

International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)

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

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Katherine Maich, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Texas University
Adriana Paz, IDWF General Secretary

“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.”

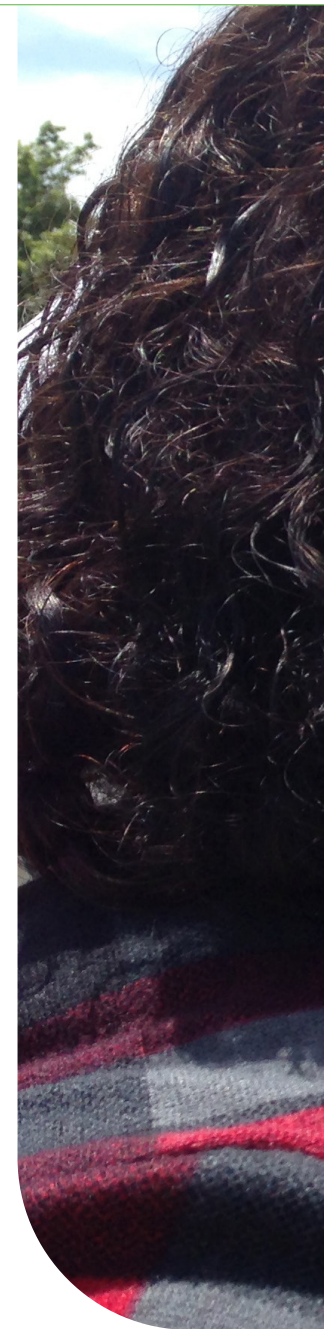
— Myrtle Witbooi 2021

Part 1. Introduction and Context

Domestic work can be defined as the labor of maintaining, cleaning, cooking, and caring in another person’s home, and it is uniquely characterized by its set of employment relations in a specific location—the home. Domestic work is, simply put, work performed in or for a household or households. A domestic worker is any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship and on an occupational basis. Domestic workers 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 (ILO C189).

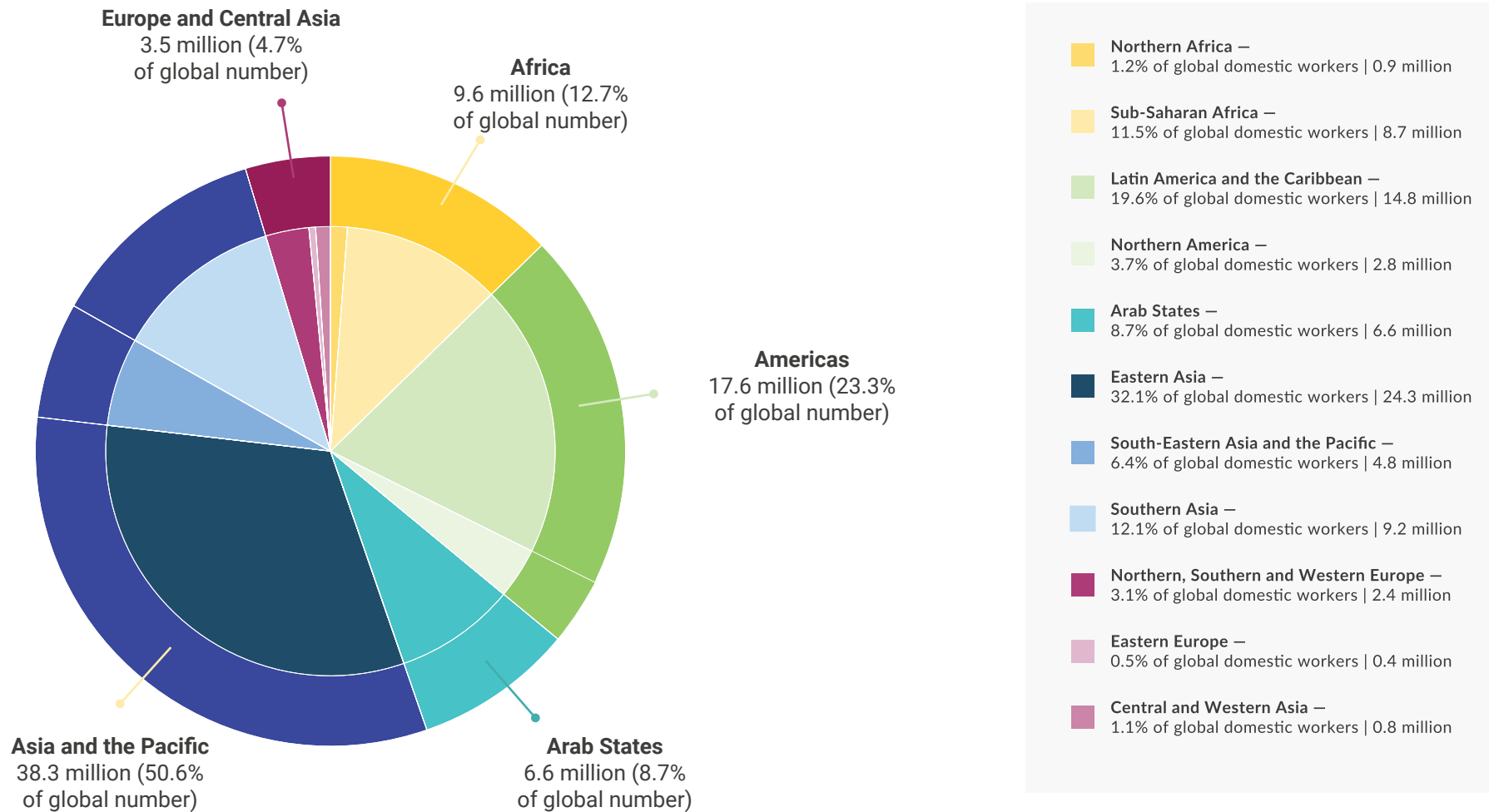
The defining feature of domestic work is therefore the household as the workplace, and the fact that it takes place within an employment relationship (i.e., in exchange for a salary, and not as

self-employed). Domestic work is thus not defined by task, but by the site of the work itself—the household. The location of domestic work in the private sphere of the home sets it apart, as legal governance of the home often privileges ownership of private property and the right to privacy over the rights of those working inside. 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. 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. Yet even in countries with legal labor protections for domestic workers, either through national ordinances, ratification of ILO Convention 189 and corresponding labor reforms, or a combination of both, there is often a lingering gap between law and practice.





Global distribution of domestic workers and regional percentages:



» Who are Domestic Workers? Where are they Located?

- An estimated 13,430,000 domestic workers work in the Global North, while 82%, 62,200,000 domestic workers, labor in the Global South and emerging economies, comprising the estimated total of 75.6 million domestic workers¹.
- Over half of the population of domestic workers work in two regions: East and South-eastern Asia has 36%, while Latin America and the Caribbean have 19%.
- 76% of domestic workers are women, though that number is as high as 91% in certain regions, such as Latin America.
- 17.2 million children are in paid or unpaid domestic work in the home of a third party or employer.
- Domestic workers skew older than other workers, though child labor also remains a serious problem and many young women and girls still work as domestic workers, even though local labor codes may technically prohibit them from doing so².
- 65.1% of all child domestic workers are below 14 years old: 7.4 million aged 5 to 11 and 3.8 million aged 12 to 14.
- Child domestic work is present in all regions of the world³.
- Migrant domestic workers are also subject to forced labor and human/labor trafficking, as well. In data gathered by the National Domestic Worker Alliance and the Domestic Violence National Hotline, the following five methods of control were identified in the thousands of domestic worker trafficking cases reported: 1) Financial - Takes or Withholds Earning; 2) Fraud/Misrepresentation of Job; 3) Excessive Working Hours; 4) Emotional Abuse - Verbal/Manipulation; 5) Needs or Wants Denied/Withheld⁴.

1 Bonnet, F., Carré, F., Chen, M., & Vanek, J. (2021). Home-Based Workers in the World: A Statistical Profile. *WIEGO Statistical Brief*, 27.

