International Labour Office

DOMESTIC WORK
POLICY BRIEF 4

Global and regional estimates on domestic workers

Around the world, millions of domestic workers clean and cook, look after children, take care of elderly people in need of help, and do other tasks for private households. Their work has been crucial for greater participation of women in the labour market, often in the absence of work-family reconciliation policies, and enabled elderly people to stay independent and receive care at home. Yet, domestic workers often lack the social recognition and many of the legal protections enjoyed by other workers. In fact, to date no one quite knows how many domestic workers there are around the world. While some estimates on the number of domestic workers have been produced and researchers have made an effort to compile national data,[1] the ILO and others have relied so far on tentative, informal approximations on the extent of domestic work.

In response to the lack of robust statistical figures, this policy brief presents new minimum global and regional estimates on the number of domestic workers. They are based on data drawn exclusively from official statistics, mainly labour force surveys and population censuses, covering a total of 117 countries and territories.[2] In order to deal with the remaining gaps in data, we use an established methodology that provides unbiased regional and global figures. This approach makes our estimates verifiable and replicable, which allows updating them in a consistent manner at a later stage to monitor trends over time. Since, for various reasons, official statistics tend to undercount domestic workers, these estimates should be seen as a lower bound for the true extent of domestic work. However, while we are likely to miss some domestic workers, the figures presented in this brief are a solid minimum estimate that provides a lower bound for the true number of domestic workers.

1. Statistical estimates on the prevalence of domestic work

In order to arrive at a reliable and verifiable minimum estimate for the number of domestic workers worldwide and by region, three important issues have to be addressed. Firstly, clarity in the definition of the term "domestic worker" has to be achieved, and this definition needs to be translated into statistical terms. Secondly, suitable national data sources have to be identified and statistics need to be gathered from as many countries as possible. Thirdly, based on a solid methodology that takes into account the remaining data gaps, national figures need to be aggregated to obtain regional and global estimates. We discuss how we tackled these three issues in turn, before presenting the results.

A statistical definition for domestic workers

When setting out to estimate the number of domestic workers, it is important to translate what we understand

[1] For urban areas in 18 Latin American countries, see Tokman (2010); for a compilation of national statistics and NGO estimates, see Schwenken and Heimeshoff (2011).

[2] A full report by Yamila Simonovsky and Malte Luebker, authors of this brief, will be published in late 2011 that will include a statistical appendix with detailed national data and sources.

by "domestic workers" into an operational, statistical definition that enables us to compile comparable data from a broad range of countries. This is no small undertaking, since domestic workers are not a homogenous group – they perform tasks as varied as cleaning, looking after elderly people or children, guarding the house, driving children to school, gardening or cooking, among others. Nevertheless, in spite of the heterogeneity of tasks performed, all domestic workers share the feature that they work for a private household.[3] For the purpose of this brief, domestic work therefore means any type of work performed in or for a household, and a domestic worker is any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship. This implies that persons who perform domestic work only occasionally or sporadically, and not as a means of earning a living (such as occasional babysitters), fall outside the scope of this definition.[4]

The two central elements of this definition are that domestic work is performed within an employment relationship and in or for a household (i.e. regardless of the specific tasks that the domestic worker performs). Although existing statistical classifications – be it by occupation, status in employment or industry – were not designed with the primary objective of identifying domestic workers, the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC), in its still widely-used Revision 3.1, matches this concept well. Its Division 95 "Activities of private households as employers of domestic staff" includes …

> *[…] the activities of households as employers of domestic personnel such as maids, cooks, waiters, valets, butlers, laundresses, gardeners, gatekeepers, stable-lads, chauffeurs, caretakers, governesses, babysitters, tutors, secretaries etc. It allows the domestic personnel employed to state the activity of their employer in censuses or studies, even though the employer is an individual.*[5]

The main advantage of this approach is that it draws on the common characteristic of all domestic workers, i.e. that they are employed in or by a household, rather than on the type of task they perform. In fact, many of the occupations listed above can also be performed outside the home – a cook can work in a restaurant, a gardener in a flower nursery, and a gatekeeper at an office building. Although some occupations are predominantly performed within households,[6] this makes it difficult to distinguish domestic workers from other workers solely on the basis of their occupation.[7] Another advantage of the industry-based approach is that it imposes relatively low requirements on the level of detail of statistical data (a disaggregation at the one- or two-digit level is sufficient).

The main drawback of the industry-based approach is that domestic workers who have an employment contract with a service agency, rather than with a household, are in theory excluded from the scope of Division 95. However, in practice, due to the lack of a suitable alternative category, workers employed by agency and deployed to a private household are often included in this division. Therefore, the risk of under-counting them is small.

