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## **Scaling Up? TRANSNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISING IN GLOBALISED PRODUCTION**

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**MADHUMITA DUTTA**

**Kitchen, Farm, Room – Spaces of Transnational Feminist  
Theorising by Working Class Women in India**

**ABSTRACT** *The term “labour geography”, first coined by Andrew Herod (1997), sought to shift the capital-centric focus of economic geography to a more labour-centric focus. Feminist scholars have long argued for paying attention to the ways that labour’s social relations and lived experiences shape the politics of labour beyond wages or formal employment. However, labour geographers problematically continue to separate the larger questions of existence, analytically and ontologically, from the questions of work and everyday labour struggles. This article draws attention to the significance of quotidian processes of theorising by working class women in India as they labour and mobilise across disparate social, economic and cultural locations. The spaces of work discussed in this article are transnational, because, as spaces of knowledge production they are shaped by, and in turn shape, transnational narratives and strategies around global labour struggle. The article offers two key insights regarding a) the everyday knowledge production of working-class women, forged through work and struggle; and b) the significance of paying attention to the political thoughts and acts of working-class women, which holds possibilities for new solidarities and political alliances. These points are made through three illustrations – women farmers at the farmers’ protest in the outskirts of Delhi, women singing ovi in rural Maharashtra, and women factory workers creating radio podcasts in Tamil Nadu.*

**KEYWORDS** *labour geography, transnational feminism, working-class women, knowledge production*

## I. Introduction

On International Women's Day on 8 March 2021, wrapped in yellow dupattas (scarves) to symbolise vibrant mustard fields, over 20,000 women filled the protest sites where farmers from across India have assembled since November 2020, just outside the Indian capital, Delhi. The farmers were protesting the new farm laws passed by the Indian parliament, which they claimed would destroy agriculture, their livelihoods and lives through market competition and the corporatisation of agriculture.

While the Indian and international news media have been reporting about the farmers' agitation, the images and voices that fill the news channels have overwhelmingly been those of men. Mostly missing are the women farmers and their allies who have joined the men in planning, mobilising, and organising in the villages; women who have stayed behind to work in the fields, produce food, take care of the animals, children, and the elderly so that others could travel to Delhi to participate in the ongoing strike. This effective invisibilisation of women's role and labour in farming is not merely incidental. Rather, it is materially manifested in the demonstrably higher rates of landlessness amongst rural women, who nevertheless form the bulk of the agriculture workforce. Indeed 56% percent of women-headed rural households are landless (India Exclusion Report 2016). And while 85 percent of rural women are engaged in agriculture, only 13% own land (Oxfam 2018). Moreover, landlessness is highest amongst rural dalit<sup>1</sup> households (Damodaran 2015; Meherotra 2019 ).

Despite this actual structural invisibility, there have been large numbers of women at the protest from the beginning. Indeed, their presence is strategic, well-planned, and well-organised. As many of them have said, they aspire to 'correct' the invisibilisation of their labour, their role, their knowledge, their politics, and their stake in the agrarian economy. "Women are never counted as farmers ... we are always counted as housewives, but not workers. More women work as farmers than men, but their work is not seen as equal. This is a major national protest and I joined it so people know that we are also farmers," said 39-year-old Sunita Rani, a woman farmer who owns less than an acre of farmland in the northern state of Haryana. Another farmer from the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, 27-year-old Kavita Kumar, explained why she and hundreds of

other women farmers and farm workers travelled 15 hours in trucks to join other women at Delhi's border on March 8. "We work from 7am to 5pm in the field, tilling the soil, cultivating, fencing fields but our contribution is not considered ... not a single woman in my village has land ownership. I have been a farmer since I was a child ... I can ride a bike, and a tractor. People will see if we can come forward for protests, we can also do farming" (Srivastava 2020).

