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Golden Steps

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Abstract: Founded in 2012, Golden Steps is a Brooklyn-based worker cooperative of immigrant women of color, all of whom have roots in Central and South America. Providing services to those who do not qualify for Medicare or need more than what Medicare will pay for, Golden Steps operates in a part of the market where home care workers are hired directly by private-pay clients and their families. Workers in this arena continue to labor under racialized legal exclusions dating back to the New Deal Era and face numerous other challenges to building power and voice. In this context, worker co-ops like Golden Steps provide one of the few available vehicles for organizing collectively on a formal basis and building a shared support structure.

Topics: Sociology, Management, Organizational Behavior, Labor Studies, unions, immigrant labor, cooperatives, home care

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This is a working paper case study. Additional versions of this case study may appear in print.

Overview

Founded in 2012, Golden Steps is a Brooklyn-based worker cooperative of immigrant women of color, all of whom have roots in Central and South America. Providing services to those who do not qualify for Medicare or need more than what Medicare will pay for, Golden Steps operates in a part of the market where home care workers are hired directly by private-pay clients and their families. Workers in this arena continue to labor under racialized legal exclusions dating back to the New Deal Era and face numerous other challenges to building power and voice. In this context, worker co-ops like Golden Steps provide one of the few available vehicles for organizing collectively on a formal basis and building a shared support structure.

Building Power from the Margins

Golden Steps has established a footing on challenging terrain. Despite being essential to the reproduction of family units and foundational to all other economic and social activity,¹ domestic workers providing in-home cleaning and caring services have long labored in isolating conditions, with few rights and protections. Collective organization has consistently been stymied by legal exclusions, structural fragmentation, and the low value accorded to the work.²

Long after Emancipation, a majority of Black women employed outside their own homes worked as domestic workers, marking continuities with the roles they played under slavery.³ Domestic workers continue to work under legal exclusions enshrined during the New Deal era, when white Southern Democrats seeking to preempt the collective power of Black people in the economy blocked the inclusion of domestic workers and farm workers under landmark labor and employment protections.⁴

Generations of new immigrant women have also been employed as domestic workers. Today, new immigrant women from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia comprise a large share of domestic workers in many parts of the country.⁵ While shifts in technology, consumption patterns, and social norms have contributed to a relative decline in domestic work

¹ Federici, S. (2018). *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Pm Press.

² Dresser, L. (2008). Cleaning and Caring in the Home: Shared Problems? Shared. *The Gloves-Off Economy: Workplace Standards at the Bottom of America's Labor Market*, 111; Boris, E., & Nadasen, P. (2008). Domestic workers organize!. *WorkingUSA*, 11(4), 413-437.

³ Glenn, E. N. (1992). From servitude to service work: Historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 18(1), 1-43.

⁴ Perea, J. F. (2011). The echoes of slavery: Recognizing the racist origins of the agricultural and domestic worker exclusion from the National Labor Relations Act. *Ohio St. LJ*, 72, 95. Though some of these exclusions were reversed through legislation enacted in the 1970s, enforcement of legal reforms remains a challenge, and many exclusions remain. For a more precise discussion, see Goldberg, H. (2014). 13. "Prepare to Win": Domestic Workers United's Strategic Transition following Passage of the New York Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights. In *New Labor in New York* (pp. 266-288). Cornell University Press.

