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WES

Work, Employment and Society
1–19
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DOI: 10.1177/09500170221138008
journals.sagepub.com/home/wes
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The Role of Community Organisations in the Collective Mobilisation of Migrant Workers: The Importance of a ‘Community’-Oriented Perspective

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Abstract

In examining the collective mobilisation of migrant workers, scholars have explored the emergence of community organisations as alternative forms of worker representation. However, community unionism scholars tend to adopt a union-centric perspective, which leaves unexplored the complex nature of community organisations. We argue that it is important to adopt a ‘community’-oriented perspective. Such a perspective allows us to explore varied capacity for collective actions and different forms of identity framing across community organisations. We argue that these can affect the union–community relationship and organising outcomes. By comparing ethnographic case studies of the role of two community organisations vis-a-vis the collective mobilisation of migrant workers, we conclude that community organisations which focus on participatory internal relations, and which frame collective identities (including class) in an intersectional way, are more likely to have reciprocal relationships with trade unions and contribute to collective mobilisation.

Keywords

collective mobilisation, community organisation, community organising, ethnography, migrant domestic workers, migrant workers, Polish workers

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Introduction

This article analyses the role of community organisations (COs) in the collective mobilisation of migrant workers (MWs). We define COs as 'organisations or groups that exist within a community (either interest or place) with a local focus, with a predominantly voluntary nature, and separate from the core activities of state and business organisations' (Middlemiss, 2009: 8). While some COs might have formal structure and state funding, some might be informal associations relying on volunteers. We define collective mobilisation of MWs as formal or informal actions by MWs to further their collective interests in the employment sphere.

MWs in the UK are concentrated in low-skilled sectors, which involve high levels of exploitation and low rates of unionisation (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo, 2021). Assessing the collective mobilisation of MWs, scholars increasingly turn their attention to 'new actors in employment relations' (McBride and Greenwood, 2009), particularly COs. There is a tendency in this scholarship to adopt a union-centric perspective emphasising the institutional frame of analysis that centres on union strategies (Holgate, 2015; Martínez Lucio and Perrett, 2009), and/or different logics of action between unions and COs (Fine, 2007; Holgate, 2015; Tapia, 2013). This scholarship tends to leave unexplored the complex nature of COs. Often, there is an implicit assumption that COs are inherently organic and relational, are agents of social changes with some capacity for collective actions (Bondy, 2022; Tapia, 2013) and naturally show interest in work-related issues (Fine, 2007; Jayaraman and Ness, 2005). This scholarship also tends to assess outcomes primarily in terms of union membership and influence (Tattersall, 2005). We argue that it is important to adopt a 'community'-oriented perspective. Such a perspective allows us to explore varied capacity for collective action and different forms of identity framing across COs. We argue that these can affect the union–community relationship and organising outcomes. By comparing two COs – Justice for Domestic Workers (J4DW) in London and Midwest European Communities Association (MECA) in South Somerset – we conclude that COs which focus on participatory internal relations, and which frame collective identities (including class) in an intersectional way, are more likely to have reciprocal relationships with unions and contribute to collective mobilisation.

Community organising of MWs: Calling for a 'community'-oriented perspective

There is a potential tragedy regarding the collective mobilisation of MWs in the UK. On the one hand, the sectors where MWs are concentrated are characterised by high levels of exploitation (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo, 2021), and thus the collective mobilisation of MWs is an important issue for social justice. On the other hand, migrant jobs tend to have employment conditions that pose barriers to mobilisation, such as dispersed forms of employment relations, systemic patterns of high turnover, the reliance upon employers for the extension of work permits and the mediating role of agencies for temporary workers (Schmidt, 2006).

In examining the collective mobilisation of MWs, scholars increasingly turn their attention to the community organising approach, which emphasises the importance for unions to work alongside COs to engage with MWs beyond the workplace (McBride and Greenwood, 2009). This scholarship tends to highlight complementary union–community relationships as grassroots-led, relational COs might help bureaucratic, conservative unions successfully reach and mobilise MWs, despite their different logics of action (Bondy, 2022; Holgate, 2015). With regard to the conditions that cause conflicts between COs and unions, a series of binary oppositions are posed to explain the difficulty of coalition building. Tapia (2013) argues that unions engage in a service-driven culture and cultivate instrumental commitment from their members, while COs engage in a relational culture and foster a form of social commitment from their members (see Fine (2007) on US worker centres). These arguments fit well with Heery et al.'s (2012) finding that conflict between unions and civil society organisations in the UK stems from differences in institutional interests, structures, cultures and logics of action.

