TIME TO CARE FOR CARE WORKERS

Ending the domestic workers' exploitation



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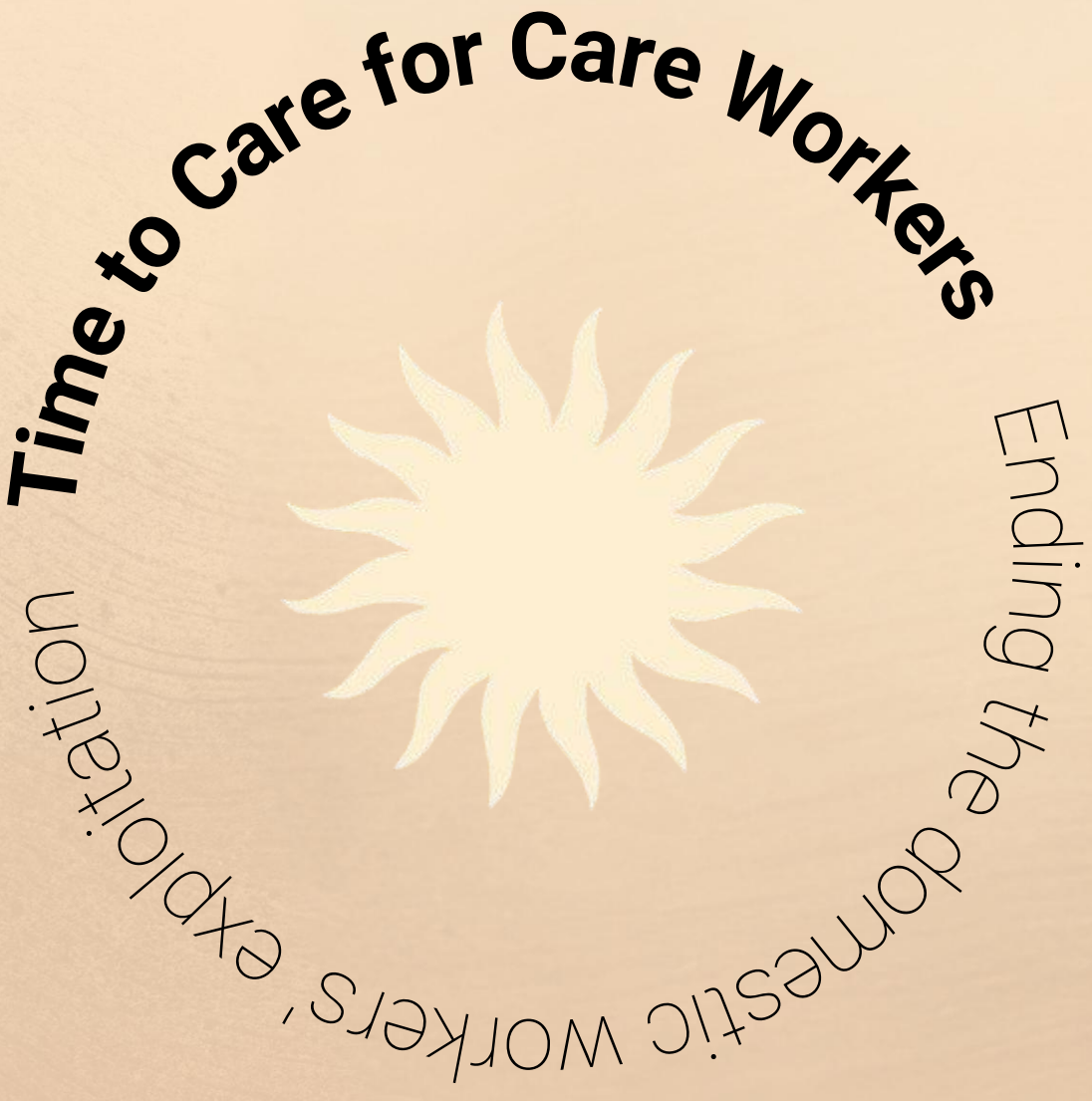
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Executive summary

Care work sustains homes, societies and economies, yet those who do it for pay are among the least protected workers in the world. Domestic workers make up 25% of the global care workforce, and the International Labor Organization (ILO) projects that 2.3 billion people, one in five of the world's population, will need care by 2030.[1] This paper argues that domestic work is work like any other and is indispensable. States must therefore treat care as a human right and public good, not a private responsibility or market commodity.

The exploitation is structural. One in 11 employed women works in paid domestic work,[2] yet the work is undervalued and legally marginalised. Around 79% of women domestic workers are informally employed,[3] they earn 56% of the average worker's wage[4] (under one-third in low- and middle-income countries), and only 6% of domestic workers are comprehensively covered by social protection.[5] Only 40 countries have ratified ILO Convention 189.[6] Gains in Uruguay, South Africa and Colombia are real but undermined by weak enforcement.

Colonial legacies shape who does this work. Migrants are about 15% of domestic workers (11.6 million),[7] and racialized, Indigenous, Afro-descendant and Dalit women are overrepresented. In 17 high income countries, migrant women care workers earn 57% less than the comparator group.[8] *Kafala* and tied visas deepen dependency: by binding a worker's legal status to a single employer, they leave workers unable to leave abusive conditions without risking their residency, and make exploitation easier to sustain.

Neo-liberal economic policies drive this exploitation. Austerity and structural adjustment weaken public care and push women into precarious work and migration, while states such as Sri Lanka promote overseas employment for remittances, worth USD7.8bn in 2025.[9] Digital platforms extend the model. The number of platforms for taxi, delivery, homecare, and cleaning services grew from 128 to more than 650 between 2010 and 2025;[10] these classify workers as independent contractors and charge commissions of up to 30%. Fairwork found only 20 to 25% of platforms met minimum standards and 2 to 8% met higher ones, while value flows to investors and private equity.[11]

Domestic workers' own organizing, led by the International Domestic Workers Federation, secured ILO Convention 189 and pressed for later standards, including Conventions 190 and 193, while the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' 2025 Advisory Opinion 31 now recognizes care as a human right.[12] Yet these movements face suppression, as states and employers use immigration controls and criminal law to make organizing too risky. Unions that support migrant workers are dissolved, workers who speak out can have their visas cancelled and be deported, and those who flee abuse can be reported as criminal absconders, so collective action is deterred before it begins.

The paper calls for recognition of care as a human right and public good; an end to discriminatory labor and immigration laws; protected freedom of association; universal social protection; regulation of platforms and the capital behind them; and universal public services. Domestic workers' leadership must be central throughout.

INTRODUCTION



1 Introduction

Care work – paid, underpaid and unpaid – is vital labor that enables our homes, societies and economies to function. It is central to human social and economic wellbeing.[13] Domestic workers represent 25% of the world's care workforce, providing childcare, elderly care, care for people with disabilities, cooking, and washing. [14] Without it, human life and all other work that happens as a consequence could not happen.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that by 2030, 2.3 billion people – one in five of the world's projected population – will be in need of care.[15] However, care is chronically underfunded, with a significant share provided through women's unpaid and poorly paid labor. Privatization of care services and infrastructure has further weakened public provision, while the persistent undervaluation of women's work across the care workforce deepens the crisis.[16]

COVID-19 exposed decades of government underinvestment in critical care infrastructure and services. It also threw societies' unmet care demands into stark relief. There has since been a surge of care-related policies nationally, regionally, and globally. In reality, however, many prioritize business as usual, i.e., focusing on the care economy; promoting public–private partnerships; and exploiting women's unpaid and underpaid care work.

