National Domestic Workers Alliance:
Leading with Love

Love With Power:
Practicing Transformation for Social Justice
Story Series No. 1
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Hannia, Yashna, Samantha and Anna arrived elated and exhausted to McPherson Square in Washington, DC to greet Pope Francis on his historic 2015 visit to the United States. The four women walked 100 miles through forests, farmland and urban streets with 96 other women, mostly immigrants and many of them domestic workers. The 8-day journey began at an immigrant detention center in York, Pennsylvania, where some of the women’s family members are detained. Inspired by the Pope’s words on migration and economic justice, they made the long walk to amplify and emanate his message of compassion, care, and global cooperation in welcoming migrants.

Pope Francis’ visit to the United States was a watershed moment for many believers and non-believers. With the global migration crisis unfolding in Europe, he called on everyone to act from the highest level of connection and care with each other and the planet.

*His vision is of universal love, where no one must live in the shadows, and everyone has dignity. We hope his message rings clearly through the halls of power and inspires our leaders to take bold action on immigration.*

—Ai-Jen Poo, Executive Director, NDWA and Co-Director of Caring Across Generations1

Each of the 100 women had their own story and reason for walking. Hannia, a member of La Colectiva de Mujeres, a domestic workers’ cooperative in San Francisco, is an undocumented immigrant with stage 5 kidney cancer. She, like the others, walked for a

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future that ensures the human dignity and justice for all people, “a future where we are stronger together.” Hannia walked with the conviction that “...When the women come together our struggle is unstoppable and our power is great. We are the ones who keep our families together.”

The pilgrimage itself made national and international headlines, but the foundational role that transformative practice played in the journey is far less known. Every morning of the pilgrimage the women gathered together to do two Somatics practices, centering and rowing. In centering, the women stood together silently, feeling their connection to their own dignity, to each other, to history and to their purpose. “I came in with a lot of righteous anger,” recalls Samantha, a member leader of the National Domestic Worker Alliance (NDWA). “That anger was taking a real toll on my body. I realized that anger wasn’t the only way to organize. Centering really helped me to put the purpose of the pilgrimage at my center, and to feel the leaders, movements and history at our backs.”

Similarly, rowing practice helped them to take this purpose find a group rhythm and sense of shared direction.

We were coming in with very different paces that could have been in conflict. Some of us wanted to walk quickly and others needed to move more slowly. Some of us needed to this be a high energy and spirited march, and others wanted a reflective pilgrimage. Through the somatic practice of rowing, and coming into rhythm and movement together, we were able to align within our differences. This had a huge impact on the pilgrimage.
—Yashna Maya Padamsee, NDWA Events Manager and gs student

2. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/women-pilgrimage-pope-immigration_56029f72e4b0fde8b0d074b8
Mornings also included women leading others in their own practices, such as martial arts, yoga, and song. “We got to see everyone shine. Without those morning practices, the march might not even have functioned,” says Ann Duncan, Campaign Organizer, NDWA and We Belong Together.

Each afternoon of the pilgrimage the women took part in a 30-minute silent walking meditation focusing inwardly on a theme, such as sisterhood or migration. After the meditation, women were invited to seek out someone they had not connected with before, to walk together and share thoughts and insights. These practices became crucial to the experience as well as the political impact of the journey.

When the women arrived in McPherson Square in Washington, DC, the sun was setting, and Sweet Honey and the Rock greeted them with song. In their hearts and bodies these 100 women felt that they arrived at a new moment in history, one that required courage, vision and deep connection. The act of walking and practicing together had coalesced them into a powerful force. They felt ready for anything.

First Steps: The Launch of NDWA
For some of the women, this journey began in June 2007, when more than 50 domestic workers came together in at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta, GA. These women who all lived and worked in the U.S., were immigrants from Bangladesh, Haiti, Barbados, El Salvador, Mexico and other countries around the globe. Echoing the Forum’s theme, “Another World is Possible,” they engaged in spirited exchange over several days to understand each other’s organizing models, analyze campaign victories and challenges, and tell the epic story of domestic work in the United States. They laughed, cried, and built lasting relationships. On the fourth and final day of the Forum, they voted to form the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA).

