

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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Executive Summary

The Process Behind the IDWF's Theory of Change

The IDWF's Theory of Change is the result of a **global consultation**, carried out between February and March 2025, with **94 affiliated domestic workers' unions and organizations across 70 countries** in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa.

Together, we looked back at our history of struggle and how **we made the unthinkable possible**: winning the groundbreaking ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers in 2011 and moving from the margins of the organized labor movement to becoming a recognized Global Union Federation.

We looked inward to assess our strategies, tactics, and lessons learned. And we looked outward to understand **the new momentum we are stepping into** — one in which, while our core challenges remain and new risks emerge, we can propose, intervene, and contribute to shaping how domestic workers achieve decent work in the “era of care.”

This Theory of Change is rooted in our lived experiences, collective struggles, and our vision for a world where domestic workers are recognized, respected, and protected.

What We Want to Change: The Problems Domestic Workers Face

There are an estimated **75.6 million domestic workers worldwide, 76% of whom are women, and one in five are migrants**. They are crucial to the care economy, providing at least **25% of care globally**, with an even higher share in some regions. Yet they continue to face **high levels of informality** — affecting around 82% of domestic workers globally — alongside **poor working conditions**, discrimination, violence and harassment, forced labor, and other forms of abuse behind closed doors of private households.

Five main factors conspire against the realization of decent work for domestic workers:



Legal: Partial or total exclusion from labor and social security laws; inadequate protection; misclassification of domestic work as self-employment; and exclusion of migrants — particularly those in irregular status — from labor protections.



Institutional: Gaps in the implementation of laws and policies; weak enforcement; and social security systems that fail to account for the specificities of domestic work.



Individual/Psychological: Limited awareness of themselves as workers and of households as employers; limited knowledge of rights and how to access them; and low self-efficacy and confidence resulting from structural conditions such as economic vulnerability and limited access to justice.



Physical: Geographic isolation and limited access to digital tools, infrastructure, and public services.



The home as a private “non-productive” sphere: The idea that domestic and care work are a “natural” extension of women’s roles, and the failure to recognize the household as a workplace and economic unit where value is produced.

These barriers do not exist in isolation. They are shaped by – and reproduce – broader socio-economic structures, social norms, and power relations, including:

- the belief that domestic work is neither real work or part of an employment relationship, and that informality is inherent to the sector;
- interlocking systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, and migration status, rooted in colonialism, patriarchy, and slavery;
- discriminatory narratives and stereotypes about domestic workers;
- structural inequalities and power imbalances between workers and employers; and
- a culture of employer non-compliance.

Domestic workers have understood these overlapping realities all too well and have developed **multilayered, innovative, and resourceful strategies to win rights and recognition** — strategies that are also inclusive and expansive, as domestic workers are themselves part of broader social movements fighting racism, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, and other forms of oppression.

What We Have Learned About Change: Domestic Workers' Organizing History

Domestic workers' grassroots organizing is a historical struggle. Long treated as non-workers, they have been deprived of many of the traditional tools available to other workers, including the right to strike and collective bargaining. Yet, despite these barriers, domestic workers have organized and taken collective action.

Domestic workers' organizing is grounded in clear premises:

- Domestic work is **WORK** and domestic workers are **WORKERS**.
- **Domestic workers** deserve labor rights and social protection.
- **Domestic Workers** are an **ESSENTIAL** part of the working class.
- Employment relations must be formalized.

For decades, despite structural barriers and chronic underfunding, domestic workers have found **innovative and multifaceted ways to build worker power** and create opportunities for advocacy across diverse political contexts, including under highly adverse conditions. Through these efforts, they have achieved key wins:

- **Representation wins:** In 2013, domestic workers formed the **International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)**, the first and only global union federation led by domestic workers themselves, which as of August 2026 brings together **96 affiliates** across **73 countries**, representing **680,000 domestic workers**. In 2024, the IDWF became a **member of the Council of Global Unions**.
- **Legislative wins:** The hard-won **adoption of ILO C189** marked a major shift in legal protection, with **40 ratifications** and a growing number of national legal reforms advancing equal rights for domestic workers over the past 15 years.