The global care crisis is a predictable outcome of economic and social systems built to extract maximum value from the world's most marginalized women at minimum cost. Domestic workers sit at the sharpest edge of this exploitation: hidden inside private homes and excluded from labor laws in dozens of countries, in a sector shaped by colonial migration corridors, racial and caste hierarchies, and gendered assumptions that recast skilled labor as undeserving of pay and protections. According to the ILO, two-thirds of women domestic workers are denied decent work.[17]

Tracing this exploitation from its colonial and patriarchal roots through decades of neoliberal austerity, this paper shows how deregulation, 'platformization', and digital capitalism have repackaged this extraction. Weak political commitments to human rights and a scarcity of legal frameworks further contribute to the limited implementation and enforcement of existing regulations.

The paper's central claim is therefore threefold:

1) Domestic work is work like any other; it requires time, skills, and labor and must carry the same rights and protections as other forms of employment.
2) Domestic work plays an indispensable role in sustaining people, households, societies, and economies.
3) Recognizing the above obliges states to treat care not merely as a private responsibility or market commodity, but as a human right and public good with corresponding obligations to fund quality services and guarantee the rights and working conditions of workers.

BOX 1: DEFINING DOMESTIC WORK

ILO Convention 189 defines domestic work as "work performed in or for a household or households" and a domestic worker as "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship". [18]

"A domestic worker may work on full-time or part-time basis; may be employed by a single household or by multiple employers; may be residing in the household of the employer (live-in worker) or may be living in his or her own residence (live-out). A domestic worker may be working in a country of which she/he is not a national."[19]

1.1 The scale of the domestic workforce

Globally, one in 11 employed women are in paid domestic work,[20] making it one of the top five women-dominated sectors. This share varies across countries, for example:

- 24.9% of women in Lesotho;
- 17.2% in Paraguay;
- 46.1% in the United Arab Emirates;
- 11% in the Philippines; and
- 6.9% in Italy.[21]

Although these data suggest a large proportion of women are in paid domestic work, official labor statistics only capture those who are officially registered. For example, the true figure for Italy may be twice the report, since an estimated half of domestic workers are undeclared workers.[22] The ILO states that "data on domestic work is notoriously difficult to capture",[23] because of domestic work not being recognized as work within some national labor laws; cases where paid domestic work may not be regarded as someone's primary occupation; and informal employment in which wages are not captured through tax and social protection registries. What data exist are rarely disaggregated by race, caste, indigeneity, migrant status or income, etc.


Hidden in plain sight
Time to Care for Care Workers

2 Hidden in plain sight: discriminated against, undercounted, and undocumented

"Domestic workers are the unsung heroines in this country and globally. They are a powerful group of women whose profession enables all economically active members of society to prosper and pursue their careers."

–Acting Justice Margie Victor (Victor AJ), Constitutional Court of South Africa (2020)[24]

Domestic work is work. It lies at the intersection of personal human relationships and labor markets. However, the care provided by domestic workers has long been treated as a private family matter. It is frequently considered a woman's 'natural' responsibility, based on patriarchal ideas of women as inherently caring, nurturing, patient, and self-sacrificing.

When such work is performed for wages, these same expectations justify low pay, blur the boundaries between paid and unpaid labor, and normalize care as an expression of affection rather than skilled work. The familiar claim that a domestic worker is 'like family' illustrates this attitude. Work within private homes and personal spaces overwhelmingly benefits employers through low wages and a flexible approach to labor rights. At the same time, in the domestic setting labor rights difficult to enforce,[25] which can give governments an excuse to overlook their obligations. Globally, around 79% of all women domestic workers are informally employed,[26] and 36% are completely excluded from national labor laws.[27]

2.1 Legal protections: progress but not quite there

BOX 2: HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL RESOLUTION 54/6

The UN Human Rights Council in 2023 adopted Resolution 54/6, *Centrality of care and support from a human rights perspective*, by consensus. The resolution "recognises the importance of respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human rights of paid and unpaid caregivers and care and support recipients", while "highlighting the need to invest in the care economy and to create robust, resilient and gender-responsive, disability-inclusive and age-sensitive care and support systems with full respect for human rights" [28]

The ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189) was adopted in 2011 as a binding global standard recognizing domestic workers as workers entitled to the same rights as all others. This includes fair wages, social protection, equal pay, decent working hours, safe conditions and freedom of association.[29] However, only 40 countries have ratified ILO C189; it is in force in 38. In Asia, where the largest concentrations of migrant domestic workers live and work, only the Philippines has ratified the convention.[30]

The ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (C190) was adopted in June 2019, recognizing everyone's right to work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence. It provided the first international definition of "violence and harassment in

the world of work", including protection for all workers regardless of contractual status – including domestic workers, informal workers, volunteers, jobseekers and interns. Crucially for domestic work, the Convention obliges states to address domestic violence and to mitigate its impact at work.[31] C190 reached 56 ratifications in April 2026, making it the fastest-ratified ILO convention of the past decade; however, this is still only a minority of the ILO's 187 member states.[32]

In 2021, ASEAN developed the *Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy*,[33] and the EU adopted *A European Care Strategy* for caregivers and care receivers.[34] In implementing these commitments, regional bodies and states must confront, content and transform the exploitative labor conditions which millions of domestic workers are in.

On 14 June 2024, the ILO adopted the *Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy*, which places primary responsibility for care provision on the state, including funding, regulation, and protection for care workers and recipients.[35]

In 2025, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) adopted Advisory Opinion 31, which recognized care – paid and unpaid – as a human right with three dimensions:

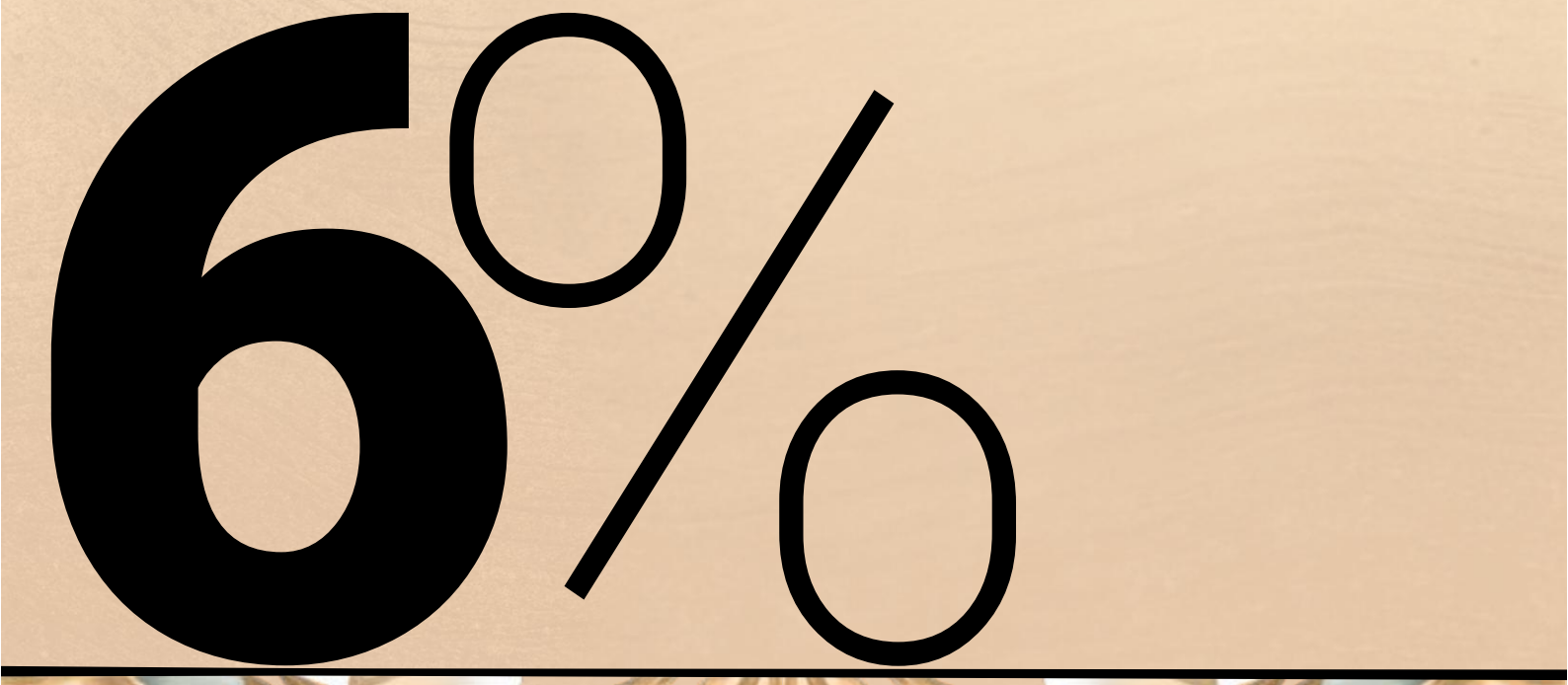
- the right to provide care;
- the right to receive care; and
- the right to self-care.

It emphasized the relationship of these rights with the rights to work, education, social security and health for all care workers.[36]

The ILO's Convention on Decent Work in the Platform Economy (C193) was adopted in June 2026, with articles covering data protection and safeguards against algorithmic discrimination for those whose labor is now mediated through digital platforms (for more on this, see **Sections 4.2** and **4.3**). Domestic workers' organizations joined the platform-worker and trade union movements in advocacy around this convention to ensure that digitization does not become a mechanism to strip workers of their rights.[37] States are yet to ratify C193.

None of this would have been possible without the organizing of domestic workers themselves. C189 was not a gift of the multilateral system but the outcome of a sustained campaign in which domestic workers, long excluded from both labor law and the established trade union movement, built their own organizations and carried their demands into the ILO's standard-setting process in 2010-2011. Organized from 2006 as the International Domestic Workers Network, that movement became the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) at its founding congress in Montevideo in 2013, a global federation of domestic workers' unions and associations with its own standing in international labor governance.[38] Where ratification stalls, organizing sustains pressure on states; and, as the campaigning around C190 and C193 shows, it has organized domestic workers who ensure that new standards address their realities rather than assume them away.

Only 6% of domestic workers globally have comprehensive social protection.



2.2 Recent national laws

The first country to ratify ILO C189 was Uruguay, which had introduced its own legal guarantees (on a level with other formal employment) for domestic workers in 2006. A 2022 review of 15 Latin American states found that Uruguay has the lowest number (46.2%) of informal domestic workers, and the highest social security coverage (78.1%) among domestic workers.[39] Uruguay's *Sistema Nacional Integrado de Cuidados* (National Integrated Care System), Care Act and National Care Plan 2016–2020 mandated universalized elderly care, care for people and children with disabilities, and childcare. However, the SNIC has not met the mark in universalization, with multiple age, disability and time restrictions for care recipients.[40] In part, this is due to an unchanging budget (as a share of GDP) for care coverage. Domestic workers in private homes continue to experience worse conditions compared to other care workers.[41]

In South Africa, domestic workers have been covered under South Africa's labor code since 1977.[42] However, in the 2020 case of *Mahlangu and Another v Minister of Labor and Others*[43] brought forward by the daughter of a woman who drowned in her employers' swimming pool while working, the High Court found that the exclusion of domestic workers from compensation in cases of illness or injury at work constituted direct discrimination. Their judgement expanded the scope of the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act (No. 130 of 1993) to include domestic workers. The Court further emphasized that discrimination was 'aggravated' in the case of domestic workers on the basis of race, class and gender.[44]

In 2025, Colombia passed a resolution to institute a tripartite dialogue committee including domestic workers' organizations. The resolution comes after decades of advocacy by such groups. The negotiating group will be responsible for discussing key issues facing domestic workers, such as living wages and working hours. [45] But as María Roa, founder of *Unión de Trabajadoras Afrocolombianas del Servicio Doméstico*, states, "Paper can hold everything … but in practice, we have to see how it is implemented".[46]

2.3 On the margins: domestic workers without protections

For many countries, policy choices hinging on centuries of racism, colonialism and sexism, continue to violate the most fundamental human rights of equality and non-discrimination of some of the most marginalised women when it comes to workplace protections in law and practice. In turn, weak political commitment, gaps in legal recognition, and restrictions on freedom of association for the majority of women domestic workers globally enable this culture of exploitation and extraction. A direct consequence of this is the high rate of precarity and informality in domestic work, which is double that of any other sector.[47] Around 79% of all women domestic workers are informally employed.[48] Even where domestic workers are formally covered by labor laws, major gaps in implementation and enforcement remain. The location of domestic work in private households, high levels of informality, limited labor inspections and a fear of retaliation can make rights difficult to claim in practice. As a result, most domestic workers face low wages or in-kind compensation; long and irregular working hours;

gender-based violence; occupational health issues, including a lack of adequate equipment and sanitation; and haphazard sick and holiday entitlements.[49]

Women domestic workers globally earn 56% of the average worker's wage; in low- and middle-income countries, they earn less than one-third.[50] Only 6% of the world's domestic workers are covered comprehensively by social protection, leaving the majority without key entitlements throughout their life cycle, such as unemployment benefit and compensation for workplace injury. Almost half of domestic workers do not have access to any maternity leave entitlements or benefits. [51]

The COVID-19 lockdowns in many Global South countries brought the sub-standard treatment of domestic workers into sharp focus. Many lost their jobs or were dismissed from their workplaces (which for many doubled as their residence) with little notice, sometimes without pay. Many women migrant domestic workers were left homeless,[52] without access to adequate healthcare or social protection. A survey across six cities (Ahmedabad and Delhi, India; Bangkok, Thailand; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; and Pleven, Bulgaria) revealed that only one-third of domestic workers received cash or food relief within the first three months of a lockdown.[53]

BOX 3: THE HINDUJA CASE

The Hinduja family is the UK's wealthiest, worth an estimated GBP37bn. In 2018, three migrant domestic workers from India working in their Swiss villa lodged a complaint, accusing the family of paying them 220–400 francs (USD250–450) a month, a tenth of the national minimum Swiss wage.[54] They also accused the family of forcing them to work 18-hour days, confiscating their passports and restricting their freedom of movement.[55]

In June 2024, the family reached an out-of-court settlement with the workers, but the case was pursued by the Public Prosecutor's office.[56] The Geneva Criminal Court found the family guilty of exploitation and illegal unemployment.[57] The family is appealing the court's decision.