There are alternative ways of identifying and counting domestic workers, namely, the task-based approach, the status-in-employment approach and the household-roster approach, but these approaches have more serious disadvantages (see Box 1). For this reason, the global and regional estimates presented in this brief rely primarily on the industry-based approach and the definition that domestic workers are all those employed by private households in the sense of ISIC Rev. 3.1, Division 95. Data are available from cross-tabulations of total employment by branch of economic activity and sex, which are found in national statistical databases and publications from official institutions.[8] These refer to the main job-holding of all currently employed persons (e.g.

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[3] While in many countries the legislation specifies that the employer must be a natural person, in other cases the employer can be the entire family/household (e.g. Brazil and Bulgaria), or even a representative or agent of the natural person (e.g. Barbados). Moreover, according to some legislation, the employer may be a third party, such as a recognized health-care agency (e.g. United States). See ILO (2009a, p. 35). In this particular case, domestic workers - often migrants - still share the feature of working for a private household, but instead of being employed by the household directly, they are engaged in a triangular employment relationship where the agency acts as an intermediary by receiving the payment from the households and, subsequently, compensating the workers after making all the corresponding social security contributions.

[4] Our understanding of the term "domestic worker" is thus in line with the conclusions adopted by the International Labour Conference in 2010 with a view to adopting new international labour standards on decent work for domestic workers. See ILO (2010a).

[5] See ISIC, Revision 3.1., Definition of class 9500, available at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/cr/registry/regcs.asp?Cl=17&Lg=1&Co=9500 . Class 9500 is the only class in Division 95.

[6] See ILO (2019, Box III.1).

[7] In Revision 3 of ISIC, Division 95 coincides with Section P "Private households with employed persons" and a disaggregation at the one-digit level is therefore sufficient. In Revisions 3.1 and 4 of ISIC, "Activities of private households as employers of domestic staff" and "Activities of households as employers of domestic personnel", respectively, were combined with undifferentiated production activities of private households into a single section (Section P and T, respectively). Therefore, data at the two-digit level would be ideal. Nonetheless, most goods-producing activities of private households for own consumption are classified in Section A ("Agriculture, hunting and forestry"), and service-producing activities other than paid domestic work are mainly unpaid household work by members of the household (which is not considered employment). Conceptually, therefore, employment data classified in Section P (Rev. 3.1) or Section T (Rev. 4) should largely coincide with Section P under Revision 3 of ISIC.

[8] If no data on domestic workers could be found using ISIC, the status-in-employment classification (ICSE) was used when available (see Box 1).

Box 1. How to count domestic workers? Alternative approaches to identify domestic workers in household surveys

There are a number of approaches to measuring domestic work that rely on different existing statistical classifications.

Task-based approach. The International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88 and ISCO-08) is sometimes used to identify domestic workers on the basis of their occupation. In particular, the occupations "Housekeepers and related workers" (ISCO-88, code 5121), "Home-based personal care workers" (5133), and "Domestic helpers and cleaners" (9131) include typical tasks performed by domestic workers. In addition, "Child-care workers" (5131) have often been included because they "take care of employers' children and oversee their daily activities" (see ILO, 2019, p. 30). However, child-care workers also "engage in helping teachers to look after schoolchildren", which falls outside the definition of domestic workers. Moreover, cooks, drivers and gardeners are not captured by the task-based approach because their occupation is not specific to households. Excluding these occupational categories would under-count domestic workers, but including them would count also those not working for private households, which would lead to an over-estimate. Another drawback of the task-based approach is that it requires very detailed occupational data (at the four-digit level), which are only rarely available in published sources.

Status-in-employment approach. This is frequently used in Latin America, where many countries have adapted the International Classification by Status in Employment (ICSE-93) to distinguish between domestic workers and other employees. For example, Brazil's IBGE (2010, p. 32) defines domestic workers as "persons who worked providing domestic services paid in cash or kind in one or more housing units". In fact, in a recent publication on Domestic Workers in Latin America: Statistics for new policies, Tokman (2010) utilized this approach. While this approach is useful and for many countries delivers the same results as the industry-based approach,[1] the distinction between domestic workers and other employees is not commonly made outside Latin America. This approach therefore cannot be used outside this region.

