



# GLOBAL ACTION PROGRAMME ON MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES



International  
Labour  
Organization

## Skills development and recognition for domestic workers across borders

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### Summary

Domestic work is an increasingly diverse sector with a varied and globalized workforce that is often viewed as unskilled. The similarity between paid domestic work and the unpaid work performed by women in their own homes has led to the undervaluation of domestic work and is generally reflected in the low wages earned.<sup>1</sup>

The overall integration of women in the labour market has shifted the burden of care onto other women from poorer countries or to historically disadvantaged groups – such as minority ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, low-caste and low-income groups – willing to accept lower wages.<sup>2</sup> Instead of re-evaluating the household division of labour and changing public policies, this transfer system reinforces the view that domestic work is women's work.

This brief shows how skills development programmes for domestic workers play an important role in reinforcing the view among workers and employers that **domestic work is real work**, improving working conditions, employers' satisfaction, and empowering domestic workers, including Migrant Domestic Workers (MDW).

A number of skills and vocational training programmes have been developed to prepare women and men for the tasks and functions that are expected of them in the domestic work sector. These were set up by government institutions, trade unions, recruitment and placement agencies, and private educational and training institutions in countries of origin, transit and destination. Unsurprisingly, these programmes face a number of challenges.

**Figure 1. Domestic work is undervalued and underpaid: Mutually reinforcing assumptions**



### Recognizing the expanding portfolio of MDWs: linking wage increases to skills level and complexity

Domestic work is becoming increasingly complex. The growing share of the world's population aged over 65 means a spike in the number of people needing long-term care. As a result, **outpatient care in homes is overtaking traditional hospital care**. This in turn is leading to task-shifts, with nurses taking the role of doctors, and **migrant domestic workers** taking the role of unregulated nurses.<sup>3</sup> This dynamic should be better recognized in pre-departure skills development programmes and on arrival, anticipating the need for domestic work in the broader context of the care economy.

The ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), defines domestic work broadly as “work performed in or for a household or households”. This work

may include tasks such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, caring for the children, the elderly and/or the sick in the family, gardening, guarding the house, driving for the family, even taking care of household pets.

### Box 1. Challenges

- Programmes do not recognize variations in the level and specialization that make up the domestic work sector. In fact, domestic workers are typically asked to juggle tasks with limited levels of complexity, such as ironing and cooking, together with more complex work such as taking care of the sick, the elderly and the disabled.
- Programmes typically address only the technical/vocational dimension of domestic work, such as (learning how to operate household appliances and using detergents. However domestic work is largely relational and ILO research shows that transversal skills (communication, organizational capacity, pre-disposition towards work) are more in demand by employers than vocational skills. Transversal skills are rarely factored into skills' building programmes and when they are, usually avoid the labour dimension such as learning to negotiate working and living terms and conditions with employers.
- Programmes generally lack a womanworker empowerment perspective. Employers prefer obedient and docile workers who are willing to accept multi-functional work arrangements and respond to their requests at all times of the day.
- Programmes are not linked to effective labour matching in countries of origin, and destination. Skills mismatch leads to "care drain" in countries of origin and to "deskilling" in countries of destination. Both of these reduce the development potential of migrants and their countries of origin and destination.
- Programmes do not address information asymmetries between employers and workers in countries of origin and destination which often results in frustrations and could ultimately transform into labour disputes.
- The growth in the intra-regional migration of domestic workers, especially in Asia, Latin America and Africa, is not matched by regional standards to recognize the skills of men and women in this sector, and to promote their "upskilling", most importantly on returning to their countries of origin.

### Box 2. Key definitions

**Skills:** "Skills are defined as the ability to carry out the tasks and duties of a given job. On the labour market, they are the main asset of an individual and their value can be measured by the ability to find and retain work and by the level of earnings." (ILO 2006).

**There are two dimensions to skills:** (i) **skill level** as a function of the complexity and range of the tasks and duties a worker can perform; and (ii) **skill specialization:** defined by the field of knowledge required, the tools and machinery used, the materials worked on or with, as well as the kinds of goods and services produced (ILO 2014).

**Skills recognition:** "Acknowledgment of an individual's skills and qualifications by employers, education/training institutions and national authorities" (ILO 2006).

