slums (Chandramouli, 2014). This census is applicable for the interviewed domestic workers in Chennai, all of which were living in slum areas.

Table 1: data on households living in slums in India (Census 2011) (Vogel 2018 )

<b>Households living in Slums (India)</b>	17%		
<b>Households living in Slums (Chennai)</b>	29%		
<b>Housing</b>	77% Permanent housing	16% Semi-permanent housing	5% temporary housing
<b>Number of rooms</b>	49% One room	29% Two rooms	4% No exclusive room
<b>Property status</b>	70% Own their house	26% Rent	Rest – other
<b>Access to drinking water</b>	74% Tap	3% Well	13% hand pump
	7% Tube well/borehole	3% Other sources	
<b>Location of Drinking water</b>	56% Within premises	4% Outside premises	
<b>Sources of lighting</b>	90% Electricity	8% Kerosene	0.5% No lighting
<b>Bathing facility</b>	81% Available		19% Not Available
<b>From that</b>	66% Bathroom	15% Enclosure with roof	
<b>Drainage Connectivity for Waste Water</b>	36% Closed drainage	44% Open drainage	19% No drainage
<b>Type of latrine</b>	66% Within premises	34 % No latrine within	
<b>From that</b>		<b>15% public latrine</b>	<b>19% open latrine</b>

Availability of Kitchen	94% inside		5% outside
<b>From that</b>	65% have a kitchen	Rest do not have	
<b>Availability of banking service</b>	53% Available	47% Not available	
<b>Possession of Assets</b>	19% Radio/Transistor	70% Television	10% Computer
<b>From that</b>	73% Telephone 4 % Landline only	64% Mobile only	5% Both
	40% Bicycle	22% Scooter, Motor Cycle, Moped	4% Car/Jeep/Van
	11% None of the specified assets		

The data in Table 1 show that the very basic facilities for living are fulfilled for a great majority of slum dwellers: over three-quarters of the slum dwellers live in permanent houses, 70% live in their own house, 74% have access to tap water, 90% have access to electricity, 94% have a kitchen facility inside and 80% have some form of bathing facility. This confirms that the overall living conditions for slum dwellers have improved. However, the data also shows that there is still room for improvement. Only 36% of the slum households have a connection to a closed drainage system and 34% still have no latrine. The data also give evidence of the accessibility to consumer products: around 70% of the households in slums own a television, around 73% have a telephone and around 40% have a bicycle (Government of India, 2015b). These numbers provide a general outline of the lifeworld of slum dwellers in India which is also applicable for the living conditions in slums in Chennai where domestic workers usually live. All of the domestic workers that have participated in the study sample “Maids and Madams – Negotiating Inequality in Urban Chennai” (Vogel, 2018) were living in slum areas.

### **The moral topography in the everyday lives of domestic workers in Chennai**

The remainder of the chapter examines the case study of maids in Chennai based on the empirical evidence obtained within the PhD project “Maids and Madams - Negotiating Inequality in Urban Chennai” (Vogel, 2018)<sup>2</sup>. A variety of everyday practices associated with modernization shape the domestic workers’ moral topography. In the case of maids in Chennai, a common definition and shared experiences of injustice – among others – characterize the moral topography. “Justice” is a significant moral source constituting the framework of domestic worker’s collective identity. From justice, the ideal

<sup>2</sup> During 2012 and 2013, around 70 qualitative interviews with domestic workers, middle class employers and experts have been conducted in Chennai. 30 of these, were conducted with domestic workers, working as part-time maids in middle class households in Chennai.

of “equality” is derived. The intrinsic concept of equality is a “strong value” (Taylor, 1989) that make up the moral topography of domestic workers in Chennai. These workers have the ideal of attaining an “equal” status to their employers. They position themselves vis-à-vis their employer in relation to this ideal. Hence, domestic workers evaluate each action of the employer as well as their own actions in relation to “equality”.

Domestic Workers want to live a decent life under conditions they perceive as fair and humane. So far, the state has failed to provide domestic workers with these fair and humane conditions. Domestic service in India have hardly been touched by state policies (Neetha, 2009: 489). Neetha (2009: 497) argues that approximately 99.9% of domestic workers in India have no formal contract regulating their working arrangement. The lack of accommodation in national law and the informality of the sector reflect the domestic workers’ weak position in society. Nevertheless, evidence shows that domestic workers have been demanding a life under fairer and more humane conditions. They compare their own lives to that of the middle class and feel that they “deserve” better. As explained above, domestic workers share a collective moral framework which is marked by this normative claim of equality and to which they compare their current living conditions.

