

ORGANIZING THE UNORGANIZED

Experience of Migrant Domestic Workers Organizing in
Asia, with specific focus of MDWs' destination countries



About IDWF

- The First Domestic Workers International Conference in 2006 and the birth of International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) in 2009
- The C189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers: A huge and historic winning for Domestic Workers and Labour Movement
- From "Network" to "Federation": constitution and formal structure were formed, 14 local and national DWs membership based organizations and unions become formal members. In October 2013, [the Founding Congress was held and the IDWN became the International Domestic Workers Federation \(IDWF\)](#). About 180 domestic workers leaders participated in this historic event.
- As of July 2019, the IDWF has **71 affiliates from 55 countries, representing over 500,000 domestic/household workers' members**. Most are organized in trade unions and others, in associations, networks and workers' cooperatives.
- Our mission: build a strong, democratic and united domestic/household workers global organization to protect and advance domestic workers' rights everywhere.



Migration of Domestic Workers

- ❑ Domestic workers: 70.1 million globally (ILO, 2018); 41% in Asia (2013).
- ❑ Migrant domestic workers: 11.5 million globally (ILO, 2015), 24% in Asia Pacific, 22.1% in Europe and 19% in Arab States (ILO, 2018)
- ❑ Migration of Domestic Workers in Asia and Middle East:
 - **Asia:** most domestic workers in South East Asia, East Asia and South Asia are locals /nationals. However this region host some of the major sending countries of domestic workers, mostly women, seeking employment beyond their national borders. Increased migration of DWs in recent years is often linked to an increased demand for domestic and care workers in the Middle East, Europe and the newly industrialized countries within Asia, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau.
 - **Middle East:** it hosts 17.6 million migrant workers, representing 35.6 per cent of all workers in the region and 1.7 per cent of the global migrant worker population. Domestic work is a significant sector of employment in the Arab states, constituting 7.7 per cent of the whole workforce, and the concentration of migrants in the sector is particularly high (ILO, 2015).



Working Condition of MDWs: Unseen, undervalued, exploited



Absence of labour and social protection



Work in isolation



Power imbalance between domestic workers and employers



Visas tied to employers



Restricted ability to leave an exploitative workplace



Stigmatization in origin and destination countries



Lack of information and access to assistance



Lack of collective organization and representation



Prone to sexual and domestic abuse

MDWs runaway from exploitative condition and become undocumented

Passport and Document confiscation



MDWs and Exploitation By Recruitment Agency

- Zero recruitment fee: does it work? Has it included domestic work sector?
- MDWs have to pay so much (overcharging) for recruitment fee, deducted from their already-low wage they receive
- Problem of non-transparent cost structure
- Debt Bondage: MDWs are required to take loan
- Complain mechanism? Complexity in seeking redress as it involves many interconnected network of recruitment agency starting from the middle man in the village, recruitment agency in home countries, recruitment agency in sending countries, and it often involves loan / financial agency.



Domestic Work: the un-organizable sector?

1. Legal and Political Barriers

- Since DWs are not recognized as workers and neither the employers, it results to the exclusion from the rights to organize and collective bargaining. Challenge in finding suitable form of collective bargaining.
- Trade union law is not inclusive toward MDWs. Many of our MDWs affiliates are not able register as an independent union. Some laws can make them possible to join as members of local union.
- Shrinking space of activism due to more political suppression and xenophobia puts migrants, including MDWs in a more vulnerable situation. → political crisis in HK, migrants raids in Malaysia.



Domestic Work: the un-organizable sector?

2. Practical Barriers

- Building mass organizations of DWs requires far more time, effort and resources, yet DWs is very lack of time. Vs Responsibilities in attending meetings, organize rally, etc.
- Isolated nature, live-in MDWs → Limited freedom to move
- Undocumented / irregular MDWs
- Language barriers: challenge for local NGOs and TUs to organize MDWs



What organizing domestic workers is about?

- Self empowerment → domestic worker as an active actor and not just service receiver / beneficiaries
- Forming collective demands and actions
- Representation
- Women leadership
- Finding new way and paradigm in organizing → go beyond traditional notion of unionization



How We Organize?