At the protest on March 8, many women carried farm unions' flags. Many – especially those from the state of Punjab – also clutched close to their chest small photo frames: "the portraits of their sons and husbands who had died by suicide over the years when they were unable [to] repay the farm debt" (Singh 2021). This act reflects the fact that between 2000 and 2015, at least 16,000 farmers and farm labourers killed themselves across the 22 districts of Punjab. While the majority were small and marginal farmers, data show that landless farm labourers too are killing themselves in alarming numbers: 7,234 suicides. The report links their suicides to farm debts; servicing debt was found to take up 64% of the total farm income in the state (Chaba 2018; Singh 2021). This reflects Punjab's centrality in India's green revolution since the 1970s, which brought the introduction of capital-intensive farming practices with the use of high-yielding seeds, technology, and massive pesticides and fertiliser inputs. While this has meant an increase in Punjab's food production capacity, contributing significantly to the Indian and global food markets, it has also led to an economic and ecological crisis for small farmers and farmworkers, manifested as crushing household debt, suicide, crippling illness and destitution (Padhi 2012; Singh 2021).

The presence at the protest of women wrapped in mustard-coloured dupattas reflects not only their opposition to the farming laws, but is a powerful articulation of their specific lived experiences, identities, histories, struggles, and antagonisms as actors integral to agrarian economic and social life. By locating themselves, their stories, and their voices at the protest, the women not only aspire to make visible the ways that the local agrarian economy is profoundly connected to global food production. They also centre women's bodies, women's labour, and women's knowledge and opinions about that economy. They do so from a position, not as supplementary or subsidiary labour, but as workers who are fundamental to the

current forms of value extraction. For those who look closely, their active presence and voices at the protest highlight the complex social worlds of labour, in which their presence is not an isolated event but a “process” and a “living body” (Gago 2020). Here it is useful to draw attention to Latin American feminist scholar Veronica Gago’s reconceptualisation of the ‘*Ni Una Menos*’ (‘Not one [woman] less’) movement in Argentina, which drew millions of women, lesbians, and transpeople on to the streets between 2017 and 2020, as a feminist strike against “multiple and specific forms of violence faced by women and feminized bodies” (Gago 2020: 10). Gago suggests that “adopting strike as a lens” allows us to “deploy the strike’s political thought as we experienced it”, helping us to “understand its processuality and multiple geographies” (ibid.: 37). This can be a useful way of thinking about the presence of women at the farm protest – as part of a continuing political and intellectual process that they are experiencing. We will come back to this point later in the paper.

The focus of this article is not on protests or strikes *per se*, but rather to think about how such political acts are part of longer historical processes, spatial relations and practices of labour in a patriarchal-caste-class structured society that shape individual and collective consciousness, identity and agency. I seek to emphasise the importance of the lives and lived worlds of working-class women by arguing that they are not *just* labouring bodies. They are always also agential social and political beings who theorise in creative ways about their conditions of life, and their labour, including exclusions and hierarchies. To understand the political thought and activism of working-class women, I argue, with Gago, that it is necessary to pay attention to the processual and spatial nature of knowledge production (Gago 2020), which requires tapping into the myriad practices deployed by women to express, organise, agitate and theorise their own conditions of labour. Further, I emphasise that theorisation is simultaneously profoundly embodied and ‘local’, as it is also transnational – i.e., reflecting and contributing to the multi-sited global labour struggles and feminist thoughts and actions.

I locate my analysis within the sub-field of labour geography, which seeks to decentre economic geography’s capital-centric focus by foregrounding worker agency in shaping the geographies of work. However, this sub-field remains constrained by its “methodological timidity” (Thrift



2000) in studying everyday labour, aka “the ordinary” (Latham 2003). As a result, labour geographers have arguably been inattentive to the quotidian political thoughts and practices of working people. I emphasise the need to locate agency within the wider social worlds, practices, forms and expressions of everyday theorising and knowledge production of working class women, individually and collectively. Indeed, geographers and scholars from other disciplines have deployed creative approaches to access everyday spaces of activism and theorisation of the marginalised, racialised working-class people under diverse circumstances and in disparate locations (see Chari 2009; Cumbers et al. 2016; Dutta 2020a; Ince et al. 2015; John 2013; Kelliher 2014; Rogaly 2020; Rege 2006). These approaches include oral histories, photographs, archives, personal diaries, life stories, testimonies, poetry, theatre, songs, podcasts, social media post/forums and more. These ‘sources’ are not mere ‘research material’ for researchers to theorise about the conditions of others, but should be seen as ways in which people are themselves making sense of their conditions, and engaging and producing knowledge about their social worlds. Most importantly, these varied genre should be understood to be producing social-political critiques from *specific social locations* within which lie the desires, the politics and the potentiality for change and solidarities. In other words, I am suggesting that songs, poems and podcasts are spaces of intense theorisation, produced every day by ordinary people, experientially. These are crucial forms of praxis – the weaving together of theory and practice – yet they remain unvalued within the academy, too often ignored or shifted to the margins of mainstream knowledge production.