One aspect, which demonstrates that domestic workers share a collective sense of justice is the fact that they expect their employers to think of them not as “servants” – which they regard as disrespectful and discriminatory – but as “workers”. They expect a certain intersubjective feeling of recognition, dignity and respect. We adhere to Charles Taylor’s (1989: 64) understanding of respect, an important dimension of which is “equality”. He mentions that many people within modern culture consider their highest good to be the notion that “all humans should be treated equally with respect”. The domestic workers in Chennai demand this kind of equal respect: *“Respect. If you see a servant not think as a servant but of respect. (...). They should talk with respect”* (DW 10/ 372-374).<sup>3</sup> This domestic worker articulates directly, that she will not accept her employer to think of domestic workers as servants, but demands to be respected as an equal human being. The next quotation further demonstrates that domestic workers expect their employers to treat them respectfully: *“They should be kind to workers. Should not use disrespectful words. Should treat workers with respect. If they want us to take anything then they should say it in a kind manner rather than using harsh words”* (DW 11/ 353).

Further quotations from domestic workers show that they expect employers to talk to them in a calm, soft and respectful manner. This again demonstrates that the workers have an underlying notion of justice. Fulfilling the ideal of equality deriving from this notion, means that the employer show respect through her speech with the worker: *“See if you do not talk to me properly, then I will not be interested in doing any work. I would feel frustrated. It is just not me, everyone will feel the same”* (DW 13/ 322). The last three quotations highlight that domestic workers use equal respect as a criterion in helping them decide whether or not an employer treats them well. The statements also show that the workers do not accept disrespectful and discriminatory treatment or language. The following

3 The full transcription of the empirical data used in the study from Vogel (2018) is accessible online under: <http://www.lit-verlag.de/isbn/3-643-90996-1>. DW stands for domestic worker, M for middle class women (employer) and E for expert.

citation shows even clearer that feelings of resistance emerge when domestic workers experience disrespectful treatment:

“They should be calm and soft-spoken. They should not ask me to do something in a high-handed way. If they understand the work pressure on me and adjust and tell me: ‘Ok, you finish your other house work and come.’ Then I will also be happy that they understand me. Or if they say: ‘You have to do this. You cannot go anywhere. You have to come at this time.’ Then I will not feel like going to that house. Some people will be sitting and when we are doing our work, they will ask me to pick up something. I do not like it.” (DW 27/ 313)

This worker stated that she would not feel like going to an employer which uses disrespectful speech towards her. This feeling and habitus of resistance is another evidence for a shared feeling of injustice. Domestic workers collectively agree that disrespectful speech and treatment are not acceptable because a moral feeling of justice and equality is inherent to their human existence. Comparing their everyday experiences to the ideal of being respected equally, the workers feel a shared sense of injustice because they are not treated in the same way as their employers.

A second point demonstrating a shared sense of justice are practices regarding “eating from the same plates”. One maid reported that nowadays domestic workers could eat from the same plates as their employers: “Long back, the employers used to give us separate vessels to drink or eat something! But it’s no longer the same case. We are allowed to eat food in the same plates they eat. I mean not the plates without washing; I just mean the same plates and no separate plates” (DW 14/ 136). This statement incorporates a spatial dimension: domestic workers think that their employers should eat from the same plate – that is, from the same level – because they are equal human beings. This spatial manifestation of the logic of equality is a good example showing how fruitful Taylor’s concept of moral topography is in describing the connection among the spatial, moral and social dimensions.

Another domestic worker was asked about her opinion about an employer who would provide separate plates for the worker: “For our point it is wrong but for them, they feel it is right. So what can we say about it? (...) *“Because we are all human beings. Now the problem is some people may be sick, maybe because of that they are doing this. We are like this. What if they have some illness, why should we use the same thing? Some thoughts come in our minds about other people. So I do not worry about this. I just go and do the work and come back”* (DW 13/ 253-255). While by using the pronoun “our” the worker demonstrates a collective sense of justice, she also clearly articulates that, from their perspective, it is wrong not to eat from the same plates. This domestic views the separation of plates as an unequal treatment and argues that as both employer and employee are human beings, there is no need to treat them differently. However, she also thinks this cannot be stated as such in front of the madams. Her strategy to deal with this inequality is simply not to think about it. So the underlying ambivalence concerning the unjust equal positions in a social (and spatial) order becomes visible.

The following quotation demonstrates that when this ambivalence comes up, then it has to be negotiated. In this case, a worker is negotiating “traditional” roles, by using her employer’s humiliation as a humiliation towards the employer herself:

"If I have no time after I send off my children and was in a hurry. I used to go like that and no other go! And she will scold me like: 'Why do you come like a beggar?' (...) I told: 'You have kept a beggar only as your servant.' (...) I told her: 'This beggar only is doing all your chores and cleaning works for you!' She responded: 'Shut up your mouth! Don't keep answering my questions like this!" (DW 6/ 281-293)

In this instance, the middle class employer called the worker a beggar because she did not come to work "clean" enough. The maid openly argued with her employer and turned the humiliation around. In such moments, when the shared sense of injustice surface and become openly negotiated, self-organisation processes are initiated.

