CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The two objectives of this study were to understand the lives and work of the urban poor home-based workers in low-income settlements ofMumbai, and to uncover the process of unionisation through which they asserted their collective voice. I used ethnographic research to look at the internal workings of LMKS, a Maharashtra-based trade union of women workers in informal employment. My research asked the questions, ‘How is home-based work performed and in what conditions?’, ‘What is the nature of trade-union work in unionsuch as LMKS?’, ‘In what way is it a defining moment in the lives of urban poor working-women?’ and ‘How and why is the solidarity through LMKS different from other forms of associating through religious or caste associations?’

In the previous chapters, we got an understanding of the lives of home-based workers in Mumbai’s low-income settlements, as well as the functioning of the LMKS. We grasped the way in which LMKS conceptualised working-women’s practical needs, their organising principles, their strategic priorities and their outreach attempts. This type of unionisation not only represents grassroots activism from the urban poor in informal employment but also illuminates the factors that characterise the *process* of ‘being organised’. As such, this is not a static study, but a dynamic one, which dignifies the process of ‘small incremental change’ among women, individually and collectively.

This chapter presents the theoretical implications of this study, by consolidating the insights that I gained from my immersive involvement with the LMKS over the years. I attempt a gendered analysis through the SRF (put forth by Naila Kabeer) to formulate an interpretation of *what went on* through the union’s efforts at collectivising women. I extend the scope of this analysis to understand its implications for the labour process (as understood by Marx and Braverman) for home-based work performed by urban poor working-women in low-income settlements. I conclude by presenting my thesis, which posits that organising women home-based workers in the informal economy entails a continuous engagement with building their consciousness as workers as well as focusing on the issues of their family, neighbourhood, and community. This is characteristically different from organising other cohorts of working-women in informal employment such as domestic workers, whose home and workplace are clearly separate.

However, before I do so, I must provide what Howard Becker (1967: 247) calls a ‘sociological disclaimer’. It must be noted that this study is biased towards ‘seeing things from the perspective of only one party to the conflict’ and that, like all researchers, my political preferences have dictated which ‘side’ I am on. (*ibid.*: 244, 245). This study is only from the perspective of urban poor working-women and the

trade-union activists among them. I have not sufficiently tried to understand the views of the middlepersons who are the crucial links in remunerative home-based work or the perspectives of men in the family and community, government officials, and policy-makers. The hope is that this lacuna will be corrected by future studies, which would 'gradually enlarge our grasp of all the relevant facets' (*ibid*: 247) of remunerative home-based work and the collectivisation among home-based workers.

I will now turn to the interpretation and analysis of my findings. To do so, I begin by presenting a glimpse of the life of an urban poor household in a low-cost settlement.

Introduction

Imagine a family of six in an urban slum. It consists of a man, his elderly parents, his wife and their two children. He is seen as theprimary income-earner and the breadwinner, while the othersare considered dependents. Assume that he is a mason on construction sites. He wakes up at 3 am and goes to stand at a designated '*Naka*' (street-corner) to be 'picked up' by a contractor who will assign him daily-wage work at one of the construction sites in the city. Competition at these *Nakas* is intense and any brotherhood or solidarity among the workers disappears in those precious moments of 'selection' by the contractor.

If he is lucky, he will be picked up from this street-corner for most part of the year and have work available. If not, he must keep waiting around at the *Naka* hoping that his services might be required by others. When he is unable to find work on a given day, he gets disappointed and angry. Dejected, he makes a run to the local liquor bar and drinks at different hours—early morning, evening, or late through the night. On days when he does manage to find work, the occupational stresses also make him disappointed and angry. When he returns from the work-site in the evening, he is dropped off at the same *Naka*. Here, he unwinds with his fellow-workers over cups of *chai* and gossip. The conversations continue when these groups of men walk to the liquor bars.

If a man hears or overhears a rumour about his wife or a family member, he feels embarrassed and humiliated. With a heavy head, he carries back home the fatigue, disappointment, rage, and humiliation of the day. He begins to get edgy and irritable at the slightest instance and his tension seeks release in a scuffle with his wife. He becomes suspicious of her (based on hearsay)and accuses her of lies, deceit, and infidelity. He beats her and the children as a way to assert his position of being the head of the household. For days and months when he is unemployed, he tries hard to retain his self-image of a breadwinner, a provider, and the primary decision-maker of the family. Being disgusted with his own self, he dreams of a day that he would not have to scramble to make ends meet. For non-judgemental succour and understanding, he then turns to other men in his situation, and alcohol provides the only affordable

‘escape’ from the reality around him. The agony of his family continues with his ups and downs. This situation is reminiscent of the African–American men at street-corners in Elliot Liebow’s (2003: 138) monograph,

> Sometimes he sits down and cries at the humiliation of it all. Sometimes he strikes out at her or the children with his fists, perhaps to lay hollow claim to being man of the house in the one way left open to him, or perhaps simply to inflict pain on this woman who bears witness to his failure as a husband and father and therefore as a man. Increasingly, he turns to the streetcorner where a shadow system of values constructed out of public fictions serves to accommodate just such men as he, permitting them to be men once again …

A man who is unable to earn enough from his livelihoods, in ways that let him adequately provide for himself and his family, is forced to seriously exceed his physical capability and work harder to make ends meet. When his extra efforts are not enough, his family members too enter the workforce to supplement the main income. The pressure of being able to afford even the most basic necessities then gets intensified for the urban poor. Hence, this family of a construction worker finds itself ‘fully employed’ by having not just the man working, but also his wife, parents and children performing home-based work or domestic work while handling all domestic chores as well. The family needs to keep taking loans by pawning its small reserve of gold and silver jewellery to pay for the children’s education or the family’s frequent healthcare expenses. In order to live on a small, stretched budget through the month, the family is forced to let go of the idea of a basic minimum wage to make way for any earnings that can be brought home.

The family lives in slums because of its inability to afford better housing elsewhere, it reduces its intake of nutritious food when the prices of food rise, it skimps on sleep because the working hours must be longer, and it works in situations and workplaces that can have dangerous consequences for physical and mental health. It also faces the constant insecurity of not having enough work and income at any time during the year, the stress of the actual work itself, the fear of intermittent disease and illness, the lack of grievance redressal for occupational hazards, and the serious lack of a safety net. Is it then surprising that the lowest age of mortality among men in Mumbai’s slums is 40 years (LEARN, 2014)?

What follows is early widowhood for the wife, which pushes all these insecurities on to her. The situation necessitates that the children and the elderly in the family too intensify their contribution to the family’s earnings. This single-woman-headed household then begins to further reduce its basic consumption required for its reproduction. The children grow up witnessing the helplessness of the mother and are forced to drop out of schools or colleges to help out with the family earnings. They enter the workforce early in life with low education and therefore their chances of going beyond a certain threshold of income and skills are further slimmed. As a result, even though they are literate, they do not have specialised education or sufficient qualifications to even be eligible for specialised skill enhancement programs, which are required to access jobs in a highly competitive job market. Structural inequalities and

discriminatory patterns of hiring in the formal sector are designed to either keep them lurking in low-paid jobs (‘sticky floor’ as opposed to ‘glass ceiling’) or not consider them for employment entirely. With nowhere else to go, the children join the informal workforce and become its permanent fixtures, engaged as domestic workers, home-based workers, construction workers, ragpickers, street vendors, garment workers, micro factory-workers, cooks, mess-workers, and so on. This could partly explain the presence of multiple generations the urban poor performing the same tasks within the informal economy.

Lifeof WorkingWomen in the Informal Economy

In the previous section, I discussed the compulsions of an urban poor working man from a low-cost settlement and the implications of his circumstances for his family. The understanding of the life of a woman worker is incomplete without understanding the material conditions that shape it. The physical, emotional, socio-cultural, and financial health of a family has a direct bearing on the work of a woman, both in her domestic and remunerative sphere. Specifically within the informal economy, social relations play an important role as far as procuring and maintaining work is concerned. The ways in which these relationships are structured ultimately determine the actions or choices that individuals are allowed to make in their contexts. In the case of women, the social mores and the prescription of their family, religion, community, and society determine their conduct with others. The way women dress or move or interact is based on their self-imposed restrictions in keeping with approved social norms for their conduct. However, these norms also impact the decisions they are able to make in a given situation of vulnerability. For instance, it is fairly common to find women alter their interactions with their friends or neighbours in response to their husband’s suspicions and beating. They become heavily guarded in their sharing of experiences and assume the highest burden of protecting the family’s honour. Women find that the simplest way to do so in everyday life is by ‘keeping to themselves’ and not sharing their troubles, irrespective of the intensity of their circumstances.

