

Gender, Work and Migration

Agency in Gendered Labour Settings

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Chapter 5

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Domestic service activism in France

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Introduction

According to an International Labour Organization (ILO) report on *Domestic Workers across the World: Global and Regional Statistics and the Extent of Legal Protection*, ‘domestic work represents a significant share of global wage employment, but domestic workers remain to a large extent excluded from the scope of labour laws and hence from legal protection enjoyed by other workers’ (ILO 2013: 5). However, worldwide, a number of changes regarding social rights, working conditions and work relations in the domestic service sector have been driven by domestic workers who united in community-level organisations or trade unions (Fraisie 2009; Vidal 2009; Meynaud 2011; Schwenken 2011; Cabezas Fernández 2013; Kabeer 2013).

Says Bridget Anderson (2000: 69): ‘In France, domestic work is more regulated by the state than in other European countries.’ For Anderson (2000), this can be understood in relation to the role played by socialist union *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), which has been active in organising the sector since the early twentieth century. A National Collective Convention for *les Salariés du Particulier Employeur* (‘Salaried workers employed by private employers’) has officially regulated the domestic service sector since 1982. The Convention was then updated in 1999. Moreover, the domestic service sector has been perceived as an area for the deployment of social, work and family policies since the 1980s. These policies aim at normalising domestic service jobs, increasing demand through financial incentives, creating new jobs for unemployed and unqualified women, improving working conditions, and introducing training in care work for children and the elderly (Scrinzi 2013). Since the 1970s, migrant women have played an important role in improving working conditions and reinforcing labour laws through activism in several trade unions.

Many studies on domestic service activism insist on the numerous obstacles and difficulties faced by domestic workers who want to engage in social movements. Because they are mostly working alone, confined in the private space, in a face-to-face relation to their employers, and because they are reluctant to be associated with a professional identity demeaned in social representations, their

overall conditions for collective action seem particularly difficult (Fraisie 2009; Vidal 2009; Kabeer 2013). How, then, do domestic workers – and especially migrant women – organise and constitute themselves as political subjects despite these obstacles? In contrast with research insisting on the lack of favourable conditions for activism, this chapter sets out to examine the process through which migrant domestic workers create new political subjectivities and to assess their potential for contesting the norms regulating domestic work, traditional conceptions of citizenship and dominant gender relations. In this chapter, the description of the political subject created by migrant women engaged in trade unions fighting for domestic workers' rights in France will be conducted by using the methodology of Kergoat, Miranda and Ouali (2011). This calls for considering, in combination, the individuation process, the sense of belonging to a group and processes of collective constitution of the political to understand how some migrant women mobilise to improve social and labour rights.

I draw on empirical data collected through in-depth interviews with two migrant women activists. One is of Mauritian origin and fought alongside undocumented domestic workers in the early 1990s. The second, of Ivoirian origin, has been involved in struggles against the exploitation of registered childminders since 2011. I focus on the individual trajectories of these two women, but their social dispositions, practices and discourses are analysed in reference to interviews conducted with 50 other migrant women during my fieldwork in Paris.¹

A detailed examination of these two singular cases presents a double interest. First, it allows deeper understanding of the mobilisation process and the shift from individual engagement to collective action. Indeed, both women have acted as leaders of trade unions or union branches specific to domestic service. Second, the analysis of in-depth interviews helps investigating the discursive construction of a new political subject. By cross-referencing these two cases, we can also assess the diversity of migrant domestic workers' experiences and claims, as well as the commonalities that emerge beyond these divergences and their subversive potential. However, it is also important to keep in mind that, among the 50 other migrant women interviewed outside of trade unions, mostly of Mauritian and Ivoirian origins, none had participated in collective action to defend their labour rights. This lack of engagement of most domestic workers in activism can be explained in several ways, as pointed out by Dominique Vidal (2009) in his study of domestic workers in Brazil. This difficulty among domestic workers in constituting themselves as political subjects, even when trade unions do exist to defend their rights, will be addressed in the conclusion.

