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Research Article

Domestic Workers' Digital Organizing and Labor Rights Advocacy in Urban Households

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ABSTRACT

Paid domestic work constitutes one of the largest employment sectors for low-income and migrant women globally, yet the isolated nature of private household workplaces has historically hindered traditional union organizing. Even where national labor statutes extend minimum wage, paid leave, and social security protections to domestic workers, widespread employer non-compliance and fear of summary dismissal prevent workers from asserting their rights. In response, domestic workers' unions have increasingly adopted mobile messaging groups, digital wage calculators, and online legal clinics to connect isolated workers and document labor abuses. This paper examines digital union organizing strategies among domestic workers in Johannesburg and São Paulo. Grounded in feminist labor geography and digital activism theory, the research draws on 44 interviews with domestic workers and union leaders (24 in Johannesburg, 20 in São Paulo). We argue that digital solidarity networks transform isolated domestic spaces into sites of collective labor empowerment — but that transformation is uneven, shaped by data costs, employer surveillance, digital literacy, and the persistent gap between rights on paper and rights in practice.

Keywords: *Domestic workers; digital organizing; labor rights; feminist labor geography; union activism; precarious employment; South Africa; Brazil.*

1. Introduction

An estimated 75.6 million people worldwide are employed in domestic work, and women make up about 76% of them (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021). In South Africa, domestic work is one of the largest sources of employment for Black women; in Brazil, it is historically the largest occupation for Black women, rooted in slavery and its afterlives (Bernardino-Costa, 2015; Brites, 2014). The workplace is a private home. There is no factory gate to leaflet, no canteen to organise in, and often no colleague to talk to. The employer is also the household, and the boundary between work and family, care and servitude, is deliberately blurred (Anderson, 2000; Glenn, 1992).

Both South Africa and Brazil have, on paper, extended strong rights to domestic workers. South Africa's Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997), Sectoral Determination 7, the National Minimum Wage Act (2018), and Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) coverage apply to domestic workers, who now receive the full national minimum wage — R30.23 per hour from 1 March 2026 (Department of Employment and Labour, 2026). Brazil's Constitutional Amendment 72 (2013), known as the PEC das Domésticas, and Complementary Law 150 (2015) extended to domestic workers an eight-hour day, 44-hour week, overtime, FGTS severance fund, unemployment insurance, and maternity protections (ILO, 2013). Internationally, ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (2011) — ratified by 35 states by 2021, including South Africa and Brazil — set a global floor (ILO, 2011; ILO, 2021).

Yet rights on paper have not become rights in practice. Non-compliance is widespread, inspection is difficult in private homes, and fear of dismissal silences claims. This article asks how domestic workers' unions are using digital tools — WhatsApp groups, wage calculators, online legal clinics, and social media campaigns — to overcome isolation, document abuse, and build collective power in Johannesburg and São Paulo. We argue that digital tools do not replace face-to-face organising; they reconfigure it, creating a 'digital household' where isolated workers can compare wages, verify the law, and act together.

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Labor Geography and Digital Activism

Feminist labor geography insists that labour is always emplaced (McDowell, 2009; Massey, 1994). The home as workplace is not a neutral container: it is gendered, racialised, and classed. In both Johannesburg and São Paulo, domestic work reproduces historical hierarchies — white or middle-class employers, Black women workers — and the ideology of domestic work as 'help' rather than labour (Brites, 2014; Glenn, 1992). Isolation is therefore not accidental; it is produced by the spatial organisation of the work itself. Organising must therefore remake space, not merely recruit members.

Digital activism theory adds a second lens. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) show that digital media can personalise and lower the costs of collective action, enabling 'connective action' alongside traditional collective action. For domestic workers in Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, mobile phones have been used to create virtual solidarities, mobilise protests, and document abuse (Smales, 2020). At the same time, digital tools reproduce inequalities: data costs, device access, literacy, language, and employer surveillance shape who can participate safely (Madianou, 2020). We therefore evaluate digital organising on three criteria: (i) connection — does it reduce isolation?; (ii) knowledge — does it make rights calculable and claimable?; and (iii) collective action — does it translate online solidarity into offline wins (wages paid, contracts signed, dismissals reversed)?

3. Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 44 participants (24 in Johannesburg, 20 in São Paulo) between January and August 2025: domestic workers (n=32), union leaders and organisers (n=8), and legal clinic / NGO staff (n=4). In Johannesburg, participants were recruited through the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) and community organisations; in São Paulo, through domestic workers' unions (including FENATRAD affiliates) and legal aid networks. Interviews in English, isiZulu, Sesotho, Portuguese, and Spanish (with interpreters) explored work histories, wages, hours, dismissal experiences, phone use, and union participation. We also analysed union WhatsApp group norms (with consent, without extracting private messages), wage calculator tools, and campaign materials. Pseudonyms are used. Limitations include a sample biased toward organised workers and the difficulty of observing employer surveillance directly.

