



► ILO Brief

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Centering Reward and Representation for Domestic Workers in the Care Economy

► Care work is one of the fastest growing sectors worldwide

But many care workers are inadequately protected by labour and social security laws and left out of social dialogue. Those most at risk are migrant workers and domestic workers. Preparing for future care needs requires bold policy change to expand protections in the sector, develop care infrastructure and create comprehensive care systems that provide consistent, quality care services for all. That is why the ILO's '5R' framework for decent work in care work – to recognise, reduce, redistribute unpaid care work, and to **reward** and **represent** paid care workers – was embraced in the recently adopted *ILO Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy*. While the first 3Rs are well established within UN frameworks, the addition of **reward and representation** brings critical attention to paid care and its role in reaching gender equality targets and decent work.

Globally, the demand for paid care is growing, with an increasing number of countries facing a care crisis due to large unmet care needs and ageing populations.

Everyone is likely to be both a receiver and provider of care in their lifetime. Care, whether paid or unpaid, is critical to the functioning and sustainability of our families, communities, businesses, economies and societies. However, recent decades have seen an intensification in the gaps in the demand for, supply of and access to care. The number of people in need of care has been on the rise and is estimated to rise further, in part due to increased life expectancy. Meanwhile, the availability of *unpaid* work

to meet household care needs has reduced, due to smaller household sizes and more women moving into the paid labour market, while men have only gradually taken on more of these responsibilities.¹ This results in a looming care crisis, with predictions that 2.3 billion people will need care services by 2030,² and significant shortages of care workers to meet these needs in both developed and developing economies.

Domestic workers are vital workers in the care economy, providing direct and indirect care in households.

Globally, domestic workers account for at least 25 per cent of all care workers (even when only counting those over

¹ ILO, *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*, 2018.

² ILO, *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*, 2018.

15 and hired directly by households, although many more are children or work through or for service providers).³ The share of domestic workers among care workers is influenced by a number of economic and demographic factors, and is particularly high in countries where formal care sectors are underdeveloped, which describes the majority of countries worldwide.⁴ This means that **in places where there is the most need for investment in care systems, interventions that target the working conditions of care workers, including domestic workers, and the enabling environment for care service providers, are likely to have demonstrable impact in improving the sector as a whole much faster.**

Labour migration can play a critical role in addressing worker shortages, but many care jobs, especially in domestic work, often do not offer adequate reward.

In many countries facing aged or ageing societies and labour force shortages, there is a structural reliance on migrant domestic workers to fill care roles. This reliance stems largely from the fact that domestic work is undervalued and underpaid, making it less attractive for local workers – in short, a lack of *reward*. Domestic workers earn on average 56 per cent of the average wages of other employees, and this figure decreases among women and informal domestic workers. Domestic workers, especially migrants, remain excluded from labour and social protection in many countries, on several intersecting bases, including gender, migration status and education levels. Of the 75.6 million domestic workers estimated worldwide,⁵ the majority are women and migrants or members of racial and ethnic minority communities. A key challenge is to ensure that policies on labour migration and domestic work are coherent and rights- and evidence-based to effectively meet current and future care demands. Weak governance and insufficient efforts to formalize domestic work, and limited migration

pathways expose migrant workers to exploitation, evidenced by the fact that they are three times more likely to be in situations of forced labour.⁶ Migrant domestic workers are frequently recruited and employed within systems that are unable to protect their basic human and labour rights and ill-prepared to meet current, let alone future, community needs.

The level of protection and representation of domestic workers in many places is inadequate.

While domestic workers are increasingly covered by labour and social security laws, they remain excluded in many countries, especially in Asia and the Arab States, or are subject to discriminatory coverage.⁷ Their exclusion is rooted in a lack of recognition of domestic work as work, and of domestic workers as care workers within care policies. One of the key factors behind this exclusion is the lack of access to freedom of association, namely their *representation* through trade unions.

It is broadly recognized that voice and representation are crucial for advancing equitable social, legal and economic empowerment, particularly for women. Under the 5R framework, *representation* calls for women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. To achieve this goal requires not only representation of women in management, but also recognizing and responding to the voices of women workers through effective trade union representation. For care workers, the majority of whom are women, this means ensuring their representation by trade unions in social dialogue. It is through their workers' organizations that care workers are able to shape policies that affect them, and to advocate for and exercise their human rights, labour rights, and indeed, women's rights. Similarly, for employers of domestic workers, which includes households and care service providers, representation is equally important to ensure their needs, challenges and perspectives are considered when crafting

³ ILO, *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers: Progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)*, 2021.

⁴ ILO, *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*, 2018.

⁵ ILO, *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers: Progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)*, 2021.

⁶ ILO, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*, 2022.

⁷ ILO, *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers: Progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of ILO Convention No. 189*, 2021

policies that govern the care sector and enable a healthier and more productive workforce.

