

SELF-MANAGEMENT IN A WORKER COOPERATIVE: possible solution for a more decent home care

"The concept of workers cooperative is the way to dignify work, it is the way to improve care conditions, and it is an industry in full growth and development (...). But isolated cooperatives are not the solution when there is a care market that pays € 2 per hour a person. "

An example of good practice from the Basque Country, Spain: MALEN ETXEA



Context:

It is estimated that in Spain 3 out of 4 women who work in the home care sector are migrant women, the vast majority coming from Latin America. Half of them work as live-in carer, living 24 hours in the house of the person they care for. Many migrant care workers do not have a work permit and are therefore hired illegally and exposed to unworthy working conditions. When after a period of 3 years living in Spain, they can finally obtain a residence and work permit, many of them continue in a precarious situation because they are not granted an official title as care worker that would be necessary to be employed legally. In addition, many families "take advantage" of the possibility to hire a housekeeper who (also) performs care tasks.

Society, institutions, and politicians: Everyone knows about the existence of this informal economy and the misery that it entails for migrant care workers. So what could be done to change the reality and improve the situation of migrant care workers in the future?

We asked Silvia, from the association *Malen Etxea* in the Basque Country, about the solutions that a workers cooperative of carer could provide for the future.

What is Malen Etxea?

"We are a migrant organization, 90% of our members are home care workers in 24h live-in care (...). Our approach as an organization is very much linked to the defense of the rights of migrant workers in this sector especially. "

What does the association do?

"Our practice contains two things that go in parallel:

- *On the one hand, work empowerment, which we do through training and workshops etc. with the objective that all workers, regardless of their administrative situation, have in their hand tools that allow them to know, understand and negotiate their working conditions. We claim for the minimum working conditions, which is to guarantee that workers have the minimum wage in 14 payments, their vacations, their holidays and the weekends off. (...)*

- *On the other hand, we run awareness-raising activities, which has to do with explaining to society that we need minimum working conditions to solve our day-to-day work. "*

The care workers cooperative

..... cannot function in the market...

"We have set up a care workers cooperative (...) but the problem is that the cooperative cannot enter the market because in this market no one is going to pay the services from a cooperative (...), which is 18-22 € per hour so that the care worker has a somewhat decent salary. Because having a migrant person working for live-in care is very cheap (...): € 2 per hour. "

"The cooperative cannot function like these home care companies either; they don't care about having an army of women and none of them work full time, which means misery in the end (...). We have very clear that in our cooperative carers need a working day of min. 7 hours to get a full salary. "

... but it can provide empowerment and support...

Even if the cooperative does not function, it contributes values: migrant care workers have a network that empowers them:



"At least (...) migrant carers know their rights (...) because when you are alone, you are lost, fear immobilizes. If, for example, you spend 24 hours with a person who has a disease or often tells you the same stories, you get depressed, and it determines your own self-esteem. (...) On the other hand, we support women without papers, to claim all their payments and we are having very good results (...). "

...it can promote self-management:

"In addition, the cooperative can manage some aspects of working conditions: We do not negotiate any employment relationship that does not guarantee the minimum conditions. But also, where we know, that there is exploitation, that there is abuse and racism, we pass it on WhatsApp, we tell the care workers about it so that no one returns to work in this house again. "

...the cooperative can become a stakeholder in defining the future for decent care work...

- **training:**

"We support professionalization, but we accuse the government of being discriminatory (...) because the only thing it does, with the measures that are

taken without knowing the sector, is to maintain a market with available slaves so that the families who do not obtain the care subsidies can hire at low prices care workers.¹ Let us propose that, for example, until today, March 30, 2021, all those who are working in live-in care, caring for elderly with or without papers, will obtain a residence permit and then we organize the training so that all can progress and perform the work they want. "

- **the recognition**

- *"Recognize night work (...)*
- *Recognize as home carers all migrant workers with or without papers (...) through the doctors of the local healthcare centers, because they know perfectly who the caregivers are.*
- *Request the central government to declare home care work a profession with difficult coverage in this country, (...) which allows us to regularize the situation of many migrant care workers.*
- *Recognize care work: Caring for elderly cannot be linked to a domestic work contract: Either you are a domestic worker or you are a care worker.²*
- *Recognize, encourage and promote the potential of an economy based on solidarity that protects the taxation of workers' cooperatives*

- **the concept of care**

- *" All the plans of the Provincial Government are based on a conceptual error from our point of view: (...) because there is no longer a network of family.³*
- *There must be a single, public and universal system of care, because (...) today, people are increasingly aged, they need more care over time, so the community will have to assume certain aspects of care, which had been previously assumed by families.*
- *The municipalities have to regain lost territory, because they are with the people, they know the reality of the situation on the ground ... Everything that has to do with home care should be an exclusive competence of the municipalities. "*

Find more information on the webpage: www.malenetxea.org

¹ Care subsidies are obtained by families after an external analysis of the dependency of the elderly person. It often happens, that the care level defined for the elderly person does not correspond to the care need detected by the families. In that case, the care subsidies, that the elderly person receives, are very low or rejected at all. Furthermore, a care worker can only be employed legally as care worker when the person disposes of an official title for home care worker.

² There is a specific working arrangement for domestic workers, who don't receive min wage and have no representation through unions. Families employ very often a care worker as domestic worker.

³ Actual plans in healthcare are in general based on the concept of supporting the family members/family networks and not so much on strengthen the community for creating community care services.



Legal aspects

In the Basque Country, the process for a migrant from a non-EU country to work formally as a Care worker, requires the following steps:

1. Residence permit: can be obtained, if the migrant manages to be registered as resident by a city council in Spain for five years. You can change your address but you must justify that you stayed for 5 years uninterrupted (you can travel, but in total not more than 10 months out of Spain). As an exception, the person may apply for the residence permit earlier (after 3 years living in Spain), making use of the so called report of "*temporary residence for reasons of entrenchment*".
2. Work permit: After having obtained a Residence Permit, the migrant can apply for the work permit. The obtaining of a work permit is linked to an employment contract with a minimum duration of one year. That means both permits are closely interrelated.
3. Report of "*temporary residence for reasons of entrenchment*" of the Basque Government: if the person can demonstrate the residency in national territory for 3 years.
4. Authorization to act as a care worker: Unless the migrant has a degree that enables her/him to perform this type of work, i.e., Technical Degree in Health Care or similar, s/he must apply for an authorization in order to work as a care worker. Until the year 2022, there exists the option to claim for an *exceptional authorization*: proving that the migrant has a working experience of 2000 hours or more in the Care sector. If her/his working experience is shorter, s/he will be granted a *provisional authorization*, allowing her/him to work as a care worker, while following a training to obtain the formally recognized competences required to work as a care worker.