This chapter reflected empirical evidence of an "intuitively given consciousness of injustice" (Moore, 1978) in the domestic worker which goes in line with Honneth's (1995) argumentation. Honneth claims that it is not the orientation towards positively formulated moral principles that form the basis for and motivation of social protest within the excluded 'under classes', but rather, the experience of violation and misrecognition through their intuitively given consciousness of injustice. The potential of this consciousness of injustice lies in the way in which the excluded can disclose and enforce possible suggestions for justice. Struggles for recognition indicate distributive injustices in society often suffered by less-privileged groups (Honneth, 1995).

### **Unionising processes as forms of self-organisation based on a shared awareness of human rights and dignity**

The empirical data from Johanna Vogel's (2018) study demonstrates that domestic workers in Chennai share a common sense of injustice. On this basis, processes of self-organisation may be triggered and domestic workers may start claiming and fighting for their rights. Charles Taylor refers as "dignity" to the characteristics by which humans think of themselves "as commanding (or failing to command) the respect of those around" them (Taylor, 1989: 15). In other words, for Taylor dignity is the "sense of ourselves as commanding (attitudinal) respect" (Taylor, 1989: 15). In Chennai, domestic workers start demanding respect from their middle class female employers and through the inceptive processes of self-organisation, they fight for a life in dignity. The following empirical statements highlight this argument.

An interviewed social worker mentions an increased social consciousness among the middle class resulting from the workers' and the Dalit movement. She further explicates that middle class women are forced to treat their workers better because of high demand of the workers:

"I think the middle class are being forced to pay higher wages and treat them a little better than they did before. (...). I think one is of course the demand and supply. But I also think there has been very built up social consciousness, which comes through the workers movement and the Dalit movement." (E 03/66- 68)

Here, the social worker also mentions an awakening social consciousness among the workers. Thus, a higher level of education in line with the extended possibilities of be-

coming educated resulted in a deeper awareness of labour and human rights among domestic workers as well as middle class women.

For the workers, the newly gained consciousness of their rights has often led to a self-confident behaviour. Furthermore, it can be argued that the benefits of globalisation and liberalisation has had what Ulrich Beck describes as an "elevation effect" (Beck, 2003) on the lives of the lower classes. The living standards of domestic workers have increased, and this in turn, has made them less dependent on their employers. Thus, based on the above outlined shared sense of injustice, maids start organising themselves. The employers in Chennai report that domestic workers have started to articulate their rights and change their expectations:

"So they know their rights. They can demand certain things. If they are not happy, they (have) better opportunities everywhere" (M 27/ 218). Likewise: "Yea they understand. Like they know, like this we can expect only this from them. You can expect more money, you can't expect more money. All this they know very well. Even though some of them are not well educated. By their experience, they know very well, what they get from where." (M 25/123)

The collective articulation of injustice is the basis upon which maids claim their rights for decent working conditions and a decent life – a good life. Domestic workers declare the necessity to fight for their rights: "(...) *In Madras only if you protest and struggle you can survive and work here. Else they will grind chilly on your head*" (DW 10/ 103). Meanwhile, forming domestic workers' unions has become more common: "*Before they used to call us 'workers' in such a degrading way and give us work. Now it is changing. We will fight for our rights. They will take members for the society and we can talk about our problems in these meetings. I am in one of the societies for (the) past five years*" (DW 09/ 141). Therefore, processes of self-organisation have started to become more institutionalised. The following paragraphs present three organisations with which the interviewed maids are affiliated and through which they have started institutionalising/unionising processes in Chennai.

The first of these is the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) which seeks to improve the legal situation of domestic workers. Founded in 1985, the NDWM is one of the biggest and most influential national and statewide organisations (Mattila, 2012: 13). This organisation is registered as an NGO and has strong links to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (Neetha and Palriwala, 2011: 114). It was founded by a Belgian missionary and is now operating in 23 Indian states (ibid: 113; Footnote 64). In total it has almost 2.5 million domestic workers as members and in Tamil Nadu the organisation works in 18 districts (United Nations Development Programme, 2012: 20). Its main objectives are the empowerment of domestic workers, the fixation of a just minimum wage and the establishment of humane working conditions. They seek to reach these goals through increased unionisation, networking, capacity building, awareness and lobbying campaigns as well as formulating policy recommendations and legislations (Neetha & Palriwala, 2011: 1133; National Domestic Workers Movement, 2007). In Chennai, 3000 women were registered as members of the NDWM trade union in 2013 (E 02/ 110) and seven of the interviewed workers were part of the NDWM. Most of these women reported that they take part in union meetings. In a few interviews, an acute awareness of labour and human rights could be noted among the domestic workers de-

monstrating that workers who were unionised were more aware of labour rights issues. The prominence of the NDWM shows that state institutions in charge of labour rights protection are partly dysfunctional. The informality of the sector resulted in domestic workers in Chennai not receiving wages according to Indian Labour Wage Regulations (Neetha and Palriwala, 2011: 111). A minimum wage has only been set in 2018. Even then, this is much below market standards.<sup>4</sup>

