



## Domestic workers speak

a global fight for rights and recognition



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**Cover photo:** Domestic workers protest in front of SBS, a major broadcast station in Korea, to condemn a soap opera (TV drama) using the term “gajeongbu” – a term which has been using to derogatorily refer to a DWs, similar to “housemaid”. The sign says “Gajeongbu” and house managers in the protest performance are pouring water onto the sign to wash away the term “gajeongbu”. At the back, house managers are holding signs saying “no gajeongbu”. Source: National House Manager’s Cooperative.

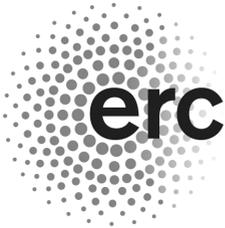
# Domestic workers speak

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Edited by Giulia Garofalo Geymonat,  
Sabrina Marchetti and Penelope Kyritsis

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## About Beyond Trafficking and Slavery

A wide range of activists, academics, trade unions, governments and NGOs are currently trying to understand and address forced labour, trafficking and slavery. *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* (BTS) occupies a unique position within this larger movement, one which combines the rigour of academic scholarship with the clarity of journalism and the immediacy of political activism. It is an independent, not-for-profit marketplace of ideas that uses evidence-based advocacy to tackle the political, economic, and social root causes of global exploitation, vulnerability and forced labour. It provides original analysis and specialised knowledge on these issues to take public understanding beyond the sensationalism of many mainstream media depictions. It further works to bring citizens, activists, scholars and policy-makers into conversation with each other to imagine pioneering policy responses.

BTS is housed within [openDemocracy](#), a UK-based digital commons with an annual readership of over nine million. OpenDemocracy is committed to filling gaps in global media coverage, helping alternative views and perspectives find their voices, and converting trailblazing thinking into lasting, meaningful change.

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## Foreword from IDWF

“Nothing of Us Without Us”. We told this to everyone as we participated in the International Labour Conference that adopted the international convention on decent work for domestic workers, the C189, in Geneva in June 2011. Throughout the ILO process, every one of us was convinced that we were there to speak for ourselves. At the end we won the convention and we united ourselves into a global structure – the International Domestic Workers Federation or the IDWF.



In these past four years, thousands of domestic workers have formed or joined unions and hundreds of leaders have emerged. Today we have 62 affiliates in 50 countries, bringing together over half a million domestic workers. We are so pleased to have this opportunity to work with openDemocracy to publish this book, *Domestic Workers Speak*, at a time when we are about to celebrate our fourth anniversary. It is through listening to these personal stories that people will believe in us. We are no longer victims nor are we just little poor women with no capacities. We are like all other workers. We fight collectively and in personal ways. Some of us have made big gains while some have not yet done so. But we are not losing hope. With the IDWF, we organise and learn together. One day, we will all be free.

Myrtle Witbooi, President, IDWF

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## A global landscape of voices for labour rights and social recognition

*Less than 20 years ago domestic workers around the world began to speak up in demand for rights and recognition. A new series shows that while they've made substantial progress, there is still a long way to go.*

Giulia Garofalo Geymonat and Sabrina Marchetti • Ca' Foscari University (Italy)

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There are more than 67 million domestic workers across the world, [according to estimates](#) from the International Labour Organisation. In the last decade, awareness has greatly increased about their living and working conditions. We now know that abuse and exploitation, child labour, discrimination, starvation, violence, debt bondage, invisibility, and the many crimes held under the umbrella of 'trafficking' are disproportionately represented within this traditionally unorganised and invisible sector. Many domestic workers – especially migrant domestic workers – are [denied access to labour and human rights](#). Even where rights exist on paper they are extremely difficult to implement, and 'the mentality of servitude' still prevails in different forms.

What is less known is that this increase in our awareness corresponds to the slow and steady expansion over the last 20 years, and despite considerable odds, of a grassroots mobilisation of workers who resist their exploitation and stigmatisation. They fight back as domestic workers, but also as migrant women, ethicised women, and women of the lower classes and caste. The widespread belief that domestic workers are 'impossible to organise' has been proven false by the enduring commitment of activists and unionists around the world.

The movement for domestic workers' rights spearheaded the push for ILO Convention 189 – the Domestic Workers Convention – which came into force in 2011. This convention arguably represents one of the most hopeful moments in the fight against exploitation and trafficking



Domestic work in Haiti. Alex Proimos/Flickr. Creative Commons.

globally, despite the refusal of many countries – included in the US and the UK – to ratify it.

It is a movement that still struggles to gain visibility, political support, and financial support. Not surprisingly, domestic workers' organising is not an issue that easily fits within the humanitarian and international donor frames – as **Marie-Jose L. Tayah** points out in her piece about organising in the **Middle East**. Indeed, when we read about the experiences of organising domestic workers, we hear about slow processes of raising collective consciousness and of reaching out to women who live and work isolated from each other, frequently in the same houses as their employers, with no money, time, or even documents.

### **Domestic workers speak**

In order to get a better understanding of some of these issues that often remain hidden, we asked domestic workers' rights activists themselves to tell us directly about their movement – their struggles, their experiences as domestic workers, the reasons for their ongoing

exploitation, and the strategies to fight it. We are both researchers and activists based at the University of Venice, Italy. We coordinate the project **DomEQUAL**, and are members of the **Research Network for Domestic Workers' Rights**.

From our university offices we reached out to our connections via email to organisations all around the world that are led by domestic workers themselves. The response has been great. In spite of tight schedules, difficulties accessing the internet, or problems with language and translation, we received contributions from organisations based in **20 different countries** across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, in addition to Europe and the US.

For most of the organisations, their members come from other, many more numerous, countries. Authors have written individually, collectively, or with allies. Some have preferred to give interviews, some have shared parts of their collective creations. For most of them, their analysis is rooted in their organising experience as well as in their personal experience of paid domestic and care work – a journey often beginning in adolescence as an alternative to school, or as a way to finance it. For some contributors, it is important to be named and recognised as domestic workers. For others it is crucial to belong to larger forms of activism, and to protect their personal identities, because they work in contexts where organising may result in lost jobs, repression, and even prison.

Among the authors are also some of the protagonists of the last decade who have witnessed or brought about great changes in this field, and their organisations have directly contributed to the creation of the ILO convention on domestic worker rights. Some have been, or currently are, representatives of the **International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)**, which was created in 2012 and currently has 62 affiliates in 50 countries, for a total of more than 500,000 workers worldwide. IDWF is a membership-based organisation which includes

trade unions, trade union federations, as well as workers' cooperatives and associations.

This variety, which readers will also find in this collection, reflects the variety of the movement and of the different contexts in which it has been growing. It also accounts for the slow process of inclusion of domestic workers into trade unions – which only began in this century – and more generally for the ongoing process of transition from informal self help groups to more structured organisations.

Across such a large variety of contexts, readers will learn about organisers taking employers to court, lobbying for policy change, and taking to the streets. They will also read about more creative forms of organising, new and old, such as language courses, participant workers' research, WhatsApp chats, financial literacy training, conflict solving forums for workers and their employers, as well as more hidden forms of communication across the balconies of employers houses, or informal gatherings in parks and churches.

### **What is work?**

All the pieces of this collection speak about the difficulty of becoming part of a political conversation and of a labour movement that is still dominated by people – predominantly men – who do not think of domestic work as *real* work. Indeed, many of these people are themselves employers of domestic workers. Workers' experiences and analyses force us to interrogate the fundamental concepts that frame our lives: what is work and what isn't? What is the limit between love and work? They also compel us to face and address concrete everyday issues, such as how to care for our kids, our elderly, our homes when we have no time and energy to do so under a capitalistic system.

Indeed, unlike other 'culprits' of exploitation, the employers of domestic workers cannot be represented as others from us, such as 'egoistic' profit making business people, or 'deviant' men who pay for sex. Do-

mestic workers are employed by all kinds of families. They typically work for other women, including, as Marcelina Bautista from the **National Domestic Workers Union in Mexico** stresses in her piece, “lawyers, legislators, teachers, feminists and public workers”.

Wherever we live, it is difficult to isolate domestic work and get rid of its social and political content, as something different and far away from us. Therefore, if we are able to listen to the analyses provided by domestic workers, we may learn a lot about the material constitution of class, gender, race, and our own complicity in their reproduction. Many readers may find in these contributions indications of how they can responsibly employ domestic workers, or of how to recognise the hypocrisy of a system that demands reproductive labour but doesn't value or recognise it.

In that sense it may not be surprising that activists stress the need to work on the cultural, the symbolic, the interiorised, and the intimate effects of subordination and power. Many speak about the impact of language and words – servant, the girl, etc. – and the importance of using new terms: ‘domestic worker’ in English, ‘family collaborator’ (colf) in Italian, ‘house manager’ in Korean. The piece by Ok-Seop Shim from the **Incheon Branch of the National House Manager's Cooperative** in South Korea speaks about the shame in her children's gaze when she decided to start working in domestic work. The piece by the Domestic Workers Rights Union in India echoes this, emphasising that many workers hide their occupation from their own families. Many more articles speak about the stigma of the dirty work, the sense of being unworthy and undeserving, to the point of feeling ‘grateful’ that employers do you the ‘favour’ of paying you.

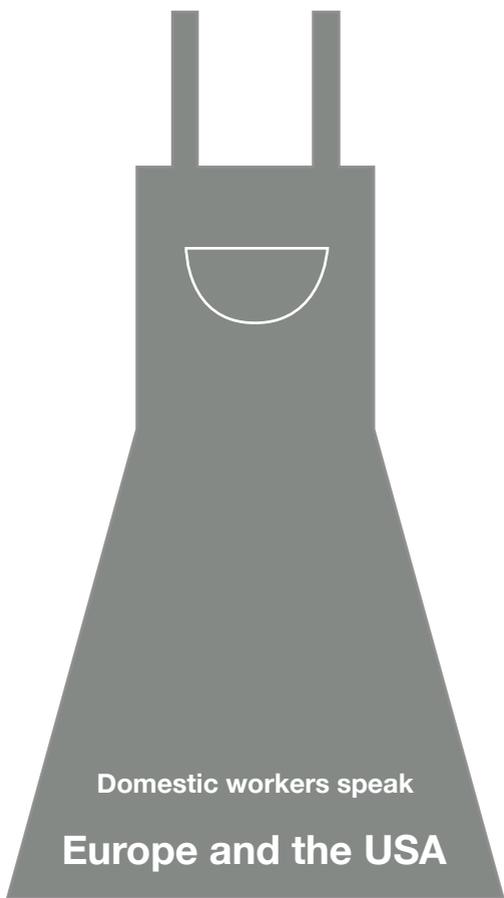
In the case of migrant undocumented workers, this interiorised dimension may extend to the sense of being a criminal, because as well shown by **Migrant Domestic Workers network FNV in the Netherlands**, one lives in constant fear of any contact with authorities. These

are all issues that call for a kind of resistance that is necessarily a collective path, a change that is not linear, that some may even call “spiritual”, as the **Acli Colf** from Italy would put it.

These issues make domestic work quite special compared to other forms of work, and domestic workers’ organising even more difficult and unique. But is it really so incomparable to other forms of labour? Interestingly, some of the authors, such as Vicky Kanyoka of the **IDWF regional office in Africa** suggest quite the opposite: that the domestic workers’ movement may indeed be exemplary for sectors looking to find their way in the new economy.

Indeed, as “the original gig economy workers”, as Ai-Jen Poo of the US-based the **National Domestic Workers Alliance** put it, this movement may represent a model of how to bring together individuals working in isolation from one another and faced with precarious working conditions, restrictions of movement, and exclusion from formal rights. These are conditions not only experienced by domestic workers, but by an increasing number of people in today’s world, and especially by those who cross national borders.





Domestic workers speak

**Europe and the USA**

## Out from the shadows: domestic workers speak in the United States

*Long exempt from most labour protections, domestic workers in the United States can show an increasingly flexibilised workforce how to survive in the new economy.*

Ai-jen Poo • National Domestic Workers Alliance (United States) and IDWF

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Our homes are our sanctuaries. Where we return after a day's work, to eat and rest. Where we feel most safe. But for so many, our homes are places that present risk.

For domestic workers – the nannies, cleaners and caregivers who do the work that makes all other work possible – our homes are their workplaces. Behind the closed doors of homes in our neighbourhoods are where this invisible workforce – consisting mostly of immigrant women – spend their days nurturing our children, cleaning our kitchens and caring for our grandparents and loved ones with disabilities. There are 100 million domestic workers, hidden from view by the outside world, excluded from many labour laws that protect other workers, and vulnerable in the shadows of the economy.

If you listen to domestic workers you will hear stories that evoke every emotion, from humour to humiliation and heartbreak. Being forced to sleep in the basement near an overflowing sewage tank. Being withheld full pay, without any recourse. Being instructed to push a dog and a child around the neighbourhood in a double stroller. The pain of having to leave your own child to care for another. There are many positive stories as well, stories of interdependence and relationships that grow to become stronger than blood. But in the context of this very intimate field of work, every story includes vulnerability, and almost every domestic worker has a story of abuse.



Carlos Lowry/Flickr. Creative Commons.

The cruel irony is that domestic workers are some of the most important workers in our economy. As the baby boom generation ages, enjoying longer average lifespans and preferring to age at home rather than in nursing homes or other institutions, the need for home-based elder care is growing. In addition, more women are in the workforce, meaning there is now less capacity for care at home and thus an unprecedented need for domestic services and support. Between the displacement of work in existing sectors of the economy by automation and artificial intelligence, and the increase in the need for home-based care and services, care jobs are anticipated to be the single largest occupation in the economy by 2030.

Something's got to give.

### **A steady march of growth**

The exclusion of domestic workers in the United States from basic labour protections, including the rights to organise, collectively bargain and form unions, is rooted in the legacy of slavery. In the 1930s, as cornerstone labour policies were being debated in the United States Congress, members from southern states refused to sign on if domestic workers and farm workers – who were mostly African American at the time – were included in the new protections. To appease them the

National Labor Relations Act (1935) and several other key labour laws were passed with those explicit exclusions.

With this as the legal and historical backdrop, I began organising with domestic workers in New York City some 20 years ago as part of an initiative to bring together Asian immigrant women in low-wage service work. It was impossible to ignore the quiet army of women of colour, mostly immigrants, pushing children of a different race in strollers up and down the streets of Manhattan.

Despite the need, it was a challenge to bring a small group of women together. Most women I met were primary income earners for their families and under extreme economic pressure to make ends meet, so the fear that coming to a meeting would jeopardise their jobs was a difficult barrier to overcome. The pressure on immigrant women was further compounded by the fear of being deported and separated from their families and communities. We persisted and eventually broke through, creating safe spaces for women to come together for connection, a sense of community and belonging.

The workers who came found strength and power in one another. The word spread to workers in other cities who were also beginning to organise. Meeting by meeting, in circles large and small, domestic worker organising started to spread locally. By 2007 we were ready to break out of the isolation of local organising and connect nationally, holding our first national meeting and officially forming the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA).

Ten years later, we're an alliance of 64 local organisations of domestic workers in 36 cities and 17 states around the country. Our members are nannies, housecleaners, and caregivers for the elderly and people with disabilities who work in the home setting. The workers join through local affiliates or as individuals from anywhere in the country, pay dues and gain access to training, benefits and other resources.

Our newfound feelings of power became tangible as we filed lawsuits and organised rallies to hold abusive employers accountable. Lawsuits led us to understand the limitations of the law itself as domestic workers had been subjected to numerous exclusions in the labour law. It became clear that we would need to organise to change the laws and enact new policies altogether.

We introduced the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights: state legislation that would establish basic protections for the workforce such as protection from discrimination, a day of rest per week, and paid time off. Our first big breakthrough came in 2010 when, after a seven-year campaign, the governor of New York state signed the bill into law. Since that time, six additional states have passed legislation to protect the rights of domestic workers, and the Federal Department of Labor has changed its rules to include two million home care workers previously excluded from federal minimum wage and overtime protections.

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*The future of  
work – for us all  
– can be seen in  
the experience of  
domestic workers.*

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In addition, groundbreaking work with domestic worker survivors of labour trafficking has begun to change the conversation about trafficking to include the spectrum of vulnerability that women in low-wage service occupations face. Millions of dollars of unpaid wages to domestic workers have been recovered and thousands of domestic workers have engaged in the campaigns, developing a whole new generation of leaders for social change movements.



Inter-Alliance Dialogue Assembly with the National Domestic Worker Alliance. Jobs with Justice/Flickr. Creative Commons.

## The future of work

While our decade of work has focused on improving conditions for domestic workers, its significance to the rest of the workforce cannot be overstated. In the early years of organising, the conditions and vulnerability facing domestic workers felt marginal to the rest of the workforce. Today, these issues are affecting a much greater segment of people – lack of job security, lack of pathways to career advancement, and lack of access to social safety nets are issues faced by workers in many sectors. In fact, as more of the workforce becomes, temporary, part-time, or ‘self-employed’, the ‘non-traditional work’ dynamic has become more and more the norm.

As the US economy adjusts to a growing ‘gig economy’, and as businesses and workers figure out how to leverage the benefits but avoid the dangers of tech-enabled gig-based work, we need only look to domestic workers to see how we will fare. Domestic workers are the original gig economy workers: we have experienced its dynamics, struggled

with its challenges, and most importantly found some solutions to survive as a vulnerable workforce.

We could all benefit from a new bill of rights for working people in the 21st century. There are millions of workers in non-traditional settings who are denied access to benefits, in addition to domestic workers. Every workforce could gain from reinvented training systems to bridge the growing divide between high-wage and low-wage workers. And, if we can figure out how to provide a real voice for this disaggregated workforce with a sustainable, scalable, 21st century workers' organisation we could create the context for workers to sit at the table and help shape the future of the global economy once and for all.

### **An alliance for the 21st century**

At the National Domestic Workers Alliance we are developing solutions with the future in mind.

We are building a national, voluntary membership association that any domestic worker can join and gain access to training and benefits. We are developing new training curriculums and career pathways for the workforce, and making training accessible in various languages and on mobile phones. We've developed a [Good Work Code](#) – a framework for good jobs in the online economy – that helps companies design their businesses with the well being of workers in mind. And we're developing a portable benefits programme that provides a means for independent contractors and informal sector workers to collect benefits contributions and apply them to the benefits she would like.

As a workforce of mostly women, the way we develop solutions is critical. We must ensure that undocumented workers and migrant workers are fully included in our solutions and strategies. We must account for the legacies of slavery and colonialism that shape today's workforce, as we invest in organising the workforce. Fortunately, that is precisely how our movement has evolved. At the intersection of many identities

and experiences, we challenge ourselves to create organising models where everyone has a voice and dignity, where everyone belongs.

The global domestic workers movement is rising at precisely the right moment, not only to bring dignity and respect to domestic work, but to shape the future of work globally to be one of opportunity and real economic security for all families. The domestic workforce sits at the centre of many changes in the global economy, and must also be at the centre of their solutions. Our belief is that the research, organising, and solutions that emerge from the global domestic workers movement hold the keys to many of the critical questions we must answer, to achieve dignity and opportunity in the future.

So next time you see a worker quietly slip into a house with her cleaning supplies, or a nanny comforting a crying child who is not hers, or a caregiver gently pushing an elderly woman in a wheelchair into the sunshine, take note.

They might go largely unnoticed by you, but their significance to us all cannot be overstated. Their struggles are the struggles of the future of work. Their solutions are the solutions for the future of work. They're not just saving us from the domestic work conditions of the past and present, they just might also save us from a future of work that doesn't learn from the mistakes of the past.

And that is how we build a future of work with dignity and respect for all workers, a future of work we can all be proud of.

## “And we continue to meet”: domestic workers stand up in France

*In a realm where many employers ignore their responsibilities, domestic workers' best chance is to empower themselves.*

Zita Cabais-Obra • French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT)

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I was born in a family of nine children in a rural village in the northern part of the Philippines, where life was miserable. Being the second eldest and with no means of continuing my studies due to poverty, I was compelled to find employment to help the family survive. It was at the age of 13 that I first worked as a domestic worker in my home country.

Having grown up in poverty, I dreamt of a better life, especially later on when I started my own family and became a mother to four children. In order to offer them a different life and give them the opportunity to finish their studies, I made the bold decision to work abroad. Young, naive, innocent, and full of hope, I was the perfect candidate for exploitation and abuse. Of course, I didn't know it at that time. It was only later on that I realised that I was a victim of:

- The pernicious and irresponsible smugglers who put my life in danger during my journey from Manila to Paris;
- The dishonest employers who exploited me without scruple;
- Isolation, language barriers, and the ignorance of my rights;
- And, above all, the burden of responsibility, shared by the vast majority of migrant women from the Philippines who leave their families and countries to offer a better future and a decent life to their children.



As part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the author's union SAMSSAP CFDT IDF, domestic workers performed a theatre play illustrating the story of

The [World Bank stated in 2013](#) that the Philippines received more than \$26 billion in (officially recorded) remittances that year, the third largest recipient after India and China, an amount equivalent to 10% of the GDP of the Philippines in that year. For many years, Filipino women, many of whom are mothers, have risked their lives by working abroad as domestic workers with the hopes of alleviating difficult living conditions for their children and extended families in the Philippines. They put their families before their own safety, health, and psychological well-being. They accept unsuitable working because they feel trapped by the many obligations they take on. They feel as though they do not have any other options besides becoming domestic workers abroad.

These people who send monthly remittances to their families back home – otherwise known as overseas Filipino workers (OFW) – have been not only helping their families, but also the economy of the Philippines as a whole. Being the largest labour-exporting country in the world, the Philippines has been able to stay afloat despite many eco-



how domestic workers created the union and gained access to many rights, including the right to collectively bargain. Credit: SAMSSAP CFDT IDF.

conomic challenges in the Asia Pacific region partly because of the stable and predictable contribution of OFWs working all over the world. However, despite reports of a stronger economy in the Philippines in recent years, there has been very little to no effort by the government of the Philippines to protect and look after OFWs. The government of the Philippines describes the economic situation in the country as a miracle, and its migrants as ‘heroes’. However, it does nothing to help OFWs rebuild their lives in their own country upon their return. For the economic value we represent, the government must acknowledge that we are paying for it at the highest price, through the exile and sacrifice of love, family and friendship – and that, at best, when we are not victims of trafficking.