2 Wolfe, Julia, Jori Kandra, Lora Engdahl, and Heidi Shierholz. 2020. "Domestic Workers Chartbook." Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>

3 <https://www.ilo.org/international-programme-elimination-child-labour-ipecc/sectors-and-topics/child-labour-and-domestic-work>

4 "Human Trafficking at Home." Domestic Worker Fact Sheet. Polaris. https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Domestic_Worker_Fact_Sheet.pdf



» Domestic Workers and the Care Economy

Domestic workers are crucial in the care economy, as domestic workers—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. Most societies continue to place a low social and economic value on domestic work, as it is often considered unskilled and an extension of women's unpaid care work.

“Domestic workers are pillars of care work and the two cannot be separated.”

— an affiliate from Anglophone/East Africa

Why is domestic labor undervalued and unrecognized? 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 and regional networks around the world. Domestic workers have a long tradition of organization and mobilization to recognize care work—performed for households—as work and their rights as workers. This legacy informs the current conceptualization of care work as work, which is also ingrained in the ILO Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. Promoting decent work for domestic workers must be at the core of a care economy agenda and policy.

“My Mother was a Kitchen Girl”⁵: Tools for Power Building and Global Recognition as Workers

Domestic workers are constantly fighting and moving forward, demonstrating their advocacy power, which relies on the symbolic power that is generated when workers speak for themselves directly to those in position to change their working conditions, by making enormous strikes on the legislative front over the last 15 years. One of the strongest tools they use is International Labour Organization Convention 189, demonstrating their advocacy power through making enormous strides on the legislative front. Convention 189: Decent Work for Domestic Workers was passed in 2011. The ILO Director General at time in his speech in 2011 said, “a great step for humanity and a small step for the ILO.” Since then, 39 countries have ratified C189 and Recommendation 201, marking huge steps forward toward gender equality, racial justice, migrant justice and domestic worker inclusion, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. C189 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.

Domestic workers have deep roots stemming from origin stories of exclusion, exploitation, displacement, and racial segregation, and they move forward an identity as workers from a whole-of-person approach deserving of dignity and respect. Through their global union federation, domestic workers mobilize hope, emphasize dignity, and build symbolic and relational power, and in so doing have brought progressive change and advancement to their movement.

Domestic workers also utilize other forms of power in their continual struggle for recognition as *real workers* and dignity at work. In 2013, they formed the first and only global union federation of domestic workers, a powerful woman-

5 South African Domestic Workers organizing song.

led organization of domestic worker leaders from around the world. The IDWF was formed at the founding Congress in October 2013 in Montevideo, Uruguay, when the International Domestic Worker Network (IDWN) became a global federation with 48 affiliates and has since grown significantly to 93 affiliates over the last 12 years, with a membership of over 669,000 domestic and household worker members. Showcasing their representational power, the IDWF uses an affiliate structure, elects their delegates and leadership, fosters worker-driven campaigns, and campaigns to ratify domestic worker-related legislation. And in October 2024, the IDWF became a member of the Council of

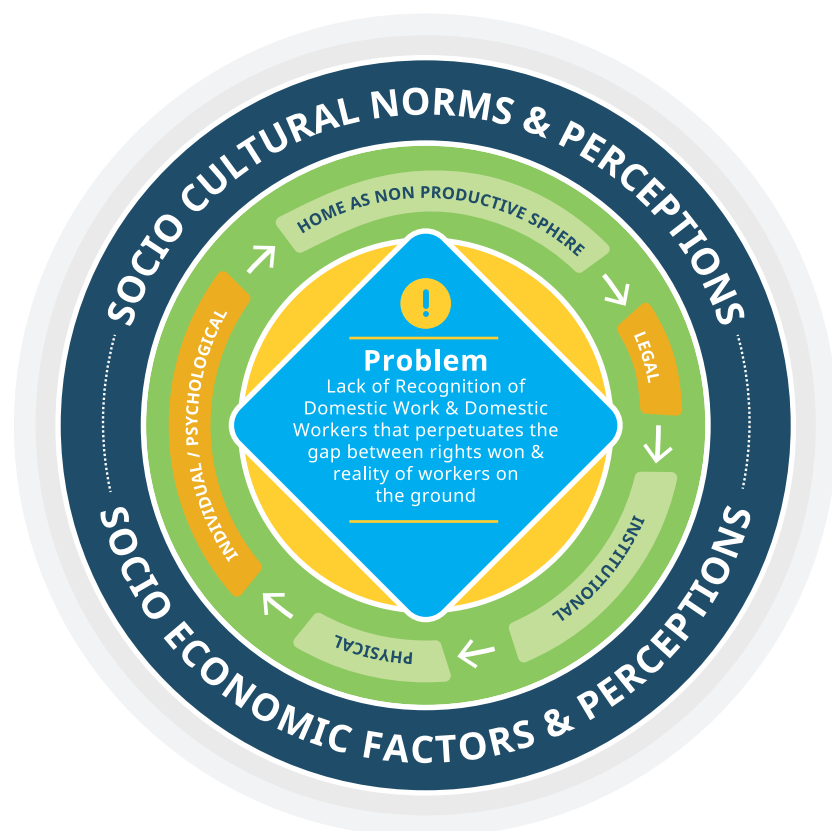
Global Unions (CGU), which is a significant milestone for the IDWF and for the labor movement at large. Additionally, in a strong demonstration of advocacy power, domestic workers have made enormous strides on the legislative front. Convention 189: Decent Work for Domestic Workers was passed in 2011, and since then 39 countries have ratified C189 and Recommendation 201, marking huge steps forward toward gender equality, racial justice, migrant justice and domestic worker inclusion; freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.



Part II. Conceptualizing the Problems that Domestic Workers Confront

Domestic workers face several significant factors and obstacles in their daily working lives. Below, the chart illustrates the various facets of these challenges that domestic workers must confront when realizing decent work, working conditions and improving their livelihoods as Black, indigenous, lower class, lower caste and migrant workers, many of whom are single mothers and the main breadwinners of their household.

» The Plight of Domestic Workers



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

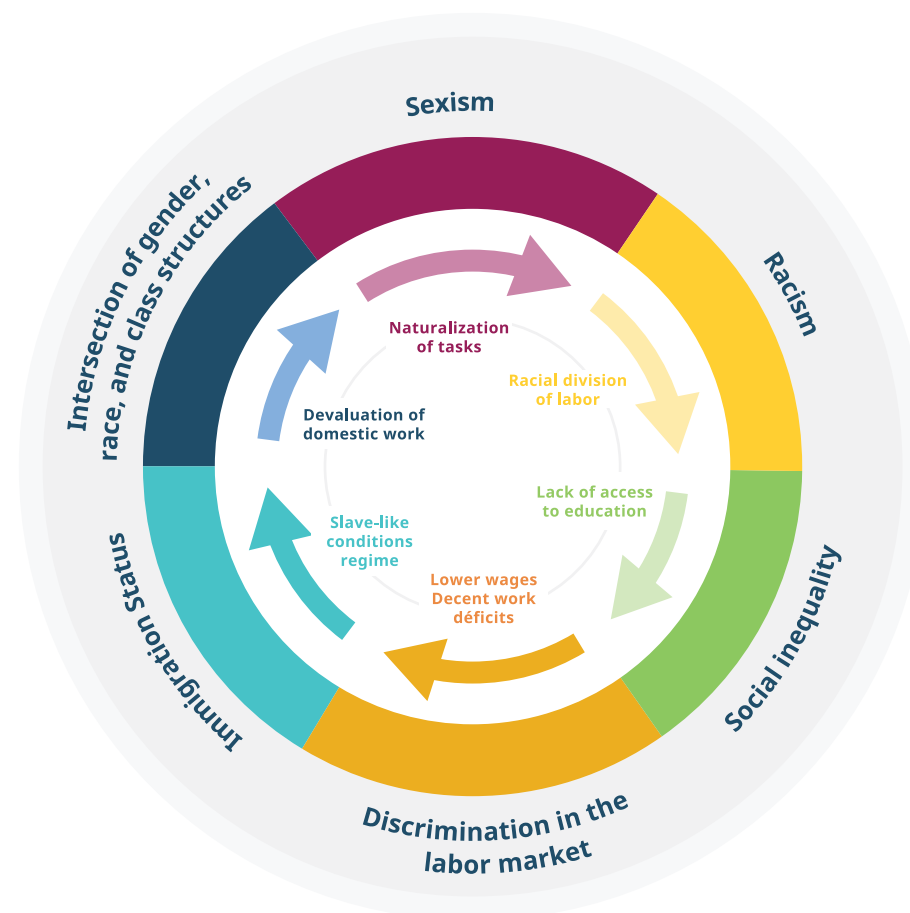


Chart 1: Five main factors that conspire against the realization of decent work for domestic workers in practice and in their everyday lives