Household-roster approach. Some countries identify live-in domestic workers in the household roster of Labour Force Survey (LFS) questionnaires, which notes down the relationship of each household member to the household head (see e.g. the Philippines LFS). Where this is done, the household-roster approach can be used to identify domestic workers who live in their employer's household. However, this approach will not capture live-out domestic workers who do not stay with their employer, but have their own household and commute to work (and thus appear, for example, as household head or spouse in the household roster). Moreover, it is not clear whether domestic workers should be considered household members in the first place, even if they live in the same dwelling unit as their employer. The System of National Accounts (SNA-93, paragraph 4.132) defines a household as "a small group of persons who share the same living accommodation, who pool some, or all, of their income and wealth and who consume certain types of goods and services collectively, mainly housing and food". Arguably, few employers share their income and wealth with domestic workers in the same way that they do with family members.

Industry-based approach. Finally, the International Standard Industrial Classification of all Economic Activities (ISIC, Revision 3.1) groups "Activities of households as employers of domestic staff" in Division 95 (see discussion in the main text). The industry-based approach draws on a common characteristic of domestic workers – that they work in or for a household – and captures quite well the common understanding of what a domestic worker is. It goes a long way to address the shortcomings of the task-based approach and the household-roster approach. Data on employment by industry are also available for many countries throughout the world (either under ISIC or adaptations such as NAICS), which makes it possible to generate comparable data across regions (unlike the status-in-employment approach, the use of which is limited to Latin America).

1. For instance, in the case of Brazil the same number on domestic workers is obtained using either ISIC or the national adaptation of ICSE.

Box 2. India: 2.5 or 90 million domestic workers?*

Although it is not unusual to find discrepancies between official estimates and estimates from other sources, the case of India is particularly striking given the magnitude of the difference. The media and non-governmental organizations frequently cite a figure of 90 million domestic workers for India.[1] However, the primary source for this figure is not given in any of the articles and it is not possible to establish who first used it, and on what basis. At the other extreme, Palriwala and Neetha (2009) have published an estimate of only 2.5 million domestic workers for India. While they use household survey data, their study focuses solely on paid care workers in India and they exclude gardeners, gatekeepers, watchmen and the residual category of "other workers" employed by private households from their definition of domestic workers.

For the global and regional estimates, the same industry-based approach (see Box 1) that was used in other countries was applied to India. Therefore, all persons employed by "Private households with employed persons" were counted as domestic workers (Division 95 of NIC 1998, India's adaptation of ISIC; see NSSO, 2006, p. 16). The most comprehensive data-source for India is the Employment and Unemployment Survey, which is conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) at the national level every five years. The most recent data from this survey refer to the 61st round conducted between July 2004 and June 2005 since, as of the date of publication of this report, data from the 2009/10 survey were not yet available.

An analysis of the micro-dataset suggests that the number of domestic workers in India was 4.2 million in 2004-05, representing 1 per cent of total employment (see Table B.1). However, since the great majority of domestic workers were women, some 2.2 per cent of all employed women were domestic workers (compared to 0.5 per cent for men). Moreover, there was a clear distinction between the types of domestic tasks carried out by each gender: most female domestic workers were employed as "housemaids/servants", while men dominated in sub-categories such as gardeners, gatekeepers and in the residual category of "other" occupations (which includes, for example, butlers and chauffeurs).

Table B.1. Employment by industry sub-categories and sex, 2004-05 (NIC 1998)

Occupations employed in Division 95: Activities of households as employers of domestic staff	Both sexes	Female	Male
Housemaid/Servant	2,312,200	2,011,300	300,800
Cook	123,400	89,300	34,200
Gardener	19,300	4,200	15,100
Gate-keeper/Chowkidar/Watchman	135,700	7,000	128,600
Governess/Babysitter	87,700	62,800	24,900
Others	1,528,400	780,600	747,800
TOTAL	**4,206,700**	**2,955,200**	**1,251,400**
Total estimated employment	408,246,900	135,834,000	272,412,900
Domestic workers in % of total employment	1.0 %	2.2 %	0.5 %

Source: ILO analysis of the micro-data of the 2004-05 Employment and Unemployment Survey (61st Round), National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) of India.

[1] See, for example, India Together, "'Domestic workers in India no better than slaves", published 17 February 2009; The Times of India, "India of Domestic Workers", published 21 June 2009; The Washington Post, "Domestic workers in India 'want a better life, too'", published 16 November 2008.

** This box was prepared based on inputs received from Uma Rani (International Institute of Labour Studies).*

excluding occasional babysitters and other workers who have another primary job) and cover only those who are of working age, which is frequently 15 years and above.