Migration echoing colonial corridors
Time to Care for Care Workers

3 Migration echoing colonial corridors

Transnational or global care chains involve people – often women from poor, racialized backgrounds – leaving their homes to find work elsewhere.[58] Migrant workers constitute approximately 15% (11.6 million) of all domestic workers, of whom 8.5 million (73.4%) are women.[59]

3.1 The shadow of colonial structures

Gendered expectations intersect with enduring legacies of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and poverty to determine who performs domestic work, the tasks they undertake, and how they are treated – often violating the most fundamental human rights of equality and non-discrimination. For instance, in the 1930s, the US Congress intentionally excluded domestic and farm workers – many of whom were African American women, men and children[60] – from the country's first core labor laws.[61] Today, 70% of the 2.2 million domestic workers in the US are women migrant workers (of whom 38% are Latinx) who continue to fight for basic labor rights.[62]

Colonial legacies shape the migration corridors, labor markets and legal regimes for migrant domestic workers. Centuries of genocide, ethnic cleansing, forced subjugation, violence and cultural erasure of Indigenous peoples' ways of life have also led to Indigenous and racialized women being overrepresented in domestic work. In countries such as Guatemala and Mexico, Indigenous women make up 28% of all women domestic workers.[63]

Latin American, African and Asian women's domestic labor in countries such as Spain, France and the UK follow the same postcolonial logic, with workers' undocumented status and exclusion from citizenship rights reproducing colonial-era racial and class hierarchies. For example, among domestic workers affiliated with the Spanish Social Security system, 43% are migrant domestic workers, of whom 82.2% are from non-EU countries, particularly Latin American and Caribbean countries, which account for 60.3% of total migrant domestic workers[64] – evidence that legal abolition does not dismantle entrenched social and economic discriminations.

Racial and caste hierarchies also continue to be reflected. Across South Asia, caste-based discrimination has assigned women from Dalit and Adivasi communities to cleaning; cooking and personal care work, i.e., roles requiring 'purity' and proximity to food and family, are reserved for workers from dominant caste communities.[65] This hierarchy persists even where it is formally illegal: the dehumanizing practice of manually handling human excreta and cleaning dry latrines by hand has been prohibited in India since 2013, yet continues to persist. It is almost exclusively carried out by Dalit women.[66] In Latin America and the Caribbean, Afro-descendant people make up 63% of the 7 million domestic workers.[67]

63%

of all domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean **are Afro-descendant.**



3.2 Lower earnings and worse conditions

There is a clear gradient of pay across gender and migration status. A 2023 study of 17 high-income countries using non-migrant men working in low-status occupations outside the care economy as a comparator found that:

- migrant women care workers earned 57% less;
- non-immigrant women working in care earned 49% less;
- migrant men care workers earned 36% less;
- while non-immigrant men in care work earned 21% less.[68]

Asia and the Pacific (24%), followed by Northern, Southern and Western Europe (22.1%) and the Arab states (19%) are the top three regions where migrant domestic workers work.[69] In these places they often face compounded discrimination as a result of their gender, migrant status and working sector – characterized by low wages and vulnerability to exploitation.[70]

Migrant domestic workers make painful decisions and enormous sacrifices in leaving their children and families behind, making ends meet at home by filling critical care gaps in their host countries. A survey of Indonesian women migrants working in Singapore found that workers remitted an average of 55% of their monthly incomes upon completion of their debt deduction periods, with these remittances going primarily towards paying for basic needs and children's education. In the interviews, some workers reported that family members found difficulty coping with everyday expenses despite receiving remittances, noting how salary levels for domestic work in Singapore have not increased in tandem with rising living expenses in Indonesia.[71]

Many women migrant domestic workers pay exorbitant fees to brokers and agents to secure work abroad. They may be unable to return home due to restrictions on mobility and laws that bind them to their employers. Too many suffer deceptive or abusive recruitment practices and may have no knowledge of their destination or employer until their arrival. In the Arab states, women make up 34.6% of all domestic workers,[72] many of whom are migrants, predominantly from Africa and Asia. They face severe discrimination, violence, forced labor and oppression under the *kafala* system, which links migrant workers' legal resident and employment status to an employer or sponsor. Depending on the country and applicable regulations, workers may not be able to legally enter or leave the country or quit their job without their employer's permission, or else face fines or even prison sentences.[73] High levels of gender-based violence, withholding of wages, confiscation of identity documents, restricted mobility, and bars on external contact are common within the *kafala* system. Abuses can include forced labor, trafficking and even death.[74]

3.3 The example of the UK's Overseas Domestic Workers visa

Following a successful campaign by domestic workers, trade unions and civil society organizations, the ODW visa was introduced in 1998, allowing workers entering the

country for six or 12 months to change employers, though not their sector; bring dependants; and, after five years, apply for long-term residence.[75]

The UK abstained from voting on the ILO's C189 (see **Section 2.1**),[76] and has yet to ratify it.[77] Instead, in 2012, it reduced protections for migrant domestic workers: those on an ODW visa were tied to a single employer through a non-renewable six-month visa, barred from bringing dependent family members and denied a pathway to permanent residence.[78] These changes came in the context of a points-based immigration system that deemed domestic workers low-skilled and their work of little economic value.[79]

An independent review in 2015 found these changes trapped workers in exploitative employment and weakened their bargaining power, and recommended reinstating the right to change employers and apply for renewal (but not permanent settlement).[80] Based on data of workers registered with them, legal charity Kalayaan estimated that trafficking affected 14% of workers issued a visa before 2012, increasing to 40% afterwards; 47% of workers lost access to their passports in the UK before the change, increasing to 73%; and the proportion of those without days off increased from 52% to 70%.[81] After 2012, 64% were reported to have no private space and 40% received irregular pay.[82]

Although the single-employer restriction was removed in 2016, the visa remained limited to six months with some limited exceptions for recognized survivors of trafficking or modern slavery. Workers remained prohibited from working outside the domestic work sector, entrenching their vulnerability to exploitative employment.[83]

BOX 4: THE UK'S 'FAMILY WORKER EXEMPTION'

Labor law, migration regimes and gender inequality intersect to compound discrimination. Regulation 57(3) of the UK's National Minimum Wage Regulations 2015 excluded live-in domestic workers deemed "like family members" from coverage under minimum wage and 48-hour maximum working week protections when the worker lived in the employer's family home which involved sharing accommodation, meals, tasks and leisure activities.[84] Several employment tribunal challenges over minimum wages failed, unless there was evidence of extreme abuse, movement restrictions or passport confiscation. A landmark challenge to the exemption clause under the Equality Act 2010 (s19) read with EU gender equality law ultimately succeeded on appeal in 2020, with the court recognizing the exemption as unlawful and a form of systemic gender discrimination against a predominantly female workforce.[85] Finally in 2023, after a sustained campaign by domestic workers' organizations, the UK passed legislation to remove the minimum wage exemption, with effect from 1 April 2024.[86]

The exploitative economics of domestic work

Time to Care for Care Workers

4 The exploitative economics of domestic work

Global care chains and the continued devaluation of domestic labor are not simply individual migration choices or responses to labor shortages. They are rooted in neoliberal macroeconomic policies and global inequalities that push domestic workers towards precarious work and migration, while sustaining economies that rely on their labor. Low- and middle-income countries depend on migrant remittances, while richer countries depend on low-paid migrant care labor. More recently, digital labor platforms have extended rather than disrupted this model, reproducing precarious working conditions while creating new avenues for extracting value from workers' labor and data, and concentrating financial gains among platform owners and investors.

