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COOPERATIVES AND THE WORLD OF WORK No.2

Cooperating out of isolation: Domestic workers' cooperatives

This brief is a part of the ILO COOP Cooperatives and the World of Work series. For more information and other articles and briefs on the series, visit ***www.ilo.org/coop****.*

INTRODUCTION

The International Labour Organization estimates that, worldwide, there are at least 52.6 million domestic workers.[1] More than four-fifths of them are women.

A wide range of tasks may fall within the category of domestic work, including cooking, cleaning and general housework, washing and ironing laundry, childcare and caring for the elderly and those with disabilities, gardening, and driving the family car.

Domestic workers work in private households for private individuals. In many countries, these are not considered workplaces or employers. Close to a third of domestic workers in the world are excluded from national labour regulations and do not have access to maternity protection.[2]

There has however been significant progress in recognizing rights of domestic workers at work at the international level in the past few years. The recent adoption of the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and the Domestic Workers Recommendation, 2011 (No. 201) has been a landmark in this respect, providing a great impetus towards the valuation, recognition and protection of their rights.

Often domestic workers face isolation due to their workplaces and restrictions on their movement by their employers. Also, domestic workers frequently work outside their home countries as migrant workers. For these and other reasons, such as lack of awareness of their rights, collective organizing among domestic workers is still relatively rare. Similarly, the employers of domestic workers are often not organized, making collective bargaining difficult. Nevertheless the campaign for, and the adoption of the ILO Convention No. 189, currently ratified by 14 countries, has led to an upsurge of organizational activity among domestic workers, as well as by NGOs and other agencies supporting them.

Cooperative enterprises can provide a practical and relevant model for domestic workers to improve their livelihoods and conditions of work. They can offer domestic workers a collective voice to advocate for their rights with employers and policy makers.

There are now a number of well-established experiences of domestic workers organizing themselves through cooperative enterprises, particularly in the home care sector.

A cooperative is defined by both the International Co-operative Alliance and the International Labour Organization as "***an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise***".

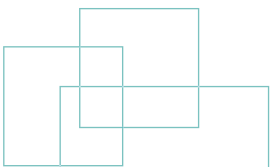
The ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193) calls for measures to promote the development of cooperatives in all countries.

Source: http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles

Cooperatives can provide a way out of precarious and informal working arrangements, which can be a feature of working life for many migrant workers. They can offer access to key services

1 ILO: Domestic workers across the world: Global and regional statistics and the extent of legal protection (Geneva, ILO, 2013). Available at: http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2013/113B09_2_engl.pdf

2 Ibid



needed by domestic workers, including training and education, housing, and financial services as well as care services for their own families. There are experiences of trade unions helping to establish cooperatives for their members in the provision of such services. In case of cooperatives providing employment services, the ownership of the workers as members as well as their democratic participation in decision-making processes are critical in ensuring that they are not co-opted into pseudo-cooperatives, as has been the experience with businesses inaccurately called worker cooperatives in some countries.

Cooperative Principles

The International Co-operative Alliance has established the following seven internationally agreed Cooperative Principles:

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community

Source: http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles

Cooperatives helping domestic workers organize

Domestic work has been defined in the ILO Convention No. 189 as "work performed in or for a household or households". A domestic worker is defined as anyone engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship.

The Convention No. 189 and the Recommendation No. 201 call for measures to ensure that domestic workers and their employers can enjoy freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. The Convention calls for the right of domestic workers to establish and to join "organizations, federations and confederations of their own choosing".

There is a long history of the cooperative model being chosen by domestic workers as a suitable form of organization for their needs. Indeed, the first known domestic workers' cooperative was established in 1877 by butlers and cooks in Uruguay. In more recent times, the cooperative option has been rediscovered by domestic workers around the world. For example, a growing number of cooperatives are being established to provide home care services, particularly in countries with rapidly ageing populations such as Japan and South Korea.

There are also examples of successful cooperative enterprises being established to provide domestic cleaning services. These bring together women workers, including migrant workers, and enable them to jointly negotiate better wages, safer working conditions and improved employment protection.

The ILO's Cooperatives Unit undertook a mapping exercise in 2013 to survey in detail the use being made by domestic workers of cooperatives and other membership based associations in social and solidarity economy. This briefing note partly draws on the results of that survey.[3]

The cooperative advantage

There are different ways that cooperatives can be structured.

Domestic workers' cooperatives are often established as *worker cooperatives*. A worker cooperative is an enterprise that is owned and democratically controlled by its members, who are also workers/employees themselves.

