

SEMINAR: CONVERSATIONS ON SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Engaging with Dalit–Bahujan perspectives on work and labour in paid domestic work

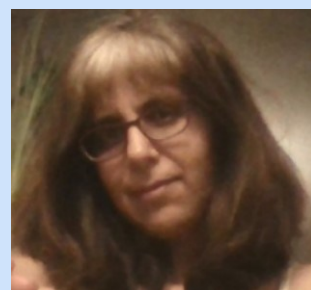
SPEAKER: Dr Lotika Singha, University of Wolverhampton

WHERE: via Microsoft Teams; email christine.copping@kcl.ac.uk

WHEN: Friday 4 December 2020, 13.00 –14.00 (GMT)

ABSTRACT: The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed how India's caste system remains entrenched in everyday life, with many domestic workers being treated as a 'necessary threat'. It is widely agreed that regulation of domestic work from a labour rights' perspective is crucial to ensure dignity of the workers. However domestic workers' dignity is also contingent on cultural understandings of domestic work in terms of caste, class, gender and ethnicity. In the dominant colonial/master /patron-servant/slave, Marxist feminist and gendered frameworks of paid domestic work in India, the Brahminical cultural construction of domestic work as low-value and demeaning is recognised. However, the Dalit-Bahujan knowledge systems, which have challenged the casteist mental/manual and purity/pollution binaries have received little attention. Drawing on Dalit-Bahujan perspectives and a cross-cultural analysis of paid-for domestic cleaning in two particular social contexts, one in the UK and one in India, I will argue that a labour rights' perspective may be more effective in ensuring workers' dignity when the casteised meanings of manual work are simultaneously addressed

Lotika has a doctorate in women's studies from the University of York and is currently an honorary research fellow at the University of Wolverhampton, UK. Her main research interest is the reproduction of social injustices through our mundane daily practices that straddle both the private and public spheres across cultures, in particular the British and Indian contexts. Lotika is currently working in the area of analysing oppression through unpacking privilege, and everyday casteism and anti-casteism both in India and the Indian diaspora. She has published several articles on paid domestic work in *Discover Society* and her monograph *Work, Labour and Cleaning: the Social Contexts of Outsourcing Housework* was published by Bristol University Press in 2019. Most recently she has co-authored with Sarbjit Johal a piece for the *Discover Society* Covid-19 Chronicles, 'Under the surface: Covid-19 and the tiered British domestic work industry'. Lotika also appeared on the BBC *Listening Project* in June 2019 with Sujen Walker in a short conversation entitled 'Learning about You'.



About the project:



This social reproduction seminar series is part of the Laws of Social Reproduction project led by Prof. Prabha Kotiswaran, and based at King's College London and CWDS, Delhi.

Feminist scholars have long demonstrated the invisibility of women's reproductive labour, with feminist economists striving to get international agencies and national governments to redraw the "production boundary" to ensure the recognition of women's unpaid labour. Today mainstream international institutions acknowledge that women's unpaid labour hinders their participation in the formal economy, particularly in the Global South. Nonetheless, there remains an absence of commitment from

states and international institutions to such systemic reforms.

Anchored in the context of India, our project thus conceptualises women's reproductive labour to include unpaid domestic work, but also abject forms of labour performed by women outside of the institutional domain of marriage and for the market, namely, sex work, erotic dancing, commercial surrogacy and paid domestic work. Drawing on feminist legal theory and deploying methodologies ranging from doctrinal case law analysis to ethnographies of women's labour markets, this project problematises law's jurisdictional boundaries over women's reproductive labour and critiques the varied, even contradictory, legal regulation of reproductive labour as well as the misguided law reform initiatives that undermine women's economic agency. Given the current interest, nationally and internationally, in unpaid care work, our project offers a timely intervention by proposing a holistic understanding of reproductive labour and exploring prospects for an alternate regulatory matrix to further women's economic justice.

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