



The UN & You

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Domestic Workers...Hidden From Public View

Domestic Workers are an integral part of the global workforce. They provide services that enable others to work and help keep the labor markets and economies working around the globe. Yet they remain outside the sphere of labor and social policy making and are confined to the informal economy – they work in other people’s homes behind closed doors and are hidden from the public view, almost invisible.

They provide a range of services – sweep and clean; wash clothes and dishes; shop and cook; care for children, the elderly, and the disabled; they provide gardening, driving, and security services. Some live within the premises of the employers, while some work part time – often for multiple employers, just to make a living. More women are engaged in the cleaning and care services, while men work as gardeners, drivers and security guards, earning better pay.

Compared to most wage workers, domestic workers receive lower wages and are excluded from benefits and protections other workers take for granted like minimum wages, paid annual leave, paid sick leave, working time, maternity protection and other social protection measures. They are vulnerable to various types of exploitation – physical, mental and sexual. Domestic workers are a neglected group, a large part of the unorganized sector. They are not organized into trade unions and often are prevented from exercising their own agency. Very few of them have labor contracts and in many countries they are excluded from labor law and social protection measures. The very nature of their work, within the confines of another person’s household and the worker-employer relationship, makes it difficult to negotiate better working conditions, minimum wages and benefits.

There are 67.1 million domestic workers globally. This figure is not accurate, since domestic workers are undercounted in labor surveys. Women and girls, who come from disadvantage communities account for almost 83 percent of the domestic workforce. Asia and the Pacific is the largest employer of domestic workers with a share of 41 per cent, Latin America and the Caribbean count for 37 per cent, Africa accounts for 10 per cent and the remaining work in the developed countries. The Middle East accounts for 4 per cent of the world’s domestic workers.

Another vulnerable category is the 11.5 million migrant domestic workers. Asia is a source of migrant domestic

workers; the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia are the major sending countries of female migrant workers. Since women make up a large segment of this group, they experience gender stereotypes and discrimination. In fact, they face cumulative layers of discrimination: as women, as migrants and as unprotected workers. The uneven power relationships between employers and employees, coupled with lack of regulatory measures contribute to their vulnerabilities – trafficking and bonded labor. The individual sponsorship system called ‘Kafala’ that is prevalent in the Middle East ties the migrant workers’ visas to individual employers and leads to dependency on one employer and abuse.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has been trying to improve the working conditions of domestic workers, though it failed in 1936 at the International Labor Conference which adopted the “Holidays with Pay Convention.” Better education, skills, and more avenues for employment have not reduced the number of people engaged in domestic work.

The ILO took up the cause of Domestic Workers – better labor standards and legal protection – again at its General Conference in June 2011. [Recognizing the significant contribution of domestic workers to the global economy and the discriminatory conditions of employment and denial of their human rights, the ILO passed the Domestic Workers Convention \(C189\) concerning decent work for domestic workers.](#) The Convention affirms the fundamental rights of domestic workers and lays down basic principles and measures regarding the promotion of decent work for them. It calls on governments to take measures to extend national legal protections to domestic workers. Migrant domestic workers should be provided with written contracts enforceable in the country of employment, clear conditions under which they will be entitled to repatriation at the end of their employment and protection from abusive practices. This Convention came into force in September 2013. As of January 2018, only 24 States have ratified it. So the struggle of the Domestic Workers continue...

Watch this Video

Women and Work: Feminists in Solidarity with Domestic Workers <https://youtu.be/KQ5b61dFn8c>