⁵ Burnham, L., & Theodore, N. (2012). Home economics: The invisible and unregulated world of domestic work. National Domestic Workers Alliance.

as a source of employment since the mid-20th century,⁶ growing labor force participation by women and increasing demand for in-home care support among seniors have created significant pockets of demand. Demand for home care specifically has actually increased, driven by longer lifespans, the aging of the baby boom generation, and a growing preference among seniors for aging in place.⁷

New York City has a long history of domestic worker networking and organizing dating back to connections forged among live-in maids in the early 20th century.⁸ In recent decades, tens of thousands of the city's home care workers employed by agencies and working in the publicly funded system have unionized with 1199SEIU.⁹ And the past 20 years have seen a surge in organizing among immigrant domestic workers employed - often informally - in the private pay market. In 2010, following several years of painstaking organizing, New York became the first state to pass a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, helping to clarify the legal rights of domestic workers and reverse a number of important legal exclusions. Since then, base building, enforcement, and changing community norms have become focal points for area domestic worker organizing groups.¹⁰

Drawing energy from broader currents of domestic worker organizing as well as a surge in worker co-op development in New York and other regions since the Great Recession of 2008-2009,¹¹ numerous domestic worker co-ops have formed across New York City during the past decade.¹² Though still relatively small in their overall footprint, these organizations are modeling important strategies for building bonds among workers and shifting relationships with employers.

The Evolution of Golden Steps

Founded in 2012, Golden Steps is a Brooklyn-based worker co-op delivering home care services in the private pay part of the market, with members providing in-home support to those who do not qualify for Medicare or need more than what Medicare will cover. The co-op was formed by women with roots in Central and South America, many of whom had experienced language and citizenship as significant barriers to decent employment. When the co-op formally incorporated in 2013, there were 20 - 22 members. Several members were already working in home care,

⁶ Duffy, M. (2007). Doing the dirty work: Gender, race, and reproductive labor in historical perspective. *Gender & society*, 21(3), 313-336.

⁷ Osterman, P. (2017). *Who will care for us?: long-term care and the long-term workforce*. Russell Sage Foundation.

⁸ Boris, E., & Nadasen, P. (2008). Domestic workers organize!. *WorkingUSA*, 11(4), 413-437.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Goldberg, H. (2014).

¹¹ For some context on recent worker co-op development in New York City, see Hudson, L. (2021). New York City: Struggles over the narrative of the solidarity economy. *Geoforum*, 127, 326-334.

¹² See <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/193/NYC.pdf>.

while a number of others joined the cooperative after being displaced by the closure of a local factory.¹³

Like other domestic worker co-ops operating outside of the publicly funded universe, Golden Steps confronted particular challenges in building a client base and arranging training and other forms of support for its members. Training needs for home care workers are particularly high given the kind of in-home support they provide.¹⁴ The Center for Family Life (CFL), a Brooklyn-based social service agency, conducted background research that informed the co-op's business model and provided assistance on all aspects of the co-op's early development, including client referrals, training on running a co-op business, and securing access to job-related training.¹⁵

Zenayda Bonilla joined Golden Steps in 2013. Having immigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador as a single mother in 2003, Bonilla experienced a decade of struggling financially in different jobs on her own. She heard about the opportunity to work at Golden Steps through a friend who was working at Beyond Care, a childcare co-op developed with support from CFL.

At first, it was hard for Bonilla to imagine herself working as a paid home care provider. She had cared for her father when he became ill with cancer, eventually succumbing to the disease, and the idea of being a caregiver evoked pain. Bonilla decided to attend an open house and go through the co-op's training process, however. Before long, she had become a member of Golden Steps, finding a new calling and sense of belonging.¹⁶

Shared Ownership and Governance

Golden Steps is legally structured as a marketing co-op. Unlike in a traditional worker co-op, where the enterprise contracts with clients, members of a marketing co-op engage with clients individually.¹⁷ Membership is not based on "shares." Instead, Golden Steps members pay a monthly cooperative membership fee of \$100 for access to ongoing training and back-office administrative services. They keep the rest of the hourly wages they earn from clients, earning a

¹³ Interview with Zenayda Bonilla. April 28th, 2022.

¹⁴ Interview with Emma Yorra, former Co-Director of the CFL Cooperative Development Program, September 15th, 2022.

