

## **REPORT FROM CONSULTATION MEETING WITH DOMESTIC WORKERS**

**DATE: MONDAY 17 OCTOBER 2011**

**VENUE: GHANA TUC CONFERENCE HALL**

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### **Introduction.**

This report presents the responses by domestic workers during a focused group discussion. The reports highlights the wages and working conditions of the participants and well as the knowledge levels of the participants on labour law provisions which affect their working life. The FGD revealed that the participants have scanty knowledge about labour laws in Ghana. Even for those legal provisions they had some knowledge about, such knowledge was faulty as they perceived such laws as applicable only to “government”.

### **Wages and Minimum wage**

Majority of the participants in the FGD had no knowledge about the Minimum wage provisions in Ghana. The few who did had did not know the amount and perceived the minimum wage as applicable to formal sector workers. The reported monthly wage of the participants of the FGD ranges from GH₵50 to GH₵100 with an average of GH₵65. The average monthly wage reported by the participants is about 35 percent less the national monthly minimum wage (GH₵100.71)

Although majority of the participants of the FGD reported monthly pay below the current national minimum wage, most of them also indicated that their employers provides them with at least two meals in a day. In addition, those who live-in enjoy free accommodation from their employers.

The FGD revealed that the monthly salaries of the majority of the participants are paid irregularly. Due to the irregularity of payment of monthly salary, some of the participants reported that in some cases they are paid only a monthly’s salary for two months of work. This is captured by one participant as:

*Hmmm, the pay is small and very irregularly. Sometimes madam will give you the money fifteen days after the month ends. Even sometimes, you will only get a month’s pay when in fact you have worked for two months.*

Although all the participants indicated that they and their employers agreed on the wage, before commencement of work, it was reported that some employers sometimes reduce the salaries of domestic workers without even consulting them. In the words of a domestic worker:

*When I was about to start the work, she told me that I will be paid GH₵70 a month. However, she sometimes gives me GH₵50 without any explanation.*

### **Additional Duty without Compensation.**

Although almost all the participants indicated that they had job descriptions at the commencement of work, most of them indicated that they have been given extra duties which do not come with compensation. A participant stated that:

*When I was first employed, my madam told me that I will only be cooking and mopping the floor. Now I iron their clothes. I also sweep the entire house. She doesn't want to see me idle. If she sees that I have finished all me work, she will give me more work.....but she has not added anything to my salary.*

### **Hours of Work**

The participants of the FGD had limited knowledge about the laws on working hours in Ghana. Majority of the participants work for more than 12 hours in a day. Typically, according to the participants, the domestic worker, particularly the live-in is the first to rise but last to sleep. The participants reported that the day of a domestic worker starts around 4:30 am and ends about 10:00pm. For those who live-in, their only respite is when their employers and their families are asleep or at work. A participant summed up the situation of most domestics as follows:

*Break? Who will give you break? They are not happy when they seen you doing nothing. I start work before they get up, prepare the children for school. When they have gone out, there is still some work to do. I only get to rest when they are out and I am done with day's. But when they are at home, they will make sure that I don't rest.*

Above notwithstanding, some of the participants in the FGD, although very few, reported fairly good working hours. They reported between two to three hours of daily rest whether or their employers are at home. One of such participants indicated that:

*As for me, I start work around 5:00 am and close at 5:00pm. In the afternoon, I rest for about three hours.*

The FGD revealed the few participants with such “comparatively good working hours” are mostly elderly women and mostly employed by expatriates. Most of them have also had long working relationship with their current employers. One of such participants reported having worked with a family for about 11 years. In Ghana, respect for the aged is a norm and this may partly explain the relatively better working conditions for the elderly participants in the FGD. Also, expatriate domestic employers have a higher tendency to adhere to employment regulations in Ghana.

### **Annual leave**

Ghana’s labour law, Act 651 provides that a worker who has worked for one year of continuous service in an undertaking is entitled to 15 days of annual leave with pay. However, Most of the participants of the FGD were not aware of the annual leave provision. And for those who appeared to have some knowledge about it, they have the misconception that annual leave provision is for government workers. Having explained the annual leave provision in Act 651 to the participants, one of them bemoaned that;

*Who will give you annual leave, even Saturdays and Sundays you will work. Even on Christmas you will work. In this job, there are no holidays. If you go, by the time you come back, you would have been replaced.*

### **Sick leave**

Almost all, except a few, of the participants of the FGD do not enjoy sick leave with pay even though there are legal provisions for sick leave with pay in Ghana. Consequently, the health-seeking behaviour of most of the participants of the FGD is least desirable. Most of the participants reported that they to take self medication at home when they are sick. They only get the chance to visit the hospital when they situation is getting out of hand. Most of them also reported that they are solely responsible for their healthcare. Those who are members of the National Health Insurance Scheme registered and pay their own premium without any assistance from their employers. A participant lamented that:

*Ah, even when you are sick, getting the chance to go to hospital is a problem. You have to work with your sickness.....I pay for my medical bills myself.*

The above notwithstanding, a few of the participants, mostly the elderly and those working for expatriates reported comparatively better employment-related healthcare schemes . One of such participants indicated that:

*When I am sick, the family take me to the hospital. They pay for my medical bills and everything. I don't have to work when I am sick.*

### **Social security**

Ghana's Pensions Act 766 of 200 provides that both employers and their employees contribute 13 percent and 5.5 percent respectively of the latter's salary as social security contribution. In addition, the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) has established an informal sector fund to provide social security for informal economy operators and serve as an additional social security for formal sector workers. None of the participants of the FGD indicated that she has social security coverage although majority of them know the scheme and its benefits. Like the other working conditions and benefits, the participants perceive that the social security as the preserve for "government workers". Hence all the participants of the FGD are not protected against the contingencies of life.

### **Occupational Health and Safety**

The participants of the FGD were oblivious of the fact that Ghana's labour law, Act 651 provides that it is the duty of an employer to ensure that every worker employed by him or her works under satisfactory, safe and healthy conditions. The participants indicated that their occupation health as safety are personal endeavours as their employers show little or no interest in it. The most common work injury reported by the participants of the FGD was knife cuts. Bodily pains was also reported as common health issue among the participants. One of the participants bemoaned that:

*Because of the constant mopping of floor, I have developed this severe back ache. But because of poverty I still have to work with it.*

### **Abuse and Harassments**

Accounts by the participants of the FGD show that physical abuse is absent and verbal abuse minimal. The accounts also show that age of the domestic workers to some extent influence the tendency of being verbally abuse. This is because the few of participants

who have experienced verbal abuse are young domestic workers. According to a twenty-four year old participants:

*My madam can insult me from head to toe. Sometimes it is too bad that I don't even know what to do. The unfortunate thing is that I cannot insult her back.*

Those who are also verbally abused also have relatively little experience in domestic work and this might influence the mistakes and “misdemeanor” which attract verbal abuses for their employers.

Only two of the participants of the FGD reported attempts of sexual harassment. While one of the two attempts was by the son of the participants employer, the other was by the “gateman” or security guard of the employer. The participants indicated that they avoided being sexually abused by aggressively defending themselves. They however did not seek any further action to seek redress.

## **Conclusion**

The forgoing is a report of a FGD held with domestic workers. The above report shows that the participants generally lack adequate knowledge about their rights as workers. This lack of information about their right generally accounts to the abuses reported above. It is therefore necessary that attempts at improving the improving the conditions of work of domestic workers incorporates sensitization programmes on workers' rights. This sensitization programme should however, not be confined only to the domestic workers alone but also to their employers. Also, unions must endeavour to extend their organizing work to domestic workers in order to extend the union services and benefits to them.