



International
Labour
Office

Background Paper

Worker Centres From a Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Lens

Igor Bosc



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Igor Bosc¹

The past two decades have witnessed a significant increase in the number of worker centres as facilities dedicated to migrant workers. The emergence of such centres has been correlated with the increased presence of migrant workers in specific sectors of the economy where outsourcing of production and services has been encouraged by public policies. While some of these trends have been documented in academic papers in North America² and South Africa,³ documentation in Arab states and Asia is limited to publications of development practitioners.⁴ In Europe, several studies refer to the roles of different types of social centres supporting migrant populations, among others.⁵

Worker centres are meant for all types of workers, however they tend to cater primarily to the needs of informal workers and migrant workers and tend to exist and be located in areas where fundamental principles and rights at work, such as non-discrimination, freedom of association and collective bargaining as enshrined in International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions [No. 111](#), [No. 87](#) and [No. 98](#), are a distant reality for both informal workers and migrant workers.⁶ In practice, this means that unions may find it challenging to engage migrant workers in such locations. The traditional structures of the trade unions, their resistance to

renewing their own institutional and organizational structures, and their inability to adapt to the new realities in the world of work are among the reasons for this challenging situation. It is in this context that worker centres have emerged as non-profit organisations, as union-managed centres reaching out to migrant workers or as autonomous informal spaces offering space for migrants.

However, unlike many non-profit initiatives focused on migrant workers, worker centres can go beyond delivery of services and can play an important role in enabling networking among migrant workers and advocating for their human and labour rights. While many governments and employers may see worker centres as cultural centres providing recreational support for migrant workers or as donor-funded initiatives to ensure that migrant workers enjoy some leisure, these centres can play a more important role than a simple recreational one.

The purpose of this paper is to explain how a worker centre can also perform functions that support fundamental principles and rights at work. The paper draws on the experience of the ILO's Work in Freedom programme in supporting worker centres in South and West Asia.

¹ This paper was presented at the ILO Anniversary Conference "Continuing the Struggle: The International Labour Organization Centenary and the Future of Global Worker Rights" held on 21–22 November 2019 in Washington, DC at a panel titled "Protecting Migrants and Refugees Working in Global Supply Chains: New Directions for the ILO". It was written by Igor Bosc, Chief Technical Adviser of the ILO Work in Freedom Programme, with contributions from ILO colleagues including Ryszard Cholewinski, Mustapha Said, Sandhu Gurchaten, Ambra Migliore, Helene Bohyn, Suneetha Eluri and Zeina Mezher.

² Fine, J., 2018. "Understanding worker centre trajectories", in *No One Size Fits All: Worker Organization, Policy, and Movement in a New Economic Age*, published by Labor and Employment Relations Association, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, School of Labor and Employment Relations.

³ Ryabchuk, A. et al, 2018. "The Changing Role of Worker Advice Offices in South Africa, from 1970s to the Present" in *Politikon*, South African Journal of Political Studies, Vol. 45, Issue 2.

⁴ Columbia University, School of International Public Affairs, 2016. Assessment of the Al Hassan Worker Centre for migrant workers in Jordan. ILO, 2019. *Lessons Learned from Work in Freedom Programme*.

⁵ Pusey, A., 2010. "Social Centres and the New Cooperativism of the Common", in *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, Volume 4, Number 1, Summer 2010; Rubio-Pueyo, V., 2016. "Laboratorios de la historia. Los centros sociales como productores de cultura política en la España contemporánea (1997–2015)", *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 17:4, 385–403; Durand, R., 2006. *Histoire des centres sociaux, Du voisinage à la citoyenneté*, La Découverte.

⁶ There are eight core conventions, which cover collective bargaining, forced labour, child labour and discrimination.

▶ A. Concepts and definitions

1. What is a worker centre with a rights purpose?

A worker centre is a place *of* workers, *for* workers and ideally managed *by* workers, although this may vary depending on legal restrictions and possibilities. Worker centres are meant to uphold a core set of principles, including but not limited to:

- freedom of movement, enabling workers to freely enter and exit the centre at will during opening hours;
- freedom of association, enabling workers to meet among themselves, network and confer about worker-related issues including worker rights;
- non-discrimination, allowing workers to be in a space that is deliberately free of any form of prejudice;
- self-governance, enabling the delivery of services that strive to respond to worker demands; and
- facilitating access to legal remedy.