Factors	
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Partial or total exclusion of domestic workers from labour and social security laws (explicit exclusion on the basis that domestic work is not recognized as work; or covered by labour and social security laws but excluded from specific provisions; threshold provisions that limit the scope of application of the law (e.g. Brazil and the 3-day rule/<i>diaristas</i>; exclusion on the basis of the household not being recognized as a workplace or falling below certain thresholds of “enterprise”) » Inadequate levels of protection (rights below those of other workers, e.g. a lower minimum wage, longer minimum hours of work) » Misclassification of domestic work as self-employed, and not as taking place within an employment relationship » Laws not applicable to migrants or to migrants in an irregular status
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Limited capacity of government institution to implement laws and policies » Limited funds to implement » Institutions such as courts or labour inspectorates not having the mandate to handle cases of abuse in domestic work » Social security systems not designed with domestic work sector in mind (e.g. having multiple employers, cost of contributions too high)
Individual/Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Lack of awareness of domestic worker as worker » Lack of awareness of households that employ domestic workers as employers » Low awareness and knowledge of rights/responsibilities » Little knowledge of how to access rights or exercise responsibilities » Fear/mistrust of one another and of public authorities charged with enforcing regulations » Digital literacy » Low self-efficacy/self-confidence of domestic workers (often driven by structural conditions, including the lack of access to justice/fear of losing job/ economic vulnerability, rather than pure lack of self-confidence).
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Geographic isolation of domestic workers’ homes vis-à-vis the homes of their employers, of public institutions including social security offices and courts, of care services, of financial institutions, etc. » Lack of access to digital tools » Poor infrastructure or public transportation that domestic workers rely on, etc.
Home as private “non-productive” sphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » It has long been falsely considered “natural” for women to perform domestic work as part of their duty to provide care » The household has been legally and economically excluded from consideration, leaving out households as units of consumption and social reproduction of the labor force » The household is where value is produced, and thus labor relations there should be covered by equal rights legislation » The concept of work, defined from a capitalist and patriarchal perspective, focuses on the production of goods and services for the market and leaves out domestic, child-rearing and care work, even though it is fundamental to the sustainability of life and the labor force
Socio-economic social norms and perceptions (these factors underpin all the above. They are at once the cause and the result)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Perception that domestic work is not real work, taking place within an employment relationship » Perception that the household is not an economic unit » Perception that domestic work is necessarily and naturally part of the informal economy (“difficult to cover”) » Interlocking systems of oppressions: race, class gender, immigration status) » Desire of employers to do as other employers do, maintaining a status quo of informal employment and poor working conditions. » Inequalities (domestic workers coming from multigenerational poverty or marginalized communities vis-à-vis their wealthier employers) that compel domestic workers to accept subpar working conditions, abuse, and violence and harassment » Narratives and stereotypes (domestic workers will steal your husbands, steal your property, lie, etc.)

The above are some of the reasons associated with historical discriminations rooted in colonial times and slavery regimes—not economic—that have led to the exclusion of domestic workers from the protection and exercise of rights to which they are entitled as wage workers. These historical discriminations (associated with patriarchy, in many regions with colonialism, and aggravated by intersectional forms of exclusion based on race, gender, ethnicity, class and caste) are at the root of the high deficits of decent work, forced labour, child labour and high levels of informality in paid domestic work. The profoundly unequal relationships at the level of the household between employers and domestic workers is mediated and understood through these interlocking systems of oppression which are strongly associated with the lack of recognition (both at the regulatory level, in practice and by employers) of the existence of an employment relationship and the rights associated with it.

The fact that the home is *not* recognized as a site of work or an economic unit that generates monetary value has been used to justify long-term exploitation and a lack of recognition of rights for domestic workers even in the best cases, when there is a legal framework of protection in place. And even when legislation for domestic workers has been passed, some laws referred to these workers as “domestic help”, “trusted employee”, or “as family”, concealing the employment relationship and reinforcing its precariousness. This prejudice was maintained, even when domestic workers were legally recognized as a labor category, since they tended to be granted limited rights, perpetuating the view of paid domestic work as inferior to other occupations.

Domestic work allows the daily reproduction of workers (it feeds them and generates conditions for a hygienic and healthy daily life) and generationally reproduces the labor force since it takes care of future workers. The work performed by a domestic worker frees up time for the adults in the household, allowing them to perform under better conditions and earn higher salaries in the labor market. It also allows parents to spend more quality time with children while domestic workers take care of and maintain the household.

Domestic workers have understood these overlapping and overarching facets of this all too well and therefore the depth and the multilayered strategies to win rights and recognition have been innovative and resourceful, at the same

time inclusive and expansive since they are also part and embedded in other social movements fighting racism, xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny.

“When domestic workers go to work, they ask about our caste. When we donate blood, they don’t ask where the blood comes from.” (worker from a South Asia affiliate, GKS)



Part III. History & Organizing Principles

Domestic workers' grassroots organizing is a historical struggle that precludes the forms of organizing that we see today. It is one of the first movements to organize the 'unorganized' or 'unorganizable'.⁶ Historically, domestic workers have been considered as non-workers whose type of work is not proper work since domestic work is seen as an extension of women's roles and relegated to the household. Historically the sector has been deprived from the traditional fighting weapons used by other workers such as the right to strike, to bargaining collectively, and to engage in other forms of concerted worker activity.

How has this group of not "real" workers that have long been thought of as "unorganizable" successfully organized into a strong global union federation that introduced a labor feminist agenda in the big house of labor—the International Labor Organization—starting with Convention 189 (Decent Work for Domestic Workers), followed by C190 (Violence and Harassment in the World of Work) and the general discussion on Care Economy and Decent Work?

The IDWF's main objective is to build a strong, democratic and united domestic and household workers' global organization to protect and advance domestic workers' rights everywhere. Domestic workers have pushed forward and developed a way of organizing the "unorganizable" in building a movement that has won key rights, visibility and recognition.



DW organizing premises

- ✓ Domestic work is **WORK** & DWs are **WORKERS**
- ✓ Deserves labor rights & social protections
- ✓ **DWs ESSENTIAL** part of the working class, not 'poor women' (unions)
- ✓ Need to formalize employment relations and restore dignity & balance of power between unequal relationships between employers and workers (not masters and slaves)



6 Jiang, Zhe, and Mark Korczynski. (2016). "When the "Unorganizable" Organize: The Collective Mobilization of Migrant Domestic Workers in London." Human Relations 1-26.

The following graphic demonstrates how domestic workers have made the unthinkable possible, and real. Presented by IDWF General Secretary Adriana Paz, these four tenets--the power of self-political representation and narrative production, creative organizing models, innovative strategic alliances, and transnational movement building organizing all demonstrate the power, resilience, and determination of domestic workers to achieve their goals--decent rights, recognition, and visibility as real workers.

