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**Worker Cooperatives' Potential for  
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Insights from a Case Study in  
New York City**

**Working Paper #29  
June, 2021**



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# **Worker Cooperatives' Potential for Migrant Women's Self-Empowerment. Insights from a Case Study in New York City**

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## Abstract

Many migrant women in New York City face structural discrimination and administrative hurdles that complicate their access to safe and well-paid labor. Worker cooperatives have been shown to reduce the precarity and economic exclusion of marginalized groups. However, although much is known about worker cooperatives' economic potential for improving workers' lives, other social effects remain far less well explored. The present research contributes to exploring this gap by examining how joining a worker cooperative empowers migrant women in their everyday lives. We apply the concept of self-empowerment to several spheres of the everyday lives of migrant women. At an empirical level, the study focuses on migrant women who are members of nine cleaning- or care-worker cooperatives in New York City. The data were gathered using a participatory research approach and consist of interviews, participant observations, and a quantitative survey. The findings are that worker cooperatives have empowering effects on migrant women beyond the sphere of paid work. Although the additional unpaid workload as co-owners of cooperatives represents an extra burden for many migrant women, they now have better wages, more flexibility, and safer workplaces. Furthermore, they acquire a range of leadership skills, enlarge their social network beyond their ethnic communities, and earn increased esteem as co-owners of businesses. Through worker-ownership, migrant women thus increase their economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, which enables them to exercise more agency not only in their paid work but also in their families and leisure time.

## Keywords

Worker cooperatives, migrant women, migrant entrepreneurship, empowerment, democracy at work, participatory research, New York City

## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the National Center of Competence in Research nccr – on the move funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. We thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments to improve this paper. A special thanks goes to the NGO Center for Family Life and its staff for their precious support during the entire research period. Their willingness to share information and their help in establishing contacts with worker-owners was invaluable. Our greatest thanks, however, goes to the worker-owners themselves, who devoted precious time and attention to this research. Without their active contribution, this research would not have been possible.

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## 1 Introduction

*As a migrant in New York, you experience many restrictions. [...] Discrimination is everywhere. [...] You are not treated the same way as the white people who speak English. Due to your color or your language, you don't receive the services to which you would actually be entitled by law. [For example,] at work, when [the employers] don't give you any break time for lunch. [...] I [also] felt discrimination for being a woman, by earning less than my male co-workers. (Valeria, 46)*

Valeria migrated from Mexico to New York City (NYC), where she found herself working for years in poorly paid, hazardous, and discriminatory employment conditions. As her statement indicates, such conditions seem to be the norm rather than the exception in NYC for many migrants and notably migrant women from the global south<sup>1</sup>. A municipal report of 2018, based on interviews with 115 home care aides, nannies, and house cleaners in NYC, confirms that low pay, ill-defined job duties, violations of legal requirements, lack of respect, and precarity are prevalent concerns in occupations for which migrant women constitute a large share of the workforce (NYC Department of Consumer Affairs 2018). In global cities such as NYC, strong labor market polarization has created a growing demand for low-paid workers, which is supplied to a large extent by migrants from the global south (Sassen 1991). Furthermore, scholars argue that neoliberal developments have increased not only poverty-related international migration (Delgado Wise 2015) but also the precarity of low-paid labor in migrant-receiving countries – for example through the dismantling of government regulations protecting workers at their workplace (Herod and Aguiar 2006). Deficient regulations combined with the steady flow of new migrants enable employers to fill vacancies without being forced to improve working conditions (May et al. 2007). In addition, many migrants do not have access to basic resources such as knowledge of their legal rights, union organization, language skills, or recognition of home-country educational degrees, which further complicates access to well-paid jobs in their new country of residence (Bauder 2003; Evans et al. 2005; Herod and Aguiar 2006; Riaño 2011).

As a female migrant, challenges at work are usually even more complex. Gender discrimination in the labor market makes access to well-paid jobs generally harder for women than for men (Kunze 2005). Many migrant women are pushed into poorly paid fields of work, such as cleaning and care labor (Anderson 2010; Fraser 2016; Schilliger 2015). Particularly in workplaces which isolate them by limiting social interactions during working time, migrant women face greater risks of being exposed to exploitative working conditions such as unpaid overtime, inadequate safety precautions, and sexual assaults from employers (Yeung 2018). One way to counteract such precarious working conditions are worker cooperatives: businesses that are owned and managed by workers who offer their labor and share the profits (Gordon Nembhard 2014). Studies have shown that cooperative work can serve as a poverty alleviation strategy by reducing income inequality (Jones Austin 2014), circumventing precarious labor (Berry and Bell 2017), and empowering workers (Spear 2000), particularly among economically marginalized population groups (Gordon Nembhard 2014). However, little research has been conducted into cooperatives' social impacts beyond the financial realm and the sphere of paid work, especially among migrant women.

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of legibility, we use the shorter term 'migrant women' in this research. The term refers to women who have migrated from the global south to the United States. However, this should not negate the diversity of experiences of various migrant women from the global south but should instead underline the structural difficulties for this population group in NYC.

This paper aims to span this research gap and thus strives to understand how the membership of worker cooperatives empowers migrant women in their everyday lives.<sup>2</sup> Combining the concept of self-empowerment (Friedmann 1992, Kabeer 1999) with Lefebvre’s spheres of everyday life (1991), we analyze changes in the everyday lives of migrant women who are members of nine cleaning- or care-worker cooperatives in NYC. This metropolis has been chosen for this study for two main reasons: Firstly, New York State has more worker cooperatives than any other US state, and the majority of these cooperatives are based in the City of New York (USFWC 2019). Secondly, the huge socioeconomic inequalities and the labor market polarization of the city – what its Mayor, Bill de Blasio, calls “the tale of the two cities” (Barbaro 2013) – underlines the necessity of researching alternative forms of labor and self-help. A participatory research approach (Caretta and Riaño 2016; Riaño 2015) led to the use of mixed methods throughout the research process. The data was collected with a survey, in-depth interviews, and participatory observations and analyzed through a global analysis, group discussions, and content analysis. This methodological approach resulted in a deeper understanding of the processes under study.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we present the theoretical perspectives, and the third section describes the participatory research approach and mixed methods adopted. The results are introduced in section four and discussed in the concluding section five.

## 2 Conceptualizing Migrant Women’s Self-Empowerment

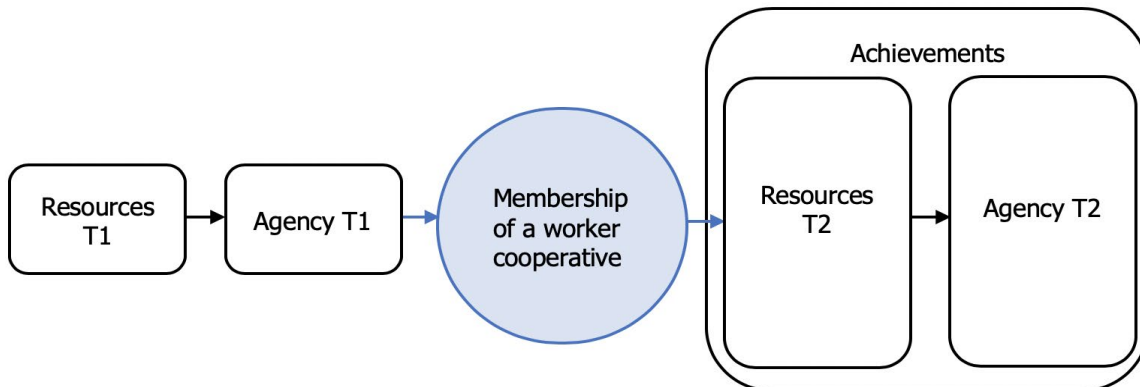
Naila Kabeer defines three interrelated dimensions for assessing empowerment: resources, which are preconditions, agency in the process, and achievements or outcomes (Kabeer 1999, 437). The first dimension includes material resources, such as money and land, and immaterial resources, such as social relationships and knowledge (ibid.). However, Kabeer does not provide a more precise distribution or explanation of the various types of resources. To better understand this differentiation of resources, and thus the social position of migrant women, we use Bourdieu’s concepts of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1983, 1985) as resources to understand the process of empowerment. The second dimension, agency, is described by Kabeer as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them,” but she stresses that it involves much more than observable actions (Kabeer 1999, 438). Kabeer also emphasizes the importance of a third dimension, which she calls achievements. In this third dimension, she summarizes all well-being outcomes that result from the actions of individuals (ibid.). While asserting that “external agents are critically important” for empowerment, John Friedmann suggests the notion of “self-empowerment” to emphasize that the empowered actors are the driving force behind this process (Friedmann 1992, 71). In our research, the cooperative members are the prime movers behind the changes in their lives, so we also use the term “self-empowerment”. Inspired by Kabeer and Friedmann, we therefore use the concept of self-empowerment to understand how the social position and agency of migrant women evolves after joining worker cooperatives.