For years domestic worker organizing in the U.S. had been gaining momentum. As more and more women entered the United States as part of the late 20th century wave of economic migrants, many entered domestic work as one of the few occupations available to them in the U.S. Local organizations began to form as a way to support, connect and build power among these workers. The founding of NDWA represented both a culmination of this moment and a new beginning for small local organizations to come together to find common ground and direction. It was the beginning of a more collaborative, more powerful, and more interdependent national movement for the rights and dignity of nannies, housecleaners and home attendants of seniors and people with disabilities.

One of those local organizations, Domestic Workers United in New York, was on its way to winning a nationally groundbreaking campaign for the New York Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. The legislation was the first of its kind and was already generating energy and momentum for change around the country. Organizers in California were mounting a similar campaign and other states were considering it. According to Ai-Jen Poo, “We were reaching critical mass and on the verge of many breakthroughs. We realized we needed space and voice to make this breakthrough become a national movement.” Other local movement leaders saw NDWA as a vehicle to amplify their voice and power, build momentum, and learn from one another. The time was ripe for NDWA.

Finding a New Way: Leading with Love

Early on, the founding leaders of NDWA decided to step back and begin imagining themselves as part of something bigger and brighter. Ai-jen reflected, “When we’d ask, ‘what do you care about?’ the women members would say, ‘I care about my own family and the one I am working for.’” Members’ experiences revealed the limitations of traditional labor organizing models where workers and employers were always set up on opposite sides. In order to honor the complex nature of members’ concerns and relationships, NDWA decided to lean with the love and intimacy that is part of many domestic workers’ relationships with their employers.

With a great sense of possibility NDWA set out to organize for care, not against an enemy. Instead of saying “Here’s what is wrong; join us!” NDWA said “This is what we want. This is what is possible. Join us!” To do this the movement would need a network of strong leaders from across the country sharing an ambitious vision for impact, principles and practices, and deep connections. They also would need to move forward, not wait, even as they developed the qualities required for the mission.
About the National Domestic Workers Alliance

(NDWA) is the nation’s leading voice for dignity and fairness for the millions of domestic workers in the United States, most of whom are women.

Founded in 2007, NDWA works for the respect, recognition, and inclusion in labor protections for domestic workers. The national alliance is powered by 48 affiliate organizations—plus first local chapter in Atlanta—of over 20,000 nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly in 36 cities and 16 states. Domestic workers care for the things we value the most: our families and our homes. They care for our children, provide essential support for seniors and people with disabilities to live with dignity at home, and perform the home care work that makes all other work possible. They are skilled and caring professionals, but for many years, they have labored in the shadows, and their work has not been valued. These workers deserve respect, dignity and basic labor protections.

Domestic work is the work that makes all other work possible. Together, NDWA believes we can win the protections and recognition that this vital American workforce needs.
In 2011, NDWA simultaneously launched a national campaign, Caring Across Generations; and SOL (Strategy - Organizing - Leadership), a national leadership development and capacity building program for worker leaders and organizers across the country. NDWA reached out to generative somatics and Social Justice Leadership to develop SOL.

SOL was launched as an intensive pilot program that included five, 4-day sessions and 70 member leaders and organizers. It is now an annual 16-day program that has become central to NDWA’s strategy.

*The story of SOL is inseparable from the big audacious experiment of building a national movement grounded in the leadership of domestic workers. This experiment starts from a place of abundance, from what’s actually needed, and from a need to fundamentally change the values in our economy and democracy.*

—Ai-Jen Poo

Following the victory of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York, NDWA identified three core elements of a transformative campaign: leadership development that recognizes trauma and facilitates healing, campaign capacity, and transformative organizing skills. SOL nurtures the qualities and competencies needed to lead transformative campaigns and build a generative movement culture. Through SOL, NDWA hoped leaders would go beyond understanding skills to embodying them. generative somatics (gs) offers a pragmatic and actionable approach to do just that.

4. Social Justice Leadership has since closed.
Internal Transformation: Moving Together as a Collective Force

“Who are we together and can we be a ‘we’?” was a potent but often unspoken question for NDWA staff and member organizers. Coming from different organizations, it was easy and natural for NDWA members to be focused on the specific goals and campaigns of their groups. A core experiment at the heart of SOL was how to build an alliance that embodied NDWA’s vision and put their values into collective practice.