Some important limitations exist in the studies of community organising of MWs. As Atzeni (2021) noted, there is often a logic of trade union fetishism in industrial relations scholarship, even when this scholarship addresses MWs' collective representation. The existing discussion about why union–community coalitions are successful or not tends to focus on union strategies (Holgate, 2015; Martínez Lucio and Perrett, 2009). This marginalises consideration of the varied roles of COs. The term 'community' is often used in an implicitly normative way, with communities seen as representative, participatory and cohesive (Bondy, 2022; Tapia, 2013). The industrial relations literature on migrant COs (Fine, 2007; Jayaraman and Ness, 2005) also focuses on workers' centres in the US that have been established with the primary purpose of improving employment rights. They assume that there is a ready-made community partner with whom unions can collaborate. This community partner is generally understood to be grassroots-led; be in a position to contribute political, financial and/or organisational resources; and have some capacity for collective actions (Osterman, 2006; Tapia, 2013).

By keeping an exclusive focus on union strategies and the organisational relationship between unions and COs, we are far from understanding the varied nature of COs. More critical interpretations of COs question whether *all* COs are participatory, cohesive and work-centred. We emphasise the importance of a 'community'-oriented perspective to explore varied capacity for collective actions and different forms of identity framing across COs, and how these affect the union–community relationship and organising outcomes.

Furthermore, if we move the focus away from unions, it is important to reconsider what community organising is for and broaden the meaning of successful organising outcomes (Simms and Holgate, 2010). Community unionism studies often regard union membership and growth as the most important outcomes (Tattersall, 2005). However, grassroots empowerment, personal growth and the development of 'communities of struggle' (Pero, 2020) may constitute key elements of community organising. COs might help build 'indie unions' – independent grassroots unions co-led by precarious MWs without integrating themselves into mainstream union structures (Pero, 2020).

Community-oriented perspective on migrant COs

To shift towards a 'community'-oriented perspective, we explore the varied nature of COs and how they affect the union–community coalition and organising outcomes. In the UK, the character of migrant COs (including their roles in supporting labour organising) has changed considerably over time. From the literature that provides a historical context, there is a tendency to begin with the post-war migration of people from the Commonwealth countries (Mayblin and Soteri-Proctor, 2011). There were class-based migrant COs, such as Indian Workers' Association, that emerged in the context of the historical reluctance of mainstream trade unions to recognise the specific needs of MWs. However, membership in most of them has decreased dramatically since the 1980s (Lacroix, 2012). Paralleling the decline in class-based migrant COs is the increasing politicisation of religious and ethnic organisations (Lacroix, 2012). Migrant COs that serve newly arrived MWs differ on many levels, including their character, services, membership and financial sustainability. We focus on the following two areas to analyse the varied nature of migrant COs.

Migrant COs: A focus on internal relationships or external legitimacy

The varied nature of COs has been discussed in the social movement literatures where there are important debates which follow the contours set by Michels' (1915) classic 'iron law of oligarchy' argument. Just as Michels argues that over time organisations inevitably come to be dominated by professional experts who implicitly prioritise organisational legitimacy above any substantive goal that may have underpinned the founding of the organisation, social movements scholars are aware of the potential danger of 'institutionalisation' and 'goal displacements' (Zald and Ash, 1966) that COs face.

The risk of bureaucratisation and professionalisation of COs has also been analysed in the migration literatures. Some studies suggest that the emphasis on co-ethnic ties might provide a place where migrants can develop solidarity and further create capacity for collective actions (Lee and De Vita, 2008). Kelly (2003), however, points to a danger of the existence of a 'contingent community' within COs. Her study of Bosnian COs in the UK suggests that some migrant COs are not necessarily ideal collectivities but are more like a formal expression of the community as a result of the benefits that can be attained through their formal status. MacKenzie et al.'s (2012) study on refugee COs in the north of England also reveals that there is a danger that institutional goals of organisational sustainability may take precedence over substantive goals of support provision. The power dynamics may be played out between various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and COs over competition for funding and political leverage.

Some scholars (Osterman, 2006), on the other hand, contend that COs may be able to resist the iron law of oligarchy by enhancing the membership's sense of agency, developing grassroots leadership and building a culture of contestation. Studies suggest COs which focus on internal relationships are able to enhance union influence and mobilise widespread participation (Anderson, 2001). For COs which focus on external legitimacy, by contrast, issues of funding complicate their ability to be involved in union–community coalitions in opposition to the government. For example, the Victorian Trades Hall Council's coalition with Community Legal Centres in Victoria, Australia fell apart when federal funding was threatened (Cockfield et al., 2009).

Forms of identity framing within migrant COs: Competing versus intersectional approaches

COs can organise members around different axes, including class, gender, ethnicity, legal status and other social dynamics. This links with an intersectional approach that emphasises the importance of understanding the lives of MWs, not just as migrants, or as workers, but as people whose lived experiences are an intersecting combination of social and economic inequalities (Alberti et al., 2013).