How DWs made the unthinkable possible? Looking from the inside out



Power of Self-Political representation & narrative production

- » "We don't want professionals speaking for us"
- » Avoided the risk of being constructed as victims & recipients of goodwill as consequence of the support received by organizations not composed by DWs



Organizing Models

- » Union model (class identity reconfigured to recognize the importance of gendered care work)
- » Association model (mobilizes around transnationalism of race/gender. Pursues new politics of identity around migrancy)
- » Community-unionism (embedded in social movements struggles)



Strategic Alliances

- » Class-based (Labour movement through trade union women's committees)
- » Gender-based (feminists NGOs from lefty to catholic)
- » Race & ethnicity-based
- » Academics/intellectuals
- » Occasionally left movement/workers parties



Transnational movement building organizing

- » 1988 Regional domestic workers confederation – CONLACTRAHO
- » 2013 International federation – IDWF

Some of the challenges of organizing involve the nature of disaggregated employers all employing individual workers, or at most a handful of workers, which limit gathering together at the same workplace. Yet even with their atomized, spatially separate workplaces, domestic workers have historically organized collective action including marches, protests, rallies, and even hunger strikes.⁷ In fact, regulatory exclusion in many countries has shaped the way that domestic workers have exercised worker power through multifaceted and creative means within various political contexts.

The following are a few examples of these forms of organizing and connecting with domestic workers.

Domestic worker unions and organizations mobilized and advocated for “newly stipulated clauses on the Standard Contract of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong on the safety in cleaning outward-facing windows.”

“In the MENA region in particular, you don’t see domestic workers walking around the streets. They are kept in well-structured houses and so on. And sometimes there are instances where in a certain area, it looks like there are no domestic workers there. But then if you play a certain music, culturally relevant music, domestic workers start to pop out and start to look out the windows. And you know a certain group of migrant domestic workers are there in that neighborhood. So one area that we need to focus on is understanding the historical background of those domestic workers.”

—Ben Braga, IDWF organizer in MENA region

7 Boris, E., & Nadasen, P. (2008). Domestic workers organize!. *WorkingUSA*, 11(4), 413-437.

Part IV. Our Goals: How Domestic Workers Have Pushed Forward: From Unorganizable to a Global Union Federation

Guided and focused on their goals, the IDWF has a number of key successes and achievements that set up the GUF for success through adapting and changing with growth. The IDWF has organized to bring forward *representation* wins, as the first and only global union federation of domestic workers, a powerful woman-led organization of domestic worker leaders from around the world.

There have also been a number of *legislative* wins, with the creation of Convention 189 and 39 countries ratifying the convention. An important shift has happened over the last twenty years in terms of these legal protections, as many governments have shifted to establish equal rights protections under the law for domestic workers. Latin America has led this shift, as currently 18 countries across the region have guaranteed equal legal rights to domestic workers.⁸ Through their advocacy, domestic workers are making Latin America a region of rights protection. Uruguay has been an important leader in demonstrating protected domestic worker labor standards, as domestic workers have been guaranteed social security there dating back to 1942 (Goldsmith 2013). Additionally, the regional network Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar (CONLACTRAHO: Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers) was founded in Uruguay in 1988, just three years after the country's return to democracy. In 2012, it became the first country to ratify C189, as well. Uruguay is also unique because in 1995, the Liga de Amas de Casa, Consumidores y Usuarios de la República Oriental del Uruguay was formed to represent employers.⁹ The Liga seeks to recognize the work that women do as housewives and since 2008, they have represented employers of domestic workers in Uruguay's tripartite wage councils, which is a significant task given that nearly ten percent of all households there employ a domestic worker.

Finally, there are key *visibility* wins. The IDWF employs anti-oppression methodologies that work to dismantle gender-based violence and multilayered forms of discrimination and work to promote women's rights and workers' rights. And 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. SITRADOTRANS, for example, is a union of trans domestic workers founded in Nicaragua that advocates for the rights of trans domestic workers and the ratification of C189.

Being a Global Union Federation has made a significant difference in the daily lives of domestic worker affiliates.



8 <https://idwfed.org/news/latin-america-news/mission-from-idwf-to-honduras-for-the-ratification-of-c189/#:~:text=In%20Latin%20America%2C%20the%20continent,with%20those%20of%20other%20workers>

“IDWF has done a lot for labour unions here in Taiwan. Because of our affiliation with IDWF, especially when we orient ourselves, it has been a wake-up call for members to say that it’s not just about DCU, it’s not just about operating in Taiwan. It also has allies in other countries.” — Emma, DCU

“Through IDWF’s collaboration with EEFAT (European Federation of Food Agriculture and Tourism)⁹, domestic workers are no longer on the margins of labor debates in Europe—they are recognized as a key part of the workforce, with specific demands and solutions.” — an affiliate from Europe

The IDWF outlines in its constitution that its main goal is “To help build strong, democratic and accountable domestic and household workers’ organization which protect domestic/ household workers’ rights everywhere.” Based on our commitment we set out some intermediate goals and milestones in different levels: individual, organizational, normative/ institutional and at the macro socio-economic level as well.



⁹ This organization translates to the “League of Housewives, Consumers and Users of Uruguay” (LACCU), which is part of the Unión Intercontinental de Amas de Casa y Consumidores (UNICA, the Intercontinental Union of Housewives and Consumers), the Confederación Iberoamericana de Amas de Casa (CIAC, Ibero-American Confederation of Housewives) and the Federación de Amas de Casa, Consumidores y Usuarios del MERCOSUR (Federation of Housewives, Consumers and Users of Mercosur),” (Goldsmith 8:2013).

Our Goal

To protect, defend, & expand the rights of DWs everywhere

Levels

Social Level

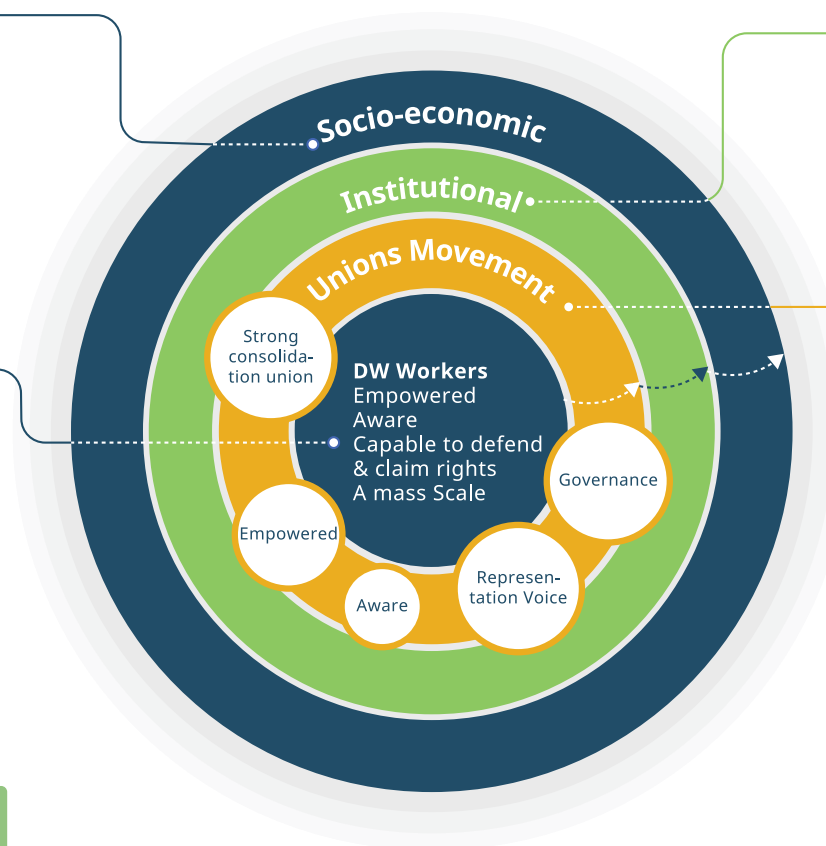
- Social perception & recognition that domestic work is work
- Recognition of the value of domestic work (care work) is central to our societies & economies
- Culture of compliance with the law at household & societal level

Individual

- Dignified & empowered
- Knowledgeable of rights & mechanisms of compliance with the law
- Capable to defend their rights & use mechanisms of compliance
- Skillful to negotiate with employers their employment relationship
- Self-worth & confidence – Resilient to navigate & advocate



Boxes outside are intermediate goals & milestones



Normative / Institutional

1. Legislative
 - Creation of legislation
 - Reforms of inadequate legislation
 - Constitutional amendments
 - Coverage and inclusion of all (migrant) workers in social and labor laws
 - Mechanisms and regulation for implementation and compliance
 - Social dialogue spaces

Strong Consolidated Organizations

- Democratic structures of governance led by DWs → **symbolic power**
- Connected & included in national trade unions & other movements fighting for social, migrant, racial, gender, economic justice → **relational power**
- Resilient & sustainable organizations throughout time
- Strong base & active
- Leaders with adequate technical and political skills.

