

Workers' Organisations Responses to Crisis: Examining the Case of Domestic Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Mexico

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Paper prepared for presentation at the

“7th Conference of the Regulating for Decent Work Network”

Virtual Conference, International Labour Office Geneva, Switzerland

6-9 July 2021

Abstract

Considered one of the most vulnerable forms of work, paid domestic work is plagued by precarious employment and working conditions, namely, low wages, lack of protections and high rates of informality. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation of workers in the sector, the vast majority of whom are women. Unable to work online or at home, domestic workers had their livelihood and economic security threatened by the rapid loss of jobs and income. Mexico was no different: from March to July, 33% of domestic workers lost their jobs. Among those who remained employed, working conditions deteriorated; many had their incomes and hours of work reduced, while others were forced to work longer hours or perform more tasks for the same salary. In an effort to assist domestic workers during the crisis, domestic workers' organisations (DWOs) – that is, trade unions and community-based labour organisations – provided direct services to workers, lobbied and raised awareness of the vulnerability of workers in this sector. With the support of social allies – mainly feminist groups – DWOs championed decent work, denounced labour abuses and demanded government action. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles and interviews with

representatives of DWOs and social allies in Mexico, this article examines the various ways in which DWOs mobilise and form coalitions to provide support to domestic workers, providing an empirical contribution to the growing literature on DWOs and, more broadly, to the literature on organising informal women workers. Based on the case study of Mexico, it is argued that, in a context of widespread informality and in the absence of government measures to support informal workers, DWOs' responses were the main form of support that domestic workers received during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, domestic worker's organisations, Mexico, paid domestic work, precarious work

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Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic evolved into an economic and social disruption with especially dire effects on the most vulnerable. Among them, paid domestic workers, who provide household services such as cleaning, cooking, gardening, driving and caring for children, the elderly and sick family members, were disproportionately affected. Considered one of the most vulnerable forms of work, domestic work is plagued by precarious employment relations and working conditions, namely, low wages, lack of protections and high rates of informality (ILO, 2020b). Unable to work online or at home, domestic workers were severely affected by the movement restrictions adopted in many countries, with many having their livelihoods and economic security threatened by the rapid loss of jobs and income in the wake of the pandemic (ILO, 2020a, IDWF, 2021). According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), in June 2020, 72% of domestic workers were significantly impacted by the pandemic, the vast majority of which hold informal employment arrangements (ILO, 2020a).

In Mexico, one of the countries most affected by the pandemic in 2020 and where 99% of domestic workers are informal workers, more than 732,000 domestic workers lost their jobs from March to July 2020, a 33% reduction in the total number of domestic workers (CEPAL, 2021). Among those remaining in employment, working conditions deteriorated; many had their income and working hours reduced, while others were forced to work longer hours or perform more tasks for the same wage (Milenio, 2020, Molina, 2020). In addition, reports of forced quarantine with employers have multiplied the cases of violence and harassment against domestic workers (Horas, 2020, Chavez, 2020). In response

to this dire situation, domestic workers' organisations (DWOs) - that is, trade unions and community-based labour organisations led by domestic workers - played a key role in supporting workers in this sector deeply affected by the crisis. By providing direct services to workers, lobbying and raising awareness about the plight of domestic workers, these workers' organisations, together with social allies - mainly feminist groups - championed decent work, denounced labour abuses and demanded government action.

Focusing on the case study of Mexico, I examine the various ways in which DWOs mobilise and form coalitions to provide support to domestic workers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. More precisely, I explore how the organised female-dominated movement responded to the crisis while examining the importance of the cross-movement coalitions between the feminist movement and DWOs to advance domestic workers' collective interests. Drawing on the qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles and interviews with representatives of DWOs and social allies, I argue that, in a context of widespread informality and in the absence of government measures to support informal workers, efforts of DWOs to alleviate the situation of domestic workers were the main form of support that these workers received during the COVID-19 crisis. This article is an empirical contribution to the growing literature on DWOs and, more broadly, to the literature on organising informal women workers.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section explores the literature on the domestic workers' movement, addressing its 'unorganisable' stigma, its efforts to build coalitions with social allies, and how past crises have impacted the sector. Then, the second section describes the qualitative methodology used to collect and analyse newspapers articles and interviews. In the third section, a discussion follows on the inequalities and the precarious working conditions and employment relations observed in the sector both in a pre-pandemic context and during the pandemic. Next, the fourth section outlines the network of organisations operating in the country and their well-established coalitions with civil society actors to reach workers and deliver better services. This is followed by an analysis of how workers' organisations responded to the crisis and the impacts of COVID-19 on employment and working conditions in three axes: consciousness-raising, provision of direct services and shaping public policy. In the conclusion the relevance and the limits of the organised labour movement during a crisis are highlighted.