Notably, the industrial relations literature on migrant COs (Fine, 2007; Jayaraman and Ness, 2005) tends to focus on workers' centres in the US that were established with the primary purpose of improving labour standards. Less attention has been paid to migrant COs which neither self-identify as labour market intermediaries nor explicitly organise work-related activities. Research suggests that many migrant COs in the UK and US were formed based on ethnicity and focused on cultural preservation and integration instead of economic and social services (Kelly, 2003; Lee and De Vita, 2008).

Some studies have explored the ambivalent relationship between ethnicity and class in organising MWs. We can identify two broad types of dealing with the relationship between ethnicity and class within COs: *competing* and *intersectional* approaches. The COs with a focus on ethnic identity are not necessarily supportive of labour organising. In effect, these COs might adopt a *competing* approach. Garapich's (2016) study of Polish COs in the UK suggests that while there is a dense network of Polish COs (parishes, Saturdays Schools, dance clubs, etc.) which focus on ethnic and cultural identity, the socio-economic needs of Polish migrants are not met as these COs often do not offer economic and social assistance. Although COs established by the post-Second World War Polish migrants were dying out because of the shrinking membership, they were reluctant to provide employment support that concerned new Polish MWs who were located at the bottom end of the labour market.

In contrast, the case of Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS) studied by Alberti and Pero (2018) points to the potential of a successful intersection of class and ethnicity in organising MWs. LAWAS' class politics was *intersectional* as it featured issues of ethnicity comprising cultural and legal recognition. Rather than using ethnicity in essentialist terms, LAWAS deployed it in a strategic manner so as to integrate a broad constituency of workers with ethno-cultural similarities into the labour movement. The shared ethnicities contributed to the development of solidarity within their Justice for Cleaners campaign. LAWAS helped T&G-Unite to recruit 1000 members over a year. It also embedded members in a solidarity circuit where class and ethnicity were interwoven.

However, even advocates of intersectional practices recognise that conflicts may arise between class and ethnicity in organising MWs. Ciupijus et al.'s (2020) study of a MW branch created by a major UK union found that while the shared language and ethnic background was effective in promoting union membership and created a platform allowing MWs to address their vulnerabilities as Polish migrants and workers, the ethnic homogeneity also created a closure. The MW branch developed into a body that had an explicit Polish membership structure and ethos, and failed to develop wider solidarity with workers from other ethnicities.

Research questions and contexts of the two cases

By comparing J4DW and MECA, we look at varied capacity for collective actions and how different collective identities, ethnicity and class in particular, are framed and intersected within COs and further affect the union–community coalition and organising outcomes. We focus on the following research questions: (1) What role does class have in how COs frame collective identities and do the COs enact practices that position different frames as competing or intersecting with each other? (2) Do COs prioritise participatory internal relation or external legitimacy? (3) What are the effects of differences in COs along these two elements (regarding the first two questions) on CO–union relations? (4) What are important (non-union-centric) outcomes of any mobilisations?

We examine differences in COs vis-a-vis collective mobilisation of MWs in J4DW and MECA. Scholars have identified structural and subjective barriers to mobilisation in both cases. There was a lack of a strong unified 'community' among both groups. For Polish workers, there was a community based on neighbourhood – Yeovil – and on shared ethnicity and language. However, research reports widespread divisions within the Polish community in Somerset (Jiang, 2013). Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) were scattered in both their workplaces and their residential areas. In addition, both groups faced structural barriers to mobilisation. For Polish workers, the non-unionised or/and anti-union employment conditions in the food-processing industry (the main sectors studied here) created a significant barrier to mobilisation (Lever and Milbourne, 2015). MDWs' individualised employment conditions also created barriers against the workers coming together. Some MDWs who entered the UK after April 2012 have become undocumented. In relation to subjective barriers, Waldinger and Lichter (2003) argue that MWs (both Polish workers and MDWs) may tend to be more quiescent in accepting low employment conditions because they compare themselves less with the workers in the UK, and more with their counterparts in their home countries. Studies also suggest that subjectivities held by MDWs – familial and servant framings (Anderson, 2000) – may constitute a challenge to mobilisation. Although MDWs had more precarious legal status, overall there were strong contextual elements in both cases which constituted barriers to mobilisation. We therefore suggest that the contextual factors did not significantly contribute to any observed differences in organising outcomes in the two cases.

Research methods

We conducted two case study ethnographies. We had little knowledge of the two cases in advance and they were chosen initially as exploratory cases (Yin, 2018). Subsequent data collection and analysis allowed us to position them as extreme cases (Yin, 2018). Although we identify the cases as extreme ones (see the Discussion section), we also look for nuances in the spirit of exploratory cases.

