



# From Union Strengthening to Theory and to Practice: A Theory of Change to Achieve Decent Work for Domestic Workers in Era of Care

*"When you ask us, what is it that domestic workers want? The answer is simple: We want what you have—rights, like any other worker."*

— Myrtle Witbooi, 2021

**Domestic work** is work performed in, or for a household or households, can be employed by a household or through a service provider (public or private). Domestic workers include those care workers who provide either direct or indirect care (or both) in households. Domestic workers are hidden inside private domains in often informal employment and working conditions due to insufficient or inadequate coverage by labour and social security laws, where employer abuse can occur behind closed doors. It is among the five top sectors with the highest concentration on forced labor and child labor and with a high deficit on decent working conditions.

Due to the work taking place inside of the household, domestic work is often not considered "real work" in terms of legal and social protections, benefits, and recognition. Laws often do not recognize freedom of association or collective bargaining rights of domestic workers, despite those rights being enshrined in ILO fundamental conventions, which apply to all workers, including domestic workers. Employers often pay "off the books" in cash, and many governments do not document domestic work employment relationships, resulting in employers not contributing to pension, sick leave, maternity, and other social protection programs. **However, domestic work is the work that makes all other work possible, and thus domestic workers play a vital role in the global economy. ILO Convention 189 provides the strongest international legal framework for recognizing domestic labor as formal work and as deserving the same protections as other employment sectors.**

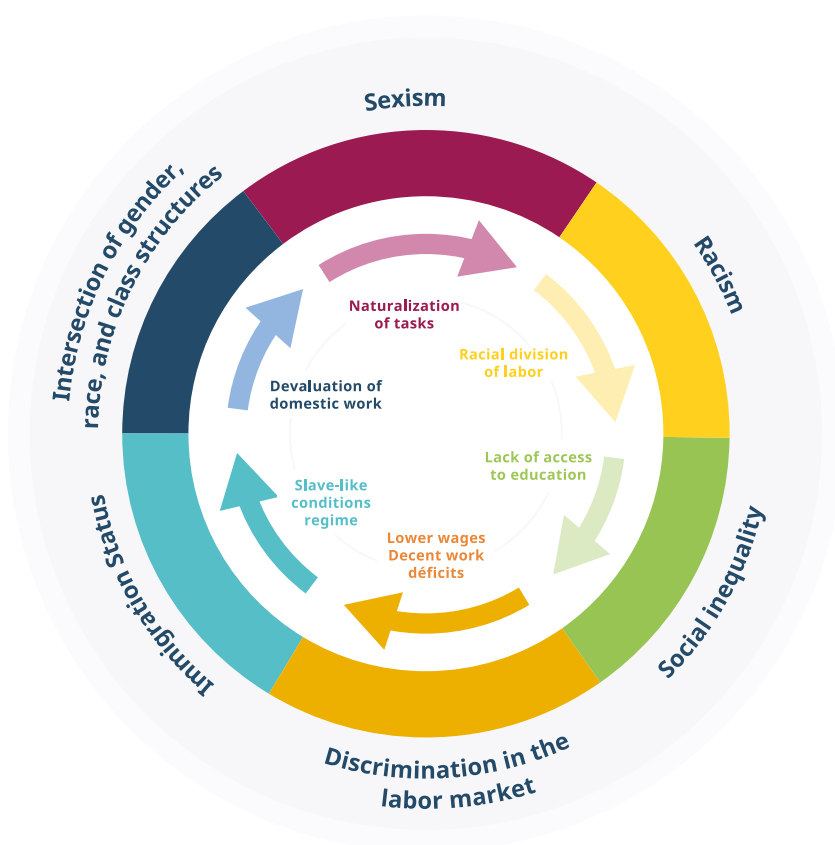
## Domestic Workers and the Care Economy

There are 75,6 million domestic workers, of whom 12 million are migrants, they are a key pillar of the care economy, —mostly women, and many women of color—provide at least 25% of care at the global level, though regionally this percentage is often higher. An estimated 2.3 billion people will rely on care in the near future, and domestic workers providing care are disproportionately susceptible to risks of Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH). Many domestic workers face sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination at work, behind closed doors in private locations. This work is usually underpaid and sometimes unpaid, and too often involves cases of modern-day slavery, forced and child labor, verbal, physical, and psychological and sexual abuse.