4.1 Economic policies fuel demand of migrant workers

The chronic underfunding of care services, and related essential public services such as healthcare and education, predates neoliberal austerity policies, reflecting longstanding political, economic and gendered choices over what is publicly funded and who bears the costs of social reproduction,[87] This is compounded in the Global South by colonial systems that left substantial social infrastructure deficits.[88] Austerity measures have continued this chronic under-resourcing of essential care infrastructure in the Global North and South.[89]

BOX 5: THE IMPACT OF IMF AND WORLD BANK INTERVENTIONS ON CARE CONTEXTS

Trade liberalization, austerity, privatization and labor market deregulation across the Global South have reduced social protection and increased economic insecurity for decades.[90] The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the IMF and the World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s interrupted post-colonial efforts by newly independent states to build economic sovereignty through land reform, labor rights, capital controls, investment in healthcare and education, and industrial policy and planning. Many Global South countries, dependent on the US dollar or Euro for the foreign exchange reserves needed to finance essential imports such as energy and consumer goods, became increasingly vulnerable to debt distress.[91] IMF and World Bank bailout loans imposed reductions in public spending, the privatization of services, the dismantling of social protection programs, and trade liberalization. The latter exposed local farmers to global competition, making small-scale farming increasingly unviable and pushing millions towards precarious employment and migration.[92] For example, India's SAP in the 1990s led to rapid urbanization, leading many women to enter domestic work due to a lack of viable alternatives.[93]

Similar to the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of 1980s and 1990s, austerity measures followed the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the need for sustained investment in livelihoods, social protection and public services in these periods.[94] In Egypt, following IMF assistance from 2012 onwards, liquid petroleum gas (LPG) prices rose by 712%,[95] electricity bills by over 200%,[96] metro fares by 600%, and fruit and vegetable prices by 230%, worsening inequality.[97] Women bore the heaviest costs in the form of increased unpaid labor, reduced mobility, deteriorating health, job losses and higher household expenses, including VAT on essentials such as menstrual products.[98] Between 2010 and 2019, fiscal contraction disrupted billions of lives through cuts to social protection, pensions, and programs for women, children, older people, people with disabilities, informal workers, Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, alongside labor deregulation, and imposing higher indirect taxes.[99]

For example, following mounting debt burdens, Ghana has seen a steady decline in social expenditure from 2011 onwards. As part of its 17th IMF bailout in May 2023, Ghana further cut spending on healthcare, education, water and sanitation, while promoting privatization and imposing regressive taxes targeting informal workers, such as taxes on mobile money services, despite parliamentary opposition. Ghana also announced a 15% VAT on household electricity, which would affect impoverished households, but had to roll it back after public and labor outrage. [100] The cuts in public expenditure have steadily contributed to increased domestic workload for women (e.g. electricity cuts made it difficult to use washing machines, blenders, refrigerators), undermined programs such as National Health Insurance, School Feeding, and Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty, and increased precarity. Conversely, Ghana has lost out on taxes to the tune of approximately USD14.39bn between 2002-2011 on account of tax evasions, mis-invoicing and illicit financial flows of extractive industries and other businesses.[101] Facing an economic crisis, Sri Lanka relied heavily on expensive commercial borrowing besides IMF assistance, with International Sovereign Bonds[102] rising from 4.1% of external debt in 2007 to 37.8% in 2019. IMF-backed austerity measures increased indirect taxes, reduced subsidies and social protection, and contributed to the closure of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) employing nearly 75% of workers, particularly women, in the informal economy.[103]

These developments coincided with changing care regimes in high-income countries. Even as ageing populations increased demand for care,[104] and more women entered paid employment,[105] neoliberal reforms and austerity constrained the proportionate expansion of care services in the Global North.[106] As a result, such societies increasingly relied on migrant domestic workers.[107] A comparative study of 17 high-income countries found growing dependence on low-paid migrant women for childcare and long-term care.[108] Neoliberal economic policies thus create the push and pull factors which fuel global care chains. In both source and destination countries, the privileged capture the economic benefits of migrant domestic workers, while those making the journeys often fall outside of the social protection systems they are sustaining. Shrinking fiscal space as a result of such economic reforms encouraged many countries reliant on labor migration to promote overseas employment as a development strategy.[109] Governments in the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam (up to the mid-2010s) actively promoted overseas domestic work because remittances generate foreign exchange reserves, support national economies and reduce local unemployment.[110]



Photo: Mark Wahwai

AI inequality

An increase of 1,000 industrial robots is estimated to **raise inequality by 5%.**



In Sri Lanka, remittances from overseas workers increased from USD2.5bn in 2007 to USD7.2bn in 2016 (equivalent to 70% of total export earnings).[111] The figure stood at USD7.8bn in 2025 after a dip during COVID-19 and the Sri Lankan financial crisis.[112]

States often fail to protect these workers who boost their economies.[113] Recruiters' pre-departure programs frequently prioritize remittance management over labor rights, while embassies and overseas support services remain under-resourced. In short, emigrating domestic workers risk being treated primarily as sources of remittance income rather than as rights-holders entitled to protection throughout the migration cycle.[114]

As described in **Chapter 3**, immigration systems in many destination countries do not offer a pathway to citizenship, expecting workers to return home after their most productive years. While destination countries benefit from their labor, responsibility for healthcare, pensions and old-age security is effectively transferred back to countries of origin. Yet domestic workers who move across countries or provinces often lose those social protection entitlements, because benefits are tied to continuous contributions within a single pension system. Many become ineligible for pensions or contributions due to the lack of cross-border coordination between social security systems.[115] Despite longstanding demands by domestic workers' unions, portable social security benefits[116] across origin and destination countries remain largely unrealized.

For many women with few livelihood alternatives, migration for domestic work is a matter of survival.[117] Without tackling structural inequalities, attempts to regulate or liberalize migration can therefore deepen rather than reduce vulnerability. For example, the Philippines imposed migration bans on certain destination countries following reports of abuse, while Sri Lanka restricted migration for women with young children. Rather than reducing exploitation, these measures frequently push women into irregular migration.[118] Women migrating from Paraguay, Peru, Chile and Bolivia to Argentina benefited from the 2002 MERCOSUR South American Trade Agreement, which facilitates movement of workers without requiring prior work authorization. Yet undocumented migrant domestic workers face greater harassment, weak labor protections and heightened job insecurity, reflecting failures by both origin and destination countries in safeguarding their rights.[119]

4.2 Conditions within the gig economy

The ILO estimates that the number of digital platforms providing taxi, delivery, homecare and cleaning services increased fivefold between 2010 and 2025 – from 128 to 653 – with a growing number dedicated to domestic work.[120] Market capitalization of leading platform companies approached USD5 trillion in 2024.[121] While promising flexibility, efficiency and formalization, gig platforms often reproduce the precarity and structural inequalities that have long characterized domestic work.[122] Platform capitalism can deepen the undervaluation of domestic and care work, and also undermine the imperative for universal, essential public services and care infrastructure.