Considering the complex tasks and responsibilities assumed by many domestic workers, the ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), has questioned the classification of domestic work as "unskilled" work".<sup>4</sup> One way of overcoming this bias is to link wage percentage increases – above the minimum wage – to education and skill categories.<sup>5</sup>

Some countries such as Argentina, have addressed this issue by setting minimum rates for five categories of domestic work<sup>6</sup> with qualified household workers benefiting from rates above the level of the general national minimum. In Italy the number of categories of domestic work has been increased from three to eight.<sup>7</sup>

An ILO study in India pointed to the importance of domestic workers' organizations in linking skills to bargaining for better wages as otherwise employers are not willing to pay higher wages in return for better skills.<sup>8</sup>



## Developing and recognizing the vocational and transversal skills of DWs

Employers are increasingly seeking workers who possess a mix of transversal and vocational or technical skills.<sup>9</sup> For example, employers look for domestic workers who can clean the house, use various household appliances, manage budgets, take care of the elderly, children and persons with disabilities without close supervision. These specialized skills and know-how needed to perform specific duties or tasks are known as **vocational skills**.

**Transversal skills** are core employability skills and reflect a person's ability to learn, communicate well, engage in constructive and healthy teamwork dynamics and demonstrate creativity and problem-solving aptitudes.<sup>10</sup> In the case of domestic work, these skills entail inspiring trust, possessing good communication skills, and speaking a language that is understood by the employer.

**Attitudinal skills** are a subset of transversal skills. They describe a worker's attitude towards work, such as initiative, confidence, willingness, perseverance, determination etc.<sup>11</sup> For domestic workers, these include flexibility (time and functional flexibility) in responding to employers' demands. Transversal skills are rarely certified or formally recognized in domestic workers' professionalization programmes.

Skills training programmes often only capture the technical/vocational dimension of domestic work, such as learning how to operate household appliances. Today however, transversal skills (communication, organizational capacity, predisposition towards work) are more in demand by employers than vocational skills. This is not surprising considering how domestic work is a largely relational function.

Proficiency in a common language is a key transversal skill valued by employers. Language is the basis for any communication between worker and employer, but also a significant decision point when considering the educational development that their children could derive from interacting with the worker. Polish employers, for example, avoid hiring Ukrainian women to care for their children, due to the "bad accent problem" that can influence a child's language development at a critical age. The opposite occurs in Jordan where employers prefer Filipina workers who have "superior English language skills".<sup>12</sup>

Trustworthiness is another transversal skill that is sought by employers, particularly those who have young children. Trustworthiness is a subjective quality, a relational attribute, and is often used by employers to mean that the worker is "hard-working", "honest", and "reliable".

Overall, employers' narratives suggest a general need for attitudinal skills reflective of the largely affective dimension of domestic work. These sought after skills are generally not recognized or certified. Caring labour is a relational occupation<sup>13</sup> requiring the worker to attend to the emotional as well as physical care of the beneficiary.

However, the "familiar" and sometimes intimate dimension of domestic work can also cripple a worker's ability to bargain for higher wages and better working conditions. Domestic workers with caring responsibilities often have difficulty commodifying their emotions towards the employer and his/her children and bargaining for better wages.<sup>14</sup> Unless the importance of these affective, relational, and non-vocational skills, is acknowledged and taken into consideration by career development programmes, they will continue to constitute a deadweight loss in any valuation of domestic work.

### Argentina's vocational training for (migrant) domestic workers

Argentina's vocational training for domestic workers is an innovative practice that reflects occupational profiles making up the sector, as well as the vocational and attitudinal skills of workers. In Argentina, qualified household workers (five categories are specified) are entitled to wage increases above the general minimum wage.

In 2006, the Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MTEySS) embarked on a series of vocational training programmes to formalize and professionalize the domestic work sector for both nationals domestic workers and MDWs. >

Since then, more than 19,000 domestic workers have participated in vocational trainings through local government, NGOs and domestic worker union-affiliated training schools, including the UPACP-OSPAC. Course participants have emphasized the importance of the training for those employed in the sector, explaining how they had become more organized in their workload management and in their performance as a result of their participation in the course. Moreover, participants were more confident of their ability to find opportunities for up-skilling.<sup>15</sup>

The objective is for participants to acquire a combination of transversal and vocational skills as well as knowledge about their rights and the benefits of joining a union. The manuals used in the vocational programme were developed with the assistance of the European-Union funded Global Action Programme on Migrant Domestic Workers and Their Families

This experience is important not only because it operationalizes the vocational (instrumental dimension) and transversal (emotional dimension) skills of domestic work, but also because it emphasizes validating skills, and upskilling rather than qualification recognition alone.