To counter this tendency, I seek here to illustrate the insights that closer attention to these modes of practice can offer. In the next section, I draw attention to two disparate locations beyond the Delhi state where women engage in everyday processes of theorising in very practical ways. First, while grinding grains to flour on grindmills in the darkness of their homes, and second, while sitting on the floor drinking tea in a small rented room after eight hours of gruelling shift work. In each case, the modes of theorising, meaning-making and articulation are distinct, but they nevertheless illuminate the multiple vocabularies and emotional repertoires that women deploy in the process of interrogating all forms of power (gender, caste, class), while offering critique and self-reflection. These illustrations

insist on more granular and creative approaches to understanding women's grounded experiences and knowledges, which then makes it possible to take, as Featherstone and Griffin (2016) note, "a pluralized account of labour agency, [that] is sensitive to its fluctuations...By combining a variety of labour experiences, it destabilizes the sense of who and what constitutes agency" (Featherstone/Griffin 2016: 387). In the subsequent section, I analyse the examples of women's theorisations in the light of feminist and labour geography theory. I conclude the paper by offering two key insights from this work: a) the everyday knowledge production of working class women forged through work and struggle; and b) the significance of paying attention to the political thoughts/acts of working-class women through such seemingly banal methodological entry points as stories, songs, poetry, conversations and so on, which are important because they draw from, are expressions of, and hold possibilities for, emergent global solidarities and political alliances for the oppressed classes.

## 2. Thinking beyond strikes

### 2.1 Grindmill songs<sup>2</sup>

At the crack of dawn, rural women in the western state of Maharashtra can be heard softly singing an *ovi* (a couplet in the Marathi language) in the dark as they grind grain into flour on a *jate* (a grinding stone) in their homes<sup>3</sup>. Sung over generations, passed down through grandmothers, mothers, and daughters, *jatyavarchi ovi* (grindstone songs) are marathi couplets (a poetic metre) that are composed and sung by women in which they express their views on life and labour, often using metaphors (Waikar 2017). As explained by 72 year old dalit farmer Kusum Sonawane, "These *ovi* show the real lives of women....We could not speak about it out in the open, so we spoke to the grindmill to share our *sukhadukkhha* [joys and sorrows]" (Sonawane 2021).

For instance, Sonawane's own *ovi* (she has composed many and continues to sing them), speak of a wide range of emotions and relationships, including those within household relations, solidarities between mothers and daughters, the precarity of women's positions in a patriarchal society, and their small joys:

“Wet wood burns in the kindled fire  
How much can I work? Nobody cares for it in my parents’ home  
Wet wood burns in the kindled fire  
A woman may toil and toil, it has no value  
Sharing of joys and sorrows between mother and daughter is the happiest thing  
They get so engrossed in talking, they don’t realise that the stars have set

O woman, [I have a] black Chandrakala saree, its padar is modern, Mumbai style  
I tell you, Tarubai, my dear sister, it’s from your son’s earnings  
It has taken a long time to build our close friendship  
If someone spoils it maliciously, it won’t take a moment to break.”

