

Decent Work for Domestic Workers

India has experienced high GDP growth in the last decades. This has enabled sections of the population, particularly in urban areas, to benefit from the growth around them. However, much of the jobs generated in this period of accelerated GDP growth were in the unorganized sector. Today, over 86 percent of workers are in the unorganized sector and as such the contribution this sector makes to the current growth cannot be ignored.

A profession that is supporting the growth in more ways than one is domestic work. Domestic work refers to housework such as sweeping, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cooking, caring of children and such other work which is carried out for an employer for remuneration. It has been referred to as “care work”, “reproductive work”, “labour of love” and for the most part it is the women of the household who have performed the bulk of it as unpaid household work, often forfeiting the opportunity to pursue paid work outside the house. Today, paid domestic work is the fastest growing sector of employment for urban women. It is the availability of paid (and unpaid) domestic work that enables households to run smoothly thereby allowing them to engage in the labour market and the tap the developments around them.

National estimates for 2004-5 suggest 4.75 million workers were employed by private households; 3.05 million of these were urban women. Despite such significant presence, and fast growth of the sector (increasing by 222% since 1999-2000), domestic work is slow to receive recognition as professional work. The invisibility and low social status awarded to this sector is compounded by the fact that a large number of domestic workers belong to lower caste or ethnic minority communities. Currently, domestic workers are not covered under any labour laws and there are no legal and policy regulations to ensure the protection of workers employed in this sector. Collecting accurate and comparable data on the number of domestic workers throughout the world is difficult because of high incidence of undeclared domestic work, under-reporting, and the varying definitions of domestic work in statistical surveys.

The **Decent Work for Domestic Workers** campaign is grounded in the four principles of the Decent Work Agenda:-

1. Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work– To promote and realize fundamental principles and rights at work for all workers
2. Broad social protection – Enhance the coverage and effectiveness of social protection for all
3. Access to decent and productive jobs – Create greater opportunities for women and men to secure decent employment and income
4. Voice and representation at work – Strengthen the organization of workers and employers and promote social dialogue



The work performed by the domestic workers does not correspond to what is generally thought of as the “labour market. This is because domestic work does not take place in a factory or an office, but in the home. It typically reflects the otherwise unpaid labour in the household traditionally performed by women, which requires no formal skill training. Because of this female character of household work, the ‘paid’ domestic work also remains hidden, undervalued.

Domestic workers suffer from lack of decent wages, ill working conditions, undefined working time, no weekly offs, loneliness (separated from family and friends, and children), no career growth, no skill development, victimization at the hands of traffickers/placement agencies and even violence, abuse and sexual harassment at workplace. The public perception of domestic work is often that it is undignified work, and the workers in this sector should be pitied as they are not qualified for anything else. Such sentiments are evident in news articles reporting criminal activities by domestic workers. Little is recognized about their role in improving the quality of life for their employers.

Domestic work has been an ILO concern since 1948. The International Labour Organization (ILO) which is devoted to advancing opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. In principle, ILO labour Conventions and Recommendations cover all the workers, including domestic workers; however the provisions applicable to them are scattered across different Conventions. A few Conventions specifically allow the exclusion of domestic workers. Domestic workers form a significant part of the working population and given their vulnerability to dangerous, discriminatory and abusive working conditions, they warrant special attention. In March 2008 the Governing Body of ILO has put the agenda of discussing the need for an International legal instrument¹ for protecting the rights of the domestic workers at the International Labour Conference in June 2010.

THE CAMPAIGN

With the help of **Decent Work for Domestic Workers** campaign, the ILO intends to:

- Raise awareness about the rights of the domestic workers amongst the public, household employers, youth, resident welfare associations and the domestic workers themselves, thereby shift public perception of domestic work and workers.
- Promote skill building of domestic workers and professionalizing domestic work by providing a definite career path to them. This can be seen as one of the tools to promote decent work as skill building can help promote better wages and the working conditions and an improved environment to both the employees and the employers.

¹International legal instrument can take the form of (1) a Convention, (2) a Recommendation, (3) a Convention and a Recommendation (4) Convention with binding and non-binding parts



- Support domestic workers to organise with the assistance from Trade Unions and further capacitate them on their rights as workers;
- Set in motion action and dialogues among its constituents and other stakeholders to improve the work conditions and application of labour rights of the domestic workers;

The strategic means of promoting Decent Work for Domestic Work are:

- ***Recognize Domestic Work as “Real Work”***
 - Enhance the visibility of domestic work by raising awareness of the extent of domestic workers and of the nature of their working lives
 - National law and legislation that recognizes domestic work as employment, worthy of regulation and labour law protection, both for Domestic Workers and for their employers
 - Statistical visibility through regular systematic data collection
- ***Reach out, Organize, Represent***
 - Spread awareness amongst the household employers, resident welfare associations and domestic workers of their rights and need to have a voice of their own with the help of media
 - Efforts towards facilitating the organization of domestic workers to improve their collective strength, voice and representation
 - Collective negotiation with the employers' associations, RWAs and with the state for protection
 - Bring together actors working on domestic workers to agree on a common “minimum floor” of benefits to domestic workers
 - Produce practical tools to support the work of constituents and civil society in promoting decent work for domestic work.

Recent initiatives of the ILO are towards a more concerted effort at spreading awareness about the rights of the domestic workers, dialoguing with the key constituents (the Government, the Employers' Organizations and the Trade Unions), involving civil society organizations, Resident Welfare Associations, the domestic workers themselves, the youth and the public at a large. The Standard Setting Process at International Labour Conference (ILC) also provides an opportunity for ILO to work with the Government and other stakeholders in organizing, developing and promoting draft national legislations for broader debate and consensus.