

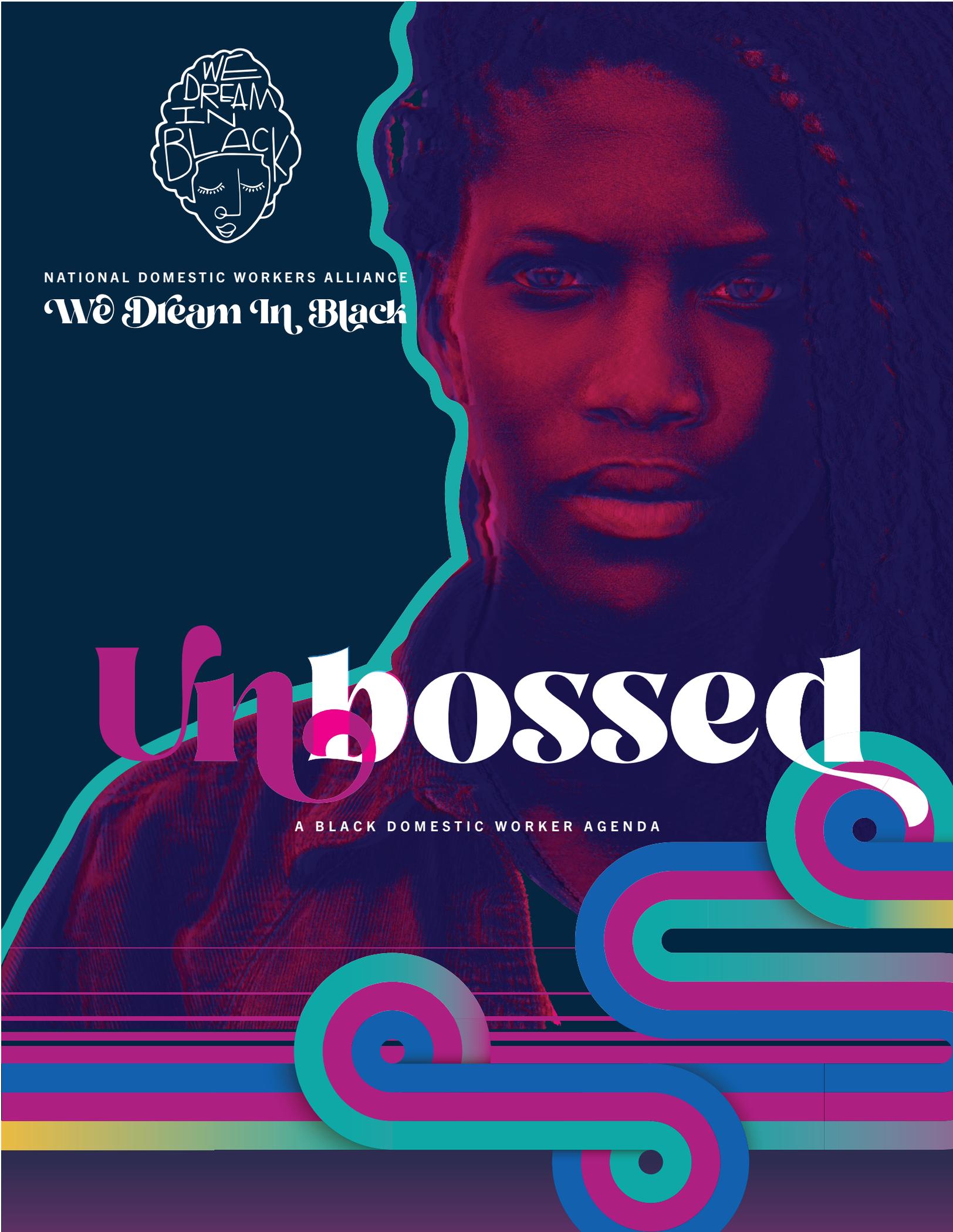


NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE

**We Dream In Black**

# Unbossed

A BLACK DOMESTIC WORKER AGENDA





*Dorothy Bolden*

*Shirley Chisholm*

WHN

WR FM

WWRL

UP

72



NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE, WE DREAM IN BLACK

# Unbossed

A BLACK DOMESTIC WORKER AGENDA

**UNBOSSSED, a Black Domestic Worker Agenda by We Dream In Black  
(project of the National Domestic Workers Alliance)**

In 1972, Shirley Chisolm shook the mainstream narrative about Black women's leadership when she made her historic bid for a major party presidential nomination. Her campaign slogan, now a Black feminist mantra, was "Unbought and Unbossed." Today, Black domestic workers claim this mantle of visionary leadership. The Unbossed Agenda is a set of principles to transform the lives and labor of Black house cleaners, caregivers and nannies through collective effort.



