



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

INFORMAL WORKERS IN FOCUS: DOMESTIC WORKERS



According to the International Labour Office (ILO) there are “tens of millions”¹ of domestic workers² worldwide, the vast majority being women from the poorer sections of society. Domestic workers are employed in private homes by the householder to carry out tasks such as cleaning, laundry, cooking, shopping, gardening, childcare or care of the elderly. Some live on the premises of their employer. Many work on a part time basis, often for multiple employers. Many are migrant workers from other countries, or from rural to urban areas in the same country. Large numbers of children are in domestic service and there are links between children in domestic service and trafficking, both within and between countries.³ Despite differences in their working and legal situation, domestic workers worldwide share common characteristics, most notably their isolation, invisibility and lack of recognition and of worker rights.

Women in Domestic Work

Why women work as domestic workers

A combination of push and pull factors contribute to women entering domestic work, either in their own countries or abroad. Rural poverty has increased in many countries occasioned by structural adjustment programmes, devastation of the agricultural sector and economic crises. This has pushed many women and girls into the domestic labour market.⁴ With few formal jobs available and facing gender discrimination, often coupled with discrimination based on caste or class, race or ethnicity, their options for decent work are few. And, as most are from poor households, they generally have low levels of education and few marketable skills, other than their skills in keeping house and caring for others.⁵ Cleaning and cooking, looking after children and the elderly is almost universally regarded as women’s work, which means that men rarely compete with women in this job market. Domestic work is therefore one of the few employment opportunities open to poor women.



¹ ILO: Briefing note on domestic work, prepared by S. Grumiau at the request of the ILO’s Bureau for Workers’ Activities, Geneva, June 2007, quoted in ILO, GB 300/2/2, Proposal for the agenda of the 99th Session(2010) of the Conference, Governing Body 300th Session, Geneva, November 2007

² Latin American organizations prefer the name “household workers”. See “Montevideo Declaration”, adopted at an ILO South American Seminar of women migrant domestic workers in Montevideo, Uruguay, December 2005, <http://www.oitchile.cl/pdf/decomontevideo.pdf> (Spanish). For English version and discussion on this issue, see IRENE and IUW, 2008, Respect and Rights: Protection for Domestic/Household Workers! Report on the international conference held in Amsterdam, 8-10 November 2006, p5, 41. <http://www.domesticworkerrights.org>

³ ILO, A Future without Child Labour (Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work) Geneva: 2002. pp29.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, 2006, Swept Under the Rug: Abuses against Domestic Workers Around the World, p16. http://hrw.org/campaigns/women/2006/domestic_workers/index.htm

⁵ Although domestic workers generally have low education levels, some domestic workers who have migrated to other countries from countries such as the Philippines or from eastern Europe often have medium or even high levels of education. Jose Maria Ramirez-Machado, Domestic Work, Conditions of Work and Employment: A Legal Perspective, (ILO, Geneva, 2003) p 3, note 12. www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/condtrav/publ/7cwe.htm



There is an ongoing demand for domestic services due to a range of demographic, social and employment trends. In Western Europe, a growing proportion of women work outside the home, whilst public provision of household and care services is in decline. Family support is often no longer available and so the need for help with housework, child care and care of the elderly has increased.⁶ Affordable, low paid domestic work frees up women to work and fills the gaps in care facilities. Similarly demand for domestic workers is strong in North America, wealthier Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea, and in many Arab States.⁷

Numbers of workers and wages

The ILO Bureau of Statistics Database shows that domestic work is an important source of employment for women but not for men. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 10 to 18 per cent of women employed are in domestic work. In the Arab countries, specifically in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over 40 per cent of women employed are in domestic work. Domestic work is also important in women's employment in many countries in Asia and Africa: the Philippines 11 per cent; Botswana 11 per cent; Namibia 12 per cent and South Africa 16 per cent. By contrast in very few countries are more than one per cent of men employed in domestic service.