### **Fighting back in France**

In the midst of this painful experience as an OFW, I was lucky to find a family among members of the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) that supported me as I took steps to escape from slav-

ery. The CFDT is a professional union in the Paris region for domestic workers that is mainly funded by membership fees. I started to advocate for domestic workers' rights in 2000 and was elected as the general secretary of the CFDT in October 2003. It was the place where I began to realise my full potential through the various trainings they offered on topics ranging from learning the French language, to managing the organisation, and organising domestic workers. The CFDT, which was founded on 7 May 1965 and to which I proudly belong, is now covered by three national collective agreements to protect the rights of domestic workers. If I am an advocate today, it is not only for me, but for all those who are trapped, as I had been in the past, in inhumane working and living situations.

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*If I am an advocate today, it is not only for me, but for all those who are trapped, as I had been in the past, in inhumane working and living situations.*

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We at the CFDT are carrying out many legal actions to redress the inequalities faced by victims, for example an Indonesian young woman called Leila who worked for a foreign diplomat in France more than ten years ago and was exploited and abused by her employer. Her case was sent to us by the Paris-based [Committee against Modern Slavery](#). We treated and defended her case before the labour court of Paris. Although we won at every stage of the proceedings, the decisions were never executed as the judicial officers stated that that Leila's former employer was a diplomat and therefore enjoyed the right to immunity

provided by the 1961 Vienna Convention. The CFDT fought for more than ten years in order for the French state to pay the reparations owed to the victim – a sum which was taken from tax payers' money.

The French penal code [protects individuals](#) from subjection to forced labour, slavery and servitude, as well as from degrading treatment and undignified work conditions, punishing those who commit these crimes from 7 to 10 years' imprisonment and from €150,000 to €1.5 million (Article 1 - 225-4-1 I). This piece of legislation has become instrumental in our fight against exploitation and abuse, as it has led 20 victims to seek support from the CFDT. However, the question of how many victims around the world do not dare to speak out still remains.

With the help of other activists, we continue to meet domestic workers in parks, in front of schools, or at open markets. We are open on Saturdays, as most domestic workers do not work on weekends. They typically come to check if their contracts and pay slips are adequate or to seek counsel if they are unfairly dismissed from their job.

Despite having won many cases over the years, there are many things that must be done to protect domestic workers. The CFDT will continue supporting migrant domestic workers and working towards better work conditions, fighting for domestic workers' rights, and providing professional trainings and workshops for personal projects, among other initiatives.

In addition to my work with the CFDT, I manage ASF, an association for Filipino migrant workers that offers informational sessions in Tagalog or English, French lessons on Sunday afternoons, and martial arts on Saturday nights in the Paris region. Our goals are to raise awareness, provide information about different resources available to migrant workers, and continuously promote the importance of learning the French language as a means to become independent and well integrated into French society. More importantly, ASF gives migrant

workers the opportunity to have a sense of community and belonging, which is important for their psychological well being. Finally, I campaign for the ratification of the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189), which unfortunately France is yet to ratify.

### **Collective bargaining and a strong need for enforcement**

In France, a national collective agreement exists for each occupation. For example, maternal assistants and their employers have their own collective agreement. This means that, if an employee and an individual employer want to enter this agreement, each party must respect the labour code outlined in the said agreement.

Each collective agreement defines the rights and duties of both parties (working hours, daily rest, minimum wage, etc.) and is negotiated on a parity basis between representatives of employers and employees. In France, there are more than 700 national collective agreements. The collective agreement for employees of an individual employer (formerly known as domestic employees) dates back to 1999 and covers approximately 1.3 million employees, most of whom are part-time workers. There are around 320,000 maternal assistants for which the CFDT signed a national collective agreement ten years ago. Despite this collective agreement, employers often violate the labour code by imposing long work hours on and breaching contracts with maternal employees. The CFDT has been actively working in national negotiations to ensure that these maternal assistants are recognised and treated like all other employees.

If I am proud to contribute a part of my experience, it is because I consider myself fortunate. Thanks to the CFDT I was able to discover the laws and the rights I now defend, which helped me become who I am today, free and committed to defending domestic workers rights. It is through my own personal experience, as a victim of slavery, that I would like to continue to encourage others to educate themselves and learn about their rights. My mission is to create awareness about the

plight of migrant workers through social dialogue in the hope of restoring justice for all victims and their families and for others to avoid the same fate as mine. It is my fervent hope that those who have the means to help will also enable themselves to rise to the occasion and fight for the same cause as the rest of us at CFDT. Let us therefore work together in order to win the difficult struggle of social justice.

## A chapter of our shared history: from servants to domestic workers in Italy

*Understand domestic labour in Italy through the history of one of their oldest organisations, ACLI Colf.*

Pina Brustolin and Raffaella Maioni • Acli Colf (Italy) and IDWF

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Discussing domestic labour in Italy is like writing our country's history following the Second World War. So I thought it was important to not only relate the conditions of domestic workers in Italy today, but to also pick up the thread of a history that stretches further back in time. I asked Pina to write these lines together with me. Who is Pina? Let's go back to 1956, when a barely 13-year-old Pina left Arsiè – a mountain village in Belluno province – to go and work in Bologna, the big city. I asked Pina why she went to work in Bologna when she was so young, and she told me:

In Arsiè, there was little work and not many prospects for having a family. A couple of vacationing Bolognese insisted on “taking me into service”, and my dad and mum agreed. I was young, but for me, like for so many other girls my age, there were not many alternatives. I left with the lady and gentleman from Bologna – with whom I would stay for over ten years – to “go into service”, as they used to say, or to “be a house servant”.

It was difficult and I did not like being far away from my family. I was little, but proud to be able to help my loved ones, and also curious about getting to know the world, learn new things, and have new experiences. The choice to move to the city allowed me to work, but also to learn about and join one of the few associations that were concerned with workers' rights, and particularly domestic workers' rights, at the time. Already at 20 years old, I knew the ACLI (Christian Association of Italian

Workers) and the ACLI Colf (the part that was concerned with women domestic workers). The ACLI Colf were initially called GAD or ACLI Groups for Domestic Workers and only became the ACLI Colf in 1964. The word Colf [*collaboratrice familiare*] owes its origins to the ACLI.

I then ask Pina what it was like to be a part of the association at that time, to which she replied:

I first became an activist and then a leader for this category of workers. I signed up to the ACLI Colf occupational register, and after being an activist, I took on the role of national secretary of the ACLI Colf between 1971 and 1976. After that, I went back to Bagnaria Arsia to be with my husband Gino and my two daughters. But I still continued my engagement with the association, and was again elected as a national representative between 2005 and 2009.

I lived through a process of cultural and legislative change concerning domestic work in Italy that occurred during the last 60 years, starting, with the regulatory framework of the 1950s, which evidently contained many gaps, if not proper violations of women domestic workers' rights. For example, it stated that working women could sleep for eight hours, and thus implicitly provided the possibility of them working as much as 16 hours a day. Through the engagement of many women, activists, and domestic workers who began to fight for their rights, awareness around the topic gradually increased, and greater protections were achieved.

Today, the regulatory framework for domestic work in Italy still contains gaps. I asked Pina what she recalls as being important milestones for domestic workers rights:

Over the years, there were various achievements and recognitions for domestic workers' rights, but some crucial moments include 1958, the year in which the first law systematically addressing domestic labour was passed, and 1974, where the first national domestic labour contract was signed. This law and contract are still in force, and constituted fundamental conquests for domestic workers rights, thanks in part to the ACLI Colf's engagement. But in addition to the gradual acquisition of rights, there were also changes from a cultural perspective: as the years passed – and particular starting in the 1960s-70s – it was no longer only aristocratic families who were offering jobs to domestic workers, but also new bourgeois families of the middle class. As this new figure of the domestic worker emerged, her role began to change.

In the past, domestic workers were often at the mercy of the *padroni* [bosses or 'masters'] and the word *serva* [servant] or *la donna* [the woman] were used in a derogatory way, which not only portrays the lack of rights for these women, but also their perceived inferiority. This issue was debated a lot in the ACLI Colf, as a way to change people's perception of domestic work in Italy. In 1961, the association's fourth National Assembly debated the theme 'Domestic labour: family collaboration', which resulted in the birth of the term '*collaboratrice familiare*', a term which is widespread today. This marked a cultural change in society to recognise and appreciate domestic work and to involve these working women in social life, instead of isolating them.

For us, it was important that domestic labour be equal to other occupations, that the laws protecting this work be improved, and that a new and uninhibited professional figure be created. It was important that the *colf* have the same rights as other workers, but also that she be equipped to do her work and that

she be able to understand her role in the family. Knowing how to do the work as a *colf* or *badante* [carer/care assistant] is not be enough; she must also be spiritually prepared in order to understand how to relate to the family she works for.

Here, spirituality does not apply to the religious sense, but to the capacity to relate, to respect, and to command respect within the workplace, without suffering abuses or feeling humiliated. To help these workers, a national training school\* was founded between 1957 and 1963 in Cevo. A small literature of pamphlets on the topic also flourished. Thanks to the discussions on the social value of domestic work and the role of women workers, the *serva*, the *donna*, became the *collaboratrice familiare*, the *colf*.

In recent years, domestic labour has extended to include personal assistance roles. It is, after all, at the crossroads of important socio-economic phenomena: increased life expectancy; the ageing population; cuts to social healthcare programmes and welfare services; the economic and unemployment crisis; the increasing number of women employed in the non-domestic labour sector; wars and other processes determining migration, to name a few.

Since the great 2002 amnesty for foreigners working without a regular contract, Italy has realised that it is a country of new immigrants, with a new occupational sector whose workforce was mostly comprised of women or foreigners: the number of workers in the domestic sector rose from a few hundred thousand to around two million, according to estimates considering both regular and irregular workers.

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\* Training schools were created in different places in Italy in order to provide domestic workers with the tools to protect themselves against exploitation and other forms of abuses. This meant basic education and the start of a professionalisation process. Indeed, at the time domestic workers were often very young (12-14 year old) and illiterate.

In 2002, I decided to dedicate myself to the concrete problems faced by people migrating to Italy. Thanks to the ACLI, I began working on issues pertaining to the rights of foreigners arriving in Italy. Fifteen years later, I can still recall how difficult it was for people to obtain residency permits. I still recall the sleepless nights, the queues at the drop-in advice stations, many working women and men's fear of being deported, of losing work... as well as difficulties they experienced like blackmail from the employers who in turn exploited them; humiliation; the suffering of families and above all, for the children they left in their homelands; and even their worries about the debts they owed. Sadly, many people still live and suffer from these conditions.

According to official National Social Security Institute figures there are around 860,000 workers in the domestic work sector, of which 88% are women (780,000), and 76% are of foreign origin. Sixty percent work as *colfs*, while 40% engage in family assistance for elderly persons – a profession commonly termed as *badante*. We are also seeing an increase in the number of Italian domestic workers, both women and men. This can be linked to the economic crisis and the need for people to find alternative work after losing their job or people – mostly women – to begin working because other family members lost their jobs.

I asked Pina how she experiences these changes today, in light of her personal history and her history in the association:

From my youth I experienced activism as a woman worker, as well as the association's passion for achieving common objectives. Over time, I shared my enthusiasm for participating in the association with many other activists, and still remain by their side. Today it is different though. Not worse, but different. In the past we fought as Italian women domestic workers, and the movement was very strong. Today, it is difficult to mobilise women workers to participate, even though there are still battles to be fought.

Like yesterday, we are mostly women – both Italians and foreign women – and volunteers who are sensitive to the problems, (both old and new) of a sector facing many challenges, important ones being indifference and the lack of visibility. Domestic work always seems to be relegated to the margins of the world of work, and this is made worse by the current economic crisis. Sadly, in our country it is difficult to give dignity to this work, as it is with other jobs considered “modest”, perhaps because we do not know how to recognise the intrinsic value of work and to give respect to every profession.

Speaking with Pina, I think of all the women, the leaders of the ACLI Colf who preceded me, and the important women in my life who have worked and continue to work as *colf* and *bandanti*; modestly, tenaciously, and simply courageously, while addressing everyday tasks with care, attention, and dignity. This ‘everyday’ character of domestic work is not abstract, but rather extremely concrete.

It is the house perfumed with lovingly-made tomato sauce. It is the cleanliness that speaks to the care given to these spaces. It is the patience when listening to an elderly person who incessantly repeats the same thing, but who is testament to our roots.

People who wash, clean, feed, migrate, pray, and dream, people who want a dignified job to improve their family’s as well as their own lives. From 1945 until today, the ACLI Colf have pursued their commitment to defend domestic workers. This is a part of our history that does not appear in textbooks. Yet it is the history of all of us.

## From personal to political, and back: the story of the Filipino Women's Council

*For 25+ years the Filipino Women's Council in Italy has worked to improve the lives of their community. Could their path serve as a model?*

Charito Basa, Rosalud Dela Rosa with Dona Rose Dela Cruz and Aubrey Abarintos • Filipino Women's Council (Italy)

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The Filipino community in Italy is one of the oldest communities of migrants in southern Europe, with first arrivals dating to the 1970s. In 2016 the resident [Filipino population in Italy was 167,176](#), of which 57.4% was female and 42.6% was male.

Most Filipino women migrants are employed in the service sector as domestic workers, caregivers for the elderly, and babysitters. By carrying out these roles, they fill the gaps created by inadequate welfare and social services in Italy. Yet their roles go beyond the care industry – as primary and secondary income earners for their families in Italy and in the Philippines; as distant mothers, wives, and daughters; and as members of Filipino communities in Italy and back home. They are women, workers, women of color, and migrants, and therefore must also face problems associated with class, gender, race, and their status as migrants.

### **Origins of the Filipino Women's Council**

The first significant collective initiative by migrant Filipino workers in Italy was probably the establishment of the Filipino Women's Council (FWC) in May 1991. The FWC was founded by 10 Filipino women, the majority of whom were employed as domestic workers in Rome.

Our immediate aim was to assist Filipino women by setting up a centre in 1992 to provide shelter and counseling services for victims of violence and exploitation. Our services were also available to migrant

women from other countries. The centre closed two years later due to problems with funds and staff training, but it was nevertheless able to respond to the urgent and immediate needs of the people it served.

That same year, the FWC helped form the Babaylan, a network of Filipino women's organisations in Europe, with the aim to strengthen organising work and help empower Filipino domestic workers, wives of Europeans, and students in EU countries.

In the 1990s, the FWC participated in a series of international conferences at the United Nations including the UN Conference on Human rights in 1993; the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994; the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1994; and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

The Filipino Women's Council displays its latest research. Photo supplied FWC.



We also became a co-coordinator for the Migrant Caucus, for which we produced position papers and recommendations that recognised the gender dimension of in migration, as well as issues related to class, race, and migration status. These position papers are used as lobbying and awareness-raising documents to influence policy makers as they formulate official documents and platforms for action at UN conferences. Migrant organisations are also among our target audiences, as our policy papers may help them better understand how decisions made by our governments at the national level affect migrants directly.

After having participated in multiple UN conferences and in parallel with increased awareness around migrant rights – and migrant women rights in particular – the FWC became more visible and active at the negotiation table. We helped craft and lobbied for migrant-friendly policies, including the regularisation of undocumented migrants, the passing of a law providing protection and support to women who are victims of trafficking for prostitution, and easier access to social and health services for migrants.

More recently, the FWC published *A Guide For Filipinos in Italy* to provide Filipino workers with basic tips on how migration policies may affect them, work permits, the process for acquiring citizenship, among other relevant topics. The guide also includes a long list of organisations that provide free services to migrant workers in the three cities in Italy with the biggest presence of Filipino domestic workers.

Members of the FWC continue to work in partnership with NGOs and Philippine government institutions in Italy in our advocacy and awareness-raising activities, particularly on awareness-raising projects on violence against women and financial literacy. We collaborate with Italian institutions in our intercultural mediation and translation services. Through our strong network of Italian trade unions, we are able to refer and/or accompany Filipino migrants in their claims for rights, processing legal documents, and various labour-related issues.

## **Research as a path towards learning about our community and ourselves**

Despite some advances in the policy arena regarding migrant rights, Filipino domestic workers continue to face important issues that have yet to be addressed. For instance, while family reunification has become easier, reunited partners/husbands often remain unemployed or are limited to employment opportunities in the domestic work sector, despite their education and previous work experience. The children of Filipino couples in Italy are sent back to the Philippines when circumstances do not allow parents to raise their kids with them because of full-time work or housing issues. If they do not do well in school, their parents take them back to Italy in their teen years, and they have trouble or are unable to integrate. Many then end up taking on domestic work as well, therefore precluding aspirations to social mobility for their households.

Many complicated social and financial issues emerge related to the chain of networks comprising the web of responsibility and care in transnational families. Almost all domestic workers assume the responsibility of helping relatives migrate, legally and illegally, so they could help shoulder the burden of supporting their kin through remittances.

Through our counseling and advocacy work, we grasped the urgency of addressing the cultural, social, and economic adjustment of Filipina migrant domestic workers and transnational migrant families in Italy. In 2004, we published the book *Me, Us and Them: realities and illusions of Filipina domestic workers*. In 2007, in partnership with the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women and with funding from UN-International Fund for Agricultural Development, we put together a study on *Gender, remittances and development and impact of remittances to rural development in the Philippines*.

Our subsequent study, *International Migration and Over-Indebtedness: the case of Filipino workers in Italy*, was supported by the International

Institute for Environment and Development in Italy and was published in 2011. To put together this report, the FWC collected testimonies by Filipino migrants on the heavy consequences of the economic crisis and the general impoverishment of the Filipino community in Italy, such as the increasing number of Filipino domestic workers who contract high interest-rate debts with financial institutions and loan sharks.

These observations showed that women domestic workers are more likely to go into debt, because they have greater responsibilities in terms of supporting their families in the Philippines and ensuring their own survival in Italy. Getting into such levels of debt condemns domestic workers and their families to a cycle of over-indebtedness, thus making them socially and economically vulnerable.

### **Addressing issues faced by Filipina domestic workers**

Over-indebtedness is a major issue for many Filipina domestic workers. One strategy proposed by the FWC has been to adopt a frugal lifestyle, save, and invest wisely. To encourage such practices, we launched a transnational project entitled ‘Maximizing the gains and minimizing the social cost of overseas migration in the Philippines’, with the participation of the Filipino migrants in Italy and as well as their families in the Philippines. The migrants are able to save and families back home are able to set up small businesses. Another important project was ‘Mobilizing Migrants’ Remittances towards Agri-based Co-operatives’ that aimed to contribute to agricultural development and to achieve food security in rural areas affected by out-migration.

The provision of financial literacy is an ongoing activity implemented by the FWC that focuses on practical issues for migrants: participants work on their actual budget and income and learn to compare expenses in Italy and in the Philippines, so that have a sense of exactly what they are doing with their money in the long term. The project encourages domestic workers to reflect on and learn how to use their hard-earned money properly, and when to say “NO” to the endless requests

for support from their families back home. It is about saving and investing and about not forgetting to ‘pay ourselves first’ before giving to others. It is about eliminating dependency by giving opportunities for the families back home to engage in productive economic activities.

However, the issue of over-indebtedness cannot be traced solely to migrants’ lifestyle choices and financial literacy. After all, migrant workers in Italy do not receive the average wage accorded to Italian citizens-workers. The value of the Philippine peso, inflation in the homeland, unemployment in the receiving country, and other issues are additional factors affecting the economic stability of migrant families.

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*We must not forget to ‘pay ourselves first’ before giving to others.*

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In light of these issues, Filipino migrant workers have to join forces with other groups, organisations, and movements to advocate for positions and programmes of action that promote financial sustainability and workers’ rights. Though first aid knowledge is useful and can even save lives, the FWC must also look beyond first aid. We may have started out as a service to organisation to help women affected by domestic violence, but we have evolved to become a development-oriented organisation that addresses integration and reintegration issues and mobilises workers to achieve sustainable improvements in their lives.

### **Thinking ahead**

Issues related to migration, employment, and the rights of migrant workers have gained significant attention at the global level. This is es-

pecially evident when migrants become targets for certain right wing groups, when governments impose more restrictions on migrants and migrant labour, and when calls are made to “send migrants to where they came from”.

We need to be informed about these problems, and to link up with global networks that protect the rights of migrants as well as movements that promote the rights of women, people of colour, the working class, and migrants. We have to move from our understanding of what we are – women, women who are workers, women of colour, women migrants – towards where we want to go.

Though we have won victories in our demands for the reunification of migrant families, there is still a lot of work to do. Among the bigger challenges are the social costs of family separation prior to reunification. These dynamics of globalisation and migration tend to reinforce imbalances in decision-making regarding who sends money and who makes the decisions back home for transnational families. Will the transnational families in Italy follow the same pattern as Filipino families ‘back home’ as a whole? Will decision-making still lie in the hands of the *padre de familia*? Will violence against women and children be opposed and eradicated?

We also face the problem of developing a FWC that does NOT rely on just a few leaders that are doing most of the hard work. We need a movement in which the spirit of activism and the participation of all or almost all members is alive and continues to grow.

## Justice for domestic workers: it's about rights, not protection

*Britain's drive to limit migration has removed many of the rights migrant domestic workers once had in the UK. Could collective organising help bring them back?*

Marissa Begonia with Penelope Kyritsis • Justice for Domestic Workers (UK)

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### **Penelope: Could you tell me a little bit about the work you do at Justice for Domestic Workers UK (J4DW)?**

**Marissa:** Every Sunday, we offer English language and computer classes. We also have a body, mind and wellness workshop to help domestic workers recover from the trauma resulting from abusive employment situations. We also have livelihood training workshops to give people additional skills and knowledge to fall back on if they choose to leave the care industry. Many domestic workers get arrested and deported, so these business skills could be helpful if they have to go back home all of a sudden and build a new future. Some domestic workers might simply want to retire and others want to run a business alongside their domestic work profession.