Data sources

In many countries, the number of domestic workers is a contentious issue. One outstanding example is India, where frequently cited figures range from 2.5 to 90 million domestic workers. As Schwenken and Heimeshoff (2011) have shown in a recent compilation, estimates by non-governmental organizations and the media often substantially diverge from the statistics published by national statistical offices (NSOs) (see Box 2). However, it is usually not possible to verify the source or estimation method behind non-official figures. One also needs to bear in mind that they are often produced for advocacy purposes by non-governmental organizations with an inherent interest in underlining the relevance of domestic work. In line with the objective of producing reliable and verifiable minimum estimates, the new global and regional estimates therefore draw exclusively on official sources.[9]

In total, data from 117 countries and territories entered into the global and regional estimates (see Table 1 for coverage by region).[10] Although these 117 countries represent only two-thirds of all countries within our sample frame, they account for 88.7 per cent of total employment outside China. For China, a combination of official sources was used to produce a tentative estimate (see discussion below). In sum, the new database has sufficient coverage to produce reliable global and regional minimum estimates.

For most countries, tabulated data from labour force surveys (LFS) and other household sample surveys were used as sources. In some instances, detailed employment data by economic activity were only found in census reports, mainly dating back to the last round, circa 2000. These data were complemented with records retrieved from LABORSTA, which itself builds on data submitted by NSOs (mostly on the basis of LFS).[11] For three countries, we had access to the original LFS micro data-sets and used these to tabulate the number of domestic workers. Finally, for Oman and Hong Kong, where domestic workers are predominantly migrants, administrative records on work permits for domestic workers were used in the absence of household survey data.

Labour force surveys and other household surveys – the main data sources – have the advantage that they are based on a representative sample of all households in a country, and are designed to capture all forms of employment – regardless of whether such work is declared or not, irrespective of whether it is in the informal or formal economy, and whether it is carried out on a part-time or full-time basis. However, a possible weakness of household surveys is that interviewers might fail to recognize domestic workers as such (and believe misleading answers such as “This is just a cousin

Table 1. Coverage of the ILO’s statistical database on domestic workers

Region	Number of countries covered	Country coverage (per cent)	Employment coverage (per cent)
Advanced countries (selected)	25	89.3	98.4
Eastern Europe and CIS	21	75.0	79.4
Asia (excluding China)	18	66.7	94.8
Asia (China)	(1)	(100)	(100)
Latin America and Caribbean	23	74.2	95.5
Africa	20	39.2	62.3
Middle East	10	83.3	78.4
Total (excluding China)	**117**	**66.1**	**88.7**

Note: Country coverage refers to the number of countries for which we found data as a percentage of all the countries in the region, while employment coverage refers to the total number of employed persons in countries with available data as a percentage of all employed persons in the region (as of 2010). Regional groupings correspond to those in ILO (2010b).

Source: ILO statistical database on domestic workers.

[9] *The national data, as well as full reference to the original sources, will be presented in the full report by the authors of this brief.*

[10] *The universe corresponds to countries and territories included in the ILO’s Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM) database. In addition, data were obtained for 17 small countries (mainly small island states in the Caribbean and the Pacific) not included in the KILM database. Given their small influence on global and regional aggregates, they were not used for the estimates.*

[11] *LABORSTA is the ILO’s database on labour statistics operated by the ILO Department of Statistics. Data are compiled from censuses, labour force and other household surveys. Free online access is available at http://laborsta.ilo.org.*

staying with us!") or that respondents might be reluctant to disclose their activity (especially when they evade income taxes). Another source of potential underestimation is that, given the broad range of activities that domestic workers carry out, it is possible that some correctly answered the interview, but then were misclassified during the coding of questionnaire responses (and thus do not appear in the division "Activities of private households as employers of domestic staff"). In addition, according to the definition of Division 95 (ISIC Rev. 3.1), agency workers are explicitly excluded since domestic services can only be produced by households (and not enterprises). However, in practice, Division 95 appears to be the only one in which to classify agency domestic workers and, in fact, we find a large number of domestic workers in labour force surveys of countries where there are predominantly agency workers (Belgium) and even in establishment surveys that collect data from enterprises, rather than households (China). A last source of potential underestimation is that domestic workers, in particular those who are undocumented migrant workers, may not be captured by the surveys in the first place when they are not part of the sample frame.