J4DW (recently renamed 'The Voice of Domestic Workers') was a self-help group led by MDWs themselves in London. J4DW had over 1000 members. As domestic work is a feminised sector, J4DW members were predominately female. J4DW organised the following activities: free English, IT and art classes; union organising courses; legal surgeries; employment rights advice; emergency support for those escaping employers; social trips; parliamentary lobbying and campaign for legal status and decent work.

MECA (recently renamed 'Diversity Voice') represented the interests of A8 migrants, particularly Polish migrants, in South Somerset. MECA's members were a mixed-gender group, while most were male factory workers. MECA was initially founded as a Polish self-help group: The Somerset Polish Community Association. In 2008, it was named MECA to improve the association's public profile. MECA's key activities included: English classes; advice surgeries on employment issues, community safety, housing issues, school education and integration; community sport activities; paid translation services; and regional migrant forums.

The researcher recognised the importance of both institutional and grassroots access to data. She initially gained access to the two COs. This institutional access helped to map out the key issues facing MWs, the bodies involved in organising them and obtaining access to a group of MWs. However, she recognised that the institutional access might neglect different voices within the community. Consequently, she became widely involved in a variety of informal migrant social clubs and churches. The researcher also lived in a local Polish neighbourhood for three months.

The researcher's background – an Asian female migrant – turned her into a half 'native'. The shared migrant and gender (applied to J4DW whose members are mostly female) background between the researcher and the researched helped to develop trust. However, being a middle class academic from a different ethnicity who had never worked as a factory worker or MDW also created social distance, which allowed the anthropological position of strangeness.

There were three strands of ethnographic data collected. First, she worked as an assistant English tutor for J4DW for two months. She then spent a further two months working as an administrator in MECA. Second, 21 semi-structured interviews were carried out with MDWs, Unite officials and community activists in J4DW. In MECA, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Polish workers, GMB union officials, community activists and local government officers. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours. Third, a number of participant observations were conducted in J4DW English, IT and art classes, anniversary parties, campaigns, social trips, union meetings, monthly meetings, parliamentary meetings, MECA English classes, committee meetings, regional migrant forums and cultural events. The researcher always had a notebook and pen in hand and made notes on a continual basis during participant observations. The notes were then augmented at the end of the day when she returned home. The analysis of the ethnographic data was undertaken in an inductive thematic manner: data were coded to themes that emerged from the fieldwork. Analysis used methodological triangulation and a 'constant comparison method' – a technique designed to compare these three strands of data systematically to help provide a more comprehensive insight. Our quote selections reflect strong and common patterns. We agreed to anonymise individual respondents, but not the two COs in question.

Findings

We present ethnographic evidence of MECA and J4DW. In each case, we analyse the nature of CO against the aforementioned two dimensions. We then discuss the union–community relationship and organising outcomes.

Case one: MECA

Prioritising external legitimacy. MECA developed a primary focus upon external legitimacy and state funding. A key point in this came in 2009 when MECA secured a Migrant Impact Fund grant from the Home Office in partnership with South Somerset Mind, a community police officer and South Somerset Racial Equality Council. By accepting this funding, MECA's strategies became directed less towards members as participators, and more towards members as payers. MWs were required to pay a membership fee first and only then could they access support.

MECA also developed an approach to leadership based on technical knowledge and elite social capital. The paid workers who were the Chief Officer, the Polish school link worker and the secretary were all university educated. They spoke fluent English and had wide social connections with British society, which made it easier to bring their community issues into the public sphere. The social background of the leadership, however, stood in contrast to the background of their key constituency who were mostly Polish factory workers from poor backgrounds. The resultant social distance created difficulties in forging mutual trust:

> They used to organise a Polish party, but no good Polish music . . . no cheap Polish vodka. They don't know how to attract Polish people. The chairperson was nice to important person in the government or whatever, but he doesn't have a heart for what he is doing. (Polish volunteer in MECA)

There was no scheme for developing potential organisers within the community. They tried to include elite migrants who had access to resources on the management board. In the committee meeting of 30 March 2011, those present were the Chair of MECA, the Chief Officer of MECA, a Polish doctor, a retired British welfare advisor and a Lithuanian member. There were no Polish factory workers on the board. The Chief Officer proposed inviting a Polish activist to join MECA's board as his business background could help with the commercial reconstruction if MECA transformed into a social enterprise later on.

With a focus upon external legitimacy, MECA was perceived by other COs as positioning itself as a competitor for resources. As a Polish organiser in Taunton noted:

> We find this organisation aggressive. They try to extend their influence to other areas in Somerset. There are Polish associations existing in other areas. MECA doesn't collaborate with us.