We also offer sessions about our campaigns for domestic workers rights, where we invite people to come give us updates on their situation in the UK, especially in terms of immigration. We also have Doctors of the World coming in every second Sunday of the month to help domestic workers access medical care. It is quite difficult for undocumented domestic workers to access medical care, especially nowadays since the Home Office is checking NHS records with the intention of arresting and deporting undocumented workers.

We sometimes invite agencies to come train domestic workers for job interviews and our IT classes help them write their own CVs. [Unite the](#)

Union also provides union courses on employment rights to help domestic workers fight their own cases outside tribunal court. To avoid paying for court fees, we try as much as possible to settle employment cases.

We also rescue and provide shelter for domestic workers. We give them a travel allowance during transitional periods to help them find another job, so they can continue to support their families. This allowance also gives them the time to recover while reducing financial stress. During that time, we can start to empower them with all the services we provide.

Besides these services, the main focus of our work is to campaign for policy changes to improve the work and living conditions of domestic workers.

**Penelope: How does J4DW get funded to offer all these programmes and services?**

**Marissa:** Unfortunately we don't have much funding at the moment. We receive some money for a part-time coordinator and to pay taxes. The rest comes from public speaking honorariums and donations. During the summer, we also do fundraising trips with our members.

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*Why do we need to be raped, beaten,  
or starved to death in order to access  
protection?*

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**Penelope: How many members belong to this organisation?**

**Marissa:** We have more than 1000 members.

**Penelope: Are most members domestic workers themselves?**

**Marissa:** J4DW is led by migrant domestic workers. Six of them serve as board directors and five are non-domestic workers with different profession backgrounds. Their role is to guide and manage J4DW. We have at least 20 active domestic workers in working groups that manage day-to-day activities.

We are very fortunate to be supported by Unite the Union, and not only in our campaigns: they provide us with the space every Sunday for free and they take care of most of our needs, like printing and making campaign t-shirts.

**Penelope: How did J4DW start?**

**Marissa:** A few years ago, there was a group of undocumented domestic worker activists called Waling Waling, way back when domestic workers had no rights at all in the UK. In 1997–1998, along with Kalayaan and Unite the Union, they won their first campaign for the right to change employer; the right to renew their visa every year; and the right to indefinite leave to remain (ILR) after five years of continuous active work, and the right to British citizenship one year after being granted ILR. In 2008, the government threatened to retract these rights, so we organised with Unite the Union, Waling Waling, Margaret Healey, and Father Aodh (the co-founders of Kalayaan, who also helped establish J4DW.)

We were eight domestic workers in the beginning: four from Waling Waling and four under new domestic worker visas. We grew very quickly and started attending conferences like the Labour Conference

in 2009. By then, we were already established. The same year, we attended the Global Forum on Migration and Development and the following year, we attended a discussion at the UN in Geneva around the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189). In 2011, it was passed, and J4DW spoke to represent trade union working groups. Then we attended a high level dialogue in New York.

Unfortunately, in 2012, we lost all these rights for domestic workers arriving in the UK from the 6 April onwards. An amendment to the 2015 Modern Slavery Act gave us back the right to change employer, but we did not regain the right to renew our visas every year. Domestic workers have visas that are valid for six months from the day their employer brings them in. Within these six months, they can change employer, but they cannot renew their visa after this time period, which means they inevitably become undocumented.

Even if they manage to run away from an abusive employer, no one is willing to hire them for one to three months, especially since many families want long-term relationships with their domestic workers for taking care of their children and the elderly.

**Penelope: So what happened in 2012 exactly?**

**Marissa:** This was during an attempt by the UK government to control migration, and domestic workers were included in these restrictions. They completely disregarded the vulnerability of migrant domestic workers, who are the most vulnerable and therefore require the most protection. Prior to these changes, migrant domestic workers fell under a special category outside the point based-system in terms of their visas, giving them access to legal rights and protection.

In 2012, however, the government said that the trafficking law was enough to protect domestic workers, but why do we need to be raped, beaten, or starved to death in order to access protection?

**Penelope: So right now, the only legal recourses for domestic workers in the UK fall under this trafficking law?**

**Marissa:** Yes, so domestic workers can access protection under this law if they are being abused, the kinds of horrible abuses I mentioned: rape, sexual harassment (although sexual harassment is difficult to prove), physical abuse, or starvation – which is in fact very common for domestic workers.

But the question is, do we really have to suffer from such horrible exploitation and abuse to access protection? Shouldn't we be entitled to proper wages, not having our passports withheld by our employers, days off or rest periods, and decent working hours?

The way to protect domestic workers is to give them access to workers rights, because we are workers and no one can argue with that. Without rights, how could we possibly have any escape route when we are being abused? Especially now that domestic workers can no longer access healthcare. How could they claim their rights or access the court when they become undocumented?

We had an experience recently where an employer reported their domestic worker missing. This domestic worker actually ran away and came to us. I contacted her employer to tell them that she ran away and that she didn't want to work for them anymore. I also called the police to let them know that she was safe and that she was not returning to

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*Without rights,  
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her employer. I asked the domestic worker to call the police herself to let them know that she ran away because she was being abused. The police asked us to come down to the station, where they interrogated us for an hour, and then we found out that the police had given her number to her former employer.

How do the authorities expect us to trust them and report abuses if they give runaway domestic workers' numbers to their abusive employers? As for myself, I don't think I will cooperate with the police again after this experience.

When a domestic worker calls us, we try as much as possible to be clear about what she will have to face if she chooses to run away. We explain that they will become undocumented, and therefore become even more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. It's very hard for us to give them advice when we know that they are being abused and we know that even after having escaped abusive employment situations, they will likely continue to be trapped in this abusive system.

**Penelope: So from what I understand, you have experience with domestic work yourself? What is your specific role in J4DW?**

**Marissa:** Yes I am still a full-time domestic worker and a community organiser and coordinator of J4DW.

It is not very easy to balance both things. The last 10 years were ok because I had a very supportive employer. I was only looking after one child, who was at school most of the time, so I had time to do some work for J4DW. My employer even allowed me to travel for two weeks for the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention and didn't even deduct my salary for those two weeks.

Now that employer's child is grown up and goes to boarding school, so they only needed me part time. I can't survive on a part-time salary,

so I had to find another job. My new job is very tough, as I am looking after three children, which makes it difficult for me to balance work and organising. My current employers understand if I need to leave sometimes to do work for J4DW, but it's not easy to get away because of the three children and the general housework. I couldn't talk to you during work hours, for example, because I had a baby with me. I can't always ask them, "can I go to the parliament? Can I go to a meeting?" I know they would let me, but I also have to look at the family's needs.

But also because we are empowering domestic workers, I could delegate work to other members of J4DW. It is really important for us that our employers support the work we do for J4DW, that is how we survive.

**Penelope: What about your work with J4DW has made you the most proud?**

**Marissa:** This is my life, and I am always ready to sacrifice everything I have financially and my time. Even if I don't sleep anymore, I still do it. People ask: "How do you do it?" and I answer that it is not that hard, because I do it with my heart. It is something that gives me life.

I feel especially proud and happy when I see a domestic worker who has escaped from abusive employment able to stand up, rebuild her life, and speak in public at the parliament. It makes me proud because I see myself: I also came from very abusive employment conditions – so many abuses and sexual harassment – and I managed to get out and rebuild my life, and do more for my fellow domestic workers. Seeing my fellow domestic workers do the same is really what makes me happy, so its worth every sacrifice, and I think that's what J4DW is really about; It's about life, family, workers, society, community, and solidarity.

## Werk woorden - Words of labour

*A collection of terms from the ILO Convention 189 accompanied with stories from domestic workers.*

Migrant Domestic Workers network FNV (The Netherlands)

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On 2 November 2013, a large group of domestic workers held a joint demonstration with their employers in the Museumkwartier in Amsterdam. They carried protest signs with slogans such as: 'We want to pay tax', 'We take care of your children', 'I have 27 house keys' and, most prominently, 'Ratify ILO convention 189 now!'

This was the first occasion in the Netherlands in which these workers became visible as a group. Two years earlier, the International Conference of Labour in Geneva adopted the ILO convention 189, an agreement which states that domestic workers have all the same labour rights as regular workers. The Dutch government also voted for the adoption of this treaty but differently than in the neighbouring countries, the Netherlands have yet to ratify the convention.

To date, the majority of domestic workers in the Netherlands continue to live and work in the shadow zone of Dutch society. The work they do is mostly invisible working behind closed doors, for which they have the keys. They receive instructions from notes left on kitchen tables, where they also find their day's payment. Some of these workers prefer not to be seen if they don't have residence papers and must stay unnoticed. The domestic workers without papers, known as 'undocumented' workers, face situations which are unthinkable for other workers in the Netherlands. Everyday activities like using public transport, buying insurance or taking a holiday, present great challenges for them.

As a labour union, we at the Migrant Domestic Workers network FNV have no means of helping domestic workers obtain legal residential

rights. We can however provide support and advice about work and income. The Dutch federation FNV isn't just for workers with papers, but for all workers, no matter their labour situation and legal status. For this reason, domestic workers have been able to join the FNV since 2006, the same year they began organising joint meetings at home and inviting union staff to discuss their specific needs. In those same meetings, they received their first membership cards, which for many constituted the first tangible proof of their existence in Dutch society, a milestone and starting point for self-organisation and the building of their collective strength.

Who are these workers, who are mostly young women and whose presence in our society is structurally denied by the Dutch government? Where do they come from and how long have they lived among us? On 13 April 2017, the Federation of Netherlands Trade Unions FNV published and presented the booklet "Words of Labour" to the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands as a collection of some essential terms from ILO convention 189.

In the following pages, you will find a selection of these words accompanied by stories from domestic workers, stories that shed light on their invisible reality in the Netherlands.

### **Extracts from WERKWOORDEN / WORDS OF LABOUR**

#### **Contract**

If you want a good service you have to pay me good too. This is the main thing I negotiate with my employer before I start to work for them. They always notice that my payment is higher than normal. This is because I treat the house as my own, I really look after it as if it were my own. So I always say that a good service costs something, and that you have to also treat me well. Because if you're mean to me, how can you have my loyalty?



Domestic workers at a demonstration. ILO/Flickr. Creative Commons.

## Work

There is enough work. The neighbours of our employers constantly ask if we have free time left. There is a demand for domestic work. There is always someone in need of a cleaner and we always recommend our friends. So the contacts are made via via, through word of mouth, and this is connected with trust. Because if you trust me, you can also give this trust to my friend.

Also when we have too much work to do or if you get sick, we always ask friends to help us. When you ask somebody to replace you, it has happened that the employer asks that person: do you want to stay working for us? A Filipino will not really accept this, because there's a kind of principle that tells us, "We are a community!" And if you nevertheless do that, you know you will be ostracised.

## **Worker**

I have one friend, he is a policeman and works in Rotterdam. He once caught a person from Thailand, but he was not working alone so it wasn't possible to let her go. He told me that if somebody is undocumented it doesn't mean that person is a criminal. He said: "For me, she was a worker and I don't have any problem with that. I know that if there is someone undocumented, they are workers and not criminals."

## **Labour migration**

In almost every family there's someone who works abroad. Actually one in five people from the Philippines live and work outside of the country. This all started in the time of Marcos when Filipinos were encouraged to go abroad. It became a policy of the government to export human capital.

And then in Saudi Arabia there were Filipinos as construction workers, as in the Middle East there were Filipinos working as domestic workers.

So the money and sacrifices of these people working abroad helped the economy of the country to grow. This policy was maintained until the end of Marcos' administration. And it also became part of the mentality of the Filipinos. Something like: 'I want to study so I can go abroad.' This became normal to everyone, especially among young people. Right now, according to the Filipino mentality, going abroad is the only solution to have a better life. It is common that after graduation the plan of a person is not to have a business or to work in the Philippines but to work abroad and send the money home. And the family spend this money so easily, because they think that money in Europe is something you just pick from the tree. So this mentality creates a vicious circle that is followed by everyone in the family.

## **Invisible**

I clean in a sort of a gym belonging to a British woman. So one day, unexpectedly, I received a message from her on my phone saying:

if someone comes to the gym while you are cleaning just say that you came to deliver something. Please, don't ever tell to anyone that you are working in my gym and that you work as a domestic worker.

And I replied to her:

no problem, I understand.

This is the way one of my employers wants me to behave toward the outside. Because if other people know about me working there, she will get a fine.

## **Safe**

There's a risk of being caught when you don't pay for the bus or tram or if you have an accident with your bicycle. These are moments when the police comes automatically.

One time, I left my place of work and I forgot my coat. Then it happened, there was this alarm that went off and wouldn't stop and I could not control myself. My fingers... you know... I never wear my glasses at work and I tried to press the code of the alarm. And I was telling myself: "Maybe I can do it?"

In the office I saw all my colleagues laughing at me for this. It was ridiculous! You know what? When it happened, I thought: this is my last day here.

## **Children**

I had a discussion once with a friend. After his daughter graduated from engineering school, my friend brought her here to be the same as

us, to be a domestic worker. I told her: “Why did you send your kids to expensive schools, make them acquire a good degree and then bring them here to work as undocumented domestic workers? And who will be next? Your granddaughter? Your grandkids?” I mean, how can you end this cycle of working abroad if you don’t change your mentality?

My friend thought I would do the same with my children. But I told her: “No! They are going to a good school in order not to be an undocumented worker abroad.” There is nothing wrong with being a domestic worker, but I want them to have a better chance, a better opportunity in life. If they really want to go abroad it is because they will work in the profession that they’ve been studying for. Otherwise the cycle never stops repeating.

### **Identity documents**

I am living a life that is very depressing in regard to work. The only difference is that it is now much easier for me to go back any time, to see my children and family. It’s easier to walk on the street here without being afraid of the police. It is easier for me to have access to health insurance, to have a bank account, and so on. But there are lots of troubles in all this as well. When I was working without papers I didn’t have to think about taxes, for instance. I knew I was not really secure here but I didn’t have that stress of the taxes.

Anyway, I think being documented is good for me, because it allows me to have the most basic rights in this country. And above all it makes it possible for me to move forward in life.

### **Minimum wage**

Luckily we all have good employers. Our minimum is about twelve to fifteen euros per hour. Well, my employer voluntarily gave me an incentive, saying: “You have been working here for three years already, but you never ask for an increase. So now I want to increase your salary by three euros.”

But I don't get any holiday money. The only thing we get is a bonus for Christmas. And for my birthday I also received something. I would say it always depends on the individual agreement you make with every employer. But most of our employers tell us, that if we would have papers they would be glad to give us a regular job.

### **Working environment**

There's one employer that always turns on a Filipino radio station when I come to work. He even asked me which radio station I want to listen to when I'm working, and I said: "Love Radio." Sometimes when I arrive in his house and there is nobody there, the music is on. It is so surprising to hear this music when I open the door! He does it to make me feel comfortable.

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*In the Philippines they see you as a big bank account.*

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### **Money transfer**

It's not advisable to have a lot of money here. Because once you get arrested there's no chance of going back to your room. If you're caught, you know any money you keep there is gone. Therefore most of us, as we don't have our own bank account here, we need to make money transfers to people in the Philippines that have a bank account. Sometimes these are your nieces or your own kids. Other times it is your husband or your wife. So this is what the majority of people do. But when there is a sick person in the family they will use the money to help this person. It is needed and you have no choice. In the Philippines they see you as a big bank account.

And when you go back home, the savings are not under your name and you want to get it back. This is always a big issue! Usually there is already a lot of money accumulated over the years and this causes trouble. You even have to push to get your money back once you have returned to your country. It is your money but it is deposited on an account that is not yours.

### **Equal treatment**

The solidarity in our group is strong. But talking about the relationship between documented and undocumented, that is very different. Yes, there is solidarity between the undocumented, I can assure you. But in the relationship between undocumented and documented migrants... there is a barrier, somehow.

Some domestic workers with papers do not want to be associated with domestic workers without papers. Some documented even criticise those who are staying here without papers, saying: “Why are you staying here if you are illegal? Why you don’t go back?”

### **Cash**

One of our colleagues was accidentally hit by a car when she was on her bike. The owner of the car called the police. So the police came and asked the lady for her passport and also checked her bag. The lady had 3000 euros in her bag and the police asked: “Where does all this money come from?” She told them that it was Paluwagan and she could not explain them what that is exactly, so the police took the money.

Paluwagan is something that many of the Filipino workers use. To be able to save money, a group of people form a common fund. For example, every week ten people decide to put, let’s say a hundred euros in this fund. At the end of the month the total amount gathered is picked up by one person of the group. Then they rotate and do the same for someone else of this closed group. It is a kind of system for making savings.

### **Social security**

We are used to being connected with each other. We are not raised as individuals but as a collective of people, as part of a group. In Ghana there is a kind of story that if you take a broom and if you break it, it breaks. But when you are holding it together and try to break it, then it doesn't break. So that is also our driving force, togetherness means victory.

Of course we have problems but we're not depressed. It is the system here that makes people depressed, because it makes you dependent on it. If you have a problem with the government, it's between you and the government, and in that situation you don't have anyone to fall back on. And that is depressing.

In my country, if you have a problem, the system cannot help you, the system does not support you, so you have to fall back on your own family. You are dependent on them and they become your support system. That's why many domestic workers without family in the Netherlands get depressed. We live in fear, because everybody is busy, nobody wants to listen to you and no one wants to hear your story. You walk with a burden and you go on and don't know what is going to happen next. The only thing that keeps us going is our perseverance.

### **Employment relationship**

I normally don't see my employers but there is one for whom I've worked for three years already, and she is like a mother to me. Whenever I am at her house she makes sure I eat. When I've worked for more than two hours, she'll stop me and say: "Now you eat!"

She treats me like a daughter. She advises me on things. She asks me: "What did you do this weekend?" And I say: "Oh, not much, I was studying." Then she replies: "But you are young, you need to go out and have fun!" And recently her mother died and I thought her mother was my grandmother so I cried, I really felt pain.

Another employer owns a restaurant and his wife is a lawyer. I call him Sir or boss because we don't have that kind of close relationship. But one day I was really surprised when he sat me down at the table and started to talk about his problem. He told me what he went through during his childhood and it turned out I had to advise him. That was new to me, because I call him boss so it was a change in our relationship. He ended up giving me ten euros more, because apparently he liked what I told him.

### **Safe**

When you're undocumented, you only plan your life back home. Therefore if you have money and you don't know what can happen to you here, better to not keep the money here. Actually, you plan your life not here but elsewhere. So, whatever you earn you have to send it home. Because if something unfortunate happens to you, you will still have something back home.

When you have documents you have the possibility to make plans here and also back home. But when you are undocumented you only have one option, to plan your life back home. If you don't have anything that protects you in the country where you are living and working, something that legalises your situation, the promise of a future does not work! Because the government has already drawn a line for you, you are an undocumented person. And if there is police knocking at your door, entering the place where you live, the first thing they'll ask you: "Who are you? What is your purpose here?"

### **Protection**

You know what it is to travel from one tram to another tram in different directions? Well, this is what I did one day, I didn't want to go back straight to my place. They know your routines, because they have been following you for a while. It is tough! I even changed all the days with my employers, I had to scramble my whole working schedule. Another friend of mine, also a domestic worker, went back home because she

could not bear this constant risk. And she had a reason to be afraid of getting arrested. Because the police who caught other colleagues of ours had pictures of these people. The police knew where everyone was living and they knew all the houses where they were working. The police even had photos of them opening the door to their employers' house. So, someone was following these domestic workers for a while.

This case was really a surprise, because nobody knew these colleagues were under surveillance for so many months. And yes, after that, we were all very paranoid.

### **Discrimination**

These are people I really hate to meet in a train or in a tram, because they can arrest me. I heard a story of some friends that were on a train. There were policemen on the train, suspicious and looking at them. Maybe because of their Asian look, I don't know. But they were asked to present their ID and so they were caught.

Therefore to avoid this kind of situation, we go away discretely when we see a policeman. If this happens, we say to each other: "There is friendship!" But in a way this creates the idea in your own head that you're a criminal. The word criminal stays with you because of all the stories from others, it gets into your mind.

### **Respect**

I don't allow any person or a card to define me. Because I believe there's more I can do than being undocumented. Some of our undocumented colleagues are very intelligent and very dedicated. But they allow their situation to limit themselves. I keep saying: "Hey, you shouldn't let a card define who you are, or limit where you want to go to. There are so many things to do here for everybody!" Yes, we are limited in a way, you cannot do whatever you want if you're undocumented. But there are many other things you can do. So, while you're waiting what your future is going to be, why not just take a risk and explore? This

is actually what I am doing. Sometimes I travel abroad, without fear.

I only get afraid when I am going to work. For example in secluded areas, areas with houses for rich people. Haarlem is dangerous. Heemstede, Loosdrecht, Baarn: those are the dangerous areas for me. So if you are walking in these kinds of places as a black person, and of course you are by foot, you will raise a lot of suspicion. “Oh my God, let me walk fast...”

Once I refused a job because I thought the area was too risky. The hours and payment were good but the house was located in such an area that I thought: “Hmm, this is not going to be okay for me.” This was a moment I said to myself: “Now I feel I am an undocumented person.”

## **Regulation**

Some feel more secure now, because they know that I am legal. So leaving the house in case the police come is no longer an issue. They aren't afraid that I will be caught by the police, they know I can defend myself one way or the other. I don't have to run away anymore, I will come back to them. So, the clients I work for don't have to worry about that anymore.

