



Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing

WIEGO Workers' Lives N° 10
December 2020

Hungry

**A Migrant
Domestic Worker in
Cape Town, South Africa**
by Bronwen Dachs Muller

COVID-19 creates specific hardships for domestic workers, and greater exploitation of those who are far from home like Selina Ndlovu. Heavy workloads, reduced income, risk of infection and unfair stigmatization all afflict these essential workers.



Domestic workers from around the world put their handprints on this fabric at an ILO meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2011. Women joining hands in solidarity and celebration (opposite) at the launch of the African Domestic Workers Network in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2013. Photos: Sofia Trevino

Cover: Domestic workers play an essential economic role by providing necessary labour so others are free to work outside the home. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage



Selina Ndlovu¹ said that among the most painful parts of lockdown for her and other immigrant domestic workers in Cape Town was being hungry while watching their employers scurrying to help the poor with food donations.

Bags of groceries, earmarked for distribution, would accumulate on the kitchen table in the Durbanville home where she slept in an outside toilet with a bed squeezed in.

“I saw eggs in one of the bags and I thought, ‘what about me, I can’t eat an egg, it’s a luxury,’” said Selina, a 42-year-old Zimbabwean who has worked in neighbouring South Africa since 2011.

To conduct this interview, I picked her up from her employer’s home and drove to an empty parking lot at the back of a nearby evangelical church. We sat in my car with the windows open and our masks on. Mid-morning early summer, it was sunny and still, and we looked over at domestic workers pushing children on swings in a park.

Selina told me she and the friends she’d made at church and at the park shared their outrage with each other on WhatsApp. A few had asked their employers for some of this food but were told, “You at least have a job, these are for people who have nothing,” Selina recounted. “But we thought, ‘no, we also have nothing.’”

Food relief in the early months of the COVID-19 crisis in South Africa was largely left to civil society with some help from local government, as national government failed to provide this (Seekings 2020).

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¹ This story uses a pseudonym because of the precarious nature of employment for domestic workers in general and immigrant domestic workers in particular.

"We can't spend money on food for ourselves," said Selina, a single mother of three. "I've got big children to take care of, you know, in Zimbabwe."

Children back home

Turned out of the family home by her violent husband years ago, Selina had decided her best hope of feeding her three children and paying their school fees was through doing domestic work in South Africa.

It was a move born of desperation. "My baby was 1 year and 8 months when I left him," she said.

She left the children in her grandmother's care. A few years ago, the older woman died. Selina's oldest, a 21-year-old son, now takes care of her youngest, his 11-year-old brother in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare. Selina also has a grown daughter.

Unpaid and overworked during lockdown

Selina's living and working arrangements took an odd twist in the South African government-imposed lockdown that started in late March 2020 and was among the world's strictest. She was stuck in the home of her former employer, where she was living, and found herself working harder than ever. She was not charged for the meagre accommodation but had to clean and babysit unpaid. Meanwhile, her current employer paid her for five weeks for the three-day-a-week job that the stay-at-home orders prevented her getting to.

"I'd feel like I'm in a prison. I couldn't go onto the street, not into a shop..." Selina said that her former employer would ask her for a shopping list, then buy the items at Checkers, a high-end retailer, and ask Selina to pay her back. "But I can't pay Checkers prices. I buy from Shoprite where it is cheaper."

Her **unpaid work** in lockdown exhausted her to the point that she considered living in a tree as a better alternative to the arrangement she had. Ignoring government restrictions, the family "didn't want to be alone, so friends would come over and stay for days at a time," Selina said. "The kids would run up and down making a mess that I'd have to clean up. It was very tough."

Despite their recklessness in ignoring the **precautionary measures** while Selina was entirely house-bound, these guests shied away from Selina as though she might carry disease.

"They were scared of me; they'd back away like I'm the one who's got COVID. But I'm cleaning the glasses they're drinking from. I'm picking their clothes off the floor."

Selina said they showed no concern about the risks their behaviour posed to her.

Myrtle Witbooi, general secretary of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU),² said these behaviours and attitudes about who is at risk of COVID-19 infection are commonplace and highlight beliefs about whose lives matter.