# Introduction

**The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)** is the leading voice in the U.S. for labor rights, respect and fairness for the nannies, home care workers and cleaners who support millions of individuals and families every day. The majority of domestic workers are Black women and immigrant women of color. Their work, though critical to households and to the U.S. economy as a whole, is economically and culturally devalued.

With deep roots in the enslavement of African peoples, the domestic work industry was built on the centuries-long economic exploitation and social subjugation of Black women. Even today, domestic work is burdened with the legacy of racist exclusions from many of the basic labor protections afforded other workers.

Black domestic workers have not been passive victims of substandard conditions on the job. From enslaved women's daily forms of resistance, to the coordinated strikes of washer women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, to organizing initiatives pioneered by 20<sup>th</sup> century domestic workers, there is a long and powerful tradition of Black domestic workers organizing to secure justice and dignity – in the workplace and in the broader society.

The leadership and courage of Black domestic workers over many generations has paved the way for a contemporary movement, with victories that are reshaping the domestic work industry. NDWA believes that Black

women must continue to lead domestic worker organizing, and that the organizing must center the lives of Black women.

This is especially critical in light of the fact that statistics are grim for Black domestic workers. The median hourly wage for Black domestic workers is \$12; the median annual wage, at \$20,362, is barely over the poverty line for a family of three.<sup>1</sup> In practice, wages are often even lower due to the high incidence of wage theft and other wage and hour violations.

These kinds of earnings contribute to the high poverty rate among Black women, higher, at nearly 25%, than the rate for women of any other racial/ethnic group, other than indigenous women.<sup>2</sup> Black women also carry greater responsibility for their families' economic security than women of other races and ethnicities. For example, in 8 out of 10 Black families with children under the age of 18, Black women are either sole income earners or contribute 40% or more to their households' income.<sup>3</sup>

Black women are employed in every domestic work occupation: they are nannies, house cleaners, and caregivers to the elderly and to people with disabilities. There are especially high concentrations of Black women in the homecare industry, where they work both independently and through agencies. More than a quar-

ter of agency-based homecare workers are Black.<sup>4</sup> And, while homecare is one of the fastest growing industries in the country, Black direct care workers have yet to see wages and benefits rise to meet the demands for qualified professional caregivers.<sup>5</sup> Black women earn less for their work in homecare than any other group.<sup>6</sup>

In 2015, NDWA launched We Dream in Black (WeDiB) to build the collective power and visibility of Black caregivers, nannies and professional cleaners. WeDiB, working at the intersections of race, gender, class and citizenship, pushes for transformative change for domestic workers. WeDiB's approach includes building a strong and active membership, training, organizing for policy change, and shifting cultural norms and narratives about care work. WeDiB's growing base of members range from young workers to elders; members who are U.S.-born and immigrants from across the African diaspora; people of multiple gender identities and sexualities; and individuals of varied class backgrounds and abilities. Our work has taken root in several regions of the country.

2020 is a pivotal year for social movements. Black domestic workers have been hit especially hard in the midst of an unprecedented health crisis, climate crisis, and an economic crisis. At the same time, uprisings and social protests against police violence and anti-Black racism have brought more people into social move-

ments than at any time in recent memory. And all of this unfolds against the backdrop of pending, high stakes elections.

Now is the time to put forth an innovative agenda that can root out the legacy of slavery from the domestic work industry, improving the lives of millions of domestic workers across the nation.