Methodology

This article is a case study that adopts a two-pronged qualitative approach: a content analysis of newspaper articles and semi-structured interviews with DWOs and CSOs leaders. Both qualitative methods were chosen for their ability to provide a variety of sources of evidence for data triangulation and for their potential to expose and explain in detail the complex and unique social process that a health emergency like COVID-19 has brought to a vulnerable population such as the domestic workers (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, Bowen, 2009, Teti et al., 2020). In this vein, while the qualitative content analysis provided a valuable understanding of the working and employment conditions of domestic workers in the wake of COVID-19, the interviews allowed for a more detailed comprehension of the approaches employed by DWOs and CSOs to reach and support workers. Given that little is known about how DWOs support their constituents, especially during crises, a case-study approach was considered the most appropriate for this exploratory research (Yin, 2018).

The Mexican case was chosen because the country has one of the lowest formalisation rates for domestic workers in the world, being described in terms of working conditions and labour rights for domestic workers as a 'low performer' country (Lexartza et al., 2016, Blofield and Jokela, 2018). Moreover, Mexico has a well-established and structured network of DWOs that, during the pandemic, proved to be a very active labour movement both in providing support to workers and in their coalition-building efforts with CSOs; therefore, their examination seems especially pertinent.

For the content analysis, a dataset of 69 online articles from 45 national and local open access newspapers was assembled (Table 1). The articles were collected from newspapers websites using the search tool 'Google News' with strings that combined the most common Mexican-Spanish terms for 'domestic workers' and 'COVID-19 pandemic' over 10 months (from 28 February 2020 - date of the first official case of COVID-19 in Mexico - until 31 December 2020). Given the focus of this research, newspaper articles that did not directly address domestic workers, but the effects of the pandemic on female workers in general were excluded. Each article was fully read and coded in NVivo. Through an analysis of the manifest content (surface-level content of the text) and the latent content (underlying meanings of the text) (Neuendorf, 2017), two categories of codes were identified: (a) the impact of the pandemic on workers and (b) DWOs responses to support domestic workers. Therefore, the content analysis provided context and allowed for tracking the evolution and diversity of actions put into practice by organisations. It also provided secondary data based on the reporting of interviews with domestic workers. Key active representatives of DWOs who could be contacted for interviews were also identified through the content analysis.

Regarding the interviews, 11 leaders from three DWOs and four CSOs were interviewed between December 2020 and March 2021. Lasting between 30 minutes to an hour, the interviews were conducted in Spanish and recorded. Questions largely focused on service provision, coalitions with other organisations, and government responses to the sector. To keep the respondents' identities anonymous, IDs were attributed to them. Therefore, throughout this article, references bracket with 'DWO' refer to interviews with representatives of DWOs, 'CSO' to representatives of non-workers CSOs and 'N' and 'L' refer to the level of performance of the organisation: 'N' for national and 'L' local.

Table 1. Newspaper content analysis

Newspaper	Number of articles	Date(s) publication	Circulation area
24 Horas	2	15 April; 26 April	National
Al Momento	1	03 November	National
Animal Politico	2	3 May; 8 May	National
Aristegui	1	30 March	National
Chilango	1	04 September	Local (Mexico City)
Contra Republica	1	16 April	National
Diario de Mexico	1	15 April	National
Diario de Queretaro	1	25 April	Local (Querétaro)
Diario de Yucatan	1	06 November	Local (Yucatan)
El Diario de Coahuila	1	03 November	Local (Coahuila)
El Economista	4	21 July; 22 July; 23 July; 14 September	National
El expresso de Campeche	1	30 April	Local (Campeche)
El Financiero	1	17 May	National
El Heraldo de Chihuahua	1	16 November	Local (Chihuahua)
El Heraldo de Mexico	2	16 April; 20 August	National
El Norte	2	4 September; 19 September	Local (Nuevo León)
El Occidental	2	5 April; 15 April	Local (Jalisco)
El Pulso Laboral	1	15 September	National
El Sol de Mexico	4	23 March; 30 March; 4 November; 6 November	National
El Sol de Puebla	1	29 Oct	Local (Puebla)
El Sol de Tlaxcala	1	11 September	Local (Tlaxcala)
Eme Equis	1	06 Oct	National
E-Vera Cruz	1	23 September	Local (Vera Cruz)
Expansion Politica	2	19 April; 21 August	National
Express Zacatecas	1	20 April	Local (Zacatecas)
Factor Capital Humano	1	04 November	National
Informador	1	11 April	Local (Jalisco)
Intolerancia	1	30 March	Local (Puebla)
La Jornada	2	11 May; 6 Oct	National
La Jornada Zacatecas	1	24 September	Local (Zacatecas)