Hunger during lockdown was widespread among domestic workers and, along with frustration and exhaustion, was among the factors that made Selina desperate enough to leave her free room and pay for a room further away from her three-day job to which she returned in May.

With schools reopening, Selina had resumed her unpaid duties in lieu of rent before leaving for work. "I would get up at six every morning to wake the children and get them ready for school; make their breakfast, pack their lunch.

"I was tired, to tell you the truth. They know we foreigners don't have options, but I couldn't carry on anymore."

Exploitation of migrant domestic workers

Selina said that she and other domestic workers from neighbouring countries battle to keep up to date the documents that allow them to work in South Africa. Also, she fears the **xenophobia** that permeates the country's populace, from high-ranking officials to ordinary citizens, and worries about ending up back in Zimbabwe, where she is certain she could not find work (Crush 2020).

² SADSAWU was officially established as a union in 2000. It organizes, mobilizes and educates individuals who are employed as domestic workers in South Africa.



Myrtle Witbooi, who started her working life as a domestic worker, at an International Labour Organization conference in Geneva in 2011. Photo: Jennifer N. Fish

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When she first arrived in South Africa, Selina looked for live-in employment and found this in Durbanville, an upmarket suburb of Cape Town. Her employer was a pregnant woman with a toddler who often joined her husband on work trips. Selina had little opportunity for rest let alone leisure.

“Even when I went to church on Sundays, I would come out and she would be in the car, hooting, waiting for me,” Selina said. “My work was cooking and cleaning and looking after the babies. The children would wake at 5am and I would be with them from then until sometimes 2am when they went to sleep again.

“I remember I was in my tennis shoes all the time. Sometimes I wouldn’t know if it was day or night. I asked her what my hours were and she told me, ‘your off time is when the baby is asleep.’”

Long, unspecified hours of work and low pay are common issues that domestic workers face, even though these labour conditions are illegal in South Africa, which has covered domestic workers under its labour legislation for two decades. In 2013, it was one of the first countries to ratify the International Labour Organization’s [Convention on the Rights of Domestic Workers](#) (C189).

Domestic workers play an [essential economic role](#) by providing necessary labour so others are free to work outside the home (Verbruggen 2020). But accessing labour rights remains an uphill battle for domestic workers here, as in most of the world. Isolation in private homes and the intimate nature of the work make it hard to organize and educate these workers, who remain largely unregistered and vulnerable to exploitation. Although SADSAWU also works to educate employers, many still refuse to comply with their obligations.

Although she knew she was being exploited, Selina felt she couldn’t quit. Her children in Zimbabwe relied on her income for their daily survival.

Also, she had grown to love the children she was looking after. “Those little kids are big now and we are very close. I love them and they love me.”

But Selina’s employer decided she didn’t need her anymore when the children were both at school and more independent. Selina then found the three-day-a-week job working for a woman she met at church.

She came to an arrangement with her former employer to keep her accommodation, which was within walking distance from her new job. In return she would help with the children, but there were no details and the agreement was verbal.

“She said I mustn’t bring in friends and let people see my room. She was embarrassed and she would always say they will build me something better soon.”

Before lockdown, one set of grandparents moved into the house and Selina found her unpaid tasks extending to cleaning up after them. Sometimes she would be given old and unwanted clothes by the grandmother. “Send them to your children in Zimbabwe,’ the granny would say. But it’s expensive to send clothes to Zimbabwe and who will want to wear torn t-shirts?”

Avenues of support

Selina made her move when South Africa shifted to a less restrictive level of lockdown in June. She now pays R1,200³ per month for the room she rents and R800 on transport to get to her three-day-a-week job. That accounts for almost two-thirds of the R3,200 per month she earns—and she hasn’t bought food yet. Still, her salary is double South Africa’s [minimum wage](#) for domestic workers, which is set at R15.57 per hour (Salie 2020).

No longer doing unpaid work, Selina feels her workload is more manageable; she cleans the home of a family of four, irons their clothes and does other domestic tasks. “Sometimes, when she is rushing to fetch the children from school, I help with the cooking but otherwise she does that.”

Her employer runs a small business from home. Selina’s face softens as she talks about her. “She is nice and I feel loved. She will say to me, ‘Selina you look so worried.’ She helps me by sometimes giving me a bit extra money that I can send to my children and letting me rest when I need to.”

