

Recognition for India's invisible workers

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08/01/2011

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For various reasons, official statistics tend to undercount domestic workers. The case of India is particularly striking given the magnitude of the difference: estimates of the number of domestic workers in this country range between 2.5 and 90 million. Domestic workers play an important part in the economy and they allow others to go out and earn money. Yet they remain invisible, unprotected and their contribution is often not recognized. Neelam Agnihotri, Communication and Information Officer in the ILO Country Office for India, reports.

Kuvari's face lights up with pride as she writes her name in English. Born into a poor family of landless agricultural workers in Jharkhand, India, life has been an unending struggle for survival.

Her parents were too poor to provide two full meals a day to their six children; education was a distant dream. As the eldest child she was sent to Delhi to work when she was 14, to augment the family's meagre income. But since she was uneducated, house work was the only option before her. A friend put her in touch with a voluntary organization that helped her find a job with a good family employer.

While working she also enrolled in a training programme, the Skills Development Initiative for Domestic Workers, run by the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOLE) and Delhi State Government, with technical assistance from the Norwegian-funded project implemented by the ILO. This not only helped her organize her work more systematically but also boosted her self-esteem. She realized she was not alone, and that there were many more like her.

Jasinta also came to Delhi from a remote village, Amlai Gudi in Assam. But after working for a year she was cheated by the placement agency and paid only half her wages. Luckily she found a new job quickly and, with the help of a voluntary organization, she also attended the domestic workers' training programme. "I used to work in a haphazard manner. This training has helped me improve my performance. My employer is very happy with the way I work now and has given me a raise," said Jasinta.

Domestic work on the rise

Paid domestic work is increasing in many economies worldwide but it remains a virtually invisible form of employment in many countries. It is also generally seen as unskilled work, a natural extension of women's work in their own homes. Thus, many domestic workers endure very poor working conditions, many are underpaid, have no social security coverage and work long hours in difficult and not always safe conditions. Some are vulnerable to trafficking or sexual, physical or psychological abuse, especially when they are migrants.

Yet domestic and care work in the home is vital for the economy. Domestic workers allow millions of others to go out to work while maintaining domestic routines. In India a new domestic worker can expect to earn about INR1,800 (US\$41) per month. This should increase as the worker acquires additional skills such as cooking or child care.

According to Tine Staermose, Director, ILO Decent Work Team for South Asia and Country Office for India, what matters to domestic workers – apart from better wages – is respect and recognition, and the realization that their work is important. "Besides their identity as workers with rights, they also form a very important segment whose contribution to the economy and growth needs to be recognized," she says.

Domestic work has been an ILO concern since its earliest days and gender equality is at the core of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda. Domestic workers form a significant part of the working population. Given their vulnerability to dangerous, discriminatory and abusive working conditions, the ILO recognizes the need to promote decent work for domestic workers. ([Global and regional estimates on domestic workers](#), Domestic Work Policy Brief No.4, Geneva, ILO, 2011.)

"Your work is important"

To bring the issue centre stage and raise awareness about the rights of domestic workers, a public campaign "Your Work is Important" was launched in India in 2009. To professionalize domestic work and promote better wages and working conditions, the ILO collaborated with the MOLE, the Government of India and the Delhi Government to set up pilot training programmes to train and re-skill domestic workers and household assistants.

The ILO also collaborates with the National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) to help domestic workers in selected states get organized and train them to improve their skills, including work discipline and the so-called soft skills that can lead to career progression.