La Jornada de Oriente	1	12 May	Local (Puebla)
La Prensa	3	7 September; 8 September; 24 September	National
Lado B	1	18 Oct	National
Linea Directa	2	21 April; 13 May	National
Megalopolis	1	02 May	Local (Mexico City)
Milenio	8	20 March; 5 April; 15 April; 28 April; 23 September; 30 September; 11 November; 20 November	National
NTR	1	13 May	Local (Zacatecas)
Oink	1	06 November	National
Pulso SLP	1	21 September	Local (San Luis)
Quadratin	1	15 April	National
Sin Embargo	2	18 April; 28 April	National
Telediario Bajito	1	06 November	Local (Bajito)
Turquesa News	1	16 September	Local (Cancún)
Unotv	1	28 March	National
Vallarta Independiente	1	16 May	Local (Puerto Vallarta)

Domestic work in Mexico

Social and work inequalities

As in most parts of the world, domestic work in Mexico is a form of precarious work performed almost exclusively by women. Of the 2.2 million domestic workers in the country, 2.1 million are female workers. Indeed, domestic work is one of the most relevant sources of female employment: one out of ten women in Mexico works as domestic worker (OIT, 2019, OIT, 2020a). However, despite being a female-dominated sector, gender inequalities permeate the sector. In a country characterised by stereotyped views of gender roles in which women are expected to perform care and housework tasks *within* the house, male domestic workers are assigned to better-paid jobs performed *outside* the house, such as drivers and security guards (Durin, 2014b, Thomson, 2009, Goldsmith, 1989). This translates into the existing gender wage gap within the occupation: the monthly wages of women are, on average, almost 12% lower than men. Likewise, men receive more employment benefits, such as paid holidays (13.1% of men versus 8.4% of women), Christmas bonus (33.8% versus 26.6%) and, although only 5% of domestic workers are men, they represent about 29% of insured social security workers (OIT, 2019, OIT, 2020b).

Apart from being a gendered occupation, domestic work in Mexico is also racialised. The sector is composed of a large flow of internal migrants from rural areas, many of whom are Indigenous newcomers to the city who find their first job opportunity in domestic work (Morales, 2011, Chávez, 2014, CONAPRED, 2011, Saldaña-Tejeda, 2015)¹. Indigenous workers² represent about a quarter of the workforce in the sector, being overrepresented in the domestic work industry: in 2010, while 2.4% of the economically active population were employed in domestic work, 22.5% of economically active Indigenous people were domestic workers (Durin, 2014a, Chávez, 2014).

Much of the precariousness that permeates the sector is deeply rooted in the inequalities of gender, race and class that characterise domestic work and the way this intersection is perceived (and devalued) by Mexican society. As several authors have noted, since colonial times, employing a domestic worker is seen by the wealthier classes as a way of signalling their wealth and social status (Goldsmith, 1989, Blum, 2004, Camus and de la O, 2014). However, although many employers consider domestic workers indispensable to their homes, domestic work continues to be seen as 'non-work' - like other types of social reproductive work and 'women's work' (IDWF, 2021, Valenzuela et al., 2020). As a result, domestic workers are not only undervalued and underpaid, but they are also subject to violence and harassment in their workplaces and outside households.

Reports of false accusations of theft, discrimination based on the grounds of ethnicity/race, as well as verbal, physical, and sexual abuse are frequent among domestic workers; about 19% of workers report being mistreated or abused by their employers and 32% affirm that the main issue with domestic work is the poor working conditions (ENADIS, 2017). Furthermore, class discrimination is widespread: 57% of workers have affirmed that people have little or no respect for the rights of paid domestic workers and almost 29% of female domestic workers feel discriminated against because of their occupation – they constitute the group ranked third for the highest perception of discrimination behind only those who are discriminated because of their sexual orientation or religious beliefs (ENADIS, 2017).

Institutional discrimination has also been identified as one of the main factors responsible for the precarious working conditions and employment relations in the sector (Blofield and Jokela, 2018).