Figure 1 shows the process examined in this research. We assume that before working in a cooperative (time T1) the migrant women already owned a certain amount of resources (T1), which served as a basis for agency (T1). With a specific social position, which stems from Resources T1 and Agency T1, migrant women become members of a cooperative (blue circle).

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<sup>2</sup> This paper builds upon two former shorter pieces that deal with the same issue (Komposch 2020a, 2020b).

Figure 1: Migrant women's self-empowerment through membership of a worker cooperative (own elaboration)



Membership of a cooperative, in turn, is expected to affect levels of resources and agency subsequently (T2). Our hypothesis is that resources and agency increase through a self-empowerment process triggered by the membership of a worker cooperative. However, this model is a simplification of more complex processes: Although the visualization of the process is linear, the changes in social position and agency can be multi-layered and take several directions. Moreover, what we describe here as time point T2 should in itself be considered as an ongoing and open-ended process, which can reverse and whose dimensions can change.

Furthermore, to better structure our data concerning these changes in the social position and agency of migrant women, we divide them into the three spheres of everyday life suggested by Henri Lefebvre: paid work, family, and leisure (Lefebvre 1991). The paid work sphere includes everything happening during the time people are paid for work at their workplaces, including employment conditions, salary, safety at work, relationships between co-workers, relationships between business-owners and workers, and processes of decision-making. The sphere of family involves everything happening in people's lives that is related to their family members including relationships with children, partners, and other family members. The third sphere, leisure, refers to the remaining time in people's everyday lives that is neither dedicated to paid work nor to family activities, including time with friends, hobbies, social justice activism engagements, and community work.

### 3 Using Mixed Methods in Participatory Research

The objective of this research is to produce insights that are not only of scientific interest but also of use to the nonacademic research participants. To include their needs as well as their knowledge in the process of knowledge production, we pursued a participatory research approach inspired by the Minga workshops (Riaño 2015). Proponents of participatory research approaches have criticized the frequent hierarchization by academics between “researchers” and “research subjects” (Caretta and Riaño 2016, 259). “Minga” means “building together” in Quechua and suggests knowledge should be produced through collective participation without neglecting the fact that such an approach also emerges from power relations (Riaño 2015, 6). Feminist researchers in particular highlight the power position of academics in defining the research design, the questions asked in interviews and surveys, and the structure of the written texts (Caretta and Riaño 2016; McLafferty 1995; Staeheli and Lawson 1995). The ideal of a participatory research approach is a close collaboration between researchers and participants at all stages of knowledge production (Caretta and Riaño 2016).

By seeking a constant dialogue with the research partners, we tried to follow the “key principle of creating inclusionary knowledge-producing spaces” (Riaño 2015, 12). Our approach consisted of co-defining the survey form and the interview questions and discussing the collected data and preliminary results together with cooperative members and staff members of the Center for Family Life (CFL) NGO. However, not all methodological stages included participation of all research partners, the members of nine worker cooperatives and the CFL. Most of the work and thus the greatest power over the choice of methodology and the interpretation of results remained in the hands of the authors of the present paper. Yet, even if only partially implemented, a participatory approach offers great potential, especially in migration research. Migration scholars rarely pursue a participatory research approach despite the fact that it can be especially “useful for immigrant communities as it democratizes science, research, and knowledge, the very fields that are used to quantify and make statistics about [immigrant communities’ effects on] society” (Francisco 2014, 88). And because democracy is a key element of worker cooperatives, this approach is perfectly in line with our topic.

### 3.1 Data Collection

In this research, mixed methods, a “combination and integration of qualitative and quantitative methods in the same research project” (Kuckartz 2014, 33, own translation), were used in both the data collection and data analysis phases. We argue that the combination of a quantitative survey, in-depth interviews, and participant observations provide a solid basis for a sound analysis of more general changes in migrant women’s everyday lives from quantitative data and of more subtle and subjective individual experiences from qualitative data.

The quantitative survey was elaborated and conducted in collaboration with the two staff members of the NGO CFL. The organization had already drafted a questionnaire on the topic. Prior to our adaptation of their draft, we formulated our own descriptive questions, as suggested by Diekmann (2018). These reflections were useful for later rephrasing and structuring the survey questions in thematic blocks. After two more rounds of mutual feedback, which further improved the questionnaire’s form and content, we agreed on its final version with the NGO. Because the cooperative members were not involved in the preparation of the questionnaire, participation in the elaboration of the quantitative survey was limited to academics and NGO representatives. The main reasons for excluding the worker-owners<sup>3</sup> from this step were lack of time and language barriers. This example demonstrates how, despite a participatory research approach, the power to decide on participation was not equally distributed among the parties involved in the research.

The CFL representatives then sent the link to the online version of the survey to all nine cooperatives collaborating with the NGO with the request that they forward it to their members. If all cooperatives forwarded the survey to all their members,<sup>4</sup> it reached approximately 223 worker-owners either in English or in Spanish, depending on their preferred language. About 32% participated in the quantitative survey between January and March 2019. The research focus on female worker-owners who work regularly in a worker cooperative led to the retention only of those completed by female

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<sup>3</sup> A ‘worker-owner’ is a member of a worker cooperative. The notion implies that the person is both worker and owner of the cooperative. All the names of interview participants are anonymized.

<sup>4</sup> Because the CFL does not possess the contact information of all the members of the collaborating cooperatives, it is not possible to make a final assessment of the survey’s dissemination. However, the relatively high number of survey responses indicates that most cooperatives forwarded the survey to their members.



worker-owners who worked more than five hours per month: 58 questionnaires out of the total of 71.<sup>5</sup> The survey participants were members of the nine worker cooperatives, which offered private cleaning and commercial cleaning (5), childcare (2), elderly care (1), or pet care (1). With membership numbers between seven and approximately 120, the cooperatives under study vary considerably in their size. Six of the nine cooperatives have only female worker-owners, and the other three are mixed. Eight cooperatives are owned by Latinx migrants, and one cooperative is owned by migrants who come from the Philippines.

In parallel to the preparation and completion of the quantitative survey, 20 interviews were conducted between November 2018 and April 2019. Of the total of 20 interviews, 17 were conducted with cooperative members, 15 of whom were women. The female interview partners were selected on the principle of diversification and saturation (Pires 1997). Diversification and saturation was sought for country of origin, age, service sector, cooperative, seniority as a cooperative member, and the individual's role within the cooperative (e.g. president or cashier). The interviews with cooperative members were biographical (Riaño 2015; Rosenthal 2007) and problem-centered (Witzel 1985) and were conducted either in Spanish or in English, which were the preferred languages of the participants. Additionally three “expert interviews” (Meuser and Nagel 2002) were conducted with staff members of two NGOs: CFL and New York City Network of Worker Cooperatives. Prior to the interviews, the focus of the interview questions was discussed with two representatives of the CFL. Shortly after, a revised version of the interview questions was discussed with seven worker-owners from different cooperatives. Their ideas and comments helped greatly to further improve the interview questionnaire.