In speaking with PARI about her ovi, Sonawane explains how women feel about their labour not being valued: “Just as wet wood or the thick water-filled leaves of succulents will eventually catch fire if they are set alight, the continued neglect of a woman’s work and its worth ultimately makes her burn with rage and disappointment.” As another ovi singer explains: “I am the woman who sat at the grindstone, crushing grain to flour every morning to make bhakri [flat bread], the daily bread that fed the family. Singing makes it easy to forget the drudgery. So we sing. We sing what we learnt from our mothers and grandmothers. We sing away the thorny hedge that surrounds me and every other woman like me in the village” (Waikar 2017). Ovi are not just limited to daily life, however; they also chronicle almost every aspect of women’s lives, including child-birth, growing up, unequal land ownership, marriages, religion, caste oppression and commentaries on politics or political figures. For example, many of the ovi that are composed by dalit women are dedicated to Bhimrao R. Ambedkar, a dalit leader who wrote the Indian Constitution. Women sing of Ambedkar’s thoughts, writings, annihilation of the caste system, and dalit emancipation through education. Influenced by Ambedkar, Radha Borhade, a dalit landless farm worker, wrote and sang the following ovi:

“Keep moving along the path of emancipation,  
In spite of poverty, do not give up education.

Put an end to enslavement; keep your self-respect alive,  
Come together one by one, strengthen the collective.

How many songs should I sing, my voice is weak [from singing,]  
One-lakh songs are not enough for my Bhim.”

Kusum Sonawane’s and Radha Borhade’s ovi, like thousands of others composed by rural women in Maharashtra, are deeply intellectual. They represent political thoughts that are intertwined with the everyday experiences of labour. As Namita Waikar writes, “For thousands of women, this was a creative space, a personal zone of free expression where the only sounds were their own voices milling with that of the two stones of the grindmill” (Waikar 2017). However, this intellectual work too often remains invisible, unheard and under-valued. Just like their manual labour, this theory-work is often seen as ‘folk’ and not part of the theory-building process. Nor is the grindstone ever envisioned as key site from where knowledge is produced by the bodies labouring over it. This invisibility has an effect: it deliberately renders the everyday theorisation of rural working-class women (many of whom belong to the oppressed castes, particularly dalits), as inauthentic. Without recognising these poems as theory work, we miss a vital opportunity to understand the everyday creativity of knowledge production from disparate social locations.

## **2.2 From farms to the factories**

“Right from the beginning they have said women should be like this and men should be like that. Women are still not able to pull themselves out of this. You should not stand on the road; you must always keep your head down and walk; you must not speak to the boys. Some people don’t even send their girls to the shops. Even me! When I go to my hometown, they [parents] tell me I can’t go the shops. Why are you going? Your brother is there, let him go. But look, they have sent me here [to the factory]!

Now they have sent me out. Here, I am an educated girl, going to work. When I go home after a long time, I feel shy to go out even to the next street. They [parents] will not send me [out]. ‘Some boys might see you’, my mother would say. I tell my mother – ‘I have come to the city to work, so many people have seen

me. I travel in the night. These are not big problems to you? But going to the next street is a problem?' She would then say -- 'these are two different things. In the city, we don't know what you are like or what you do or where you go. As long as you are here, you're under our protection.'" (Lakshmi, 23 years old<sup>4</sup>)

Over a period of four months, seven women, five of whom worked in an electronics factory, created a series of radio podcasts discussing everyday ordinary things that in many ways profoundly shaped their lives, their identities, their views and how it was to be in a society that is deeply patriarchal and casteist. These conversations took place in 2014 in a small, rented room where the workers lived close to the factory in the town of Kancheepuram, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

In the above quote, reflecting on her experiences in her mother's home, Lakshmi draws attention to the specific and contradictory ways in which patriarchy and caste shapes everyday relations in households, where young women, especially from higher or dominant castes, are restricted from being seen in public places in their own hometowns or villages, despite the fact that they can be seen while labouring in faraway places away from their families. In this instance, Lakshmi draws attention to the gendered language of familial protection invoked by her mother in restricting her movements, which also reveals caste dynamics and sexual anxiety in the local community. Lakshmi's family belonged to the politically powerful and dominant Thevar (OBC) caste community in the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, which periodically erupts into caste violence over inter-caste marriages and love affairs between people of different caste groups. Therefore, while Lakshmi is in her parent's home, she is asked to conduct herself in a certain way that doesn't attract attention, especially from men of different castes. But when she goes to work in a distant town, working night shifts with men, travelling by buses at odd hours, or living independently with other young women (often from different castes), her parents are more willing to relax their restrictions. This lenience is mainly driven by economic need, since Lakshmi's factory wages were a key source of income for the family. Drawing on her experience, Lakshmi points out how values are not constant but shift with context. Clearly, Lakshmi is abstracting from her own experiences to theorise the complexity of her social world.