Further, the scarce-resource conditions that characterise low-income settlements widen the rift between women, mainly because men find it convenient to leave to the women all the difficult tasks of filling water, doing laundry, providing care, cooking and feeding, and maintaining cleanliness. This is not only because these tasks are laborious and unpaid but also because they entail fighting with the neighbours on a daily basis. In Dharavi, one finds such high levels of congestion that the living rooms of most homes extend into the narrow labyrinths that form the pathway for thoroughfare. This is bound to create tension in the use of ‘public space’ and therefore continually requires negotiation and toughness. The woman is consumed by worries over her family’s health needs, her children’s education, unexpected eviction which intensify her vulnerability and helplessness. With such strife in her living environment, the woman also

faces uncertainty in work, precarity in working conditions, and exploitation in her working relationship. Together, these form the **base** of her 'super-exploitation' (Mies, 2012b). Global capitalcomfortably sits on top of this exploitative base and makes unbridled gains, whilepatriarchy facilitates this process. As a result, women suffer in isolation, are oppressed and exploited, and are expected to suppress their voice. Women internalise the norms and gender-role expectations in work and life, and their suffering remains invisible even to their own selves. Walby's (1990) analysis of the movement of private patriarchy to public patriarchy is important in understanding this process. She described six key patriarchal structures that operate simultaneously and define the 'full range of patriarchal relations'. These are the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions including religions, media, and education (Walby, 1990: 178). She further distinguished between two forms of patriarchy—private, which has an exclusionary strategy, and public, which has a segregationist strategy (*ibid.*). She noted that the intersection of the first wave of feminism with expanding capitalism marks the shift of private patriarchy to public patriarchy.The former is characterised by household production in the private sphere and the control of the women by a patriarch, whereas the latter constitutes the foundation of the structures (*ibid.*). In private patriarchy, the man in the family ultimately benefits by the subordination of women, whereas in public patriarchy, women are subordinated in the public arena collectively instead of by individual patriarchs (*ibid.*). Hence, in the private sphere, women's mobility is restricted by limiting their access to the public sphere. However, in public patriarchy women are not necessarily formally excluded but are collectively subordinated through structures. In other words, women's exclusion from the state is replaced by their subordination within it (*ibid.*: 178).

Social Relations Framework

It is only when we take a holistic approach to examine a working-woman's life that we can begin to fathom the factors responsible for her systematic subjugation. It is in this context that I find Kabeer's (1994) SRF for gender analysis useful. The SRF had originally emerged as a response to misconceived and misdirected development interventions, which Kabeer (1994: 267–268) argued,'…compartmentalized [*sic*] modes of development planning' and they tended to

> …focus on very specific aspects of women's lives …and define their intervention in terms of those aspects alone …Such interventions are either doomed to failure (thereby confirming planners' worst fears about women's irrational behaviour) or else result in the intensified exploitation of women's labour.

Because it takes a holistic view of the gendered social relations that shape the lives of women, the SRF is not prescriptive but relies on the complexity of the processes that govern women's life. Hillenbrand et al. (2014: 354) elegantly summarise the aims of the SRF in saying that,

> It aims to capture the complexity of gender–power relations, the gendered nature of institutions, and the interactions between policies and practices at different institutional locations …it focuses beyond the grassroots level of household and community to other structural systems that produce and reproduce inequality, including the state and the market.

The static nature of existing models and approaches to women's empowerment are conceptualised taking into account women's roles and responsibilities. The SRF on the other hand, makes space for the dynamic nature of gendered social relations, focusing on the power inherent in them. By power, Kabeer (*ibid.*: 66, 226) does not refer to a single aspect of the social system but the whole gamut of social relations embedded in structures: 'male power …operates through the organizational [*sic*] logic of public institutions …', which 'enable men to mobilize [*sic*] a greater range of resources—symbols and meanings, authority and recognition, objects and services—in a greater range of institutional domains: political, economic and familial'. She argued that, 'In practice, economic processes frequently work through cultural relations, and cultural "rules" have concrete, material effects' (*ibid.*: 134).Hence, instead of viewing it as a 'dichotomy', one must look at the confluence of economic and cultural aspects in defining the position of the woman in the social hierarchy.

From 'I Cannot' to 'We Can': Creating a Collective Consciousness

It would be a misnomer to assume that the interests of women are homogenous. Owing to their positioning in societies through a variety of different social relations, often women's interests as a category are shaped in a complex, and sometimes conflicting manner (Kabeer, 1994: 299). The process of building a 'consciousness' is therefore central to any attempt at women's empowerment. Kabeer argued that,

> …women's strategic gender interests …are likely to emerge only through a process of struggling 'against the grain' of common sense [*sic*] notions about gender inequality. 'Conscientization' [*sic*] …is an important step in the struggle through which women increase their *capacity to define and analyse their subordination*, to *construct a vision* of the kind of world they want, and *to act* in pursuit of that vision (*ibid.*) (emphasis added)

This is only possible if women are able to question the belief systems that systematically legitimise their subordination, by analysing their problems and situations and then devising strategies to confront them. This is a slow process of creating individual awareness through collective awareness and sustained through a dialectic process among women themselves. This process takes on the arduous task of replacing a large part of women's refractory conceptions of divisiveness with those of solidarity. The narratives of

LMKS activists discussed in the previous chapters bear testimony to this fact. This does not imply that women do not implicitly retain at least some part of their distrust towards each other despite being unionised—after all, long years of conditioning do not wash away instantly. Yet, it is important to understand that the process of*questioning* that begins to take root, induces in women a willingness to challenge, and eventually override these divisions. Hence, while they retain some prejudices and biases, they alsogradually learn to give them less importance, in favour of their collective identity.

This process of reimagining can be triggered at any moment: some women are influenced by this 'unusual thinking' soon enough and most others take a long time to be convinced. Women-led movements such as LMKS therefore have twice the number of difficulties in implementing their solidarity-based strategies, because at each instance, they must confront (1) the distrust women have *learned to feel* towards each other and (2) the divisiveness that the activists themselves retain. The dialectic process of argumentation and consensus-building among activists, among activists and members, and among members themselves, is therefore the only way in which this tide can be turned in favour of all women.

It is perhaps useful to recognise the challenging yet transformative work of LMKS in terms of 'practical gender needs' and 'strategic gender interests'. Molyneux (1985) suggested that women's strategic gender interests are deductively derived 'from the analysis of their subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements from those which exist', whereas practical gender needs are inductively derived

> …from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labour …are usually a response to immediate perceived need, and they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality (Molyneux, 1985: 232, 233).

Extending the use of these meaningful constructs in her SRF, Kabeer (1994: 300) indicated that,

> …practical gender needs, arising as they do out of their pre-assigned, routine responsibilities for family welfare within the existing gender division of labour, are likely to be more easily accommodated within the policy-making agenda than their strategic concerns which threaten the existing status-quo.... Retaining both needs and interests as distinctive elements of social-relations analysis …allows them to be perceived as actors competent to interpret their own needs rather than as merely recipients of officially defined provision.

Gender-transformative movements such as the one initiated by LMKS seek to address women's practical gender needs *as well as* make space for their strategic gender interests. In subsequent sections, we shall see how this dual focus has resulted in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the LMKS.