4. The Global and National Context: Rights Without Enforcement

Globally, domestic workers are among the least protected workers: only about half have legal coverage for minimum wages, and far fewer are effectively covered in practice (ILO, 2021). ILO Convention 189 requires equal treatment, written contracts, minimum wage, and social security, but ratification does not guarantee enforcement, especially where labour inspection cannot easily enter homes. Recent scholarship stresses that ratifying C189 is necessary but not sufficient: implementation, inspection, and worker voice are decisive for health and rights (Mack et al., 2024). In South Africa, the 2020 Constitutional Court judgment in Mahlangu v. Minister of Labour, which extended Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act (COIDA) coverage to domestic workers, was a landmark — and a reminder that exclusion had been written into law (Mahlangu, 2020; Du Toit, 2024). In Brazil, the PEC das Domésticas was the culmination of decades of Black feminist and union organising, yet formalisation rose unevenly, informality persisted, and many employers responded by reducing hours or dismissing workers rather than formalising them (Costa et al., 2016).

Table 1 summarises the legal frameworks and the enforcement gap in the two cases. As Table 1 shows, both countries now grant formal equality in core protections, but enforcement depends on registration systems (UIF/eSocial) that employers control, and on workers' willingness to risk dismissal by claiming rights.

Table 1. Legal protections and enforcement gaps for domestic workers in South Africa and Brazil (c. 2025–2026)

Dimension	South Africa (Johannesburg)	Brazil (São Paulo)
Key law	BCEA (1997), Sectoral Determination 7, National Minimum Wage Act (2018), UIF, COIDA (from Mahlangu 2020)	Constitutional Amendment 72 (2013), Complementary Law 150 (2015), FGTS, INSS
Minimum wage / hours	Full national minimum wage: R30.23/hr from 1 Mar 2026; 45 hrs/week max; overtime 1.5x	National minimum wage applies; 8-hr day / 44-hr week; overtime 50%
Written contract / payslip	Required: written particulars, payslip, UIF registration	Required: eSocial Doméstico registration, FGTS, payslip
Enforcement problem	Inspection of private homes difficult; non-registration for UIF common; fear of dismissal	eSocial compliance uneven; high informality; employers cut hours / dismiss to avoid costs
Union	SADSAWU; IDWF affiliate networks	FENATRAD and state unions; strong Black feminist organising

Source: Authors' synthesis from ILO (2011, 2021), Department of Employment and Labour (2026), Costa et al. (2016), and interviews. Wage figures are indicative and change annually.

5. Johannesburg: WhatsApp Groups, Wage Calculators, and the Fear of Dismissal

In Johannesburg, the dominant digital tool is WhatsApp. SADSAWU organisers described groups organised by suburb, language, and employer area — 'Rosebank group', 'Soweto group' — where workers share payslips (with names redacted), compare hourly rates, and ask: 'Is R25 per hour legal?' A wage calculator, shared as a link and as a simple spreadsheet, allows a worker to enter hours and days and see the legal minimum, overtime, and UIF deduction. One organiser said: 'Before, the madam said the wage. Now the phone says the wage.'

Online legal clinics, run on Zoom and WhatsApp voice notes, allow workers to consult a paralegal without taking a day off or travelling to a union office. In our interviews, three workers described using a clinic to draft a letter challenging unpaid overtime; two recovered back pay, one was dismissed and then reinstated after union intervention. The digital trace matters: screenshots of messages, payslips, and rosters become evidence that is otherwise impossible to obtain in a private home.

Yet digital organising is constrained. Data costs mean many workers use WhatsApp only on Wi-Fi or with 'WhatsApp bundles' that limit other apps. Employers sometimes monitor phones, require workers to leave phones in a room, or search messages. Migrant workers from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Lesotho face additional fear: dismissal can mean loss of housing (for live-in workers), loss of income, and exposure to immigration enforcement. Union leaders therefore teach digital safety: using pseudonyms, deleting sensitive messages, and moving sensitive conversations to in-person meetings. Digital solidarity, they stress, must not become digital surveillance.

6. São Paulo: eSocial, Social Media, and Black Feminist Organising

In São Paulo, digital organising intersects with Brazil's eSocial Doméstico system, which requires employers to register domestic workers online and pay FGTS and social contributions. Unions have used social media — Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube — to explain eSocial, to show workers how to check whether their employer has registered them, and to campaign against non-compliant employers (without naming workers). One union leader said: 'eSocial was meant to formalise. We teach workers to use it to prove they exist.'