As the graphic demonstrates, the main goal of the IDWF is to protect, defend, and expand the rights of domestic workers everywhere. This begins with the individual, as we want every domestic worker to have decent work in a real, everyday way, meaning that the laws are in place and implemented, institutions have the capacity to promote and enforce compliance, and domestic workers have the knowledge and the capacity to defend their rights in the workplace.

This situates the domestic worker as empowered, aware, and capable to assert and advocate for their rights.

The surrounding layers show the institutional and socio-economic factors that have to be in place the empowered domestic worker to exercise that agency. The laws are in place and

implemented, institutions have the mandate and resources to properly implement said laws and to promote and enforce compliance, domestic workers are organized into unions, and society values domestic work as work. This creates a new social contract that places care at the center of our societies and economies, etc.

If we take this approach, then the ultimate goal is seen at the individual level (on a mass scale), and then there are milestones or intermediate goals that will help facilitate reaching that end result.

Those intermediate objectives are within the scope of control of IDWF, such as winning laws. For example:

Goal: Make decent work a reality for all domestic workers
Intermediate objectives / milestones:

1. At Normative / institutional level:

- Coverage of all domestic workers (including all migrants) by labour and social security laws
- Level of rights are adequate
- Implementation of rights
- Domestic workers can (have access and capacity to) participate in social dialogue, including collective bargaining
- Domestic workers are organized into trade unions

- Domestic workers are connected to each other and to social support networks

2. At the social level:

- Social perception that domestic work is real work, recognition of the value of domestic work (and all care work) as central to our societies and economies.

3. At the individual level:

- Domestic workers have information and knowledge of rights
- Domestic workers know how to defend their rights (know how and where to access justice)
- Domestic workers know how to negotiate the employment relationship
- Domestic workers have self-confidence and self-efficacy / resilience tools

4. To protect and advance domestic workers' rights everywhere

5. Our goal is to influence, shape and affect changes in multidimensional spheres which are ultimately to a) improve working conditions, to bring decent working conditions as defined by the ILO C189, b) to improve life conditions and restore dignity and respect

- i) legislative (creation of legislation such as C189, domestic workers laws, bills of rights, etc. legislative reforms either labour law reforms (case of Thailand, Mexico) or constitutional amendments (Brazil, Mexico)
- ii) To influence and participate in the technical design for core public policies such as social security, minimum wages, regulations of by laws to ensure implementation mechanisms of the laws
- iii) Political: the articulation of rights, respect and recognition of the sector: which is also manifested in the relational/institutional power and social dialogue spaces
- iv) Narrative/culture change to challenge and fight racism, patriarchy, discrimination, harassment and other types of violence(s) and a culture of non-compliance with the law

Even in challenging situations and times of despair, domestic workers respond by organizing creatively and innovatively. Organizing for decades before they had any legal guarantees of rights or equal protection, and drawn from the most excluded sectors in their societies, domestic workers are well practiced in building power and organizations covertly, measuring and mitigating risks, and cultivating strategic alliances to create openings for advocacy, social recognition, and decent work amidst repression. In recent years the growth of organizing in the Gulf region, advocacy campaigns under regressive right-wing governments in the Americas and in Asia illustrate domestic workers' creativity and political astuteness in refusing to abandon the struggles for equal rights and decent work in even the most challenging climates.

The IDWF and its affiliates have responded to climate disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic, and other crises of global instability by seeking to meet the needs of domestic workers and their communities and helping them to access disaster relief. The IDWF initiatives to share relief resources even with allied sister organizations not affiliated to the IDWF has cemented the federation's global leadership and demonstrated what real working class-led solidarity can do for survival and resilience in the face of crises. The fact that domestic worker unions were able to successfully increase membership during the Covid-19 pandemic as most of the global labor movement contracted underscores the success of the movement's alternative organizing.

Domestic workers have truly always had to know how to organize across isolation, by building connection and solidarity without the benefit of physical proximity or freedom of movement. They utilize outreach strategies that demonstrate a commitment to show up for vulnerable and struggling during times of crisis and extend this support even to non-affiliates like CONLACTRAHO. In these moments of extreme crisis, demonstrating such solidarity showcases the trust and credibility of the IDWF and its affiliates.

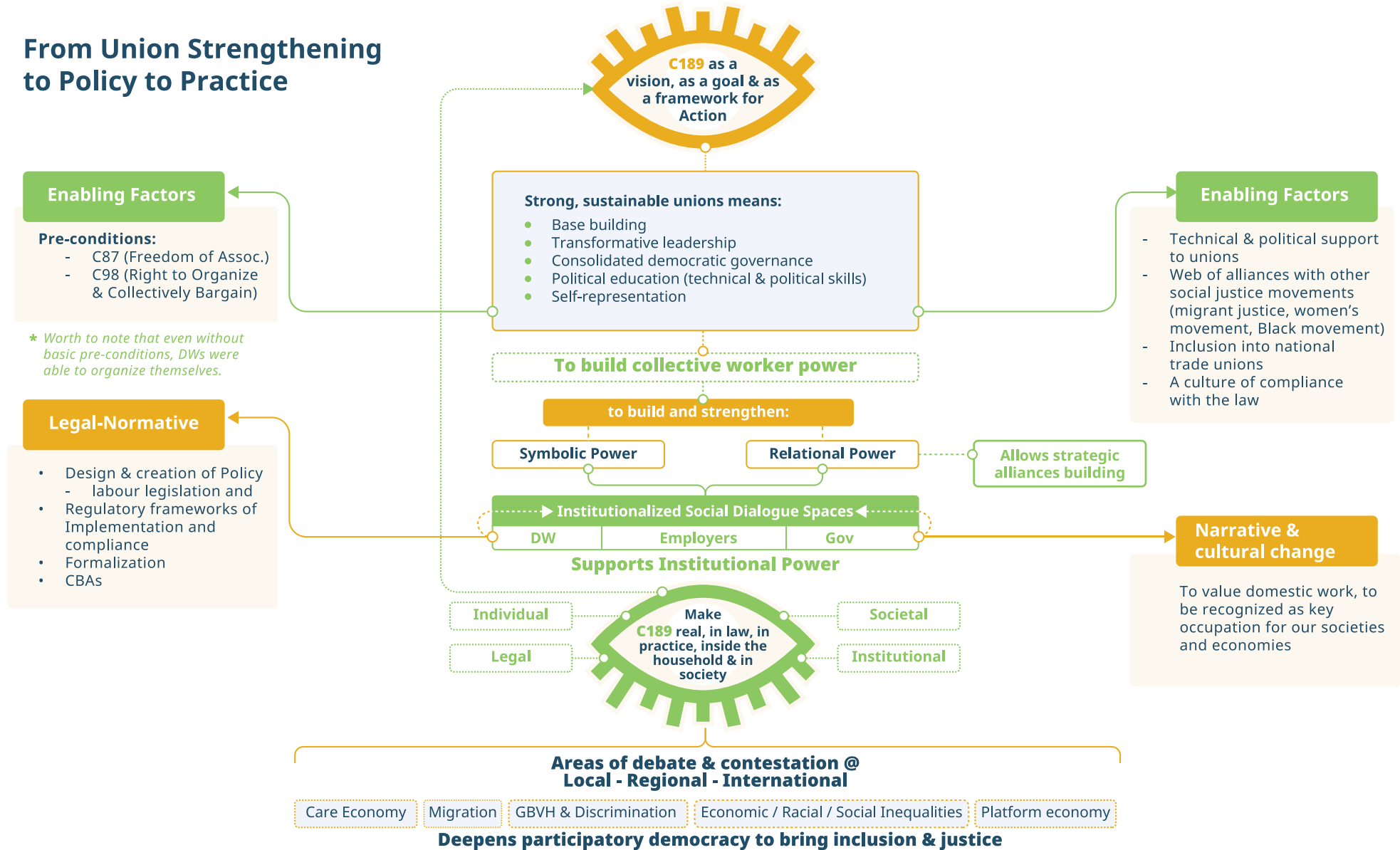
Part V. IDWF Theory of Change: From Union Strengthening to Policy and Practice

Given these achievements, how have domestic workers secured their achievements in representation and towards the formalization and legal protection of domestic workers? In the current political and socio-economic moment to move forward and continue to make change? How do domestic workers understand the best path forward to achieve full recognition of their rights and dignity? In what ways can domestic workers learn from the origins of their movement and their path-breaking historical achievements to map out the road toward realizing decent work?