Kabeer (1994: 281, 2820) identified five interrelated aspects of social relationships within institutions, which are significant in the analysis of gender inequality (emphases original):

1. *Rules: how things get done*

2. *Resources: what is used, what is produced*

3. *People: who is in, who is out, who does what*

4. *Activities: what is done*

5. *Power: who decides, whose interests are served*

The dimension of resources is of particular importance to us. The SRF attempts to understand not just 'what is produced', but also, '*how* it is produced'. Kabeer (1994: 280) states that the means of production could be classified into three categories—human resources, tangible resources, and intangible resources. The intangible resources are equally important as the human and tangible ones. This is evident from noticing that people participate in all informal networks and associations with great tenacity to gradually build this category of resources. These associations, however, tend to be based on religious, caste, regional, or linguistic grounds and often do not have women as active agents of participation or decision-making, even though they may visibly seem to be so. An excellent example of this can be found in Tarini Bedi's (2007: 1535) ethnographic work on the participation of women in Shiv Sena party's women's wing called the Mahila Aghadi:

> … [the Aghadi] was born out of efforts of young Maharashtrian women in Bombay touched by joblessness of their fathers and brothers and therefore attracted to the Shiv Sena's potent 'sons of the soil' message …the multiple founding narratives [of the Aghadi] …focus on visual events where women's bodies were inserted into public space via a performance of 'dashing and daring' …however, despite the broad recruitment of women into the party and plenty of interaction between men and women, Shiv Sena …preserves a separation of the women's wing, arguably in order to ensure that women remain structurally subordinate.

A forum that goes beyond such 'optics' and genuinely seeks to bring out the suppressed voice of the woman therefore creates an unusual space for working-women in informal economy to come together *for each other*. Even though the organising principle of LMKS is based on women's identity as workers, it goes beyond looking at issues and concerns of work alone. It has an inclusive approach, which welcomes women workers (and non-workers) belonging to different religions, castes, and linguistic and regional backgrounds and fosters interactions among them. Most of these interactions are contentious because of the widespread diversity of women's backgrounds, but the activists play a role in recognising these differences at the same time as creating the consciousness of a 'shared collective identity' of being LMKS members. Over time, close interpersonal relationships are fostered among them creating the intangible resources of solidarity, a collective consciousnessand organisational capacities. One of the most important contributions of the LMKS is its ability to covert these*intangible resources* to *material (tangible) resources* for its members in times of crisis or need, thereby establishing at least some control over their individual and collective lives. For instance, women try to tap into the reservoir of their collective strength during medical emergencies when others pool in small amounts of support in cash or kind. Another example is that of collecting contributions from members and non-members for purchasing

rations and supplies to be distributed to extremely poor LMKS members during the festival of *Diwali*. A third example would be calling for a strike demanding higher piece-rates for women's home-based work. Participation and investment in extra-household associations such as LMKS is therefore considered meaningful and valuable by women not only regarding their rights, identity, self-esteem, and solidarity (non-material, in-process benefits) but also regarding their material needs (tangible benefits) and collective influence within their communities.

LMKS emphasises the interlinking of practical gender needs with those of strategic gender interests. There are unexpected hurdles dotting every step of its way. When LMKS began to build on its small incremental collective successes, it developed the confidence to take on higher risks of questioning and challenging the status-quo. However, it also began to meet with stronger resistance from all quarters. In several instances, LMKS activists have received life-threats, their reputations have been slandered, they have been stalked, they have been called seditious, and they have been blamed for provocatively coercing other women to create a disturbance in their seemingly comfortable lives. For instance, soon after the LMKS had been victorious in pressurising the local ration office to release temporary ration cards to its members at the lowest fee, the (then) president of the union was beaten up by goons at the behest of local middlepersons that were engaged in the business of making ration cards at exorbitant rates. Further, even within their own families, they have faced tremendous opposition in various forms. For instance, they have been thrown out of their homes in the middle of the night,[63] they have been assaulted physically and sexually, they have been falsely accused of having affairs and illicit relationships, and they have faced higher restrictions on their mobility and interactions with others. For example, a former president of the LMKS found her husband cutting up her union identity card when she put up a resistance to his disrespectful behaviour and daily violence towards her. After she resisted, he became angrier and decided to teach her a lesson by assaulting her, first physically then sexually. At such times, the woman feels a much higher need for succour, and the union makes itself available to her unconditionally, without caring for the time of day. It also offers its full support in confronting the 'other side', provided the woman wishes to do so. This proves that the ability to take on risks is preceded and followed by unconditional support from the union. This is in stark contrast to theories which examine people's gains in material terms alone. de Volo (2006: 149) in her work on a Nicaraguan mother's organisation reported that,

> … emotional support, collective identity, and empowerment to be highly valued nonmaterial long-term benefits derived from the process of participating collectively in pursuit of other goals …the benefits are accrued in-process as actors officially participate for some larger goal.

63 In one case, for having attended a 3-day residential capacity building workshop out of town

It is evident that at such critical junctures, it is the power of solidarity among women, and their 'shared collective identity' as LMKS members that uses and simultaneously builds their intangible resources by encouraging them to stand together and *not give up*. Even though the pressures to give up the formal association with the union are high, it is the belief in this collective support of the union that strengthens the woman's resolve to stay connected with it. Kabeer (1994: 301, 302) noted that

> …going as they do at the very heart of the power relations of gender, they are also likely to meet with powerful resistance. The capacity to withstand this resistance has to be built up; it cannot be taken for granted. Consequently, the idea of strategic gender interests can also be given a processual interpretation. Meeting daily practical needs in ways that transform the conditions in which women make choices is a crucial element of the process by which women are empowered to take on the more deeply entrenched aspects of their subordination ....

Denial of dignity is only understood by a person at the level of feeling, as an abstract concept. When the union steps in and helps her to resolve her issues, it is also performing the latent function of making her realise that she is important. Hence, any act that addresses not only her immediate issues as a worker or a woman, but also her dignity as a human being,has a powerful impact on her concept of her own self. When a woman feels convinced that she must take control of her life, the union that has helped her to get there becomes her main source of strength. She starts to believe that she has a stake in ensuring its survival, and feels a sense of ownership of it. She allows herself to participate in it, actively or passively. However, in order to get to this point, the union has much work to do, not the least of which is to sustain and build on the momentum of the small incremental successes of its individual members and the organisation itself. Keeping the momentumstrong, and the interest of its members alive, is then the real task of the union. This is the part where the creativity and ingenuity of the activists come into play.

Unions such as LMKS tend to be more open to new ideas of mass-mobilisation than their formal sector counterparts that follow a set pattern and structure, however weak or ineffective these may be. Having and sharing information is important, but it is equally significant to ingenuously come up with creative ways of engaging people's imagination. For instance, the Solapur branch of LMKS ingenuously organises '*haldi-kumkum*' ceremonies every once in a while.[64] The setting of Solapur LMKS '*haldi-kumkum*' gatherings is informal, in which LMKS members from various slums of the city converge for an evening of fun, games, laughter, and bonding. LMKS activists use this opportunity to share new information about the union's work, as well as give and receive updates from their various initiatives with the members. Similarly in Mumbai, LMKS activists organise a *Diwali* party for its fiftypoorest members irrespective of their religion or caste and end the party with a distribution foodgrains and other essentials. Apart from the

64 In Maharashtra, *haldi-kumkum* is a popular get-together of women, where they gather to put turmeric-vermilion powders on each-other's foreheads, and chat, joke, laugh, sing and play some group games.

standard field-meetings, such initiatives are important in fostering contact, sparking interaction with each other, and rejuvenating the members' interest in the union.

LMKS Nashik office is open for any member to visit, catch a breather and chat with activists and other members at the office. Domestic workers, for instance, visit the office at noon, right after their morning shift ends. There is no agenda here, except to say 'hello' and catch up with activists and others present in the office at that time. They talk about their day, listen to others talk about theirs, overhear the activists talking about registration in government welfare boards or listen as they provide compassionate counsel to battered women. Even if it means a 10-minute exchange, this break helps them unwind and feel enriched by their time at the union before going back home. Members value the time they get to spend in the union office and in the field meetings, imagining the union as a space where they go not only for their troubles but also for informal interactions that provide them a 'sense of belonging' to a solidarity group. The role of the union as a forum for discussing and collectively resolving work and workplace issues is certainly important. But simultaneously, the openness of the LMKS outfits in helping women build their articulation skills in a gradual manner in an enabling learning-environment, where they can unwind, develop the ease to ask questions without fear of being judged, learn from each other, and garner the collective energy to stand in support of each other in times of crises and celebration, are all equally important components for sustaining the momentum of building 'circles of influence'.