- MDWs are already organized in many forms, usually for the sake of social networks and mutual supports. These groups are organized based on hobbies, religions, ethnicity and nationality groups.
- Gather groups and individual to raise their awareness → discuss their workplace concerns, sharing information and experiences among each other.
- Make intentional organizing effort: collective identification of common concerns, such as working hours, wage, agency fee, etc.
- Reflect and analyse on the existing / non-existing laws in the countries
- Making collective demands
- Building leadership is the key → adopting collective decision making and democratic principles in the union / organization level.
- Building alliance with trade unions, NGOs and other key stakeholders
- Keep the things going and moving forward!
- Uniting domestic workers in regionally and globally



What forms of Organizations and Structures?

- Not all our affiliates are organized in unions, some are organized in associations or cooperatives.
- Choice of the organizations depend on different factors: existing legal framework in the country, role of trade union, internal needs.
- Hong Kong: nationality-based domestic workers unions join in one federation and is affiliated with trade union centers
- Malaysia: nationality-based, take form of associations
- Singapore: a group of committee
- Thailand: a network / associations of migrant and local DWs

Hong Kong: A Federation Uniting DWs Across Nationalities and gain some victories

- FADWU (Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Union) uniting DWs unions of 4 nationalities: Philippines, Thai, Nepalese, and local DWs in Hong Kong.
- Formed in 2010 and registered as trade unions, gain big support and affiliated with Confederation of Trade Unions.
- Actively involved in social dialogue with Government, campaigns and rallies.
- Some victories:
 - In 2017, FADWU mobilized surveys done by MDWs and campaigns on the overcharging by employment agency and this resulted to the revoke of license of two major employment agency in HK.
 - Leaders of federation are capable to represent MDWs case in labor tribunal. Major achievement in 2018, leader of Filipino Union was able demand technological court to provide hearing via teleconference → first time ever for DWs in HK.
 - Bringing case into campaign for policy change → after termination of a MDWs because of cancer, FADWU actively demand the Legco to provide access of medical services.

Malaysia: From support group to collective demand

- AMMPO - SENTRO (Association of Filipino MDWs) and Indonesian Domestic Workers Group in Malaysia were initially formed by few numbers of domestic workers. In a strict migration policy environment, AMMPO managed to have around 200 members, and the newly formed Indonesian group has now around 100 potential members and about to form their first Congress next year.
- Challenge in getting recognition / registered as a migrant DWs worker union. According to the trade union act, migrants can only join / become the members of the local unions.
- Both associations are able to identify common problems of their working conditions and deliver inputs and demands in regard to the draft of Domestic Workers Regulations to the MOHR and mobilize campaigns on the C189 ratification along with NGOs. In fact the coalition of *Ke Arah 189* are lead by DWs themselves.
- AMMPO becomes main partner of the Filipino Embassy in Post-Arrival Orientation for MDWs newly comer. They gets tremendous support from SENTRO – The National Trade Union Centers → MDWs agenda included in the MoU with the Malaysian Trade Union Congress.
- Indonesian group actively push the bilateral MoU between Indonesian and Malaysian government to recognize MDWs.

Thailand: Organizing beyond a formal form

- Legal limitations for MDWs to organize and form unions
- Network of Domestic Workers in Thailand was formed in 2009 → uniting 14 smaller groups of Thai DWs and 7 smaller groups of Burmese DWs. In total they have more than 600 members.
- Activities:
 - Advocate for the ratification of C189
 - Promoting standard employment contract
 - Employers engagement
 - Case referral

Recommendations: What roles we can play in enhancing MDWs voice and strengthen their rights?

- All stakeholders must recognize domestic work as work and set standard for decent work for domestic workers.
- To empower them, we must be able to identify and address their needs (such as legal or health assistance), build their awareness and enable them to actively participate and organize (provide stable meeting places, organizer, structures, organizational plan and agenda).
- National trade unions should accommodate the sector, for both local or migrant domestic workers. This can be done by allowing them to join the confederation, provide seats in the excom, train them and let them represent themselves.
- Enabling the environment for collective bargaining and social dialogue.
- Ratify and Implement international laws and instruments → IDWF campaign priority: ILO C189, ILO C190.