The potential benefits of the worker-owned cooperative structure for domestic workers include:

- It can help with access to a broader pool of jobs;
- It can allow a group of workers to negotiate contracts, working hours, wages and other terms of work;
- It can provide opportunities for obtaining new skills and knowledge;
- It can provide the services which members need (including access to financial services; social services; legal support; advice and counselling etc.); and
- It can offer experience in democratic self-government and management skills.

Financial cooperatives such as credit unions and savings and credit cooperatives can provide much-needed access to low-cost financial services. One example is the Asian Migrant Credit Union in Hong Kong, which for instance provides a mechanism for avoiding the high cost of money transmission.[4]

Domestic work can also be organized through the development of *consumer cooperatives*, where those in need of domestic assistance create their own cooperatives which then supply them with the services they need. This sort of cooperative has been successfully developed in many cities and towns in Québec, for example.[5]

It is also possible to have multipurpose domestic workers' co-operatives that are established as such from the start, or begin with one service and expand into other services based on the needs of their members. For instance, a cooperative that starts as a financial services cooperative can diversify its services to include other services; or a consumer cooperative can add care services as per the needs of their members.

Maximizing the value which home care service cooperatives can bring

Domestic workers' cooperatives, run by their members who are domestic workers themselves, can offer an alternative to commercial employment agencies where the work is organized through such agencies. The fees charged by intermediaries

3 Information on ILO COOP activities and products can be reached at http://www.ilo.org/coop. Findings of the survey and the methodology used are available from ILO COOP upon request at coop@ilo.org

4 http://www.amcu-hk.org/about-us

5 http://www.fcsdsq.coop/

(often a percentage of domestic workers' earnings) are either removed altogether, so that domestic workers can enjoy more of the fruits of their labour, or remain as part of the collective wealth of the cooperative.

Si Se Puede! (We can do it!) Cooperative in Brooklyn, New York, is an example of how such services can be provided by cooperatives to their members.[6] Worker-owners of the cooperative receive full pay for their work—there are neither job placement fees nor organizational middlemen. Workers work for individual employers with assistance from a social service organization, which acts as an employment coordinator. Workers receive their pay directly from the organization, and there is no requirement for them to pay any fee, other than their membership dues.[7]

Cooperatives can also offer an effective way to bring about the provision of home care services, especially in countries with a rapidly ageing population.

As nations grow older, the need for home care services increase. In the US, the National Domestic Workers Alliance is working in partnership with the Domestic Employers Association, the Direct Care Alliance and other organizations in the *Caring Across Generations* campaign, which is designed to transform the way that long-term home-based care is provided in the United States.[8] The country's largest worker cooperative, Cooperative Home Care Associates, operates in this sector. In Japan, too, cooperatives are active in the provision of home care services.

Trade unions and cooperatives working together for domestic workers

The historically close links between cooperatives and trade unions continue today in some countries through organizing and provisioning of services for domestic workers. The ways in which this is achieved can be manifold: cooperatives may convert themselves into recognized trade unions (particularly in countries where no effective representation for domestic workers exist in national social dialogue mechanisms); cooperatives and trade unions may collaborate together around joint advocacy work; and trade unions may choose to provide services to their members through cooperatives.

In Jamaica 16 per cent of the women in the labour force are working as domestic workers.[9] The Jamaican Household Workers Association (JHWA) began as a membership-based association in 1991 providing skills training to their members in household management, negotiation and conflict resolution skills. They also advocated for fair and just working conditions and wages for household workers before formally registering as a trade union in 2013. Today it has more than 1,600 members and is a partner in the country's Minimum Wage Advisory Commission.

In India, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is both a registered national trade union and a grassroots organization which works to provide employment through the creation of cooperatives owned and run by its two million women members. Around half of their members are found in the state of Gujarat where SEWA was established in 1972. Among other types of cooperatives, SEWA has helped its members establish health care, home care, midwifery and child care cooperatives.[10] Through these cooperatives, according to SEWA, "workers obtain continuous work and income in a non-exploitative manner with better bargaining position, and are transformed into worker-owners".

In South Korea, where domestic workers are currently not recognized as legally holding 'worker' status, the South Korean Home Managers Cooperative works closely with the country's trade unions and has been staging rallies with them calling for social recognition, legal protection and the adoption of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention No. 189. Many other domestic workers' cooperatives are being formed in South Korea, including with migrant worker members, after the recent change in the country's cooperative legislation.[11]

The challenges of creating cooperatives

There are also challenges in establishing cooperatives. Cooperatives are enterprises and must be run in an effective and business-like manner in order to survive and become successful. Running a business requires time, specialized skills and resources which may be difficult for domestic workers to find, particularly if they are already working long hours.