The focus upon external legitimacy also meant that little emphasis was placed on internal relationships. A division occurred when the Chief Officer proposed changing the organisation's name from The Somerset Polish Community Association to MECA in 2008. The Somerset Polish Community Association was a Polish self-help group which mainly targeted Polish MWs. The rationale of changing the organisation's name was to attract more members from other A8 countries and increase their chances of receiving public funding. Some Polish volunteers opposed this suggestion because they thought they there were already too busy helping the Polish community and would not have enough capacity to support other A8 MWs. Nevertheless, the name was changed to MECA to improve the association's public profile, and several Polish volunteers left afterwards.

Competing approach to ethnicity and class, with ethnicity emphasised. MECA positioned itself as a non-political organisation committed to facilitating social integration. Any A8 migrants can be members regardless of their work status.

The commonly used framing strategy was 'ethnic discrimination'. This type of ethnicity-based framing was evident in the speech made by its Chief Officer at a Bridgwater cultural event to raise awareness of the police force's ineffective response to investigating a physical attack on a Polish man by local people in July 2011. He also emphasised the importance for Mendip district council to recruit people of different nationalities and ethnicities to promote diversity in the Mendip Migrant Worker Forum in April 2011.

Although MECA's own research showed that work-related problems were reported as the most important concern for members (followed by medical care and housing), work exploitation had not been framed as a fundamental issue facing MWs.

It was commonly reported that Polish workers were paid the National Minimum Wage and suffered from a lack of health and safety precautions in food-processing factories. As a Polish worker noted:

> I take the hearts and livers out of the meat, and then I need to put them on the hanger and come back. Roughly it takes something between 10 and 15 seconds. You can easily hurt yourself. Once I got slipped and fell down, but these accidents won't be recorded. I've been working there for three years already, no pay rise.

Polish workers were in considerable need of collective representation. However, MECA's willingness to contribute to mobilisation in opposition to local employers was compromised by their reliance on state funding. To qualify for the Migration Impact Fund, it needed to focus on social integration. Becoming a forum for mobilisation for conflict, therefore, potentially stood in conflict with this aim of integration.

Competitive union–community relationship. In relation to GMB's partnership with MECA in providing employment advice, the GMB Yeovil organiser stated that although he had continually been in attendance there, not many Polish workers joined GMB. From an advice session for 20 to 30 Polish workers, only two or three at the most would join GMB. As the following quote illustrates, conflicts often arose because MECA would see members joining unions as a loss of control over their community:

> If they come to GMB, then they might not join MECA, because we provide all services that MECA can offer. He (MECA's chief officer) is very reluctant because he sees himself losing the control of his community. (GMB Yeovil organiser)

GMB officials reported that their community learning projects in MECA were not effective in strengthening union recruitment and organising:

> They are random people from different workplaces. So they don't have common employment issues. We do introduction on what trade unions are, but we don't organise them as such in classes. (GMB Polish education project worker)

Outcomes. Although its institutional profile was rising, MECA did not manage to nurture a supportive Polish community. Distrust was commonly reported. As one Polish volunteer commented: 'it's just an abstract Polish community. You see Polish workers coming here, but they don't support each other.'

There was little evidence to show that Polish workers developed a sense of collective activism to combat work exploitation. It was commonly reported by members that they still had no clear idea of employment rights and they were not confident about negotiating working conditions with employers after receiving training there. Many members stated that MECA was the only organisation they joined in the UK. Many had never heard of unions and the Citizens Advice Bureau. GMB failed to recruit many members from their advice surgeries and community learning projects in MECA.

MECA, however, managed to provide a meeting place where Polish workers may develop mutual support beyond MECA's organisational scope. Several Polish volunteers left MECA and established a small-scale, informal self-help network. They met in local cafes or their own houses to help fellow workers who were exploited at work and encouraged Polish workers to join unions.

Case two: J4DW

The authors have published a separate analysis of the collective mobilisation processes and outcomes involved in J4DW (Jiang and Korczynski, 2016). As such, here we present a summary picture of those aspects, while presenting fuller data on the nature of this CO, as this was not a focus in the other publication.

Valuing internal relationships. J4DW was rooted in internal relationships, as played out in a sharing culture, grassroots leadership and participatory democracy. Their recruitment method involved a MDW asking another MDW, usually a friend, to join them in making sense of an issue. J4DW classes and meetings were characterised by informality and a sharing culture. The session started with warm greetings, involving kisses, hugs and laughs. There was a specific section that allowed members to share what was going on with their work and life and how they felt about classes and social trips. J4DW also offered emergency aid to those MDWs who escaped from their abusive employers. Short-term accommodation and clothing were often provided by their fellow workers. Social trips to different cities of Britain were regularly organised to facilitate friendship among MDWs.

