

## Hard Numbers and “Velvet Triangles”: Mobilising Statistics for the ILO Convention on Domestic Work

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### Extended Abstract

After nearly half a century, domestic workers were again tabled on the agenda of the International Labour Conference in 2008. Three short years later, Conference delegates voted to establish the International Labour Organization’s Convention on Domestic Work (C189). This paper builds on the insight that the campaign to push for C189 was taken up by a feminist “velvet triangle”<sup>1</sup>. These networks are usually comprised of women in social movements, femocrats and academics. They are usually characterized by informality and personal networks. The informality of these alliances is due, in part, to the gendered marginality of an issue area, allowing for improvisation and agile coalitions<sup>2</sup>. The paper aims to establish that the issue of domestic work and C189 was indeed taken up by a velvet triangle in the context of campaigning for the Convention. Secondly, it characterises the nature and components of this triangle. Finally, it focuses on the production and mobilisation of statistics on domestic workers as a key “cognitive resource”<sup>3</sup> in the campaign for the Convention.

This paper has employed bricolage as a method, in which phenomena are not understood as discrete entities, but rather “focus on the relationships and interconnections between people and their socio-historical and political contests”<sup>4</sup>. Bricolage draws from the tradition of critical hermeneutics, which builds “bridges between reader and text, text and its producer, historical context and present, and one particular social circumstance and another”<sup>5</sup>. It involves “crafting” and “tinkering”<sup>6</sup> with available data and theory given time and resources at hand “for the purpose of solving a problem or problems tailored to one’s own research project”<sup>7</sup>. For this specific bricolage, I draw from a variety of sources

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Schwenken, “‘Domestic Slavery’ versus ‘Workers’ Rights’: Political Mobilisations of Migrant Domestic Workers in the European Union,” Working Paper 116 (San Diego: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Petra Ahrens, “Velvet Triangles and More: Alliances of Supranational EU Gender Equality Actors,” in *Handbook of Feminist Governance* (Cheltenham, UK & Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 335–46, <https://www.elgaronline.com/display/book/9781800374812/book-part-9781800374812-36.xml>; Alison E. Woodward, “Building Velvet Triangles: Gender and Informal Governance,” in *Informal Governance in the European Union* (Cheltenham, UK & Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Burkard Eberlein, “Formal and Informal Governance in Single Market Regulation,” in *Informal Governance in the European Union* (Cheltenham, UK & Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2003), 161.

<sup>4</sup> Tasha Wyatt and Zareen Zaidi, “Bricolage: A Tool for Race-related, Historically Situated Complex Research,” *Medical Education* 56, no. 2 (2022): 170.

<sup>5</sup> Joe L. Kincheloe and Peter McLaren, “Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research,” in *Key Works in Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Kecia Hayes, Shirley R. Steinberg, and Kenneth Tobin (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2011), 294, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-397-6\\_23](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-397-6_23).

<sup>6</sup> Joe Kincheloe, “On to the Next Level: Continuing the Conceptualization of the Bricolage,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 11, no. 3 (2005): 325.

<sup>7</sup> Michael G. Pratt, Scott Sonenshein, and Martha S. Feldman, “Moving Beyond Templates: A Bricolage Approach to Conducting Trustworthy Qualitative Research,” *Organizational Research Methods* 25, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 219, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428120927466>.

– documents available online, archives, and semi-structured interviews with people mentioned in reports and the literature. From the ILO’s digital archives, I consulted Records of Proceedings of key International Labour Conferences, and surveyed documents from the Statistics department – notably reports on the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (various years), and the publication *Bulletin of Labour Statistics* (various years).

The paper traces the origins of this triangle to bottom-up calls to develop measurement methodologies to make women’s labour “visible” in the UN Conferences on Women, and later in discussions about the informal economy. The Conferences were important because they convened groups that would ostensibly form the three corners of velvet triangles – members of government interested in women’s issues, bureaucrats and technocrats from international organizations, women’s movements, and experts. This “space” offered the model for transnational organising that would be taken up by social forces that pushed for the ILO Home Work Convention (C177), and later the ILO Convention on Domestic Work (C189). The problem of quantification of unpaid labour in households, was also carried forward by the women’s movements that are still represented at the ILO today. They have brought the agenda not only for recognising the value of workers in the informal economy, and domestic and care workers, but also how they could be made visible in the UN System of National Accounts, and its statistical systems.

The paper then examines the relations among femocrats in the ILO, academics, and the global trade unions in one important element of the campaign – mobilising statistics on domestic workers worldwide. The production and mobilisation of statistical estimates were crucial in making the sector more tractable. Focusing on the production of statistics, i.e. the quantitative translation of the call for valorisation, links the bottom-up demand from the women’s movements to concrete changes in the UN System of National Accounts. Some of the most important changes are the creation of the “household” as a unit of production, and the expansion of the definition of “work” to include unpaid labour. Finally, the article also shows that the explicitly political project of the women’s movements yielded not only a normative labour instrument, but advances in different fields of study, including labour statistics. In other words, the vision of science as an endeavour that is somehow hermetically sealed from society is not accurate in this case, and that the production of scientific knowledge, while still an overwhelmingly elite endeavour, need not always cater to elite demands.