1 Julia Wolfe, Jori Kandra, Lora Engdahl and Heidi Shierholz, *Domestic Workers Chartbook*, p. 48, 52, Economic Policy Institute, May 14, 2020, <https://files.epi.org/pdf/194214.pdf>

2 Asha DuMonthier, Chandra Childers, Ph.D. and Jessica Milli, Ph.D, *The Status of Black Women in the United States*, p. 77, Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2017, <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/The-Status-of-Black-Women-6.26.17.pdf>

3 *Ibid*, p. 48

4 Wolfe, *Domestic Workers Chartbook*, p. 42

5 Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment Projections*, [https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/fastest-growing-occupations.htm#ep\\_table\\_103.f.1](https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/fastest-growing-occupations.htm#ep_table_103.f.1)

6 Wolfe, *Domestic Workers Charbook*, p. 48

# Methodology

In the summer of 2019, WeDiB held a series of discussions with over 50 of our most active chapter members who work as house cleaners, nannies and homecare providers in Georgia, North Carolina, New York, Florida and Massachusetts. The goal of the process was to surface the issues that are the most pressing for Black domestic workers. We asked:

- 1. What workplace issues are impacting you the most?*
- 2. What larger economic issues are impacting you the most?*
- 3. What issues are most impacting the Black communities to which you belong?*

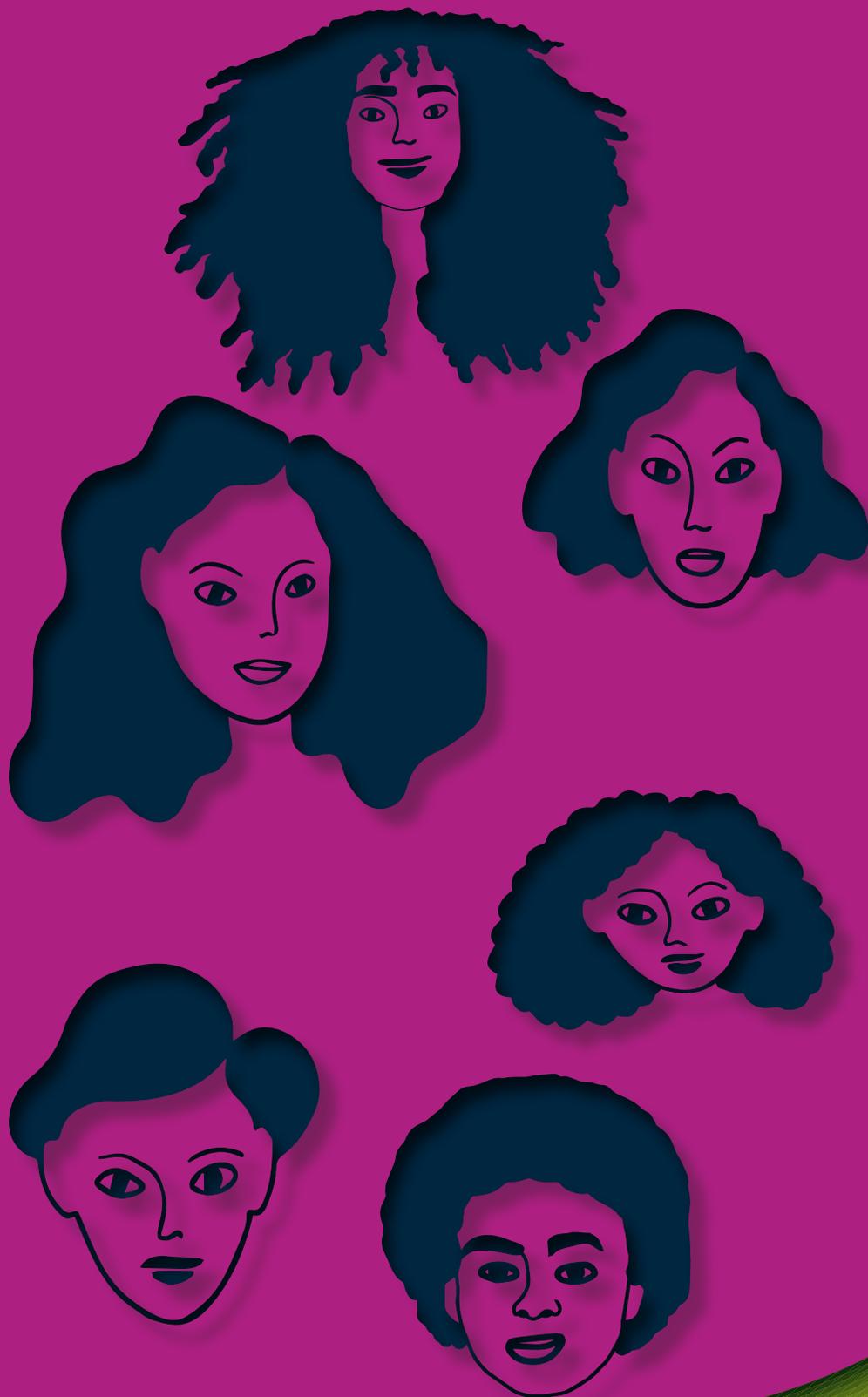
In addition to the real time concerns and ideas expressed by our members, we also considered the findings of WeDiB's previous study of Black domestic workers in Atlanta, GA and Durham, NC. That study found that low wages are an overwhelming concern among Black domestic workers. In Atlanta and Durham, over 1/3 of Black domestic workers also listed access to job training as a major gap, and more than half of all respondents in both cities reported that they rely on public assistance and services.<sup>7</sup>