The data from the surveys and interviews are based entirely on statements made by the research partners. To complement the data, several participant observations were conducted (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, 204). These observations include cooperatives' meetings, the leisure activities of cooperative members, and training courses at the CFL during which cooperative members received leadership and administrative training.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Following Mayring's suggestions that mixing methods in the data analysis can enrich research (Mayring 2002; 2015), quantitative and qualitative steps were also combined in the analysis of the data. The first stage of the analysis consisted of a global analysis (Flick 2009) that included a review of all the survey data, interview transcripts, observation notes, and memos. The initial ideas and insights acquired through this global analysis enabled some preliminary findings to be elaborated.

These preliminary results served as a basis for three group discussions with worker-owners and representatives of the CFL.<sup>6</sup> The group discussions were inspired by the Minga workshops, where

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<sup>5</sup> The remaining 13 questionnaires were excluded for three reasons: First, male worker-owners were excluded. The survey was sent to both female and male worker-owners because it was also intended to be of use to the CFL, which was interested in a general picture of the cooperatives' social impacts on worker-owners. Secondly, only the questionnaires of worker-owners who worked more than five hours per month in a cooperative were considered. Third, two more questionnaires were excluded because there was strong evidence that these survey participants misunderstood several survey questions.

<sup>6</sup> All worker-owners from the nine worker cooperatives under study and all staff members from the cooperative initiative of the CFL were invited to these workshops. A total of fifteen staff members of the CFL and sixteen worker-owners from different cooperatives joined the discussions.

the research partners discuss the preliminary results presented by the academics (Riaño 2015). The global analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data indicated that worker-owners played four main roles: as paid worker, mother, wife or partner, and immigrant living in NYC. These were discussed with the research partners.<sup>7</sup> On the basis of these roles, all the participants then discussed changes in the worker-owners' lives since they had joined the cooperatives. The discussion of these roles helped to define the notions and categories that were central to migrant women's experiences in their everyday lives, which were included in the later qualitative content analysis.

The final analytical step was the in-depth analysis. The survey data was analyzed to depict general changes in social positions and the agency of migrant women since their joining a cooperative. The qualitative content analysis was preceded by creating a category system. As suggested by Schreier, deductive categorization, the theory-driven composition of categories, was combined with inductive categorization, the composition of categories, on the basis of data (Schreier 2012, 84). Notably, the group discussions with worker-owners and CFL staff members helped to create analytical categories inductively. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods during the entire research process enabled the methods to nourish and complement one another. It allowed the research topic to be illuminated at different levels and a more holistic understanding of the processes under study.

The participatory approach of this research proved to be scientifically useful because the exchanges with worker-owners and with staff members of the CFL deepened our understanding of the empowering potential of worker cooperatives. The group discussions were especially helpful in collectively reflecting on both the cooperative members' perceptions of their everyday lives and our own first interpretations of them. However, the idea of full participation has its limits. The main share of the work, the responsibility, and most of the power to define the results remained in our hands. Research participants have different financial, social, time, and institutional resources that strongly influence the various roles occupied in this research collaboration and gave us, as academics with higher resources, most of the power to define the results of the research. A similar conclusion can be drawn regarding the unequal rewards obtained through participating in this research. The study certainly benefits all parties involved. However, the individual benefits are again greatest for us scholars, who can use the research to promote our personal careers (Pohl 2016). Despite the many benefits of a participatory approach, we deem it important to acknowledge the power structures that permeate even such participatory research settings.

## **4 Worker Cooperatives' Impact on Migrant Women's Everyday Lives**

In this results section, we present evidence of the extent to which migrant women in NYC empower themselves through membership of a worker cooperative. The section is divided into four subsections. In the first subsection, we introduce the history of worker cooperatives as a response to precarity and marginalization and elaborate on the specific socioeconomic context of NYC. In the subsequent three subsections, we examine how membership of a worker cooperative has transformed the social position and agency of migrant women. Each of the three sections deals with a specific

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<sup>7</sup> The identification of these four roles was an intermediate step toward our final analytical framework, which examines the transformation of these roles within broader life spheres.

sphere of everyday life: paid work, family, and leisure. But even if we distinguish analytically between the impacts of cooperatives on these spheres of everyday life, it is important to note that all life spheres are always interlinked with one another. As Lefebvre stressed, it is ultimately the unity of all three spheres that “determines the concrete individual” (Lefebvre 1991, 31).

#### **4.1 Standing Up to Precarity and Marginalization Through Worker Cooperatives**

In this first subsection, we present historical data on worker cooperatives in the US and demographic data on members of today's worker cooperatives in NYC, and we discuss the extent to which these historical and demographic data provide some indications about the social position and agency of cooperative members.

##### **Worker Cooperatives in NYC: A Response to Economic Marginalization**

Worker cooperatives are businesses that serve the needs of their members and curtail the maximization of profits of individuals. According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), the primary goal of cooperatives is not profit but to realize the “common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations” of their members (ICA 2018). Just like any other business, cooperatives must cover their costs and compete in the market. Yet cooperatives “modify capitalist principles” by the fact that workers hold the ownership and control and that they are the beneficiaries of the business (Gordon Nembhard 2014, 4). In cooperatives, democratic decision-making is secured by the rule of “one member, one vote,” which means that “[m]embers share equal voting rights regardless of the amount of capital they put into the enterprise” (ICA 2018).

In the US, worker cooperatives have been and still are particularly popular among African-American and migrant communities, as they offer a way of reducing economic marginalization due to racial discrimination (Gordon Nembhard 2014). Historically, the cooperative movement has mostly flourished in economically difficult times, such as after the Great Depression of 1929, during the 1960s and 1970s due to rising unemployment, and in the aftermath of the Great Recession in 2007–2008 (Gupta 2014; Jackall and Levin 1984; Pavlovskaya, Safri, and Hudson 2016).

NYC, with its municipal budget of more than \$92 billion, is one of the richest municipalities in the world. At the same time, almost every fifth citizen of this metropolis lives in poverty<sup>8</sup> (NYC n.d.). The strong polarization of the labor market in NYC – a decreasing share of middle-class jobs contrasted by increasing shares of both low-income jobs requiring few skills and elite jobs requiring greater skill levels (Sassen 1991) – is one common explanation for the inequalities in the city. In a labor-market-polarization perspective, it can be argued that above all it is the low-paid workers, often migrants, who keep global cities such as NYC working (May et al. 2007). The steady flow of new migrants enables employers to fill vacancies without having to improve working conditions (*ibid.*). Therefore, working conditions in low-income work areas often remain poor.

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<sup>8</sup> The NYC poverty rate defines the percentage of the population “whose NYCgov income is less than the NYCgov threshold” (NYC Mayor’s Office for Economy Opportunity 2018, 1). This threshold is based on national spending on “food, shelter, clothing and utilities” and it varies by the size of a family. However, it differs from the national threshold by including higher housing costs in NYC (*ibid.*).

The cleaning and care sector in NYC provides employment for many migrant women from Latin American and Asian countries under precarious working conditions (Fraser 2016). In NYC, 70% of all cleaning services, 53% of all healthcare work, and 51% of childcare is carried out by foreign-born workers (NYC Comptroller Stringer 2020). In addition to poor wages, isolated workplaces make it difficult to confer with colleagues and often expose workers to arbitrariness and abuse from clients (Yeung 2018). The fact that care and cleaning are regarded as "typically female" activities (Schilliger 2015, 161), which women should perform without remuneration and for which no qualifications are required, leads to a further devaluation of this work. In addition, such work usually involves long working days and inadequate equipment.

