



Regional Workshop on the Role of Trade Unions in Promoting Decent Work for Domestic Workers in Arab Countries

(Beirut, 11-12/11/2010)

Background Information

Background

There are today millions of domestic workers. They represent an important and growing segment of the labour force and their work is enabling others to improve their living standards. The great majority of them are women and many are migrant workers. Since 1948 the International Labour Organization has repeatedly drawn attention to the insufficient or absent protection of domestic workers in labour legislation. In March 2008, following an international campaign by Global Unions supported by ACTRAV, the ILO Governing Body decided to place Decent Work for Domestic Workers as an agenda item for the 2010 International Labour Conference.

The ILO Governing Body proposed that the International Labour Conference develops ILO instruments, possibly in the form of a Convention accompanied by a Recommendation to give this group of workers the protection they so urgently need. Trade unions, in particular the Workers' Group of the ILO, has been on the forefront to promote the adoption of international standards that can be used to improve the legal environment and enable domestic workers to benefit from the full range of protections and rights related to decent work. A global campaign has been launched to support the adoption of an International Convention accompanied by a Recommendation.

The majority of domestic workers in Arab countries are migrant women from Asian and African countries. They largely live within the households that receive their services, under sponsorship arrangements. Excluded from labour and social security laws in the region, they are viewed as aliens or victims rather than workers at both the level of social perception and policy response. The undervaluation of care work at all levels leads to the undermining of workers performing it.

To date, trade unions across the region have not been actively involved in the campaign for Decent Work for Domestic Workers. Regional labour activists have had a tendency to claim that addressing the concerns of specific groups of workers, such as domestic workers, carries the risk of falling into a 'divide and rule' situation, since it is

the rights of all workers that should be promoted. Missing from this approach has been an understanding of social justice that gives the priority to the worst-off, and a sense of strategic planning rather than an 'all or nothing' approach.

Sustainable improvement in the conditions of domestic work in the Arab region hinges on the self-organization of domestic workers, including women migrant domestic workers. Often they can neither join trade unions in their countries of origin nor are they welcome in the trade unions of the countries where they work. Upon their return home they may associate with support organizations mainly providing help to mitigate the trauma and abuses that they have suffered.

More recently, associations of domestic workers have emerged to organize migrant domestic workers in their countries of origin. The experiences of domestic workers organizing in other countries of destination can also inspire and guide ongoing efforts. Across the Arab region, domestic workers' own support networks exist and are quite vibrant although typically strictly confined to national community lines.

Trade unions globally, and in the Arab region particularly, have a crucial role in advancing the standard setting process on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The so-called "Brown report", which includes the proposed Convention and Recommendation based on the first discussion, as well as Office commentary, has already been sent to governments. Governments' replies need to reflect the results of consultations with employers' and workers' organizations. Employers' and workers' organizations can also reply directly. In this context, the workshop aims to enable the formulation of a regional trade union position in support of Decent Work for Domestic Workers.

Objectives

Organized jointly by RO-Beirut and ILO ACTRAV, this two-day activity will mainly gather trade union representatives from the region to discuss the standard setting process for Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The two-day workshop is expected to:

- ❖ Advise national trade union centres concerning comments to be made on the "brown report" as per the ITUC circular,
- ❖ Inform and mobilize future trade union actions, and
- ❖ Come up with plans for moving forward.

Time & Place

Padova Hotel, Sin el Fil, Horsh Tabet
November 11-12, 2010
Beirut, Lebanon

Participants

25-30 participants to the two-day meeting include:

- ❖ Representatives from workers' organisations from West Asian Arab Countries, Gulf Cooperation Council Countries and North African Arab Countries (to be determined by the Secretariat of the Workers' Group)
- ❖ Where no trade unions or representative workers' committees exist, human rights NGOs and/or women's organizations could also be included as observers. It is also proposed to this effect to invite the Migrant Forum Asia, which has experience of work in both countries of origin and countries of destination of migrant domestic workers.
- ❖ Representatives of domestic workers trade unions and support groups from countries of origin (Philippines, Sri Lanka and Ethiopia). It might be appropriate to invite the representatives of the Hong Kong migrant domestic workers who are in the process of forming a multi-community trade union and will affiliate to the national trade union centre, affiliated to ITUC.
- ❖ A number of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon will also be invited to the workshop to present their testimonials.
- ❖ Representatives from the international trade union movement, including ITUC/IUF/PSI
- ❖ Representatives from NGOs will be invited as observers. However this participation would be of limited nature in order to enable trade unions to concentrate on discussing concerns and strategies. Among NGOs to be extended an invitation are Kafa, HRW, FES, Solidarity Centre (with the understanding that they contribute funds)

Languages

In Arabic and English with simultaneous translation

ILO: Walid Hamdan, Simel Esim, Azfar Khan (DWT-Beirut); Martin Oelz, Luc Demaret,(ACTRAV)

ITUC: (to be determined)

Trade Union Representatives from the region: (to be determined by Secretariat of Workers Group)

Sending country organizations' representatives: (to be determined by Secretariat WG) and migrant workers in Lebanon to present their testimonials

The short version of a documentary (10 min) on domestic workers in Lebanon (Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from home) will also be shown on the first day of the workshop.

[Background Info 5 Nov En LM.docx](#)