Platform business models across geographies were found to minimize labor costs by shifting risks from employers to workers.[123] Most platform operators classify domestic workers as self-employed independent contractors or 'partners', denying them the rights afforded to employees, such as minimum wages, social security, paid leave, occupational safety and collective bargaining.[124] Workers bear the costs of smartphones, internet access, transport, equipment and insurance; their digital intermediaries may charge registration and training fees.[125]

Similar to ILO C193 (see **Section 2.1**), the EU's Platform Work Directive was designed to close this protection gap for gig workers. However, legal scholars have found it fails domestic workers specifically, because its provisions were built with delivery and ride-hailing work in mind, not the fragmented, in-home, relationship-based nature of care and cleaning work.[126]

Platform owners extract revenue through commissions: for instance, workers for India-based domestic gig multinational Urban Company were charged a commission of up to 30% of every job – before protests in 2021 forced a reduction to 25% Workers were also compelled to purchase company-branded products and pay penalties if they fell below a monthly job quota.[127]

Platform companies use complex, opaque and sometimes error-prone algorithmic systems to allocate jobs, pushing workers to maintain high ratings to gain access to more lucrative jobs. Platforms use discriminatory and changing systems to enforce workers to accept a minimum number of gigs and be available a minimum number of hours or shifts. They may also automatically downgrade workers after complaints from clients.[128]

A study of platform-mediated in-person services across 15 countries – including the United States, Australia and some European states – found that workers' apparent autonomy to set wages is constrained by platform-generated market rates, competition and clients' willingness to pay. Platform prompts can push rates below workers' preferences, while competition for regular work can create a 'race to the bottom'. Communicating and negotiating with clients and travelling between jobs, together with self-employment costs, cancellations, and delayed or non-payment, further erodes effective earnings. [129] "If they challenge me, I say, 'Well, if you went to your accountant, would you challenge what he's going to charge you, or when you go and have your hair done, do you negotiate with the hairdresser and say would she like to receive less?'" (Interview with platform worker).[130]

Such practices leave workers under surveillance and subject to control, while simultaneously deprived of the labor rights that would come with formal employment.[131]

Silvia, a 41-year-old domestic worker, earning a minimum wage as a platform worker in Colombia, described to Fairwork her struggle to survive on low wages: "A minimum wage is barely enough... we live just on the edge." She also described split shifts and digital surveillance: "The whole day is a frantic rush... They control the clock-in and clock-out. The control starts right there." [132] Fairwork, a project run from the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford, assessed platforms across 26 countries finding that only 20–25% of platforms could demonstrate minimum standards, including:

- minimum wages;
- mitigation of task-specific risks;
- transparent terms and conditions;
- due process for decisions affecting workers; and
- freedom of association and expression.[133]

Only 2–8% met higher standards such as:

- living wages;
- social protection;
- no unfair contract terms;
- fair management; and
- meaningful worker representation.[134]

Customer ratings, automated performance monitoring and unilateral changes to commissions and pricing further reduce workers' bargaining power.[135] As Elena, a 52-year-old domestic worker in Chile, explained: “Sometimes you have to bite your tongue... You don't want them to rate you badly or stop giving you jobs.” After a client's adverse rating, her account was deactivated for several days without an opportunity to respond.[136]

Furthermore, rather than disrupting the hierarchies that structure domestic work, digital platforms actively encode and reproduce them. Research on Indian gig and domestic-work apps has found that platforms provide employers with demographic filters – including caste, in one case. Even without explicit caste fields, employers routinely use workers’ names, religion, state of origin, profile photos and prior work experience as proxies to screen candidates. Caste- and religion-based discrimination is therefore built into platform design, rather than merely persisting despite it.[137]

There are, however, some positive exceptions identified by Fairwork. For example, the Colombian platform Hogarú provides contracts, minimum wages and social security;[138] while Paraguay’s Helpers[139] recognizes employment relationships, provides social security, facilitates direct communication with workers, and places limits on the tasks workers are expected to perform.

Ultimately, digital platforms result in a structure where risk, discipline and precarity are pushed onto the domestic worker, while capital, valuation gains and control remain with a small number of investors. This is not incidental to the business model, it is the business model.

4.3 How platforms extract value from workers to benefit investors

While austerity deepened hardship for millions after the 2008 financial crisis, the stimulus packages by the Federal Reserve of the United States as well as the Central Banks of Europe and Japan to address the recessionary economy generated large pools of surplus capital seeking profitable investment.[140] Combined with rapid advances in digital technologies and the growing power of venture capital markets, this fueled the rapid

expansion of platform capitalism. Market capitalization of leading platform companies approached USD5 trillion in 2024, and projections exceeded USD5.5 trillion in 2025.

In the US, Care.com, one of the largest platforms organizing the provision of cleaners, nannies and carers, was bought by billionaire media mogul Barry Diller's IAC (InterActiveCorp, now People Incorporated) in 2020 for close to USD500m,[141] then resold in 2026 to the private equity firm Pacific Avenue Capital Partners; Diller's IAC used to hold a controlling stake in Handy and HomeAdvisor, the cleaning-gig platforms, through its subsidiary ANGI Homeservices (now Angi Inc).[142]

In Europe, Rocket Internet, the Berlin-based venture studio run by the billionaire Samwer brothers, used access to relatively low-cost capital to aggressively build, rapidly scale and sell platform businesses across countries using the typical extractive model: raise capital, undercut local competitors and informal agencies, and take a cut of every booking.[143]

Platform companies pursue rapid market expansion and higher valuations by using subsidies, discounts and high introductory wages to attract workers and users, often absorbing short-term losses in an effort to capture market share.[144] For example, after years of losses, Urban Company reported its first profit in 2025, yet its USD20bn initial public offering the same year valued the company at approximately USD155bn, nearly 12 times its annual sales.[145] This stock market floatation allowed existing shareholders to realize part of the financial value attached to the platform, even as women providing labor through the platform were describing poor pay, high commissions and unsafe conditions.[146]

As platform owners consolidate market share, workers often face reductions in incentives, higher commissions, and intensified algorithmic management as the companies seek to extract more value for shareholders.[147] Workers who have taken out loans or purchase large assets based on initially high platform earnings can become trapped by debt and falling incomes.[148] In this way, financial risks are transferred from investors to workers and their households, where losses are absorbed through reduced household consumption, increased unpaid labor by women, postponed medical treatment and growing indebtedness.

Platform companies generate value not only from the services they facilitate, but through the data they collect on users and providers.[149] For instance, domestic workers' behavioral, location and performance data is monetized. It is acknowledged that accumulation and control of large datasets can strengthen competitive advantage, market power and company valuations, while regulations such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) constrain the unrestricted extraction and use of personal data.[150] However, workers have little knowledge or control over how their data is collected, processed or monetized. This widens inequalities between labor and capital, and between the Global North, where digital ownership is concentrated, and the Global South, where much of the labor is performed. [151]
The growth of the gig economy also reflects inequality. Modelling of data from US metropolitan areas shows that declining inequality between 1900 and 1960, driven by the

expansion of mass education, reduced the hiring of domestic workers, alongside increased use of household appliances, as former domestic workers transitioned to manufacturing jobs. Conversely, increased automation in manufacturing from the 1960s onwards disproportionately benefited high-skilled, college-educated workers at the expense of low-skilled workers, increasing inequality: an additional 1,000 industrial robots is estimated to raise inequality by 5%.[152] This was accompanied by increased hiring of domestic workers, accelerating between 2005 and 2020 as gig-economy platforms improved the efficiency of task allocation for domestic workers, couriers and dog walkers – typical job categories in the gig economy. Data modelling suggests that a 10% increase in wage inequality is associated with an approximately 5% increase in domestic service employment in the United States.[153] While these findings have limited predictive value for other countries, they provide important insights into the relationship between inequality and demand for domestic work, including its more recent expansion through the gig economy. Rather than reducing the total burden of care work for everyone – such as reduced time cleaning, washing and cooking – or fostering gender equality in domestic chores, technology is being used to commodify these tasks, reorganizing domestic labor around market demand, and facilitating easier access to relatively cheap labor.