I first introduce the individual trajectories of the two women and their relation to activism in France. I then describe how they use their national and ethnic belonging to constitute a core of activists who are involved with them in trade union organisations. I go on to examine, in more detail, their protest practices and discourses, and to assess the implications as regards the creation of a novel political subject. Finally, I focus on the subversive potential of domestic service activism in relation to domestic work.²

Individual trajectory towards activism

Hélène Capitaine,³ of Mauritian origin, and Solange Sarr, of Ivoirian origin, are both leaders of collective organisations involving migrant women working in the domestic sector. Hélène Capitaine was a main leader of the Mauritian group acting within the union branch of the CFDT for the defence of the rights of domestic workers in the 1990s. Solange Sarr is, at time of writing, president of a trade union she created in 2011 in Paris, originally with the aim of fighting for the particular rights of childminders. The focus on the personal trajectories of these two women, from their birth countries to their insertion into the domestic service sector and activism in France, is relevant for various reasons. First, as leaders, they are essential to the survival of domestic workers' mobilisation. Since Hélène Capitaine left the trade union at the end of the 1990s, Mauritian activism has essentially disappeared. The trade union led by Solange Sarr draws part of its dynamic from her personal commitment and her important presence in the media. Second, their different trajectories underline the diversity of migrant women working in domestic service in France and its consequences on the claims they formulate. Finally, the two cases articulated show how domestic workers' claims evolve over time and thus reflect evolutions in the domestic service sector.

Hélène Capitaine: a long career in domestic work

Hélène Capitaine became a 'maidservant' in Mauritius at the age of 9. She had left school very early and joined her older sister to work in a white family, taking care of the children and cleaning the house. She was entering domestic service in the 1960s, at a time when maidservants were required to work barefoot and to respect a domestic code dividing maids and their employers along a strict hierarchy. Maids wore a uniform and ate in the kitchen, using only their own chipped plates and glasses. Wages were very low and no labour laws protected workers' rights. Hélène Capitaine's parents were also domestic workers in white families. The skills, knowledge and appropriate behaviour of a servant in the white homes had been passed from generation to generation in families, and had its origins in slavery.

At the age of 20, Capitaine joined a Marxist trade union to fight for the rights of domestic workers and to ask for better pay. She became an activist in the post-independence context (by 1968); in the 1970s, social movements led by the working class spread in Mauritian society, which led to the adoption of a first labour law for all workers in 1975, the Labour Rights Act.

Capitaine continued to work in domestic service. She married late in comparison with the social practices of her milieu, at the age of 25, then divorced because of conjugal violence.

She arrived in France in 1987 and started to work as a live-in domestic worker. She soon became administratively irregular, due to changes in migration policy and the closing of legal channels for labour migration in 1975. At the time, the Mauritian Workers Movement (MTM, from the French *Mouvement des travailleurs Mauriciens*), which, since the 1970s, had been fighting for the regularisation

of all Mauritians, was falling apart. Capitaine consequently decided to join a trade union to ask for the regularisation of women working in domestic service and to claim labour rights. She presents her political mobilisation in France as an undocumented domestic worker continuously with her activism in Mauritius:

When I arrived in '87 I ended up undocumented like a lot [of others]. With my past experience of activist in Mauritius I couldn't stay in this situation without doing anything. In Mauritius, with some friends of different headquarters in the JOCF, the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique Feminine*, we created the first trade union for maidservants which was affiliated to the GWF's confederation, the 'General Workers Federation', which united the most important trade unions of the country: dock workers, textile factories, sugar industry etc. In the seventies, the country started to develop, the tourism industry and textile factories employing a lot of women earned a lot of money for the Mauritian economy and it was the beginning of the empowerment of women. Workers were noticing that nothing was changing for them since the independence, in spite of high employment rate. They mobilised and, through trade unions, they asked for pay rise and the right to paid leave. And we the maidservants were not recognised at all: we had to organise by ourselves to be recognised like full workers and not like the legacy of slavery. I can say that this work stuck on my skin, I couldn't go out to work in factories. So I said to myself, because I don't succeed in working in the factories of the Export Processing Zone, I have to fight even more to make the job recognised.

This insight into H  l  ne Capitaine's prior experience as a domestic worker and activist in Mauritius, together with her administrative situation upon her arrival in France, helps us to understand her early engagement in a trade union in France and how her conceptions of the rights that she organised to claim, with other Mauritian domestic workers, were shaped. Their protests aimed above all at the regularisation of undocumented domestic workers, at a pay rise and at fighting against demeaning working conditions, such as wearing a uniform during service. According to her own work experience, the uniform symbolises the legacy of slavery and the condition of 'maid'. H  l  ne Capitaine's activism in France took place in a context in which a national Collective Convention had just been negotiated between trade unions in the domestic service sector, but yet, at the same time, the procedure for employers to declare domestic workers was complicated, thus favouring informal work. H  l  ne Capitaine obtained a long-term residence permit, then left the movement at the end of the 1990s, but she still works in homes to this day and takes care of the elderly.

