



**Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-first Session**

**Women's economic empowerment in the
changing world of work**

**INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL
The global care economy in the context of the
changing world of work**

**Empowering Domestic Workers through
Workers' Cooperatives for Care Services**

by

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

In this presentation, I will argue that workers' cooperatives are vital to the realization of CSW goals to protect women workers, in particular domestic workers. Domestic workers provide vital care to the world's growing and ageing population and yet as women, informal workers and – in many contexts often migrants – they are among the world's most isolated and vulnerable workers.

The National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) was registered as a trade union in 1982 to fight for domestic workers and other low-paid workers whom unions refuse to organize. It fights through the courts, in the media, etc against abuses by employers, from withholding wages and summary dismissal to rape and sexual assault. It campaigns for domestic workers to be recognized as workers and to be protected by employment legislation. Over the years, NUDE has shown its dynamism, adaptability and responsiveness to change locally, Regionally and Internationally. The leadership has not only struggled for women's rights in the workplace, especially women in the lower socioeconomic group, but for women's issues more generally. However, one of the biggest challenges for NUDE and its members remain the lack of recognition and respect for domestic workers in Trinidad and Tobago. Domestic workers and other informal sector workers have consistently reported experiencing low pay, lack of national insurance contributions by employers, abusive working conditions (i.e. sexual assaults, poor working conditions, fired for joining union, or getting pregnant, taking sick leave etc.) they receive no payslips, and they work without contracts.

Those are the defining features of informal employment which lacks social protection and labour rights, which constitutes a challenge for women's economic empowerment. The growing informality of work and mobility of women workers must be addressed. If we are to achieve women's economic empowerment and rights to and at work in the changing world of work, the Commission on the status of women should make a concerted effort to urge governments and other stakeholders to take action to strengthen normative and legal frameworks for full employment and decent work for all women by Achieving universal ratification without reservations and full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and relevant ILO conventions and recommendations. In particular Convention 100 and 189.

After decades of struggling for a decent life for domestic workers and low income workers in NUDE. We were inspired by the ILO's Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation 193, and as a direct response to paragraph 16 which encourages workers' organizations to create cooperatives, we began to organize a service workers' cooperative in 2009. The principle idea was to have a legal entity that would be recognized by employers hiring domestic workers and would demand high standards of pay and working conditions.

As many domestic worker cooperatives globally have showcased, when people come together to create a business entity that is recognized by the public and is able to compete on equal grounds with other private companies and government programs, the domestic workers are able to be on a different footing than when they worked alone and isolated in households. There are a number of positive impacts on the individuals, the group and the community that have been demonstrated by domestic worker cooperatives across the world. Some of these positive impacts include increase in income,

better working conditions, asset-building, more freedoms with time, leadership development, increase of benefits, and so on.

In 2014 the SWCC became registered as a worker cooperative with its 25 founding members. During the years in formation NUDE members met with the cooperative officers to discuss the concept of a cooperative, its potential benefits, how it might function and where we may receive assistance.

The goal for NUDE has been to oversee the development and support of a worker cooperative that would provide good jobs for the domestic worker members joining NUDE. NUDE felt it was positioned to take on the role of cooperative developer because of its expertise in worker organizing, knowledge about domestic worker issues and leverage with members interested in worker ownership and raising the standards for domestic workers in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Commission on the Status of Women must send a strong message to governments, social partners and stakeholders that in order for all women workers' rights to be protected government must "Support the creation of decent, good quality jobs for women in the care economy in the public and private sectors". And "increase the share of trade and procurement from women-owned enterprises and female cooperatives in both the public and private sector".

Sustainable workers' cooperatives are vital to the achievement of these goals. In an effort to understand the ways in which co-operative enterprises manifest in the care sector, the ILO cooperatives unit (COOP) and The Gender Equality and Diversity Branch (GED) undertook a joint initiative: A Global mapping of the provision of care through cooperatives. The broad objectives of this mapping were to assess the global landscape of co-operatives that provide care, identify the challenges and opportunities that cooperatives face and determine the resources that cooperatives need in order to be viable care providers, enterprises and employers.

How quality care will be provided to the world's growing and ageing population is rapidly becoming one of the most important elements on the development agenda, representing a daunting challenge worldwide. Caring for infants and children is at the core of life itself, for families, communities and nations. It is also one of the central tensions to harnessing the productivity of women, as they are universally the main providers of care. At the same time, longevity is one of the most positive and relevant demographic phenomena to emerge in recent decades. The ageing of populations and the new inter-generational relationships radically affect the human landscape. Globally, the number of older people is expected to exceed the number of children for the first time in 2047. The proportion of people aged over 60 in the population is projected to grow to 22 per cent by 2050, amounting to 2 billion.

As care needs continue to expand and diversify, the care economy has enormous potential for employment generation in the coming years. However, care work across the world remains characterised by a void of benefits and protections, low wages or non-compensation, and exposure to physical, mental and, in some cases, sexual harm. It is clear that new solutions to care are needed on two fronts: in regards to the nature and provision of care services, and the terms and conditions of care work.

As the data collected suggests, cooperatives act as mediators between the care worker and the client, and enhance the worker's bargaining power in that relationship. The worker acts with the voice and protection of the cooperative behind her, a function of the fundamental basis of cooperative negotiating.

The cooperative value-added extends not just to employees but also to those receiving care services. Over 60 per cent of survey respondents directly tied to a care cooperative reported that care cooperatives are likely or very likely to provide care services that are affordable.

Accessibility, affordability, service quality, durability and community participation are key dimensions of service provision that cooperatives often actively promote. Another 58 per cent of survey respondents directly linked to a care cooperative stated that such cooperatives are likely or very likely to provide accessible services—e.g., prolonged hours, disability access, or providing services in an accessible location. However, there may be possible externalities of such extended availability, such as unexpected overtime. This may have disproportionate effects on female workers, who must balance time and manage their own care responsibilities at home.

Evidence from the COOP-GED mapping suggests that cooperatives generate access to better terms and conditions of work in the care sector (e.g. regularized work hours, access to benefits, more bargaining power), especially for female workers.

The cooperative approach to care is distinct from public, other private and even non-profit providers – when the seven cooperative principles are engaged, cooperatives foster inter-dependence rather than dependence in care giving. It supports the CSW goal to “make women`s informal employment in domestic work, home-based work and small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as other own-account and part-time work more economically viable by extending social protection and minimum living wages, and promote the transition to formal employment in line with ILO Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204) and through ratification and implementation of ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (no. 189)”

The cooperative approach also supports “tripartite collaboration among Governments, employers and women workers and their organisations to prevent and redress gender inequalities in the world of work” and encourages “women`s leadership in trade unions and workers` organisations and urge all trade union leaders to effectively represent the interests of women workers”

But cooperatives face significant barriers that limit their potential, as SWCC and NUDE have experienced. Critical challenges include insufficient and uncertain funding, unsupportive legislation and limited cooperative and care know how and expertise.

In order to harness their potential to support vulnerable women workers and the realisation of CSW goals, it is vital that adequate funding, training and support is provided for workers' cooperatives.