This paper will focus particular attention on fundamental principles and rights at work.

2. What is the rationale for the location and activities of a worker centre?

Worker centres are usually located in sites where working and living environments are rather adverse and where some workers are ordinarily not treated equally due to national extraction, religion, social origin, colour, race, ethnicity, nationality, caste or gender, and hence do not enjoy equal rights. Ensuring respect of fundamental principles and rights at work requires deliberate and proactive measures that depend on context. Such measures may be simple yet countercurrent and are fraught with implementation challenges. For example, the existence of space for gathering in an industrial zone where industrial relations are tense and freedom of association is often restricted or denied can itself appear as a public order threat for unaccustomed security personnel. Or, for example, the presence of foreign workers in a suburban area celebrating a birthday party and tacitly expressing their diversity can appear to be disruptive of local values and traditions. As another example, the presence of a worker centre's social worker, who listens to workers in an area where tensions have been recurrent, can be perceived as a threat to some employers. Hence, while the activities of a worker centre may appear to be straightforward from an outsider's perspective, in reality a worker centre that seeks to advance fundamental principles and rights at work may also be perceived as a disruptive space and may face pressure to discontinue its work in some way or another. While such spaces are not meant to create disorder, if they

are to fulfil their purpose, they cannot leave fundamental principles and rights at work unaddressed.

The types of activities that a worker centre undertakes depend on the history and status of industrial relations in its location. The nature and vision of the people who run the centre also play an important role.

The space may be used for multiple purposes, including social, cultural, recreational, educational and legal, provided they respond to workers' demands and interests. These functions will be explained further in this paper.

3. What is NOT a worker centre with a rights purpose?

While a worker centre may offer a range of services, its primary purpose is creating an enabling space to uphold the basic rights of workers and strengthen solidarity networks with other workers. Provision of services is not the primary function of a worker centre. Likewise, a worker centre is not devoted to specific beneficiaries (e.g. migrant workers, women workers, refugees), but rather to find enabling mechanisms to uphold the rights of all, especially those whose rights are being upheld the least. The impact of different types of 'service centres' is typically dependent on the effectiveness of the services they provide and their sustainability. However, a *worker centre with a rights purpose* is somewhat different. Its impact is measured based on the extent to which it is able to create an enabling environment to uphold the rights of all workers, especially those who tend to be marginalized.

It is important to emphasize that while a worker centre may provide a 'safe space' for workers, it is not meant to be a primary shelter for victims of trafficking or violence or for refugees. Worker centres are meant to enable visiting workers to exercise their own rights, including the right to enter and leave the centre at will. Many shelters cannot guarantee such freedom.

4. What is a 'safe space' for migrant women workers or others?

The term 'safe space' commonly refers to a place that has been created so that individuals who feel marginalized can come together to communicate their experiences with marginalization. These spaces are meant to be freely accessible, including for people with disabilities, and enable socialization and access to services, with the guarantee that visitors will not experience any form of direct or indirect discrimination. Worker centres should all provide 'safe space'.

B. Worker centres and fundamental principles and rights at work

5. How does the 'safe space' of a worker centre address discrimination?

In many contexts, informal workers, internal and international migrant workers, and refugees are not able to enjoy the same rights as native workers. For example, migrant workers – especially migrant women – earn less, work longer and often face different forms of compounded discrimination based on many intersectional factors, including but not limited to gender, race, nationality and caste. This may happen at the workplace, their place of residence and/or elsewhere. For many, the experience of humiliation, harassment and injustice on a regular basis during and after strenuous work hours takes a toll and can be alienating. While some are able to articulate what they experience, others simply feel exhausted, depleted and depressed, unless there is a venue or way for them to come to terms with what they experience.

The safe space is meant to be open to all workers regardless of class, race, nationality, gender, age, religion, legal status, occupation and sexual orientation, under the condition that diversity is fully respected and visitors do not seek to impose themselves and their views on others. It is meant to be a place where no form of discrimination can occur. This requires regular, deliberate and proactive measures to deconstruct the meaning of discrimination in that particular context. It usually includes frequent equality sensitization and other empowerment programmes to ensure that those who are most likely to be subjects of discrimination can feel safe within the premises. These measures may vary depending on context. See point nine below for further details.