¹⁵ Interview with Maru Bautista, former co-director of CFL's Cooperative Development Program. May 20th, 2022. Launched in 2006, CFL's [Cooperative Development program](#) helped to incubate 21 cooperatives with more than 450 members in its first 15 years. In addition to technical assistance, CFL provides the co-ops it helps to incubate with start-up grants for brochures, web development, and other business needs. See <https://truthout.org/articles/co-ops-enable-women-entrepreneurs-to-work-as-owners-and-decision-makers/>

¹⁶ Interview with Zenayda Bonilla. April 28th, 2022.

¹⁷ Krishna (2013:87) explains that marketing co-op "is essentially a modified union hiring hall approach that acts as a referral mechanism," noting that this arrangement "requires less administration and management" than a traditional co-op structure (101). Krishna, G. J. (2013). Worker Cooperative Creation as Progressive Lawyering: Moving beyond the One-Person, One-Vote Floor. *Berkeley J. Emp. & Lab. L.*, 34, 65.

substantially larger share of revenues than workers at traditional agencies.¹⁸

Like many smaller worker co-ops, Golden Steps operates largely by direct democracy, albeit with some delegation of authority to elected leaders. All members are required to attend bi-monthly general meetings where they discuss training needs, job-related challenges, and different aspects of the business. Members also participate in different committees, including a publicity committee, an office committee, and a leadership committee that includes a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. Over time, members rotate through different roles, but there is also some degree of specialization based on background and experience - for example, those who are more fluent in English tend to be the ones answering phones as part of their duties on the office committee.¹⁹

As research on smaller worker co-ops functioning by direct democracy has shown, participating in cooperative governance requires substantial commitments of time, which can be particularly challenging for low-wage workers balancing multiple responsibilities with little support.²⁰ “We have three jobs: family, the job, and the cooperative,” said one Golden Step member in a 2018 interview.²¹

Strength in Community

The co-op also gives something back to members, however, providing a nurturing community that helps to counter the isolation domestic workers providing different kinds of services often experience. “The difference in a cooperative is that you feel like you have a lot of support,” said another member in a 2018 interview, “...like there are people behind you who have your back.”²² This includes comfort when members lose clients with whom they have been working and established close relationships. It also includes support in navigating issues that are not as directly related to members’ jobs at the co-op, such as housing insecurity.²³

Golden Steps also provides an important community in which members can develop their political analysis and discuss strategies for building relationships with employers. All members receive “anti-oppression” training that provides (or reinforces) a broader framework for understanding why direct care labor provided by women of color is so devalued, helping those who may not have already connected with larger domestic worker movements to situate their own circumstances in the context of broader struggles.²⁴

¹⁸ See <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/immigrants-seen-making-their-mark-their-new-homes>.

¹⁹ See <https://publicseminar.org/2018/03/elizabeth-golden-steps-elder-care-cooperative/>.

²⁰ Krishna notes that retaining member commitment to engaging in the life of the co-op can be particularly challenging once members have realized the most concrete economic benefits, including securing an adequate client base. Krishna, G. J. (2013).

²¹ See <https://urbandesignforum.org/democratizing-the-workplace/>.

²² See <https://publicseminar.org/2018/03/alicia-golden-steps/>.

²³ Interview with Emma Yorra, September 15th, 2022

²⁴ Matthew, R. A., & Bransburg, V. (2017). Democratizing caring labor: The promise of community-based, worker-owned childcare cooperatives. *Affilia*, 32(1), 10-23.

Members also receive training on their rights under the law and strategies for communicating effectively with employers, and have access to a community with whom they can discuss the complexities of building caring relationships while asserting their interests. Membership in the co-op does not solve the structural inequities that undergird members' relations with clients and their families, but it does provide a foundation enabling members to exercise greater agency and voice.