Renting her own place allows Selina to cook food for herself and she’s now occasionally able to help friends who live-in. But it doesn’t always turn out as planned, with employers home a lot more than they were pre-COVID-19, she said.

A Zimbabwean domestic worker with a live-in job told Selina she was starving. She hadn’t eaten a proper meal for a long time and had no means of buying food.

“I took some food I had cooked to share with her, but when I messaged her to say I would pass it to her over the wall, she said ‘don’t.’” Her employers were relaxing outside with drinks and snacks and she knew they would be embarrassed and angry at the implications.

Selina received no help from government or any organization during the COVID-19 crisis. Because she was paid by her

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³ The South African rand (ZAR) averaged R16.6 to USD1 between January and November 2020.

employer during lockdown, she didn't apply for assistance. Zimbabwean domestic worker friends who lost their jobs or had their pay reduced also received nothing, she said. Most didn't know of any relief they would be eligible for without having a South African identity document.

Selina said she had not heard of any successful applications among migrants for the Special COVID-19 Social Relief in Distress Grant of R350 per month. When it was introduced in May 2020, the grant, aimed at helping those who had lost livelihoods, was only for South African citizens but this changed mid-June when the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town⁴ won a **court order** that enabled some asylum-seekers and others to apply.

Very early in the COVID-19 lockdown, SADSAWU began a **GoFundMe campaign** to raise money to help domestic workers—and particularly single mothers—in need.

Myrtle, who started her working life as a domestic worker and is the president of the **International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)**, said that SADSAWU's food vouchers and rent assistance reached more than 300 domestic workers desperately in need of help, regardless

⁴ The Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town is an NGO that has been working since 1994 to provide social welfare and poverty alleviation while fostering integration between migrants, refugees and South Africans. By June, the centre had raised more than R130,000 that was used to help mostly women migrants with food, rent, health-care and other needs.

of citizenship. Migrant domestic workers from other African countries face extreme hardships, she said.⁵

One recipient of the food vouchers had nothing to eat at home, not even a slice of bread, Myrtle said. The recipient wept when she opened the app on her phone that showed the voucher. "She sounded so happy and said she'd wondered if it would be alright if she bought a packet of biscuits or would that be seen as too wasteful," Myrtle recalled.

So-called TERS (Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme) payments were introduced by the government to provide up to 60 per cent of the salaries of staff who lost their jobs as a result of measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. The scheme enabled employers to claim on behalf of their employees as long as they were registered with the national unemployment insurance fund (UIF). However, the problem for most domestic workers is that their employers have not registered with the fund, Myrtle said, noting that workers could not register themselves.⁶

"It is in the employers' power to integrate domestic workers into the UIF system. But they block this by being non-compliant—they need to contribute, and they don't," she said.

Rogan and Skinner calculated that only 20 per cent of the country's 1.2 million domestic workers reported being registered for UIF in the quarterly labour force surveys. According to the UIF Commissioner, by mid-June only 35,374 domestic workers had successfully applied for and been paid UIF, which represents just 15 per cent of the domestic workers who were registered. Numerous implementation challenges have included accusations that employers have not passed on UIF monies to their employees (Rogan and Skinner 2020).