6. How can worker centres foster an enabling environment for freedom of association?

Several factors act as obstacles for migrant workers and refugees with respect to freedom of association as described in the ILO's [Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 \(No. 87\)](#) and the [Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 \(No. 98\)](#).

There can be legal barriers that are part of national laws restricting such freedoms and there can also be institutional and cultural barriers. National trade union organizations are often not inclined to reach out to these categories of workers because they are scattered and sometimes perceived as a threat to the "historic" trade union identity and role.

Other practical and logistical barriers also play a role, some of which can be addressed by a worker centre. For

example, domestic workers or cleaners often feel isolated in their houses, workshops or premises. The work of manufacturing-sector workers in industrial zones and construction workers on construction sites is marked by the rhythms of long working hours and commuting, with not much time for privacy, interaction and socialisation. Slums, refugee camps and dormitories can feel crowded, and the expectations related to women in these places can be rigidly gendered, with limited privacy. In fact, there are often very few physical and accessible spaces that offer a convenient location for social integration, networking and psycho-social wellbeing for those who may need them. This is especially the case for migrant women workers.

Worker centres are meant to provide a partial response to these challenges by offering a secure location where workers can freely and safely meet, exchange views, make connections and often access tailored services responding to their explicit needs without having to feel any form of threat, discrimination and/or marginalisation. Worker centres are also meant to enable migrant workers and refugees to interact with local workers and build solidarity networks.

In the absence of similar spaces elsewhere, a well-located and managed safe space can become, by default, a location where social networking becomes possible and where common issues and possible courses of action are discussed. Given the asymmetries of power between employers and migrant workers, a worker centre can play an important role in enabling workers to expand their social capital.

However, while worker centres serve as a space of gathering and counselling, they cannot, on their own, fill the gaps of a legislative, cultural and social nature that deprive these workers of the effective recognition of the right to form and join unions for the representation of their interests and for the exercise of the right to collective bargaining.

7. How do worker centres foster an enabling environment for collective bargaining?

As with freedom of association, there may be several legal, institutional and other barriers to collective bargaining for migrant workers. Worker centres on their own cannot overcome such barriers, however they may offer an important space for informal connections and negotiations to take place.

The location of a worker centre is important. If it is in an area close to where migrant women workers live, work or commute, it may be more popular. (If, however, it is

perceived as being too public or under the scrutiny of an employer, workers may feel too insecure to use it. A variety of context-specific factors may influence the accessibility of a centre.)

In addition, if worker–employer relations are tense or living conditions difficult, it is more likely that issues regarding those challenges, including possible courses of action, will be discussed in an accessible safe space. A well-located worker centre can therefore play an enabling role for some forms of preparation for collective bargaining. However, in the absence of legal space for freedom of association, even a worker centre that is located in an industrial zone may face difficulties.

However, just like a coffee shop does not take responsibility for discussions that happen among its clients while they have coffee, the management of the centre, while being supportive of efforts to promote labour rights, is not necessarily privy to the discussions and networking that take place among workers within its safe space.

8. How can a worker centre address unpaid women's work and forced labour?

Worker centres can diminish the time women spend on unpaid work by offering additional services such as automatic laundries and support services for child or elderly care, depending on specific contexts and needs. Of course, this depends on workers' expressed needs and the availability of funding.

Worker centres can address issues related to forced labour by offering information on and access to an effective remedy in case of reported abuses. A social worker or lawyer may provide advice and guidance on ways to seek remedies and may sometimes play an informal mediation role.

9. What are the basic activities undertaken by worker centres for migrant workers?

The types of activities that worker centres undertake should be very closely linked to the gendered needs arising from various factors. These may include: prevalent industrial relations, living conditions, relations between migrants and local inhabitants, commuting patterns of migrant women workers, the range of urban services accessible to migrant women, and other security concerns that migrant women workers may have. Since all these factors vary from context to context, there is no single, standard set of activities. Below is a list of basic activities that may be undertaken, including more elaborate services, depending on needs:

- **Providing psycho-social support and space for privacy and respect:** Social workers can regularly monitor interactions and ensure mutual respect among workers. In some cases, this may include more than just monitoring. For example, when symptoms

of alienation are prevalent among many workers (e.g. recurrent suicides, cases of violence against women), psycho-social services may be needed. In such cases, a worker may also need a silent space to rest, mediate or practice their religion.