When the momentum reduces, there is a gradual weakening of these circles of influence. Infighting among trade-union activists is both the reason and result of this reducing momentum.Sustainingthe motivation among the leadership and the momentum among membership is therefore important. Having a liberal mix of individuals from different walks of life and diverse socio-economic backgrounds giving ideas to keep this momentum can prove to be enriching. However, there are several hindrances too. Initiating and sustaining grassroots leadership of women is difficult due to family resistance as well as the dynamics enfolding among the activists themselves. Informality and its inherent vulnerability compounds this problem and not having sufficient wherewithal further intensifies it. Women leaders are social actors of the same social milieu as the constituents they represent, and may not be taken seriously in the beginning. Further, directive, authoritarian leadership styles too can strip the sense of ownership among the core group of activists. As grassroots leaders of a new movement with gender and class as its intersecting focal points, they must newly learn to reimagine their relationships with other women— not thinking of them as 'competitors' but as 'co-actors' creating a congenial space and building their collective futures. In addition, they must make the uncomfortable move of spilling out family and community secrets at a collective forum, maintain a balance of generosity and firmness when approached with members' grievances, be answerable to their members' allegations, be prepared to make enemies

within their community and society, learn to run an office and have transparent monitoring and information systems, look for building bridges with the State, employers, and relevant campaigns, maintain alliances, and overcome fear in the process.

All this is difficult to accomplish because it requires a radical change in their hitherto accepted notions of 'I cannot' to be replaced by 'We Can'. At different points in this journey, women consider giving up because of the pressures of resistance they find against themselves. Hence, with every step forward, there is a possibility of going two steps back. Over the years, LMKS has learned to accept that this is the way in which the process unfolds for most women. It believes that as a union, if it manages to project a non-judgemental and compassionate acceptance of the indecision and confusion of its members and leaders, it has a better chance at long-term survival as a forum of poor marginalised women attempting difficult negotiations. In this vein, Kabeer (1994: 91) offered an optimistic view of women's organising effort

> …the political will for taking on more politically controversial issues which address women's strategic gender interests is contingent on women themselves organizing [*sic*] to demand and promote change …Solidarity is likely to be most effective when it is built from the bottom up, in response to locally identified needs and priorities …therefore, women's collective strength and creativity remains the main hope for a transformative politics …Throughout the world, it has become apparent that women's formal and informal lobbies, organizations [*sic*] and movements have formed the backbone of struggles to resist the predations of a top-down development process …individually, these organizations [*sic*] appear weak, underfinanced and disparate. But together, they represent a diverse and rich movement for changing women's lives….

Home-Based Work and the Labour Process

In the above discussion, I have attempted to use the SRF to analyse the work of LMKS. Let us now try to understand the implications of organising in the informal economy on the actual labour process. Given the topic of this study, I will restrict this discussion to the labour process in home-based work. Before I begin this discussion, I wish to reiterate that home-based work constitutes both own-account workers (self-employed) and piece-rate workers (wage-employed).

Labour process: A brief history. Two scholars are credited with the origin of the labour process theory. The first was, Karl Marx, who studied the labour process in the transition from pre-capitalist to the capitalist mode of production and introduced the concept of alienation. The second thinker, Harry Braverman extended Marx's discussion in the later stages of capitalism (also known as monopoly capital). For Marx (1992: 284) 'The simple elements of the labour process are (1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work'. The labour process is, therefore, purposeful activity aimed at the production for use-value or exchange value. In *Capital*, Marx noted that,

> Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*sic*] his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of …Apart from the exertion of the working organs, a purposeful will is required for the entire duration of the work. This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work and the way in which it has to be accomplished, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as the free play of his own physical and mental powers, the closer his attention is forced to be (*ibid*).

Purposeful will is therefore an important component of the labour process, devoid of which, work can become drudgery. Closely linked to purposeful will then, is the cognitive conception of work itself. Marx suggested that

> …we presuppose labour in a form in which it is an exclusively human characteristic …what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been *conceived* by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally (*ibid*.) (emphasis added).

'Conception' too is essential in executing work, because a worker derives meaning from it. Hence, purposeful will and conception are two important points that must be considered before beginning a discussion on the labour process.

Somewhere in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in Western Europe, capital penetrated in the sphere of production in the form of 'manufacturing capital' (Mandel, 1992: 55). As opposed to the pre-capitalist form of production, in manufacturing, a single capitalist employed a number of labourers to manufacture large quantities of goods. A system of division of labour was introduced to increase productivity and efficiency. This division essentially separated the conception of work from its execution, resulting in a gradual process of deskilling, which eventually caused alienation of labour. In the nineteenth century, a number of scientific and technological innovations boosted factory production, where tools were replaced by machines and the separation of conception and execution of work became even more pronounced. In 1832, Charles Babbage published '*On the Economy of Machinery and Manufacturers*' in which he put forth his ideas for the division of labour based on skill levels, wherein high-cost workers were supposed to perform only high-skill jobs and leave the rest of the work process to low-paid and low-skill workers. Such a division of labour, according to Babbage, would result in high profitability for the manufacturer. Later, Braverman called this the 'Babbage principle' and said that Frederick Winslow Taylor with his 'scientific management' had 'understood this principle better than anyone else' (1974: 81).

In the twentieth century, capitalism had evolved from its competitive form of 'larger capital beating the smaller' to that of a consolidation of capitals in the form of monopoly capital. It is in this contextual climate that Braverman was writing about the significant changes occurring in the way work was being organised in modern industry. Baldoz and Koeber (1999: 135) noted that 'contrary to prevailing

perspectives of the time, which reflected the imperatives and interests of management, Braverman argued that work is systematically degraded'.

Braverman's labour process theory. In his 1974 seminal work titled '*Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*', Braverman argued that the separation of conception and execution of work that characterised the capitalist mode of production, led to work becoming increasingly meaningless and alienating forlabour, subsequently resulting in the degradation of work. Owing to the deep division of labour, Braverman believed that

> …the labor [*sic*] process is now divided between separate sites and separate bodies of workers. In one location, the physical processes of production are executed. In another are concentrated the design, planning, calculation, and record-keeping …two worlds of work are created: the world in which a very few managers and engineers grasp the process as a whole as their special monopoly, and the world of scheduling clerks, inventory clerks, timekeepers, machine tenders …and so on, each of whom performs simple labor [*sic*] in service to a complex machine and each of whom is expected to make a working life …out of these scraps of duties, none of which can engage the interest or capacities of a mature human more than a few weeks …after which they become sheer and mindless drudgery (1998: 86, 87, 321).

In addition to this deskilling process, the corporation also tries to 'produce a rapidly growing output without a proportional growth in the number of workers' in its attempts to economise on labour time by reducing the number of workers (*ibid*: 322).

Braverman's (1974: 318) deskilling thesis is important to us, in that, it presents a case for the cheapening of labour power through, among other ways, a breakdown of complex work-processes into simpler tasks

> …performed by workers whose knowledge is virtually nil, whose so-called training is brief, and who thereby be treated as interchangeable parts. In this way the requirements of production are satisfied *not through small pools of highly skilled labor* [*sic*] in each craft but by *labor of the simplest sort*. The consequence is that for most jobs the *whole of society becomes a labor pool* upon which to draw, and this helps to keep the value of the labor power at the level of subsistence for the individual or below the level of subsistence for the family' (Emphases added).

Braverman concluded that the 'accumulation of wealth, which takes place at one pole of society in the capitalist system is matched at the other pole by an accumulation of misery' (*ibid.*: 325), and that a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism will present itself as the only option to eliminate the cruelty inherent in capitalism. In the words of Spencer (2000: 226), Braverman had

> …identified capitalism as the antithesis to human production …[his] vision incorporated the reconnection of mental and manual labour and thus embraced a specific commitment to the restoration of humanity in work … For Braverman …there was no antidote to alienation beyond the abolition of capital itself.

Apart from the criticisms of Braverman's work, such as his romantic view of craftwork, which underpins the deskilling thesis, the failure to consider management strategies apart from Taylorism, the denial of the workers' capacity to resist and force changes in management strategies, the deliberate neglect of the

subjectivity of labour, and the inadequate treatment of new technologies (Rowlinson and Hassard, 2000: 87, 88), what is important in our context is its lack of applicability in the transitional contexts of developing countries such as India, where the characteristics of feudal, caste-based pre-capitalist production relations co-exist with the capitalist relations of production (Khasnabis and Nag: 2001, 4836). If Braverman's deskilling thesis applies to workers engaged in a capitalist mode of production, should we assume that workers operating in the informal economy in developing countries are untouched by the deskilling process? This is especially important in the context of home-based work. Let us now turn to a brief discussion of the deskilling thesis and home-based work in informal economy. We will do so by discussing the labour process and work organisation of home-based work.

