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"Domestic workers' social networks and the formation of political subjectivities : a socio-spatial perspective

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2017
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/23919
Khunou, Kelebogile Francina (2017) "Domestic workers' social networks and the formation of political subjectivities: a socio-spatial perspective, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <https://hdl.handle.net/10539/23919>

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Abstract

Despite their long history of organising, South African domestic workers are deprived of a platform to organise due to the post-apartheid state positioning itself as the primary articulator, representative, and protector of domestic workers' collective interests and the resultant displacement of the domestic workers' union in these roles. Even at its peak, the union struggled to rally domestic workers around its cause. The shift from "live-in" domestic work to "live-out" domestic work provides workers with greater personal freedom and less isolation from friends and family; allows them to gain some control over their working conditions and; challenges the "atomised" nature of domestic work as domestic workers interact quite frequently with each other in spaces such as taxis and buses, taxi ranks and street corners as they go about travelling to and from work every day.

Domestic workers' engagement in the everyday practice of commuting to work and the spaces where domestic workers regularly interact with each other allow for the appearance of social networks where grievances can be shared and rallied around; mutual support is given and; information regarding work can be obtained. Significantly, these social networks are integral to the formation of collective identities and the building of political subjectivities of domestic workers, who as a group are deprived of a platform to organise.

Furthermore a fuller conception of political action needs to be adopted. Domestic workers, who are without resources and the leadership of a vital union, find themselves in a position of political marginalization; yet participate in everyday forms of resistance. These coupled with their engagement in everyday life, constitute the invisible face of political mobilization. The social networks that have appeared show promise, however they are under-developed and have not yet been formalised in a way that organised action can ensue. As such it is possible that organisational impetus will have to come from the efforts of middle class actors belonging to NGOs, activists and government agencies as has been experienced in other parts of the globe.