**Figure 2. Argentina Vocational Training Manuals**



Employers prefer workers with certain attitudinal skills –who are willing to accept multifunctional work arrangements– over specialization. In fact, overspecialization is seen as undesirable. MDWs respond to needs that frequently extend beyond the reach of the household, like supporting employers in running their private enterprises (shops or restaurants).<sup>16</sup>

The preference for domestic workers who will accept multifunctional work arrangements is tied to another preference (not skills-related) for live-in arrangements. Live-in arrangements ensure the worker’s on-call availability. Employers of live-in domestic workers and those who hire live-out domestic workers typically

have distinct household characteristics and needs. The top reason quoted by employers for employing live-in domestic workers was due to the presence of household members requiring 24-hour care. Safety concerns were also mentioned as a top reason for not considering a live-out worker.<sup>17</sup>

This tendency is reinforced by orientation programmes that build the subservience of workers. Instead of addressing migrants’ rights, pre-departure orientation programmes “attempt to regulate women’s dispositions at work...as well as regulate their sexuality” by emphasizing “traits of self-sacrifice, hard-work, and religiosity.”<sup>18</sup>

**Box 3. A preference for “mouldable workers”**

“Generally, they prefer them [MDWs] with no experience. In this case, she will be raw material... You can teach them your own way, in cleaning, in dealing with the children. You know, each country has its own way of living. If the domestic worker has served in other countries, she will give us trouble here...

– Recruitment agency manager in Jordan.

“The ones that have experience, they want you to behave according to their wishes, instead of behaving according to yours.”

–MDW employer (female) in Jordan.

(Source: Sivolobova 2015; El Rayyes 2015).

**Improving skills matching in countries of origin and destination**

The lack of coherence between employment and labour migration policies can result in inefficiencies in the labour market. This is exacerbated by the absence of workers’ and employers’ organizations, for example in making effective use of labour market information systems, and planning and improving education, vocational training and lifelong learning to ensure skills for employability. **Care drain**, the deskilling of migrant women through their integration in the domestic work sector, and the absence of regional competency frameworks for domestic workers are evidence of **labour market deficiencies that reduce the development potential of migrants, and of countries of origin and destination.**

#### Box 4. Live-in vs. Live-out: Flexibility as a valued attitudinal skill

“The foreigner comes far to look for employment, she doesn’t really have a home in South Africa. You’ll get ladies who come here and they’ve got teaching qualifications, and they come here and they’ll happily be a nanny because they see it as their earning an income that they can send home to their kids. We just find that they’re more service oriented. They acknowledge that they’re being paid for a service and they’re happy to deliver that service. They are very open, they are easy to communicate with. They never complain”.

##### – Placement agency in South Africa

“The salary of someone who works by the hour is more expensive. But, in this case, you don’t have to pay [recruitment] fees upfront, and you don’t have to pay for the residency and work permit. So, [hiring a live-in or a freelancer] ends up costing the same at the end...it has nothing to do with cost. I cannot rely on [a free-lance MDW] who may or may not show up... the free-lancer works for different families, and she is not fully committed to me”.

##### – Employer in Lebanon

### Preventing care drain in countries of origin

Despite the significance of remittance earnings to countries of origin, there is growing concern about the potentially negative impact of migration on the country’s human capital development, generating a “brain drain”, a “care drain” and a “mismatch between skills and local jobs.” DOLE data show that five out of the six first occupation categories of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) deployed in 2010-2014 are on the domestic hard-to-fill lists for the decade 2010-2020; nursing professionals, care workers and cleaners, and caregivers are among these.<sup>19</sup>

To prevent a care drain from poor to rich countries in the nursing sector, the World Health Organization (WHO) developed a global code of practice on the international recruitment of health personnel in 2010. A similar code could be considered for the domestic work sector.