In NYC, the number of worker cooperatives has increased sharply over the past decade (WCBDI-NYC 2019). Since 2014, after the election of Bill de Blasio as mayor and under the pressure of a growing cooperative movement, the municipality has started to support nongovernmental organizations financially, which for their part support the creation of worker cooperatives and help cooperative members to develop their businesses, for instance with administrative support and training. Most of the cooperatives under study were initiated by the CFL, which recruits members in local, mostly migrant neighborhoods to create new cooperatives and provides them with support, especially during the establishment phase.

### **The Examined Worker Cooperatives and the Social Position of Their Members**

A person's social position in society and therefore their agency is closely related to ethnicity, gender, class, and body.<sup>9</sup> To understand how migrant women can empower themselves through cooperatives, it is therefore crucial to analyze their demographic data. Furthermore, to assess the extent to which the findings of this research can be generalized to other workers of other cooperatives in NYC, it is important to understand how the worker-owners involved in this research differ from the general population of worker-owners in the city.

Today NYC has around 30 functioning worker cooperatives (NYC NoWC 2020). The largest number of cooperatives in NYC can be found in sectors such as cleaning, healthcare, and childcare (Pavlovskaya, Safri, and Hudson 2016, 4). Women represent 98% of all worker-owners in NYC,<sup>10</sup> and most of them (99%) are Non-White (70% of them are Latinx) (Pavlovskaya, Safri, and Hudson 2016, 9). The majority of all worker-owners (97%) have no more than a high school degree, and most of them are between 31 and 65 years old (*ibid.*, 7-8). Geographically, most worker cooperatives (77%) are located in Brooklyn (*ibid.*, 10).

The cooperatives studied in this research fit well into the city-wide image of cooperatives. All of the nine cooperatives studied are in cleaning or care work. Six out of nine cooperatives in the study have only female worker-owners, whereas the three others are mixed but with a majority of female members too.

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<sup>9</sup> Following Winker and Degele (2009), we use "body" as an intersectional category, which includes age, physical (dis-)ability and health.

<sup>10</sup> The largest worker cooperatives in New York City can be found in "feminized spaces" of labor such as the cleaning and care sectors (Hudson 2018). However, there are also a few cooperatives that consist mainly of men, notably two in the construction sector (Pavlovskaya, Safri, and Hudson 2016).



Most of the 58 cooperative members participating in the survey originally come from Mexico (31). Other cooperative members' countries of origin are the Dominican Republic (9), Ecuador (8), the Philippines (7), El Salvador (5), Colombia (2), Guatemala (1), Honduras (1), Argentina (1), and the US (1).<sup>11</sup> According to our interview partners, access to cooperative membership did not depend on residence status or origin but on the willingness to participate in and commit to cooperative forms of labor. The strong racial segregation in New York City and the CFL's focus on specific neighborhoods explains why there is nevertheless a certain degree of homogeneity in the regions of origin. Most of the survey participants were between 26 and 45 years old (44). A smaller proportion is older than 45 years (18), and only one woman is younger than 26 years. Most of the survey participants (48) have been living in NYC for 10 to 29 years. Twelve survey participants have been living less than 10 years in NYC and two more than 29 years. Most survey participants have two children (27), followed by those with three children (12), four or more children (11), one child (9), and no child (4). The school education and marital status of the worker-owners was only asked during the interviews. Of the 15 female interview participants, the highest school-leaving qualifications range from primary school (3), secondary school (3), and high school (1) to a university degree<sup>12</sup> (8). Among these fifteen women, ten women were married, three were separated, one woman had a partner without being married, and one woman had no partner.

Such a static view of demographic data provides information about the background of the worker-owners. However, it does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the empowerment process of an individual's social position and agency over time. A diachronic perspective is needed to grasp these changes. The following three subsections examine empowerment-process in three life spheres: paid work, family, and leisure.

## **4.2 Paid Work: From Employee to Co-Owner of a Business**

The sphere of paid work goes beyond the actual execution of specific working tasks. It includes aspects such as how companies are organized, what autonomy an individual has in shaping their paid work life, how safe a workplace is, and how they are treated by others while performing their work. In this subsection, we show whether and how these aspects have changed for the individuals in the study since they became members of a cooperative.

### **Democracy at Work: Gaining Voice but Also Unpaid Responsibilities**

Most interview participants have never had a job that allowed them to participate at such a high level in the decision-making process as they do in cooperatives. Many of the cooperative members interviewed mentioned that the possibility of owning a company and being able to control and manage their work was in fact one of the main motives for joining the cooperative. As Silvia, a worker-owner of a cleaning cooperative, reported:

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<sup>11</sup> Some survey participants did not answer particular questions in the survey. The difference between the numbers mentioned here and the total number of 71 completed surveys are these survey participants who did not answer this question.

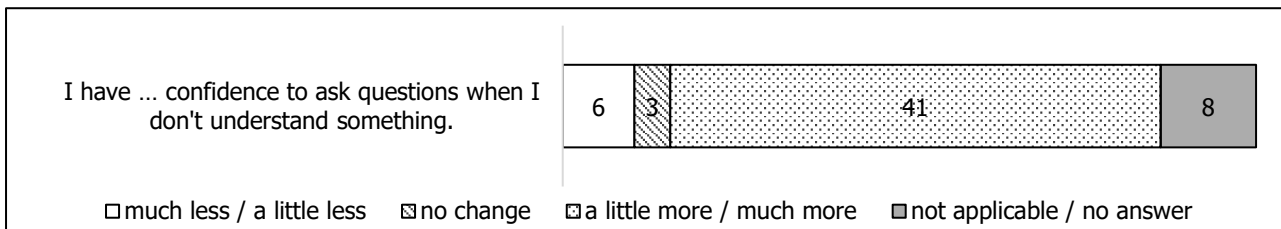
<sup>12</sup> Three of these women have a bachelor's degree, one woman has a master's degree, and the other four women did not specify their university degree in the interview. Unfortunately, our questions were not specific enough to produce a more detailed picture of the educational background of the migrant women. In any event, one also has to keep in mind that even higher degrees are often devalued through migration or not recognized in the destination country (Riaño 2015).

*There are many employers who abuse immigrants. They pay you when they want to, [and] when they don't want to, they don't pay you. In the cooperative, it's different. We are all owners and workers. And we all have a voice. That's one of the reasons I became a member of the cooperative. (Silvia, 44)*

Silvia's statement shows that she identifies not only as a worker but also as an owner. The identification as an owner appears to be crucial: She is not a "simple" employee anymore but holds her own business. This change seems to increase her reputation and prestige: an increase of symbolic capital, in Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu 1985, 724).

Learning to speak up and express their own opinions as co-business-owners results in a change in the women's agency. Of the 58 women participating in our survey, 41 reported that since becoming a worker-owner, they are more confident about asking questions when they do not understand something (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Change in confidence to ask questions (survey, own elaboration).<sup>13</sup>



Possible explanations for these numbers can be found in the qualitative data of the interviews. Carina was a mother of three children and had worked in a nail studio in her country of origin. Prior to becoming a member of a cleaning cooperative, she was not used to speaking up in front of others:

*Before [becoming a cooperative member], I felt like everything I said was stupid. I didn't know how to express myself. I didn't talk [...] especially in front of other people. I had this big fear. But then, they [the other cooperative members] asked me to become vice-president of the cooperative and I accepted. [...] This helped me to overcome this fear, because sometimes I had to talk in front of the whole membership. (Carina, 38)*

Acquiring skills such as talking in front of a whole cooperative membership increases not only cultural capital but also self-confidence. Furthermore, it increases the possibility of participating in decision-making processes and therefore increases agency.