The director of J4DW was a MDW herself. There were attempts to develop a group-centred leadership. The major decisions affecting MDWs were collectively discussed at their monthly meetings that all members were encouraged to attend. Within J4DW, there were five working groups: education, well-being, trade union, media and communication and fundraising, and each was led by a MDW. The director insisted that J4DW should maintain its grassroots nature by recruiting voluntary activists within the community and rejecting any state funding.

Class-based, intersectional organising approach. J4DW recruited members from the occupational group of MDWs, regardless of ethnicities. J4DW consistently adopted a class-based approach to their lobbying and organising activities. As the director noted, their main framing strategy was that 'MDWs are workers and thus deserve the same employment rights like other types of workers'.

Before joining J4DW, MDWs' understanding of work exploitation was often limited due to paternalist familial and/or servant framings of their position. Familial framings were underpinned by employers' benevolence through giving gifts and providing quasi-familial emotional support. MDWs' initial response to employers' friendliness focused on the positive side:

> My employer is nice because sometimes he gives me money. Sometimes he gives me help and support. (Indian, female 24 years old, single, 1.5 years in the UK)

Notably she earned £300 per month, while working for 12–17 hours per day.

Many MDWs also described themselves as 'domestic servants' when they initially joined J4DW. The servant framing was reinforced by public perceptions of domestic work in their home countries. Several Indian MDWs mentioned that when they told their friends about their work, a common response was 'Oh, you are a servant'.

MDWs' worker identity was something that had to be worked for rather than assumed. J4DW utilised two social processes to emphasise the status and identity of members as *workers*: politicised learning and radical art. The English tutors had an explicit aim of positioning members as workers who needed to defend their employment rights. For instance, when members described themselves as 'servant', the tutor would develop the process of reframing by asking MDWs to use the term 'worker'. A story-telling method was utilised to encourage members to share their work-related experiences. The advantage of this was that personal stories contained a lot of details and emotions that readily elicited resonance from fellow workers.

J4DW has organised monthly art workshops since 2009. There was a range of art practices undertaken within J4DW which were participatory in nature, including singing, drawing, writing and acting. J4DW sought to create a political art context in which MDWs were able to share common concerns and take social actions. Typically, members were given tasks such as drawing pictures and writing poetry about their work and life in their home countries and receiving societies. These participatory art works elicited reflections among MDWs about their employment situations which contributed to an understanding of the structural exploitations they faced collectively. As an example, here is part of the poem 'Our Journey' collectively written by MDWs, which reflected their working realities and collective strength:

> Unemployment rise
>
> Poverty is worse
>
> From hunger we fled, with love and hope in our hearts

> To Foreign land we emigrate
>
> We labour day and night
>
> Cleaning, hoovering, mopping
>
> Our meal is hardly once a day
>
> Ironing, cooking
>
> A full load of laundry I say!
>
> Gardening, marketing, car washing
>
> . . .
>
> Enough is enough!
>
> We could take no more
>
> Free and let our wings fly
>
> We educate and soar
>
> We organise
>
> We campaign!

Having emphasised members' status and identity as *workers*, J4DW's organising approach was also intersectional. J4DW members were from Asian and African countries. Ethnicity was effectively integrated to labour organising in several important ways. First, ethnicity contributed to establishing a trusting culture. Members often cooked their national cuisine and brought them to the classes for sharing. During annual social gatherings, members wore traditional costumes of their own cultures to celebrate the ethnic diversity of the group. Second, J4DW was also aware of the importance of diverse ethnic representations so that they could understand particular challenges faced by different ethnic communities in the workplace, such as languages and cultural barriers, and better utilise ethnicity-based networks to mobilise wider support. Among those members on the management board are MDWs from the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Morocco and Nigeria. The Philippine embassy offered financial and service support to J4DW. Finally, J4DW integrated ethnic discrimination into labour organising as ethnic discrimination was commonly reported as one important form of workplace abuse:

> I came to the UK to work for a famous British actress who had previously employed me in India. I started working at 7:00 a.m. until 3:00 a.m. She would call me 'stupid Indian'. (Indian, female, 40 years old)

J4DW organisers believed that positive gendered and ethnic identity could reinforce MDWs' confidence as proud workers who believed that they were capable of challenging exploitative structures. A good example was Miss J4DW Valentine's Beauty Pageant in which contestants of different ethnicities were asked to present traditional costumes of their own cultures and answer questions about MDWs' employment rights. One organiser emphasised that the focus of the contest was not about physical beauty, but more about MDWs' self-confidence, which can be derived from positive gendered, ethnic identity, and that they believed this confidence could be transferred to the political arena. The winner of 2018 became the main activist in J4DW's lobbying and campaign for legal status and decent work for MDWs.