¹ Unlike other countries - mainly in the Global North - where most of the migratory flow for domestic work is made up of international migrants, in Mexico, immigrant domestic workers are a minority of the sector's workforce VALENZUELA, M. E., SCURO, M. L. & VACA TRIGO, I. 2020. Desigualdad, crisis de los cuidados y migración del trabajo doméstico remunerado en América Latina. *serie Asuntos de Género*. Santiago: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL).

² According to Durin (2013), this percentage is lower than the real, since, at the time of the census, many Indigenous people did not recognise speaking an indigenous language (way in which Indigenous ethnicity is attributed to a person in Mexico) due to the prevailing discrimination in the urban environment DURIN, S. 2013. Servicio doméstico de planta y discriminación en el área metropolitana de Monterrey. *Relaciones. Estudios de historia y sociedad*, 34, 93-129..

Despite major legislative and regulatory reforms³ that took place in the country from 2018 to 2020 resulting in a significant expansion of labour protections for domestic workers, these reforms did not address the full regulatory spectrum of unfair and discriminatory mistreatment of workers in this occupation. Largely due to the mobilisation efforts of DWOs, these long-sought reforms guaranteed for domestic workers many, but not all, labour rights and protections enjoyed by workers in other sectors; unemployment insurance, for example, continues to be denied to domestic workers. Besides, issues related to law enforcement and labour inspection jeopardise the implementation of these reforms (DWO/N-1).

These inequalities, added to others, contributed to the worsening situation of many workers during the pandemic. With confinement measures in place to prevent transmission, domestic workers in Mexico faced the stark choice of either exposing themselves to the virus or losing their jobs. Although they did not appear on the list of essential workers⁴, many workers continued to work normally despite the suspension, from March 30 to April 30, 2020, of all non-essential activities (Juárez, 2020). Among those who did not stop working, some groups such as those with certain medical conditions (e.g. diabetes, obesity, hypertension, pregnancy) were more at risk due to their greater chance of experiencing severe COVID-19 symptoms. In the same vein, another group considered more vulnerable to COVID-19, that of workers over 60 years old – one in every ten domestic workers – had their right to stay at home commonly disregarded (OIT, 2019). Moreover, measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including the use of masks and antibacterial gel, were not observed at the workplace (DWO/L-3; México, 2020).

Precarious working conditions and employment relations

³ Among the main reforms are the incorporation of domestic workers into the national social insurance scheme, the amendment of Chapter XIII of the Federal Labour Law which ensured domestic workers some of the basic labour rights guaranteed to other workers, and the ratification of the Convention 189 of the ILO on Domestic Work (also known as C189).

⁴ Few countries have clearly defined whether domestic workers are essential workers or not IDWF 2021. The impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers in Latin America. International Domestic Workers Federation . In Latin America, for example, Brazil, Chile and Argentina defined paid domestic work as non-essential work. However, in some of these countries, exceptions apply: for example, workers whose employers work in essential sectors (such as health), or workers who work for isolated elderly people were considered essential workers SALVADOR, S. & COSSANI, P. 2020. Trabajadoras remuneradas del hogar en América Latina y el Caribe frente a la crisis del COVID-19. In: MUJERES, O. R. P. L. A. Y. E. C. D. O. (ed.), IDWF 2021. The impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers in Latin America. International Domestic Workers Federation .

Although domestic workers make an important contribution to almost 5% of Mexican households (Vaquiro, 2019), few of them receive a decent salary. In a country where the minimum wage is much lower than the living wage⁵, about 42% of domestic workers receive less than the minimum wage and about 71% do not receive any type of employment benefit (OIT, 2019, CONEVAL, 2017b, Rojas-García and Toledo González, 2018). Even compared to other informal workers, informal domestic workers are clearly at a disadvantage: their wages are, on average, 19% lower than informal workers in other sectors (OIT, 2019). Not surprisingly, about 45% of domestic workers live in moderate poverty and 7% are extremely poor (compared to 34% and 7%, respectively, in the population as a whole). Besides, almost 23% of domestic workers suffer from mild food insecurity, 16% from moderate and 13% from severe food insecurity (OIT, 2019, CONEVAL, 2018).

With just over 1% of domestic workers having access to social insurance and less than 0.8% with a written contract specifying their activities, working hours, benefits and vacations, the vast majority of workers hold informal employment arrangements (OIT, 2019). As informal workers, they do not access social protection systems. In practice, they are not entitled to unemployment benefit in the event of dismissal, nor health care or sickness benefit in the event of illness. This lack of social protection had serious ramifications during the crisis limiting workers healthcare options if faced with COVID-19.