Maintaining community is not easy. In recent years, differences in perspective emerged within Golden Steps that were difficult to reconcile.²⁵ During the pandemic, a group of members split off and formed a new co-op, Steady Hands. The split was challenging for all involved, but most agree that it was ultimately a healthy outcome. The seven worker-owners who remain at Golden Steps - all of whom joined the co-op shortly after its founding - are now devoting significant energy to recruiting new members, which has included holding their first-ever virtual open houses.²⁶

For members of Golden Steps, community building frequently extends beyond the co-op. This has included significant investments of time and energy in a collective formation, Cooperatives United for Sunset Park (CUSP), that provided back-office services for several worker co-ops based in the neighborhood. CUSP was successful in the few years that it was up and running, even incorporating as a nonprofit for a brief period, though it ultimately proved difficult to sustain.²⁷

Bonilla, for her part, has engaged in multiple forms of community building and support ranging from promoting English classes to connecting local residents with social services and economic resources. During the pandemic, she helped 50 others apply for support from New York State's Excluded Workers Fund - an effort that was noted when she won recognition from the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives as its 2022 "Cooperator of the Year."

Job Quality

In addition to the benefits of shared ownership and a community of support, Golden Steps members earn more than they would working independently or for another agency, according to Bonilla - a rate of \$22 - \$25 per hour. Members attribute this in part to the collective identity and reputation they have forged through the co-op, which affords them greater respect and value in the eyes of existing and prospective clients. According to one member, being invested in the co-op and wanting to maintain its strong reputation serves as an added motivation for providing high-quality services.²⁸

Job-related training also contributes to the co-op's reputation and its ability to charge a premium for its services. Through Golden Steps, members are certified in key skill areas (e.g., adult CPR

²⁵ Interview with Zenayda Bonilla. April 28th, 2022.

²⁶ Interview with Emma Yorra, September 15th, 2022.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See <https://publicseminar.org/2018/03/alicia-golden-steps/>.

and first aid, nutrition, and food preparation, preventing falls) that home care providers in the independent, private market must typically find and pay for on their own.²⁹ This training not only helps members to build skills; it confers legitimacy and professional identity. Golden Steps has also made a commitment to preparing its members to attend to the needs of a diverse client base - e.g., members recently received training in better serving the needs of LGBTQ+ clients.³⁰

Bonilla notes the transformative impact that being a member of Golden Steps and receiving professional training on different aspects of caregiving has had on her personally. This training combined with her experience working as a peer and community advocate gave her a different sense of possibility and has led her to start the process of training to be a social worker. “If not for Golden Steps, I would not be where I am today,” she says.³¹

Looking Ahead

Golden Steps is currently at an inflection point given the recent organizational split. Bonilla is optimistic about its prospects, helping the co-op to plan for the next stages in its development even as she undertakes her own career transition.

The Golden Steps case raises larger questions about what is needed to support and sustain the development of other co-ops like it. Indeed, the existing footprint of these organizations is far smaller than the workforce that could stand to benefit.³² Establishing a well-resourced support infrastructure could help to expand this footprint.³³ Access to high-quality training could be part of this infrastructure,³⁴ along with back-office services and other forms of ongoing support delivered in a manner accountable to the members of different co-ops - the kind of support that CUSP provided for a brief period in Sunset Park.³⁵

In recent years, a growing number of immigrant worker centers have supported the development of worker co-ops in the domestic work arena, often linking enterprise development to larger organizing and power-building strategies. As contemporary domestic worker movements continue to achieve legislative wins and greater cultural visibility, a growing corps of worker co-ops could play an important role in changing community norms and shifting relationships on the ground.

²⁹ Golden Steps has established ongoing relationships with institutions such as Cornell Cooperative Extension, which has provided training to members on nutrition and health. See <https://publicseminar.org/2018/03/elizabeth-golden-steps-elder-care-cooperative/>.

³⁰ Interview with Zenayda Bonilla. April 28, 2022.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Krishna, G. J. (2013).

³³ Interview with Maru Bautista. May 20th, 2022.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Interview with Emma Yorra, September 15th, 2022.