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## “Our subaltern position is determined by the law!”: the struggle for visibility in Spain

*Recent developments in Spanish law have put domestic workers on a firmer footing, but they remain unequal to workers in other sectors.*

Ana Carolina Elías Espinoza • Servicio Doméstico Activo (Spain)

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In the last three decades, the number of women migrating to Spain for work in the domestic care sector has increased. Migrant women involved in this sector attend to the pressing reproductive and care necessities of Spanish families within the framework of a dying welfare state. Many of us entered Spanish households as undocumented workers and, in most cases, as live-in employees (or *internas* in Spanish). The working conditions for domestic workers, and especially for *internas*, are often exploitative and include:

- A lack of a formal labour contract and an absence of employer contributions to social security;
- The inclusion of the in-kind income (comprising food and lodging) within the monetary wage, resulting in drastic and arbitrary salaries;
- Wages ranging from €400 to €800 a month with extensive working hours, characterised by a demand for the almost total availability of the worker and endorsed under the ambiguous legal figure of “time of presence”, which has institutionalised live-in work. Time of presence is the time in which the worker is present in the employer’s household, outside working hours and without performing effective work, but available on demand. According to the legislation, time of presence must be agreed between the employee and the employer and must be paid in money or in kind, but results in arbitrariness;

- A lack of social protections;
- Arbitrary payment of dismissal settlements.

While workers in Spain should theoretically be protected from the labour abuses listed above under the Workers' Statute, this is not always the case in reality.

### **The Active Domestic Service in Spain**

Domestic worker activism in Spain has a decades-long history, but the active participation of migrants in these movements since the mid-2000s has revitalised struggles for extending domestic workers' rights, while also giving visibility to the subordinate status or devalued citizenship of the migrants within the sector.

In 2005, there was a historical milestone regarding the general regularisation of undocumented foreigners, which led to more awareness around the conditions of migrant workers. Not only did this alert us to the essential value of formal employment status, but it also increased our interest in learning more about migrant workers' rights. In short, we became aware of the subaltern position of migrant workers under Spanish law. Although almost 32% of documented migrants in regularisation processes were domestic workers, a large number could not be legalised because they had no proof of their employment status.

In 2008, our sense of powerlessness and awareness of our treatment as second class citizens led us to formally establish the Active Domestic Service (Servicio Doméstico Activo, SEDOAC), an association consisting of both undocumented and documented migrant women that aimed to inform, advise, and attend to the needs of migrant domestic workers in Spain. Over time, we have worked with and supported lobbying and advocacy efforts that push for changes in the laws that affect migrant domestic workers.

Our organisation does not have public funding. We support our actions through voluntary work, membership fees, and occasionally receive some funding from feminist groups.

SEDOAC's first steps overlapped with the beginning of the Spanish economic crisis, which generally worsened the working conditions of domestic workers. Many workers who had acquired legal residence were not able to meet the social security contribution payments required to renew their status. Although social insurance is to be paid by employers, many migrant employees ended up paying for it out of pocket for fear of losing their legal status.

### **Progress, but still a long way to go**

Given this context, migrant domestic workers' claims became stronger and were integrated into the political debate for domestic labour law reform. Although an improved regulation was approved in 2011 (Royal Decree Law 1620/2011), it left aside important issues, such as the right to unemployment benefits; the abolishment of in-kind income; and the creation of an effective labour inspectorate. It also opened the way for private recruitment agencies to commodify the sector and reduce our capacity to negotiate our conditions. Additionally, the law does not fully guarantee protection against abuse and sexual harassment, and it was not accompanied by any attendant occupational risks prevention regulations for this sector.

The Royal Decree Law 1620/2011 on domestic work in Spain revokes 26-year-old legal regulation and was approved five months after the adoption of the ILO Convention 189 for Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The Spanish government has yet to ratify this convention.

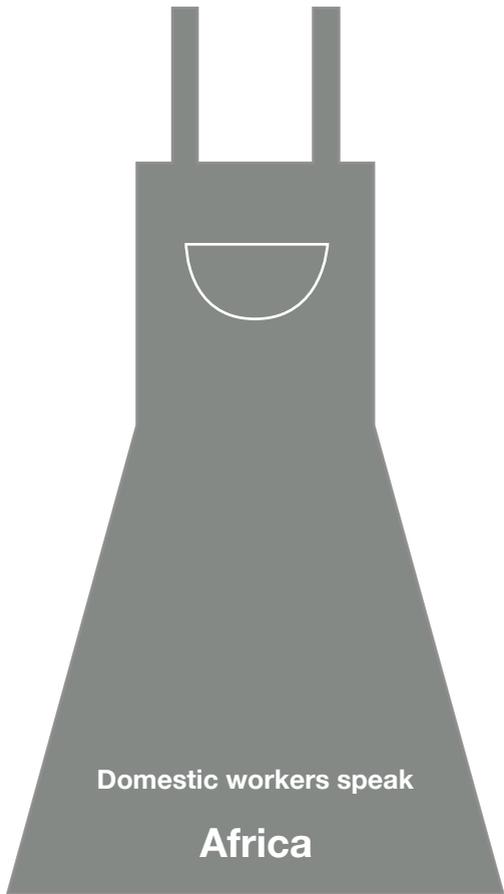
Currently, it is estimated that there are around 600,000 domestic workers in Spain; approximately 90% are women and 50% are migrants. Despite the Royal Decree Law 1620/2011, the sector is still characterised by temporary employment, labour fragility, social devaluation and, at

times, irregularity and exploitation. Around 30% of the workforce is not registered and therefore does not have access social security benefits. Because of this, our struggle is ongoing and the migrant women's movement has been gaining strength and visibility.

Aware of the importance of networking for advocacy, SEDOAC joined 16 other organisations across the country in order to create the Turin Group in 2012. In this context, the organisation demands the immediate ratification of ILO Convention 189 and equality between domestic labour and other sectors of the workforce, thus overcoming the gaps established by the current legislation in the country.

In October 2016, the Turin Group led the National Congress on Domestic and Care Work in Spain in Madrid, which was attended by around 150 participants. The congress brought together a large number of organisations in support of the struggle for domestic worker rights, which agreed on a political agenda for the coming years. There is much to be done, but the conditions are right for successful advocacy and political mobilisation on this issue.





Domestic workers speak

**Africa**

## Organising domestic workers across Africa: a regional view

*In less than 10 years domestic workers in Africa have gone from barely any organisational contact to a thriving movement.*

Vicky Medard Kanyoka • IDWF

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I am Vicky Medard Kanyoka and I work for the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), as the regional coordinator for Africa. My background in labour rights stems from my work in the women's department of the Trade Union Congress of Tanzania, and later in the Conservation Hotels Domestic Workers Union (CHODAWU) as the director for women, gender, organisation, and youth.

It was during this period that I became interested in domestic workers rights. We had a number of complaints from domestic workers, who were not part of the union, including unfair dismissals, abuses, and termination without benefits. After coordinating a project on child domestic workers for my union, I was appointed in 2009 by the [International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations](#) (IUF) to run a project on domestic workers in Africa – not an easy task. This was during the preparations for an ILO convention for domestic workers.

Coordinating Africa as a region was very difficult for me because I didn't know what was going on in any other African country besides Tanzania. I didn't know who to reach out to, the total number of domestic workers in Africa, or the challenges faced in each country. Nevertheless, I felt confident because of my experience of working on child domestic workers rights in Tanzania and because of the visible commitment of colleagues from Latin America, Asia, South Africa, and the USA when we met to strategize about how to start our movement and what to do in our respective continents.

Domestic workers' trade unions in Africa started becoming visible during the campaign for the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention in 2009. That is not to say that they did not exist before, just that the voice of domestic workers and activities of the domestic workers' movement were dormant.

### **Starting from scratch**

In 2009, only nine domestic worker unions existed in Africa. They had names, but only had a few members or no membership at all, which made it difficult to even ask for membership numbers. Interventions like recruitment drives, seminars, and workshops to build domestic workers' capacity so that they could claim their rights were very limited compared to other sectors or did not happen at all. Those unions that did have members did not keep records of them, and the participation of domestic workers in decision-making processes was very limited. This was especially true in unions where domestic workers were subsumed under one general union covering multiple sectors, such as KUDHEIHA in Kenya, or CHODAWU in Tanzania. In 2008, the IUF conducted a workshop in Kenya for the KUDHEIHA union through the Africa Women's Project. Of the thirty domestic workers who attended the workshop, not one was a member of the union.

Trade unions for domestic workers faced many challenges, including low membership due to a lack of organising skills among domestic workers, as well as many other necessary skills such as leadership, networking, communication, negotiation, advocacy, and lobbying. They also had limited knowledge of how trade unions operate and the rights of workers, women, and domestic workers, as well human rights. The absence of recognition for domestic workers as workers in legal mechanisms meant that domestic workers – and the organisations they created – were marginalised in all spheres of the world of work.

The development of domestic worker organising in Africa has undergone four phases:

### **Phase I, the beginning: building organisations and the campaign for an ILO Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, 2009-2011**

This first phase included mapping out trade unions for domestic workers in the region, which was done through building alliances with other trade unions, trade union centres, and global unions. We also built alliances with civil society and human rights organisations. Furthermore, we conducted sub-regional training workshops for both French and English speakers in the few unions organising domestic workers at that time.

Trade union leaders, domestic worker organisations (both trade union affiliates and non-affiliates), and domestic workers from different unions and supportive NGOs all attended these workshops. An important outcome of these workshops was the recommendation that an African Regional Domestic Workers Network be formed. Moreover, it was through these events that we strategized how to campaign for the adoption of the ILO convention for domestic workers (C189) in different countries and across different regions.

### **Phase II, the African Regional Conference: Building a domestic workers network in Africa, 2011-2013**

After the passing of C189 we held an Africa-wide conference to discuss issues of domestic workers in the region. The first conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya in 2012. Participants included representatives from Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone African countries. Representatives reported on developments towards the ratification of C189 in their respective countries, and laid out their plans for continuing their advocacy efforts. Some achievements included successful recruitment drives to increase organisational membership and the formation of new unions specifically for domestic workers, such as SYTRAD in Guinea, SATHR in Senegal, SINED in Mozambique, CIAWU in Malawi, SYNIATHA in Mali, and UHFTAWU in Uganda.

During the conference, we declared 16 June Global Domestic Workers Day and recommended that we call for African governments to ratify and implement C189. We also revisited the recommendation to establish an African Network for Domestic Workers.

### **Phase Three: Launching the Africa Domestic Workers Network, June 2013**

Domestic workers in Africa put into practice the major recommendation of launching a regional network with the leadership and guidelines necessary for it to operate. On 16 June 2013, the Africa Domestic Workers' Network (AfDWN) was launched in Cape Town, South Africa, exactly two years after the adoption of C189. The same year, Africa was to record the ratification of C189 by two countries: Mauritius and South Africa.



Photo provided by author.

The launch conference of the AfDWN took place between 15-16 June 2013. The South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers' Union (SADSAWU) hosted the conference with the support of the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU). Ninety-five domestic worker representatives from 17 organisations across 17 countries, with a total membership of 95,572, participated in the conference, and were

joined by steering committee members and coordinators of the [International Domestic Workers Network](#) from Asia, the Caribbean, the USA and Latin America, as well as ally organisations from South Africa and Europe.

#### **Phase Four: Strengthening domestic workers trade unions**

The strategic goal of IDWF is to have a strong, democratic, and united domestic workers global organisation for protecting and advancing the rights of members by 2020. The IDWF currently includes 20 AfDWN member organisations. In order to meet the IDWF's strategic goals, the African region needs to build the capacity of domestic workers' trade unions by addressing the following challenges:

1. Most domestic workers' trade unions in Africa have inadequate knowledge about trade unions because they are new and have always been excluded from the benefits provided by trade unions, including education on trade unions. They have poor knowledge of the organisational systems, including organisational structures at national and international levels, that underpin good union leadership, member participation, constitution and good governance, internal decision making processes, representation, team work, planning, and membership recruitment.
2. Domestic workers have inadequate skills in several areas, such as leadership, effective communication, lobbying and advocacy, negotiating, public speaking, record keeping, recruitment drives, due collecting, handling finances, management, networking, report writing, etc.
3. During the current campaign to lobby for the ratification of C189 and amendments to national labour laws, one of the key challenges is putting forward and continuing demands for changes to minimum wages and protection issues, including occupational health and safety, social security, and written contracts.

### **What are the major challenges in Africa today?**

Apart from Mauritius, South Africa, and Guinea, no African country has ratified C189, an enormous obstacle to achieving decent work for domestic workers in Africa. And for those three exceptions enforcement remains a problem.

In addition, the issue of migrant domestic workers is escalating, as many domestic workers – especially from Ethiopia, Ghana, Mauritania, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya – leave Africa to work abroad in Middle Eastern countries due to unemployment or in search for greener pastures. There have been a number of reported incidences of death, rape, and other forms of abuse. Yet, sending countries that have signed agreements with receiving countries do not have proper mechanisms to monitor what is happening to domestic workers working abroad and existing laws and policies are not being enforced.

With poverty at the family level still constituting an important challenge, child labour and especially child domestic work remains a big problem in Africa.

There is still a lot of work to be done to organise domestic workers in African countries. There are currently only 20 countries with trade unions for domestic workers, and existing trade unions are still not as strong as they could be.

Our plan for the future is to continue strengthening domestic workers through training programmes, organizing more domestic workers organisations in different countries, and campaigning for the ratification of C189.

## Domestic work is decent work

*A founder of the domestic workers movement in South Africa recounts the struggle for labour protections and rights in the time of apartheid.*

Myrtle Witbooi • South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union and IDWF

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So the question is, how did I come from my humble beginnings to where I am now? My life in this field started in 1966, when I became a domestic worker. I was working for a family, in 1967, and I remember I was pregnant and had a baby that same year. I also remember that, during the apartheid times, there was an article in the newspaper about how some employers didn't allow the friends of domestic workers to visit the property.

The question that came to my mind was what are we? And why are there no rights for us? So I questioned the situation. I wrote a letter and I sent it to the newspaper without thinking. I just wrote my frustration: why are we different? Why are there no laws to protect us? Why are we not seen as people? And then, three days later, a reporter from the newspaper came to the door and was looking for the maid, the servant. This reporter decided that I educated and asked me why I kept my ideas to myself, instead of speaking out.

So we called a meeting in 1968, here in Salt River (Capetown, South Africa), in a big hall for garment workers. At that time, we still had the

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*I have the ability to speak.*

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apartheid system that coloureds, blacks, and whites were separated. The reporter put an article in the newspaper inviting domestic workers. At that meeting, I discovered something about myself. There were about 250 domestic workers present and the reporter prepared a long speech for me. But when I went to the front, I realised that, no, the reporter's speech was not what I wanted to say.

When I saw the domestic workers in front just like me, I just opened by saying, "Good evening, I am a domestic worker just like you", and broke the ice. And what happened there became history. The domestic workers finally started talking about what had happened to them, how they were exploited, and a lot of things came out to the surface. A few days later, the same reporter came back and said, "Oh, they are electing you as a chairperson". I didn't even know what a chairperson was, but he said, "you must speak and represent domestic workers".

### **The seeds of a movement**

My employer decided that she didn't want to lose me, and that she was going to allow me to use the garage for Sunday afternoon meetings – the only free time we had – and the telephone during the two hours a day I was normally resting, since I was in the newspapers and was even receiving phone calls from some employers. They wanted to ask advice about their workers, and sometimes requested that I come and try to solve the problem between them.

I became a spokesperson for both sides, and that is where I discovered a certain talent I have: I have the ability to speak. I have the ability to share with others who listen to me and that makes me feel so good. I saw this manifest when I interacted with others, and I realised that I enjoy speaking about the concrete issues faced by domestic workers.

I started meeting with other domestic workers, other pioneers of the domestic workers' struggle. Together we started going into churches and onto the streets to speak with other domestic workers, during a

time of apartheid. I got married but I was not allowed to stay with my children, as the Group Area Act separated us by colour. My eldest daughter was only a month old and she had to stay with my mother. My husband was kicked out in the middle of the night, and my employer could not do anything as it was the law of the country that no domestic worker could have their family with them.

This all became too much for my employer and me, so I went to work in a factory as a shop steward, but I never forgot about the domestic workers. In 1982, my employer closed the factory and he actually said to me, “you need to go and find out what is happening to those domestic workers you left behind”. So I went to look in a phone book and I saw a domestic workers association listed, and I asked myself if this was an organisation. I remember that Friday I went into town, as I walked into that room, and the women said, “Myrtle, we can’t believe this. We were looking for you all of this time.” “Your place is here,” they said. What shocked me was that when I went to the meeting, it was the very same domestic workers that use to meet with me in the garage. They told me to address domestic workers’ problems and to become a part of this struggle.

### **Unionising domestic workers in South Africa**

In 1985 organisations worked together to form the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and one year later we launched the South African Domestic Workers Union as one of its affiliates. I had been part of the fundraising team and was asked to be the national treasurer. At the same time, I kept fighting for labour laws. We had no labour laws, there was absolutely no laws to protect and no rights for domestic workers. We were earning only 110 rand per month, which was at the time was only worth about 10 dollars, even though we worked from Monday to Monday.

In 1988 we sat on the steps of the former labour department, waiting for the former minister of labour to come out and speak to us. At that

stage, domestic workers only paid 25 cents per month to be in their union. We kept going and we had protests. In 1986, when they banned all organisations, they didn't really come after us. We kept fighting.

In 1994, when we got freedom, we asked why so many necessary labour laws remained either non-existent or unimplemented. The discrimination is still there, especially among women. We are trying to break those barriers down. Domestic workers still don't have houses, they are isolated from their children, and some stay in houses without proper toilets. They earn too little to have a banking account or to buy their own homes and yes, we might be a bit better off because we have some labour laws, but do these laws play a big role in domestic workers lives? Not really.

While we had achieved some laws in South Africa, we needed international rights for domestic workers. That's where we began to work towards ILO Convention 189, the 'Domestic Workers Convention'. We

A domestic workers in Johannesburg, South Africa. Solidarity Center/Jemal Countess/Flickr. Creative Commons.



found that South Africa was leading in terms of labour laws and that many of the items that were discussed at the ILO had already been addressed in South Africa. South Africa was there from the beginning, when we began discussing the global rights of domestic workers.

In 2006, under the auspices of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV), we held a domestic workers conference to discuss how to go forward and fight for global rights for domestic workers. Two years later we set up a committee to fight for international domestic workers rights. I was chair that committee with 10 other members from different countries.

We formed that committee not knowing where it would lead, but in 2009 we were given a chance to go to the ILO. There I spoke on behalf of both my government and the international domestic workers network. It was the first time domestic workers could speak out, and I was so proud to be a former domestic worker and to lead this delegation. There, we learned about the different ways we were discriminated against globally. We found out that we shared experiences of being degraded by our employers. We also learned that some of the governments were clamping down on workers, saying that we are only poor women and thus underserving of rights.

It reminded me of our former discrimination in South Africa. Sexism was there. But we proved them wrong. We showed the power of domestic workers when we stand together. We were so great that we even defied them by throwing a banner at the ILO down, which we were not allowed to do, when we achieved the convention on domestic work in June 2011. Again I was so proud to speak. It shows you the power that we have.

### **Where to now?**

But now we are asking, how do these international labour laws actually help us? And we find that there is still a lot of discrimination. There

are still a lot of countries that don't have decent rights for domestic workers. If a domestic worker does not have freedom, how could she possibly enjoy these rights?

We launched an International Domestic Workers Federation in 2013 because, even though we had national and international labour laws, we still needed a mechanism to ensure that the voices of workers were heard and to uplift these voices, which is a big role. And then, again, history was made. This federation was for women, and led by women. Again, I was fortunate to be chosen to be the president. In the past few years, I have really enjoyed leading this federation towards gaining rights for workers in the world. We started out as 255,000 members and 30 organisations, and today we have over 500,000 members and 62 organisations. At the beginning everybody was watching us, saying we were women and won't be able to lead, and step by step we have proved them wrong.

In five years time, we want to reach 200,000 migrant workers and double the number of domestic workers. In COSATU, we have this saying, "an injury to one is an injury to all". We have seen this at the national level and now we are fighting to assure that every domestic worker around the world can gain dignity through decent work.

If anyone had told me 50 years ago that I would be here today, after having become a domestic worker as well as a single mother of three children in 1982, I would not have believed them. Today I am a proud leader, a mother of three and now also a grandmother of three. I will continue fighting for domestic workers rights every day of my life, as I remember those early days that led me to this particular struggle, that has now made its place in world history.

But the struggle remains to fight for justice and decent rights for domestic workers.

## Domestic worker speaks out

*Union officials alerted me to the wrongs happening in my own workplace. Now I campaign with them to promote the rights of all domestic workers in Kenya.*

Ruth Khakame • Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospital and Allied Workers and IDWF

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After completing my O levels, I had the ambition to pursue a course in the medical field. My dream, however, could not materialise due to my family's financial situation: we could not afford the college fees that would enable me to realise my dream. I therefore began working for a woman living in the urban centre, in order to have her support to raise the funds for the college fees.

Upon arriving to her house, my employer informed me that I would need to wait for the next college intake period, which was six months later, and assist her in her household chores and other domestic duties in the meantime. I was a little disappointed by this, but I had no choice but to be patient and to devote myself to the tasks assigned to me. Being fresh out of secondary school and still naive, I was somewhat satisfied with this situation. This was also the first time I felt free from strict parental restrictions and close supervision, since my mother was very strict in our rural home. I therefore took full responsibility of the house and the homestead at large as a domestic worker.

In the beginning, I only undertook some duties but things took a turn when the six months elapsed and I was informed that the long awaited college-intake had been cancelled for the foreseeable future. My employer informed me of the situation and resolved to keep me as her domestic worker with a monthly stipend, a small amount of which I was able to put away as savings.

The stipend was however insufficient, as I also had to spare a portion of it for my mum and siblings back in our rural home for their sustenance and to help supplement my mother's small-scale vegetable business income. I tried to negotiate for better remuneration with my employer – whom I then viewed as my employer – but she seemed adamant that between my accommodation and meals, I was better off than other domestic workers who didn't live with their employers and therefore had to report to work early in the morning and leave late in the evening.

Realising she was unwilling to increase my remuneration, I felt obliged to abide by her terms of service and employment, given my family's desperate financial situation. I committed myself to high levels of honesty, integrity, and diligence in my duties as a domestic worker, with the hopes that things would eventually change for the better or that I would secure some better casual work or an informal sector position elsewhere in future.