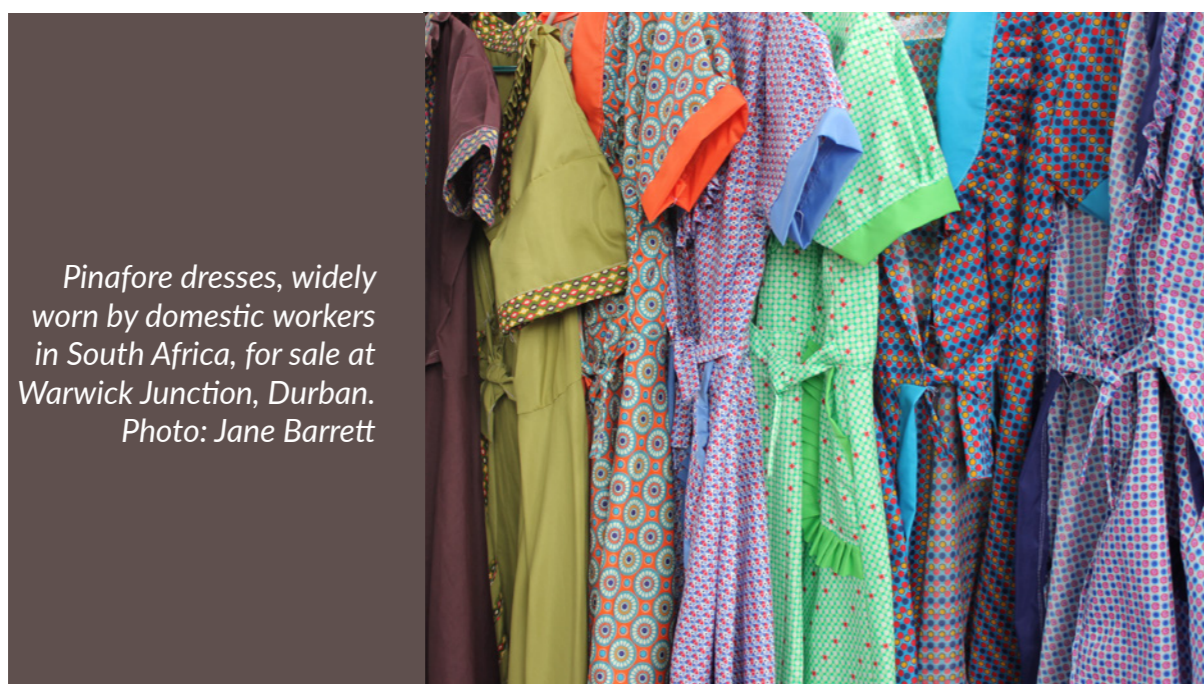
According to Myrtle, these payments could have made a significant difference in helping domestic workers cope in the crisis. "Instead, five days a week, women walk in here, retrenched or working fewer days. Or they WhatsApp asking, 'what can I do?'"

⁵ The IDWF has also launched a **fund to help migrant workers** in the 58 countries where it has affiliates like SADSAWU.

⁶ The UIF changed in recent months to allow employees to register themselves for TERS, and there was a directive from the Ministry of Labour to also allow previously unregistered workers to apply for TERS. While this was operationalized in mid-November 2020, migrant domestic workers still face several barriers to access.

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Pinafore dresses, widely worn by domestic workers in South Africa, for sale at Warwick Junction, Durban. Photo: Jane Barrett

A lean season far from home

Selina had been remitting R600 a month but her accommodation and transport costs now make this impossible. "If I can find a room to share, it will be easier," she said.

Her older son is angry that she has been sending less money home this year and talks of leaving to do the illegal **goldpanning** on disused mines that has killed many desperate Zimbabweans.

"I said to him, 'No, who will care for the little one if something happens to you?'"

Selina's ex-husband, who lives in Harare and now has several more children, "does nothing to help" the family, she said.

With the health risks posed by the pandemic, as well as the cost of the trip, Selina has no plans to visit her children in Zimbabwe this year. "I'm scared that if they close the borders, what am I going to do?"

Also, she needs to focus on finding another two days of work per week, she said.

Myrtle said domestic workers in South Africa traditionally leave the cities where they work to visit family in rural areas or in neighbouring countries over the Christmas period. While COVID-19 health protocols make travelling difficult this year, severe income drops are the bigger hurdle, she said.

"Some employers are now telling them that they paid them for a month of no work in lockdown and so they won't receive their usual holiday pay," she said.

Workers are finding that they have to accept this, as well as cuts to the number of days they work. "They're told by their employers, 'We too are suffering and this is the reality now. Take it or leave it'"

Myrtle, who is 73, has never seen a crisis of this proportion. "In the 50 years I have been involved with domestic workers, I never once thought I would face this crisis. How are we going to survive?"

She answers her own question: "We must put our heads together as women and think about how we are going to train people to start generating an income in this changed world. Domestic workers are saying, 'I need you to teach me, to empower me, give us ideas on how to move into the gig economy. I need to raise my five kids. If I have to make something—like aprons—that's fine, I'll do it'"

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This is a posed photograph of a domestic worker in a private home in Johannesburg, South Africa. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage



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