- **Language, acculturation and information:** This support is particularly important if the social, cultural and linguistic distance between migrant workers and local inhabitants is large. Instruction is about more than just language. It's also about bridging cultural divides and offering practical advice on dealing with ordinary communicational and procedural issues of everyday life. In some cases, activities may even include field visits to historical landmarks.
- **Soft skills and empowerment:** Depending on worker-identified needs, a worker centre may offer specialized training in dealing with harassment, or in negotiation skills and other forms of empowerment. Participatory awareness sessions on sensitive issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive health and other health-related issues (i.e. breast self-examination) can be quite empowering for women. Such platforms for exchange of knowledge and sharing of experiences can be very powerful in strengthening cohesion within a culturally diverse group of individuals.
- **Space for social bonding and networking:** This is important not only for workers to connect among their peer colleagues, but also for them to meet other workers. This includes space for small and large meetings. It includes making sure that workers can celebrate birthdays and other special events with special equipment (e.g. speakers and other paraphernalia). It may also include facilitated access to the internet to enable workers to connect with families and friends back home, and so on.
- **Advisory services regarding labour and living conditions:** These types of activities are particularly important when industrial relations are tense and/or visiting workers openly demand effective remedies. Activities may include legal advice and support in navigating through procedural requirements to address grievances and mediate solutions.

10. What types of supplementary services are provided by worker centres?

The following is a non-exhaustive list of services that are often offered at worker centres. These services often depend on specific worker demands.

- **Recreational services:** Depending on the availability and accessibility of such services to migrant workers in nearby areas, these may include subsidized access to dance floors, dance lessons, karaoke, gyms, aerobic classes, beauty parlours, art competitions, and other similar facilities and services. Such possibilities for

self-expression may already exist at an affordable price, and therefore, the range of such services may vary accordingly.

- **Vocational skills:** Some workers may seek to acquire technical skills that may enable career advancement. Employers may also offer free classes, depending on the circumstances.
- **Activities alleviating women's unpaid work:** Depending on the context and location of the safe space, services may be developed in accordance with women's demands, such as child care facilities, automatic laundries and other services.
- **Health consultations:** These services are particularly important when they are not already affordably accessible to workers. These services may respond to regular health issues, reproductive health, and occupational safety and health, among others.
- **Transportation services:** Some industrial areas may be geographically spread out and may require transport support services to facilitate access to a worker centre.

- **Other commercial services:** Other commercial services may be required, such as the provision of coffee, tea and biscuits. If larger shops are not locally present within reasonable proximity of the safe space, the workplace or the living quarters, then it may make sense for the worker centre to provide subsidized access to such services.

11. What are the advocacy functions of a worker centre?

Worker centres that support effective enjoyment of fundamental principles and rights at work gradually develop experience in communicating recommendations to employers, labour offices and other officials. In that sense, by virtue of the experience they accumulate, they play an important advocacy role, which in some cases can be an important domain of their activities, depending on context. Based on documented feedback received from workers, worker centres may recommend practices and policies that address commonly identified decent work deficits.



► C. Governance, management and sustainability

12. Who manages a worker centre?

Ideally, a worker centre is managed by workers from the area it caters to. However, this is frequently not fully possible, and therefore intermediaries are often involved, such as social workers from government or non-government organisations, unions or other non-profit legal entities. This legal inability to ensure that workers fully manage a centre can generate representational challenges, as intermediaries can unduly influence the agenda of a worker centre as a result of differing perspectives, pressure from other stakeholders and variable funding priorities. It is therefore very important for worker centres to have management systems that enable workers' views to be meaningfully taken into account. A management intermediary with a capacity to understand and advocate on non-discrimination, mobility and labour challenges is important. A good team of social workers is usually a critical factor in enabling a worker centre to be effective. The characteristics of successful management intermediaries are that they are able to:

- understand the pulse of worker-employer-inhabitant relations well;
- understand and enact effective anti-discrimination measures that are sensitive to gender, class and migration status;

- maintain networks of contacts that enable them to seek support for visiting migrant workers; and
- remain proactive in seeking innovative solutions and resources to address the challenges of the prevailing working and living conditions.