Domestic workers, meanwhile, must combine poorly paid care work with their own unpaid care responsibilities or rely on other family members, often women and girls, to take them on, reproducing inequalities across households, states and generations. Addressing these inequalities requires robust labor regulation, algorithmic transparency, worker control over data, decent work, social protection, collective bargaining rights and a gender-transformative approach. Adopted in 2026, ILO Convention 193 concerning decent work in the platform economy is a major step forward in this direction, providing binding international labor standards for the platform economy.[154]


From margins to movement
Time to Care for Care Workers

5 From margins to movements: Key wins in the struggle for rights

5.1 National and regional organizations

Domestic workers have built their own spaces in the face of systems and states that had exploited their labor for years. Organizing autonomously across borders, and from the ground up, domestic workers developed a movement rooted in their own lived experience and political analysis.[155]

These and other local wins were the result of decades of sustained, worker-led organising by women who refused to accept that the work of sustaining life was not protected by the law. For example, in LAC, the *Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe del Trabajadoras del Hogar* (CONLACTRAHO) brought together domestic worker federations across the region, amplifying the voices of Afro-descendant and Indigenous women who had long been organizing nationally in Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay.[156] In Brazil, sustained pressure by the National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD) contributed to Constitutional Amendment 72 in 2013, which finally expanded labour rights for domestic workers after decades of exclusion.[157]

Organizations like SUMAPI (*Samahan at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawang Pantahanan sa Pilipinas*) in the Philippines and HOME (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics - Singapore) in Singapore have organized, supported and advocated alongside domestic and migrant domestic workers, building networks of solidarity and collective action in response to exploitative working conditions, restrictive migration regimes and gaps in labor protection.[158]

Similarly, the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union has organized domestic workers within a labor system shaped by apartheid, in which predominantly Black women have performed poorly-paid and undervalued domestic work in predominantly white households. Progress includes workers' inclusion in unemployment insurance in 2001, a first minimum wage in 2002, and a Constitutional Court ruling in 2020 that finally entitled domestic workers to compensation for injury and death at work. However, the fact that domestic workers work inside homes is challenging for enforcement, and many workers continue to face barriers to accessing and exercising the rights they have won.[159]

Such national and regional struggles united in 2009 when the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) brought together CONLACTRAHO, the Asian Domestic Workers Network, the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union, and the National Domestic Workers Alliance of the United States, among others. IDWN became the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) in 2013.[160]

FROM ISOLATION

ISOLATION
Behind closed doors. Limited voice.

CONNECT
Workers come together.

ORGANISE
Build collective power.

ACT
Challenge exploitation.

CHANGE
Shape rights and policy.

TO COLLECTIVE POWER



5.2 Movement suppression

The suppression of domestic workers' movements varies across the world.

For example, in Hong Kong, a number of unions and political groups that had provided logistical and legal infrastructure for migrant worker campaigns to lobby government for decades have been dissolved.[161]

In many SWANA countries, the *kafala* system suppresses collective action before it can even begin through visa cancellations and absconding charges. The former allows employers to have a worker expelled from the country if they were, for example, to contact an organizer, speak to a journalist or file a complaint.[162] The absconding charge allows employers to report workers who flee abuse to police as criminal runaways. Dubai police have even run active public campaigns urging residents to report absconding domestic workers, framing them as a security threat.[163] The system does not need to actively repress a movement: the threat of visa cancellation, deportation, and criminality is sufficient to deter collective action before it begins.

What unites these otherwise different contexts is that suppression rarely looks like a baton. It looks like a law that never passes, a union that quietly dissolves, a shelter that turns you away, a debt you cannot afford to risk.

BOX 6: PUBLIC EXPOSURE OF ABUSE IN LEBANON

This Is Lebanon began in 2017 as a Facebook page run by Dipendra Uprety, a former migrant worker who had been detained in Lebanon. It grew into a registered NGO in Canada run by former domestic workers that publicly exposes employers on social media when they refuse to address reported abuse. At its peak, the Facebook page received more than 20 abuse reports per day, translated across seven languages. The group reports resolving around 50% of cases privately, using social media exposure as leverage. In one case, the group ran a social media campaign that located a Filipina worker, who had been hidden from her family for ten years and forbidden by her employers from leaving or using a phone. Uprety's explanation of the tactic is: "Lebanon is a shame culture. People really care about their reputation."[164]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



6 Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has shown how the exploitation of domestic workers is a product of colonial, patriarchal and neoliberal systems designed to extract maximum value from the labor of the world's most marginalized women at minimum cost. Digitization and the gig economy have maintained this trend, adding in the transfer of commissions from some of the world's lowest-paid workers to the balance sheets of billionaires and private equity firms and sovereign wealth funds, while leaving the workers themselves with less protection than before platforms existed. The racialization of domestic work, the feminization of poverty, the debt traps of migration and policy systems that criminalize escape from abuse are not separate problems but interlocking mechanisms of a single system of domination.

Domestic workers' movements have achieved major victories throughout their history, including the adoption of ILO Conventions on domestic work, as well as national and local progress. However, these victories on paper have consistently been outpaced by transformation on the ground, with platform economies accelerating a race to the bottom. Neoliberal capitalism – as a system sustained by care work, both unpaid and underpaid – will continue to find ways to extract and maximize profits.

Improving the situation for domestic workers requires both immediate reforms that expand rights and protections, and deeper structural transformations of how care is valued, financed and provided. It requires a fundamental reordering of how states, economies and societies value care. What follows are the recommendations that emerge from the evidence, grounded in the demands of domestic worker movements themselves.

6.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations are consistent with the ILO's '5R framework', which calls for recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work; rewarding paid care work through decent wages and social protection; and supporting workers' representation.[165]

The leadership of domestic workers must be central to all reforms. Their movements, unions and organizations must be recognized as the authoritative voices on the policies that affect their lives. They should be resourced accordingly, and protected from legal, political and individual suppression (see **Section 5.2**).

Recognize and invest in care as a human right and public good

States must move beyond treating care as a private responsibility and formally recognize it as a fundamental human right and a public good. This will come with corresponding obligations to fund, regulate and guarantee it. This includes the ratification of the relevant ILO conventions (see **Section 2.1**) by all countries.

The 2025 advisory opinion of the IACtHR (see **Section 2.1**) is a useful reference for advancing recognition of the right to care: the human rights to receive care, provide care and practice self-care with dignity.

End discriminatory legal frameworks and immigration laws

Domestic work must be recognized in law and practice as work like any other. This means states must end legal frameworks that exclude domestic workers from labor rights, including on maximum working hours, days off, social protection and decent working conditions, as per ILO's C189 and C190 (see **Section 2.1**). This includes the abolition of the *kafala* system and all equivalent sponsorship and tied-visa arrangements. In short, immigration systems should be reformed where they create or reinforce workers' dependency on employers, restrict workers' ability to leave abusive employers, or undermine access to labor or social protection.

Governments should also ensure that dependent family members can join domestic workers and provide routes to permanent residence in the host country. States that have not yet ratified ILO Convention C189 and C190 should do so without delay, and those that have must ensure that national legislation reflecting the convention is passed and implemented in letter and spirit.