In order to think through these questions and come up with collective answers and solid next steps, the IDWF has put forward a conceptual framework of our own *theory of change*. This involved a months-long process of global online and in-person discussions, participatory focus groups, brainstorming, surveys, and collaborative theory-building culminating in a three-day-long workshop in São Paulo, Brazil in late April. Reflecting on early days of organizing to build our global union federation structure and the myriad challenges at play within the global economy, in this document the IDWF articulates a conceptual framework for action, for the IDWF, technical officers at the ILO, governments, philanthropy and allies in the labour and women's movement, that addresses issues of both theoretical and practical significance for the movement.

Recognizing and acknowledging our storied history of struggles and success, a theory of change grapples with both the substantive achievements of the domestic workers' movement and the pressing challenges facing domestic workers in the era of care. What difference has our movement been able to make in the lives of domestic workers and their organizations, and how can it build strength and efficacy going forward?

From Union Strengthening to Policy to Practice



- » As the graphic demonstrates, the **enabling factors** for any type of worker organizing start with two pre-conditions: ILO C87 on Freedom of Association and ILO C98 on the Right to Organize and Collectively Bargain yet, it must be noted, that even without these pre-conditions domestic workers, and specially migrant domestic workers were (and are) able to organize. In countries where there is freedom of association is allowed for most of the sectors, domestic workers were left out from this right under the labour code, such as in the United States where farm workers and domestic workers were exempted from labour organizing as a legacy of a slavery regime. In countries in the Middle, where at least 83% of domestic workers are migrants, they are not allowed to organize and unionize.
- » The second set of enabling factors for any worker organizing, which are technical and political support, and the inclusion into the broader organized labour movement, were not always granted and enjoyed by domestic workers unions. They had to make their in-roads, get acceptance and legitimacy in the trade central unions -in some cases this process still on-going. And lastly a culture of compliance with the law when it comes to the recognition and value of domestic work as work; however, even in countries where there is a legal framework in place, there is no compliance when it comes to implementation of such protection for domestic workers due to a myriad of reasons stated earlier and further explained below in the text.
- » The two sets of Enabling Factors then allow the cultivation of strong, consolidated sustainable domestic workers' organizations and unions. This, for our movement means **base building**, which is to constantly organize and grow our base through expansion and growth of the membership, union consolidation (such as completion of the legal registry of the union, bylaws of the union's constitution, etc). A intentional and intense effort in **capacity building** for the members such as the development of political and technical skills for leaders to advocate, propose and negotiate the terms and conditions of their rights.
- » A model of **transformative leadership** that is centered in care and in personal and collective trauma healing, amplification, and renewal, with a succession of leaders. The feminist premise of '*the personal is political*' is put in practice in domestic worker union organizing when it comes to restore the sense of dignity, worth and pride to undo the tangible consequences of the systems of oppression and exclusion that pushed domestic workers to margins. "To mobilize hope and dignity to fight for our rights we must heal first" (Ketty Carrillo, domestic worker in Peru participant of the IDWF LUNA school -Leadership, Unity, reNewal and Amplification)¹⁰.
- » This also means strengthening and healing domestic worker identity (race, class, gender, cast, ethnicity, migration status, etc.) to augment and leverage the **symbolic power** of the movement
- » In this way, strong consolidated unions are in position to leverage **symbolic power** and to use **relational power**, which enables them to access **social dialogue spaces** where **institutional power** is build.
- » By being able to open up **institutionalized social dialogue spaces** -that must be led and sustained by political will of government officials, ministries of labour, social security institutes, etc - by virtue of their symbolic and relational power, then changes at the legal/normative level and also culture/narrative change can be enacted in order to support a culture of compliance with the law and to value domestic work as a pillar for societies and economies.
- » This in turn leads to the process of making C189 real, meaning in theory and in practice at the individual, legal, societal, and organizational level.
- » Finally, in order to keep deepening and nourishing systems change, the movement of domestic workers engages in *strategic areas of debate and contestation that both shape and are shaped by the organizing on the ground*. Importantly, there areas are the care economy, migration (safe migration and fair recruitment), GBHV (intersectionality lenses to combat violence(s) discrimination and harassment, economic/racial/social inequalities.

10 <https://idwfed.org/capacity-building/latin-america-capacity-building/leadership-unity-renovation-and-amplification-luna/>

Part VI. Strategic areas of debate and contestation

» Care economy

Care work is critical infrastructure—as vital to the functioning of economic life as telecommunications, roads and bridges, hospitals and fire departments. Our goals going forward are to achieve full recognition of domestic worker rights and dignity both in law and practice in the era of care. Care needs will only increase as the global population continues to age. By 2035, 300 million jobs will be needed and these growing global care needs are already emerging as various countries struggle with the demands of what is often called a *care crisis*.¹¹ Thus, it is of crucial importance to include domestic workers, the largest sector that provides care. Domestic workers are often at the bottom of the care work hierarchy, as they are often excluded from social security systems and have less access to care services. When care is provided by the public sector, formalization tends to increase.

“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.”¹²



¹¹ <https://www.ilo.org/publications/global-care-crisis-quality-care-home-case-including-domestic-workers-care>

¹² <https://www.ilo.org/publications/global-care-crisis-quality-care-home-case-including-domestic-workers-care>

“There are a lot of domestic workers who can cook, take care of children, and are drivers. We can have a training curriculum which speaks to this, and certification that recognizes this reality.”

- an affiliate from CHODAWU, Kenya

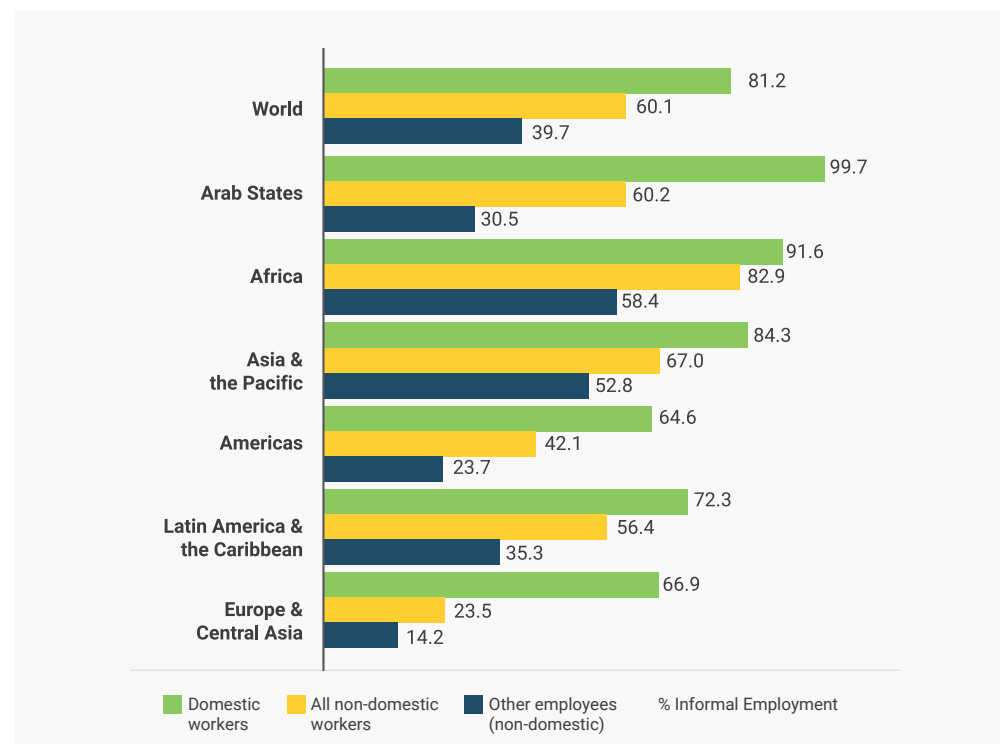
“Domestic work is carried out in households, care work is specifically carried out with care for children, the elderly, and those who cannot move around in their daily lives alone. We note that 25% of domestic workers do care work without realizing it or being paid for it.”