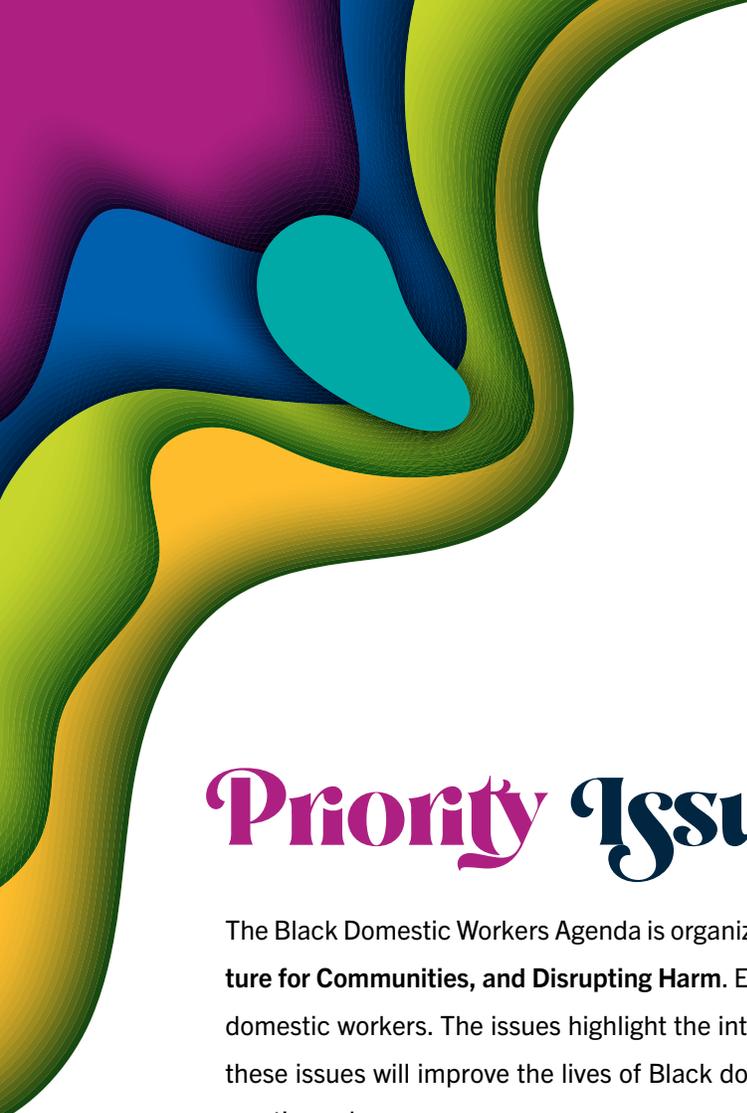
WeDiB leadership drafted an initial summary of priority issues and presented chapter membership with a draft of the Black Domestic Workers Agenda. The draft included the three principles that represent the

greatest points of unity among Black domestic workers in WeDiB's membership: Transforming Domestic Work, Infrastructure for Communities, and Disrupting Harm. Between November 2019 and February 2020, our members and allies gave additional input and feedback, and participated in workshops to expand on the three principles. We gathered this valuable information during our in-person 2019 WeDiB end-of-year retreats, and during our NDWA National Assembly, held in Las Vegas, NV in February 2020, which brought together over 65 organizations that are working to win dignity and rights for domestic workers across the nation and the world.