Guarantee freedom of association and civic space for organizing

States must guarantee domestic workers their full range of civil and political rights, including freedom of association; the right to organize and join trade unions; the right to collective bargaining; the right to assembly; and access to information and justice without fear of retaliation or deportation. For migrant workers in particular, rights to organize must be decoupled from immigration status: no worker should be deterred from organizing by the threat of losing their right to remain in the country.

This means ensuring that immigration laws and their enforcement uphold human and labor rights and are never used to penalize or deter workers for organizing, and ensuring domestic worker organizations, especially those led by migrant and racialized women, are included in the policy processes that shape their lives and work.

Ensure social protection for domestic workers

States must explicitly include domestic workers, including platform-based domestic workers, in comprehensive social protection systems, alongside all other informal workers. Coverage must include healthcare, unemployment insurance, paid parental benefits, occupational injury and accident insurance, pensions, and paid sick leave, irrespective of nationality or migration status.

Destination countries must assume a fair share of responsibility for financing social protection for workers. To address the lack of portable social security, home and host countries must establish bi- or multilateral agreements that enable migrant domestic workers to retain coverage across borders throughout their working lives and into retirement. States must also ensure the portability of social protection benefits within

countries, between the different sectors of employment that domestic and informal workers may work in.

International financial institutions and multilateral development banks must end the imposition of austerity measures that cut social spending and systematically undermine social protection systems. They must also stop promoting labor deregulation that weakens workers' rights, entrenches precarious employment, and fuels the economic insecurity and distress migration that force many workers into exploitative forms of work.

Regulate digital platforms and end algorithmic exploitation of domestic workers

States must extend the same protections to the gig economy, rather than allowing digitization to become a loophole through which decades of progress around labor protections are quietly undone. States should ratify ILO's C193 and ensure that their implementations are suitable for domestic workers.

Domestic workers' employment status must be based on an accurate assessment of the work they do. States must prevent excessive commissions by platforms and ensure fair remuneration and conditions of work. Platforms should adopt zero-tolerance measures against worker abuse, including the suspension or removal of abusive clients.

Platforms' algorithms must be continuously assessed for their real-world impacts and designed to prevent discrimination while promoting gender justice. Transparency around algorithmic work allocation, incentives, ratings and wage-setting is an important part of this process.

Workers must have effective rights over the collection and use of their personal data, including the right to make corrections. Platforms should prohibit unilateral deactivation of providers without fair process and the right to appeal.

Governments should regulate the role of venture capital, private equity and platform owners in the platform economy. This would include prohibiting predatory practices that shift risks to workers.

Governments should actively support women-owned, worker-led, cooperative and community-based platform models that expand workers' agency, strengthen collective organization, eliminate precarity and deliver socially sustainable care services.

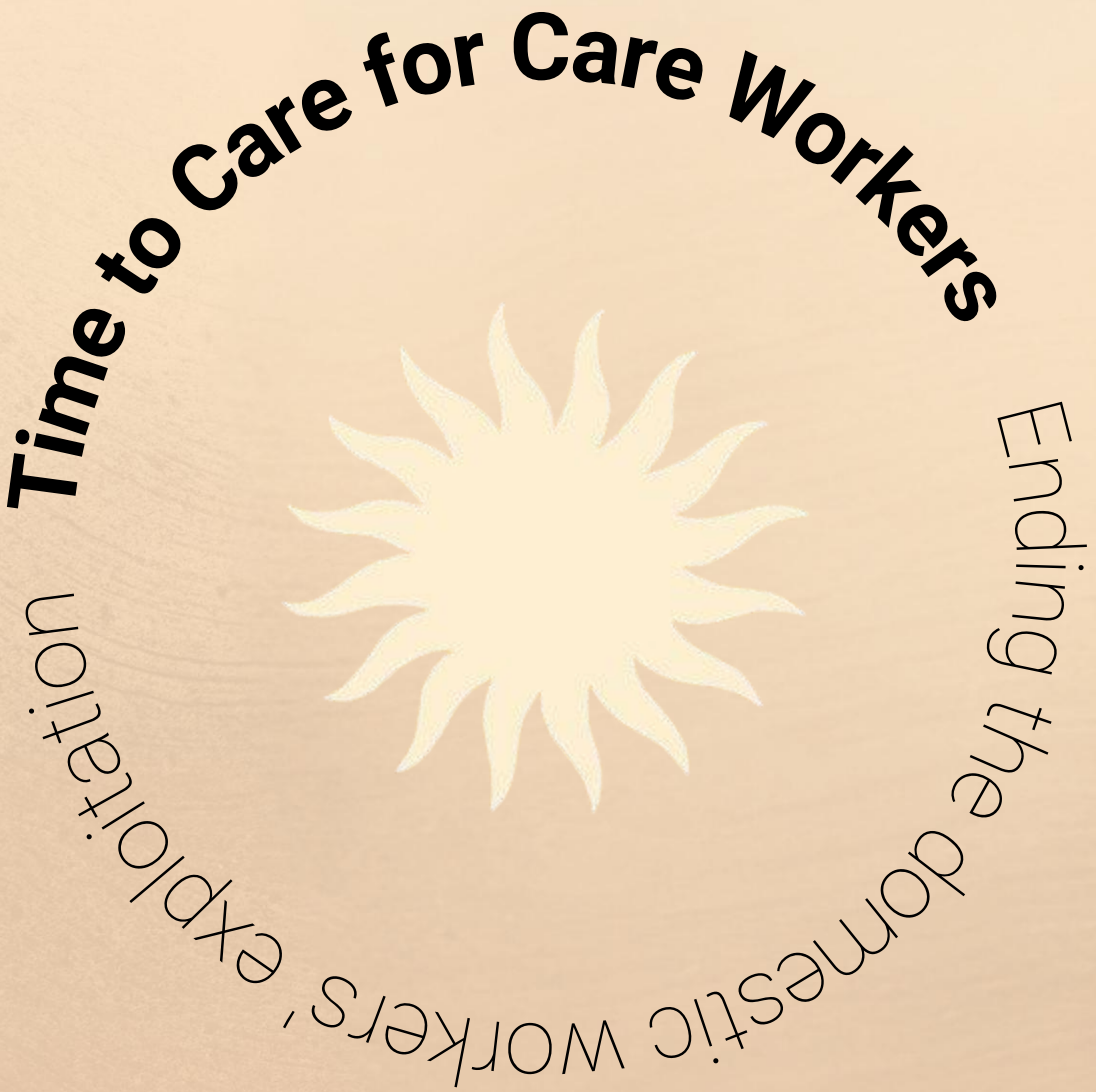
Ensure universal public services to promote decent work for domestic workers

Universal access to public services and infrastructure – such as healthcare, education, childcare, sick care and elderly care – substantially reduces the poverty and precarity that often drive distress migrations. States must proportionately increase public expenditure and ensure universal public services, while stopping the outsourcing of cleaning, catering and other services to private entities, as is often done for cost-cutting. This can generate substantial employment for national domestic workers in public services, as seen in

social democratic care regimes where public services are stronger and local domestic workers find employment.[166]

International financial institutions must also align their financing conditions with universal public services, embracing the position that public services are investments in wellbeing and not expenditures to be curbed. They must end the imposition of cuts to public wages and stop promoting the privatization and outsourcing of services.

NOTES


Time to Care for Care Workers
Ending the domestic workers' exploitation

Notes

All links last accessed 23 September 2026, except where specified.

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