Although no research has confirmed the relationship between domestic work and a greater chance of contagion by COVID-19, there are some indications that the very characteristics of domestic work (i.e., care work performed in households, with close interactions with employers for prolonged periods) makes social distancing almost impossible and puts workers at a higher risk of exposure to the virus (CEPAL, 2021, IDWF, 2021). Similarly, many workers face long hours commuting on public transport - almost 60% of domestic workers depend on public transit to get to work and 37% spend more than half an hour commuting (OIT, 2019) - a factor that can increase their chance of infection in a country seriously affected by the pandemic. All these factors have probably contributed to the alarming death figures among domestic workers: of the 1,050 deaths caused by COVID-19 in the Mexican state of Tlaxcala until September 2020, 231 were domestic workers (Lima, 2020); in Mexico City, out of the first 10,000 deaths, 2,018 were domestic workers (Navarrete, 2020). Regarding the deterioration of work conditions and employment relations during the pandemic, as both the content analysis and the interviews revealed, unjustified dismissal without notice, wage cuts, increased workload, forced

⁵ According to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (*Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social* - CONEVAL), the organisation responsible to measure poverty in Mexico, the minimum wage would have to be increased 4.7 times to cover the basic food basket for a family of four CONEVAL, C. N. D. E. D. L. P. D. D. S. 2017a. Ingreso, Pobreza y Salario Mínimo..

quarantine and increased violence and harassment within the home were the labour abuses most reported.

As for the mass layoff observed during the pandemic, cases of 'suspension', in which employers claimed that workers' services were not necessary 'until further notice', making workers believe that they would be called when 'the situation improves' were widely reported. Perhaps more alarming, however, is that, as informal workers, most of them were sent home without compensation, such as a 70-year-old worker who - after working for more than 40 years in the same house - was fired during the pandemic without receiving any form of compensation (DWO/L-1; CSO-L/1; Milenio, 2020, Molina, 2020). Consistent with the findings of Loveband (2004) and Rojas-García and Toledo González (2018), the financial impact of the pandemic on household income and employers' fear of being infected by domestic workers were among the main explanations for this 'suspension' (DWO/L-2; Carrasco, 2020). As respondents explained, while some employers, in their eagerness to reduce household expenses, laid off long-time workers to hire younger and inexperienced workers for lower wages, others preferred to fire employees based on their fears that domestic workers were transmitting the virus to the employer's family members (DWO/L-2; DWO/L-3).

Among workers who kept their jobs, many had their wages drastically reduced or were subjected to longer working hours for the same wages (DWO/L-3). Claiming that they could not cover workers' full wages, some employers reduced the number of workers' working days or simply stopped paying them (DWO/N-1; Calderón, 2020). Likewise, other employers disregarded labour rights on daily working hours or days off (Aguilar, 2020, México, 2020). Consistent with Rojas-García and Toledo González (2018) observed in the 2008 recession, the reduction in the income of domestic workers led many to seek employment in other informal sectors during the pandemic (DWO/N-1).

Furthermore, for those who remained employed, the imposition of additional tasks was another source of distress. With more people based at or working from home, some domestic workers experienced an intensification of work with an increase in the number of tasks to be undertaken during their working hours. Caring for children, the elderly and the sick (in some cases, employers infected with COVID-19) are some of the tasks that were added to their usual routine (Carrasco, 2020, Milenio, 2020). Many have reported the additional burden of stringent and regular cleaning activities to keep the house sanitised, often using dangerous chemicals (DWO/N-1). Among the live-in workers, the lack of clarity regarding their duties, as well as longer and indefinite workloads hours were reported issues (Aguilar, 2020, Xantomila, 2020).

Still concerning the live-ins, as Loveband (2004) reported during the SARS outbreak, forced quarantine imposed by employers, especially during the first months of the pandemic, was not rare (Aguilar, 2020,

México, 2020). Among those live-out workers who had to continue to work, some had to change their working arrangements and remain in their workplaces during the confinement. As employers would not allow them to leave the household for fear of being infected, some domestic workers saw an increase in their working hours as they were trapped with their employers, unable to return home and care for their own family members (Chávez, 2020, Nolasco, 2020). Among those who remained in their employers' homes, many reported being threatened. As one domestic worker reported to the press, employers used to say: 'if you leave, you are fired' (Carrasco, 2020).