Another prominent organisation in Chennai is the Centre for Women's Development and Research (CWDR) founded in 1993. According to the 2010 CWDR Impact Assessment Report, the organisation is active in 85 slums in Chennai (Azariah & Vani, 2010: 5). Their focus lies on domestic workers, adolescent girls and single women. The main objectives of the CWDR are to foster domestic worker trade union enrolment, organise women into self-help groups as well as create and strengthen educational opportunities (Azariah & Vani, 2010: 5-6). Although 14 of the interviewed domestic workers in Chennai acknowledged being members of the CWDR Manushi Trade Union, the majority felt that they had not benefited from their membership. In spite of this, there were women with a high awareness of labour and human rights among the interviewees. Even if the impact appears thus far to be modest, the empirical data demonstrates that at least a certain level of awareness has been reached.

The third organisation is the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), one of the largest party-affiliated trade unions. Efforts to increase unionisation in Chennai have been strengthened by left-leaning political parties and the long-established trade unions associated with them. The leader of the Chennai Section for Domestic Workers reported that in general the unionising processes of domestic workers is a difficult task. Due to the hours and the nature of domestic work, participation in union activities is rather low and the great majority of workers are not unionised (Mattila, 2012:13; Neetha and Palriwala, 2011:113). In explaining the low unionisation rates among domestic workers, CITU cited the fact that union work is not considered female work and that domestic workers do not recognize themselves as workers (E 04/ 96).

Hence, the above empirical case study of domestic workers in Chennai has shown that these female workers share a collective sense of injustice. Examples of workers who expect employers to talk to them respectfully or to treat them equally by using the same plates for their food show that the domestic workers have a shared moral source of justice according to which they evaluate these actions as unjust. Furthermore, this shared moral topography have resulted in domestic workers' starting to organise themselves.

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we intended to shed light on the moral topography and the nature and conditions that constitute everyday ethics of marginalized citizens in Chennai. Our attempt to articulate the specific characteristics of the moral topography of domestic

4 See <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2018/sep/19/new-minimum-wage-cap-will-lead-to-exploitation-of-domestic-workers-1874107.html>.

workers and understand their geographies of “doing ethics” (Lambek, 2010) have provided a deeper understanding of how moralities are continuously constituted through social, material and spatial relations.

The moral topography of the everyday lives of domestic workers in Chennai is characterised by shared experiences of injustice. Justice, as a moral source, begets the ideal ‘equality’. Consequently, domestic workers express their ideal of a relation marked by ‘equity’ to their middle-class employers. This shared sense of justice become evident in the domestic workers’ claim to a decent and fair life. One aspect of this claim is their expectation of recognition and respect from their employers. The empirical evidence demonstrates that domestic workers often do not (any longer) tolerate disrespectful and discriminatory actions or forms of communication from their employers. Indeed, the presence of such treatment leads to feelings of rejection and resistance which, in turn, result in specific collective practices.

Furthermore, examples from the everyday practices of domestic workers show that the moral dimension also manifests spatially; different levels of respect are attributed to different societal groups. Especially the topic ‘eating from the same plate’ provides a good example of the spatial manifestation of morality. The above mentioned logic of equality in the collective conscious of domestic workers necessitates they eat spatially on the same level as their middle class employers. A shared sense of injustice and increased awareness of their rights drive domestic workers to start organising themselves in the lack of such spatial equality. The National Domestic Workers Movement along with two other examples of organisations promoting domestic workers’ rights proved that processes of self-organisation has started to become more and more formalised.

To conclude, the practical and pragmatic knowledge production of marginalised urban citizens is increasingly important in an urban world evermore complex and polarised. Knowledge and practices created and implemented by citizens themselves are powerful and socially often more legitimate, and therefore, promise to be effective in everyday life. The project URBANSELF provided a conceptual basis for identifying and understanding collective practices in the realm of the citizens in order to tackle urban challenges in the Global South and the Global North.

*Figure 1: Domestic workers in the Canal Bank slum in Mylapore, Chennai (Vogel 2018)*



*Figure 2: Domestic worker washing dishes in the kitchen while the employer (right) is preparing tea (Vogel 2018)*



*Figure 3: Slum area at a river bank in Chennai (Vogel 2018 )*



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