Labour process and work organisation in home-based work. As far as the piece-rate work is concerned, a home-based worker is usually told what needs to be done and she executes it. The middleperson is usually the one to share the details of the desired work. The design specifications are usually given to the middleperson by one or two individuals within the manufacturing unit (if the value chains are smaller and the work comes from a local micro-enterprise) or handed down a long chain of middlepersons (if the value chains are longer and the work comes from larger enterprises or export houses). Very rarely is she asked to use her imagination or creativity to perform the job. She is expected to 'prepare the pieces' exactly as the middleperson has asked her to, down to the final detail. In order to avoid any confusion, often middlepersons bring along a completed piece as a 'sample' with them before distributing the pieces and raw materials required. Any change or slight difference from the expected design or specifications means rejection of those pieces. Rejection spells consequences such as non-payment for the rejected pieces or re-doing them. As a result, the worker gets a clear message that using the creative side of her mind to enhance the quality of the piece at hand would be futile, because it would not only be rejected, but also spell financial consequences or extra work for no extra money. As it is, the payment for piece-rate home-based work tends to be extremely low.

Often the middleperson provides the materials to perform the remunerative task at hand, but other facilitating tools must be those of the worker's. As a result, one witnesses the use of items easily available in the living environment of the worker (such as staircase steps, tree-trunks, or window-grills) and basic household items (such as chairs, stools, pillars, rinds of cello tapes, small pieces of wood, utensils, and other household items) used widely by home-based workers. The investment in tools and implements is either low or inexistent because they (and their families) do not see the logic in spending money on buying better tools to ease the physical burden of the work and to enhance productivity as home-based work tends to be extremely low-paid.

As far as the self-employed home-based workers are concerned, their labour process and work organisation is entirely different from that of the piece-rate workers. First, they are usually not part of value chains and hence, no middleperson is involved in their work. Surely, there are exceptions to this rule, such as dependence on others for the marketing and sale of their home-made products. However, in the case of nearly all the self-employed home-based workers that I have come across, there has been no involvement of middlepersons. I have also noticed that a large part of self-employed home-based work involves providing services (intangible) rather than manufacturing products, such as providing home-based *tutoring*, providing home-based *salon* services, serving home-based *meals*, and providing tailoring services.[65] The decision-making often rests with the person who is providing the service, in that, the home-based tutors decide the fees they would charge per pupil, the timings of their classes, the intake limit, the holidays, and the distribution of their own responsibilities. In the case of those home-based enterprises where whole families are engaged as workers, the decisions are either made by the husband or the wife. For instance, in the case of mess-workers who provide cooked meals, work segregation is often gendered. Women and girls usually perform the tasks of prepping and cooking, whereas men and boys handle deliveries and payments.[66] Self-employed home-based workers tend to be excessively competitive with each other and hence remain divided. While one loses business owing to non-payment from one of the clients, the others vie to get those same clients. Thus, the 'sharing of burden' characteristic of groups of piece-rate workers is entirely missing in the case of self-employed home-based workers. Building solidarity among such competing groups is extremely challenging.

Self-employed home-based workers are also different from piece-rate workers because the former have near-complete knowledge of the entire work process compared to the latter. For instance, home-based mess workers are responsible for all activities related to serving cooked food, such as buying vegetables and other ingredients, cleaning and prepping them, cooking and packing the tiffins, and then delivering these tiffins to the clients. As opposed to this, home-based piece-rate workers are responsible only for one part of the 'value-addition' in an entire chain. This means that they often lack the ability to conceptualise or visualise what constitutes the entire chain, where their products end, at what rate they are sold, and a general lack of understanding of the entire gamut of activities required to make the final product. It could

65 It could be argued that work such as serving cooked-meals and tailoring does result in a 'product', but I consider these services because they are characteristically different from the idea of a 'product'. It is generally difficult to distinguish between products and services, because every product is bound to have a part of service and vice versa. However, in my view, the key differentiation between a product and service is that of selling expertise. In other words, a home-based tailor or mess-worker is essentially selling his/her expertise in creating that meal or that tailored item respectively. From the point of view of the receiver, s/he then is consuming a product, but paying for the expertise that has gone into making that product.

66 There are certainly some overlaps, where one notices men and boys involved in prepping and cooking as well.

be argued then, that home-based piece-rate work, at least to some extent, can be alienating. Self-employed home-based workers on the other hand, have an understanding of the entire circle of activities that constitutes the creation of their product or service. In general, they do not need to depend on the largesse of the middlepersons to get work or to be paid. However, this in no way suggests that they do not face insecurities and challenges in their work. Operating as low-end home-based enterprises in the informal economy, they are always exposed to the risk of crackdowns by the police and civic officials for being 'illegal' operations.

Further, home-based enterprises necessarily entail a convergence of the home and the workshop where 'the production of commodities is synchronised with reproduction of life' (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya, 2009: 41). In most cases, home-based enterprises use labour of the family members. Among all the risks associated with running one's own enterprise, the main challenge for home-based self-employed workers is the continuous anxiety of finding enough 'takers' for the services they offer. The scoping and sustaining of clients or consumers rests entirely on their shoulders. As a result, they must rely on their reputation within their social network to find work and customers. Often the competitors also come from the cultural and regional milieu as them, and hence there is competition in mobilising resources from the same pool of a common social network. It must be remembered that in India, religion and caste play an important role in determining one's occupation. In the informal economy, this trend is even more pronounced. Hence, in the absence of alternatives elsewhere, individuals and families are often forced to fall back on their caste-based skills and occupations, which reinforces as well as perpetuates occupational segregation on religious and caste grounds. A resultant process is that of deep consolidation of religious and caste-based social networks, leading to polarisation of interest groups based on these divisions. Family members, especially the young adults studying in schools and colleges, do not have a choice but to keep on contributing their unpaid labour to the enterprise, often against their wishes and despite their education. Hence, breaking out of such family occupations, which tend to be based on religious and caste-based skills, is not really an option for most young people. Even though the work may be hazardous and uninteresting for some or most family members, they must continue it so that they are able to reproduce themselves.

Another worry for self-employed home-based workers in the informal economy is the inability to create any savings. A mess-worker once told me, 'we eat from what we cook for our clients …the money we make gets used up in buying vegetables, meat [and other essentials] …I am unable to save any money ever. [I] often worry …' Home-based enterprises find themselves continuously in need of credit for running their business, and informal credit-systems (such as borrowing from moneylenders or from the

social network) are the only options available to them. Further, there is another important argument raised by Pearson (2004: 141)

> …the distinction between home-based workers and micro-entrepreneurs is not just a matter of semantics… own-account homeworkers while requiring better access to markets and microcredit, also need health insurance, health and safety protection, and pension provision. To lump them in the general category of enterprises, however small, is to lose sight of the precariousness of the work they carry out in order to ensure the survival or security of their families.

Unionised home-based workers: Implications for the labour process. In the previous section, we got an overview of the labour process and work organisation in both types of home-based work, piece-rate (wage-employed) as well as own-account (self-employed). It is evident that there are problems inherent in each of the types. It must not be forgotten that all home-based workers, whether they are piece-rate or self-employed, must also handle all domestic chores as well.

While piece-rate home-based work causes the worker to keep her cognition and creative imagination completely out of her productive activity, 'purposeful will' is nearly missing in certain family members in home-based enterprises of the self-employed. Each of these can be alienating conditions. Before we go any further, let us consider the meaning of the term alienation of labour. According to Braverman (1974: 317),

> …alienated labour [*sic*]…must be understood first of all in accordance with the prime definition of the verb to *alienate*, that is, to transfer ownership to another. The ownership of the tools and instruments of production is in capitalist society alienated, that is, transferred to others. The ownership of the product is alienated in the same sense. The same applies to the ownership of the proceeds from the sale of the product, and finally the process of production too is alienated. It too is transferred to alien control and becomes the property of others. In the end, everything about the productive process becomes alien to the worker in the sense that everything is outside his or her interests, claim, and control—the wage becomes the sole equity of the worker in the job. Thus in capitalist society production is carried on in an atmosphere of hostility or indifference by a mass of workers who have lost all stake in or concern for the process, and this in turn makes necessary certain extraordinary means of control and management (emphasis original).