Nevertheless, the additional responsibilities as co-owners of cooperatives result in new challenges, which require additional effort. Worker-owners have to devote many unpaid working hours to the management of the cooperative: regular meetings, advertising campaigns for the cooperative, and individual functions such as presidency, vice-presidency, treasury, and minute keeping. All these tasks have to be handled in addition to the worker-owners' paid work and family life.

<sup>13</sup> Figure 2 and all the following figures in this chapter illustrate answers to the survey question "What has changed in your life since you joined the cooperative?". For each answer, the participants had the following options: "much less," "a little less," "no change," "a little more," "much more," and "not applicable." If participants did not answer at all, we counted them as "no answer." For the sake of readability and because the quantitative analysis mainly serves to show general changes, we merged the categories "much less" with "a little less" and "a little more" with "much more."

### Improvement of Socioeconomic Situation

In addition to the democratic organizational structure of the cooperative, other factors related to paid work lead to the self-empowerment of the worker-owners. Notably, wages and working hours strongly influence the opportunities of migrant women to shape their everyday lives. On average, the wages of the interview participants have more than doubled since they became members of a cooperative. One worker-owner explained that, prior to the cooperative, she used to work in a supermarket, earning \$6.50 per hour. With this wage and the expensive costs of living in NYC, she had to work seven days a week. Today she earns \$25 per hour in childcare and has several days off every week. The economic capital of most migrant women who work in a cooperative has therefore been increased significantly through the cooperative.

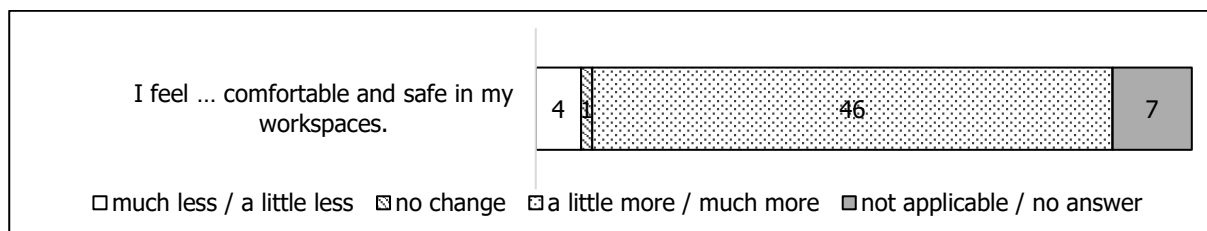
Not only do the worker-owners gain more money in fewer hours of work, most of them are also more flexible in planning their working hours. For example, a worker-owner from a cleaning cooperative, states that “I like the fact that I can choose my [working] hours [in the cooperative]. Like this, I am much more flexible” (Angela, 40). Most of the worker-owners interviewed could even choose their vacation days. This is a significant change from their previous paid work, where they were often not entitled to any vacation at all. The flexibility they have gained is of great benefit to many worker-owners. Compared to most of their previous jobs, they now experience greater freedom in organizing their paid work lives and thus their entire everyday lives. The women now see more alternatives, which Kabeer (1999) mentions as crucial for empowerment.

### More Safety and Comfort in Workspaces

Another working condition which has changed for a large proportion of the female workers is the feeling of safety and of being comfortable in the workplace. The question of safety in workplaces in particular is closely linked to gender, ethnicity, and class (Krieger et al. 2006). For instance, the Black and Latinx population in the US is at much higher risk of being killed or injured at work than the white population (Leeth and Ruser 2006).

Of 58 women who completed the survey, 46 indicated that they feel more comfortable and secure in their workspaces since they have joined the cooperative (Figure 3). Only four women stated the opposite, that they feel less comfortable and safe in their workspaces.

Figure 3: Transformation of feeling comfortable and safe in workspaces (survey, own elaboration)



For those feeling less safe and comfortable in their workplaces, this change could be due to the election of the former President Donald Trump in 2016. Feelings of safety and comfort are closely linked to social positioning as a migrant, a person of color, or a woman. It is therefore reasonable to assume that feeling less comfortable and safe in workplaces could be because migrants in general experienced greater fear and danger after the former President Trump took office. Oskar, a staff member of the New York City Network of Worker Cooperatives (NYC NoWC) calls it the “climate of fear” and reported that “what happened after the Trump election is that people are much more

afraid now, much more uncertain about what is going on” (Oskar, 38). The decreased sense of safety and comfort that those four survey participants reported could therefore be related to the general political climate rather than to the cooperatives.

However, most research participants feel more secure and comfortable since they became a member of a worker cooperative. As shown in the interviews, this increase may have diverse causes. Several interview participants stated that many migrant workers are used to accepting dangerous working conditions because they do not know their rights as workers. A worker-owner of a cleaning cooperative described the hazardous conditions of her previous employment:

*When I was working in the cleaning sector before [joining the cooperative], I lost my sense of smell because I had to use many chemicals with chlorine. It took me a while to get better because my nose was very irritated. Now, I'm fine again. (Paula, 47)*

By joining the cooperative and attending various workshops of the CFL and other organizations, the worker-owners learn more about their rights as both migrants and workers. Additionally, as owners of the cooperative, they can choose the products and equipment with which they work.

The health consequences of poor and inadequate work equipment are often only felt when aging. Since many migrant workers in the US have either no or only very poor health insurance, such working conditions make the lives of older migrant workers even more precarious. In addition to age, gender plays a major role in safety and health. Gender-based violence such as sexual harassment and assault is a reality for many workers. In particular, female migrants who work in isolated professions such as domestic work are at increased risk of violent and sexual assault at work (Yeung 2018). Cooperatives can provide support for women in such isolated spaces so that they know how to call for help in a risky situation. Paula reported:

*The cooperative office sends me to a job and I'm much safer there because all of my co-workers know exactly where I am. [...] Safety when entering a place that I don't know is very important to me. The cooperative gives me this safety. (Paula, 47)*

Paula already had worked as a cleaner prior to the cooperative, but she had been hired directly by her clients. She mentioned that before being part of a cooperative she had always been on her own both at work and when negotiating the terms of employment. Her statement indicates that the risk of this isolation is reduced by the fact that the women are now organized as a group and that the individual can count on the support of her colleagues if needed. This mutual support increases the individual's social capital through a strong network with other cooperative members that strengthens the individual's position and power.

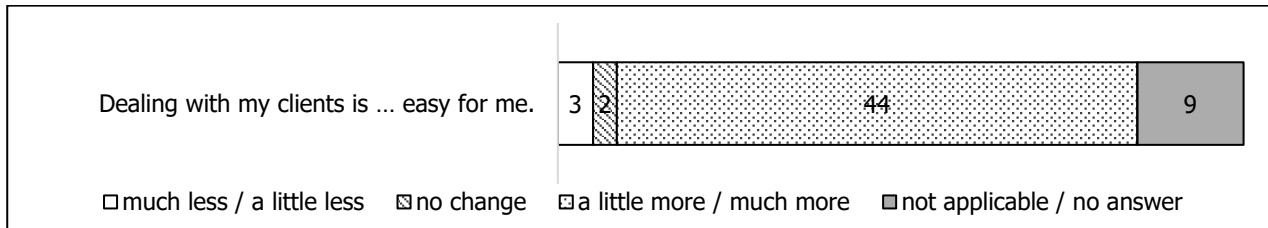
### **Changing Roles: From Employer to Client and From Employee to Business-Owner**

The migrant women under study were used to working for employers, both private and corporate, prior to their membership of the cooperative. Now they offer their work as owners of a cooperative to their clients. This shift of roles from employer and employee to client and business-owner is crucial to understanding the social position and agency of worker-owners at their paid workplace. Various interview participants reported that in previous jobs, they had felt very uncomfortable and sometimes unsafe during work because of their employers. Due to their position as mostly low-income migrant women of color, many interview participants had experienced humiliating working conditions in previous jobs. As business-owners, the interviewed women generally experience more respect than they did as employees of a company or in the informal businesses in which they had



been working before. The change in the way worker-owners face their clients was also reported in the survey. Of the 58 women participating in the survey, 44 answered that as a member of a cooperative it has become a little or much easier to deal with clients (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Transformation ability to deal with clients (survey, own elaboration)<sup>14</sup>



The worker-owners of a cooperative start their assignment with a contract, which has to be signed by both parties and which therefore guarantees basic conditions. Paula explains how she felt strengthened in her bargaining position after joining a cooperative:

*When the family got another child, I asked them [the clients] to pay me more. I wasn't scared anymore that they could say no because I had this confidence of being part of the cooperative. (Paula, 47)*

In this subsection, we showed how membership of a worker cooperative enables migrant women to increase their income, to strengthen ties with other worker-owners, to improve organizational skills and increase knowledge about workers' and immigrants' rights, and to gain esteem from contractors. As co-owners of the business, these migrant women not only gain control about the processes within the company but also alter the relationships with their contractors, who are no longer employers but clients.