## Conceptualizing the Problems that Domestic Workers Confront

Interlocking systems of oppression, rooted in colonialism, patriarchy and slavery conspire against domestic workers. Yet even while facing these structural challenges, a lack of resources and being severely underfunded, domestic workers have overcome numerous obstacles and organized to form local unions, worker associations around the world. Domestic workers confront global issues of the inequalities of migrant labor, platform work, GBVH, and informality. The IDWF employs anti-oppression feminist methodologies that work to dismantle gender-based violence and multilayered forms of discrimination and work to promote women's rights and workers' rights. The IDWF is the first global union federation to recognize and celebrate trans workers as workers, members, and leaders within the organization and within their home countries.

## Domestic Work at the Intersections of Class, Race, Gender, Ethnicity & Migration



## Building Power and Global Recognition as Workers

Domestic workers are constantly fighting and moving forward and have secured major victories:

- In 2011 the movement secured the adoption of an international ILO Convention C189 and a Recommendation (201) in 2011 that asserts that domestic workers have working conditions no less favorable than those normally applicable to other categories of workers. It also defines basic rights, conditions of employment, working hours, remuneration, occupational health and safety conditions, child labor standards, and migrant and social security guidelines, including maternity, for domestic workers.
- **In 2013 domestic workers formed the first global union federation of domestic workers**, a powerful woman-led organization of domestic worker leaders from around the world. The IDWF was founded with 48 affiliates and today they have 93 affiliates in 70 countries, with a membership of over 669,000 members.
- Up to day **ILO Convention 189** has been ratified in 39 countries.
- Even in countries where C189 has not been ratified, there are **implementation measures** taken such as legal law reforms, countries' constitutional amendments and creation of new legislation to recognize and protect domestic work as formal labor.
- New spaces in the global labor movement (e.g., joining the **Council of Global Unions in 2024**) a significant milestone for the IDWF and for the labor movement at large.

Through collective action and organizing “the unorganizable,” domestic workers have built narrative, symbolic, and institutional power, and in so doing have brought progressive change and advancement to their movement.

## Theory of Change: A Movement-Led Framework

The IDWF's Theory of Change outlines how change happens—from the individual, to the organizational to the institutional to the societal level.

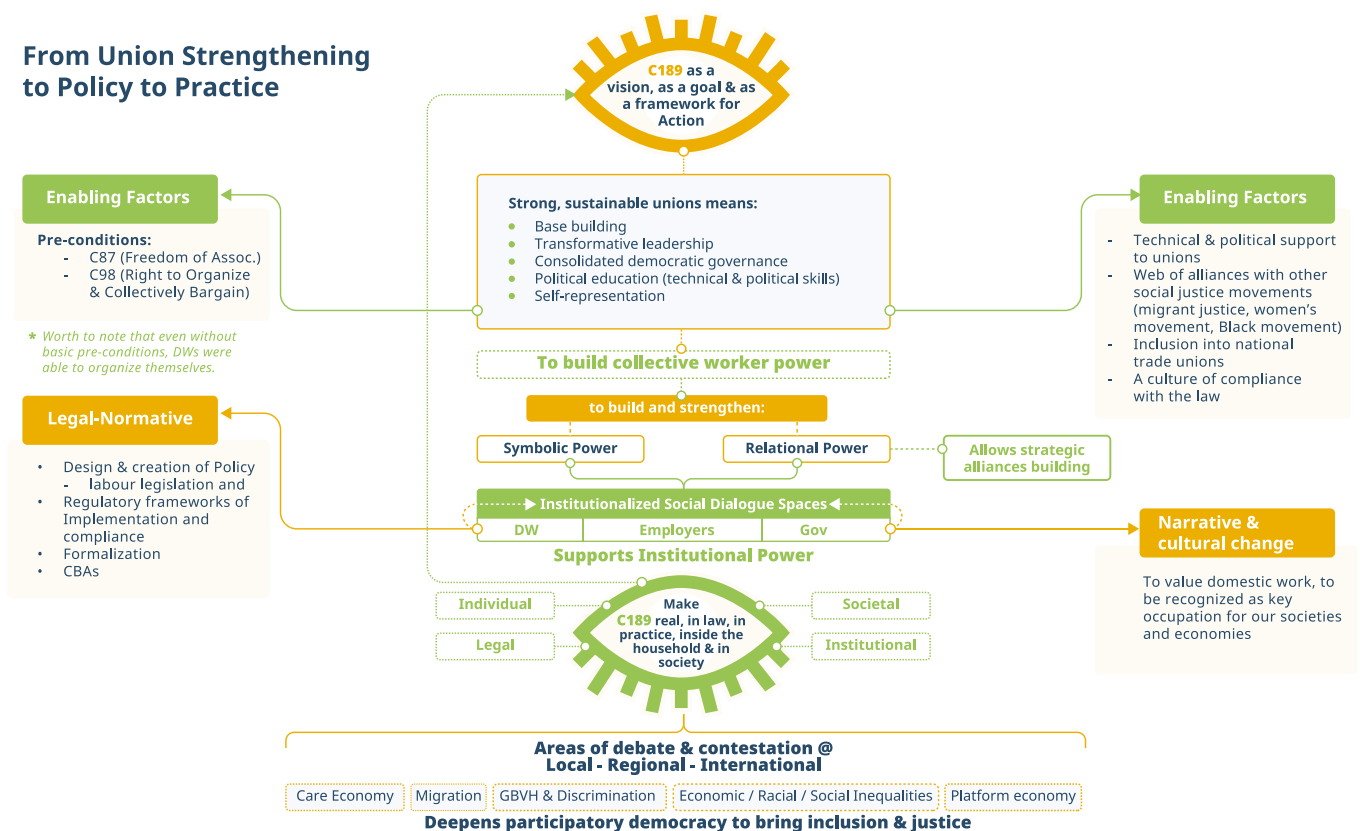
### Main Goal:

To protect, defend and expand the rights of domestic workers everywhere to enjoy decent work in law and in practice.

### Intermediate Goals:

- **Individual:** Domestic workers are empowered and capable to advocate for their rights
- **Unions:** Strong, democratic and sustainable unions and organizations of domestic workers
- **Legal:** protections are created or reformed to be applied and enforced
- **Institutional:** Access to social dialogue and collective bargaining
- **Social:** Public recognition of domestic work as work and culture of compliance with legislation

This framework is rooted in trade union feminist, anti-oppression values. It draws strength from domestic workers' lived experience and resilience in confronting informality, GBVH, unsafe migration and overall total or partial exclusion (whether in law or in practice) from labour protections and benefits.



## Strategic Areas of Debate and Contestation

To advance rights, recognition, and dignity, IDWF focuses on:

- **The Care Economy:** Recognizing domestic workers as care workers in public policy and social protection systems.
- **Migration:** Securing protections for migrant domestic workers across borders.
- **Informality:** Promoting formalization through labor law coverage, unionization, and regulation.
- **Digital Labor:** Addressing risks and inequalities in platform-based domestic work.
- **Gender-Based Violence:** Using C190 to challenge GBVH and centering care and trauma healing informed organizing.
- **Racial & Social Justice:** Fighting discrimination rooted in colonialism, patriarchy, and class inequality.

## The Future of Work is Bound to the Future of Care

*“Recognizing domestic workers as care workers, and including them as care providers within national care policies and social security systems, and ensuring they too have access to labour and social security rights and care services can contribute to ensuring a sufficient supply of domestic workers qualified to meet the care needs of the future, while ensuring decent work for domestic workers.”<sup>1</sup>*

The IDWF supports the definition of care highlighted in the ILO report on Decent Work and the Care Economy which states that care work is crucial for the future of decent work, and that it consists of both paid and unpaid work, and it includes direct and indirect care.

Extending labor law coverage, supporting the strengthening and the sustainability of domestic worker unions, including freedom of association and collective bargaining rights to domestic workers would increase worker protections on the job.

In this way, we look to our origins and our decades of global organizing to create a multi-layered theory of change that enables us to make a path forward toward decent working conditions, rights, and dignity that ultimately deepen participatory democracy to advance and realize social, economic, migrant and racial justice. As IDWF General Secretary Adriana Paz reminds us, “when the women that are at bottom of the socio-economic pyramid rise up to elevate the recognition of their rights, the rest of the women above in the pyramid win, this is why domestic workers organizing must be supported and uplifted”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/publications/global-care-crisis-quality-care-home-care-including-domestic-workers-care>