Reciprocal union–community relationship. Unite successfully recruited and organised MDWs through J4DW. The Unite organiser emphasised that J4DW's grassroots-led, *intersectional* organising approach was inspirational for traditional union officials:

> I, a white, male, middle-class union officer go and recruit them, they won't feel comfortable. We approach J4DW first . . . They are inspirational for us as trade unionists because they are teaching us how to organise people. (Unite London organiser)

J4DW was initially affiliated to the food and restaurant branch within Unite. Owing to the increasing number of J4DW members joining Unite and the specificity of MDWs' conditions, Unite set up a separate domestic worker branch in 2020. Unite also supported the campaign led by J4DW for changes to restrictive immigration rules for MDWs (see below).

Despite the sustainable, strong links with Unite, J4DW emphasised the importance of maintaining its autonomy. As one founder summarised:

> If we look back, some crucial points stand out. One was our relationship with trade union. That was a very crucial, and secondly, was the fact that we organised workers themselves . . . total independence from any other group.

Outcomes. An important outcome was the collectivising of work-related norms. MDWs began to explicitly establish collective norms and outline methods of changing problematic situations. As one Filipino MDW commented:

> I don't have days off. I got up at 5:30 a.m. and slept at 10 p.m. I don't know anything about wages and rights . . . I have been silly, 200 pounds per month (the salary of her first job in the UK). I can be rich by staying in London, 250 pounds a week. I can send a lot of money back to the Philippines. I want to negotiate my salary with the help of my friends here (J4DW).

Many MDWs improved their self-confidence. As one member commented: 'I know there will be somebody who supports me. I am more active now.'

There was also evidence of material gains within the employment sphere. Two members successfully brought unfair dismissal cases to an employment tribunal and won compensation. After that, a separate working group, led by the two MDWs involved, was established to help fellow workers with the procedures in making a claim to employment tribunals.

The enhancement of self-confidence and personal efficacy further increased MDWs' propensity to join unions and collective actions:

> I joined campaigns for domestic workers and other workers . . . I feel now I can make a difference, not just controlled by anyone. (Filipino, female 53 years old, married with three children, six years in the UK)

Unite successfully recruited approximately 200 people from J4DW. A notable collective success for the mobilising of MDWs involved the UK government in 2016 granting MDWs the right to change employers within their six-month Overseas Domestic Worker visa.

However, there were also challenges. The rejection of state funding might pose limits to resource utilisation and affect the sustainable development of J4DW. In addition, despite their effort of developing collective leadership, several MDW organisers played a key role in J4DW due to the limited time commitment of other members. This raises the question of whether J4DW is able to sustain itself if the main MDW organisers step down.

Discussion

We started our article with a critique of the union-centric perspective in community unionism studies that adopts a normative interpretation of COs as participatory and work-centred. By adopting a 'community'-oriented perspective, we focus on two dimensions – whether COs prioritise international relationship or external legitimacy and how COs frame different identities – to analyse the varied nature of COs and how it affects the union–community relationship and organising outcomes. The data collection and analysis allowed us to position J4DW and MECA as two extreme cases against these two dimensions.

To answer the first research question – how COs frame collective identities and position different frames – our ethnographic studies echo two broad types identified in the literature review: *competing* and *intersectional* practices between different axes within COs. MECA utilised ethnicity in an essentialist way and positioned class and ethnicity in a competing way. Given that employment was the key driving force behind Polish MWs' move to the UK and work exploitation was reported as the major concern of members, there was a potential for a de facto stress on members' status as migrant *workers*, but this opportunity was not taken up by MECA. With a focus on an ethnicity-based membership structure and organising strategy, MECA concentrated on non-confrontational integration. This echoes Lacroix's (2012) and Garapich's (2016) concern that there is a tendency of ethnicisation of migrant COs in the UK and many COs do not focus on class identities. By contrast, J4DW's organising approach is *intersectional*, with a focus on members' status and identity as *workers*. J4DW successfully utilised politicised learning and radical art to transform MDWs' familial and servant framings into collective worker identity. Rather than using ethnicity and gender in essentialist ways, J4DW strategically utilised them to nurture trust and develop MDWs' agency as proud workers who were capable of challenging exploitative structures. Here we argue that community unionism scholars need to be more sensitive to different forms of identity framing across COs and it is important to explore different axes around which COs organise members (Alberti et al., 2013).

To answer the second research question – whether COs prioritise internal relationship or external legitimacy – our study reveals that migrant COs do not naturally have internal solidarity and capacity for mobilisation. This contrasts with the community unionism scholars' assumption that COs engage in a relational culture and have some capacity for collective actions (Osterman, 2006; Tapia, 2013). We emphasise the importance of differentiating COs with a focus on participatory internal relations from COs prioritising external legitimacy. The case of MECA points to the potential danger of 'institutionalisation' and 'goal displacements' (Zald and Ash, 1966) that COs face. By receiving Home Office funding, MECA became a professionally run and bureaucratic CO with an explicit emphasis on the organisation per se. MECA's professional leadership was deeply embedded in bureaucratic routines. MECA built a 'contingent community' (Kelly, 2003) with no political unity, and thus it did not provide a collective basis for mobilisation. J4DW, by contrast, sustained itself through enhancing the membership's sense of capacity and agency, developing grassroots leadership and building a culture of contestation without transforming into a hierarchical organisation. We argue that COs' relational culture and capacity for collective actions cannot be assumed, and a 'community'-oriented perspective requires us to carefully examine whether and how capacity for collective actions is mobilised within COs.