It is difficult to gauge the extent of the under-counting of domestic workers. As argued above, comparing official statistics and non-official estimates by NGOs is not necessarily informative, given that the latter are often not based on a verifiable methodology. However, some statistical offices have looked further into potential methodological shortcomings of household surveys in recording paid domestic work. An example is Germany, where domestic work is frequently part of the "shadow economy". Here, the 2009 Labour Force Survey counted 206,000 persons engaged in "Activities of households" (ISCI Rev. 4, Tabulation Category T). The national accounts section of Germany's NSO supplemented these data with other sources and estimates that some 712,000 persons are engaged in the same industry (see Körner and Puch, 2011, p. 44).[12] While some of the difference is due to the undifferentiated activities of households, the alternative estimate indicates that the true number of domestic workers might be substantially higher than the one captured by the LFS. Nonetheless, the German NSO recommended using the household survey data, which remain the best available, verifiable source for statistics on the number of domestic workers.

Methodology for global and regional estimates

To obtain reliable global and regional estimates on the minimum number of domestic workers, two methodological challenges need to be addressed. The first challenge is that the estimates refer to 2010, but many of the underlying national data have been collected in earlier years (mostly during the late 2000s). Since the number of domestic workers is likely to have changed since the data were gathered, we made the assumption that their number has grown in line with total employment.[13] Therefore, for each responding country, we first calculated the share of domestic workers in total employment (disaggregated by sex) in the latest available year, and then applied this ratio to the employment figures for the year 2010.[14] This provides estimates of the number of domestic workers in responding countries in 2010. The second challenge is that we do not have data for all countries, and thus have to correct for missing data. This was done based on a standard methodology that involves constructing calibrated response weights, which can be used to produce estimates that are consistent with global and regional employment aggregates.[15] The resulting estimates are thus unbiased and, given the high coverage of the database (see Table 1), a robust approximation of the minimum number of domestic workers.

2. Global and regional estimates: Main results

Our estimates indicate a minimum of 52.6 million domestic workers worldwide (see Table 2). To put this into perspective, this figure is greater than the number of employed persons in large countries like Viet Nam, Mexico or Nigeria. If all domestic workers worked in one country, this country would be the tenth largest employer worldwide.

Given that there are reasons to believe that the source data under-count domestic workers (see discussion above), the true number of domestic workers could be close to the estimate of 100 million domestic workers worldwide that was previously cited by the ILO.[16] However, with current data availability, it is difficult to determine the range where the "true" value lies, and the figures presented in this brief are the most reliable minimum estimates available.

[12] For the purposes of the regional and global estimates, we followed the advice given by Germany's statistical office and used the LFS data.

[13] While the share of domestic workers to employment might not have remained exactly constant, large shifts are unlikely in a few years.

[14] The employment figures for the year 2010 are retrieved from the ILO's Global Employment Trends model (GET).

[15] See ILO (2010b, Appendix II).

[16] For example, GB.301/2 paper quoted 100 million domestic workers. However, it is important to emphasize that this was not an ILO estimate based on statistical data.

Table 2. Global and regional estimates on the number of domestic workers in 2010, by sex

Panel A. Both sexes			
	Domestic workers	**Domestic workers in % of total employment**	**Domestic workers in % of paid employees**
Advanced countries (selected)	3,555,000	0.8%	0.9%
Eastern Europe and CIS	595,000	0.3%	0.4%
Asia	21,467,000	1.2%	3.5%
Asia excluding China	12,077,000	1.2%	4.7%
Latin America and Caribbean	19,593,000	7.6%	11.9%
Africa	5,236,000	1.4%	4.9%
Middle East	2,107,000	5.6%	8.0%
Total	**52,553,000**	**1.7%**	**3.6%**
Panel B. Females			
	Female domestic workers	**Female domestic workers in % of female employment**	**Female domestic workers in % of female paid employees**
Advanced countries (selected)	2,597,000	1.3%	1.4%
Eastern Europe and CIS	396,000	0.4%	0.5%
Asia	17,464,000	2.5%	7.8%
Asia excluding China	9,013,000	2.6%	11.8%
Latin America and Caribbean	18,005,000	17.4%	26.6%
Africa	3,835,000	2.5%	13.6%
Middle East	1,329,000	20.5%	31.8%
Total	**43,628,000**	**3.5%**	**7.5%**
Panel C. Males			
	Male domestic workers	**Male domestic workers in % of male employment**	**Male domestic workers in % of male paid employees**
Advanced countries (selected)	958,000	0.4%	0.5%
Eastern Europe and CIS	199,000	0.2%	0.2%
Asia	4,003,000	0.4%	1.0%
Asia excluding China	3,064,000	0.5%	1.7%
Latin America and Caribbean	1,588,000	1.0%	1.6%
Africa	1,400,000	0.6%	1.8%
Middle East	778,000	2.5%	3.5%
Total	**8,925,000**	**0.5%**	**1.0%**

Source: ILO estimates based on data from official sources.

