

Episode 142 - Chandran Chetan: Action and Empowerment in India: National Domestic Workers Movement

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at W.W. dot. In social work dot org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're so sure from Buffalo one of our favorite spring rituals here is the opportunity to visit our downtown ballpark and watch our professional baseball team the Buffalo Bisons the Triple A affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays features ballplayers one step away from the major leagues and the best part. High quality baseball and affordable prices for the entire family. And here's an insider's note. It's possible to peek through the left field fence if you're standing at Oak Street. I'm Peter Sobota in this episode. Our guest Father Chandran Chetan of the National Domestic Workers Movement continues our conversation about human trafficking in India that's fueled by economic conditions and the demand for domestic workers who are frequently exploited and hostile and unsafe homes. Father Chetan builds on our previous discussion with sister Kristen Mary describing how the organization builds institutional support for the work of the movement by helping the workers not only to get ahead but also to get together. He discusses the importance of their participation in speaking out for their cause and the organization and unionisation of this workforce. Father Chetan highlights the movement's current activities as well as the challenges to the cause. Father Chandran Chetan has served as the state coordinator with the National Domestic Workers Movement since 2009.

[00:02:01] He holds a master's degree in social work from Loyola College. He was interviewed by telephone in India in February of 2014 by Dr. Filomena Critelli associate professor at the School of Social Work we're here speaking with Father Chandran Chetan and we're far away. Speaking to him in Ronchi India and it's really my pleasure to speak with you today. Father Shechem I had the privilege of visiting the W.M. offices in Mumbai and get a little taste of what you're doing but it's really a great privilege to make this available to our listeners about the incredible work that you're doing. The first question I'd like to ask you is how if you built institutional and public support for the efforts of your organization. When we talk about our work to ensuring the rights of workers in the informal economy but clearly the them because I think we definitely have to work with a number of stakeholders all the employers you know we have the best of laws. But unless and until the employees understand and respect the rights of the workers the laws will have no impact on the work. What we try to do is to inform and create awareness among employees and of course the general public that domestic workers are also workers. They also have rights like any other workers. In fact use different methods and strategies like signature campaign street theatre posters handbills and even TV ads these constant campaigns and efforts have brought some attitudinal changes in the public towards domestic workers. Now regarding gaining institutional support for our struggles we believe in you know collaborating networking and working together with different groups in both governmental and governmental at different levels local regional and national.

[00:04:02] So we often engage with the different groups and committees to push our agenda forward. We also believe that media plays an important role in reaching straggles and the month that the employers government and general public Ferbey invite both print as well as select on media and all the programs and the them to highlight the issues. In fact media in India has been very supportive to us in recent years. I would say this is a

national Hobby have been enjoying the support of various groups mainly of the public employees infusions and including media working on a very very broad based level. Getting all the major areas it can help forward your campaign. Now another aspect of your work that I think is so striking is the way that you organize and project the voices of workers themselves in order to engage them in this struggle and to empower them. So can you talk a little bit about some of the strategies that you use to promote their participation and to help encourage women and girls. I'm assuming that most of your constituents are women and girls to get involved and to speak out. The participation of the workers is very important and we always ensure maximum participation of the workers. Now we always focus on developing the leadership of the domestic workers so we organize the glittering pool and focus other leaders on labor and other labor issues. We always encourage the leaders by publicly agonizing efforts and supporting them for their performances. We also let the leaders conduct regular meetings at all levels local district state and national and even let them plan their own actions.

[00:05:49] We also organize exchange visits both within the country as well as outside. In fact last year we had to exchange such visits. We went to Nepal and another group who was from South Africa. The Internship helped them definitely to learn the best practices with domestic workers in other circumstances and situations and countries our leaders in fact actively participate in all our programs like campaigns and take up labor issues and handle cases including rescuing children from forced labor. Domestic worker is accused of falsely of that and other issues. We also use all possible ways and means to ensure maximum participation of the workers both in planning as well as implementing programs and ensuring that the lobbying activities with policy matters. So we have leaders at different levels at the local level at the district level at the state level at the regional level and at the national level. This way we ensure that they are part of this moment. They planned this moment they implement this activities and then they are able to go ahead. That's excellent. So can you tell us about some of your current campaigns and some of the issues that you're focused on right now. This is very very challenging work that you're doing. What are some of the obstacles that you encounter in executing these campaigns. We are inside busy with and interested in a number of campaigns possible lobbying for inclusion of domestic work as a sector under the shade pool of employment as well as fixation of minimum rates of wages for the industry workers in the fields. As you know India has 35 states and you'd in 30 years of age or at least seven states and one union territory together.