Domestic workers may need support in acquiring the required business skills. Cooperative business support organizations, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, and other non-profit bodies can provide such assistance. In fact many of the examples of domestic worker cooperatives had such support to get started in the form of training. Once the cooperative becomes more established and experienced, it will be in a position to provide this support to new members and share the experiences for the formation of other similar domestic worker cooperatives.

Migrant workers may need particular support services, as the cooperatives they establish will need to operate within a legal and business culture which may not immediately be familiar to them.

On the other hand, many domestic workers have already acquired the experience which comes from long years of working on a self-employed basis. Furthermore, the skills developed working in a close personal relationship with clients and their families – whilst often not formally recognized as skill sets – can be of high value in negotiating and resolving conflicts. The psychological insights and know-how which come from working effectively with clients can also be very relevant in ensuring smooth relationships between cooperative members.

6 http://wecandoit.coop

7 ILO: Mapping of Domestic Worker Social and Solidarity Economy Organizations (unpublished)

8 http://www.caringacross.org/

9 http://jhwa1.blogspot.co.uk/

10 SEWA: Women's Collective Businesses—SEWA-promoted Cooperatives and their Women's Cooperative Federation. Available at: http://www.sewa.org/images/Annual_Report/PDF/Women%E2%80%99s%20Collective%20Businesses%20%E2%80%93%20SEWA-promoted%20Cooperatives.pdf

11 ILO COOP interviews with domestic worker cooperatives in Seoul, Korea, May 2013

CONCLUSION

The flexibility of the cooperative business model has been amply demonstrated both historically and through the wide range of cooperatives functioning in the world today.

Domestic workers, because of the nature of their work in private households, face particular challenges and difficulties. By coming together in cooperatives, they can find it easier to achieve decent working conditions and fair levels of remuneration, as well as access to services, training and better job opportunities. It would be of great value if domestic workers' support organizations can avail the cooperative option and know how to them.

Home care the cooperative way in South Bronx, New York City

Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA) is the largest worker co-operative in the United States, employing 2,200 inner-city homecare workers in the South Bronx area of New York City and generating income of over US$ 40m. Originally established in 1985 with the support of a non-profit organization Community Services Society, CHCA is now owned by 1,700 low-income women, from immigrant, African American and Latin American backgrounds.

CHCA's workers work in the homes of their clients, but the cooperative uses the term home 'aides', which is considered more appropriate in the US context than 'domestic worker'. Cooperative members perform care services for the elderly, including bathing, toileting, grooming and meal preparation.

The South Bronx is the poorest district in the United States, with almost half the population living below the poverty line. New trainee members recruited by CHCA are typically single women with childcare responsibilities, some in their twenties but others in the fourties or fifties. Trainee members undertake an intensive four-week training programme on key clinical and interpersonal skills, which gives them both Personal Care assistant and Home Health Aide certificates. The classroom-training course leads to immediate placements in a permanent unsubsidized job within the cooperative. Thereafter in-service training, personal and vocational counselling, supervision and the cooperative's culture of a respectful management approach help provide a supportive work and learning environment.

The model pioneered by CHCA in South Bronx has now been replicated in other US cities. Home Care Associates was started in Philadelphia in 1993, and now employs 70 workers. Cooperative Home Care of Boston, launched in 1994, has 60 aides. All three cooperatives operate as sub-contractors for local health care providers, typically a local hospital or a visiting nurse association.

CHCA claims that, by improving home care jobs, it can transform the challenges faced by unemployed women into sustainable opportunities for economic independence. It also improves the quality of the care received by thousands of low-income city residents.

Source: http://www.chcany.org

Regularizing domestic workers' employment status through a cooperative in Spain

New legislation has been the catalyst behind the creation of a new co-operative for women domestic workers in the Valencia region of Spain.

The establishment in 2012 of the Cooperativa Valenciana de Empleadas de Hogar de Levante (Valencia Cooperative of domestic workers of Levante) follows directly from the reform of social security and employment legislation for domestic workers in 2011. The reform requires domestic workers, even those working only a handful of hours a month, to be employed through a proper contract of employment.

The cooperative provides a mechanism for women domestic workers to have their employment status regularized and to have access to social security. Members of the cooperative also have access to childcare support and to vocational training.

The cooperative also indirectly helps older people and those with disabilities reliant on home care support, and who would otherwise have to take on all the responsibilities of becoming the employer. The service offered by the cooperative provides a convenient solution to this issue. "Anyone who needs a domestic worker can use the cooperative and not have to worry about the legal requirements," says a spokesperson for the cooperative.

Valencia Cooperative of domestic workers of Levante was originally established by 15 women workers, and it is the first cooperative of its kind in the Valencia region.

Source: http://www.cvehl.weebly.com

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