### **The long hours of the daily routine**

As a domestic worker, I programmed myself to work very long hours: I woke up at 4 a.m. every day, except on special days, where my employer and her family were away, which was a rare occurrence. Upon waking up, I had to ensure that breakfast was ready and that everyone had had their bath, all while preparing the children for school. Since it was very early in the morning, the children often resisted getting up or taking their bath, which often resulted in commotion and tears. Their parents misunderstood the children's behaviour as a response to gross harassments or mishandling on my part, which then led them to direct harshness and abuses towards me. This dynamic made the children believe that whatever they were doing was right and eroded their respect for me.

After breakfast, I would take the children to school and, after ensuring that they got into the school compound safely, I would rush back to

the house to catch up with my housework schedule. I would start with the whole family's daily laundry – which was to be done separate from my clothing – after which I would clean the utensils, the furniture, and the whole house, including the washroom, scrubbing the walls, and cleaning the compound. I would then proceed to the maintenance of the garden by watering the flowers.

These tasks would take up the better part of the morning and would be followed by feeding the chickens, which was accompanied by collecting eggs and even cleaning the whole poultry section. At times, this would also be done with the guidance of a veterinary officer who would come on a fortnightly basis.

Then, I would arrange the clean clothing and bedding and go pick up the children from school. I would clean them, give them some food, and eventually make preparations for the family supper. The parents would be home by 7 p.m. with supper ready for everyone. After supper, I would clear everything from the dining area and prepare the children for bed, while also ensuring that everything was in place before the end of the day, meaning that would only go to bed after 11 p.m. However, I would sometimes be indefinitely delayed if one or more members of the household returned late or when there were guests visiting.

### **From worker to union leader**

This became a routine and reached a point where it got so monotonous, that misunderstanding between my employer and me increased. Specifically, my employer felt offended when I reminded her of my desire to develop career-wise. There were also tensions due to my indecent working conditions, which I mostly became aware of thanks to the officers of the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA - Workers), who were carrying out door-to-door domestic workers' rights awareness and recruitment campaigns. They invited me to join them in a meeting for domestic workers and I became interested after attending

a few sessions. A lot more was brought to my attention when I joined the union as a member in 2013 and began to actively participate in its activities.

KUDHEIHA made me realise that a lot of labour malpractices were directly taking place in my work environment. I also noticed that my employer took advantage of my ignorance on matters pertaining to labour laws, labour relations, the Employment Act of the Kenyan Constitution, and International Labour Organisation standards. Through the union's monthly meetings for domestic workers, I learned about the then upcoming elections for the formation of a National Domestic Workers Council (2015), which would be comprised of representatives of domestic workers from various regions of the country. I took the opportunity to represent my region in the national elections and was elected the National Chairperson of Domestic Workers Council. The council is made up of nine elected members who are domestic workers and is part and parcel of the KUDHEIHA union; it is not an independent body. It was created to address and coordinate the domestic workers agenda from grassroots all the way up to the national level.

When I became a union leader for the council, I resigned from my position as a domestic worker to represent domestic workers' interests in the Department of Domestic Workers at the KUDHEIHA offices.

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*KUDHEIHA made me realise that a lot of labour malpractices were directly taking place in my work environment.*

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As the national chairperson of the council, I am actively involved in the continuous mobilisation, recruitment, organisation, and retention of domestic workers. I intervene regularly to solve various disputes between the employers and domestic workers, participate in advocacy meetings that serve domestic workers' interests as well as media campaigns for public awareness. I facilitate various workshops and trainings for domestic workers to raise their awareness on matters pertaining to the decent work agenda, and campaign for the ratification of the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189).

In Kenya, there are up to two million domestic workers, the majority of which work in major cities and municipalities. KUDHEIHA has organised up to 16,000 domestic workers. The Domestic Workers Convention covers the needs of specifically domestic workers, and once it becomes ratified the government will be committed to addressing the needs of domestic workers. There are currently many gaps in existing laws, which are already poorly enforced. Ratifying the convention in Kenya will have a direct impact on the lives of domestic workers.

Defending and championing domestic workers rights has been a key objective in my duties and responsibilities as a union leader, which have been driven by my personal experience as a domestic worker. As a former domestic worker myself, I am able to understand what domestic workers go through in their day-to-day duties. It is worth noting, appreciating, and even recognising the noble work and contributions of domestic workers to society. Domestic workers should be regarded with high levels of dignity and respect, as they are also human beings and employees who should be treated with fairness.

## Story of a domestic worker in Africa: migrant, unionist and community leader

*It takes a lot of legwork to organise the world's invisible workers.*

Lulu Omar • Conservation, Hotel, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (Tanzania)

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My name is Lulu Abdallah Omar and I am 27 years old. I was born and raised in Zanzibar, Tanzania, where I currently live with my grandmother and my grandfather, as both my parents passed away 23 years ago. I studied primary and secondary school in Zanzibar, in a school called Sunni Madrassa. Having done well in my exams, I was offered the opportunity to continue my studies and do A levels.

My parents weren't able to pay for the school fees, so I decided to find a job instead. In 2007, I started working as a domestic worker. First, I worked for an Indian family in Zanzibar: I cleaned their house and took care of their children for five years. Then, I joined a union that advocates for the rights of domestic workers called Conservation, Hotel, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHOWADU). It is the only trade union in Zanzibar that deals with domestic workers and it has been registered as trade union since 2001 under the Trade Union Act.

I joined this union when my employer stopped paying my monthly salary and the union helped me get the money owed to me from the boss. From then on, I became an active member of CHODAWU and started to help fellow domestic workers who found themselves in similar situations to mine. In 2012, I went to college and got a diploma in business information technology from Zanzibar University, during which I continued to be an active member of the union by standing up with domestic workers and helping them become aware of labour laws and their rights as workers.

In Zanzibar, the working conditions for women, and domestic workers

in particular, are very difficult. Domestic workers' rights are violated in their work environment, and are treated unfairly by their employers. They are often treated like slaves, and are denied their basic human and worker rights. Most domestic workers are under eighteen years, which means they leave school to start working. Many of these domestic workers are sent to countries in the Middle East to work, but the majority working in Zanzibar stay in the mainland regions, namely Mtwara, Lindi, Dar-salam , Mwanza, and Singida.

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*I have been trying  
to lead by example  
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impossible.*

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### **Organising in Zanzibar**

As a union leader and a gender coordinator, I have done a lot of advocacy and lobbying for the rights of domestic workers along with other migrant domestic workers in Zanzibar. I have been working with CHODAWU, the Employers Association, the International Domestic Workers Federation, and other international NGOs to push the government to ratify the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189).

I have also been trying to make employers and other communities aware of the importance of creating favorable working conditions for domestic workers, and to encourage domestic workers to join our union for their own benefit. However, this awareness raising process is not easy, given that some of these issues are deeply rooted into the culture of the people and their belief system, and that many people are financially benefiting from the current situation of domestic workers.

I particularly face opposition from the community, employers, as well

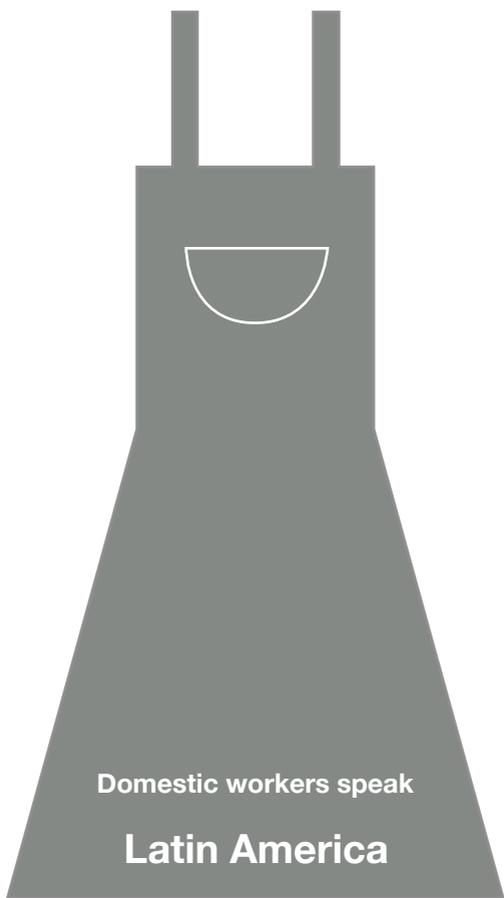
as the government and other influential people. I have been trying to lead by example and do things that people have perceived to be impossible to demonstrate that when there is a will, nothing is impossible. I have managed to win over opponents, mobilise domestic workers rights campaigns, and convince workers to join the union by doing door-to-door outreach campaigns. These are some of the achievements of this work:

- Many domestic workers and migrant domestic workers have received contracts with their employees after a campaign we held in 2013 and 2014. Domestic workers have come back to us to say that they have now received a contract according labour law.
- Many migrant domestic workers have joined and registered with the CHOWADU union.
- Some domestic workers and migrant domestic workers have had the opportunity to sit down together and share their experiences working in Tanzania and abroad.
- We were able to establish an association of migrant domestic workers in Oman that shares information with our own union via liaisons. I also established special committees in Tanzania that focus on certain work places. In these ways we work directly with communities from a grassroots level to the national level, in both rural and urban areas.
- We can now have peaceful dialogues with employers about domestic workers' rights thanks to government support.

Migrant domestic workers are the most vulnerable group of domestic workers. Often times, those who leave to work in countries in the Middle East have a lot of problems and no one to turn to because they got

there through labour recruiting agencies. When they come back home to Tanzania, they often seek help from CHOWADU. We try our best to sit down with them and tell them about their rights and the importance of letting us know if they want to travel to another country, so we could continue having contact with them and sharing information with them through WhatsApp. That way, they also have a way of letting us know if they are in trouble.

We currently have about 3,660 domestic workers registered with the union on the islands of Unguja and Pemba, both part of Zanzibar. As members of the union, these workers have access to more information about minimum wage, overtime payments, and have been able to participate in many awareness raising meetings. The people of Zanzibar – especially the employers and employees – now take seriously the rights of domestic workers. Indeed, many employers have started changing their attitude and behaviour towards domestic workers.



Domestic workers speak

**Latin America**

## The work is not undignified, but how you treat domestic workers is

*Today, through this text, I want to claim my rights and those of my compañeras.*

Marcelina Bautista • National Domestic Workers Union (Mexico)

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Paid domestic work is not recognised in my country, neither socially nor economically. This absence of recognition is experienced by thousands of women who do this type of work, and the valorisation that we receive – or lack thereof – is reflected in the terms used to describe our work.

The terms that are usually used for people doing paid domestic work are often pejorative. For example, ‘*servidumbre*’ (servitude), is a term that originated in feudalism and whose meaning doesn’t correspond to the notion of workers as subjects of law. Another term commonly used is ‘*doméstica*’ (domestic), which evokes the treatment of animals that are tamed to live in people’s homes.

For these reasons, a few years ago, we began insisting on being called domestic workers, as this term reflects that we are indeed subjects of law. However, our recognition as workers should not only be reflected in our designation, but must also manifest in concrete ways on both social and economic levels. In other words, we would like our work to be seen in the same way as any other type of work.

I am one of over two million domestic workers in the country, which represents 10% of women currently employed in Mexico without employment benefits or social security. And today, through this text, I want to claim my rights and those of my *compañeras*.

## **My story, your story**

Defending my rights as a domestic worker has been a process of building awareness, surmounting obstacles, and personal empowerment.

When I was a girl, I lived experiences that marked my life: poverty and the lack of opportunities, including the opportunity to study. But these were also the factors that allowed me to make important decisions for my life in the future.

At the age of ten, my father sent me to work for a family so that I could continue my studies. However, my heavy workload meant that I worked far more than I was able to study, and the opportunity of having an education became more distant each day.

At the age of 14, I left Oaxaca, my state of origin, to move to Mexico City, a city as big as it was diverse and rife with discrimination. Working in people's homes was my only option, since I was a minor and had progressed very little in my studies, a constraint that remains common for many women in our country. In fact, female domestic workers have an average of two to three years less education than the rest of the employed population and begin working as domestic workers when they are minors in many cases.

While I abandoned my dreams, I committed myself to taking care of children, keeping houses clean and organised, having breakfast ready, and waiting for my "*patrones*" (employers) with a set table and fresh food. This is what all my days looked like for many years: I took care of lawyers, legislators, teachers, feminists, and public workers, and ironically, they did not take my rights seriously. Many of them were afraid that I would leave them. They told me I was like family, and yet would give me leftovers to eat or demanded that I wear a uniform. They would go on vacation, but left me behind to work, since that was when the house had to be cleaned or the piled up work had to be done.

In this field of work, affective relationships often blur the lines between labour and voluntary acts of goodwill, but what we seek are working relationships based on mutual respect.

Psychologically, many domestic workers experience blackmail from employers who don't want them to leave. This is especially true when it comes to childcare, since we establish close relationships with the children, which may in turn make us accept mistreatment from the parents.

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*They told me I was  
like family, and  
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demanded that I  
wear a uniform.*

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Not only did I abandon my dreams and the security of my surroundings, I also experienced racial and class discrimination, as well as exploitation and low salaries because of my age.

But one day, as a teenager, I decided to free my dreams from inside the four walls of a house. Not because the job was indecent, but because I felt I needed to strive towards my goals, regardless of my young age. Many of

my *compañeras* live in conditions of marginalisation and exploitation, with little value given to their labour and to their person.

I realised that domestic work, which remains undervalued and invisible to many, is valuable for workers, but also for employers. It was not the act of caring for an employer that reduced my dignity or violated my rights as a person and a worker, but rather the way most of us have been and continue to be treated. So I learned to claim those rights and seek out dignified work conditions.

I wanted to break barriers and convince other domestic workers, employers, and the government that dignified work and regulation is everyone's responsibility and that we must be protected and supported by a just and fair legal framework. So I decided to become a human rights activist after having been discriminated against, mistreated, and exploited as a domestic worker for over 20 years.

### **A fight for all of us**

Since the age of 29, I have been a part of the [Conlactraho foundation](#), which serves as a trade union school. I served as general secretary there 18 years after its creation, taking up diverse roles in which I had the opportunity to participate in the creation of ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers. I also had the great opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from other continents in the creation of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). In 2000, I founded the [Centro de Apoyo y Capacitación para Empleadas del Hogar](#) (CACEH), with the goal of creating an alternative space for implementing strategies for the recognition of domestic workers rights and to strengthen the collective organisation for social dialogue at a national level. Until December 2016, I was Latin America's regional coordinator for the IDWF.

This fight has not been an easy process but it has been very satisfying and challenging to bring domestic workers' issues into the public agenda. This is because while the public sphere is destined for men, the private sphere is usually destined for women, and often comes with problems of discrimination, mistreatment, abuse, exploitation, and in some cases, child labour.

### **My experience**

I had the great opportunity to represent domestic workers in the debates that took place in the ILO in Geneva, Switzerland for the creation of Convention 189, which was approved on 16 June 2011 and whose ratification in Mexico is currently but a governmental promise. While the government appears to be open to ratifying this convention, they

do not seem willing to incorporate any of its stipulations into existing Mexican laws.

We now have a collective national organisation where workers can exercise their individual and collective rights, thanks to the creation of the first national domestic workers' union in Mexico's history, which is a monumental advancement. These rights include autonomy, collective agreements, and the right to strike or protest if a worker experiences a rights violation, for example, by being fired without justification. This came as the result of more than 15 years of struggle from our sector, which has been socially invisible.

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*We aim to dignify the work of the 2.4 million domestic workers and we are convinced that we will be heard.*

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We aim to dignify the work of the 2.4 million domestic workers and we are convinced that we will be heard. This is why we promote the ratification of Convention 189, which will allow for millions of domestic workers to leave their informal conditions and have the ability to exercise their rights as workers, to be recognised and to access justice.

We don't want any of our domestic workers to experience injustices or for any employer to go through complicated procedures if they want to register their employees with social security, as there are currently no appropriate paths to do so.

Due to the lack of legislation in Mexico to protect domestic workers and as a way to support the ratification of Convention 189, we consistently execute a campaign called “*¡Ponte los guantes por los derechos de las trabajadoras del hogar!*”, which translates to “Put your gloves on for the rights of domestic workers!”

Our struggle reached an international level and the domestic workers of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Europe are united today through the IDWF, with the mission to turn our rights into a reality.

During the entire process of creating the [Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar](#) (SINACTRAHO) – which counted more than 100 members when it was established in 2015 – community support has been fundamental. This includes other unions, feminist and human rights organisations as well as the employer’s collective [Hogar Justo Hogar](#), an organisation that was formed recently to raise awareness about how improving the work and life conditions of domestic workers can also benefit employers and society as a whole.

Many of you are employers of domestic workers. After reading these lines, I urge you to call us domestic workers, as we are subjects of law. And I want to invite you to reflect on our labour, which was perhaps invisible to you up until now, because this is an issue that affects all of us.

***¡Ponte los guantes por los derechos de las trabajadoras del hogar!***

**Put your gloves on for the rights of domestic workers!**

*A previous version of this piece was published in Spanish at La Silla Rota.*

## How do we make labour rights real?

*Domestic workers have achieved many gains in Colombia in the past years. Now they're setting their sights higher.*

María Roa (UTRASD), Ana Teresa Vélez (Escuela Nacional Sindical - ENS) and Andrea Londoño (Fundación Bien Humano) (Colombia)

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Today in Colombia, people and government are finally talking about domestic workers rights. This might sound a little strange, given that it is such a fundamental issue. Historically, these women have been relegated to the least visible margins of society, and their work has been consistently undervalued, despite their enormous contribution to society. These women (because talking about male domestic workers is naming the exception, which in itself portrays the problem) have been subjected to every possible form of discrimination: extensive work hours<sup>1</sup>, payments that are much lower than the minimum wage<sup>2</sup>, and no social protections – without forgetting to mention instances of labour and sexual abuse. While the past six years have been marked by a series of steps towards improving work and life conditions for domestic workers, it will take a lot more work to push back against centuries of discrimination.

Our journey in this struggle started seven years ago, after we agreed with other people and organisations that were concerned about this issue that the only way to move forward was through collective action and teamwork: by combining our knowledge, the few economic resources to which we had access, and hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Our goal was to make people in our country value the great contribution of paid domestic workers – 96% of whom are women<sup>3</sup> – as well as understand that undervaluing of these workers structurally contributes to social inequity.

Despite their own financial and social difficulties, these female domes-

tic worker leaders opted for a democratic approach – which is committed to the peace process<sup>4</sup> – towards becoming aware of their rights and demanding them through unionism. These brave women have had constant support from the [Escuela Nacional Sindical](#) (ENS) and the [Fundacion Bien Humano](#).

### **An organised sector**

Colombia currently has three domestic worker unions: Sintrasedom, Sintraimagra and the Unión de Trabajadoras Afrocolombianas del Servicio Doméstico (UTRASD). The last of these is based in Medellin and is the most politically influential. UTRASD's board members, María Roa, Claribed Palacios, Flora Perea, Nydia Díaz, Gloria Céspedes and Reynalda Chaverra, have been important figures and voices for advocating for domestic workers rights. Particularly [María Roa, was recognised as one of the most important leaders in Colombia in 2016](#).

UTRASD was officially established in 2013, as a result of two important developments. First, in the few years preceding 2010, afro-Colombian leaders from Medellin began to mobilise for their rights. Then, in 2011, the ENS and [Carabantú](#), an organisation for the empowerment afro-Colombian women in the region, conducted the investigation “*Barriendo la Invisibilidad de las Trabajadoras Domésticas Afrocolombianas en Medellín*”. The findings of this research prompted ENS to decisively support the UTRASD's workers union, which they have done for the past six years. A group that started out with 23 women in 2013 quickly began growing and now consists of almost 400 members, a dynamic directive board, two sub-chapters in Cartagena and Apartado, nine committees, three active cooperation projects, and an ambitious action plan.

### **With a basis in law**

At a legislative and governmental level we can say that domestic work caught the public eye in 2009, when Colombia's Congress began discussing the Care Economy Law (*Ley de Economía del Cuidado*),

which was being promoted by senators Cecilia López and Gloria Inés Ramírez. Thanks to them, in 2010, law 1413 ordered the measurement of women's contribution to the economic and social development of the country through unpaid domestic work for the first time.

In 2011, the International Labor Organisation shook things on a global scale with the Domestic Workers Convention (C189), which was the first international call for addressing the conditions of domestic workers. The following year, Colombia passed law 1595 to incorporate C189 and express the government's will to protect domestic workers, before ratifying the convention in 2014.

In 2013, decree 2616 was issued to regulate social security and was followed by decree 721, which gave domestic workers access to the family benefits system. As a result, out of nearly one million domestic workers in Colombia, “in February 2016, more than 19,000 people were registered for social security depending on their income. According to the [Superintendence of Family Subsidy in March of 2016](#), the number of domestic workers accessing family benefits increased to more than 104,000 people”.

In 2014, the Constitutional Court of Colombia issued judgment C-871, which charged the Colombian Congress with correcting the discrimination faced by domestic workers regarding the denial of their service bonus, namely the right to one month's salary per year as a bonus.

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*Why doesn't Colombia have an association of representative voices for the employers of domestic workers?*

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Last year, the Constitutional Court also recognised the infringement of domestic worker's rights in the [185-16 judgment](#), whereby they were determined as subjects needing special constitutional protection. Exactly five years after C189 was adopted in Switzerland, the Colombian Congress – led by the legislators Ángela María Robledo and Angélica Lozano – unanimously approved the 1788 ley de prima, or the law that recognises the same service bonus for domestic workers as for the rest of Colombia's workers.

These advancements have helped show the people in Colombia that domestic workers have the same rights as any other worker.

### **Next steps**

In 2011, the Fundación Bien Humano started a project called “Hablemos de Empleadas Domésticas” as a strategy to give domestic workers more visibility and to position them as subjects with rights. The project includes support for the empowerment and the public positioning of base organisations, such as the UTRASD.