Data on wages in domestic work are also available in the ILO Bureau of Statistics Database for a few countries. They show that women employed in domestic work receive much lower wages than women working in other jobs and that the wage levels are lower for women domestic workers than for men domestic workers. For example, in Costa Rica women employed as domestic workers earn an average of 40 per cent of wages paid to other women workers while the comparable ratio for men is 67 per cent.

Migrant Workers

Over the past three decades the share of women among international migrants has increased significantly. Women now make up approximately half of the estimated 200 million migrants worldwide, with women and girl domestic workers an important part of this trend.⁸

Asia is a large source of international migrants working as domestics both within Asia and beyond. As of the mid-2000s around 6.3 million Asian migrants were legally working and residing in the more developed countries of Asia. Most come from Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka where women, mostly domestic workers, make up 60-80 per cent of registered migrants. Perhaps another 1.2 million undocumented migrants are in the region, many working as domestic workers.⁹

Arab countries employ millions of migrant domestic workers. In Saudi Arabia for example, there are approximately 1.5 million domestic workers, primarily from Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.¹⁰

In Latin America domestic workers make up to 60 per cent of internal and cross-border migrants. Young women migrate from the less economically developed countries, for example Bolivia and Peru to work in the more developed countries, such as Argentina and Chile. Women migrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America make up most of the domestic workforce in the US.¹¹

In France more than 50 per cent of migrant women are employed in domestic work. In Italy some 600,000 people are registered as domestic workers; the majority are non-EU nationals. There are also many who are undocumented, not having a work permit, making an estimated total of 1.2 million workers in Italy providing domestic services to individuals.¹²

Child Labour

Throughout the world there are thousands of girls working in domestic service, especially in countries in the developing world. They are particularly hidden workers and among the most



⁶ ETUC, Out of the Shadows: Organising and Protecting Domestic Workers in Europe: the role of trade unions, Report of a conference organised by the European Trades Union Confederation (ETUC), IRENE and PICUM, Brussels, 14-15 April 2005, p.10, www.etuc.org/a/2

⁷ United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA), State of the World Population, 2006, Domestic Workers Far From Home, http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2006/moving_young_eng/stories/stories_Noraida.htm

⁸ Human Rights Watch, 2006, p3.

⁹ United Nations Population Fund, 2006

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, 2008, "As If I Am Not Human", Abuses against Asian Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia, p 2. <http://hrw.org/reports/2008/saudiarabia0708/>

¹¹ United Nations Population Fund, 2006

¹² IRENE, 2007, Part 11, p3



difficult to survey. The ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) notes that available statistics probably show only the “tip of the iceberg” and provide “an alarming indication of the extent of the phenomena worldwide”. It reports that around 175,000 children under 18 are employed in domestic service in Central America and more than 688,000 in Indonesia. Most child labourers are between 12 and 17 years of age but some are as young as 5. In South Africa nearly 54,000 children under 15 are working as domestics and in Guatemala around 38,000 children between 5 and 7. It is also estimated that more girls under 16 work in domestic service than in any other category of child labour.¹³

Problems at Work

Domestic workers are isolated and vulnerable, especially those that live in their employer’s home. They are dependent on the good or bad will of their employer. As women they are subjected to gender discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping in relation to their work which is regarded as low status, and accorded little value. They risk physical and psychological abuse and sexual exploitation, with migrant domestic workers and children being especially vulnerable.¹⁴ They work long hours, for meagre pay, and usually have no maternity leave, health care or pension provision. Living conditions of those who stay on the premises of their employer are frequently sub-standard. In many countries they are excluded from the provision of labour law and social security protection, or inferior standards apply. An ILO report examining legislation for domestic workers in over sixty countries notes that, “Regardless of the manner in which domestic work is regulated by national laws, standards on domestic work fall below labour standards set for other categories of workers”.¹⁵ Even where protective laws are on the statute books, they are frequently ignored by employers and not enforced by authorities. Domestic workers who do not live on their employer’s premises face many of the same problems. This means that a majority of domestic workers work informally, whatever their formal legal status, and make up a sizeable portion of the informal women workforce.