Solange Sarr: ex-tradeswoman in domestic workers' activism

Solange Sarr had a completely different trajectory. She left school, at the age of 16, but never worked as a maid in the Ivory Coast. She comes from the urban middle class of Abidjan. She married at the age of 20 in the 1980s and had two children.

At first, Solange Sarr did not work; she then started her own business, selling men's suits in a transnational trade company operating between France and the Ivory Coast at the end of the 1980s. She explained, during our interview, that her husband did not bring back enough money for the family, meaning that she had to fulfil the role of 'head of family' herself.

Solange Sarr's professional and family trajectory takes place in the context of recession and structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). In this context, the informal trade activities of women from the middle class were essential to the survival of African households. As Mélanie Jacquemin (2009) points out, the very harsh material conditions of tradeswomen in the informal sector, who sell goods and services at low costs, call for the use of domestic workers to cope with the domestic tasks usually done by women in the home. As a tradeswoman, Solange Sarr used to employ a domestic worker at home, who was paid at low costs reflecting Solange Sarr's own low-paid activities. Because Solange Sarr did not earn a lot through her selling activities and because she wanted to leave her unfaithful husband, she decided to migrate to France in 1992, while pregnant. According to her narrative, the birth of her child allowed her to obtain residency documents and, very soon, she started the process that would allow her to bring her other children, still in the Ivory Coast, to France. She first entered a secretarial college, then worked part-time as a secretary, before realising that nanny jobs were better paid. She thus became a registered childminder, with working conditions regulated by the national Collective Convention for *les salariés du particulier-employeur*. At the time, childcare activities were being professionalised in France. Childminders were thus working formally, with work contracts in due form, and their tasks would concern only activities related to childcare, including cleaning the spaces used by children (their rooms), but not the entire house.

According to Solange Sarr's discourse, her willingness to participate in activism started when her employer asked her to clean the house. Making reference to a professionalised and specific vision of childminding helped her to refuse the request and to reflect on her working conditions:

I was working as a nanny for a year in a family and in 2009, my employer told me 'Solange, you are not the type of nanny who fits with us.' I said to myself 'what, I am not the good type of nanny?' In 2009, after years of experience in childminding, my employers told me that they now wished a 'nanny' who on top of caring for the children, would clean the house. I was surprised because in my work contract I was only employed for childcare, but thinking about my family responsibilities, I decided to accept their proposal to do two jobs for the price of one. But back at home that evening, I looked at myself in the mirror and said this to myself: 'come on my dear, you are not going to accept this proposal from your employers.' The following morning I declined the offer. My employer asked me to resign after my refusal. And it is at this time that I first pronounced the word '*prud'hommes*'. I told her that it was her who had to fire me, otherwise I would seize the competent tribunal. My employer noticed that I was ready to hold on, and accepted to fire me.

In 2009, Solange Sarr started to unite other childminders in a nannies' collective in Paris; in 2011, she created a trade union specialising in the defence of childminders' rights. The trade union evolved towards the defence of labour rights for all domestic workers and, in 2013, it took a new name referring to a national trade union for the employees of private employers. The trade union that Solange Sarr helped to create aims to ensure that employers respect the labour rights established by the national Collective Convention. It focuses on guaranteeing that work contracts and professional identities, as defined and regulated by law, are respected.

Hélène Capitaine and Solange Sarr's trajectories thus noticeably differ. In many ways, they reveal the diversity of migrant women who work in domestic service in France. Their prior work experience in their birth countries has shaped how they perceive and prioritise between their claims. Even if the period obviously has an influence upon the orientation of their activism, their previous jobs before entering the domestic service sector in France and their administrative status play an important part in the process through which their claims are selected and formulated as leaders of trade unions. The next question that arises involves examining the domestic workers surrounding these two women in their activism and analysing how administrative status and working conditions, but also national or ethnic belonging, play a part in the constitution of a core of selected activists.

Activist group constitution: national belonging, ethnic identity and administrative status at stake

In the early days of their collective action, Hélène Capitaine and Solange Sarr used informal means and places to organise and meet with other domestic workers whom they had met through work. Often, they had met through the networks of fellow countrywomen that had allowed them to enter in the domestic service sector in France in the first place. Indeed, migrant women from Mauritius and the Ivory Coast usually find a domestic job through a compatriot who knows an employer or a domestic service agency (Ibos 2012; Le Petitcorps 2015). These fellow nationals thus constituted the first group of activists around both women.

