



International
Labour
Organization

Cooperating out of isolation: the case of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait

Validation Roundtable

Amman, 14-15 December, 2014

Concept note

Background

As in other parts of the world, Arab countries have seen an increase in – mainly female – migrant domestic workers,¹ who have become the primary care providers in the household. This is the result of many contributing factors including the lack of affordable and well-regulated social care provisions and infrastructures, demographic shifts and transformation of families, and changing income and working patterns. In parallel, Arab women are slowly but steadily increasing their participation in the labour market which limits potential time allocated to provide care for their families and households.

Despite recent attempts and progress of some countries in the region to better understand the principles and values of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), the lack of a comprehensive governance framework for migrant domestic workers results in an asymmetric working relation between the domestic worker and the employer. This working relation, determined by the sponsorship or *kafala* system, is characterized by an uneven distribution of power whereby the workers have limited or no space for negotiation and their voices are not represented. In general, the *kafala* model remains the main system in the region to contract migrant domestic workers. It gives the employer full legal and economic responsibility for the domestic worker throughout their stay in the receiving country, more specifically inside the household of the employer. As a result, many ‘live-in’ domestic workers face isolation and limited freedom of movement, which hinders their possibility for collective organization.

Moreover, the fact that most labour laws in the region exclude domestic workers increases the risk of vulnerability and exploitation of the worker. Similarly, domestic workers in the majority of Arab countries are not allowed to establish a trade union, although they may have the right to join a national workers’ union such as in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait. Despite the existence of informal networks and community-based initiatives, at times led by religious institutions, the level of formal organization of migrant domestic workers continues to be limited. Hence their voices remain largely unheard.

¹The exact number of domestic workers in the Arab states is not well known, due to lack of adequate and accurate statistics.

As part of the “Regional Advocacy Strategy on ILO’s Domestic Workers C. 189 Action in the Middle East”, the ILO has produced a comprehensive study entitled “Cooperating out of isolation: the case of domestic workers in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait”. The study is an attempt to map the current legislative and policy frameworks, institutional structures and membership-based initiatives that can provide domestic workers with the space to economically organize in the Middle East. It also looks at current opportunities in national legal frameworks that could allow and promote domestic workers’ economic enterprises and solidarity economy organizations, with *cooperatives*² being an attractive option. Effectively, research shows that cooperatives can help provide services for their members and improve the governance of the domestic work market, especially vis-à-vis private employment agencies.

This work stems from an upsurge of membership-based organizational activity among domestic workers in many parts of the world. There are now emerging examples of domestic workers organizing themselves through cooperatives. Cooperatives have been recognized as a viable business model that provides services to their members across a wide range of sectors, such as agriculture, finance, housing and social services. They also constitute appropriate space for domestic workers to claim their rights and improve their working conditions, as enshrined in the ILO Recommendation No. 193.³

For instance, across the United States, domestic workers have formed their own cooperatives for intermediation with employers. UNITY Housecleaners Cooperative and Si Se Puede, both New York based domestic worker cooperatives, serve as intermediaries between their workers and employers. Through the cooperative workers get paid almost three times the minimum wage. UNITY Housecleaners has not only worked with employers but also with legislators participating in campaigns to pass a national Bill of Rights for domestic workers which requires private employment agencies to inform workers about overtime, benefits and other entitlements, regardless of immigration status. Such experiences of employment services are being adopted by domestic workers around the world and could be replicated also in the Arab states. Domestic workers’ cooperatives also provide financial aid, housing, education and other services to their member from South Africa to Jamaica, Korea, Hong Kong, Italy and the Philippines.

Rationale

Following on the recent assessment “Cooperating out of isolation: the case of domestic workers in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait” the ILO proposes a stakeholder validation workshop to discuss the findings and options for collective service provision among migrant domestic workers in these countries; the workshop will serve to validate and prioritize the findings from the assessment. It is expected to lead to a dialogue on the economic viability of employment and other services provided through cooperatives with a view to supporting the rights of migrant domestic workers and improving their terms and conditions of work. This will allow constructive thinking on enabling factors that can promote the formation and operation of cooperatives among domestic workers, including the role of national workers’ organizations in integrating cooperatives as a service provision mechanism for their members. The workshop will also build on experiences from other parts of the world and learn from their challenges and benefit from their success.

²A cooperative is defined by both the International Co-operative Alliance and the International Labour Organization as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.”

³ ILO Recommendation No. 193 on the promotion of cooperatives provides a good reference on the guiding principles for cooperative work, as does the ILO COOP strategy 2013-2015, which includes work on migrant cooperatives, including domestic workers. The Recommendation also recognizes the potential of cooperatives to develop fair value chains, thanks to their sustainable and democratic nature.

Objectives

The overarching objective of this workshop is to validate the findings of the assessment, prioritize findings and explore ways to provide services for domestic workers through cooperatives. More specifically, the validation workshop aims to:

- Analyse challenges and opportunities for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait with regard to exploring the potential of organizing services through cooperatives;
- Explore innovative practices from across the world which may provide insights into ways employment services can be provided;
- Raise awareness on Convention No. 189 and Recommendation No. 201 that guide action to protect domestic workers, including their right to organize.

Participants

Participants will include representatives from each country, with government, workers' organizations, informal domestic workers' networks, rights-based support institutions working with domestic workers and legal experts. It will also bring international and national expertise and representatives from cooperatives. Authors of the study will be there to present their findings. A total of 30 participants will take part in this workshop.

Venue, duration and format

Venue: Le Méridien, Amman, Jordan

Duration: 14-15 December 2014 (2 days)

Format: Plenary sessions and round table discussions, working groups, Q&A with simultaneous interpretation in Arabic and English.

Key informative documents:

- Cooperating out of isolation: the case of domestic workers in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait, ILO 2014
- Domestic Workers Cooperatives Policy Brief, ILO COOP.
- Media products developed for the event.



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Day 1 – Sunday 14th of December, 2014

08:30 – 09:00	Registration	
09:00 – 09:30	Welcoming note	ILO, Phil Fishman and Simel Esim
09:30 – 10:00	Introduction to the ILO work on migrant domestic workers in the Arab states	ILO, Emanuela Pozzan
10:00 – 11:30	Cooperating out of isolation: the case of migrant domestic workers in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon Discussion	Authors Thorayya al-Reyyes and Nizar Saghiye
11:30 – 12:00	Coffee and snack break	
12:00 – 13:00	Trade unions and worker cooperatives	ILO ACTRAV, Pierre Laliberte and ITUC, Marieke Koning
13:00 – 14:15	International experiences of domestic worker cooperatives: Case studies of domestic worker coops in the US, Asia and South Africa. Discussion	Rebecca Kemble (US) Grania Mackie (South Africa) Fish Ip (Hong Kong)
14:15 – 15:00	Working group (country specific, discussion of the findings of the study)	
15:00	Lunch	

Day 2- Monday, 15th of December, 2014

09:00 – 09:45	Recap of day 1 and presentation of working groups	
09:45 – 10:15	The experience of SWaCH: Waste-pickers cooperative for efficient waste management and decent work (India)	Malati Gadgil (India)
10:15 – 11:30	Domestic workers' in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait responses	Workers' Center (Jordan) Fenasol and MCC, NARI (Lebanon)
11:30 -12:00	Coffee and snack break	
12:00 - 13:00	Working group (mixed groups – cooperating out of isolation exploring different models)	
13:00 – 14:00	Working groups presentation and discussion	
14:00 – 14:30	Discussion and validation of the study	
14:30 – 15:00	Ways forward and conclusions	ILO
15:00	Lunch	