### Preventing the deskilling of women migrants

Skilled and highly-skilled women migrants often end up in occupations that are not commensurate with their qualifications and experience, resulting in their “deskilling” or “brain waste”. Deskilling is prevalent among migrant women in the domestic sector and can be the source of a loss of self-confidence that can negatively impact their career choices and career advancement.

Almost **18 per cent of Ukrainian women domestic workers in Poland, for example, have a Masters’ degree while 25.3 per cent have a Bachelor’s degree.**<sup>20</sup> Zimbabwean women migrants in South Africa are also more likely to be working in “low-skilled” and low-paying jobs in the agricultural, security, hospitality, DW sectors and as hawkers, while the majority have completed secondary and tertiary education.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, Uganda concluded an agreement to place up to a million college-level women and men in Saudi households to perform functions as diverse as cleaning, caring for children, gardening and acting as security guards.<sup>22</sup>

### Developing and recognizing MDW skills across borders

Given the diversity of MDW backgrounds and skill sets, it is also not uncommon for poor women from rural areas, with very limited exposure to modern household amenities, to be overwhelmed on arriving to their place of employment.

It may also be difficult for migrant workers who do participate in orientation and skills programmes to see their skills recognized both in destination countries, where their skills may not be certified, and upon returning to their home countries, where there are little chances for the acknowledgement of their newly acquired skills. This situation generates “missed opportunities in capitalizing on the wealth of new learning and skills the workers bring back,” impacting negatively on the countries’ “capacity to build a skilled and qualified workforce”.<sup>23</sup>

### Pre-departure orientation programmes

MDW orientations provide a taste of the work and life experience that prospective workers can expect at destination. If designed well, they can build a solid foundation for the empowerment and protection of MDWs across their journey. The Philippines, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Cambodia –four countries with the common goal



of increasing migrant deployment levels—have different approaches to managing pre-departure programmes.

Programmes in the Philippines and Sri Lanka are public-private partnerships, and in Nepal and Cambodia they are run exclusively by recruitment agencies. The depth and breadth of pre-departure programmes also vary across countries, ranging from one to twenty-one days of training.

The effectiveness of pre-departure programmes is often challenged on the basis of their management structure, design, and geographical reach. The interests of recruitment agencies, which are often in the drivers' seat of these programmes, are irreconcilable with the interests of migrant workers and as a result are less about upholding the rights of migrant domestic workers than they are about teaching workers to be acquiescent in their engagement with employers. Moreover, coordination between government agencies at different levels is lacking,<sup>24</sup> which results in gaps and overlaps in multi-stakeholder training programmes.<sup>25</sup> The programmes are often generic in design and their outreach is limited to urban centres, highlighting the need for context, and task-adaptive (care, cleaning, cooking etc.) trainings with wider outreach.<sup>26</sup>

### At destination: Civil Society Skills Training

At destination, MDWs benefit from sporadic exposure to civil society-run skills programmes. Civil society-run skills projects operate as a “social space” for the women to come together to meet their compatriots in similar employment.”<sup>27</sup>

Civil society organizations also leverage skills programmes as capacity and livelihoods strategy for refugees who often find occupational niching in the domestic work sector. The Refugee Egypt, for example, began in 1987 when two teachers from All Saint's Cathedral began a small outreach crafts project with refugees in Cairo. In the years since, the programme

has expanded to cover a training and placement service for refugees in the domestic work sector. Refugee Egypt runs an intensive two-week cleaning course and an orientation class. Almost 20 refugees graduate every month. A certificate is delivered to each participant.

More established programmes include Argentina's training for household workers (see above) and Italy's regional training programme for family caregivers.

### Facilitating the intra-regional mobility of domestic workers

**Eighty per cent of intra-regional migration flows are cross-border.**<sup>28</sup> The migration of domestic workers across the Indonesia-Malaysia, Ukraine-Poland, Zimbabwe-South Africa, and Argentina-Paraguay corridor is a case in point.

Within Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has put in place Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) to facilitate intra-regional mobility by guiding the skills assessment and recognition of several professional categories.<sup>29</sup> While intra-regional mobility for “unskilled” workers is much higher than for skilled occupations, MRAs for domestic workers are hard to establish given the difficulty of demonstrating equivalencies.