Like Lakshmi, other women in the rented room or in the factory questioned their social and economic conditions in very practical and ordinary language. For example, they made connections between the factory and their homes, especially in terms of the gendered nature of work and social relations. Speaking of their factory work, women spoke not only about its harshness, but they also emphasised the sociality of the workplace, which was produced through their everyday practices of care and emotion. For instance, 23 year old Kalpana said: “Our legs pain when we stand and work. But we talk, comment and laugh at each other...we don’t notice these difficulties.” 27 year old Pooja elaborated by adding:

“When we are working, we speak to each other and find out things about each other. Like who’s in your family, what do they do? What is your background? People will ask you these things. This way we get to know each other, we share both our difficulties and happiness. Work and money is needed, but people matter the most, they [co-workers] take care of us like a family...our friends. If I am unwell, they take care of me and ask me to take some rest. If I have not eaten, they scold me and ask me why I haven’t eaten?”

By drawing attention to their everyday spatial labour practices of work on the assembly line, what Kalpana and Pooja are emphasising is the possibility of transgression of an otherwise power-saturated, highly exploitative workplace by producing sociality and solidarity. This solidarity could in turn produce possibilities for subverting or resisting conditions of labour in the factory (Dutta 2020b). Again, the women here are using their experiences to theorise power, not as being unidirectional and constant, but rather as shaped and reshaped by ordinary acts such as care, emotions, and empathy.

### **3. Doing work, doing theory**

I began this article with reference to the presence of women farmers and farm workers at the ongoing farmers’ protests at Delhi’s borders. This act of presence is not something that came about overnight; it has been in the making for a long time. Navsharan Singh (2017) points out that

while the present farm protest and contemporary peasant struggles in Punjab have historical roots, the public narrative of the same has mostly been about men, largely omitting the vital role of women in these struggles, especially dalit women and other women from marginalised peasant communities. Yet, Singh notes that women, landless dalits and marginalised farmers have been integral to the recent agrarian struggles in Punjab, which have been centred around the “rights of dalits over village commons, their right to live in the villages even when the distribution of resources is such that it leaves them no ownership of the land they live on and till, the recognition that Punjab’s agrarian crisis .... is being borne also by the landless and, above all for ending impunity for sexual violence which women and, dalit women in particular, endure as caste and patriarchal oppression.” (Singh 2017: 30) This coming together of dalit women and men and marginal peasantry, claims Singh, is “opening the possibility of building new solidarities and political alliance of the oppressed.” (ibid).

In emphasising the role of dalit and non-dalit peasant women, Singh notes the lack of scholarly writings or mainstream media attention to the political actions led by marginalised women. However, these struggles do get documented in the vernacular pamphlets and union records that circulate at protest sites, and in blogs, poetry, music, fiction and rural theatre. Adds Singh, “It is in these expressions that the marginalised people are finding the intellectual tools to comprehend what is going on with them” (Singh 2017: 31). As with the rural women in Maharashtra composing and singing ovi to work through their everyday labour, the dalit and non-dalit peasant women of Punjab are creating a solid body of knowledge, of political thought and action, based on their experiences. Therefore, the presence of women farmers and farm workers in Delhi (and elsewhere) is part of long-term political and intellectual work that women have always been doing but which remains persistently undervalued and unrecognised in public media and in academic discourse.