Bien Humano also created a robust communications network through its Twitter account @Empleadas\_hogar, a Facebook page Trabajadoras Domésticas, a YouTube channel Hablemos de Empleadas Domésticas, and the website [trabajadorasdomesticas.org](http://trabajadorasdomesticas.org), to disseminate information resources. With the conviction that “unity makes strength”, Bien Humano joined forces with ENS and UTRASD in 2011 as part of a strategy that has allowed them to reach the highest functionaries, other national and international organisations, mass media outlets, and the leaders and citizens of Colombia with the message that dignity and the law must start at home, with our women workers.

The latest political development in Colombia has been the creation of tripartite roundtable, an ideal scenario codified in the Bonus Law (Ley de Prima) in order to promote C189. In this committee there are places for representatives of the national government (Ministry of Work),

workers (trade unions and the UTRASD) and for the employers is the Asociación Nacional de Empresarios (National Association of Entrepreneurs), which gives rise to many questions: why do employers of domestic workers in Colombia get to be represented by businesspeople? Are problems faced at home, in the private sphere, comparable to problems in the business industry? Why doesn't Colombia have an association of representative voices for the employers of domestic workers? And how can one be created?

In Colombia, domestic workers have started a formal path for organising; the topic has entered the political and media agenda; domestic workers rights have gained more visibility through social media; civil society organisations have effectively demonstrated support; and there is a legitimate base for achieving decent labour for domestic workers, but compliance is distant and the path to obtain it is rife with uncertainty. However, we see a lot of potential in modern information and communication technologies and in social media.

While the national government has manifested political willingness to address these issues on occasion throughout the past years, it nevertheless lacks a permanent strategy, designated leaders, and economic resources to do so. Moving forward, it is also necessary to adopt an inspection plan to record developments in homes, sanction the non-compliance of norms, and to cut the cultural tendency of abuse towards domestic workers. It is just as important to create massive permanent campaigns to raise awareness about these new legislative developments, as well as for the government to provide support for domestic worker unions that goes beyond words.

It is true that there is an increase in how much domestic workers rights are being talked about in Colombia, and that this cause has received the support of many people and organisations; but the real question is: how can we make the government and employers take these rights that are currently on paper and apply them in everyday life?

*This article was written in representation of the workers union Trabajadoras Afrocolombianas del Servicio Doméstico - UTRASD (Afro-Colombian Domestic Workers), Escuela Nacional Sindical - ENS (National Worker-Union School), and the Bien Humano Foundation.*

## **Endnotes**

1. The “Eradicating Invisibility Investigation”, took place in 2012 by the National Workers-Union School (ENS) and the Afro-Colombian Corporation of Social and Cultural Development (CARABANTÚ), with the mission to describe the working conditions and the racial discrimination towards afro-Colombian women who are domestic workers in the city of Medellin. It was reported that 91% of live-in domestic workers worked between 10 and 18 hours daily and that 89% of non live-in workers worked between 9 and 10 hours, without receiving payment for any extra hours in 90.5% of the cases.
2. The same investigation revealed that 62% of domestic workers receive between 300,000 and 566,000 pesos each month; 21% between 100,000 and 300,000; and 2.4% between 50,000 and 150,000. (The value of the USD at the time was of 1,750 pesos).
3. According to the most recent data of the National Administrative Statistical Department (DANE), in 2015, in Colombia there were 725,000 people hired as domestic workers out of which 96% are women, which represents 7.4% of the total employed women in the country.
4. During the past four years in Colombia there has been a peace process taking place with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which aimed to reach peace agreements to end a war that has lasted more than 50 years. The civil population, mainly in the fields, has been greatly affected by displacement and abuses from both the FARC and the state. These agreements are now in their implementation phase.

## “A few steps forward, still a long way to go”: old issues, new movements

*A critical approach to domestic work based on our lived experiences.*

Lourdes Albán • Asociación de Trabajadoras Remuneradas del Hogar (Ecuador)

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The situation of paid domestic workers in Ecuador has been, and continues to be, a critical issue. Despite knowing that our rights as humans and workers are violated on a daily basis, many of us choose to endure conditions of abuse, exploitation, and discrimination because of economic necessity and our responsibility to take care of our families.

In addition to caring for the households of our employers' families, many of us are heads of our own households, which involves a host of additional responsibilities. Every month, we need to pay rent and other fees for social housing (that is, if we are lucky enough to obtain government assisted housing). In addition to these expenses, we need to account for health, food, and clothing costs, as well for basic electricity, water, phone, internet – with technology advancing, the internet has become indispensable for the education of our children – and daily transportation costs for our families and for ourselves. To cover these expenses, we need a source of income, and without education or professional training, our only option is to find work in homes, which guarantees neither adequate conditions nor fair treatment and pay.

Many of us migrate from rural areas to big cities from a very young age in search of work opportunities, with the intention of achieving economic stability for our families and ourselves. We must educate our children, as we do not want them to be subjected to the same work conditions, humiliation, and abuse – both psychological and physical, including sexual abuse by our employers or their sons. We want our children to have qualifications, professions, better work opportunities, and a better quality of life.

Domestic labour involves a multitude of responsibilities: we are in charge of cooking food, general domestic chores, and taking care of our employers' pets and families. It's not the nature of domestic work that is terrible, but the conditions and circumstances we face at work: the lack of adequate supplies to perform our tasks, the exposure to risks, and the occupational illnesses that can result from this kind of work. Employers need to understand that we are people just like them, with rights and responsibilities, and that we also have families that need us and wait for us. They need to start treating our work with the dignity and importance it deserves, and they need to acknowledge that we also contribute to the country's economy. After all, it is our labour that allows them to go out and work and improve their own economic condition.

### **Domestic labour under power relations**

Women perform most domestic labour, not surprising given that women's roles have historically been considered largely reproductive. They have been perpetually undervalued by a patriarchal system and culture, in which men are seen as being the sole economically, socially, culturally, and politically productive agents in their households. This often results in women, be they children or young adults, feeling inferior and dependent on men, regardless of how important their economic contribution is to their families. This is especially true for low-income women, who are more vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and human rights violations.

It is also expected that domestic workers show gratitude for working in elite households, instead of advocate to improve their labour conditions. The '*patrona*' is the woman of the house, i.e. the one with the power, money, and respect. She decides how much and when she will pay the '*criada*' or '*sirvienta*', who cannot protest out of fear of being thrown out of the house and into the streets. The fact is that this power formula goes largely unquestioned further contributes to domestic labour being undervalued and rendered invisible.

Furthermore, this power imbalance facilitates the path towards discrimination, racism, inequality (with regards to class, ethnicity, and gender), sexual harassment, and abuse, not only in the home, but also at a systemic level. These unequal power relationships – which often result in gender violence and woman-to-woman discrimination – have been reproduced and normalised by our society. As such, decades have passed without any serious attempt to create and respect laws to protect women in this sector.

### **Organising as a path towards claiming our rights**

Historically in Ecuador, the rights of domestic workers have not been recognised: we have had to endure conditions such as long working days, job instability, no access to social security, no contracts, no vacation days, and no access to the benefits that other workers receive from the government and from society.

There have been many cases of employers violating our human and workers rights. Currently, many of us are not being paid the legal minimum wage and do not have work contracts to rely on for our protection. Many of our employers demand that we work through casual service contracts, which effectively absolves them from their responsibility to provide us with 13th month bonuses, paid vacation, and health insurance.

These issues and the general precariousness of domestic work inspired a group of *compañeras* to gather in the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 1997 to create the Asociación de Trabajadoras Remuneradas del Hogar (ATRH), an association that fights to defend labour, gender, and human rights for domestic workers. The association includes members from Guayas, Manabí, Los Ríos, Pichincha, Esmeraldas, among other provinces.

Through different media outlets, the members and founders of the ATRH have been able to inform themselves about labour rights, so-

cial security, among other themes of interest and have educated their peers. They were also able to use this knowledge to provide free guidance to members who suffered from various human rights violations.

Other NGOs such as FOS Socialist Solidarity, Centro de Solidaridad Sindical de Finlandia SASK, and Care International have played a crucial role in the development and operation of our activities by providing counsel and supporting us economically. The organisation is currently struggling to sustain itself financially since its only source of funding is limited and comes from SASK.

We have had roundtable discussions with the Ecuador's Ministry of Labour Relations, the Ecuadorian Institute for Social Security, and other departments in order to advocate for the rights of workers from our sector. On 20 June 2016, after a long struggle of 18 years, the Sindicato Nacional Único de Trabajadoras Remuneradas del Hogar Ecuador (SINUTRHE) was established with the aim to guarantee compliance with workers' rights in the domestic work sector.

In addition, Ecuador ratified the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C 189) in 2013, for which there was unanimous support in the National Assembly. We – the women from ATHR – are also a part of the Central Única de Trabajadores (CUT). These milestones indicate that the government of Ecuador and its different ministries, as well as several important NGOs, are willing to support the struggle for domestic workers rights.

### **Progress, step by step**

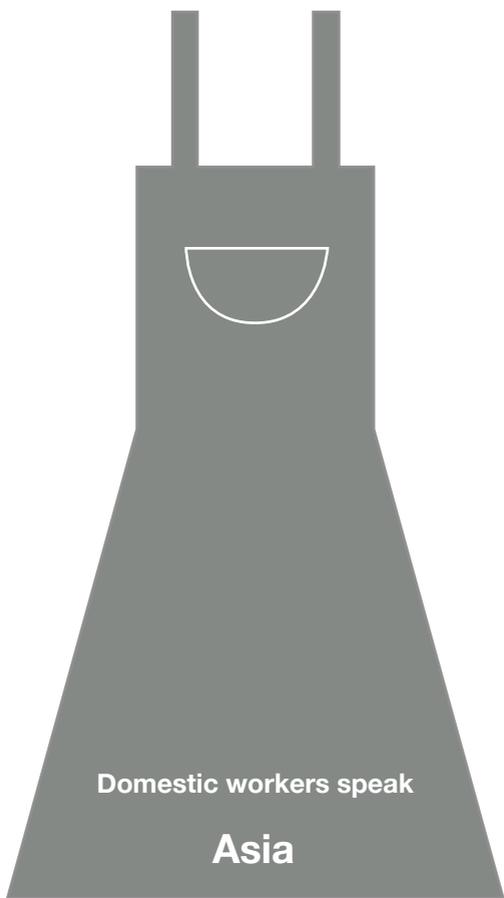
In 2008, the legal juridical framework for domestic workers changed positively under the mandate of president Rafael Correa and the new constitution written for the Republic of Ecuador. The government raised and regulated wages of our working class, from an unjust salary to a basic, unifying the salary for all workers. There are no specific regulations for the domestic care sector, as domestic workers fall under

the Labour Code and therefore are supposed to have the same rights as other workers.

From 2008 to 2017, the minimum wage increased from 180 to 375 US dollars per month. According to the code, the minimum we can make is a basic unified salary for a full day of work, in addition to overtime after eight hours of work, regardless of whether the worker is a live-in domestic worker. Additionally, we now have the right to be affiliated to the Ecuadorian Institute for Social Security, bonuses, reserve funds, paid vacations, health rights, and other benefits stated by the law.

Domestic workers are also protected by articles 243 and 244 of the Organic Integral Penal Code in Ecuador, which penalises employers who do not affiliate their workers to the Ecuadorian Institute for Social Security or comply with work inspections at a national level. Domestic workers can also have permanent part-time contracts, and thus have access to the same rights and benefits of full-time workers.

The continued advancement of domestic workers' rights largely depends on a joint effort between the associates and workers of our association, the SINUTRHE, the government, and society in general, to make sure that laws are followed and that our workers' rights and human rights are being respected.



Domestic workers speak

**Asia**

## Dignity and visibility for domestic workers: no longer workers in the shadow!

*The roots of prejudice against domestic workers in India run deep.*

Geeta Menon • Domestic Workers Rights Union (India)

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The voices of ‘workers in the shadow’ may not be loud, yet they are slowly but surely emerging into the sociopolitical landscape of India. Domestic workers of today work in a different system than their sisters of yesteryear. Part-time as well as many full-day workers now live in their own homes, commuting to their employers’ houses as regular places of work. Those of us that work in the unions impress this upon workers: that the employer’s home is not their ‘home’ but their ‘work-place’, their ‘factory’!

Most ‘part timers’ work long hours across many different houses. They suffer caste discrimination and assaults upon their dignity, working without many of the rights enjoyed by other workers, including social security, leave, and various types of protection. The majority are women, as gendered notions of housework consider it natural that young girls should slave away at work that is devalued. Tens of thousands of the domestic workers are to be found in urban and semi-urban houses, invisibly contributing to the economy and the household.

There are also a large number of migrant domestic workers who continue to work as ‘live-in’ employees, lost in the shadows where employers and recruitment agencies all too easily, and all too often, find ways to exploit them. They work long hours with no rest or free time, have their salary withheld, and suffer from all kinds of indignities including sexual harassment, severe isolation, and ill health.

It is not understood in India, as it is in some parts of the world, that domestic workers are neither servants nor machines. They are work-

ers, part of a productive economy, and their identity as workers must be recognised and respected. Yet getting to this point is difficult. The invisibility of domestic workers, with no defined workplace or employer and with the subtle physical, emotional, and verbal abuse that takes place in the privacy of the home, makes it extremely challenging to build up domestic workers collectives. It's a challenge because most of the women themselves believe they, as workers, are devalued.

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*It is not understood in India, as it is in some parts of the world, that domestic workers are neither servants nor machines.*

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### **Strategies for organising: the innovative path**

Keeping these facts in mind, it is obvious that strategies for organising will vary. The part-timers and full-day workers, living in the slums of Bangalore, are contacted directly through cultural programmes, awareness programmes, membership drives and through the existing NGOs and CBOs in different residential areas. Public sittings, information surveys and street corner meetings are also held in these areas. Some volunteers have been working in colleges to sensitize the students to their own domestic help.

One of the important, but not necessarily easy ways of reaching domestic workers in their residential colonies is through NGOs working in these areas. The women's organisation Stree Jagruti Samiti (SJS), for example, works in the neighbourhoods to spread awareness on issues

faced by domestic workers. The Domestic Workers Rights Union, supported by SJS, has gone farther, attempting to collectivise domestic workers and raise up homegrown leaders.

One key way the union has done this is through the establishment of Worker Facilitation Centres, as they help us get away from the notion of individual struggle in a vacuum. Working under the slogan *Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha* – ‘Struggle and Build’ – our first pilot centre in Bangalore drew in over 4000 domestic workers and more than 12,000 other unorganised workers in just one year. The centres have three main functions. First, they register workers and help us build databases of contacts. Second, they provide workers with information, especially on accessing social welfare schemes. And third, they offer a grievance redress mechanism to help with workplace and personal issues.

The strategies to organise residential or live-in domestic workers have evolved by trial and error. These workers are the most difficult to organise, and getting information about their numbers or contacting them is sometimes impossible. The union has met workers at the gates of their employers’ homes to raise awareness and to collect information. Attempts have also been made to create a forum with employers, who have shown more concern as of late for what domestic workers suffer. The sisterhood solidarity is evident in cases of domestic violence, or when neighbours ill treat workers. But when it comes to workplace issues like wages, leave, etc., they mostly remain silent. So the attempt is now being made to form an inclusive partnership with the employer so that both employers and employees are aware of their rights and responsibilities. We at the union are currently in the process of drawing up a code of practice that we hope will further this project.

Finally, we also take up certain cases that are likely to build local awareness and get picked up in the media. As the movement likes to say, ‘effective media is the best organiser’, and the process of investigating these cases helps us train lay members and leaders alike.

## Challenges

Organising domestic workers not a smooth process. The very nature of the work, both in terms of duties and locations, is scattered. This makes collectivisation very difficult. The women would also ask “what will we get if we join your group?” or claim “our employers are good; we don’t need to join you”. In addition, there was always an underlying fear of losing one’s job, even though awareness of what a union actually is was low. And, given that workplace definition and employer employee relations are arbitrary, individual notions prevail and result in low levels of collective consciousness.

One of the major hindrances to organising was that many women had not told their families that they were working as domestic workers. There is a shame, a stigma in working as domestic workers. This stigma comes from their caste locations as well as the notion that they go to houses where there are ‘other’ men. It also comes from a societal notion of housework, which is largely devalued, gendered, and called women’s work. This further affects perceptions of domestic workers.

The union activists say that it is easier to successfully organise as self help groups rather than as a proper union. This is partly due to a lack of awareness of even being workers, as they don’t work in a factory, but in someone else’s house. However, things are changing since the Domestic Workers Rights Union was formed, and now many domestic workers have joined the Union.

There is no legislative framework for domestic workers in India, and their work is not ‘scheduled work’. Still neglected, although there is now the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (C189). The struggle at all times to establish an identity, to pressurise, to fight apathy, to gain recognition.

We face a special challenge when the union handles allegation of theft or crime, as the police and the judiciary are indifferent, apathetic, and

do not see it important that a domestic worker has rights. Constantly delaying, seeking to effect compromise and taking the side of the employers – the revictimisation continues. All actions of authority are arbitrary, and workers face violence both in the privacy of their own homes as well as in the privacy of their employers homes!

A major stumbling block when the union takes up cases is that there is no proof of their labour. Be it salary, or leave, or dismissal – the employers simply deny that the workers have worked in their house. The labour department is of little help, as it's inefficient and lacks interest. The labour commissioner has acknowledged that lack of knowledge regarding the unorganised sector makes for a huge challenge. Having dealt with the organised sector, these officials find it difficult to comprehend or to imagine, in the absence of a statutory framework, how to deal with the issues of the unorganised sector.

The feudal mindset prevails, although life has become globalised. The notions of caste, the discriminatory, arrogant, suspicious attitudes, the disrespect even shown by the children of the employers, social marginalisation – the roots of all these run deep. There is no concept of overtime work or pay. They are seen only as 'helping'. The loans given by employers to workers are also framed as helping, introducing a problematic element of mutuality that compounds the difficulties for the workers.

### **Signs of success**

The impact of the effort to organise domestic workers is certainly being felt although it may not be clearly visible and defined. There are noticeable changes in the women between the time they joined the union and today. This is evident in the small assertions made by the women and the recognition they have received, such as when they boldly raise the issue of caste at their workplace. In most households in India, women face discrimination because most of them belong to the Dalit caste. Very often, employers give them food on a plastic plate

that is specially allocated for them. One domestic worker broached this issue with her employer saying, “I am not an outcast. I clean and wash your house, vessels and clothes. We both have the same blood. I will not drink from a separate plastic cup”. Her assertion helped her to claim her dignity.

Similarly, other women have shared how their employers have begun to see them in a new light. Many of the domestic workers now have a weekly day off; get some extra money as a bonus and some have even got an increase in salary! The women too have realised the value of collective strength and have managed to voice and take up issues collectively. Many a time, women have themselves handled issues of allegations of theft and have also negotiated for themselves. Many domestic workers have expressed how their being a member of a union has given them new respect in the police station. They have gained courage in their own lives.

The women tell the story of a fellow union member named Shaila, who was wrongfully accused of theft. Shaila was thrown out of her employers’ house, and was standing at their gate, crying, when Vonamma, the president of the executive committee, and other members of the union came to support her.

Vonamma was able to articulate to the employers that if they were intent on firing Shaila, they would have to make an official police complaint and find some evidence of her guilt. The employers finally gave in, admitting that there had been no theft. Shaila was unable to keep the job, but she was able to retain her pride and her employer was made to apologise. It seems like the community that the union has helped build among these women has been a major driving force for their strength – both collectively and individually. The women have been inspired by one another, and are learning from each other’s experiences.

Vonamma was seven years old when she began domestic work. Born in Bangalore, her father died very soon after her birth. Her mother – also a domestic worker – was left with the task of raising eight children. None of them received an education, and as a result, they also joined the workforce. Vonamma toiled away in a kitchen, standing on a stool that would raise her small figure to the kitchen counter, and was beaten by her employers when she displayed tiredness. Now she is 29, unmarried, and lives with her mother.

The first step is to recognise that these places are no longer just slums, but labour colonies. Most of the women in the union live in slums, and SJS's work involves recognising that these urban spaces are not merely dwelling places, but sources of labour. These women are economic entities. Making the effort to move on from thinking of slums merely as residences is making the effort to recognise the work that these women do as wives, mothers, daughters, daughters-in-law, caretakers, and as women living on the economic margins.

Hailing from various parts of South India, the shared characteristic among the women of SJS is a lack of education and skills. Most only went through a few years of school. Saraswati, a member of the union, says that most of the women state their own terms and conditions to future employers, and inform them of their involvement with the union. It appears that being unionised has given these women a greater sense of self and belonging – some larger context and perspective from which to think about the work that they do and their legitimate, economic contributions to their communities.

Most of the women have resigned themselves to lives in the informal sector that will likely remain on the margins of Bangalore's society and economy. Yet they are determined to fight for the rights and dignities they deserve, and for happier lives for their children. The most difficult step in this movement appears to be the translation of these dreams of respectable wages, regular bonuses, and workplace dignity into reality.

Two factors stand out more clearly than others as hindrances to the fulfilment of these dreams: firstly, the oppression and mistreatment of domestic workers is firmly embedded in Indian middle-class society's psyche, and much of the struggle for these women's rights depends on some level of malleability on the part of their employers. Secondly, there is a sense of inertia among the women when it comes to taking larger steps forward, especially with regard to their own literacy and education. Solving these problems – for example, mobilising these women to participate in adult education programmes of some sort – is an expensive, resource-consuming endeavour.

At the social and legal levels it has been assertions by the women about their dignity and rights that have led to some changes. The government is engaged in policy framework discussions, the Karnataka government has included domestic workers on its board of unorganised workers – after much struggle from our union – and the ILO Domestic Workers Convention now exists. The labour department has been more accepting and inclusive when interacting with the domestic workers union, and they have taken our concept of worker facilitation centres seriously.