- Francisco Sambo, SYNED, Mozambique.

Informality (intervention on re-conceptualizing professionalization and skills training as a strategy to overcome informality and to achieve decent work)

Domestic workers must move toward formalization, and the extent to which domestic workers enjoy formal employment and decent work notably depends on the intersecting issues of: “(i) the organization and financing of care; (ii) employment arrangements (direct hire by households versus through/by service providers); and (iii) the resulting extent to which they are covered by labour and social security laws.”¹³

Domestic workers working in informal employment conditions compared to other non-domestic workers, by region (Percentages)¹⁴



¹³ https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_protect/%40protrav/%40travail/documents/publication/wcms_916326.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_protect/%40protrav/%40travail/documents/publication/wcms_802553.pdf

Recognition of domestic work as real work continues to be a problem for domestic workers, and this lack of awareness perpetuates the gap between rights won and the reality for workers on the ground. Despite progress in the last 15 years, domestic workers are still often excluded from labor and social security laws. Even when domestic workers are covered, their rights are often not applied in practice, often because employers do not comply with their legal obligations, leaving domestic workers to work in informal arrangements. Many people who hire domestic workers do not consider themselves as employers and do not inform themselves of relevant regulation, let alone respect labor rights of their employees¹⁵ Many national and sub-national laws do not recognize the household as a place of employment, meaning domestic workers are often not recognized as “real” workers with labor rights. 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, which was reaffirmed in ILO Convention 189.¹⁶ Additionally, domestic workers’ exclusion from collective bargaining rights is due to the household not being recognized as a workplace, or falling below threshold provisions on the number of workers at the workplace. 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, similarly guaranteed in Convention 189.¹⁷ Some states do not permit domestic worker organizations to advocate for policy change, while others marginalize domestic worker organizations and domestic worker voices. However, domestic work is work and deserves to be treated as such. In fact, domestic work is the work that makes all other work possible, and thus domestic workers play a vital role in the global economy.

Domestic workers must contend with a lack of workplace guarantees, exclusion from collective bargaining rights, and little regulation of working conditions and job protections, wage standards, and legal recourse. Domestic workers have been long misunderstood as informal workers, which they are

not—though they often deal with structurally informal working conditions. This conceptual misunderstanding has resulted in the technical misclassification of domestic workers and the misrecognition of their labor and working conditions. Despite the fact that it falls outside the conventional regulatory frameworks of many countries, C189 provides the strongest international legal framework for recognizing domestic labor as formal work and as deserving the same protections as other employment sectors. Domestic worker unions and organizations continue to organize to promote formalization, recognized employment in their home countries, and have been organizing themselves into worker-led unions dating back to the 1930s in some countries. Indeed, they are far from informal workers.

ILO C189 functions as an instrument of formalization for domestic workers, in that it calls for the 1) coverage of domestic workers by all labour and social security laws; 2) affording adequate levels of protection, at least equivalent to those of other workers; and 3) that those laws are applied in practice. All three indicators need to be met for them to be considered in fully formal employment. However, underpinning the whole framework is the recognition of domestic work as work that is performed within an *employment relationship*, meaning there is an employer and an employee, which is inherently a relationship of subordination. It means domestic workers should be treated like other employees (and not as self-employed workers) under labour and social security laws. It means we understand formalization to be on a spectrum: fully informal would mean being fully excluded from the labour and social security laws, while fully formal would be the above three criteria met. However, domestic workers land somewhere in between: partially covered by laws, or enjoying only some of their rights in practice. In this way, the road to decent work for domestic workers must be one of full formalization.

15 Maich, Katherine. (2020). “Of Home and Whom: Embeddedness of Law in the Regulation of Difference.” *Political Power and Social Theory* 37: 184-210.

16 McBride, Justin, Chris Tilly, Rina Agarwala, Jennifer Chun, Georgina Rojas, Ben Scully, Sarah Swider, Nik Theodore. (2021). “Organizing Informal Workers to Win: Lessons from Informal Domestic and Construction Workers in Six Countries.” <https://lrle.ucla.edu/Publication/Organizing-Informal-Workers-To-Win-Lessons-From-Informal-Domestic-And-Construction-Workers-In-Six-Countries/>

17 Blackett, Adelle. (2020). Domestic workers and informality: Challenging invisibility, regulating inclusion. In *The Informal Economy Revisited* (pp. 110-115). Routledge.

» Platform and Digital Labor

Numerous sectoral challenges remain, especially in this socio-economic and political moment in the global economy. One growing area affecting domestic work is digital platform labor. Some early research has shown how digital platforms control on-demand platform workers through the algorithmic management of the labor process. Other studies have found how algorithmic management and shifts to platforms often leave workers feeling vulnerable and stigmatized, rather than entrepreneurial, independent, and empowered. Yet in light of these findings and the rapidly changing digital landscape, could platforms in practice have a different outcome—could they instead offer paths toward stability and steps toward worker protections for domestic workers? Despite popular attention around it, digital, algorithm-based platforms do not appear to be an effective mechanism for domestic workers to exercise worker power or access rights.

Recent research has examined algorithmic management of domestic work through care provision platforms, noting that platforms can “shift risks and rewards for workers in different ways,” including by disadvantaging workers who lack polished, competitive digital skills, and by “offloading inefficiencies and hidden costs directly onto workers.”¹⁸

Yet there is insufficient evidence that platforms can serve as an outlet for worker power for domestic workers or that they truly foster democratic worker control over their wages, working conditions, and employer selection. Within platform labor there is a growing acceptance of domestic workers as mutually interchangeable, as well, in that it does not matter who is doing the platform work as workers are fungible and disposable, and easy to replace. Early research on domestic worker digital platforms in South Africa demonstrates the undemocratic nature of algorithmic management for domestic work, as

the client ratings system put additional pressure on workers and offered no control over their working time.¹⁹ Additionally, with the platform work modality we have seen higher risks that GBVH at work can be exacerbated, and often go unaddressed.

There are some important examples of domestic workers innovating to assert worker power in algorithm-mediated jobs. For example, Ethiopian domestic workers are employing programming (2025), “Digital Platforms for Job Matching,” in which they establish online job-matching services to connect domestic workers with verified employers, reducing the risk of exploitation.

Other findings from UN Women demonstrate positive impacts of platform arranged work in Southeast Asia.²⁰ Kuwait is increasingly using digital platforms to track contracts and salary payments as well as to register complaints, such as through the Kuwait Ministry of Interior app. And in 2021, NDWA in the United States partnered with Handy to create a pilot program for domestic workers in Indiana, Kentucky and Florida, ensuring a \$15/hour minimum wage, paid time off, and occupational accident insurance coverage that will be administered by NDWA through its portable benefits program.²¹ While still in its pilot phase, this is an important move to ensure that workers are treated as “real” workers with benefits and insurance coverage, significantly stronger benefits than what traditional gig workers are guaranteed.

» Migration: multi-lingual, multi-racial transnational organizing of migrant domestic workers

Domestic workers migrate internationally and within their home countries constructing “global care chains” that are racialized, gendered, and change with time.²² Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) often face concerns around legal status, immigration barriers, employer dependency, lack of safety and security, forced labour, and fears of deportation. Thus, another key area of

18 Ticona, J., Mateescu, A., & Rosenblat, A. (2018). Beyond disruption: How tech shapes labor across domestic work and ridehailing. *Data & Society*. https://datasociety.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/06/Data_Society_Beyond_Disruption_FINAL.pdf

19 Sibiya, Wandile and David du Toit. (2022) Sweeping up decent work: paid domestic work and digital platforms in South Africa, *Gender & Development*, 30:3, 637-654, DOI: [10.1080/13552074.2022.2126199](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2022.2126199).