Thinking this way, all three illustrations – women farmers at the protest, rural women singing ovi, and factory workers creating radio podcasts about their labour and their lives – can be reimagined not just as *expressions* of political thoughts, but in fact, as a grounded praxis where theory and practice are interwoven into each other to create potentiality for change. This is praxis that is woven individually and collectively, through women’s strug-

gles and lived experiences, woven intergenerationally across multiple layers of oppression and across multiple sites of living, be it in homes, on farms, and in streets, factories, villages, and cities. Further, I argue that these practices, that “interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity”, need to be envisioned as transnational feminist practices. I take this conceptualisation from Nagar and Swarr (2010:5), who describe transnational feminism as an “intersectional set of understandings, tools and practices” that “attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies.” This conceptualisation of transnational feminism emanates from the critique of the monolithic notion of “Third World women” as passive victims by post-colonial feminist scholars such as Mohanty (1984). They emphasise the need to highlight Third World women’s activism and agency “to recast the category of Third World women to imagine new forms of transnational solidarities and collaborations” (Nagar/Swarr 2010: 5). As the cases above show, women are engaged in continuous processes of self and collective reflection, interrogation, and theorisation about their conditions of life and labour. While the enactment of thoughts and practices are specific to the context, they do not occur in a vacuum. They are produced and drawn from knowledge(s) circulating across spaces, places and times that create the possibilities for organising and solidarities. The women from the factories and farms interrogate the gendered nature of labour, social discriminations and exploitation that is both specific to the local/regional conditions and interconnected with the larger political economy of global production of commodities. This production of knowledge forms the basis for larger political actions, as is witnessed in the farmers’ protest in Delhi, and holds the potential for solidarity and political alliance with the oppressed, both nationally and transnationally. Defined as such, it is no leap to envision women’s songs, podcasts, and front-line protest as a process of “collective problematization” in which women bring attention to “the specific exploitation of women’s labour [that] becomes a point of view that allows for the reconceptualisation of the very notion of the bodies implicated in that work. That work is named, it becomes visible and recognised in its concrete manifestations” (Gago 2020: 41).

As important as this theorising is, it begs the question: how do we, as ‘scholars’, make visible these quotidian knowledges and practices of



working class women that have remained peripheral and at the margins of the academy?

To answer this question, let's first turn to labour geography, which has long been interested in understanding the many forms and modalities of labour agency (see e.g. Coe/Jordhus-Leir 2011; Cumbers et al. 2010; Cumbers et al. 2015). For example, Featherstone and Griffin (2016), citing EP Thompson's seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class*, urge labour geographers to "develop a more diverse, contested and plural sense of the 'agentic spatial practices'", emphasising the need to pay attention to "particular uses of space to produce and sustain agency" that move(s) beyond a "general invocation of agency, to think about the particular spatial practices through which agency can be co-constituted" (Featherstone/Griffin 2016: 386). To understand 'agentic spatial practices' requires a conceptual and methodological creativity that looks beyond the conventional forms of expressions, acts, and sites focusing on "unofficial sources and stories", which then "opens up a focus on diverse political antagonisms shaped through struggles and political practices", as Featherstone and Griffin point out (ibid).

There are instances where geographers have built bridges across the centre-margin divide to centre the political thoughts and ideas of the subaltern people. For instance, the geographer Richa Nagar, in her research with seven women workers in rural Uttar Pradesh, embarked on a self-reflexive journey, where writing autobiographical narratives and building trust between women became the key process for building critical feminist theory and knowledge (Writers/Nagar 2006). In the process, one of the decisions that the women collectively took was to write in Hindi, the language with which they connected more intimately everyday. Writing, and later publishing it, in Hindi was an explicitly political act for the women, for two reasons. One, it represented their own social location "in relation to the elite status of English meant that they always saw writing in Hindi as a political act". Second, writing in Hindi meant that their ideas and knowledge was being produced first and foremost for their communities, friends and allies (Writers/Nagar 2006: xxxv). In this way, they *sited* their work not in a transnational space per se, but in a space of Hindiness, their own space. Yet, through the process of reflection and writing this way, the women produced a scathing critique of international devel-

opment ideology and mainstream, so-called ‘transnational’, feminist politics, showing how aid agencies end up reinforcing domination over those people they claim to help.