Finally, many interviewees reported being concerned about the increase in violence during the pandemic, especially sexual violence against women (DWO/L-1; DWO/L-3; DWO-N-1; CSO-L/1). Inside the house, as one DWO's leader observed: 'many (employers) believe that because they are paying, they can do whatever they want' (DWO/L-1). Another organisation representative echoed this by pointing out that workers were never as close to employers as during the pandemic. As she affirms, during the quarantine there was an increase in violence within the home, both among family members and among employers-workers (DWO/N-1).

Domestic workers organisations in Mexico: organising and building coalitions to respond to the COVID-19 crisis

The first initiatives to mobilise domestic workers in Mexico date back to early part of the 20th century: between 1920 and 1950, around 30 DWOs emerged in different parts of the country; all disappeared in the following decades and Only in the 1980s, with a new a wave of consciousness-raising and political work, new organisations are established (Goldsmith, 1992). By 2021, there was only one trade union – the National Union of Domestic Workers (SINACTRAHO, as per its acronym in Spanish) - and four CBLOs established and run by domestic workers. These DWOs can be divided into two levels based on their geographic coverage. While at the national level, there are the SINACTRAHO and the Support and Training Centre for Domestic Employees (CACEH) - both based in the Mexican capital, Mexico City – at the local level, three smaller CBLOs operate in large Mexican cities (table 2).

The DWOs working at the local level have also come together under the umbrella of the National Network of Domestic Workers (*Red Nacional de Trabajadoras del Hogar*, in Spanish), an initiative that aims to strengthen the contact between DWOs and enable joint actions. Created in 2007 by five members, the Network had at the time of interviews three members; two of the original members ended their activities due to lack of resources (DWO-L/2).

Table 2. Domestic workers organisations

Organisation	Type	Level	Constituency
National Union of Domestic Workers (SINACTRAHO)	Trade union	National	Domestic workers
Support and Training Centre for Domestic Workers (CACEH)	CBLO	Nacional	Domestic workers
Domestic Worker Support Centre (CATDA-Morelos)	CBLO	Local (Morelos)	Domestic workers
Collective of Domestic Employees of Los Altos de Chiapas (CEDACH)	CBLO	Local (Chiapas)	Domestic workers
Network of Women Domestic Employees of Guerrero	CBLO	Local (Guerrero)	Domestic workers

Founded in 1977, the longest-running DWO is the Domestic Worker Support Centre (CATDA-Morelos) while the newest is SINACTRAHO, born in 2016 as a result of the mobilisation of CACEH (Torres, 2020, Goldsmith, 1992). CACEH, founded in 2000 under the leadership of Marcelina Bautista, the main face of the Mexican domestic workers' movement in the country and abroad, is the organisation with greater visibility both nationally and internationally. In Mexico, CACEH has focused its activities on providing training and education services as well as counselling and advocacy for domestic workers. Beyond Mexico's borders, CACEH played an important role in the formation of the CONLACTRAHO and IDWF (Torres, 2020).

As discussed, CBLOs, as quasi unions, lack collective bargaining powers. However, in Mexico, given the prolonged absence of a union to shape public policies and promote the collective interests of the occupation, the CBLOs assumed the role of interlocutor with the government. In this sense, most of the legislative reforms that occurred in the country can be attributed, in large part, not only to SINACTRAHO efforts but to the campaigns run by CBLOs to shape public policies. Likewise, the grassroots work of local CBLOs in providing services to domestic workers not reached by SINACTRAHO is vital. As some respondents explain, significant differences between the 32 Mexican states in terms of working and employment conditions, as well as differences in the composition of the domestic working population and distrust of national unions at the local level, make it necessary for local organisations to exist (DWO/L-2; CSO/L-1).

During the pandemic, the relationship between DWOs became more important than ever due to the lack of government support for the sector. As one local leader pointed out, the pandemic has made it

even clearer that, if they do not collaborate and strengthen their ties through their own national and international networks, no one will help them, especially the government (DWO/L-1). In this vein, far-reaching organisations, notably SINACTRHO and CACEH, played an important role during the pandemic promoting courses on decent working conditions for organisations operating at the local level (DWO-L/2). In turn, IDWF provided economic resources for SINACTRHO to distribute to the most affected workers (among them, the elderly, pregnant women and people with chronic diseases), in addition to providing telephones for their representatives to keep in touch with their constituents (IDWF, 2021)

To provide better services and reach a wider audience, DWOs have established coalitions with non-workers CSOs sympathetic to their causes, most of them are feminist groups that seek, among other things, to promote the interests of working women or vulnerable workers in general (table 3). Indeed, as discussed above, the characteristics of the domestic work sector and the interests shared between the feminist movement and the DWOs (promotion of working women labour rights), have contributed to the effective solidarity between movements. For many years, CSOs have been supporting DWOs financially and with other resources (mainly training and shared campaigns). During the pandemic, these coalitions were strengthened and most of the DWOs interviewed received financial resources and training from social allies (DWO-L/1; DWO-L/2).