Capitaine describes the constitution of the Mauritian group of domestic workers in the CFDT at the beginning of the 1990s:

We were organised in Paris, in small neighbourhood committees. We had a committee in the 18th *arrondissement*,^[4] besides we used to gather at my place, and then other workmates would let us their *chambre de bonne*^[5] in various *arrondissements* of Paris, in order to do the meetings, think together and fight and be informed. I remember in Boulogne, there was a hostel that rented rooms only for Mauritians. It was Mauritians' city.

In a similar vein, Solange Sarr used acquaintances among her compatriots to mobilise her colleagues:

On 17 October 2010, I sent a text message to all my nanny friends and I told them ‘we have to organise, we have to unite, to make nannies’ labour rights recognised, like in any job, we have to meet together and unite our strengths to stop employers taking advantage of us.’

She started using parks and playgrounds, where childminders go during their work, to gather and organise collective mobilisation.

The core of activists around both H el ene Capitaine and Solange Sarr were women who shared a common national or ethnic identity (in the French context), the same administrative status and similar working conditions. How can we explain this selective process? First, in both cases, the activist groups drew on pre-existing migration networks that connect migrant women of the same national identity. Such networks usually organise the insertion of migrant women in domestic service from the moment they arrive in Paris. The Mauritian network, which has been operating since the early 1970s, facilitates the insertion of migrant women in a specific part of domestic service market: Mauritian women predominantly work as part-time or full-time housemaids for wealthy upper-class employers, whose wealth is usually the result of family inheritance. In these families, Mauritian migrant women do almost all of the housework, sometimes including cooking and managing the house (Le Petitcorps 2015). The Ivoirian network concerning childminding has been operating since the 1990s. It principally organises work in middle- and upper-class families of upwardly mobile young executives (Ibos 2012).

These old networks are well organised to quickly place new migrant women in the domestic service market. The reputation gained by some domestic workers among private employers and recruitment intermediaries play a part in the efficiency of these networks among migrant workers. In turn, this model has a consequence for the construction of a sense of group belonging based on national or ethnic identity. Among the upper class, Mauritian women have a reputation as being particularly helpful and well-mannered. Ivoirian and, more broadly, ‘African’ women have a reputation for being good at cuddling children. These stereotypical representations developed by employers have an effect on migrant women’s self-representation and are strategically used by them. The competences putatively ascribed by employers in relation to what they perceive as the workers’ ‘natural’ talents or particular cultural features make them more desirable in specific aspects of domestic service. In turn, workers use the ascribed talents or features to sell their services in the domestic service market. Both of these pre-existing networks of migrant women and the good reputation earned by some groups help domestic workers to form a national or ethnic group. This sense of belonging enables them to achieve a good position within the domestic service market, but also to organise collectively through a feeling of shared identity. Indeed, ethnic and national identities formed the basis on which these migrant domestic workers’ collective actions were constituted. It thus appears that well-organised networks of migrant women in the domestic service market reduce workers’ isolation and favour activist formation.

Besides national or ethnic belonging, H el ene Capitaine and Solange Sarr also developed their activist practices and demands together with migrant women who shared the same administrative status and working conditions as them. Administrative status in France shapes one's place in the domestic service market, especially as regards wage level and the quality of working conditions. Capitaine, an undocumented worker, fought in a trade union together with other undocumented women, asking for collective regularisation. Indeed, being regularised has a crucial impact on one's wage level, including the opportunity to benefit from labour rights and the ability to negotiate issues (including wages and working conditions) with employers. Mauritian undocumented domestic workers wanted to regularise their status to enter the upper layer of the labour market, which would give them access to social protection, decent wages and the ability to negotiate their wages. In contrast, Solange Sarr and the other 'African' childminder members of her trade union are all in regular situations and have work contracts. They are thus more clearly associating with their professional identity as 'childminders' and use this identity to fight against the assimilation of 'African' women as 'maids'. They aim to be considered professional childminders in the same way as non-migrant and white workers in the same field.