### 4.3 Family: Increasing Voice and Co-Determination

Membership of a worker cooperative not only changes the migrant women's social position and agency in the paid work sphere but also in their family life, which is shown in this subsection.

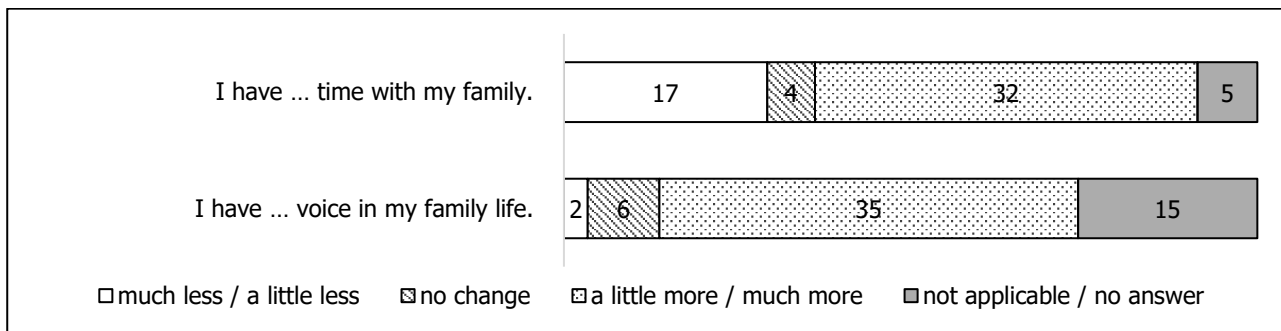
#### Time for and Voice Within the Family

We begin this subsection with a discussion of two issues, which provide a general overview of the changes that occurred within the family sphere after joining a worker cooperative: the time women spend with their families and the women's power to influence or make decisions about family-related matters. These findings will help to examine the transformation of more specific family relationships.

Of the 58 women participating in the survey, 32 reported that they spend more time with their family since they have joined the cooperative (Figure 5). Seventeen women said they have less time for their family since becoming a member of a cooperative, and four women reported no change.

<sup>14</sup> The English formulation in the sentence 'Dealing with my clients is much more easy for me' could not be avoided because of the structure of the survey and was almost irrelevant as most questionnaires were completed in Spanish.

Figure 5: Transformation of family life (survey, own elaboration).



There seem to be two reasons for these widely divergent responses. The better wages and increased flexibility provided by the cooperative enable most of the worker-owners to work fewer hours than in other jobs. In interviews, women who had been fully engaged in paid work prior to the cooperative generally reported that they can now spend more time with their families. However, those women who had not previously been in paid work, or only to a very limited extent, reported that they now have less time for the family. This appears to be one plausible explanation for the relatively high number of individuals who report having less time with their family. Another possible reason is the extra unpaid work linked to the management of a cooperative. The time a worker-owner can spend with her family thus also depends on how strongly she becomes involved in the democratic processes of the cooperative.

Of the 58 survey participants, 35 stated that their voice in the family has increased (Figure 5). Six women reported no change, and two women observed a decline of their voice in family life. In the following, the data about the two themes of time with the family and voice in the family is examined in more detail by looking at three roles in the family in which the social position and agency of women can change: first as mother, then as partner, and finally with members of their family of origin, such as parents and siblings.

### Mother's Role Being Transformed

Having children is very common for the worker-owners of the cooperatives examined in this study. Of the 58 women who answered the survey, only four have no children. Most of the respondents (32) have two or three children. However, the children do not always live with their mothers in NYC. Some interview participants reported that their children live in their countries of origin or in other countries. Accordingly, the women's relationships with their children and consequently their social position and agency as mothers are very diverse due to these geographical circumstances.

Several worker-owners also mentioned that they have learned to apply skills and knowledge they had acquired within the cooperative to the education of their children. For instance, Maria noted that the democratic decision-making within the cooperative has also taught her new ways of talking to her son:

*Since I am in the cooperative, I have learned how to better communicate. And I feel that I communicate better even with my children. My son is in the middle of his teenage years, so I have to negotiate with him: "If you do that, I'll give you this." And he says, "Where did you learn this way of talking, mom?" (Maria, 40)*

Acquiring skills and knowledge about communication and work collaboration and about the English language, computer technology, and business management through cooperative work increases the cultural capital of worker-owners. Being a worker-owner of a cooperative thus allows mothers not only to spend more time with their children and to better support their children financially but also to provide their children with knowledge and skills acquired through cooperative work. All this indicates that cooperative work positively influences the migrant women's agency in the upbringing of their children.

## Empowerment in Couple Relationships

The analysis of the couple relationship is crucial for the investigation of changes in the social position of migrant women in their everyday lives. In traditional patriarchal and heterosexual partnerships, women are at least informally subordinated to men (Millet 1970). As various scholars have shown, gender relations in migrants' lives can be either transformed or reaffirmed by migration and the entry into paid work in the receiving country (Menjívar 1999). Some authors argue that migrant women can enjoy more autonomy (Hugo 2000) through migration, whereas others stress that those women who come as family migrants experience a loss of equality in gender relations (Riaño 2011, 2015). In line with Menjívar, we argue that changes in gender relations in migrants' lives depend not only on earning a better wage in the new country of residence but also on the type of professional activity undertaken by the migrant women (Menjívar 1999, 619). Scholars have shown that women's financial autonomy can disrupt patriarchal structure by giving them the possibility of making more choices about their everyday lives (Bastia 2013; Menjívar 1999).

The vast majority of research participants live in a partnership, and most of them are married. Similar to the children, their partners' place of residence also varies. Most of the interviewed worker-owners from the Philippines said that their partners live abroad. The Latin American interview participants' partners live in NYC in most cases. Survey respondents and interview partners both reported changes in their couple relationships since becoming members of a cooperative. Of the 58 women participating in the survey, 24 responded that their partners had gained more respect for them and their skills since they joined a cooperative. Six women answered that there was no change, but no woman mentioned a decreased respect from her partner. The remaining 28 respondents did not answer this question. The interview partners described some of the changes in greater detail. Valeria, for instance, explained:

*Through the cooperative, we as women are empowered in the family. ...]. He [the husband] used to see me as subordinate because he made all the money. That's how I saw myself too. I saw myself so small and thought I had to respect everything. [...]. Now, I no longer see myself that way. I take my own decisions and they – my husband, my children and my mom too – they all see this part of me. [...] He [my husband] has changed: he is nicer and takes me into account. He's like: "What are we going to do?" It's not like [before when] he used to decide everything. [...] I am no longer the obedient girl. I now look for alternatives and contribute because I am independent.*  
(Valeria, 46)

Valeria's example illustrates the extent to which the social positions in a couple relationship can change. Through her higher income and status as the co-owner of a business, Valeria receives more respect from her husband, her children, and her mother. This, in turn, helps her see herself in a different light. The extract also shows how the quality of couple relationships can be improved by dismantling patriarchal structures. More generally, many of the worker-owners have been able to equitably balance financial dependencies with their partners and, sometimes, they have even

reversed them. Thus, they increase their ability to take decisions independently. By being aware of alternatives, the women's autonomy and agency increases in their partnerships and family lives. However, the dilution of traditional gender roles resulting from the wife's new status as the self-employed higher earner also often led to conflicts in the partnership. These conflicts sometimes culminated in separations, which became possible through the women's greater independence. The cooperative member Giovanna, for instance, mentioned while speaking of her separation from her partner that "With the cooperative, I felt more able to take decisions in my life" (Giovanna, 33).