As far as piece-rate home-based workers are concerned, one could also ascertain that they have never had a say in the entire production or labour process. How the product should be made, which design should be chosen, what materials should be used, what rates should be paid, when the payments should be made, etc., have never been their decisions in the first place. Now let us remind ourselves of the situation of piece-rate workers who are made to understand, by way of rejection of pieces or redoing of pieces for no extra money, that their creative abilities while making the pieces are 'not welcome'. This can be an alienating experience for the worker. It is even more so, if she is working in isolation. If we go back to the discussion in the sections above, we can understand why group work is so important to piece-rate workers. More than the other benefits that a group setting offers (such as breaking monotony, sharing the

burden of childcare, etc.), the most important characteristic is that it helps deal with the alienation experienced while performing a repetitive task, devoid of any creative engagement.

Of all the home-based tasks that I came across in the low-income settlements of Mumbai, most were performed on a piece-rate basis, except the mess service, tutoring service, and some tailoring which were on own-account basis. This shows us that a significant number of home-based workers are a part of local, national, or global value chains. It could also be a result of the concentration of garment and other manufacturing micro-units within the slum, which are linked to global value chains. As far as the piece-rate work is concerned, a home-based worker is usually told what needs to be done and she executes it. The middleperson is usually the one to share the details of the desired work. Very rarely is she asked to use her imagination or creativity to perform the job. Also, most home-based work, especially relating to garment and rubber, tends to be 'finishing' work. This could include tasks such as snipping loose threads off the stitched garments, peeling cashew-shells, or inserting threads in baggage tags, all of which are usually considered 'unskilled', and not requiring a specialisation. The worker often has to sit long hours cooped up in her home performing these tasks, which tend to be monotonous, repetitive, and lacking creativity. She must submit to these characteristics of her work because it is only by way of repetition that she can complete a large number of pieces. She watches TV alongside to create temporary amnesia about the arduous nature of her work, but switches off other electric items such as lights and fans to save on electricity bills. Her work is tiring, monotonous and she tends to get irritated due to her isolation.

As an alternative, home-based workers often prefer to perform such work in groups, simultaneously chatting, joking, and discussing updates of their neighbours. Interactions within the group cause her to temporarily forget about the monotony of her work, and kill the boredom inherent in such work. These groups have women mostly from the same neighbourhood, and hence, men too do not mind it when the group sometimes sits late through the night to perform the work. Since most areas in Dharavi are linguistically segregated, these groups too tend to comprise of women who speak the same languages.

Despite the divisiveness that women have been conditioned to maintain with each other, working together brews organic solidarity among these home-based work groups. Such groups choose community spaces to sit and work together, and here one finds a range of interesting selections. I have found women sitting on platforms outside their houses, on raised circular platforms built under *Peepul* trees, on the thoroughfares right outside their homes, in open community halls, at doorsteps of their homes, open areas around religious spaces, and so on. In this manner, even though the work performed in isolation of their homes seems monotonous and meaningless, women find entertainment and joy in the interactions of their work groups, which cause 'forgetfulness' about its negative aspects and make it bearable. If one attempts to

understand the value each individual member attaches to this group, it would perhaps be easier to comprehend why slum evictions and associated displacement are so difficult on people. Not only do the evictions crush their homes and livelihoods, but also this ‘organic ecosystem’ built within the groups over several years of bonding.

Another advantage of working in these groups is to share the burden of childcare. When a woman is working alone in her home, she feels stressed because while performing home-based work, which requires concentration on every piece, she also has to look after the needs of the child. This can cause frequent disturbances and stress, and often home-based workers wait until the children are asleep to resume their home-based work late through the night. This reduces their sleep time, causing huge sleep deficits and irritability, especially during the ‘season’ period when the order volume is high and the return time is short. As opposed to this, the group setting has definite advantages. All home-based workers in that group have their children around them, playing with each other or studying, eating, sleeping, or merely sitting near their mothers. Even if the woman is busy working, someone or another in the group is always watching out for them. This way, the burden of childcare is shared and the women are able to perform their remunerative tasks in a relatively ‘tension-free’ manner.

However, there are also some demerits of such groups too. By themselves, these groups*tend* to have an exclusionary element inbuilt in their formation.As we have seen in Chapter 1, Dharavi is formed along regional-linguistic lines. All neighbourhoods have at least one or two dominant linguistic groups. More often than not, most members of these groups are part of the same extended family or kin group. If this is so, they often belong to the same religion and caste. As a result, home-based workers who congregate in groups to perform work together are often known neighbours with similar backgrounds from among family, kin, and friends residing in the same lane or neighbourhood. Linguistic solidarity is both a reason and result of this process, of which exclusion could be an unintended consequence. It is certainly possible that this home-based workers’ group is open to welcoming other neighbours who do not belong to this same linguistic group, but such occurrences are rare.

Also, these groups are not usually able to channelise their group solidarity for any meaningful gains vis-à-vis home-based work itself. In other words, apart from providing much relief while performing monotonous, alienating, and low-paid piece-rate work, this group is not able to put up a resistance to demand for better piece-rates, timely payment of wages, and better working conditions or to develop a culture of group-norm-setting for dealing with each of these work- and workplace-related problems. This paradox exists because none of these home-based workers considers themselves ‘workers’, rather they believe that they are killing time, which is in turn shaped by the larger social structure that constantly

devalues them. As an unspoken rule, everyone in the group believes that their individual work is '*timepass*' and as a result, nobody ever thinks of questioning or challenging the existing conditions or the status quo.

It is here that the unionising work of LMKS brings valuable (and some would say 'radical') changes. By using the 'organic solidarity' of the group to mobilise memberships, it makes home-based workers part of a much larger inclusive arena of 'working-women in the informal economy', instead of their erstwhile 'shared identity' as a small exclusive group brought together by virtue of their linguistically formed residential areas. Second, and more importantly, it continuously works to create aconsciousnessthat they are 'workers' who have rights to sufficient work and decent working conditions. Third, as we have seen from the LMKS success stories collective action, it builds on this process of identity creation to induce practices of informal norm-setting and collective bargaining through the group. As a result, they begin to have a say in the labour process, however meek it may be. It sets in motion the crucial element of interaction within the group, which concerns itself with different aspects of home-based work and working conditions, thereby developing a sphere of control.

As the group starts to make gains on the basis of their collective action, it begins to have the shared confidence to take on bigger risks and demand for even better conditions. From a purely economic perspective, these gains may not seem significant at all; however, from a sociological and trade-union perspective, we notice that the group gradually begins to have an expanding control over the labour process and work organisation. It infuses a different kind of solidarity, which is based on 'shared purpose' and their 'collective identity' as workers worthy of fair wages, respect, and dignity. This change also shapes their view of themselves, their expectations from others (especially the treatment from the family) as well as their belief in the power of collectivisation. Thus, we see that, in the case of piece-rate workers, the alienating character of their work is gradually reduced when they begin to have a say in the labour process.

It is more difficult to organise the self-employed in home-based enterprises because the pressures induced by family are the most difficult to resist. As a result, there is much less scope for collective action within the enterprise, which essentially constitutes family members. Further, each enterprise is in competition with another and hence, devising a 'shared purpose' is all the more challenging. Here too, LMKS has made significant progress. Let us elucidate with a specific case.

In Dharavi, a significant number of families serve home-cooked meals. Typically, their clients are migrant workers or bachelors who reside in shared housing such as dormitories, where cooking facilities are not available. As a general practice, these subscribers pay for the meals on a monthly basis, wherein the

payment is made at the end of the month (when they themselves get their salaries). Some years ago, one of the mess-workers (a member of LMKS) mentioned that their most pressing problem at the time was that a large number of clients were defaulting on monthly payments. When the food service would subsequently be stopped, they would simply move on to the next mess and repeat the same practice there as well. Owing to the intense competition among home-based mess enterprises, none of them shared that they were each facing the same problem. It came to light only after LMKS decided to conduct a meeting in their area. One of the important conclusions of that meeting was that the mess workers had to stop viewing each other as competitors and realise that at a number of levels, they all faced the same problems.[67] It was suggested that they put up a united front and turn away the defaulters. To do so, they collectively devised a strategy of informing each other when such an incident (of defaulting) occurred, so that every other mess worker in the group would say 'no' to that person until he was left with no option but to pay his dues. In this manner, LMKS was successful in uniting the mess workers in addressing a significant problem that affected all of them equally. It was thus, in all of their interests to not take the narrow view of 'getting one new customer' and look beyond by focusing instead on the larger long-term gain of establishing a strategic system that discouraged, and eventually eliminated, the clients' practice of defaulting on payments. Even though the competitive spirit among home-based mess enterprises would perhaps never completely go away, LMKS was able to make a breakthrough in this specific instance of defaulting, which helped everybody. Their collective decision of turning away defaulters and standing united on this issue continues to exist to this day.

