

Decent work for domestic workers: towards new international labour standards

Domestic work employs millions of workers, mostly women, around the world. The June 2010 session of the International Labour Conference will held a first discussion on a new international labour standard for a domestic workforce that is growing worldwide. ILO Online spoke with Manuela Tomei, Director of the ILO's Conditions of Work and Employment Programme, about working conditions of domestic workers, and how they can be improved.

05/31/2010

domestic_standard

ILO Online: How would you define domestic work?

Manuela Tomei: Domestic workers may cook, clean, take care of children, the elderly or the disabled, even domestic animals. Domestic workers may work full- or part-time as wage workers for one or more employers. They may also be self-employed with substantial control over the terms of their work, or provide services in individual homes while being paid by licensed institutions. Domestic workers, especially full-time migrant domestic workers, may also live in the employer's home.

ILO Online: What is the composition of this workforce?

Manuela Tomei: The composition of the domestic workforce changes by country and over time, but, everywhere, their numbers are growing. According to a [new ILO report](#) prepared for this year's International Labour Conference, domestic work absorbs a significant proportion of the workforce, ranging between 4 and 10 per cent of total employment in developing countries and up to 2.5 per cent of total employment in industrialized countries. While domestic work is overwhelmingly comprised of women, an important proportion of them migrants, men also work as gardeners or as guardians in private homes or as family chauffeurs.

ILO Online: What are the reasons behind this increase in domestic work?

Manuela Tomei: Changes in the organization and intensification of work and the marked rise in female labour participation rates, which has reduced women's availability for unpaid care work, are responsible for this increase. Besides, the ageing of societies, intensified national and international migration of women and the decline in state provision of care and social services have made it increasingly difficult for families to reconcile paid work with family responsibilities. As a result, reliance on domestic work has increased everywhere across the world as a private strategy to counter mounting work-family tensions.

ILO Online: What are their conditions of work?

Manuela Tomei: Despite its growing social and economic significance, domestic work has been, and remains, one of the most precarious, low-paid, insecure and unprotected forms of employment. Many domestic workers are overworked, underpaid and unprotected. Abuse and exploitation are common, especially when children and migrant workers are involved. Because of their young age or nationality, and the fact that they often live in the employer's household, they are particularly vulnerable to verbal and physical violence. There are frequent media reports on such violence, including suicides and homicides in the worst case.

ILO Online: Where does the lack of protection come from?

Manuela Tomei: The serious decent work deficits facing domestic workers are a consequence of their legal and social vulnerability. Domestic workers are excluded either de jure or de facto from the effective protection of national labour law and social security regimes-both in industrialized and developing countries. Another flagrant case is the exclusion of domestic workers from the scope of occupational safety and health legislation in most countries, as the household is erroneously perceived as safe and non-threatening.

ILO Online: What is so specific about domestic work that it needs special regulation?

Manuela Tomei: Domestic work differs from other types of work in many respects. First, domestic work is largely limited to inside the home, and therefore can escape the outreach of conventional mechanisms of control, such as labour inspection services that face legal and administrative obstacles to inspecting private premises. Second, domestic work mirrors work traditionally performed by women without pay, and is thus

perceived as lacking in value and exogenous to the “productive” economy. This explains why domestic workers commonly earn low wages, and may often be either under- or unpaid at regular intervals.

Third, domestic workers have limited bargaining power as they are an “invisible” (working inside the household, out of public sight) and isolated workforce, with no peer workers to turn to for support or guidance on what is to be considered a reasonable request or an unacceptable treatment. When migrant workers are involved, their isolation may be even greater as they often do not master the national or local language and have no family or other supportive networks to rely on. All these characteristics reinforce the perception of domestic work as not constituting “real” work, thus contributing to its further undervaluation and neglect.

ILO Online: Why do we need international labour standards on domestic work?

Manuela Tomei: Existing international labour standards do not offer adequate guidance on how to ensure meaningful protection to domestic workers as they either fail to address the specific context in which domestic work takes place or allow for their exclusion. This led the ILO Governing Body to agree to include a standard-setting activity on decent work for domestic workers on the agenda of the 99th Session (2010) of the International Labour Conference (ILC). The latter will deal with this question according to the double discussion procedure. This means that, while in 2010 the ILC will be called to discuss the desirability and form of a possible international instrument (s) on the subject, a final decision on a possible adoption will be taken in June 2011.

A specific international norm for domestic workers, to be effective, would need to reaffirm the protections to which domestic workers are already entitled to under existing ILO standards, while recognizing their special employment relationship and providing for specific standards to make these rights a reality. The decision to discuss such a norm on decent work for domestic workers reflects the ILO's commitment, as embedded in its Decent Work Agenda, to bring workers once deemed to be outside of its constituency into its mainstream work. It recognizes that domestic workers are real workers and takes account of the fact that the overwhelming majority of domestic workers in the globalizing economy are women.