In a recent review of labour geography’s trajectory, Kendra Strauss (2018) notes that the sub-discipline has remained true to its commitment of centring labour by paying attention to labour practices and to workers’ agency, and she cites a host of scholars working in this arena (e.g. Coe/Jordhus-Lier 2011; Dutta 2019, 2020b; Cumbers et al. 2008; Hastings/MacKinnon 2017; Herod 2003, 2017; Padmanabhan 2016; Ramamurthy 2000; Rogaly 2009; Sportel 2013; Sweeney/Holmes 2013; Warren 2014; Williams et al. 2017). Nevertheless, Strauss also argues that the time is right for labour geographers “to also examine the ontological and epistemological foundations of theorizing and some exclusions or path-dependencies they engender” (2018:152). This is an important reminder to theorise worker agency in new ways and from new locations, especially in contexts where workers’ agency is being conceptualised as embedded in the material practices of community building (Crossan et al. 2016). In practice, this means centring our attention on areas such as the social being of workers (Dutta 2016); mass strikes (Nowak, 2018); or the health and well-being of workers in global supply chains (Prentice et al. 2018) – to name just a few. Such work would respond to Strauss’s call to go beyond “defining, identifying and documenting agency and resistance”, and begin the challenging work of “asking what kinds of intellectual and political engagement this focus might preclude” (Strauss 2018: 153).

This work offers a preliminary response to Strauss’ provocation. While Strauss encourages labour geographers to more actively theorise labour from new spaces and peoples, I suggest we go further. I suggest that it is less the work of the labour geographer to theorise others’ labour. Rather, I see great potential in using our position within the academy to make more visible the long-hidden, long-marginalised theorisations that are already being produced, daily: those of the labourers themselves. In other words, I insist that we as scholars hold no monopoly over the ability to theorise or produce intellectual knowledge. Labouring bodies of all kinds are already linking their lives to transnational struggles, identifying the powers that shape their lives, and articulating paths forward towards a more emancipatory future. As I have shown here in the case of women in India, we have

much yet to see, to hear. Specifically, I identify two issues that deserve much more political and intellectual attention from labour geographers: (1) the processes and politics of knowledge production by subaltern marginalised classes; and (2) the possibilities for new modes of solidarity and political alliance with the oppressed.

Of course, these are not new ideas. Postcolonial, Race and Dalit scholars – in both the global North and South – have critically engaged with these ideas for a long time. In particular, they have explored the notion of difference, particularly in terms of how within highly racialised and caste structured societies, people produce knowledge from dramatically different social locations; those differences exist not only between but within the global North and South. In India, for example, feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege (2006) and Smita Patil (2013) elaborate on difference from a dalit feminist standpoint. Patil articulates this clearly: “Dalit feminist thought has the epistemic vantage location to challenge the authenticity of knowledge that is generated for the emancipation of the oppressed through pointing out the caste-cum-class privilege of the dominant intelligentsia and institutional histories” (Patil 2013: 43). This is similar to the black feminist scholarship in the U.S., where social location and the experiences of black people, especially black women, puts them in a similar position; in other words, a position from which powerful knowledge is generated through everyday experience. The knowledge is powerful, not only because it is produced in the crucible of experience, but because – for that reason – it holds out the potential for action and solidarity/alliance-building amongst the oppressed. Therefore, the ontological and epistemological foundations for theorising agency must lie in these lived experiences and knowledges of oppressed and marginalised working people, especially women.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Drawing from three brief illustrations from India – the ongoing farmer’s protests; grindmill songs of peasant women; and women factory workers – I argue for greater attention by scholars to the theory-building that is a daily practice of women workers across disparate social, economic

and cultural locations. I show that knowledge is produced everyday by working class subaltern women as they labour and live in caste, class, gendered and racialised societies. Their political thoughts are produced in many visible and invisible ways: as women go about doing their daily chores at home, or labour in the fields, or mobilise against sexual oppression and violence on the street, or build relationships across generations or among co-workers. These spaces, with specific socio-spatial relations and power dynamics, shape modes of understanding, articulating, and opening up possibilities for global solidarities.

However, these micro-scale sites remain invisible due to the archetypal understanding of what constitutes a workplace, enduring binaries in how we 'see' productive and reproductive spaces, or national and transnational spaces. These sites of "working class feminism" often remain missing from the larger narratives of labour struggles or worker agency (Datta 2007; McDowell 2015). There is a large body of feminist literature that has pointed to the gender dynamics of the globalisation of production, which has produced new conditions of gender oppression. Bair has noted an analytical and epistemological shift in this feminist inquiry from "macro to a more micro-orientation" to examine the "diverse and context-specific constructions of gendered labour found at the global-local nexus" (2010: 204). These three illustrations go further by foregrounding the significance of paying attention to the everyday theorisation by working class women, that not only illuminates the context specific conditions of labour but emphasises the centrality of these practices in contributing to the multi-sited global labour struggles. Hence, they offer us an opportunity to reimagine and look afresh at the processes taking place at the microlevel that hold the possibility for transnational labour politics and solidarity.