- **Visibility wins:** Through **anti-oppression approaches** that challenge gender-based violence and intersecting forms of discrimination, domestic workers have increased their visibility and recognition as workers and political actors.

Four tenets explain how domestic workers have organized the “unorganizable” and made the unthinkable possible:



Power of Self-Political Representation & Narrative Production: Asserting their own political voice and speaking for themselves, rather than being cast as victims or recipients of goodwill.



Organizing Models: Developing models built around identities shaped by class, gender, race, and migrancy, while connecting domestic workers’ organizing to broader social movements.



Strategic Alliances: Forging class-, gender-, race-, and ethnicity-based alliances across labor, feminist, and social movements, alongside academics, intellectuals, left movements, and workers’ parties.



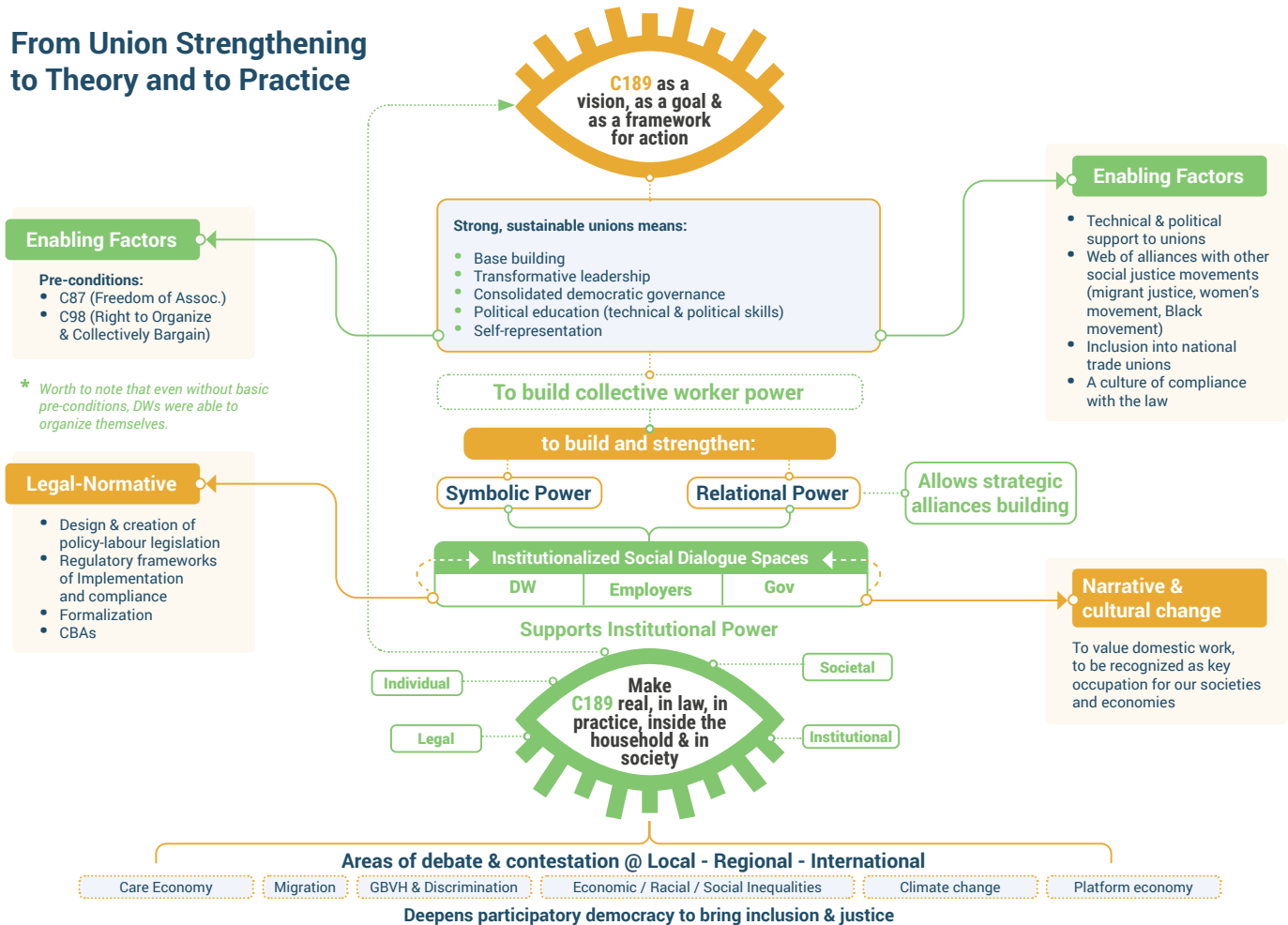
Transnational Movement-Building: Building power across borders through regional organizations and networks.