Further, LMKS made the other important contribution of helping mess workers realise that their children, especially the teenagers and young adults who were serious about their education and had consistently maintained good grades, must be offered an opportunity to pursue occupations of their choice. These discussions brought together various mess workers and their children. The latter described their dislike for different aspects of mess work, such as breathlessness while standing over large pots of hot food, the fear of getting burnt while performing hazardous tasks such as deep-frying over large pots of hot oil, and a disdain for the arduous tasks of chopping vegetables andwashing utensils. It dawned on all those present that this was perhaps the first time the children had got a patient hearing from their parents and family members.

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67 Among other important thoughts that came from the mess-workers through brainstorming in the meeting, three are worth mentioning: 1. The idea of making individual contributions to collectively own an electronic dough-kneading machine; 2. Taking turns in going to the wholesale vegetable market APMC on the outskirts of the city and buy supplies for all mess-workers, so as to benefit from the cheaper prices of these items; 3. A peaceful protest outside the local police station, and possibly coming to an agreement with the officials to resist intermittent police harassment.

As a generality, the lives and daily routines of mess workers and their families are structured around their work in the house, and there is never enough time to sit down and discuss issues that matter to each one. Through this meeting where several mess workers and their children came together, they were able to do so. The parents realised that their children felt a certain sense of coercive pressure in the home and often they would perform several mess-related tasks against their will. The mothers understood that their children wanted altogether different options of careers and work, which did not have anything to do with mess work. As a result, LMKS was able to create a bridge of open communication within families, which had thus far operated as commercial enterprises relying on and treating family members as unpaid workers.

In this way, we see that organising efforts and strategy-devising methods of the LMKS had helped even difficult-to-organise self-employed home-based workers. In the first example of mess workers' problem of defaulters, LMKS was able to unite the mess workers over a specific issue that affected them, hoping that this solidarity would also be extended into other spheres of cooperation in the future. In the second instance, LMKS was able to make an intervention in a situation of communication-deadlock within families that had never bothered to know their children's interests or cared to understand if they were performing mess work willingly or under pressure. Thus, LMKS was able to create some solidarity among the seemingly divided and competitive self-employed home-based workers. Moreover, it was able to coax them to take into account their children's 'purposeful will' in performing mess work. Both of these are extremely important and 'difficult-to-accomplish' actions as far as unionising successes are concerned.

Beyond Financial Gains and Labour Process

The success of LMKS organising efforts mentioned in this study are encouraging. But is organising only about bargaining for better wages? Yates (2010: 64) put this matter into perspective by stating that,

> …we often think of unions as organizations [*sic*] whose only purpose is to get their members more money. Yet Bronfenbrenner and Juravich found that 'unions which focus on issues such as dignity, justice, discrimination, fairness, or service quality were associated with higher win rates than those which focused on more traditional bread and butter issues, such as wages, benefits, and job security'.

In the first victory case of LMKS, home-based workers performing sequins-embellishment tasks registered a 250% to 500% increase in piece-rates because of their collective action. This would arguably be a 'one-time wonder' and its gains were limited to that particular group of workers alone. In other cases, the LMKS has been able through collective action to bring tangible material benefits to its members and leaders (in the form of ration cards, PAN cards, financial assistance, etc.). But is this not all that matters.

In that case, what are the other successes associated with organising in informal employment? As we have seen in the sections above, one success would be the initiation of group activism among home-based workers that helped them have a say in the labour process, and in the long run also expanded their control in it. Second, and most importantly, it is the creation of 'consciousness' among workers (especially women workers) that they *are* workers, contributing family members, and productive citizens who have the right to be treated with dignity and respect. This is a much harder and much slower process, which unfolds in unpredictable ways. Yet, it has the potential to create a long-term change in the minds of women workers and shape their struggles in questioning as well as resisting the status quo.

A big part of what makes this process difficult is the fact that they are *home-based* workers. There is little doubt in the minds of most home-based workers that the only persons performing 'work' in their families are those members that *go outof the house* to work. As a result, while they might mention to officials in census remuneration that there are only one or two 'earning members' in their households (their husbands, sons), their inability to see themselves as earning members and contributors to family income means that they make themselves invisible, both in real terms (such as in official statistics of census) and in an abstract sense (own conceptualisation of the value of their work). This invisibility permeates not only the worker and her family but also the minds of the trade-union activists. It requires intense unlearning efforts, which, despite the few cases mentioned earlier, also do not guarantee a complete transformation in the thinking about home-based workers and their work. However, an altogether different process begins to take shape alongside, which is more powerful than sporadic victories of the union.

Reconfiguring the base. In all my years of working with the LMKS, I was able to cite concrete examples of specific work-related or workplace-related victories of different cohorts of workers. For instance, I would write about the LMKS struggle demanding street-vendors' rights to public space for plying their trade without harassment or the victory of LMKS in addressing workplace issues of domestic workers or garment workers. However, I would rarely hear of a direct work-related success story about home-based workers.[68] It was after many years of observing the work of LMKS activists that it suddenly dawned on me one day that contrary to my belief, the LMKS was engaged in creating daily success stories with home-based workers. The activists and I had never conceptualised these as constituting 'work-related victories' and therefore found ourselves making the same mistake of making them 'invisible'.

In terms of union-work, the LMKS spends maximum time in, what the activists call, 'solving cases'. Typically, a member or non-member may come to the union office with a problem, which she believes is

68 This would also make me wonder if I made the wrong choice in undertaking a study of home-based workers. I would imagine that it would have perhaps been better to choose to focus on the mobilisation of domestic-workers as a topic for my doctoral work, because the instances of successful collective action were plenty.

beyond her ability to solve. She is either referred to or already knows about the union. Most often, these problems are related to domestic violence, harassment by in-laws, family discord, family feuds, quarrels with neighbours, sexual harassment, eve-teasing, breach of trust and resulting money problems, children's educational needs, family's medical needs, assistance during emergencies, and so on. I have observed that most of the victims in these 'cases' of family and neighbourhood problems are home-based workers. Hence, when the activists pursue the resolution of each case through its 'Mahila Aadhar Kendra' (Women's Support Cell) they are helping not just in solving the woman's 'family problem or neighbourhood problem' but also her *workplace problem*.

The strife and precarity in the living and working environment of the female home-based worker together forms the basis of her 'super-exploitation'. Local and global capital accumulation stands firmly on this base, with patriarchy facilitating the process. The lack of visibility, isolation, and suppression of her voice makes this experience an intense and unending saga. Socialisation is the process by which the conceptualisation and acceptance of patriarchal gendered roles are underpinned in the collective psyche of a community and also become the guiding framework for people to act as per the expectations of these roles. By this logic, the invisibility and devaluation of a woman's work as an unpaid homemaker performing domestic chores also extends into her work life as a home-based worker. The pressurising household conditions and dismal living conditions within which home-based work is performed, provide fertile grounds for class exploitation as well. The informal nature of their work and employment relations, in turn facilitated by the lack of regulation or legislations, makes home-based workers structurally powerless. A combination of these factors together attacks her dignity as a human being. Any attempts at correcting these wrongs must therefore necessarily consider her existence as comprising all these pressures working simultaneously, forming the base of her super-exploitation. Here, I find it appropriate to quote Kabeer (1994: 134, 135) who noted that

> … the elusiveness of gender power within the household is the greater because of its embeddedness in the most intimate arena of human relationships, that of the family … it is highly unlikely that the subtle and concealed nature of such power will reveal itself … It is frequently the 'silences' and 'absences' … the information that is withheld rather than that which is volunteered, which signal the presence of disempowering relations.