What this short description allows us to see is that the constitution of activist groups among women sharing the same nationality or ethnicity and a common administrative status helps some domestic workers to improve their place in the domestic service market and to achieve a pay rise, better working conditions and a better symbolic status at work.⁶ Migrant women in the domestic service market from well-organised migration networks and with good reputations associated with their national origins are also more likely to join activism. This process often happens through the circle of their acquaintances. It can also be noticed that Mauritian and Ivoirian workers share a common concern regarding wage negotiation, which shapes the aim of their protests. For both cases under examination, we have to take into account individual and collective migratory projects as the factor explaining the centrality of wage negotiation in their activism. All migrant women explain in their interviews that they came to France to earn enough money to ensure a good education for their children; hence, as soon as they are regularised, they attempt to negotiate with their employers to improve their earnings.

I next asked whether that mobilisation follows only particular ethnic or national interests in challenging competition on the domestic service market, or if their claims aim to change domestic workers' conditions in a deeper and broader way.

Beyond ethnic belongings: a new political subject

Traditional trade unions, which have been little involved in the defence of the rights of domestic workers, have tended to look with suspicion at the formation of activist groups among migrant women. A leader of trade union *Conf ed eration G en erale du Travail* (CGT), who manages the very recently formed union branch specialising in domestic service, told me in an interview that what childminder activists around Solange Sarr used to do equated to 'communitarianism'.⁷ It seems

that, according to traditional trade unions, migrant women who work in domestic service are not yet seen as legitimate activists. Their ability to constitute a particular political subjectivity is not recognised and their collective action is considered merely ethnic collaboration to defend particular interests. Traditional trade unions speak of these self-organised activists with reference to the same ethnic representations that circulate on the domestic service market. They imply that such collective action cannot escape from a form of ‘cultural’ behaviour. However, two distinct processes are at work: although, on the one hand, the core of activists was formed by mobilising co-national networks, activists nonetheless *do* fight for domestic workers to be recognised and granted rights as full workers in a broader way. The very first groups of activists united around both H  l  ne Capitaine and Solange Sarr shared a specific point of view on domestic work that arose from their shared sense of belonging and administrative situation in France, but a much larger process of collective organisation ensued, which included other domestic workers. The objectives of their actions thus went far beyond the particular interests of a specific group of domestic workers.

For H  l  ne Capitaine, claiming the regularisation of undocumented domestic workers was a predominant concern. She explains:

When I arrived here, the only thing I didn’t want was to be in competition with workers already settled here, because before I had to know the price of bread and to read the Collective Convention for domestic workers, because otherwise we would be two groups with different working conditions and the employers would take advantage of it. They like to have an undocumented person, who doesn’t know her rights, in order to exploit her. The only way was to organise ourselves, but it was difficult, the law didn’t allow us to unit as undocumented migrants. We could be denounced.

H  l  ne Capitaine joined a trade union as an undocumented woman so that she could learn what the rights of registered domestic workers were. The main aim of Mauritian undocumented domestic workers organised in collective action was then to obtain regularisation, so as to become registered domestic workers. Being an undocumented worker is not an identity; it is a condition of exclusion from labour rights. Yet it is transformed by domestic worker activists into a political subjectivity, which is able to articulate a rights claim. Through activism, H  l  ne Capitaine searched for and expressed her ability to claim her labour rights even though, as an undocumented worker, she was not expected to engage in activism. The incentive to organise collectively among undocumented domestic workers was not to create an opposition or a distinction in relation to other domestic workers; rather, they organised to be recognised alongside registered domestic workers and to share the same labour rights. The fight for inclusion thus aimed at serving all domestic workers’ interests, because the objective was to suppress the ongoing division of the domestic service market that still differentiates wages and working conditions depending on status, thereby creating competition. The fight to unite undocumented workers is thus a first necessary step towards presenting

domestic workers' interests ahead of, and in opposition to, employers' interests. Mauritian belonging was the means through which to unite, but not the objective of the protests.

Differently, the claims currently formulated by Solange Sarr aimed precisely at upholding labour rights as stated in the Collective Convention. An extract of her discourse shows her understanding of the technical aspects of her work contract and the attention she pays to how it is applied:

With this employer I used to work over 55 hours, without knowing that I didn't have to do more than 50 hours per week, and that from 48 hours there were extra hours, Borloo law 'work more to earn more', it means that beyond 48 hours, employers have to give us an additional amount, 50% extra.