20 https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/wee-care-stat-brief-digitally-enabled-care-economy-in-sea_18.09.pdf

21 Andrias, Kate, and Benjamin Sachs. 2021. “NDWA-Handy Pilot: Major Gains for Workers Long Excluded from Labor Laws Protections.” OnLabor.

22 Ehrenreich, Barbara and Arlie Hochschild (2003). *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (Illustrated, reprint ed.). New York City.: Macmillan.

strategic debate and organizing is migration, as migrant domestic workers are often subject to employer abuses that cross borders and time zones as they are located far away from their home countries and cut off from kinship ties and social networks.

Globally, one out of every five domestic workers is a migrant, and in countries with a high GDP and a reliance on migrant labor, this percentage can reach as high as 80%. There has been a massive hike in the number of MDWs in the post-pandemic era as governments of countries of origin rely on MDWs

for remittance as a quick fix for the economic and financial crisis. Despite the significant size of this demographic and their contribution to both their countries of origin and destination, migrant domestic workers lack social protections and are often not recognized as real workers. In addition to being subject to poor working conditions such as long hours, infrequent breaks, a lack of days off, GBVH and other abuses, migrant domestic workers face challenges due to their migrant status in general.

Within the Asian context, organizing MDWs begins usually begins by creating safe spaces for workers to share daily lived experiences together with fellow MDWs. This is especially important for MDWs to be able to connect through their shared cultural background and language as well as precious employment status while in another country. The IDWF facilitated the establishment of the Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Union (FADWU) in 2010 in Hong Kong, which is comprised by both local and migrant domestic workers' unions of various nationalities operating within Hong Kong. Through the collaborative support and coordination of the Asian Migrants Centre (AMC) and the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), FADWU achieved the distinction of being the first registered federation of domestic workers' unions in Hong Kong. Before FADWU was established, migrant domestic workers had organized unions based on their respective nationalities, including those representing Filipino, Indonesian, Nepalis, Indian, and Thai workers. FADWU organizes to educate MDWs and wages campaigns against job hopping policies and excessive agency fees.

In general, migration status often serves as a mechanism of control as domestic workers' legal status is tied to their employer through visa sponsorship systems,

and so they face substantial barriers to asserting their rights or changing employers when experiencing poor conditions. In addition, migrant domestic workers often face heightened isolation. Language barriers, lack of awareness of local laws, and separation from support networks can reduce their ability to seek help or organize collectively for better conditions. Despite the challenges, migration has elevated domestic workers' issues to international forums. This provides leverage for pushing national governments to adopt and implement better protections as part of their migration governance.



For example, in Uganda, domestic workers have negotiated bilateral labor agreements with Gulf countries to improve protections for migrant domestic workers working abroad. Additionally, they have advocated for mandatory pre-departure training to inform migrant domestic workers about their rights and legal protections.

Another important example is that even though the kafala system remains in effect in Lebanon, bilateral agreements increasingly push for domestic workers' right to hold their own passports and the freedom to terminate contracts without employer consent under abusive conditions.

» C190/GBHV



Gender-based violence and harassment affects domestic workers in all regions of the world, and the violence they experience is not only based on gender but also based on the intersection of race, caste, class, ethnicity, etc. Domestic workers thus see gender as inseparable from their race, class, ethnicity and caste, and are subject to GBVH in the workplace. In surveys conducted by IDWF, results confirmed that GBVH domestic workers experience is committed by men, women, direct members of the employing household and their relatives, as well as by recruitment/employment agency intermediaries.

The IDWF views C190 (Violence and Harassment in the World of Work) as the second most powerful tool along with C189 to fight for collective liberation and freedom, which is why centering trauma healing is at the heart of mobilizing and organizing.

There are a number of challenges to effectively change this oppression. Despite the fact that domestic workers mobilize to ratify C190 by putting their bodies and their personal stories on the line in order to create awareness and educate policy members and other people in general, the results of their campaigning and advocacy are public policies about GBVH that fall short. These policies often do not end up addressing the severe violence and harassment and discrimination that domestic workers suffer at the workplace through their employment relationships. An important positive example of a legal framework that does address GBVH is in Argentina, where there is a special labour relations branch for the domestic worker sector to address these kinds of issues.

» Racial justice and forced labor (IDWF resolutions)

The IDWF 4th Congress passed resolutions around migrant domestic workers and forced labor based on proposed resolutions on “Prioritize the Organizing of Migrant Domestic Workers in Destination” by IDWF affiliates in Asia, “Resolution to Combat Human Trafficking and Improve Migrant Worker Rights in the MENA region” by IDWF affiliates in MENA, and “Resolution on strengthening trade union power and organizing domestic workers in Europe” by IDWF affiliates in Europe. MDWs are increasingly vulnerable to abuses and forced labour due to the kafala or sponsorship system, exploitation by private employment agencies, and the lack of grievances redress mechanism.

Particularly, migrant domestic workers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are vulnerable to extreme human rights and labor rights abuses. Migrant workers are reliant on agencies and brokers for information and transit, potentially leading to misinformation, exploitation, and human trafficking.

Based on the IDWF 3rd Congress 'Composite Resolution on Human Rights' put forward by the affiliates in the Americas (North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America)²³, the IDWF uses a lens of intersectionality, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, and caste come together to create discriminatory situations of abuse in the workplace for all domestic workers and in particular for migrant domestic workers. The IDWF recognizes this discrimination and thus fights for racial justice at the individual, legal, and institutional levels.



Part VII. The Future of Work is Bound to the Future of Care

Domestic workers play a central role in the care economy and the care era, this current and important moment where global care needs are increasing and will only continue to rely upon domestic workers. Care is the foundation upon which life itself exists –it is necessary for humans, societies, and economies to function. 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. Care work is delivered throughout the life cycle, ensuring sustainability and quality of life. Care is the link between production and reproduction processes since care work is the backbone that makes all other paid work possible. Despite its vital importance, the central place of care in the provision of well-being has remained invisible in the mainstream economy. The current social organization of care reflects profound inequalities that are rooted in slavery, ownership and disenfranchisement of people from the Global South. Such inequalities are expressed through differentiated social and economic status and positions of power that are often used to exploit the labor of racialized women and girls, migrant women, and women working in informal settings. The unequal organization of care is both a driver and outcome of poverty and structural inequalities, with implications for the rights and well-being of those providing and receiving care.

The IDWF will continue to address those barriers and keep pushing forward in skills and capacity building and in funding movement building work that focuses on efforts to:

- » Build strong, united, democratic, and sustainable united domestic worker organizations / unions, and global union federation (formation and consolidation of unions, capacity building, basebuilding, etc.)
- » Keep organizing domestic workers working under different modalities such as platform care work

23 https://idwfed.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/resolutions_adopted_by_the_second_IDWF_congress_2018_cape_town_south_africa_en.pdf

- » Advocacy campaigns promoting legal reforms and enforcement on domestic workers' rights, migrant rights, women's rights, and issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender.
- » Build public support and change how people think about domestic work, in order to change working conditions and win more
- » Ensure domestic workers' political representation—domestic workers should be present and have a voice in any forum where we work and where our care needs and lives are being discussed.
- » Build alliances with and promote domestic workers' voice within trade unions and organizations in other sectors, in particular with those of and related to migrant workers, women and informal workers. To change the bigger problem of unjust power relationships, we need to build a broad and diverse movement.

The IDWF and its affiliate members continue to grow in numbers and capacity and continue to expand our global presence and impact. Sharing successful campaigns for C189 ratifications and national-level legislation for its implementation as well as creation of public policy to combat discrimination, violence and harassment has been important for building solidarity across IDWF affiliates, who are actively building a global domestic workers movement. 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, hence domestic workers organizing must be supported and uplifted”.







International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)