Black feminist organising is central. Domestic workers' unions in Brazil have long linked labour rights to anti-racism, drawing on the legacy of Benedita da Silva, a former domestic worker who became a congresswoman and championed the PEC das Domésticas (Bernardino-Costa, 2015). Digital campaigns — #PECdasDomésticas, #DomésticaTemDireito — combine legal information with testimonies about racism, sexual harassment, and the devaluation of Black women's care. In our interviews, São Paulo workers described WhatsApp groups as spaces to discuss not only wages but also dignity: 'We are not family, we are workers. Family does not get dismissed without pay.'

Challenges mirror Johannesburg but with Brazilian inflections: platformisation of domestic work through cleaning apps creates new forms of precarity, where workers are classified as independent contractors and lose PEC protections (Machado & Lima, 2021). Digital literacy varies by age — older workers, who form a large share of the sector, often rely on daughters or union organisers to navigate eSocial. And the political context matters: after 2015, fiscal austerity and labour reforms weakened enforcement, making union digital campaigns a defensive as well as offensive strategy.

Figure 1 below summarises the mechanism linking digital tools to collective empowerment in both cities. As Figure 1 shows, the pathway runs from isolated household, through digital solidarity network, to collective empowerment — but each step depends on safety, data, and offline union support.

Figure 1. How digital tools transform isolated domestic work into collective organising (analytical model)

Isolated household	Digital solidarity network	Collective empowerment
One worker, one employer, no peers	WhatsApp group: compare wages, share payslips	Knowledge: 'my wage is illegal' becomes 'our wages are illegal'
Law is abstract / employer says the wage	Wage calculator + online legal clinic	Claim: letter, back pay, UIF registration
Fear of dismissal silences	Peer accompaniment, pseudonyms, evidence screenshots	Action: joint complaint, strike, campaign
Work = 'help' / family	Social media testimonies, #DomésticaTemDireito	Identity: 'we are workers'
ISOLATED HOUSEHOLD → DIGITAL SOLIDARITY NETWORK → COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT		

Source: Authors' synthesis from interviews (n=44) and literature cited in Sections 2, 5–6. Figure 1 is analytical, not a statistical estimate.

7. Comparative Synthesis: What Digital Organising Changes — and What It Does Not

Three findings cut across Johannesburg and São Paulo. First, digital tools make rights calculable. A wage calculator turns an abstract minimum wage into a number a worker can show an employer. An eSocial check turns a claim of formalisation into a verifiable fact. This calculability is powerful because domestic work has historically relied on informality and personal discretion.

Second, digital tools make isolation visible. When a worker posts 'I work 60 hours for R2,000' and five others reply 'me too', isolation becomes a shared condition, not a personal failure. That recognition is the precondition for collective action, as feminist labour geography predicts: remaking space — even digital space — is organising (McDowell, 2009; Massey, 1994).

Third, digital tools do not, on their own, close the enforcement gap. In both cities, workers who claimed rights faced retaliation, and unions could not protect everyone. Digital organising works best when linked to offline structures: union membership, legal clinics, inspection, and political campaigns. It also requires material support: free data, safe devices, digital literacy training, and protection from employer surveillance. Without those, digital organising risks becoming a privilege of younger, urban, better-connected workers (Madianou, 2020; Tufekci, 2017).

8. Policy Recommendations

We recommend four reforms. (1) Fund digital organising as labour infrastructure: unions should receive public and donor support for data bundles, devices, wage calculators, and digital literacy, with safeguards for privacy. (2) Strengthen enforcement in private homes: allow workers to report via WhatsApp / online portals, protect whistleblowers from dismissal, and increase penalties for non-registration. (3) Regulate platform domestic work: classify platform cleaners as workers, not independent contractors, and extend PEC / Sectoral Determination protections to them (Machado & Lima, 2021). (4) Centre Black feminist leadership: domestic workers' unions, led by Black women, should co-design policy, not merely be consulted (Bernardino-Costa, 2015). These steps align with ILO Convention 189 and the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) agenda (IDWF, 2022).

9. Conclusion

Domestic work has long been described as unorganisable: too isolated, too personal, too feminised, too racialised. The domestic workers of Johannesburg and São Paulo show that it is organisable — not by replicating factory organising, but by inventing a new form: digital solidarity networks that turn isolated households into connected workplaces, and isolated workers into a collective. A WhatsApp group, a wage calculator, and an online legal clinic may seem modest. Together, they do what unions have always done: make a worker's problem a workers' problem, and make a private grievance a public claim. The task now is to ensure that digital empowerment is matched by legal enforcement, so that the right to organise online becomes the right to be paid, protected, and respected offline.

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