To address the third research question – how the varied nature of CO affects the union–community relationship and organising outcomes – we suggest that the COs which adopt a class-based, *intersectional* approach, and which focus on participatory internal relations, are likely to facilitate the reciprocal union–community relationship and contribute to collective mobilisation. J4DW's class-based, *intersectional* organising approach enhanced Unite membership and influence. Its focus on participatory and relational culture paved a solid basis for their campaigns on employment rights and migrant policies. J4DW joined with Unite and other partners to successfully campaign for a change in immigration rules which granted MDWs the right to change employers. However, the COs which adopt *competing* practices, and which focus on external legitimacy, might compete with unions and other COs for membership and influence and shift the focus away from class-based issues. MECA competed with GMB and other COs for membership and influence. There was no clear evidence of the development of collective activism around employment. This supports the studies which emphasise the importance of the successful intersection of class, ethnicity and other relevant social dynamics in organising MWs (Alberti and Pero, 2018). Our finding also echoes MacKenzie et al.'s (2012) argument that some COs might focus on institutional goals and thus compete with unions and other NGOs for funding and political leverage and thus pose challenges to mobilisation.

We also explored the nuances of these two cases. Despite the existence of a 'contingent community' within MECA, it managed to provide a meeting space where a small-scale, informal Polish network prioritising employment issues emerged beyond MECA's organisational scope. While J4DW successfully mobilised MDWs based on employment and developed a fruitful relationship with Unite, it faced the challenge of the long-term development of the organisation due to its rejection of state funding and the issue of a leadership pipeline.

To address the final question concerning non-union-centric organising outcomes, we point to a need to broaden the meaning of organising outcomes. While community unionism scholars often assess outcomes against union membership and material rewards (Tattersall, 2005), the J4DW case reveals that grassroots empowerment, personal growth and confidence, and the development of 'communities of struggles' (Pero, 2020) are also important components of community organising. Despite the fruitful collaborations with Unite, J4DW maintained its autonomy without fully integrating into mainstream union structures. J4DW possessed some key characteristics of 'indie union' (to use the term coined by Pero (2020)). A 'community'-oriented perspective of assessing organising outcomes requires us to go beyond the institutional framework of unions in order to address MWs' perspectives and initiatives.

Conclusion

This article focuses on the potential contribution of COs to the collective mobilisation of MWs – an emerging and important theme in sociology of work scholarship. Overall, our analysis emphasises the importance of shifting from union fetishism (Atzeni, 2021) with a focus on institutional frame of analysis to a 'community'-oriented perspective to understand the varied role of COs in community organising of MWs. Here we suggest some analytical points that can be gleaned from the two cases.

First, in contrast to the normative interpretation of COs as participatory, cohesive and work-centred in the industrial relations studies (Bondy, 2022; Fine, 2007; Tapia, 2013), our study shows that migrant COs do not necessarily focus on MWs' worker status and identity as *workers* and engage in a relational culture. We point to the importance of analysing the varied nature of migrant COs against two dimensions – whether COs prioritise international relationship or external legitimacy and how COs frame different identities – as they have a significant impact on the union–community relationship and organising outcomes. Our study suggests that COs which focus on participatory internal relations, and which frame collective identities (including class) in an intersectional way are likely to have reciprocal relationships with trade unions and contribute to collective mobilisation. By contrast, COs which emphasise external legitimacy, and which frame collective identities in a competing way might compete with unions and other COs for membership and influence and thus pose challenges to mobilisation.

Moreover, a 'community'-oriented perspective argues for the importance of going beyond the institutional framework of unions to address MWs' perspectives and initiatives when assessing organising outcomes. Grassroots empowerment, personal growth and confidence, and the development of 'communities of struggles' are all important components of community organising. Echoing Pero's (2020) study of indie unions, our study shows that migrant COs, such as J4DW, may not fully integrate themselves into mainstream union structures.

We acknowledge a limitation in the article. The two extreme cases have taken the theoretical premises to an extreme level. We call for future research into a range of COs which differ in those two important dimensions to gain a more nuanced, holistic understanding of the varied nature of COs and how it affects the union–community relationship and collective mobilisation.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Date submitted May 2020
Date accepted July 2022