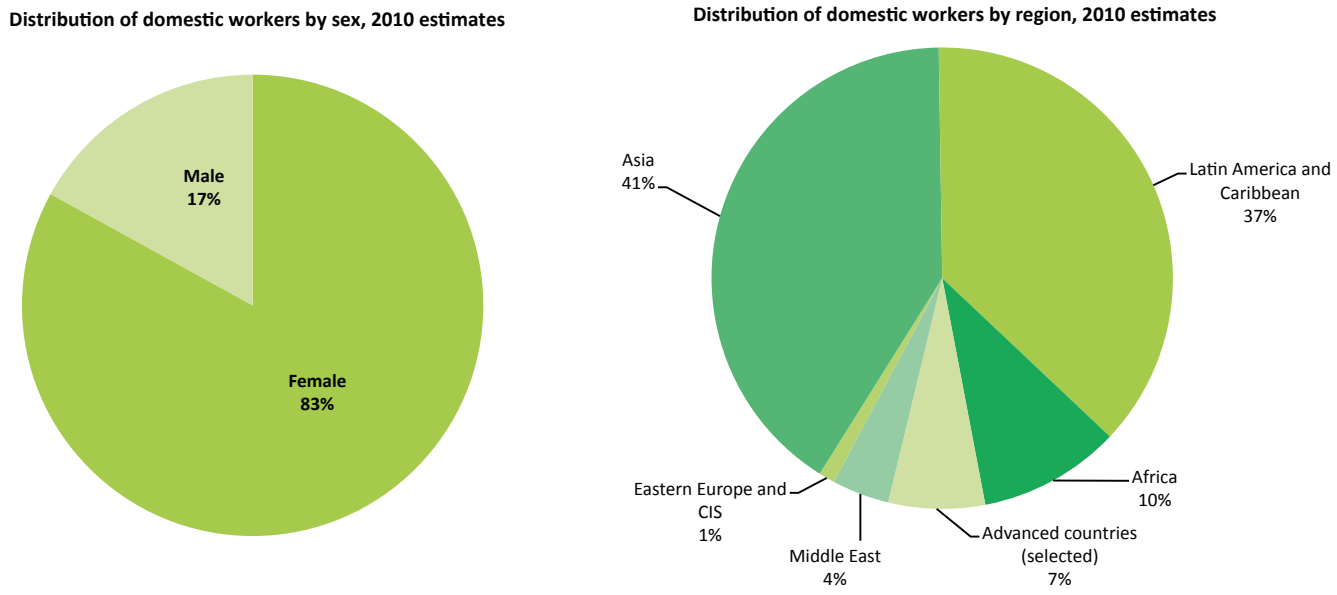
Even with these caveats in mind, the estimates show that domestic work is a significant source of employment: it accounts for 1.7 per cent of total employment worldwide, and for 3.6 per cent of wage employment. While domestic work is less prevalent in advanced countries (0.9 per cent of total wage employment) and in Eastern Europe and the CIS countries (0.4 per cent), it accounts for a far higher share of wage employment in many developing and emerging countries: in Latin America and the Caribbean, 11.9 per cent of wage employment is in domestic services, followed by the Middle East (8.0 per cent), Africa (4.9 per cent) and Asia (3.5 per cent).

Domestic work is predominantly carried out by women, who account for 83 per cent of all domestic workers worldwide (see Figure 1). The gender composition fluctuates between regions, and the female share ranges from approximately 64 per cent in the Middle East and 67 per cent in Eastern Europe and the CIS countries to 92 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. With a female share between 70 and 80 per cent, the remaining regions lie between the two extremes (not tabulated). Since women often face particular obstacles in obtaining paid employment, some 7.5 per cent of all female wage workers are in fact domestic workers (compared to 1.0 per cent of male wage workers), reflecting the importance of domestic work as a source of employment for women around the world. This fact is particularly accentuated in Latin America and the Caribbean, where paid domestic work accounts for more than a quarter (26.6 per cent) of female wage employment, and in the Middle East, where almost one-third (31.8 per cent) of female wage workers are domestic workers. The case of the Middle East is due to the generally low labour force participation of native women, and the fact that a large share of female migrant workers are in domestic services.[17]

As depicted in Figure 1, the two regions with the largest number of domestic workers are Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. In Asia, at least 21.5 million women and men work in private households (or 40.8 per cent of all domestic workers worldwide), while 19.6 million domestic workers live in Latin America and the Caribbean (some 37.3 per cent of the global total). Africa and the advanced countries follow in the ranking, with 5.2 million and 3.6 million domestic workers, respectively, while the Middle East (2.1 million domestic workers) and Eastern Europe and the CIS countries (595,000 domestic workers) contribute less to the global total.