As we see in this article, working class women don't necessarily abstract their worlds in conventional ways – say, by sitting quietly at a desk, writing. Rather, they adopt innovative, often non-textual genres in which to theorise their conditions of life and labour. The methodological implications for labour geographers are clear. To understand these forms and processes of knowledge production, both intellectually and politically, we need to adopt innovative and non-conventional forms of *doing* research. It's not just about using 'creative methods', but to think more ontologically and epistemologically about knowledge production. It is not my contention

that we look for theory everywhere or in every act, but rather that we pay more explicit attention to the everyday creativity of working-class women's theorisation, which is invariably forged in contexts of struggle. In doing so, we can make possible new ways to draw attention to the "relation between struggle, antagonism and agency in ways" as Featherstone and Griffin have argued, that gets foreclosed by "accounts drawing on the rather mechanistic linkages between structure and agency" (2016: 398).

- 1 Dalits are historically the most oppressed communities in India and continue to be socially, economically and culturally marginalised by other castes groups under the Hindu religion in India and other parts of South Asia.
- 2 'The Grindmill songs project' by People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) is a digital journalism platform which is compiling and recording Marathi language couplets from across rural Maharashtra. The ovi presented in this section are from PARI's website: <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/gsp-masterpage/>
- 3 In the last decade, hand-operated grindmilling has been slowly replaced by motorised grinding. <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/the-grindmill-songs-recording-a-national-treasure/>
- 4 Translated excerpts from Mobile Girls Kootam - 'Episode 1: Teashops', radio podcast series. Available at: Mobile Girls Kootam. Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/show/6shRBBRr3KldP2lywTBkoI>

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*ABSTRACT Der erstmals von Andrew Herod (1997) eingeführte Begriff der „labour geography“ diente dazu, den kapitalzentrierten Fokus der Wirtschaftsgeografie durch einen stärker arbeitszentrierten Fokus zu ersetzen. Feministische Wissenschaftler\*innen plädieren seit langem dafür, die sozialen Beziehungen und gelebten Erfahrungen zu berücksichtigen, die die Politik der Arbeit jenseits von Löhnen oder formaler Beschäftigung prägen. Dennoch trennen Arbeitsgeograf\*innen nach wie vor auf problematische Weise die größeren Fragen der Existenz – analytisch und ontologisch – von den Fragen der Arbeit und der alltäglichen Arbeitskämpfe. Dieser Artikel lenkt die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Bedeutung alltäglicher Prozesse der Theoriebildung von Frauen aus der indischen Arbeiterklasse, die über unterschiedliche soziale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Positionen hinweg arbeiten und sich organisieren. Die in diesem Artikel diskutierten ‚Räume der Arbeit‘ sind als transnational zu verstehen, weil sie als ‚Räume der Wissensproduktion‘ transnationale Narrative und Strategien des globalen Arbeitskampfes prägen und zugleich durch diese geprägt werden. Der Artikel liefert zwei wichtige Erkenntnisse über a) die alltägliche Wissensproduktion von Frauen aus der Arbeiter\*innenklasse, die durch Arbeit und Kampf geprägt ist, und b) die Notwendigkeit, die politischen Gedanken und Handlungen von Frauen aus der Arbeiter\*innenklasse zu berücksichtigen. Dies birgt die Möglichkeit für neue solidarische Zusammenschlüsse und politische Allianzen. Zur Illustration werden drei Fallbeispiele herangezogen: i) Bäuerinnen bei Protesten in den Außenbezirken von Delhi; ii) Frauen, die im ländlichen Maharashtra Ovi singen und iii) Fabrikarbeiterinnen, die in Tamil Nadu Radiopodcasts erstellen.*

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