

Almost a year ago, in June 2011, a milestone event took place that promised to improve the lives of millions of working people – mostly women - worldwide, including more than a quarter of a million in Hong Kong and potentially as many as 20 million in mainland China.

The event was the adoption by the International Labour Organization (the UN specialised agency dealing with work-related issues), of the first international labour standards covering domestic workers; Convention 189 and the accompanying Recommendation 201 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers.

This act sent out a clear message, that a worker does not lose basic rights simply because her work takes place in a private house, and that domestic workers are entitled to fair employment terms, protection against abuse, social security and – where available to other workers – a minimum wage.

Yet, resistance persists to adopting these international standards into national laws. Some say that women's contribution to the home and general social good is immeasurable, and formal legal measures just demean this. Others believe international standards have no place inside the home. It's also said that domestic work is not a real job, and that formal terms and conditions would ruin a relationship that is more akin to a family than a worker-employer.

These arguments simply justify the systematic devaluation and marginalization of domestic work and exclude millions of people from the sort of work-related protection most of us take for granted.

But the fact that such arguments are still being heard should be a major concern for our societies and leaders, because millions of families employ domestic workers and in many countries domestic work is a significant source of employment. Overall, 41 per cent of the world's domestic workers are in Asia, equivalent to 21.5 million people aged 15 or above. In the Philippines around 11 per cent of employed women are domestic workers, in Malaysia it's around 6 per cent, and in Indonesia more than 4 per cent. What's more the demand and the numbers are increasing, particularly as populations age, more women go out to work, and higher-skilled workers seek the freedom to build careers.

When the newspapers carry horrific cases of abuse of domestic workers, we are shocked. Yet we often fail to make the connection between these stories and the social and legal environment that leaves the workers vulnerable, whether they are employed in a foreign country or in their own. The ILO estimates about 60 per cent of domestic workers in Asia are excluded from national labour laws. Almost 99 per cent have no legal safeguards against excessively long hours, 88 per cent are not entitled to a statutory minimum wage.

In many places local labour laws do not cover foreign domestic workers (Hong Kong is a noteworthy exception to this). In other countries (e.g. Singapore) they are covered by separate laws, bilateral Memorandums of Understanding or standard employment contracts. But the non-binding nature of these agreements and the frequent lack of dispute resolution procedures make these systems less effective in resolving problems.

Several nations are taking action to improve this situation, for example Singapore's decision to set a weekly rest day from January 2013. But as well as legal changes a fundamental shift in attitudes is required. Both domestic employers and workers must know their rights and obligations. As we approach the first anniversary of Convention 189 and Recommendation 201 it is time to recognise the true economic and social value of domestic workers.