Table 3. Non-worker civil society organisations

Organisation	Type	Level	Constituency
Parvada	Non-worker CSO	Local (Jalisco)	Domestic workers
Jade Sociales	Non-worker CSO	Local (Yucatán)	Vulnerable workers
Tzome Ixuk Mujeres Organizadas	Non-worker CSO	Local (Chiapas)	Indigenous women
Hogar justo hogar	Non-worker CSO	National	Domestic workers' employers
Instituto de Liderazgo Simone de Beauvoir (ILSB)	Non-worker CSO	National	Women
Fondo Semillas	Non-worker CSO	National	Women
Nosotrxs	Non-worker CSO	National	Women

Consciousness-raising

Part of the DWO's mission is to sensitise workers and employers about workers' rights while drawing society's attention to the situation of domestic workers. Moreover, by highlighting the precarious conditions of domestic work, DWOs seek to raise awareness about decent working in the sector. In this vein, many of their pre-COVID-19 campaigns were focused on the recognition of domestic workers as workers (and not 'helpers' or quasi-family members), campaigns that were intensified during the pandemic and gained prominence with hashtags such as "Work at Home is Work" (#TrabajoEnCasaEsTrabajo) (Nolasco, 2020)

Furthermore, during the pandemic, in response to the increase in the number of reports of labour abuse, DWOs intensified some of their pre-pandemic campaigns directed to workers and employers, especially those on social security. Other new campaigns and informational materials relevant for the context of the pandemic were launched in partnership with social allies, mainly on topics such as safety measures at work for COVID-19 and workers' rights in event of unfair dismissal (DWO/L-1; DWO/L-2). Due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, many of these campaigns were restricted to the internet. However, this did not apply to all campaigns since some workers do not have smartphones or do not have access to the internet (DWO/L-2). Many DWOs also used their media interviews to denounce abuses that occurred during the pandemic and to 'call for solidarity', asking employers to be fair, conscientious and show empathy for workers (Aguilar, 2020, México, 2020).

Provision of services

Most services provided by DWOs aim to provide information, advice and training to workers. In addition, these organisations are at the forefront, in many cases, they are the first ones that workers turn to when they need help, either because of problems with their employers or when they face difficult personal situations. Thus, training, employee-employer mediation efforts and other types of services offered by DWOs before and during the pandemic are among the main contributions of these organisations to the sector.

DWOs aim to provide information, advice and training to workers. These organisations are also at the forefront of providing help and support to workers, especially when faced with problem employers, which often takes the form of employee-employer mediation. In that respect, during the pandemic, training workshops seem to be among the most frequent services provided by DWOs. Again, most of them were carried out online, but some organisations have chosen to continue with face-to-face training as a way to build empathy and strengthen the connection with members, as one national

organiser pointed out (DWO/N-1). However, the pandemic has greatly affected the form and number of face-to-face workshops offered. Due to the additional costs of protective measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 (e.g. purchase of hand sanitisers and face masks), the quantity of in-person training was reduced. In addition, social distance measures have forced organisations to deliver workshops to fewer people (DWO/L3).

Mediation of disputes between employees and employers was also frequently reported by the media and by the interviewees and are closely related to the increase in layoffs and wage cuts observed during the pandemic. Although the DWOs have lawyers on their staff, most disputes were resolved in informal mediation sessions outside the courts (DWO/L-1; DWO/L-2; DWO/L-3; DWO/N-1). As some local organisers pointed out, this is largely due to domestic workers' fear of claiming their rights (DWO/L-1; DWO/L-2).

More material forms of support, such as food baskets or financial support, were also delivered by at least two organisations to domestic workers (DWO/L-1; DWO/N-1). Other types of support, such as psychological support and the organisation of recreational activities, were also provided to workers in an attempt to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on their lives (DWO/L-1; DWO/N-1). As one DWO's leader explains, these actions proved to be important as the mental health of workers was impacted not only by changes at their workplaces (e.g. increased stress at work caused by the prolonged stay of employers at home) but also by changes at their own homes (e.g. the prolonged stay of their children and partners at home) (DWO/N-1). Peer support networks to give workers a voice and create opportunities for them to interact, such as the 'My work counts' online community (*Mi trabajo cuenta*, in Spanish), were also part of organisations' strategies to support workers (Carrasco, 2020).