The specific trade union for domestic workers that Solange Sarr established rejects the juridical uncertainties that usually prevail between employers and employees in the home, in a work relation at times embedded in affective ties. These activists fight against the decoupling of domestic workers' labour rights from common labour rights for all employees. Through their protests, for example fighting for paid overtime hours, they seek the inclusion of domestic workers among employees as a whole. They challenge employers' tendency to neglect the Collective Convention and to apply their own vision of labour rights at home, asking for the same technical precisions over working hours or fringe benefits as are available in any other sector. They want to suppress the specificities that have developed around domestic service specifically because the work is being done in the home, in the private space and through personal work relations.

After its creation as a specialised trade union for childminders, Solange Sarr's union enlarged in 2014 to include all domestic workers. Now, women engaged in the trade union are from different origins, even though a few come from France. Yet other, more traditional, trade unions continue to identify the union as an ethnic organisation. This remains the case even though Mauritian and African activists have put distance between their national and ethnic belonging and the political subjectivity that they claim. Their demand for labour rights has not been formulated in the name of their Mauritian or Ivoirian or African identity, but through an original subject position, able to bring a new issue into the public sphere where previously 'there was nothing to see' (Ranci re 2001: 63).

Indeed, both activists interviewed and their colleagues in the trade union became involved in collective mobilisation as domestic workers, women and foreigners. This particular political subjectivity is focused on bringing a new object of contention into the public sphere and is shaped by the fact that these three conditions have historically led to exclusion from the realm of citizenship, as defined by the state. At different periods, domestic workers, women and foreigners have all been conceived by French state policy as parts of the population unable to participate in citizenship and political activities, thus having only the option of being governed (Ranci re 2001). The activism of migrant women fighting for the rights of domestic workers therefore turns a social group assigned to citizenship

exclusion into a political subject empowered to defend its own rights, to change its conception of work, to transform work relations into political conflict and to make the private space of domestic work political. Migrant women's activism thus goes further than claiming labour rights. They not only seek to make their job recognised through pay rises and a change in symbolic status, but also promote training for all domestic workers to offer them the opportunity to leave domestic work and to access other jobs. In other words, as a social group long excluded on three different accounts, the recognition of their profession is secondary to their claim to political existence. Beyond the professional sphere, they attempt to turn their condition into a political subjectivity that seeks to bring matters from the domestic and private sphere into the public.

Subversive potential of activism on domestic work

According to Elsa Galerand and Danièle Kergoat (2008), women's relationship with work is always potentially subversive in relation to waged work and prevailing gender norms. Their position in the sexual division of labour – at the junction between productive and reproductive work – leads to a change in their conception of work due to the fact that women think about domestic and waged work in continuity. But women's relation to work can become empowering only if they introduce a collective, political dimension. Meanwhile, a lot of obstacles hinder collective action – notably, the fact that female workers do not necessarily identify themselves politically as women and do not fight in the name of this political subject, as if to be a woman could not be anything other than a dominated status (Galerand and Kergoat 2008). What, then, is the relation of migrant women to domestic work and how do they consider themselves as women in activism?

I have already demonstrated that both activists interviewed, H el ene Capitaine in the CFDT and Solange Sarr in the trade union for domestic workers that she created, have fought for the transformation of domestic service into recognised waged work and asked for a pay rise, recognition of their work and the application of the general labour rights of all employees to domestic workers. This claim was accompanied by insistence on the importance of training for domestic workers, to allow their competences to be recognised. H el ene Capitaine and Solange Sarr have both furthered this objective in their activism. Sarr's trade union even established partnerships with training organisations to promote the qualification of workers in domestic jobs.⁸

Domestic workers' activism thus introduces a real change in domestic work because it brings domestic matters, working conditions and work relations into the public sphere.⁹ As Solange Sarr explains, they fight against the idea that domestic service is considered to be within the realm of employers' intimacy. Indeed, this argument aims at preventing domestic workers' self-defence when facing illegal working conditions:

In our work contract it is written that we are subject to discretion. It is written in our work contract! But what it is, discretion? Ok if we see that a husband is having an affair it doesn't concern us it is a couple's own matters and

we don't have to talk about this. But when it is about nannies' rights it isn't intimacy anymore. It is a professional question! It is regulated by the work code, by the Collective Convention, there we have to talk, we have rights, like in any other job.