The union has managed to put pressure on the police and the criminal justice system, and two cases regarding migrant domestic workers were successfully handled by the High Court. The cumulative impact of these processes are slowly becoming visible in other districts, from Mangalore to Belgaum. The voices are growing louder and the exploitation is becoming more subtle, always still caught up in the warp of feudal relationships.

Women's rights are at such a premium in our country that even a few hundred individuals raising their voice and trying to break the culture of silence is of immeasurable value. Every voice counts because women have to surpass class, caste and patriarchy controls to gain visibility and dignity.

## The Filipino *Kasambahay*'s long struggle against invisibility

*With more than one million domestic workers in the Philippines there is massive potential for collective action.*

Himaya Montenegro and Verna Dinah Q. Viajar • UNITED and LEARN (The Philippines) and IDWF

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While the Philippines is renowned for exporting domestic labour around the world, the practice of hiring help is common in the Philippines as well, especially in wealthy households and for full-time working couples. In fact, the practice of having 'house helpers' or '*kasambahay*' – the Filipino term for domestic worker derived from the words *kasama* (companion or someone you rely on) and *bahay* (house) – has been prevalent for as long as we can remember.

In the past, poor families would send their young children to work in wealthy households as a method for repaying debts, in exchange for their children's education, or as a means to obtain in-kind or cash payments. Later on, poor families in the provinces allowed their children – mostly the girls, but some boys as well – to be recruited as domestic helpers in Manila. With time, the terms 'maid', 'boy', '*tsimay*' (a Filipino slang word for house helper but with derogatory connotations), or 'house helpers' began to take on derogatory meanings.

Domestic work continues to be considered one of the lowest forms of work, reserved for 'provincial' girls from the Visayan regions. The term '*inday*' describes girls who trekked to urban Manila in search for better work as maids. *Indays* are commonly depicted in soap operas as uneducated, provincial, and loud. Today, due to enduring forms of discrimination and difficult work conditions, domestic workers in the Philippines are finding their voices as workers and organising to break stereotypes and push for policies that protect domestic workers nationwide.

## The potential power of millions

While it is difficult to determine the exact number of Filipino domestic workers abroad, [official statistics from 2015](#) indicate that one-third of 2.4 million overseas Filipino workers were unskilled labourers; a category that includes domestic workers, cleaners, and manufacturing labourers. In the Philippines, the government only started recording data on the number of workers in private households as part of the wage and salary workers category in its [2004-2005 Labor Force Surveys](#). Government estimates for 2017 put the number of local domestic workers at 1.2 million, but other estimates range from 600,000 to 2.5 million. Numbers aside, it is important to recognise that Filipino domestic workers both abroad and in the Philippines experience abusive work conditions, low wages, and human rights violations.

The Philippines has been sending domestic workers to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Singapore since the 1980s, but it was only in the 1990s that attention was finally given to the conditions of domestic workers. This was mostly due to high profile tales of abuse against Filipino domestic workers abroad, such as the [Flor Contemplacion](#) and [Sarah Balabagan](#) stories, which mobilised other migrant workers, NGOs, religious groups, and Philippine embassies to work towards defending and protecting the rights of Filipino domestic workers.

Given the number of Filipino domestic workers in the country and abroad, it is no wonder that the Philippines was at the forefront of campaigns for the rights of migrant domestic workers, the ratification of the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189), and the adoption of a national law for domestic workers or the Kasambahay Law.

Historically, domestic labour was unregulated because it was perceived as being lowly and non-work. House helpers and domestic workers were not protected by labour laws and did not have access to social benefits. Today, the perception and non-recognition of domestic work persists: domestic workers in the Philippines continue to be un-

der-paid, receive low salaries and no days off, and lack social benefits. Additionally, many domestic workers find themselves in situations of debt bondage, are juridically unrepresented (and thus invisible), and experience bad working and living conditions (most domestic workers don't have private rooms and are exposed to hazardous chemicals, to name a few examples).

### **Building a movement**

These problems motivated many of us to organise as domestic workers. We quickly realised that the situation of domestic workers is a unique case in the Philippines. The conditions listed above pushed the Labor Education and Research Network (LEARN) – a labour NGO engaged in workers' education, research and networking since 1986 – to work with domestic workers on self-organisation and empowerment. As current and former staff of LEARN, we, the authors, were involved in different campaigns on domestic work issues.

Without funding, LEARN in cooperation with its affiliate trade unions and organisations began discussing the unique and differing conditions of domestic workers in Manila, the Philippine capital. When Himaya Montenegro, an author of this piece and a former domestic worker herself, was hired as a teacher at a kindergarten supported by LEARN, the members of the network became more aware of the differing conditions and aspirations of domestic workers in the Philippines. Among these are child domestic workers striving to finish education while doing unpaid domestic work in exchange for school tuition; student domestic workers that have stopped their schooling and remain unpaid by their employers; and domestic workers – especially elderly workers – without social protection.

A few domestic worker organisers, including Himaya, went to gated neighbourhoods, urban poor areas, and schools (where domestic workers often wait for their young charges) with LEARN researchers to conduct one-on-one interviews with domestic workers. These in-

interviews helped domestic workers network and had a snowball effect, with domestic workers referring their friends and acquaintances to each other and to LEARN. We then did house to house visits to create personal relationships with and among domestic workers.

After these conversations and discussions with domestic workers, we decided that addressing the economic concerns of domestic workers – primarily due to low wages – was a priority, so we formed a community savings cooperative for domestic workers. The purpose was to help domestic workers avoid debt bondage and to provide them with a mutual aid programme for solidarity and support. Besides this mutual-help initiative, we also offered regular discussions and short seminars on domestic worker rights and social protection.

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*We formed a  
community savings  
cooperative to help  
domestic workers  
avoid debt bondage.*

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### **From a diffuse network to UNITED**

United Domestic Workers of the Philippines (UNITED) was created in 2012, after the ILO Technical Working Group on Domestic Work was formed and the ILO Convention 189 on domestic work was adopted and ratified in the Philippines. We grew from a small, informal group of 73 domestic workers in 2012 to an official organisation of 273 members in April 2015. In 2014, we obtained financial support from the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), and in 2016 we were able to register UNITED as a workers' organisation at the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment. Today, we have over 1,053 members from different regions of the Philippines.

The purpose of UNITED is to organise domestic workers in the Philippines under a democratic national union in order to empower them to claim their rights as workers and to help them enhance their skills and knowledge in organising. Aside from a membership fee of Php50.00 (€1), members also pay Php30.00 (€0.55) in monthly dues. There are currently 347 due-paying members in the 22 local chapters, which gives us hope for the sustainability of the organisation in the future.

UNITED also helps mediate conflicts between domestic workers and their employers by conducting forums for domestic workers to discuss issues with their employers to ease any potential misunderstandings between both parties. In most cases, UNITED negotiates individually with household employers on behalf of their members. In special cases, UNITED may rescue abused Kasambahays and refer them to lawyers, appropriate law enforcement agents, and government agencies.

The state recognises and supports UNITED in its organising work and education for domestic workers. At municipal and city levels, UNITED organises events to celebrate Kasambahay Day and assemblies to offer government programmes like scholarships and healthcare to Kasambahays. In Muntinlupa City, for example, the city mayor's office and the gender and development office sponsor UNITED's scholarship and skills training programmes. Recently, the [Pag-IBIG Fund](#) and UNITED began negotiations for a Memorandum of Agreement to register all Kasambahays, and especially UNITED members, for housing and credit programmes.

UNITED raises public awareness through basic orientation seminars, 'know-your-rights' sessions, social media outreach, and broadcasted interviews. With the help of LEARN, UNITED is participating in proposing amendments to the Kasambahay Law on certain provisions that are vague and provide no sanctions against the violations of domestic workers' rights. In the future, we are planning to develop a collective bargaining negotiation framework with homeowners associations

that would require employers to provide spaces or meeting places in their villages for UNITED's organising work and for domestic workers to celebrate holidays like International Domestic Workers day and Kasambahay Day.

UNITED is also currently engaged in different mobilising efforts to support other workers' issues and campaigns for voters' registration for the upcoming Barangay elections. Barangays are the smallest political unit in the Philippines, where community leaders are elected on a regular basis. UNITED continues to be a member of the Technical Working Group on Domestic Work with the ILO, employers, NGOs, and trade unions. We are also connected to feminist groups, migrant workers' organisations, and especially other organisations affiliated with the IDWF.

There are still many challenges faced by domestic workers in the Philippines. One of the major problems remains the low salary of domestic workers, which leads to economic hardships. Other problems include social and political issues of disempowerment, a lack of enforcement of national law, and the reluctance of employers to register domestic workers in mandatory government programmes such as in the social security system. Furthermore, there is a fundamental lack of recognition of domestic workers as workers and the invisibility of child domestic workers. UNITED will continue to work towards overcoming these challenges for the benefit of domestic workers in the country, both now and in the future.

## Broken laws and unprotected workers: the conditions of foreign workers in Taiwan

*Care workers in Taiwan are being worked to the point of exhaustion, with dangerous consequences. Could basic rights make life better for workers and recipients alike?*

Chen Betty 陳容柔 • Taiwan International Workers' Association

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In 1989, the import of foreign workers' was legalised as a special case to satisfy labour gaps for the labour-intensive Ten Major Construction Projects. In 1992, the Employment Service Act that legalised the hiring of blue-collar international workers from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand was also put into effect. Workers were categorised under 'industrial' and 'caregiver' roles – the 'industrial' category included fishing, factory, and construction jobs while the 'caregiver' category included organisational caregiver, private nursing, and household worker roles. Taiwan has approximately 40,000 national domestic and care workers in the country, which is a small number in comparison to the 250,000 foreign workers.

Due to gaps in the social welfare system, the Taiwanese government has failed to provide a care system. In legalising the import of foreign caregivers, the government left the responsibility of long-term care to families. In addition to conveniently outsourcing the problem, the government's management system of foreign workers has led to many human rights violations. For example, the system limits the length of time foreign workers are allowed to stay in Taiwan and workers are unable to choose or change employers at free will.

In addition, domestic workers – both foreign and domestic – are not protected by the Labour Standards Act. They are paid below minimum wage, work overtime, and are required to live in the homes of the recipients of care. According to [data released by the Ministry of Labour](#),

foreign nursing workers work an average of 13 hours a day and up to 34.5% of these workers don't have any days off throughout the whole year. These conditions often lead to cases of overworking, illnesses, and physical abnormalities among foreign workers. They could also trigger aggressive behaviour, such as harming care-receivers. Nevertheless, the government has yet to actively tackle the issue.

Founded in 1999, the Taiwan International Workers' Association (TIWA) was established as a result of numerous foreign workers' complaints, an event which increased awareness about domestic workers' living and work conditions among advocates. In 2003, after the unfortunate death of Liu Xia – a late national policy advisor to the president, Xia was killed by her care-giver who, suffering from delusions due to over work, thought she was saving her charge from an earthquake – TIWA partnered with grassroots organisations serving foreign workers to launch the Promotion Alliance for the Household Services Act and drafted the Household Services Act within the same year.

TIWA proposed the legislation of the Household Service Act in 2004, calling for laws to provide protection to household caregivers and workers' right to use respite service. Respite service allows caregivers to take reasonable leaves of absence, improving the quality of care to care-receivers while providing job opportunities to local care-givers. However, despite these legislative developments, Taiwan's government has been delaying its efforts to contain the situation and thus leaves slavery-like labour conditions unresolved.

### **Continuing the struggle**

Over the past few years, TIWA has also focused on issues like long-term care by cooperating with Members of Labor Struggle and other Taiwan-based labour unions. We have supporters that make donations on a monthly basis. Meanwhile, we also work for governmental projects and apply for funding. Some of the employers with disabilities keep in touch with us and recognise the need to organise foreign work-

ers associations. They are convinced that the labouring conditions of foreign workers should be protected and that the government should also provide care.

In 2007, the Promoting Alliance for Household Service Act changed its name to the Migrants Empowerment Network in Taiwan, or MENT for short. The organisation officially expanded its work to promote the welfare of all foreign workers. MENT holds the Foreign Worker March once every two years, with a different theme for each march. In 2003, the theme was “Anti- slave” and in 2005, it called for “Valuing foreign workers’ contribution”. MENT also assisted in the launch of the Filipino organisation KASAPI and the Indonesian IPIT, two organisations that serve as foreign workers’ representation platforms. In the marches of 2007, 2009, and 2011, the themes were “I Want My Day Off”, “I Want My Day Off-Still Not Allowed” and “Where is My Day Off”. They urged the government to improve nursing workers’ work environment and enact the Household Services Act.

Over the past few years, due to the shift in population structure, the aging society has been urging Taiwan’s government to work on the Long-term Care Services Act, to fill gaps in terms of human resources in long-term care. However, this act left out the 200,000 foreign workers that have been providing service to the area. Taiwan’s government continues to exclude foreign workers from the workforce by keeping individual caretaker recruitment services. In 2013, under the theme “say NO to sweatshop long-term care, say YES to minimum wage”, the march mocked the mistaken development of Taiwan’s long-term care system. In 2015, MENT expanded its focus to the problem confronting minorities, arguing that nursing workers and care-receivers should both enjoy non-exploitative caring conditions.

Over the past few years, foreign nursing workers’ poor working conditions and the lack of legal protections triggered hundreds of marching



Foreign workers march in the 'say NO to sweatshop long-term care, say YES to minimum wage' campaign in 2014. Photographer: Chang Jung-lung (張榮隆)

activities, protests, and press conferences as well as higher exposure in the news. While these actions garnered sympathy, they did not lead to concrete changes of the situation. Many showed their sympathy by commenting that foreign workers in Taiwan simply want to make a living and are therefore entitled to days off. Yet, it is not uncommon to hear comments like “they are making way higher in Taiwan compared to their home country”, “why are you helping foreign workers?” or “foreign workers are dangerous” and so on. Based on accumulated experience in dealing with foreign workers’ issues, we are aware that it’s difficult to pressure the government to act while at the same time changing the mentality of Taiwanese people towards foreign workers, as well as pushing for the improvement of an incomplete social-welfare system. However, working towards promoting and accelerating foreign workers’ basic human rights is a quest that cannot be given up.

## When local and migrant domestic workers fight together

*Care workers put their hearts into the job. Is asking for recognition and rights in return too much?*

Phobsuk Gasing (Dang) and Bobo Lai-wan Po • Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Union (FADWU), and Fish Ip • IDWF

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When *Po Po* passed away last year, I was sad. I had been taking care of her for six years. We lived together, ate together, and went to sleep together. Whenever she felt pain, I immediately felt it as well. *Po Po* often screamed and moaned all night, making it difficult for me to fall asleep. I was unable to compensate for my lost sleep during the day. She couldn't walk and I needed to lift her up to help her use the toilet.

I took care of *Po Po* as if she was family. While working for my second employer in Hong Kong, I realised that in order to properly care for someone, I needed to imagine that I was caring for my own parents and treat them from the heart. At the time, I was taking care of an elderly man and felt embarrassed when he needed me to bathe him. As soon as I started treating him as though he was my own father, the embarrassment went away. Care work required us to work with love.

I am from Thailand and I have been working as a migrant domestic worker for 26 years. I was a factory worker in Thailand, but did not make enough money to support my family of three daughters. I came to Hong Kong to work as a domestic worker with the hopes for a better income. However, the work was not what I imagined it to be. Whereas I previously worked for eight hours a day in the factory, domestic work involved much longer, unregulated working hours.

In my first job in Hong Kong, I ate leftovers from my employer's family,

which was not enough food. I slept in the same bed as a baby girl. I would not sleep until 3 a.m. and then wake at 5 a.m. to prepare breakfast for the family. Sundays were technically my day off, but I was required to stay at the house until 11 a.m. for the family's breakfast and had to be back by 6 p.m. Because I didn't speak Cantonese or English, I could only smile back when my employers scolded me or disrespected me. In my second job, I took care of an elderly man, as well as all the domestic chores for two apartments in a three-story building. I walked up and down the stairs over a dozen times a day. I slept in a small structure on the roof of the building, next to where the employers raised chickens in cages. I often fell ill because of the poultry dust and faeces.

In Hong Kong, there are 350,000 migrant domestic workers, the majority of whom are live-in workers. There are also around 50,000 local domestic workers who mainly do part-time work in multiple households. Local domestic workers do not work long hours for individual employers, but

work at an intense pace because their wages are calculated at an hourly rate. "We chase after the clock to work. A work which should take seven days to finish, we finish it in three hours. We forget ourselves while we work. We chase after the high demand of employers. Not until you finish the work, back home to rest, you feel all the pains and tiredness", said my friend Bobo PO Lai-Wan, a local domestic worker. "They (employers) feel they are paying you and want to squeeze you as much as they can".

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*I could only smile back  
when my employers  
scolded me or  
disrespected me.*

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Employers ignore workers' health and safety, and as a result, domestic workers suffer from serious occupational illnesses due to the intensive and repetitive nature of their labour. For example, Bobo lost the ability to work as a domestic worker because her hands became too weak and she can no longer kneel or squat. Carpal tunnel syndrome, back pain, trigger finger, and tennis elbow are only some of the major health problems faced by local domestic workers. "We expressed this problem to Mathew Cheung, commissioner for labour, in 2005. He said we got the muscle strains and back pain because we are old or we just got the illness from our own family domestic work", said Bobo, recalling from her union meeting experience with the Labour Department of Hong Kong. To make matters worse, domestic workers do not enjoy any retirement protections as they are excluded from the Mandatory Pension Fund Ordinance.

This is the reality of domestic workers: being on standby around-the-clock, excessively long hours of work, food deprivation, difficult accommodation, and verbal abuse from employers, just to name a few. Our wages are low and for those of us who are migrants, our first few months' salary goes towards paying off agency fees.

It wasn't until less than ten years ago that I started to take part in union activities, before becoming a union leader myself. After the Asian Migrants Centre (AMC) advised Dang and her colleagues to organise a

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*Once our work contract is ended or terminated, we are only entitled to two weeks before our visas expire.*

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union for Thai migrants, I attended a few training sessions and helped form the Thai Migrant Workers Union in Hong Kong in 2009. The same year, with the assistance of AMC and the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), and along with members from the Filipino, Nepali, and Indonesian migrant workers unions and Hong Kong Domestic Workers General Union, which organises local domestic workers, we came up with a list of demands for the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers, which helped lay the groundwork for the adoption of Convention 189 on Domestic Workers in 2011.

At the same time we decided to form a federation of domestic workers. The Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions (FADWU) was thus established in 2010, with the idea of giving local and migrant domestic workers the space to support each other and have one united voice as domestic workers. FADWU is a self-funded union that is membership-based. Our members mostly consist of both local and migrant domestic workers, who pay a monthly or yearly membership fee to help sustain the union. We also fundraise and apply for small grants and government funding.

The Hong Kong government claims that, just like any other worker, we are protected under the Employment Ordinance. However, certain immigration rules, such as the two-week rule, prevent us from enjoying basic labour rights. According to this rule, once our work contract is ended or terminated, we are only entitled to two weeks before our visas expire. This makes it very difficult for domestic workers to file a case of abuse or to find alternative employment with better working conditions. As a result, many of us are silent about the labour abuses and exploitation we face.

Furthermore, we recently completed a [research project](#) through which we learned that employment agencies have been charging domestic workers more than 30 times what is permitted by the law. Excessive agency fees are an urgent issue for migrant domestic workers in Hong

Kong, as they keep workers in debt bondage. The governments in both Hong Kong and the countries of origin must establish measures to stop and punish agencies for these abuses. Other important issues to address are the regulation of working hours, the freedom of workers to choose where they stay, and the regulation of food and accommodation through labour inspections.

The 4-18 rule in the Employment Ordinance allows a full package of rights only for workers who work a minimum of 18 hours per week and who work for four weeks consecutively. This rule should be removed, as local domestic workers typically work with multiple employers, meaning that they do not necessarily fulfil the 4-18 requirement in each given employment situation. These workers are therefore barred from enjoying full labour rights, including paid holidays and severance payments. A Central Compensation Fund for Occupational Illness should be set up to pool insurance money from different employers into a centralised fund and make it possible for local domestic workers to claim compensation for occupation illnesses. As a first step, the various occupational illnesses that domestic workers suffer from must be recognised.

FADWU and its affiliates have made significant progress in the betterment of our working conditions. These initiatives have also allowed us to come together as workers and learn from and support each other. Together, we feel empowered to assert our demands to have our rights respected. Together with the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), we successfully contributed to the adoption of the ILO Convention 189 concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers. We now have an international standard recognising us as workers who deserve the same rights as any other worker. Every May Day, we rally with other workers. In the past two decades, we have achieved labour insurance for local domestic workers as well as standard wages, contracts, and practices. For migrant domestic workers, we recently got the government to increase the punishment for excessive agency fees.

Most importantly, we have committed leaders to handle cases, share experiences, organise activities and actions, and address our demands to the government and politicians. Through all these actions, we have made our union and ourselves visible.

Ever since *Po Po* has passed away, her son has continued to employ me. He knows that I am a union leader and he recognises the importance of my labour and my activism. We need to gain more support from employers like him. In Hong Kong, we launched the My Fair Home campaign to encourage fair treatment of domestic workers by their employers. We also published [an employer handbook](#) to show employers how to treat their workers fairly and decently. Since then, we get more telephone enquiries from employers asking us how they can help their domestic workers reclaim excessive agency fees.

We are still far from achieving our struggle. The Hong Kong government needs our labour, yet continues to ignore our rights and the value of our labour. We must combine efforts with other workers in the fight for labour rights for all. We are workers, not slaves.

## Let's write a contract and call me house manager: experiences of a workers' cooperative

*Domestic labourer are not recognised as workers under South Korean law, but worker-led initiatives are transforming the face of how this work is perceived and managed.*

Ok-Seop Shim • National House Manager's Cooperative (South Korea) and IDWF

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Ok-seop Shim is now the Chairperson of the Incheon (South Korea) Branch of the National House Managers Cooperative. She started her career as a domestic worker in 2009 and was elected to Chairperson of Incheon Branch in 2011. She has been re-elected four times since.