The current public health and economic crises in America, which have exposed enormous inequities based on race, gender, class, and citizenship status, have added great urgency to this work. We will put this agenda into action as our organizing directive over the next 5 years to give power back to the visions of Black women, immigrant women, and low-wage workers – some of the most invisible, essential and unprotected workers in our country.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Bayard and Kimberly Freeman Brown, *Pay, Professionalism and Respect: Black Domestic Workers Continue the Call for Standards in the Care Industry, Volume I Atlanta, Volume II Durham, October 2018*, <https://ips-dc.org/report-pay-professionalism-and-respect/>





# Priority Issues

The Black Domestic Workers Agenda is organized around three principles: **Transforming Domestic Work, Infrastructure for Communities, and Disrupting Harm**. Each of these principles frame the issues of most importance to Black domestic workers. The issues highlight the intersectional nature of Black domestic workers' lives. Making gains on these issues will improve the lives of Black domestic workers and positively impact Black communities and all domestic workers.

Many of the priority issues we identify are particularly relevant to homecare workers. Over the past several decades, significant numbers of Black domestic workers have become heavily concentrated in the commercial home health care industry, where they work as home health aides and personal care aides. While Black women make up 13% of women workers in the U.S., they constitute 28% of all women working in homecare.<sup>8</sup> Homecare workers also face heightened risks during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

We recognize that there are a number of effective organizations, networks, and individuals who have been doing work to improve life in Black communities for many years. WeDiB believes in building powerful collaborations and strong movements. We believe that we are positioned to lead in some areas to advance our priority issues, and provide strong strategic support in others.

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Hess, Ph.D. and Ariane Hegewisch, M. Phil., *The Future of Care Work: Improving the Quality of America's Fastest-Growing Jobs*, p. Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2019, <https://iwpr.org/publications/future-care-work-jobs/>



## Transforming Domestic Work

Fundamental to We Dream in Black's vision is the transformation of the domestic work industry. We believe that domestic workers should be protected from abusive conditions in the workplace and have the power to command fair wages and a full complement of labor rights. We fight for the following:

**Access to Professional Wages and Workforce Development.** Care is one of the country's fastest growing industries, largely fueled by the growing need for home health workers. Despite rising demand for workers, wages within this sector have not risen, nor do they reflect the vital nature of this work. They do not match the increasing demands for the professionalization of homecare, via certification and educational requirements. Professionalization within the care industry has also been racialized, with Black women priced out of the workforce development opportunities that are required to thrive in their occupations. The combination of stagnant wages and increased demand without increased opportunity in the care industry leaves most Black domestic workers underpaid and/or underemployed, while many areas of the country suffer from a shortage of certified care workers. We believe we can rectify this dilemma with the following:

- *Increase the federal minimum wage and repeal minimum wage preemption laws;*
- *Enact wage pass-through policies in conjunction with Medicaid expansion across the country, and increase investments into public funds that are directed to increased compensation for direct care workers;*
- *Create state funds to finance free portable certification and paid vocational training opportunities for care workers;*
- *Institute government-backed wage supplement programs across the child care and homecare industries, to reward trained workers and enable job growth; and,*
- *Expand access to free ESL, literacy, and secondary education for working adults.*

**Strong Employment Laws and Civil Rights Protections.** Racial oppression, a devaluing of household labor, and the unregulated nature of domestic work create a perfect storm for care workers who are still excluded from significant federal and state law protections that most other sectors enjoy. Black domestic workers have historically led struggles to improve the conditions of the industry, but there is still much work to do. We believe that the National Domestic Worker Bill of Rights will close many of the existing gaps and protect domestic workers from exploitation, harassment, and discrimination. In addition to passing the National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, we will work to:

- *Pass and enforce Domestic Worker Bills of Rights on the federal, state, and municipal levels that include domestic workers in labor and civil rights protections, create new rights and benefits to address the unique challenges of the industry, and support rigorous enforcement that effectively protects workers' rights;*
- *Combat the withholding of worker rights and benefits on the basis of the misclassification of employees as independent contractors;*
- *Win family-friendly policies such as paid leave for domestic workers;*
- *Extend the protections of the National Labor Relations Act to all workers, and repeal state-based "right to work laws" that undermine the right to organize; and,*
- *Grant legal status to all undocumented workers along with protection from retaliation and discrimination based on immigration status.*

**Enforcement of Labor Rights and Worker Voice.** The domestic worker movement has had a number of successes on the federal, state, and municipal levels. Winning policy changes, however, isn't the end of the fight. In an industry wherein the nature of the work can be isolating, and violations of rights such as rampant wage theft can remain hidden, enforcement of labor rights requires its own initiative and effort. We believe enforcement is made possible with the following:

- *Increase investments into the Department of Labor (DOL), Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and other federal, state and local enforcement agencies to ensure that workers' complaints are investigated and dealt with in a timely manner;*
- *Fight for publicly funded demonstration projects that improve the enforcement of labor rights in the domestic work industry, and result in mandates and other actionable recommendations by state-level workforce agencies;*
- *Direct grants to community-based groups to work with enforcement agencies to conduct mass education and identify violations of workers' rights;*
- *Increase penalties and strengthen enforcement mechanisms to deter wage theft and other workplace violations;*
- *Create pathways to bargaining for non-traditional, low-wage and multi-sector groups of workers; and*
- *Increase state funding for free and affordable legal advocacy for all workers.*

**Expand Research on the Domestic Work Industry.** Domestic workers across the country are responding to shifts in the industry: the growth of the gig economy and domestic workers who are employed through apps; a rising demand for homecare workers; and, especially in homecare, an older workforce. There is a lack of data on the ways in which these shifts impact Black women in the labor force. In order to expand our knowledge of the domestic work industry, we must do the following:

- *Utilize community-based research models to gain key insights on the trajectories of Black domestic workers' careers;*
- *Collaborate with labor groups and academics to develop data and analyses that provide the foundation to advocate for practices and policies that advance economic justice for Black domestic workers; and*
- *Deepen the research on Black domestic workers for whom data is scarce, including those who are 55 and older, those with disabilities, transgender, queer and/or immigrants.*



## Infrastructure for Thriving Communities

Black women have cared for individuals and families in this country for centuries, often sacrificing our own families' care in order to serve employers—all while fighting for our work to be valued. Valuing Black care workers is not just about increasing wages in the care sector. It is also about creating a culture shift from care as an individual burden to care as a collective responsibility. We seek to build up the civic, social and economic infrastructure required to eradicate poverty, and strengthen Black communities. Great caregivers are the key to high quality care for everyone, and ensuring that we feel secure and safe in all parts of our lives, allows us to do our best work. As such, we fight for the following:

### Universal Family Care.

We believe that all people deserve to be economically supported as they make the best choices to care for their families. The U.S. population is living longer than ever before and the elderly constitute a substantial and increasing proportion of the population. Many parents, driven by economic necessity, re-enter the workforce too soon after childbirth. People are in need of care for their loved ones at both ends of the age spectrum. Caregiving can be strenuous and exhausting for family members. At the same time, quality care by a professional caregiver is unaffordable for many people with disabilities and the aging population. As caregivers in their own families as well as for employers and clients, Black domestic workers have a compounded interest in strong social support for care. Workers who must leave the workforce to care for their own family members not only sacrifice their income, the loss of contributions to their own social security benefits results in reduced income in old age. We believe that Universal Family Care is a reparative and bold policy idea that provides solutions. We need to:

- *Win universal access to affordable, quality long-term care, including the right to receive care at home;*
- *Expand funding and subsidies for child care programs and public education, and pass universal pre-school for all families; and*
- *Grow state-based social insurance programs to finance support and compensation for family caregivers who are already caring for their relatives.*

## Healthcare.

Black people are still recovering from a painful history with the US healthcare system that is marked by documented medical racism, together with our exclusions from health systems as patients and as practitioners. While recent laws such as the Affordable Care Act work to narrow some gaps in access to healthcare, many domestic workers still cannot afford medical care. This is especially true for undocumented immigrants and in states without Medicaid expansion. A strong healthcare system would not only provide Black families with access to quality care, it would also support increased wages for the thousands of Black women in the care industry whose pay is subsidized through public programs like Medicaid. We intend to collaborate with allies toward the following solutions:

- *Universal health care and the cancellation of health care debt;*
- *Increased access to hospitals and health practitioners in rural and under-resourced areas;*
- *Access to quality, culturally-relevant care, including trans-specific services;*
- *Full reproductive autonomy; and*
- *Increased access to free mental health services for direct care workers.*

## Safety Net and Benefits.

For too long, our safety net has not reached Black domestic workers. The majority are left without adequate paid time off and without the resources to retire. Black immigrant domestic workers without citizenship status cannot access forms of public assistance required to achieve stability and resilience, particularly in times of crisis. All Black domestic workers should have access to the full range of assistance and benefits required to keep their families safe and realize their full potential. As a starting point, we will work to pass the Healthy Families Act, which would allow many more Black and low-wage workers to earn paid sick time and take care of their families without losing wages or their job.

**Affordable and Sustainable Housing.** Housing is a human right, but too many working people are unable to reconcile stagnant wages with rapidly increasing housing costs. The health and economic crises of the past decade have illustrated the fragility and instability of our housing sector. All too often, Black communities lack the resources or support to keep us in our homes, whether we are renters or homeowners. Urban Black communities suffer from development-induced displacement, predatory lending and widespread disinvestment. Quality affordable housing is scarce. As domestic workers, who take care of other people's households in order to support our own, we are devoted to ending homelessness, increasing affordable and sustainable housing, and expanding housing rights for working families across the nation.



## Disrupting Harm

In addition to building infrastructure for the communities in which Black domestic workers live, it is also necessary to disrupt the systemic and systematic harms that impact their lives. Black domestic workers face the systemic violence that impacts women, the racialized violence that impacts Black people, as well as the systematic harm that impacts us all. In order to disrupt these harms, we will lift up the following:

### **The Elimination of State Violence against Black Women and Families.**

Our members and communities live with the fear of the institutional violence of the state at the hands of the police, prisons, immigration enforcement and more. We are disproportionately impacted by the punitive systems within our schools and communities. Our families are being torn apart, forcibly housed in private prisons, and constantly under threat by attacks on immigration and amnesty programs. Public safety should not be anchored by police, incarceration or the criminalization of Black bodies. There is another way forward. We believe the way forward is to divest our taxpayer dollars from carceral systems and instead create a pathway to citizenship for all immigrants while also investing in systems that enable people to thrive and live dignified lives, including schools, public services, living wage jobs, a strong safety net and, most of all, a care infrastructure that works in the interests of both caregivers and recipients of care.

### **The Elimination of Interpersonal Violence Against Black Women.**

Black women deserve to live free of harm, free of violence, free of shame. We deserve an abundance of options to live with dignity and safety. The reality, however, is that Black women, including Black domestic workers, often fall victim to, and become survivors of, gendered and interpersonal violence in their homes, workplaces and in their communities. In the fight for the safety and dignity of all Black women, we are particularly invested in those who are most unprotected and vulnerable to criminalization when they attempt to fight back – this includes women living in poverty, trans women, survival sex workers, and undocumented immigrants. Ending interpersonal and intimate violence requires an investment in community responses to harm, transformative justice that seeks to undo the root causes of violence and an end to human trafficking of all kinds. We also support passing the BE HEARD in the Workplace Act, to prevent harassment, abuse, and ensure that all Black women are protected, no matter where we work.



### **Environmental Justice.**

Black communities and working class communities are disproportionately impacted by environmental justice issues. Bad corporate and governmental actors negatively impact the ongoing environmental health of these communities, which are also most impacted in the event of environmental crises and disaster. We seek expanded access to relief for domestic workers who are impacted by environmental disasters, investments in public transit, and universal access to adequate nutritious food. We need a just transition from our current economy to one that fosters collaboration between labor, community and environmental justice groups in order to restore the balance of our global ecology.



**Unbossed**  
A BLACK DOMESTIC WORKER AGENDA



**NATIONAL DOMESTIC  
WORKERS ALLIANCE**