These activists' relationship with domestic work is therefore different from the way in which women who have not worked in domestic service relate to unpaid domestic work. Domestic worker activists aim to have their work in the homes of others recognised as waged work. They do not consider themselves in the same position in the division of labour as women who do not share their domestic service experience. The condition of women as a political subject has long been defined around the notion of a shared experience of providing unpaid domestic work in their own household, while then being engaged in waged work outside the home. The lack of recognition of domestic service work as waged labour has meant that domestic workers have felt that they have not been recognised as sharing the same social and political positionality as other women who provide paid labour while also having to look after a family and children. One of their central claims – from the emergence of Mauritian activism to the present day, but also previously with Spanish domestic workers' collective action in the 1960s (Arondo 1975; Fraisse 2009) – has thus been to be recognised as women like other women involved in both waged work and work in their own family. Domestic workers emphasise the fact that their employers – especially women – tend to neglect the fact that as well as their domestic service, the workers also have a family and children. Activists want to challenge the perception that they should be constantly available for domestic service in terms of time and affective disposition. This can be achieved partly by emphasising their lives as women and mothers outside the professional sphere. Therefore the desire to care for their own children is the driving force behind activism and it holds a subversive potential regarding salaried society. Indeed, domestic worker activists insist on the importance of obtaining a pay rise so that they can offer a good education to their children, aiming at their social promotion. H el ene Capitaine explains:

We, just as the Filipino activists, we asked for the same thing. We had well understood, they were also fighters! They had a sense of trading, we had divergences in thinking, but when it came to the issues of documents and pay rise, we were all on the same page. Because we had to earn money in order to send our children to school, we had the same purpose.

Activism for salaried domestic work is thus incentivised by women's desire for their waged work to become a means of ensuring a good social position for their children in the French society.

Domestic work activism thus brings a new issue to the fore, where there was previously nothing to see: this activism introduces a new female political subject who holds a different relationship with domestic work than that of the women helped in their home. It therefore challenges traditional understandings of the

social group of 'women'. By wanting to be included within that group of women, they aim at suppressing the division of labour and the hierarchy that prevails between women – between the one who serves as a domestic worker devoted to the others' needs and the one who benefits from this domestic service in her own house and family. This claim goes even further and proposes changes to the whole representation of domestic work, because activists imagine a 'socialisation' of domestic work whereby unpaid work almost disappears and the hierarchical division of labour is erased. As H  l  ne Capitaine suggests: 'That is to say it could be one day: I would clean your house and then you as well come to clean my house!'

At the same time, domestic worker activists distinguish their relationship with work from that of other women, but do not refer to men's relation to work and domestic work. H  l  ne Capitaine and Solange Sarr talked about male domination when they discussed their personal trajectories: they were both divorced at the time of their entry into activism. But, at the same time, they did not refer to male domination in relation to domestic service, as though this conflict unfolded only between women domestic workers and their employers. This conflict between women also occurs during negotiation between trade unions, because employers' trade union FEP  M (*F  d  ration des Particuliers Employeurs*) is mostly composed of women. The future evolution of the trade union currently presided over by Solange Sarr may later demonstrate that a signified opposition between women, and domestic workers' struggles to be considered as women, were a necessary prior step towards the subversion of the sexual division of labour more broadly.

Conclusion

The focus on the discourses of two leaders of domestic service activism in France has allowed us to develop an analytical distinction between personal trajectories, ethnic/national belonging, and a new political subject emerging through the struggles of, and claims formulated by, both activists. The insight into these two different trajectories also helped to highlight the diverse work experiences and social resources of migrant women working in domestic service, and hence the plurality of their engagement in activism. Not all migrant women in domestic service are unqualified and undocumented. Pay levels vary vastly, from low wages for the undocumented to better wages than those of secretaries for some childminders. Furthermore, migrant women with prior experience of domestic service in their birth country do not have the same conception of work and the same practices as ex-tradeswomen who themselves used to have a maid at home.

The first important finding of this empirical analysis is that group belonging must be distinguished from the political subjectivity that is created through activists' claims. Both leaders have mobilised their national or ethnic identity, which was also the means through which the actors of the domestic service market in France represented and recruited them, to form the first core of activists and start collective mobilisation. But their claims do not aim at protecting the particular interests of their group, even if the coming together of migrant women sharing