The first retreat focused on building a felt sense of shared vision and aligning the group around what was possible if they worked together. “We used very little language about the enemy or opposition, we focused on vision, possibility and what people care about os the ground,” recalls Staci Haines, generative somatics founder and trainer. Jill Shenker, NDWA International Organizing Director & Field Assistant, describes the somatic activity at end of the first retreat:

**We stood together in a beautiful field in one long line, extending our arms and vision towards the future of our movement. We took steps forward for 1 year down the line, then 5 years and 10 years. At 20 years we named the things we could see, like domestic worker rights passed in every single state.**

After this practice Jill felt she could see and hear that “people got it” and were ready to move together as a collective force.

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**About generative somatics**

generative somatics envisions a movement guided by cultivated wisdom, love and rigor.
The mission of generative somatics is to grow a transformative social and environmental justice movement -- one that integrates personal and social transformation, creates compelling alternatives to the status quo and embodies the creativity and life affirming actions we need to forward systemic change.
Early on in SOL, participants were introduced to the Somatic practice of Jo. The Jo is a wooden staff used in the martial art, Aikido. SOL participants used the Jo practice to connect with their vision, power and capacity to make impact. Spenta Kandawalla, generative somatics Program Director & Lead Teacher, vividly remembers:

*The room would bubble up when it was time to practice Jo. Everyone brought their attention, focus, and hearts to the 31 movements of the form. They practiced using their Jo as an extension of their power, as an extension of their longings, and as a way to coordinate their actions in themselves and with each other. Watching 70, primarily immigrant women, wield their power boldly and with accountability was incredibly inspiring.*

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**Somatic Arc of Transformation**

- **REGENERATING SAFETY**
  - Safely shaping conditioned tendency
  - Resilience
  - Ally with and blending

- **SOMATIC OPENING**
  - Opening through the body
  - Releasing historical patterns and stories
  - Disorganization
  - Increase emotional range

- **COMMITMENT**
  - What are you committed to?
  - Body as self, transformation, resource
  - Increase somatic awareness

- **EMBODIMENT**

- **CURRENT SHAPE**

- **NEW SHAPE**

- **EMBODIED NEW PRACTICES**
  - Regular practices and actions aligned with commitments and new shape
  - Sustainability
  - Practicing well being

- **CONNECTION**
  - Mutual connection/interdependence
  - Healing shame
  - Intimacy
  - Conflict as generative

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'Sites' developed by Alan Greig and generationFIVE
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Later on, SOL focused on transformative campaigns and the contradictions that often come up for organizers as they face difficult decisions and the need to take quick strategic action in rapidly changing conditions. Staci Haines described the Somatic practice that SOL participants used to explore new ways to relate to contradictions and divisive perspectives:

One group of organizers stood in the middle with two other groups standing on either side of them giving voice to the two “poles” of the contradiction. In the first round the group in the center just focused on letting themselves react to the contradiction, being pulled, swayed and disheartened, noticing what reactions came up.

In the second round they engaged in “centering” by becoming present, open and connected to each other, their vision and what matters to them. They were still aware of the contradiction, but they practiced expanding to get bigger than the contradiction in order to hold the complexity somatically.

In round after round we would see trust break down when they went to the reactive place. They stopped liking each other and felt polarized. But, when the member leaders Somatically “centered” and expanded themselves, the polarization dropped and they went from being two sides to one circle. From that place they could see how very different negotiation and strategy and relationships are possible.
In the last SOL retreat, immediately after the 2012 Presidential elections, participants had a live opportunity to practice holding the contradictions present in the divergent positions that their organizations were considering taking on immigration reform. Identifying specific choices and polarizations that might arise in the 6-month period that lay ahead, the Somatic practice at SOL allowed participants to develop a nuanced sense of current conditions and opportunities, as well as the capacity to disagree without breaking relationships. As noted by Raquel Lavina, a SOL Trainer:

“You could feel a huge leap in their ability to deal with difference in a deep and nuanced way...the group had a grounded political and strategic debates. When faced with significant differences, rather than go for false unity or stop working together, they were able to reground in their shared long-term vision. At one point when two groups could not agree on a tactic, they decided not to work together in the short-term but devised ways to stay connected so as not to disrupt long-term movement building.