Questioning, challenging, rethinking, and reconfiguring this base of women-workers' super-exploitation is crucial, if organising home-based workers is expected to have an impact on their work and life in a meaningful way. In expending most of its time, effort, energy, group-ideation (discussing 'ought to be' and 'ought not to be' conditions) towards providing unconditional support to women in distress, LMKS is doing exactly this—attempting to reconfigure the base. It is a daunting exercise, because it attempts to challenge the convenient logic of patriarchy, norms of appropriate behaviour for men and women,

exploitation in work, all of which operate through multiple layers of institutional and structural deadlocks that trap women. This kind of a rounded approach to organising is certainly more beneficial and impactful than the creation of islands of power in an overall context of powerlessness.

Concluding Remarks

In this study, I have tried to portray the lives and working conditions of urban poor home-based workers in low-cost settlements of Mumbai. I have uncovered the aspects of their work and life, which are characterised by their vulnerability and systematic marginalisation. In fact, the vulnerable and powerless status of women is a prerequisite for their exploitation. Fragmented and vulnerable workers in the informal economy mean that the payments for their labour power are appallingly low, but people are still willing to work. The pressures of rising costs force other members of the family (wife, children) to also enter the workforce to supplement the income of the primary breadwinner.

Mass media and civil society propagating middle-class morality raise comments such as ‘children should be in schools, not at work’, but such statements could be shallow, naïve, and insensitive. The choices that the poor make are influenced by the circumstances that engulf them, and solving an issue out of its context is only a means to address the effect and not the root cause. It is no surprise that many efforts of NGOs and charitable organisations do not necessarily bring about a radical transformation of the work, lives, or living conditions of the urban poor, precisely because they tend to look at the problem not in its entirety but as a separate smaller component that can be addressed independently with the right inputs. A deeper and more rigorous approach is required to understand the factors that coerce families into using whatever labour is available to make ends meet. In this context, Huws (2012: 6) cited the work of Marx and Engels by stating that

> …members of a multi-person household can be employed for lower wages than those of a sole ‘breadwinner’ since their wages do not include the whole cost of reproduction for an entire family …the employment of women and children contributes to the cheapening of the value of all labour …the coexistence of collective households on the one hand and labour markets made up of atomised individuals on the other thus provides strong, albeit contradictory, foundations not only for gender inequality in the labour market but also for the general disadvantage of workers vis-à-vis capital in maintaining the value of their labour. Such structural reasons are not, of course, the whole story …older patriarchal patterns …explain[s] male dominance over women, reinforced by physical force as well as by cultural practices and religious ideologies and also expressed in the division of labour in the form of gendered hierarchies and gendered service relationships in households and in broader communities.

Gender inequality pervades all other forms of inequality—economic, racial, ethnic, and religious—so any attempt to address it would also address these other forms (Jain cited in Kabeer, 1994: 81). It is in these contexts that we must place the work of LMKS. Over the past ten years since it began its work in Dharavi, it has proved, first of all, that synergies among women workers in the informal economy are

possible and sustainable in the long run. Second, it has buttressed the fact that it is necessary to develop a reasoned response to this phenomenon of gender inequality by keeping ‘work’ at the core of its analysis. LMKS is an inclusive forum and welcomes all women workers. While initially the membership extended only to women workers in diverse informal trades, in recent years, it also includes male workers as ‘affiliate members’ from the garment, construction, and rag-picking sectors. LMKS has also gone a step further by organising children in the form of a support group as well. The group has acted as a place for laying down essential building blocks in reimagining male–female relationships from an early age.

The success and long-term sustainability of the LMKS approach lies in the fact that it is a grassroots movement of the urban poor that focuses its attention on closing the dignity gaps in their individual and collective lives through identity creation, collective strength through sharing, and overcoming fear together. Through its innovative approaches and creative strategising, it has been able to make unusual gains for all its members in general and for the home-based workers in particular. Perhaps the most important of these gains are creating consciousnessand collective identity of being workers, having a say in the labour process, and getting better returns on their remunerative work. The belief in leadership of poor women too is a factor in its sustainability, because they tend to have the highest stake in ensuring its success.

This process of creatingconsciousnesscomes with the imminent outcome of slowly beginning to ‘question everything’. Women gradually start questioning the unequal and second-class treatment meted out to them by their family through very small steps when such instances occur, for instance, asking a husband ‘Why are you beating me?’ or attempting to stop him from doing so. These may seem like small steps, but they are massive for women who have been conditioned to think of their circumstances in fatalistic terms. Women who have never questioned their gendered roles and ill-treatment find themselves exposed to a new kind of thinking about themselves and those around them. This process is mired in difficulties, especially because of the pressure of patriarchal gendered roles closely linked to social acceptance and inclusion.

Dissent or resistance is unsettling for women, their families, and their communities. Often the first consequences of such questioning are intensification of the bad treatment (in the form of increased domestic violence or loss of work). At such times, the family tends to accuse the union activists of having a corrupting influence on the women. Most women are not prepared for such consequences. While they try to comprehend the new dynamic that unfolds in their lives, most tend to target their confusion and anger towards the women activists who had urged them to think differently in the first place. In this manner, women activists are often in the first line of attack from the women that they try to help. Over

time, however, one notices a gradual acceptance of the union's 'nuisance value' and women members begin to get comfortable with minor and major backlashes. Some accept it as the immediate effect of their rebellion 'running its course', while others eulogise their rebellion stories in informal collective fora of the community and the union.Gradually, women begin to gain a control over their lives, sexuality, work, and labour process. They begin to collectively come up with a conceptualisation of 'what should be (*oughts*)' through 'what should not be (*ought-nots*)'. Once they learn to make small incremental successes and address dignity gaps, they gain the collective confidence to continue doing so. The main task of the union then is to sustain the momentum in this dynamic process.

Fora such as LMKS provide the reassuring space for people to cope with the 'shaking ground beneath their feet'. Work processes and employment relationships are continuously changing throughout the world. Talking about the stress inherent in the simultaneous 'decomposition' and 'recomposition' of skills, labour processes, organisations, sectors, and industries today, Huws (2007: 2) said,

> …the daily reality of work for many is dominated by the attempt to resolve multiple tensions— between continuity and change, stability and flexibility, co-operation and competition, repetitiveness and innovation, following protocols and using initiative, responding to the demands of here-and-now and reacting to those that arrive electronically from a distance, and dealing simultaneously both with the ubiquity of information and the impossibility of processing it all. These changes at a human and workplace level translate at a higher scale into transformations in the social and economic structures of cities and regions and globally in the relative power positions of nations and companies.

Having a support network such as LMKS to fall back on facilitates accommodating to these changes by sharing the burden of the constant changes in the way work is organised and implemented. It also helps to question parts of the work organisation and labour process, even if these may be at the very end of the global value chains. After all, we must not forget the assertions of Silver (2003) and Webster et al (2008) that

> …the complex global network of production based on outsourcing and subcontracting—this is emerging and consolidating is actually making global capital more vulnerable than before to disruptions in the global circuit of production and circulation …(Silver and Webster cited in Sanyal and Bhattacharyya, 2009: 35).

Unionising is both an intellectual *and* emotional experience for people (Yates, 2010). Any experience of dignity, or the lack thereof, can only be understood at the level of 'feeling'. This could explain why long-time members of LMKS who have not received any material benefits through the union, continue to renew their memberships every year. They hope that someday they will get some benefits. However, at gatherings such as workshops or demonstrations, one finds that women's interaction with each other fosters strong bonds among them, whether or not they belong to the same slum or area of residence. One could infer then, that the act of participating itself is pleasurable and 'not simply an instrumental means to a separate outcome' (deVolo, 2006). Since this process is primarily of those at the grassroots, by the

grassroots, for the grassroots, it does not appear to be artificial or top-down in its approach, but instead seems to be an inductive and inclusive movement for articulating and asserting the rights of all. Also, as Kabeer (1994: 80) reminded us,

> …our knowledge of the world is constructed not discovered…the 'ways of knowing' that have dominated the production of knowledge…have played an important role in defining and legitimating certain viewpoints and methods….

It is time we change these 'ways of knowing' by incorporating new voices from below, researching and writing about them, and building alliances across local, national, regional, global boundaries in the pursuit of an equitable world order.