Together, these approaches have enabled domestic workers to build collective power and drive change, even in contexts where traditional forms of worker organizing are limited or unavailable.

How Change Happens: From Union Strengthening to Theory and to Practice

Drawing on the achievements of our movement and the pressing challenges domestic workers face in the era of care, this Theory of Change guides us in strengthening our movement and becoming more effective in advancing decent work for domestic workers. At its center is **ILO Convention No. 189 –our vision, our goal, and a framework for action.**

From Union Strengthening to Theory and to Practice



The process of making C189 real begins with organizing and strengthening domestic workers' organizations. This requires a range of enabling conditions that support base-building, leadership development, democratic governance, and workers' self-representation. Together, these foundations build **strong, consolidated, and sustainable domestic workers' organizations** and strengthen collective power.

Collective power enables domestic workers to leverage **symbolic power** and build **relational power**, opening and strengthening spaces for social dialogue and building **institutional power**. Through this power, domestic workers can drive change along two interconnected pathways:

- **Legal and institutional change:** advancing labor protections, implementation and enforcement, collective bargaining, and formalization.
- **Cultural and narrative change:** challenging the devaluation of domestic work and building recognition of domestic work as a pillar of societies and economies.

Together, these pathways help make C189 real — in law, in practice, inside the household, and in society.

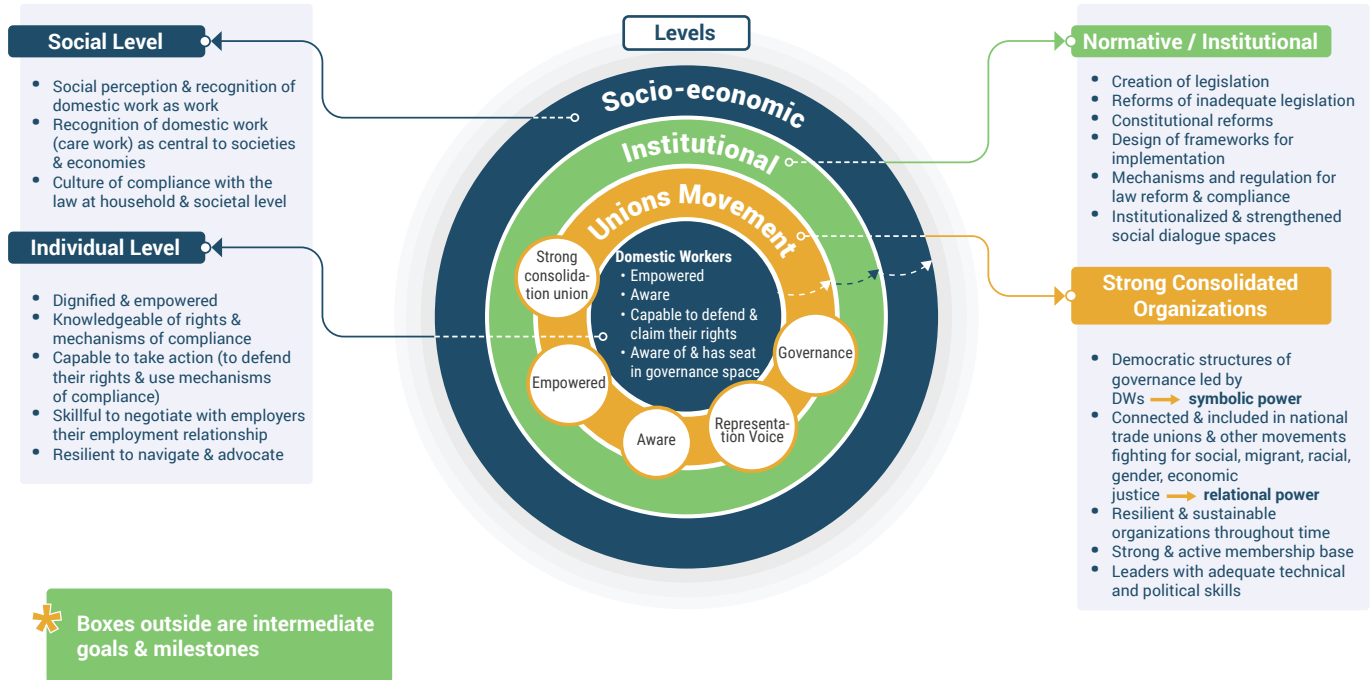
The Change We Want to Achieve: Our Goals Moving Forward