Shaping public policy

Lobbying activity intended to influence and shape the public policy agenda is a substantial part of the work of DWOs. During the pandemic, given the growing interest in the plight of domestic workers and the greater exposure these DWO organisations had in the media, this became even more evident. Among their main demands were the establishment of COVID-19 protocols at home and the expansion of the domestic workers' labour rights, especially unemployment insurance (DWO/N-1). However, more than that, DWOs took advantage of the media's attention to criticise the lack of effective responses from the government.

The only measure taken by the national government to support domestic workers, that is, a loan programme, was severely criticised by DWOs, since, in practice, most domestic workers were not eligible because they were not enrolled in social security (DWO/L-1; DWO/L-2; CEPAL, 2020). In addition, as many respondents indicated, the loan was not viable for several reasons, even for that 1% insured by social security. Among the reasons cited were the uncertainty of workers regarding their employment situation when it comes to repaying the money. In addition, to be eligible, domestic workers needed to contribute for at least three consecutive months, and many of them do not make regular contributions (DWO/L-1; DWO/L-2; DWO/L-3; DWO/N-1). Similarly, local governments did not provide much support either⁶. Among the few municipalities that offered some type of support (mainly food baskets), this was aimed at the vulnerable population, benefiting domestic workers indirectly due to their vulnerable situation (DWO/L-1; DWO/L-3; CSO/L-1).

Conclusion

By analysing the Mexican case, this article contributes to the growing literature on domestic workers' organisations and, more broadly, to the literature on organising women holding informal jobs. Based on an empirical analysis through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, the article adds to the existing literature in two ways. First, it provides an analysis of how DWOs support their constituencies, going beyond the debate around the sector's 'unorganisable' stigma and the barriers that domestic workers face in establishing these organisations. Second, it offers an examination of the cross-movement coalitions established between the feminist movement and DWOs, something that remains understudied in the literature on DWOs.

The relevance of this work lies in the fact that the situation in Mexico is not an isolated one. Both the academic and grey literature that has emerged on the impact of the pandemic on the domestic work sector have pointed to the precarious situation of workers during the COVID-19 crisis in various geographies (Alcorn, 2020, ILO, 2020a). This research aims to allow the construction of parallels with other cases in places where more research is needed, especially in the Global South, where female workers face the most precarious working conditions and where literature is scarce. However, there are limitations in the design of this research. For example, insufficient attention has been paid to

⁶ In Mexico City, where the local government offered unemployment insurance (1,500 pesos for two months) to formal employees who lost their jobs, this support was also granted to some (few) domestic workers WIEGO 2021. *La crisis del COVID-19 y la economía informal: Trabajadoras y trabajadores en empleo informal en Ciudad de México, México..*

workers' perceptions of the support they receive, thus, future research may seek to understand the support of DWOs from the perspective of workers. In addition, international comparative research is also an interesting way to find out if the findings sound the same in different contexts, and this can be the focus of future research.

At a moment when deteriorating working conditions and employment relationships make vulnerable workers, such as domestic workers, more vulnerable, responses from workers' organisations gain more relevance. The support provided by trade unions and community-based labour organisations which already played a major role in supporting workers before the COVID-19 pandemic, becomes even more relevant during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when there is no government mobilisation towards the sector. Through their unique position to recognise and understand the needs of workers, DWOs in Mexico, with the support of social allies, were the main players in supporting sector workers during the pandemic. Their awareness-raising campaigns, provision of direct services to workers and activities to shape public policies were essential to safeguard the most vulnerable workers. However, these efforts are not commonly valued in the literature on domestic workers' organisations, since little attention is given to understand how these organisations support their constituents.

On the other hand, the capacity of organisations to support domestic workers and promote decent work in the sector has limitations. Until the trade union, SINACTRAHO, was established in 2016, the labour movement could not represent workers before the government and employers or in tripartite negotiations at the ILO. The constitution of SINACTRAHO partially resolved this issue; as discussed in this article, traditional collective bargaining efforts with employers are still hampered by the very characteristics of paid domestic work. Besides, SINACTRAHO creation is relatively recent and despite its close relationship with more experienced DWO's, namely CACEH, there is still a long way to go in learning unionism. Furthermore, as Nadasen (2016) reminds us, 'organized women are not representative of the vast majority of workers in a given occupation - they were clearly a minority' (Nadasen, 2016). This is the case for domestic workers in Mexico, where of the nearly 2.3 million workers, only 1,500 were unionised in 2020 (Nolasco, 2020).

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