### **Greater Responsibility and Recognition in the Family of Origin**

In addition to changing the women's social position and agency as mothers and partners, membership of a worker cooperative can also have an impact on the relationships with members of their family of origin, such as parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives.

The family's place of origin varies greatly among the research participants. Some research participants, particularly those with Latin American origins, migrated to the US with their siblings and parents. However, most research participants said their parents and siblings were in their home country. For these geographically more distant family members, the cooperative can be an important source of revenue too. Of the 58 female survey participants, 21 stated that the cooperative enables them to support their families in their home country financially.<sup>15</sup> Some even report that their parents and/or siblings in the country of origin depend entirely on the worker-owner's money transfers: "My parents live completely from the money I send to them" (Paula, 47). In line with Yeoh et al.'s (2013) findings, which stress that remittances are crucial to migrant women as "transnational acts of recognition" (*ibid.*, 444), it can reasonably be assumed that this also transforms the position of the worker-owners in their transnational family relationships. Economic capital can give them more influence over family matters. At the same time, a relationship of dependence emerges in which the worker-owners are assigned more responsibility, such as Paula, who is the sole breadwinner for her parents. How relatives can change their views of the worker-owners becomes evident in a statement by Valeria: "[Now,] I take my own decisions and they – my husband, my children, and my mom too – they all see this part of me" (Valeria, 46). Apparently, her partner's, her children's and her mother's acknowledgement of her as an independent individual with agency is new for Valeria.

It is thus reasonable to assume that the worker-owners' increased financial capital improves the migrant women's social positions in their relationships with parents, siblings, and wider family, but it also creates new dependences. Both increased remittances and the recognition the women gain through their financial independence, changes the way they are perceived by the members of their extended family. Furthermore, although not within the scope of this paper, these findings show that the improved income of migrant women in worker cooperatives has a social impact that transcends national boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

#### **4.4 Leisure Time: Reclaiming the Public Sphere**

Most research participants do not spend their entire time on paid work or with their family. Their everyday lives include other activities, such as meeting friends, pursuing hobbies, and political and community activism. In the interviews and in the responses to the survey, the research partners mainly addressed changes in their paid work lives and in their families. However, in line with

<sup>15</sup> It can be assumed that the number would be higher than 21 because many survey participants misunderstood this survey question (instead of marking all true statements, many survey participants thought that they could only choose one option).

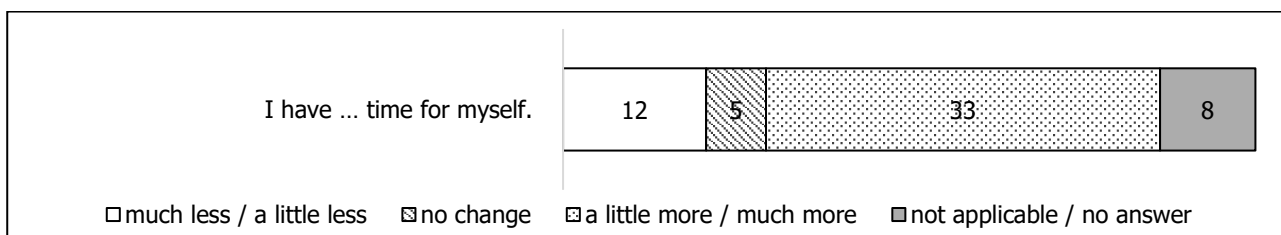
<sup>16</sup> There is extensive literature on the impact of remittances; see Antón (2010).



Lefebvre (1991), we argue that it is crucial to recognize the changes in women's leisure time to fully understand the changes in the social position and agency of migrant women. Lefebvre indeed stresses that leisure is closely linked to paid work and that scholars should investigate “the way the life of workers as such, their place in the division of labor and society, is ‘reflected’ in leisure activities, or at least in what they demand of leisure” (Lefebvre 1991, 30).

An overview of our survey data shows that the worker-owners’ time for leisure activities has changed greatly with the cooperative. Of the 58 women who have responded to the survey, 33 women indicated that the time available for themselves had increased since joining the cooperative (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Transformation of the amount of free time (survey, own elaboration).



In the following, we examine in more detail how membership of a cooperative influences how migrant women spend their leisure time and how it can transform their social position and agency in their leisure activities.

### More Diverse Educational Activities and Stronger Extra-Familial Relationships

The way in which people spend their free time depends on preferences and interests but, as mentioned by Lefebvre (1991, 30), the individual’s social background and their position in society plays an even greater role. The leisure activities from which an individual can choose, depend not only on the various types of capital that define the individual’s social position but also on their gender, ethnicity, and body.

When asked about their leisure activities apart from spending time with family and to the extent to which their choice of activities had changed since they joined a worker cooperative, most interview participants responded with examples of sports and educational activities or spending time with friends. Two worker-owners mentioned such new possibilities of shaping their leisure time according to their desires:

*I like doing sports. With the cooperative, I can choose a shift that starts at 11 am. Like this, I can bring my kids to school at 8am and then go to the gym before I start working. I love that flexibility. (Maria, 40)*

*I have much more time [now] to educate myself a bit more now. There are a lot of activities and lectures in the Center [for Family Life], which I attend in my free time. (Silvia, 44)*

As a member of a cooperative, leisure activities such as sports and continuing education have become more accessible to many worker-owners. The flexible working hours and the higher salary as well as the wide range of courses offered by the CFL and other community organizations facilitate their access to such activities. At the same time, the worker-owners can further increase

their cultural and social capital, especially through educational activities. However, some worker-owners stated that they have less time to engage in leisure activities due to unpaid additional work as a cooperative owner or that they need these activities to cope with stress caused by the additional cooperative management duties.

Many interview and survey participants reported that their nonfamily social network has greatly increased through the cooperative and that they spend their free time seeing friends. Paula, for example, stated that

*The cooperative gave me the opportunity to get to know more different people, not only Latinos or Americans, but also people from other countries. [...] I have a good friend now who is from the Philippines and we see each other a lot. My English is not very good, but we talk and laugh. It is great because in English I often pronounce the words incorrectly and she then corrects me. I am very grateful for that. And at the same time, I can teach her Spanish. (Paula, 47)*

Getting to know people from other cultures and other social classes is not only exciting in itself; it also diversifies one's personal network and thus social capital. Paula's example also shows how social capital can lead to an increase in other types of capital, notably cultural: through her close friendship with someone who speaks another language, she can improve her English skills.

## **Raising Voices for Social Justice**

Whether the social position and agency of migrant women has changed after joining a cooperative can also be examined through their community and social justice activism. Political advocacy, community engagement, and promoting social justice are deeply rooted in the democratic structures and the tradition of worker cooperatives. Scholars suggest that cooperatives can strengthen civil society because “their strong links to the community provide a uniquely favorable basis for the utilization of social capital, its reproduction and accumulation” (Spear 2000, 519). Organizations that support cooperatives usually emphasize strengthening community support and social justice principles. Through political education, organizations such as the CFL try to increase the migrant workers’ knowledge about their rights and thus to create awareness within a community, because this enables further action.