the same identity first aimed at improving their place in the competitive domestic service market. The activists ask for pay rises, the improvement of their working conditions, the abolition of 'maid' status, and the recognition of their political existence as women and foreign domestic workers. It can be noticed that they do not make reference to their racialised identity in the French context as protest rhetoric to fight against exploitation and domination in domestic service. Yet they do highlight the importance of their position as 'foreigners' and their exclusion from citizenship and labour rights. This indicates that the race, class and gender nexus often used by intersectional analyses as the matrix of definition of group belonging is not necessarily drawn upon by domestic worker activists to denounce their domination and to turn their citizenship exclusion into political ability to defend their own rights. Rather than racial difference, it is women's different relationships with domestic work, as domestic worker or as employer, which is presented as the main hierarchical division of labour. However, as mentioned, none of the other migrant domestic workers interviewed had participated in activism. When I asked why they did not seek further information regarding their labour rights by approaching existing trade unions and when speaking to labour leaders on this issue, two reasons emerged. First, as Dominique Vidal (2009) pointed out, the face-to-face relationship with their employers prevents domestic workers from committing to collective action. Most of the domestic workers interviewed expressed that they were reluctant to join a trade union when their labour rights were not respected, because they were afraid to ruin a relationship based on trust with their employer and potentially to lose their job. The second reason is that not all migrant domestic workers trust trade unions led by migrant women, especially when of African origin. The Ivoirian nannies I met were reluctant to give money to a trade union led by an African woman and they thought their labour rights would not be defended properly by a black woman. Therefore, where activists create a political subject beyond racial categories, some domestic workers tend to reproduce racial stereotypes and hierarchies.

The second finding is that when activists unite as domestic workers sharing a specific administrative status and particular working conditions, their call to action for the improvement of their labour rights has a subversive potential for other workers and women in general. Fighting, as undocumented domestic workers, for equal pay means that all domestic workers' wages can be improved by challenging the competition in labour costs. The objective of being recognised as a salaried worker and a woman also changes the whole conception of domestic work, which is still associated with unpaid or low-paid work and confined to the realm of intimacy and the private sphere. It is still seen as incompatible with labour rights and public, political existence. Migrant women activists thus wish to be included as among all domestic workers, whatever their origin, among all workers even if they work in the private space and among all women besides their activity in domestic service. This has the potential to subvert the way in which the domestic service market is organised and the conception of domestic work. And yet, more than the job's recognition and professionalisation, they ask for political existence as migrant women and for the possibility of choosing other forms of work in spite of their social status.

Domestic service activism can therefore potentially lead to radical questioning and changes in the various divisions of labour that underpin domestic work – including race, class and gender hierarchies. Nonetheless, we notice that, since the emergence of the first activists in France up to the more recent establishment of Solange Sarr’s trade union, similar claims have been put forward in spite of the evolution in working conditions of domestic workers over time. These include the right to dignity and to not be assimilated to a ‘maid’, the desire to be recognised as a worker like all workers and as a woman like all women, and the ambition to bring issues pertaining to working in the private space into the public sphere. The continuity of these claims, shared by successive activists, proves that dominant attitudes to domestic service have not undergone significant change even if the sector is being professionalised, including through targeted public policies. Domestic worker activists should thus be heard with more attention, most particularly by feminist movements. What these women point to in their claims is that changes in domestic service are key to the transformation of the condition of *all* women in relation to domestic work.

Notes

- 1 The fieldwork was carried out in Paris between October 2012 and January 2014.
- 2 I would like to thank Céline Cantat for her very helpful reading, corrections and comments.
- 3 Names have been anonymised.
- 4 Parisian administrative neighbourhoods.
- 5 Small bedrooms, usually on the last floor of a building, which were used to host a family’s domestics. Today, *chambres de bonne* are usually the cheapest places to rent on the Parisian letting market.
- 6 Being recognised as a childminder is a symbolic conquest over the ‘maid’ stigma that still follows migrant women.
- 7 In France, the word holds a negative connotation and is commonly used to refer to an ideology in which the fight for the particular interests of an ethnic group prevails over a fight for the universal rights of the majority.
- 8 I noticed then that in the aim of promoting domestic workers’ competences, the trade union created by Solange Sarr first excluded men from its action. For example, women activists rejected male gardeners, whose rights are defined by the same collective convention. According to the union, the inclusion of men could have some consequences for the union’s attempt to have the competences of women in domestic work recognised. Later, the union included men among its members, but its activity remains mostly organised by women.
- 9 We also observe that both leaders lend a transnational dimension to domestic workers’ activism: Héléne Capitaine used her past experience in Mauritius to organise collective action in France; Solange Sarr has now created a trade union for domestic workers in the Ivory Coast. They thus challenge both public–private and national boundaries to improve domestic workers’ labour rights.

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