

Decent Work for Domestic Workers



International
Labour
Organization

Work like any other.

Work like no other.

Work in households and homes is as old as time, and vital for the well-being of families, communities and societies at large. Often considered as a typical ‘woman’s’ occupation, domestic work is frequently not perceived as ‘employment’. There are those who argue that women’s contributions to the home and general social good are immeasurable – valuable and precious – and any effort to put a price tag on these efforts only demeans the contribution. But these gender-biased arguments have only resulted in the effective and systematic marginalization and undervaluing of domestic work across the board. Domestic workers – those who make working in the homes of others their ‘occupation’ – want their labours to be fairly recognized and rewarded.



The issues at hand:

Paid domestic work remains virtually invisible as a form of employment in many countries and thus many domestic workers endure very poor working conditions, often in the form of underpayment of wages, long working hours, inadequate privacy, and the threat of sexual harassment. In more extreme cases, domestic workers are found operating in conditions akin to forced and slave labour. When domestic workers are young, this kind of employment is synonymous to the worst forms of child labour. Domestic workers - whether national or migrant - have limited bargaining power, are unable to access social services and often can not complain about abusive conditions. Migrant domestic workers are doubly victimized, suffering not only from the poor conditions often associated with their work, but also from pervasive irregularity of their work status and the unsympathetic attitudes of authorities and the public towards migrants in general.

But for the economy outside the household to function, care work at home is vital. This is clearly in evidence as more women are joining the formal labour market in pursuit of their own decent work. Policy measures to support families’ efforts to combine workplace demands and those of caring for their households have been limited. Meanwhile, the demand for care work to be performed by non-family members has been on the rise everywhere. Today, domestic workers make up a large portion of the workforce, especially in developing countries, and their numbers have been increasing everywhere.

Signs of hope & optimism:

Lack of protection for domestic workers has been a long-standing concern of many human and labour rights organizations – and within the ILO. The creation of normative action for domestic workers dates back as far as the mid-1930’s. In 1970 the ILO published the first world-wide survey on the status of domestic workers. Throughout this period, ILO supervisory bodies have been unequivocal in their affirmation that domestic workers are entitled to decent working conditions and respect for their fundamental principles and rights at work. Now a fresh impetus, largely driven by the trade union movement in many countries, has actively called for the improvement of working conditions and the protection of children and youth in domestic work.

Moving forward with the ILO:

A major step was taken when the Governing Body agreed to place decent work for domestic workers on the agenda of the International Labour Conference in 2010, with a view to the setting of labour standards.

The prospect of new international labour standards on domestic work offers an excellent opportunity not only to bring greater attention to the issues of domestic work but also to promote alliances of the major stakeholders already advocating for the protection of domestic workers. In support of that, the ILO in Asia and the Pacific is undertaking a coordinated advocacy initiative on the theme of “Decent Work for Domestic Workers”. (see overleaf)

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Time to recognize

Time to reward

An advocacy campaign:

It is time that we all recognize the value that domestic work brings not only to the individual families who employ domestic workers, but also the greater value they bring to societies at large.

The International Labour Office in Asia and the Pacific has launched an advocacy campaign to work with our constituents in governments, worker and employer organizations to help them prepare for the 2010 ILC discussion on Decent Work for Domestic Workers – a discussion that could lead to the creation of an international instrument (such as a new ILO Convention or Recommendation). In advance of the 2010 discussion, a law and practice report on domestic work, along with a questionnaire, has been sent to the member States for their views on creating such international labour instruments.

This advocacy initiative also seeks to actively promote to the public at large the individual rights and responsibilities of domestic workers in Asia. By helping to coordinate existing commitments and alliances, and by bringing together the many disparate groups already advocating for change, we will be able to better focus technical services in policy and programs where at present those services are limited.

Our objectives:

- To advocate for stronger international protection for domestic workers, as they claim their rights already articulated in universal human rights instruments and other relevant ILO international labour standards
- To press for national law and legislation that recognizes domestic work as employment, worthy of regulation and labor law protection for domestic workers and their employers
- To campaign for services and mechanisms that directly address the needs of domestic workers, including protection from forced labor and human trafficking and most importantly, enable them to join freely representative organizations and associations of their choice.

In Bangkok, Thailand, a National Consultation on Decent Work for Domestic Workers will be held on the 10th of September. The consultation will bring together representatives from the Royal Thai Government, Employer and Worker Organizations, Civil Society Organizations and others. As a group they will examine the current laws and practices that relate to the protection of domestic workers in the country – both Thai and foreign – and prepare for the international discussion at the ILC in Geneva in June 2010.

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