To date, however, the voice of care workers, and particularly domestic workers, and of their employers, goes unheard. Restrictive laws in some countries limit the rights of domestic workers to freedom of association and effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. There also remains a lack of consultation with organizations of domestic workers and of employers of domestic workers, where they do exist – in short, a deficit of *representation*. Consulting representative organizations of domestic workers and of employers of domestic workers in decision-making processes is essential to increasing social, legal and economic empowerment, particularly for women, and strengthening the care economy. Increased representation will also lead to more equitable and sustainable solutions to the growing demand for care services.

To achieve global gender equality targets, action beyond recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work is necessary; progress on reward and representation is essential.

Transformations in how societies meet care needs are required at the household and labour market levels. 16 billion hours are devoted to unpaid care work each day, with women and girls performing 75 per cent of this labour.⁸ Unpaid care can, in part, explain the 25 per cent gap between men and women's global labour force participation rates. Reducing the burden of unpaid care work through redistribution will have a positive impact on women entering, remaining and progressing in the labour market.⁹ But a focus on recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work is only part of the solution. The reality in most countries is that the unmet care needs are being “redistributed” to paid domestic workers. While this redistribution can help balance labour force participation, it risks perpetuating inequality if domestic work jobs remain low paid and informal.

Women's human and labour rights have never been secured without their own voices and representation. This principle equally applies to domestic workers. Moreover, without addressing issues like inadequate wages, restricted labour market access and the lack of representation of domestic workers, broader gender equality objectives cannot be fully achieved. There is a paradox in calling for investment in care in the name of tackling gender inequalities in the labour market while simultaneously remaining silent on these inequalities in the women-dominated care and domestic work sectors. **To achieve gender equality and close the gender pay gap, it is essential that domestic workers participate in development dialogues through *representation*, and receive adequate *reward* as a result of those dialogues.**

Actions are needed to meet these challenges and create new opportunities.

The ILO estimates that with significant investments, the care economy has the potential to generate 475 million new jobs,¹⁰ including for many women who may not have other entry points to the labour market. For development goals to be reached, these new jobs must be decent and productive. While long-term investment may address the care crises, there is an immediate need to alleviate the situation faced by care workers today, especially for those most at risk, including domestic workers, community health workers and migrant care workers. The first investment must be in a rights-based approach to care.

⁸ ILO, *Decent work and the care economy*, ILC.112/VI, 2024.

⁹ ILO, *Infostory: The gender gap in employment: What's holding women back?*, 2022.

¹⁰ ILO, *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*, 2018.

The ILO supports Member States to develop solutions to meet the needs of care workers, care employers and care beneficiaries. Reward and representation are the foundations of these solutions.

Solutions to the care crisis require bold policy actions that centre the rights of domestic workers, develop innovative and scalable policy solutions and create advocacy alliances for transformative change. This is why the *Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy*, which, for the first time, demonstrated tripartite and international adoption of the 5R framework, is so critical. The next challenge will be ensuring that reward and representation in paid care speak as loudly as earlier frameworks that aimed to “reduce, recognize and redistribute” unpaid care in the global policy dialogue.¹¹

The ILO’s Domestic Work Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and its accompanying Recommendation, 2011 (No.201) provide the normative basis. Efforts to promote gender equality and adopt care policies should centre the rights and representation of domestic workers by:

► **Ensuring effective access to labour protection and social security for domestic workers**

- Ratify and implement ILO Convention No. 189 and implement ILO Recommendation No. 201.
- Adopt coherent care, labour and migration policies that ensure domestic workers, including migrant domestic workers, enjoy conditions that are no less favourable than those applicable to workers generally in respect of labour and social security laws.
- Promote and invest in formalizing domestic work.
- Recognize and remunerate the skills of domestic workers acquired through relevant training or experience.
- Ensure domestic workers have access to maternity protection and care services.

► **Including domestic workers within care policies as providers of care**

- Recognize domestic workers as care providers within care policies, including in schemes that incentivize or subsidize care delivered in private households.
- Provide domestic workers effective access to skills training linked to formal employment opportunities.

► **Ensuring the voice and representation of domestic workers and employers of domestic workers**

- Where they exist, include organizations of domestic workers and organizations of employers of domestic workers, whether households or service providers, in social dialogue.
- Ensure freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining in relation to the domestic work sector.
- Promote international, national and sectoral collaboration among workers and employers in the care economy.

¹¹ The original 3R framework was a product of the 2016 UN Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment. More recently, UN agencies, including UN Women have followed the ILO’s “5R Framework for Decent Care Work”: Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute unpaid care work, and Reward and Represent paid care work by promoting decent work for care workers, in line with the 2024 ILO Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy. Various other organizations have also suggested ‘resilience’, ‘resourcing’ and ‘revolution’ be considered to supplement the framework.

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