Organizing Among Domestic Workers

Most domestic worker are not organised into trade unions and have no representative voice. In some countries they are not allowed to join trade unions.¹⁶ Even where they have the legal right to organize, because they are isolated and vulnerable, it is not easy for them to do so. Where they do organize into unions these organizations struggle to grow and sustain themselves. Generally, established unions and national centres have not prioritised organizing domestic workers precisely because they are invisible, are women in “low status” jobs, seemingly without collective power, difficult to organize using traditional approaches and a challenge for financial sustainability.

Fortunately there are exceptions. One example is in Italy where the Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Commercio Alberghi Mense e Servizi-Confederazione Generale Italiana (FILCAMS-CGIL), a union in the commerce, tourism and services sector, has negotiated a national collective agreement for privately employed domestic workers. There has been such an agreement since 1974.¹⁷ And, domestic workers are organizing themselves in many other ways. Migrant workers organize into groups on the basis of a common nationality or language. Others form groups and develop organizations through faith-based institutions. Some self-help groups or organizations decide that a trade union is needed and transform themselves. In Peru, the NGO, Instituto para la Promoción y Formación de Trabajos en el Hogar (IPROFOTH or Institute of Promotion and Formation of Workers of the Home) formed a trade union which was registered in 2006. The Indonesia Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) in Hong Kong started off as a self-help group of Indonesian migrant domestic workers and decided to become a trade union to gain recognition, and have a more political agenda of promoting labour rights. Elsewhere domestic workers, against all odds, have chosen to directly form a new trade union, such as the South African Domestic, Service and Allied Workers’ Union (SADSAWU). And where forming independent trade unions is difficult they find creative ways of organizing and fighting for their rights, such as through the Beijing Migrant Women Workers Club in China.



¹³ ILO-IPEC, Domestic Labour, Global Facts and Figures in Brief, <http://www.ilo.org/ipecc/areas/Childdomesticlabour/lang--en/index.htm>. See also ILO-IPEC Hazardous Child Domestic Work. A briefing sheet, (Geneva, 2007), <http://www.ilo.org/ipeccinfo/product/viewProduct.do?productId=4044>

¹⁴ See for example, Human Rights Watch, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2008: Amnesty International, 2007, Indonesia: Exploitation and abuse: the plight of women domestic workers, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA21/001/2007>; Oxfam and Kalayaan, 2008, The New Bonded Labour? <http://www.kalayaan.org.uk/documents/Kalayaan%20Oxfam%20report.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ramirez-Machado, 2003, p 64

¹⁶ ILO: Freedom of association and collective bargaining; Right of workers and employers to establish and join organizations, Chapter III, Report III, Part 4B, ILC, 81st Session (Geneva, June 1994).

¹⁷ ETUC, 2005, p 38



Not only are domestic workers organizing locally, but they are uniting regionally and globally. In Asia the regional Asia Domestic Workers Network (ADWN) was formed in 2004. It consists of twelve local domestic worker organizations and support NGOs from six Asian countries. In Latin America, there is a long established regional organization, Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar (CONLACTRAHO or the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers) with member organizations in thirteen countries in the region as well as in Canada and an organisation of migrant workers in Europe.¹⁸ In the USA, in June 2008, the National Domestic Worker Alliance, founded in 2007 at the US Social Forum, held its first Congress.¹⁹

In an important development, in 2007 the global union federation, International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF), placed priority on support for domestic workers. It is establishing a network to promote domestic workers' rights, and is leading a campaign for an ILO Convention on domestic work. This initiative has the support of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), and other global union federations.²⁰ The recommendation to explore forming an international network was taken at the International Conference, "Protection for Domestic Workers", held in Amsterdam, November 2006.²¹

Domestic Workers' Demands

Some of the common demands of domestic workers around the world are:

- Recognition of domestic work as real work, and not simply an extension of unpaid household and care work
- Recognition of domestic workers as workers
- Recognition and valuing of domestic work and the skills involved
- Worker rights in law - equal to other workers including the right to organize and join trade unions; the right to representation
- Decent conditions of work, including limitations on working hours, rest periods, overtime pay, paid holidays, sick leave, maternity leave and a living wage
- Social security and protection: health care (including for those with HIV/Aids) and pensions
- Access and right to training
- Freedom: of movement, to change employer, from harassment, from physical and psychological abuse and sexual exploitation
- Decent living conditions, including housing and facilities
- Favourable immigration laws
- Regulation of recruitment and placement agencies

On the Agenda: ILO Domestic Work Convention

The rights of domestic workers as workers in international and national law, until recently, have received little attention. This is changing with more countries putting in place laws to protect domestic workers, or signalling their intention to do so. Whilst trade unions from time to time have voiced the need for a special ILO instrument (convention), employers and governments for a long time have not seen the need for an international labour standard for domestic workers, and it has not been strongly pursued. However, in 2007, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) reiterated the call, with strong support from domestic worker organizations, the IUF, WIEGO, and a range of allies. In March 2008, the ILO Governing Body, with some supportive governments amongst its members, agreed to start the standard setting procedure for a Convention on Domestic Work. A discussion of "Decent Work for Domestic Workers" was placed on the agenda of the 2010 International Labour Conference with the intention of adopting an instrument, possibly a convention in the following year. The ILO process leading up to a possible convention is outlined in the box below.



¹⁸ IRENE, 2007, Part 11 for information on these and other organisations. See also a series of interviews conducted for ITUC by Sam Grumiau: Interview with Anjali Shukla, National Domestic Workers Movement, and Teresa Joseph of the North East Domestic Workers Movement in India; www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article987; Interview with Sartiwen Binti Sanbardi of IMWU, www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article472; Interview with Hester Stephens of SADSAWU, www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article1483&var_recherche=Ester%20stevens

¹⁹ www.domesticworkersunited.org

²⁰ Interview Barbro Budin, IUF Equality Officer, by Natacha David for the ITUC, <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article1585&lang=en>; see also <http://www.domesticworkersrights.org/www.domesticworkersrights.org>

²¹ IRENE, 2007, Part 1, p24.



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Photo: ABC News

Towards a Domestic Work Convention: ILO Process and Timetable ²²

In January 2009	The Office sends a law and practice report along with a questionnaire to ILO Member States Governments have to consult with workers' organizations and employers' associations
End August 2009	Deadline for submission of replies to the Office
January 2010	The Office sends a second report, examining the replies received, to Member States
First discussion in June 2010 at the International Labour Conference of the ILO	A decision is taken on the form of the draft ILO instrument(s) - whether a Convention or a Recommendation or both
August 2010	The Office sends a third report containing (a) draft instrument(s) to Member States
End November 2010	Deadline for submission to the Office of comments on the third report by Member States
March 2011	The Office sends two reports to Member States: one examining the replies received on the third report, and the other containing the text of the draft instrument(s) revised in the light of comments received
Discussion in June 2011 at the International Labour Conference of the ILO	A Convention or any other agreed instrument will be discussed and adopted or rejected by the ILC

²² Karin Pape, Report on a Meeting at the ILO, May 2008, WIEGO; Manuela Tomei, ILO, personal communication, September 2008

HOW WIEGO HELPS

WIEGO has consistently raised its concern about the situation of domestic workers. It has encouraged and supported organizing and networking amongst domestic workers. WIEGO was a member of the Steering Committee that organized the international conference "Protection for Domestic Workers", held in Amsterdam in November 2006. It is working with the IUF, which is a member of WIEGO, to help build the international domestic worker network, and campaign for an ILO Convention. It is also working to improve statistics on domestic workers and to make these data available to domestic worker organizations and advocates.