It was also essential for NDWA to explore individual and collective trauma. Most SOL participants have experienced intimate violence, child abuse as well as the traumatic impact of immigration and oppression. The same is true throughout the communities they are organizing and among women workers at large. An entire SOL session was solely focused on healing trauma, and the relevance of this for leadership, organizing and strategy. By integrating Somatic healing processes within SOL, the organizers created space to name those experiences and to actively work with them. One NDWA member, Araceli Hernandez of Casa Latina, describes the result.
I could see faces transforming when we talked about our own stories. I began to see the other organizers as people who have physical lives and their own problems. I also saw liberation around their minds and bodies as we did this work together.

Finding trust and resilience in each other, the group felt better prepared for collective action and overcoming divisions within movement work. “A really radical practice for the movement is extending trust and committing to rebuild it if it’s broken”, asserts Raquel Lavina. “So many of us want to trust each other’s values, methods and politics before taking action together, and then we split over disagreements. Oppression relies on us being divided, so it is radical if we extended trust from the beginning and use collective action and practice to build and rebuild trust with each other over time.”

If you want to do work that is focused and with a big vision you need to work on yourself and your own limitations. I now feel a sense of liberation, more complete and energetic in my job as an organizer. I believe more in allies, collaboration, and community. My vision and my energy are open.
—Araceli Hernandez

Through SOL, NDWA is able to build a culture and campaigns around a core set of values and practices: values and practices that were deeply embedded in the 2015 pilgrimage. Members experience the power of embodied leadership and transformative practice that is rooted in sharp strategic direction, a commitment to healing trauma, and political education and analysis. In fall of 2015, SOL grew to include a National 4-day Orientation Program that introduces new affiliates to the vision, politics, transformative practice and organizing approach of NDWA. The training team is now made up of NDWA national staff, gs teachers and worker leaders. Building work leadership is central to SOL’s purpose, NDWA and gs are now offering the third year-long SOL Program to the next group of member leaders and organizers. Members who have gone through the orientation program are able to apply to be part of the longer series.
External Impact: Toward a Caring Economy

The 100 women 100 mile march to meet Pope Francis in Washington DC was just one sign that the work of the NDWA has developed tremendous momentum. The success of NDWA has been extraordinary. From the front page of the New York Times to the Sun Magazine they have ignited national concern for the issue of care and have used it to bring an unexpected wide range of people and organizations into meaningful connection with each other.

In just eight years, NDWA became a tremendous force in national politics and culture. It grew from 13 affiliates in 5 states, to 50 affiliates in 18 states. Through media, culture and policy campaigns, NDWA fundamentally shifted the conversation about domestic workers, labor, immigration, women’s issues, and aging. NDWA caught the attention of the Obama Administration, won major campaigns at the State level, and amplified the voices of domestic workers in public dialogue locally, nationally and internationally.

In June 2011, NDWA and its partners won C189 Convention for Decent Work for Domestic Workers at the International Labor Organization, now ratified by 15 countries; and in 2013 NDWA helped to launch the International Domestic Workers Federation with domestic worker organizations in 43 countries. In September 2013, with support from the White House, the U.S. Department of Labor released new regulations to include millions of home care workers in the Fair Labor Standards Act, ending 75 years of exclusion from minimum wage and overtime protections. In July 2015, Connecticut passed its own Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, becoming the sixth State in the country — after California, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Oregon and New York (with a similar bill pending in Illinois) — to guarantee basic labor protections to the domestic workers who make all other work possible.

Strategies for a Caring Economy

Win protections
23% of domestic workers are paid below the state minimum wage.

We work to build lasting change with laws that protect the workforce.

Uplift women
95% of domestic workers are women.

We foster their vision and leadership to become the needed voices for change.

Ensure fairness
46% of domestic workers are immigrants.

We build game-changing campaigns to win equality for immigrants, women and their families.
Perhaps most profoundly, NDWA has demonstrated the power of care by making connections between communities so often divided against each other.

Long after the recent 100 mile Pilgrimage, the vibration of the women’s footsteps, and the transformation that took place along the way, will be felt far and wide. Beyond the media visibility and the knowledge that the Pope himself read their letter, NDWA sees new walks springing up in communities across the country creating space for more and more women to be part of this growing movement. “A woman who might not feel comfortable coming to a meeting will come to walk,” says Yashna, “These new walks will take place on the 11th day of each month, honoring our country’s 11 million undocumented immigrants.

Through transformative organizing, NDWA is charting a path to a world where love and dignity are the values we live by - and are built into the very core of our economy and society.