During the interviews, numerous cooperative members reported that their cooperative membership increased their interest and involvement in social justice and political processes. Several of them reported that they had not been politically active before. Only after becoming members of a cooperative did they become involved in social justice causes and community work. Elena, for example, told me:

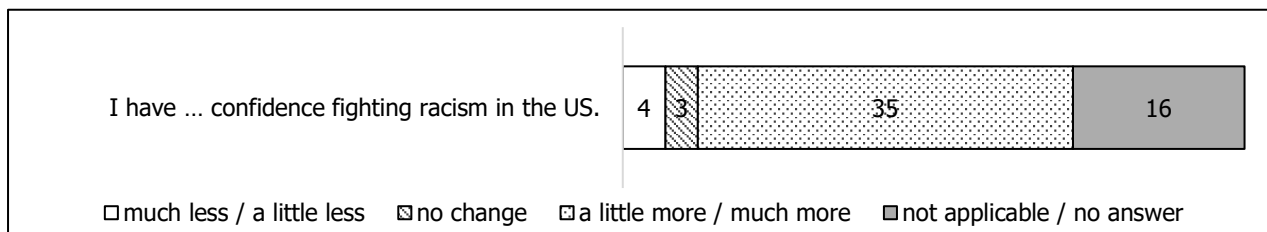
*Before I was in the cooperative, I would have never attended protests – never, never!  
Since I am in the cooperative, I am seeing a lot of these [social justice] issues.  
(Elena, 38)*

This process, which Elena described, can be explained in two ways. Firstly, the worker-owners have acquired cultural capital: they have learned about their rights as workers and migrants and about democratic procedures. The knowledge and skills thus acquired help them to better understand the political system and their individual possibilities for action. Secondly, these individuals have expanded their social capital: by organizing as groups of worker-owners, they acquire a social network they can rely upon in social justice and community-related organizing. The

increase in both cultural and social capital leads to greater confidence in resisting injustice and discrimination.

In the survey, 35 out of 58 women said that since they had joined the cooperative, they felt more confident about fighting racism in the US (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Transformation of confidence in fighting racism in the US (survey, own elaboration)



The worker-owners' engagements in the political sphere are diverse and range from participation in protests to organizing neighborhood collectives and lobbying politicians. Regardless of the specific type, these engagements are probably the most publicly visible form of empowerment that these women have experienced. Even though not all worker-owners are engaged in these political activities, political participation has increasingly become an option for these migrant women after joining a cooperative. Through the increase in cultural and social capital, the migrant women see more opportunities to engage in political life and decide how and to what extent they want to participate. In Kabeer's words, the migrant women have increased their "ability to define [their] goals and act upon them" (Kabeer 1999, 436). Ultimately, these political practices boost the social positions of the migrant women involved: they acquire further organizational and communicational skills (cultural capital), they develop contacts with organizers from other cities and state officials (social capital), and because they are invited to many of those activities, they also earn increased respect (symbolic capital).

## 5 Conclusion

This paper breaks new ground by analyzing the potential of worker cooperatives to empower migrant women in their everyday lives. It recognizes intersectional discrimination patterns in the capitalist labor market and the difficulties many migrant women face in gaining access to well-paid and fair work opportunities in the US, and it shows the extent to which worker cooperatives can counteract these structural exclusion mechanisms and enable migrant women to empower themselves.

We confirm previous findings that showed that worker cooperatives can help circumvent precarious labor conditions (Berry and Bell 2017), reduce income inequality (Jones Austin 2014), counter economic marginalization (Gordon Nembhard 2014), and empower workers (Spear 2000). The novel contribution of this study lies in its ambition to venture beyond the financial realm and the sphere of paid work. To provide a fuller picture of the worker cooperatives' potential for self-empowering migrant women, we integrated all three spheres of everyday life: paid work, family, and leisure.

In the paid work sphere, we showed that membership of a cooperative has led to an increase in resources and achievements for almost all the migrant women participating in this study. Research participants now earn better wages and have more flexibility than before becoming members of a cooperative. Furthermore, they also increased their cultural capital by learning to assume business

responsibilities and to implement democratic decision-making within the cooperative. The women also function as a team in each cooperative, which strengthens social cohesion within the group and thus increase the social capital of each group member. The mutual support through the cooperative has increased the migrant women's feeling of safety in and around the workplace, because they know that they have a network of people that can provide assistance if needed. Prior to the cooperative, many women used to work as employees in cleaning or care companies or were employed directly and informally. Today, the migrant women negotiate with their clients as co-owners of a co-operative. Through this new role, worker-owners earn greater respect from clients and take control of the terms and conditions of their work.

Membership of a cooperative and the resulting increases in resources also lead to numerous achievements in the family life of migrant women. The higher wages, the knowledge acquired about their rights as migrants, and the broader social network gained through the cooperatives give the migrant women more independence from their partners. This greater independence, in turn, often leads to greater autonomy of the women within their family life. The negotiation and communication skills that migrant women learn within democratic forms of organization can also have positive effects on their parenting. Furthermore, their increased economic capital enables them to better support their relatives in their home countries, which can lead to more recognition from parents and siblings but also to greater dependencies.

Finally, worker-ownership in the cooperative also transforms migrant women's leisure time. Thanks to higher wages and greater flexibility in their working hours, most migrant women now enjoy more leisure time. Also, many women have been able to start or intensify activities that were previously difficult to access. For instance, sports activities have become more accessible through the increase in the worker-owners' time flexibility. Continuing education has also become more readily accessible through the low-cost or even free-of-charge learning opportunities provided by community organizations such as the CFL. Many worker-owners now also spend more time on community or social justice activism. This new civic engagement is diverse and ranges from volunteering in community organizations to participating in protests and lobbying local politicians. This achievement of making one's own voice heard in society is probably the most visible form of self-empowerment encountered in this study.

As we have shown, these three spheres of everyday life are all closely related with one another. Some worker-owners explicitly mentioned this interdependencies themselves:

*In the cooperative, we have the power to change things. And now I feel this [power] even at home. I have the possibility to improve [my life]. Before being in the cooperative I didn't feel this way. (Paula, 47)*

By integrating these three life spheres in the analysis, we have shown that the migrant women in our study have generally increased their resources in all spheres of everyday life, which has consequently provided them with greater agency in the three life spheres.

Taking a critical perspective on our results, it is important to note that we mainly presented general trends and selected individual narratives regarding women who are still members of a cooperative. To interrogate women who have left worker cooperatives was not possible within the scope of this research but would certainly have enriched our findings by potentially adding more critical assessments of worker cooperatives and their impacts on migrant women's everyday lives. To more fully incorporate such potential shortcomings of worker cooperatives, future studies could include processes of disengagement (Fillieule 2010) among cooperative members.

It is also important to note that the results of this research concern cooperatives that were supported, at least during their establishment phases, by NGOs that in turn received financial support from the city for this work. This raises the question of whether the “self-empowerment” processes observed in this study would have been possible without initial external support. At a conceptual level, it might thus be more appropriate to speak of external empowerment initiatives, which then set in motion the “self-empowerment” processes actually observed in this study. At a political level, this finding indicates that public funding for worker cooperatives, such as that provided by the City of New York, represent worthwhile policy instruments not only for poverty alleviation but also for gender equality, the inclusion of migrants, and democratic participation.

Worker cooperatives alone are not able to overcome structural challenges such as the global inequalities that enable the wealthy classes to outsource their reproductive work to migrant women and the image of care and cleaning work as typically female work. However, the structural hurdles that migrant women face due to their gender, ethnicity, class, and body render their increase in agency through the membership of a worker cooperative particularly remarkable. We conclude that membership of a worker cooperative enables migrant women to gain power, exercise greater agency, and thus reduce the discrimination they experience. Even if cooperative labor is not yet capable of transforming larger capitalist power structures, this study has shown how self-empowerment of marginalized groups such as migrant women can begin at a workplace level and have impacts far beyond.



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