For Latin America and the Caribbean, our figures are considerably higher than a previous estimate of 7.6 million domestic workers for urban areas in 18 Latin American countries (Tokman, 2010; see also Valenzuela and Mora, 2009). Two main reasons account for the

Figure 1. Distribution of domestic workers by sex and region, 2010 estimates



Source: ILO estimates based on data from official sources.

[17] *For instance, in 2009 Oman had 87,500 registered female migrant workers, of whom 69,250 were employed in private households. See Statistical Yearbook of Oman 2010, Table 6-2.*

Box 3. Measuring child domestic work*

Under international law, "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years" (see UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989). The estimates presented in this brief, which refer to persons above the minimum age for general admission to work (generally 15 years), therefore include some domestic workers who are technically still children. Their employment is permissible under international standards, unless the type of work they perform is hazardous, i.e. likely to jeopardize or harm the health, safety or morals of children (ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182). Where countries consider domestic work to be hazardous, the minimum age shall not be less than 18 years, and all domestic work by children is a form of child labour to be abolished.[1]

In addition to children aged 15 to 17 years, many children below the age of 15 years are employed as domestic workers. To assess the extent to which children engage in domestic work, the ILO's Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (SIMPOC) has prepared new statistics derived from its global estimates on child labour that were published in 2010 (Diallo et al., 2010). The international standards[2] define the target population for measuring child labour as "all persons in the age group from 5 to 17 years". In this framework, the term "child domestic work" refers to children ages 5 to 17 who are engaged to perform domestic tasks in the home of a third party or employer (with or without remuneration). It is therefore considered as an economic activity or a subset of children in employment.

Based on the above definition, SIMPOC used a task-based approach (see Box 1)[3] to identify child domestic workers. The results[4] show that at least 15.5 million children between the aged 5 to 17 years were engaged in domestic work in the world in 2008. This represents almost 5 per cent of all children in economic activity in this age group. While just over half of them were in the age group from 15 to 17 years, the number of child domestic workers between 5 to 14 years of age is estimated at 7.4 million (not tabulated). This accounts for over 4 per cent of all children in employment in this age group.

Not surprisingly, girls by far outnumber boys in domestic work. With regard to children aged 5 to 14 years, while 2.6 per cent of employed boys are in domestic work, this ratio is more than twice as high among girls (6.3 per cent). In absolute terms, there were 2.5 million boys involved in domestic work within the age group 5 to 14 years, compared to 4.9 million girls. The tendency becomes stronger for the age group 15-17 years, where 12.2 per cent of girls in employment are engaged in domestic work, compared to only 2.2 per cent for boys.

Table B.2. Estimates of number of children in domestic work by age and sex, 2008

Age group and sex	Child domestic work	Children in employment	Child domestic work in % of children in employment
5-11 years	**3,514,000**	**91,024,000**	**3.8**
Boys	1,430,000	49,490,000	2.9
Girls	2,084,000	41,534,000	5.0
12-14 years	**3,880,000**	**85,428,000**	**4.4**
Boys	1,069,000	49,679,000	2.2
Girls	2,811,000	35,749,000	7.9
15-17 years	**8,131,000**	**129,217,000**	**5.9**
Boys	1,694,000	76,608,000	2.2
Girls	6,436,000	52,609,000	12.2
Total 5-17 years	**15,525,000**	**305,669,000**	**4.8**
Boys	4,193,000	175,777,000	2.4
Girls	11,331,000	129,892,000	8.6

Source: ILO Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (IPEC/SIMPOC).

** This box was prepared by the Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (SIMPOC), which is the statistical unit of the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC).*

[1] In addition to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, see the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), which require countries to set a minimum age for admission to employment and to implement a range of programmes and measures to eliminate the worst forms of child labour.

[2] See the Resolution concerning Statistics of Child Labour adopted by the 18th ICLS in 2008, available at www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/meetings-and-events/international-conference-of-labour-statisticians/WCMS_101467/lang--en/index.htm.

[3] Due to a limited number of datasets with four-digit level of ISCO, these results are based on ISCO-88 codes 512, 513 and 913, which mainly cover domestic tasks performed by children in or for households. The SIMPOC estimates use the earlier version of the classification because essentially all available data-sets were based on ISCO-88, rather than ISCO-08.