[00:07:38] Eight have fixed minimum wages for domestic workers in this state because labor is a state issue. So we are looking to work and lobbying for fixation of minimum wages for domestic workers and all the states by our different state chapters. That's one. Number two we have been constantly lobbying for the Constitution of the social security votes in different states. We have legislation and the legislation by name the unorganized workers Social Security Act 2008 it was constituted and adopted in 2008 and this law is to be implemented in different states by the State Government. But today only 15 states out of 35 have constituted the Social Security Board. And even the 15 applicants to have not come out with no proper schemes and social security protection and benefits to work. So we are constantly working with the state governments to ensure that the state governments constitute the board and implement the schemes under that particular legislation. We are also lobbying for the adoption of the national draft policy for domestic workers which is pending since September 2012. In fact we have been fighting for a rather demanding for legislation but the Government of India into the through a task force meeting decided to come out with a policy instead of legislation but this legislation has been pending since 2012 September. So we are lobbying with their central government to

get a central government. We are lobbying the federal government and different agencies like the US on domestic locusts the Ministry of Labour of the government of India the advisory group of the National Advisory Committee of the government of India.

[00:09:22] So the two different means we are fighting that the national policy which is spending be adopted and then other campaigns are for example advocacy for comprehensive national legislation for domestic workers in order to ensure relation of domestic books as a work as well as to guarantee social protection. This has been our campaign for last three 40 years and still we have not reached anywhere and there were more important campaign of causes the lobbying for the ratification of the ILO Convention will take names Larry not till today. About 10 or 11 countries have adopted it. So I divided the government of India has not done it. So we are also lobbying for the ratification of the convention 189. These are some of our current campaigns. If you ask me about some of the challenges the most important challenges or lack of political and administrative goodwill political parties are not addressing the real issues of the workers and people the illegal drugs that slow in implementing the existing policy and policies and schemes. This is a major challenge for us in our work. Secondly of course solidarity of the workers I'm talking about domestic workers and keeping them united to fight constantly especially when they do not receive any benefit economic benefit they should have from the government. So people up for 2 3 years begin to question what had we got by being part of this movement or part of this union full union our movement is not supposed to give. It is the government which is supposed to give back because they are very the project very slow. They are not told the sick. You know we have the problem of keeping the workers united to fight for their rights.

[00:10:57] So this is basically the challenge for us and we have to work on this and we are in fact working on it. While I can tell from just the visit to your office in Mumbai that you're working non-stop I know it means constant organizing keeping people involved and then putting the pressure to advocate on that more governmental level. I was very struck when I visited the office. And Sister Jeanne was telling us some of just the attitudes that there are about domestic workers not being workers or that somehow this is a good situation for people to be living in a home that they're getting good meals that they're living in nice places. That seems like you have a lot of entrenched attitudes and outlooks that you really have to try to change as you do this work. So let's talk about some of your organizations goals and hopes. I know you're working on a number of fronts. What are some of the things that you are hoping your goals for the future and maybe some ways that our listeners can support your efforts. Well the initiative in fact the problems of unionizing domestic workers in different fields about three years ago. Basically this national movement has been a movement in movement of work. But there are certain limitations and we work as a movement. That means you know as an end to legally technically we do not have the same space like a union local formulator to union. So we felt the need not that we may be able to better lobby the government that we need to organize the workers in the union.

[00:12:30] So we did that in 2010 to be initiated and we are glad that in last October that is 2013 the different state level unions that registered state level unions of domestic workers came together and formed a federation of them. Today we have national domestic Australian federation in India. Of course there are other federations too here in Parliament. But this has been a very important moment in the history of our movement and the wonderful task is now to strengthen this process. It is a very very and maybe it's just a few. Let's call it my five six months old baby this federation that we're talking about. So we need to strengthen the baby. We need to feel this baby and to build the capacities of the leaders

of the state as well as national because it is the leaders from the grassroots who have now reached their Federation at the national level but they need to bolster their capacity. That is an important aspect of our future work. We feel that we need to concentrate on strengthening their capacities. That is one so that they can effectively pressurise the Government to effectively stand up for their rights before the employers before the government before the public and to fight for their rights.