### Promoting the upward mobility of returning domestic workers

At destination, migrant workers acquire new skills and competencies, including languages, workplace skills, and even entrepreneurial skills.

The integration of returning migrants and the recognition of their work experience is important to increase their prospect for employment, while avoiding deskilling, or employment in the national domestic work sector where wages are low and labour and social protection lacking. Support services are also important to aid migrants in their employment search when they return to their home countries.

To help countries make the most of the skills of returning migrants, the International Labour Organization has drafted guidelines for skills recognition of returning migrants. The guidelines are for use by government agencies in countries of origin and destination, national agencies responsible for skills' recognition, local agencies and non-governmental organizations, national employers and workers' organizations and private employment services.<sup>30</sup>

#### Box 5. Stages of the proposed skills recognition process for return migrants

Assemble the portfolio of evidence upon return
Map to RMCS and national competency standards
Finalize portfolio with support of an advisor
Assemble the portfolio of evidence upon return
Assess the portfolio and verify decision
Recognize the new skills of returned migrant workers

Source: ILO, 2010

## Proposed skills recognition process for return migrants

Examples of how national authorities are managing the skills' development and reintegration of return migrants include the experience of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) in the Philippines, and Sri Lanka's Bureau of Foreign Employment.

In the **Philippines**, TESDA manages the assessment and certification of competencies of Filipino Overseas Workers, maintains a database to link the experience and competencies of returning migrants to prospective employers, and provides support services through the Permanent Returning Overseas Filipino Workers Network (PeRSON).

The country's National Labour Migration Policy (NLMP) in **Sri Lanka** called on the State to facilitate the return and reintegration of migrant workers by creating opportunities for "skill transfer, productive employment, and conflict-free social integration". The main focus of the policy is on "low skilled" workers, especially women domestic workers who have limited capacity, knowledge and access to information and services. The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) is entrusted with providing services to prospective in-service and returnee migrants and their family members. SLBFE facilitates regular entrepreneurship training, assistance for re-employment and bridging skill gaps, and recognition of skills through "Recognition of Prior Learning" and certification.

## Recommendations

- Skills' programmes should strike the right balance between leveraging and recognizing existing skills, on the one hand, and skilling, on the other. Leveraging existing skills will reinforce workers' and employers' recognition of the professional value of the work performed by women in households broadly.
- Skills development programmes must account for the increasingly varied nature of the domestic work sector, both in terms of the skill sets represented, training and experience, and the qualities that employers are seeking.
- Transversal skills, core employability skills reflecting ability to learn, effectively communicate and problem-solve, should be recognized and certified through professionalization programmes. Failure to recognize these competencies contributes to the under valuation of domestic work overall with impli-

cations for employee wages and the quality of care administered to employers.

- Skills' programmes should be grounded in fundamental principles and rights at work, rather than teaching docility, and receive the support of public institutions or the social partners to ensure compliance with rights-based curricula. In that regard, developing participatory and learner-centred pre-departure trainings, prioritizing MDW rights and developing more specific curricula for destination countries should be considered.
- The classification of domestic work as "unskilled work" does not reflect the complexity of the sector today. To address this, wage percentage increases above the minimum wage should be tied to education and skill categories.
- Effective labour matching must be undertaken to prevent "Care drain" and the "deskilling" of migrant women, which effectively reduce the development potential of migrants, and of countries of origin and destination.
- Recognizing the gendered nature of the sector, women trainers and post-training support with a gender-sensitive curriculum should be offered. Additionally, coordination with consular services, government agencies, and placement agencies in countries of destination on training and orientation programmes could be considered to help support the integration of migrant workers in the society and labour market of host societies.
- Until MRAs are recognized and reflected in the national legal systems, bilateral agreements between governments remain the "most reliable infrastructure for cross-border skills development in the short term"<sup>33</sup>.
- Governments should provide plans for reintegrating MDWs into larger plans of social cohesion that recognize these workers' abilities upon return. Country-sponsored programmes should centre on skill transferability and productive employment to avoid MDWs deskilling.

## End Notes

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## Project partners

The project is implemented by the ILO in collaboration with the following partners and associates:



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