13. The governance of a worker centre

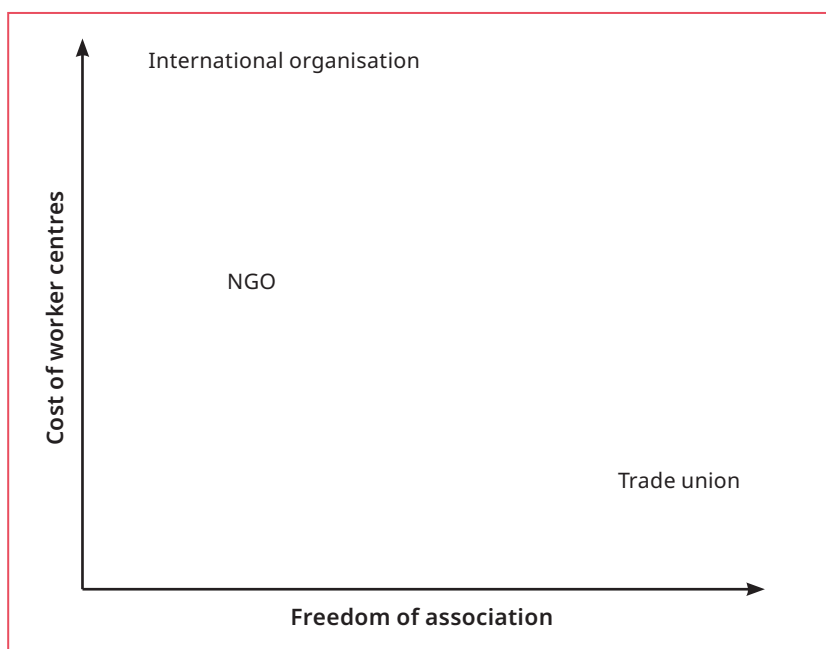
In view of the challenges identified above, worker centres often have governance mechanisms that deliberately seek to enable self-management by, of and for migrant workers from the area. A system of managerial checks and balances is usually needed to make sure that managerial feedback loops are dynamic and effective. However, even a good governance system on paper is insufficient if power relations between workers and others remain too unequal.

14. What is the timeframe and sustainability of a worker centre with a rights purpose?

The longevity and sustainability of a worker centre depend on two factors:

- **Labour rights context:** The extent to which fundamental principles and rights at work can be effectively exercised by migrant workers in the areas covered by the worker centre determines the legal

Factors affecting the sustainability of worker centres



status and sustainability of a worker centre with a rights purpose. For example, local stakeholders may distrust local worker organisations and only trust an international organisation to run a worker centre. This is obviously an expensive scenario. However, when an NGO is allowed to operate as an intermediary to run a worker centre, such an option becomes more affordable. Similarly, when the right to exercise freedom of association is allowed for migrant workers, a trade union could naturally undertake the role of a worker centre and sustainability would then only depend on its membership fees. In many contexts, industrial relations are so challenging that a worker centre is not allowed to exist in any legal form. In other cases, existing worker centres may be forced to close if local stakeholders find them too threatening.

- **Funding:** Some worker centres exist thanks to the contribution of employers who promote the welfare of their workers. This is rather significant, considering the need to correct power asymmetries in the employment relationship and the need to enable an environment that offers some degree of dignity to workers – an important pillar of better industrial relations. However, most of the time, worker centres are funded by other

types of corporate, bilateral or multilateral donors or trade unions. The costs involved in managing a centre increase depending on the labour rights situation of the location and the managing institution. The costs are high if only an international organisation is allowed to manage the centre. They diminish when an NGO is allowed and able to manage it, and the costs drop even further when a union or a cooperative is allowed and able to manage it. While some services may require a nominal fee charged to workers, access to and exit from worker centres should never be restricted. Nominal fees are, however, usually insufficient to make worker centres sustainable, and some type of external fund-raising is necessary until the legal environment and industrial relations improve.

15. What is the broader contribution of worker centres?

Worker centres are not only centres that provide services to workers. They also play an important role in fostering an environment of mutual respect among workers and native populations, an environment that is critical to ensuring decent work for all.

Work in Freedom

Work in Freedom is an integrated development cooperation programme aiming to reduce vulnerability to trafficking and forced labour of women migrating to garment and domestic work. The programme works along migration pathways in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon and some of Gulf countries. Interventions focus on promoting mobility by choice, fair recruitment to decent jobs, and safety and dignity for migrant workers.

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