[00:13:45] That is part of our future growth and future less the immediate concern and the concern will be empowering young women especially potential migrants like I work in Ranchi which is the capital of Chalfant and Harkon is known for migration jargon is known for trafficking young women are trafficked from the rural districts of hearkened to cities and states like Maracha upclose and Mumbai Delhi and major metropolitan cities and they go through all kinds of problems and issues they are fooled they are abused and they are underpaid and all kinds of problems. So what we are trying to do is now to identify such young potential migrant and train them here and ensure the decent work and working conditions so that they will not think of going to Mumbai and Delhi and get into all kinds of issues and problems. So we are in fact working towards ensuring fake moderations this baby. One of our Crespi has focused that in the coming future. Another concern is Subco verbalising domestic work through proper contract know most domestic workers in India work without a written contract. They cannot ensure that their rights are not welcomed. If there is a written gone like they know they can take their employer to court if they are not paid majors are there any other issues because domestic workers who work without contract there is. The problems are becoming more and more difficult to handle. Then things happen. So what we are working on is we have to work on. I think them to work through proper contract and consent and whole business can support. Yes I would welcome you to come to get a little with us and then maskers. Yes the listeners can help us in different ways and especially I think there are warrantees to come down to India and work with especially in terms of developing the skills and the personality of the people that we are talking about so that we can ensure a safe migration so that we can prevent trafficking so that we can ensure a better future for the young growing generation of our country.

[00:16:03] So there are of course wollen they do come to India to work on different projects so we will also would be happy to have you all in this to work with us to join hands in our Steggles that would be a way of your listeners can support us. This is as you know important global issue and certainly we're here in the U.S. Some of them deeply or are familiar we have some similar issues here and there's fights over minimum wages and wage protections for workers. It's an important cause. So are there any other things that you would like to share. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about how long you've been working with domestic workers. I mean a little bit about how you got involved in it. Yeah. I've been working with the domestic worker as part of the nationalist cause movement since 2007. I did my master's in social work and I came to notice a and I came to Christie through a national meeting. And I listened to the shoes of domestic workers and how they are working to ensure rights and protection to this little group. I was touched I felt that I could do something to get rid of Sudan and various police who are working on this issue. So I notice Jan and then she of course welcomed me and then in 2007 I initiated an Mawlawi and a very small way. And in 2009 I took over coordination of the one of the 17 states that we will combat is charted and slowly in another 20 years time on the board.

[00:17:37] I also joined the international team to plan and to take the role of the workers in the lottery so that is the last 70 years I'm part of this movement and in fact my I belong to a congregation a society called Indian Missionary Society which works in northern India. The

concretion has in fact completely freed me to welcome the domestic workers both in shock and and kindly as a whole nation bombshell moment. So I'm grateful to them because they have let me look on this issue with the locals. That is why I am here since 2007 and I personally believe that if we are committed on this work I think we can do great work together. And when it comes to this issue because the nationalist movement has been with people last 28 years and we have seen ups and downs we have good days and we have bad days and we have brought certain changes into society in the attitude of people. I would say of course that my real wishes that all of us have to begin to if we have to moderate it or they can see changes we will see changes in society. You know when each of us developed a positive attitude towards our workers and our nonstick workers are not considered as human beings. Soufi don't let the positive attitudes to US workers who are contributing to our economy while contributing to our family. Then of course we can be happy and they can be happy and that it is our right to ensure happiness of the workers who work with us or who work for reasons like so. That is my final wish and I of course would like to thank you and the School of Social Work for your efforts to reach the issues of the multiple guns and voices of domestic customers.

[00:19:27] And I am sure together we can build many more Bridges Well I want to thank you father Chechen and it's very inspiring to hear. I didn't realize that you were also a social worker to hear somebody in our field doing such you know sounds like you're very optimistic and inspirational in terms of your real belief in the power of people and the ability to really work together and organize. And I think this is an excellent model for our listeners our students to learn more about. So I really want to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your thoughts and experiences with us. So thanks so much. Thank you. Thank you. Aliment you have been listening to Father Chandran Chetan discuss his work with the National Domestic Workers Movement in social work if you found this episode interesting. Check out the podcast with Father Chetan colleague's sister Christine Mary at episode 140 of our podcast series. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our Web site at W. W. dot social work dotBuffalo.