As outlined in the IDWF Constitution, our main goal is

“To help build strong, democratic and accountable domestic and household workers’ organizations which protect domestic/household workers’ rights everywhere.”

Our Goal

“To protect, defend, & expand the rights of DWs everywhere” (IDWF Constitution)



Building on this overarching goal, our Theory of Change identifies **intermediate goals and milestones** across four interconnected levels of change:

- **Individual Level:** Domestic workers are **empowered and recognized in their dignity**, aware of their rights and able to access the mechanisms available to defend them vis-à-vis employers and decision-makers.
- **Organizational Level:** Domestic workers are organized into **strong, democratic, consolidated and sustainable organizations**.
- **Normative/Institutional Level:** All domestic workers, including migrants, are covered by **adequate labor legislation and social protection** systems; laws and policies are properly implemented and enforced; and spaces for social dialogue are institutionalized and strengthened.
- **Socio-economic Level:** Domestic work is socially **recognized and valued**, and a culture of compliance with the law is strengthened.

Progress across these interconnected levels helps **make decent work a reality for domestic workers**, improving working and living conditions while advancing dignity and respect. In turn, these changes contribute to a new social contract that places care at the center of our societies and economies.

The Future of Work is Bound to the Future of Care

Domestic workers are central to the care economy and to meeting growing global care needs. As the backbone that makes all other paid work possible, care work is fundamental to the future of decent work. Yet the current organization of care remains profoundly unequal, relying disproportionately on the labor of racialized women and girls, migrant women, and women working in informal settings. These inequalities both drive and reproduce poverty and structural discrimination, affecting the rights and well-being of those who provide and receive care.

In this challenging landscape, IDWF will continue to engage in **strategic areas that are shaping the present and future of domestic work**: the **Care Economy, Informality, Platform Economy, Migration, Gender-Based Violence and Harassment/C190, Racial Justice and Forced Labor, and Climate Change**.

Across these areas, IDWF will continue to strengthen the movement's capacity and collective power to:

- Build strong, united, democratic, and sustainable domestic workers' organizations and strengthen our Global Union Federation.
- Organize domestic workers across different forms and modalities of work.
- Advocate for legal reforms and their effective implementation and enforcement, advancing the rights of domestic workers, migrants, and women.
- Build public support and advance cultural and narrative change around domestic work.
- Ensure domestic workers' political representation wherever decisions are made about their work, care, and lives.
- Strengthen alliances with trade unions and other movements and organizations.

Rooted in our history and decades of global organizing, **this multilayered Theory of Change charts a path not only toward decent work, rights, and dignity** for domestic workers, but toward deeper participatory democracy and the advancement of social, economic, migrant, and racial justice.

“When the women that are at the 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.”



Adriana Paz Ramírez,
IDWF General Secretary

Read the full Theory of Change

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International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)

IDWF is a global federation of domestic and household workers and their representative organizations. As of July 2026, IDWF brings together 96 affiliates representing 680,000 domestic workers in 73 countries.

Led by domestic workers themselves, IDWF builds collective power to advance labor rights, social justice and gender equality through organizing, leadership development, collective bargaining, advocacy and international solidarity.