[4] Available household survey data tend to produce a conservative estimate of the number of children aged 5 to 17 years in domestic work since they do not probe in sufficient detail to capture all aspects of child domestic work. A separate technical paper provides a full account of the estimation methodology and underlying data, and present results in greater detail. See www.ilo.org/childlabour.

difference in the results. Firstly, there are differences in coverage: the estimates presented in this brief include the Caribbean and refer to 31 countries (rather than 18) and aim to capture a country's total urban and rural employment (rather than just urban areas, as in the paper by Tokman). Secondly, our estimates are largely based on the industry-approach (Division 95 "Activities of households as employers of domestic staff" in ISIC Rev. 3.1), whereas the previous figures for Latin America employed a mixture of the task-based approach (ISCO) and status-in-employment approach (ICSE) (see Tokman, 2010, p. 2).[18]

With respect to China, there is no publicly available national household sample survey or census that contains data on the number of domestic workers. There are, nonetheless, several sources that allow us to make a tentative estimate. On the one hand, according to the 2008 establishment survey there are 292,000 persons employed in "services to households".[19] In all likelihood, these correspond to domestic workers employed through service agencies. Given the fact that the survey is based on data from enterprises, this figure excludes those workers employed directly by households and thus provides a lower limit. On the other hand, China's 2000 census showed that roughly 15.1 million persons, or 2.2 per cent of the total of 699 million employed persons, worked in "Social Services".[20] Under the 1994 Chinese industry classification, this division contains "Resident services" (i.e. domestic services), but also industries such as hotels and tourism.[21] The figure is therefore an upper-bound.

Official estimates by the Chinese Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) on the number of domestic workers are consistent with this broad range. They are based on a survey conducted in four cities (Shenyang, Qingdao, Changsha, Chengdu) in 2004, which indicated that there were 2 million job opportunities for domestic workers in these cities, half of them vacant. By extrapolating this result to other urban areas, the MOHRSS estimates that the sector has a potential to provide a total of 15 million jobs.[22] Assuming that half of these jobs are vacant, this corresponds to approximately 7.5 million active domestic workers in 2004, a number that is likely to have grown over time. If we apply the ratio of domestic workers to total employment found elsewhere in Asia to China's total employment for 2010, this results in a figure of 9.4 million domestic workers, roughly in line with the MOHRSS estimate. For the purposes of the global and regional estimates, which would be incomplete without China, we used this figure as a tentative estimate. To obtain a more accurate picture on the incidence of domestic workers in China, labour force survey data would be needed.

It should be emphasized that the global and regional estimates of the number of domestic workers are based on household survey data that generally follow the standard international definition of employment. A person is therefore counted as employed only if she or he worked for at least one hour in the preceding week (or was temporarily absent from work) and is above the legal minimum working age, which is typically set at 15 or 16 years old. Our estimates therefore exclude children below working age. Box 3 provides an insight into the prevalence of child domestic work.

3. Conclusions: Towards decent work for domestic workers

This policy brief has presented new global and regional estimates on the number of domestic workers. The results of the data analysis reveal that the extent of domestic work is significant. As of the year 2010, at least 52.6 million women and men above the age of 15 years were domestic workers in their main occupation. This represents a significant share of global wage employment, some 3.6 per cent worldwide. Some 43.6 million domestic workers are women (83 per cent of the total), and domestic work accounts for no less than 7.5 per cent of female wage employment worldwide. In the Middle East and in Latin America and the Caribbean, more than a quarter of all female wage workers are domestic workers.

These findings underline the economic contribution of domestic workers, and also the timeliness of the discussions on new international labour standards on decent work for domestic workers at the up-coming 100th Session of the International Labour Conference in June 2011. By setting a global benchmark, such new standards could be a reference framework for addressing the working conditions of millions of domestic workers worldwide.

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[18] For a few Latin American countries (namely Honduras and Paraguay) for which no data by industry were available, we did, in fact, identify domestic workers through the classification on status in employment.

[19] China Statistical Yearbook 2009: Table 4-6 Number of Employed Persons in Urban Units at Year-end by Status of Registration and Sector in Detail (2008). See NBS (2009).

[20] Based on Table 4.7 of the publication "Women and Men in China. Facts and Figures 2004". See NBS (2004).

[21] For a discussion of the Chinese national industrial classification, see Zhao (2004) and various publications on the website of the NBS.

[22] See the "white paper" with statistical findings from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of China (Beijing, 2004).

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The Domestic Work Policy Brief series aims to stimulate and inform policy debates on advancing decent work for domestic workers. It provides information on terms and conditions of employment in domestic work, policy issues and different views on these issues, and varied approaches to addressing them around the world.

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