After doing a number of self-employed jobs and as I got older, I decided to change careers. I wanted a job with flexible working hours that would allow me to have more free time to see the world. That's when I encountered a recruitment and training announcement for house managers. Beginning to work in a sector that was completely foreign to me felt very challenging, but I was confident that I would do great, given my life-long experience in managing my own home.

I was 54 years old when I started working as a house manager, after completing a three-day-long course and two, four-hour-long field training sessions in September 2009. During this training course, I learned about the work of National House Managers Cooperative (NHMC), and felt encouraged by their message of working with pride and dignity.

The NHMC was established in 2004, as an economic network both for and by domestic workers. Built on the voluntary engagement of members with the principles of cooperation and unity and operating through a membership fee, the NHMC promotes the true spirit of a workers' cooperative by creating a participatory and self-governing

body of house managers. The NHMC has around 400 members nationwide and 10 branches.

### **Out with the maid, in with the house manager**

My children had never been ashamed of my work; they were always proud of their working mom. However, when I started to work as a domestic worker, they strongly urged me to stop. I think it was because they had a long-standing prejudice against domestic workers. The NHMC has promoted the use of the term “house manager”, but in reality, we are still generally referred to as maids, domestic servants, or nannies. There is a long road ahead of us to improve social awareness about domestic workers and to bring people to acknowledge our work as ‘decent’ in Korean society.

Against this backdrop, the NHMC carried out the campaign “Call Us House Managers” as an effort to create a better social understanding of domestic workers. While publicly pushing back against labels that degrade domestic workers, this campaign advocates for the social recognition of domestic work as decent work by emphasising domestic workers’ professional expertise.

After I was elected as the head of the NHMC’s Incheon Branch in 2011, I stopped working as a house manager. I am currently in charge of organising the branch, which entails placing and managing jobs for house manager members, and to ensure and maintain their employment stability. In addition, we work to defend the fundamental rights of domestic workers in the workplace. If a client demands that a house manager member does excessive work, or treats her unfairly – for example by accusing her of stealing something without any legitimate grounds – the branch office addresses the issue on behalf of the member. If necessary, especially when a client persistently ignores or disregards house managers, the branch may decide to stop providing services to that client.

The most frequent complaints I receive are excessive demands by clients. Members of the NHMC are skilled workers trying to provide the most satisfactory service by working faithfully for a pre-determined set of working hours by contract. However, many clients nevertheless complain and demand even more work within fewer hours. We are not superwomen. Nevertheless, clients often blame house managers for failing to complete tasks without recognising that what they were asking for was unreasonable. In such cases, emotional labour is required to respond to the client, which is difficult and challenging for house managers.

Due to the lack of social recognition and support for domestic work services, many newly-trained house managers leave the field for other jobs soon after they begin to work. In addition, many of us often get injured while scrambling to finish large amounts of work in limited periods of time.

### **Self-protection and standardised work**

In 2013, the NHMC conducted a study in partnership with professional researchers on the health conditions of domestic workers in order to address these difficulties and improve working conditions accordingly. The research results showed that musculoskeletal system diseases and work-related stress were very common for domestic workers. The prevalence of depressive disorders among domestic workers was also higher than that of Korean women in general.

Recognising the urgent need to improve social awareness and relevant laws and regulations for domestic work services, the NHMC developed a manual on domestic work services in 2014. This manual was then used as a basis for creating a standardised work contract for NHMC members. These terms include provisions setting out the duties of the client, the fundamental rights of domestic workers, as well as basic information about the detailed service offerings, hours, spaces, and payment.

Typically, contracts have not been common in the domestic work services sector. The NHMC thus carried out a campaign to sign work contracts. We offered a workshop on the significance of signing work contracts once a month for almost a year. However, it was difficult to persuade clients to sign contracts, as many refused on the grounds that they had never had problems in the absence of contracts in the past.

A written contract is essential for reminding the client of his/her obligation to not demand too much work from domestic workers, while supporting the client's right to compensation from an insurance agency if necessary. As more clients become aware of the importance of written contracts, the number of signed contracts has increased. At present, a third of the clients who use our services sign contracts, which are signed by the client, the house manager, and the NHMC branch office.

According to the Labour Standards Act, created more than 60 years ago immediately after Korean War in 1953, domestic workers are not recognised as workers protected by law because they work in the private homes of individuals. A result is that, according to estimates from domestic worker organisations, there are around 300,000 domestic workers in Korea that experience extremely poor working conditions and job insecurity, with nowhere to turn for unpaid wages; unfair treatment; and work-related injuries. Most of these injustices mainly result from the fact that domestic workers are not recognised as workers by law and their labour rights are therefore not secured.

### **The risks of unrecognised work**

Many house managers in Korea are middle-aged women. They're good at their job and eager to work, but their years of experience have often left them with musculoskeletal system disorders, such as pains in their knuckles, arms, legs, or back. Work-related injuries are also not rare. However, domestic workers are not eligible for occupational health and safety insurance, as they are not recognised as workers by law.

About 16 months ago, a house manager member broke her wrist while cleaning the upper part of a wall in a client's bathroom. She climbed up on the top of a toilet to reach the wall and fell down from the toilet. With no help available, she went to a hospital alone and got a surgery. She had to pay for her medical expenses from her own pocket and could not work for a long time during her recovery. Until today, she cannot work as she still suffers from the aftereffects of the accident. Her client was at home at the time of injury, but did nothing to assist her and took no responsibility for her injury. As she is not a worker by law, she cannot claim any form of compensation from occupational health and safety insurance.

The non-recognition of domestic labour also results in frequent unfair dismissals. In many cases, clients announce the termination of a contract without any prior notice. A sudden termination of a contract from a regular client suddenly leaves the house manager without job. But neither the clients nor the legal system account for the difficulties and economic insecurity of domestic workers who helplessly have to wait for new employment.

Another difficulty faced by many domestic workers is that there is no channel through which to obtain remedies if a client refuses to pay for work. Some keep postponing payments, by saying that they don't have the money. Others refuse to pay, by saying that the provided service is not satisfactory. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Employment and Labour does not accept complaints for overdue wages from domestic workers, because they are not workers by law.

To make matters worse, big conglomerates armed with large amounts of capital and advanced technology, like smart phone apps, have competitively entered the domestic work service market to take advantage of these gaps in labour law. They develop platforms where domestic workers and clients can interact directly, without the need for intermediary agencies (apart from the platform itself). Their interest is to earn

profit, so they prioritise hyper-productivity at the expense of fair working conditions for domestic workers. For example, the hourly wage is lower and service hours are shorter, while domestic workers still bear similarly heavy workloads. This further threatens the improvement of working conditions and decent job creation for domestic workers.

The relevant labour laws, including the Labour Standards Act, should be revised to guarantee rights as well as employment and occupational health and safety insurance protection for domestic workers.

The NHMC has been active in raising social awareness on domestic workers by carrying out different campaigns including the “Call Us House Managers” and “My Fair Home” campaigns. It has also promoted improving laws and institutions to protect the labour rights of domestic workers. As a result, in 2014, the Korean government promised to develop a policy to protect domestic workers, which has yet to materialise. However, we did not give up. We developed a bill to protect domestic workers’ human rights and labour rights for ourselves and sent the bill to a number of supportive lawmakers. Finally, in early February 2016, the draft bill “the Act on the Employment Improvement of Domestic Workers” was presented to the National Assembly (The Republic of Korea’s legislative body), but failed to pass by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. The NHMC is preparing the legislation of the act again in the 20<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

The Korean government should ratify the ILO’s Domestic Workers Convention (C189) immediately. It should further develop effective policies guaranteeing the fundamental rights and improving the situations of domestic workers, who remain vulnerable in this insecure labour market.

## The story of a run away domestic worker in Singapore

*Endless chores, verbal abuse, and physical confinement.*

Lana • Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Singapore)

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My name is Lana (a pseudonym) and I am a Filipino domestic worker in Singapore, where I worked for four months without a single day off. My workday began at 5 a.m. and often didn't end until close to midnight. In addition to cleaning, cooking and washing, I had to take care of two young children.

Here is what my daily work routine looked like:

### Morning

- 
- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| 5:30       | • Wake up and bathe   |
| 5:40-6:30  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Put kitchenware and utensils back into respective cabinets</li><li>• Prepare children's school bags with water bottles, milk bottles, milk powder, and handkerchiefs</li><li>• Place school bags on dining table and sir's bag on dining chair</li><li>• Prepare sir's water bottle, take out one packet of tissues</li><li>• Eat breakfast</li><li>• Discard newspaper from the previous day and collect new newspaper from door</li><li>• Dust floor if time allows</li><li>• Change children's diapers and help them wear uniforms</li></ul> |
| 6:50-7:25  | • Send children to school   |
| 7:30-12:00 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clean up bedrooms and do three-step cleaning (sweeping, dusting, mopping) for all rooms and living room</li><li>• Set up bathroom and master bedroom</li><li>• Wipe all children's toys</li><li>• Carry out any additional tasks</li><li>• Marinate meat for dinner (if meat is being served)</li></ul>   |
-

## Afternoon

12:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Eat lunch</li></ul>
12:30-3:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hand wash children, sir, and madam's clothes</li><li>• Do laundry and continue cleaning up</li></ul>
3:00-5:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prepare dinner</li><li>• Transfer all clothes from service yard to study room</li><li>• Cook dinner</li></ul>
5:00-5:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mop kitchen floor</li><li>• Prepare bathroom for children's bath</li><li>• Set table for dinner</li><li>• Set up high chairs, turn on TV, and close windows</li><li>• Make sure all electrical appliances in kitchen are off and that fridge door is closed</li><li>• Sweep and dust floor again</li><li>• Check children's room for insects</li></ul>
5:45 p.m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Meet sir at bus stop (sir will call you for exact timing)</li><li>• Ensure door and gate are locked</li></ul>

## Evening

6:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bring children to room, let them drink water</li></ul>
6:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clean up bathrooms after children's baths</li><li>• Unpack school bags, remove school paper announcements and wash toys in bag</li></ul>
6:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prepare dinner for children and feed them</li></ul>
7:00-7:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prepare dinner for sir and madam</li><li>• Mind the children while sir and madam are eating</li><li>• Prepare fruits for sir, madam, and children</li></ul>
8:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prepare milk for the first child</li></ul>
8:40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Eat dinner</li></ul>
9:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prepare milk for the second child</li></ul>

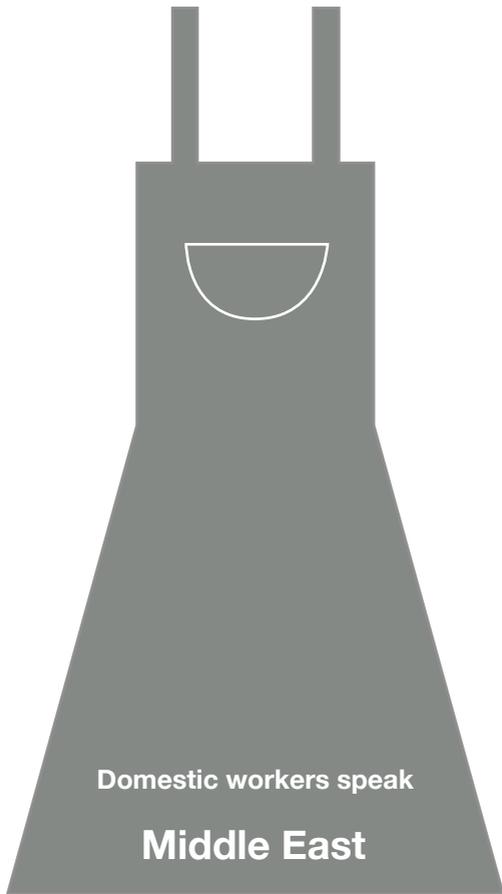
## Night

- 9:00-11:30
    - Place standby milk and hot flask in respective rooms
    - Clean utensils, milk bottles, and sink
    - Clean and wipe rice cooker parts
    - Clean kitchen stove and table surfaces
    - Sterilise milk bottles
    - Soak soybeans and place meal for tomorrow in the fridge to thaw
    - Dispose of rubbish and lock door and gate
    - Mop kitchen floor and living room
    - Wipe sofa and play mat
    - Wipe toys (on Saturday nights and when kids are unwell)
    - Shut window and door blinds
- 
- 11:30
    - Bathe and rest

One day, I had had enough of these never-ending chores and verbal abuse from my employers and I decided to run away. I went to the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) for help. HOME provides a range of services, to migrant workers – including migrant domestic workers – such as language courses, cooking classes, shelters for migrant workers in distress, and legal services.

In Singapore, migrant workers have almost no legal rights and are not allowed to form workers organisations or alliances. HOME is run by a group of local members who try to provide services to these workers, but they are not supposed to organise them. The group is independent from the state and the staff often feels they are walking fine lines.

When I returned to the employer's home to collect my belongings, he locked me up and refused to let me leave the house. He closed the wooden door behind me and I was too frightened to do anything. It was only after a HOME volunteer called the police and that I was released and brought back to the shelter.



Domestic workers speak

**Middle East**

## Claiming rights under the kafala system

*How can domestic workers organise when the legal system places them at the complete mercy of their employers?*

Marie-José L. Tayah • IDWF

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The Middle East plays host to the largest number of migrant domestic workers in the world. National statistical sources [collated by the ILO](#) estimate that 1.6 million migrant domestic workers are working in the Levant and countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). [Another estimate](#), from the International Trade Union Confederation, puts the number even higher at 2.5 million. These women traditionally hail from Asian countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India, however Ethiopia, Madagascar, Kenya and Uganda have also emerged as new countries of origin.

The admission, residence and exit of migrant domestic workers are governed by the *kafala* system, a private sponsorship scheme for temporary migrant workers. [Kafala](#) ties the work and residence permits of a domestic worker to a specific employer; makes residence permit renewal the responsibility of the employer; and makes employment termination, transfer from one employer to another, and exit from the country contingent on the sponsor's approval. It is a system that leaves workers at the complete mercy of their employers.

Further, domestic workers continue to be excluded from the scope of national labour laws with the argument that domestic work cannot be regulated like other sectors without violating the sanctity of the employer's household. Employment contracts thus regulate the employer-agency-worker relationship; however these documents carry little weight without adequate inspection mechanisms. Even where standard unified contracts exist – such as in Kuwait, Jordan, and Lebanon – agreements negotiated bilaterally with countries of origin

supersede them, promoting a race to the bottom in the working and living conditions of domestic workers from different nationalities and encouraging stereotypes about the quality of the work performed by women from certain countries.

As a result, domestic workers are overworked, underpaid and cheated by brokers and recruiters. They face considerable barriers to accessing justice and their embassies and consulates do not have the resources or capacity to respond to the volume of complaints. Furthermore, when domestic workers – faced with unfair laws, barriers to justice, and employer impunity – decide to leave the homes of their employers they are declared “absconded” and become susceptible to arrest, long periods of detention, excessive fines, and finally deportation and blacklisting.

Over the past 10 years, international organisations and NGOs in the Middle East have launched advocacy campaigns, submitted legislative proposals, and offered a variety of legal and socio-medical services to migrant domestic workers. These initiatives were rarely guided by the priorities of domestic workers, in part because very few spaces exist for domestic workers in the Middle East to articulate their concerns. The result has been a plethora of well-intentioned but incongruent programmes and services for domestic workers. This is progressively changing. Inspired by images on Facebook and Instagram of domestic workers taking the streets across the world, domestic workers across the Middle East are consolidating in nationality-based or sectorial organisations to make their demands heard.

The following is a description of the barriers to domestic workers’ unionising in the Middle East; a review of emerging models of collective voice outside the union model; and a discussion of the role of the International Domestic Workers’ Federation (IDWF) in reconciling the organic social dynamics of organising among migrant domestic workers with classical trade unions.

## **Barriers to the unionisation of domestic workers in the Middle East**

Freedom of association is generally restricted in the Middle East. Trade unions and strikes are banned in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Only workers' committees are allowed, although not for women migrant domestic workers. Domestic workers can join existing unions in Lebanon and committees within union federations in Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain ([ILO, 2015](#)). Across the Levant and the GCC, domestic workers are not allowed to run for union-elected positions on account of their migration status.

Domestic workers in Lebanon succeeded in establishing their first sectorial union in the Middle East in 2015 under the umbrella of the National Federation of Employees' and Workers' Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL). The union remains unrecognised by the Lebanese Ministry of Labour, but is reported to count over 500 members. It was formed through an ILO-led process involving women migrant domestic workers; four NGOs (i.e., Nasawiyah's Anti-Racism Movement, Insan Association, Frontiers Ruwad (FR), Kafa (Enough Violence & Exploitation); the National Federation of Employees' and Workers' Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL); and the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). The 20-month process, completed in January 2014, had three main objectives: (1) raise domestic workers' consciousness to encourage active participation in advocacy campaigns; (2) promote collaboration between domestic workers, unions, and NGOs over priorities and interventions; and (3) create synergies with the global domestic workers' movement ([Tayah, 2014](#)).

The 80 participating domestic workers provided the critical mass required to establish the domestic workers' union in January 2015. Over the past two years the union has concluded agreements with trade unions in the countries of origin, such as the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) and the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU), to extend protection to domestic work-

ers across the migration cycle. These agreements, unfortunately, lack focus and are not supported by implementation protocols.

The union has also expended substantial energy campaigning for recognition by the Lebanese authorities, but has yet to define a policy position and strategy on domestic work outside of the generic anti-*kaf-ala* slogans. Union engagement at the policy level is hampered by the sector's fragmentation across recruiters and brokers at origin and destination; multiple government agencies; origin country embassies; a multitude of policy spaces (national, binational, regional, interregional, global); and transnational policy issues that are at the crossroad of care, migration and employment regimes. All of these require a high level of technical knowledge that FENASOL, in spite of its heightened awareness to the challenges in the sector, still lacks.

Elsewhere, in May 2017, the Arab Trade Union Confederation (the Arab office of the International Trade Union Confederation) supported establishing a national committee of migrant workers as part of the General Federation for Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU). The committee is headed by the president of the federation and composed of the presidents of the construction, garment, public services and municipality workers' unions. It aims to represent migrant workers, including domestic workers. The General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions (GFBTU) had also set up a committee for migrant workers that will include a focus on domestic workers. These are welcome developments, but the trend toward migrant committees rather than domestic workers' committees risks stymieing sector-based organising and undermining the principle of equality between migrants and nationals in their working conditions.

Practical, organisational, and political barriers frequently prevent domestic workers from joining domestic workers' unions and migrant workers' committees where they are permitted to do so in the Middle East.

Practical barriers include workplace isolation and restrictions on mobility, such as the denial of a leave day outside the home; bans on driving; long and unpredictable working hours; and the withholding of personal documents. Further, the fear of employer reprisal through contract termination (which may lead to deportation) is also commonly cited as a deterrent against organising efforts. Outreach efforts are further limited due to the absence of gathering areas such as parks and churches/temples in the GCC, which often greatly facilitate ad hoc forms of solidarity among domestic workers.

Gender dynamics, conflicts of interest and the inability of migrant workers to comply with strict union reporting requirements constitute organisation- and union-level deterrents for domestic workers. Men dominate the leadership structure of trade unions in the Middle East, and as a consequence they have largely been unable to welcome (women) domestic workers into their ranks. Trade unionists in the region are also employers of domestic workers, especially in the countries of the GCC. Finally, leaders of the domestic workers' communities wear multiple hats: they are leaders in their migrant communities and leaders in the sectorial union. Their activism on the migration front is incongruent with strict trade union reporting requirements. The domestic workers' leaders who worked with FENASOL and became the founders of the Domestic Workers Union of Lebanon have since moved on to form the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon. They recognise the importance of the union but prefer the flexibility of organising around both sectoral and national lines.

Additional organisational barriers include low salaries, time limitations and language barriers. Low salaries mean that domestic workers are unable to pay membership dues and are unlikely to pay for transportation to attend union activities. Where the leave day is respected and tolerated by employers, domestic workers are also much more likely to rest rather than to spend their free time with the union. Language barriers in Middle Eastern countries – where domestic

workers hail from over 12 countries of origin – are also an obstacle to sector-wide strategies.

More broadly, national level politics serve as another layer of obstacle for domestic worker organising. Population politics – migrants make up half the population of the GCC and over 90% of the population of certain countries like the UAE and Qatar – and the pressing issue of integrating refugee populations into labour markets of countries like Lebanon or Jordan are always thin lines to tread. On top of that, unions are often associated with certain political parties, and in some countries there is a growing rift between independent trade unions and government-supported trade unions. These dynamics greatly complicate organising in the region as these tensions are often instrumentalised to exclude domestic workers from unions and policy agendas.

### **The association model for collective voice in the Middle East**

Domestic workers can set up or join trade unions but they can also adopt the association model of organising (e.g. community-based organisations), and/or experiment with arrangements straddling the association and union models ([Bonner, 2010, pp. 10-15](#)). There are many examples of migrant workers' associations organising around gender, race, nationality and/or occupation in the Middle East. These associations have adopted union characteristics (e.g., paying membership fees) but do not have union powers.

In 2011, the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon established the Migrant Community Centre as a meeting space for migrant workers, and offered trainings in online activism, self-defence, computer skills, and grassroots advocacy. The MCC is now host to the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon, which is starting to receive attention. On Labour Day 2017 it led the Migrant Workers' Parade, reading out a statement under the slogan "Kafala kills" that denounced the deportation of domestic workers who give birth in Lebanon and the deaths of migrant domestic workers that are not properly investigated. Photos



May day parade Lebanon 2017. Photo by Marie-José Tayah. All rights reserved.

of the parade and the workers' demands featured on the evening news and in major national newspaper outlets. In follow-up to the parade, the alliance and concerned NGOs are planning a meeting with the Ministry of Labour to discuss potential strategic partnerships on and with domestic workers.

Other associational models in the region include Migrante International – the global alliance of Filipino Overseas Workers (OFWs) – which counts as a national chapter in Saudi Arabia. Migrante International receives complaints of OFWs in distress and their families and seeks redress for their grievances. It also regularly conducts research and fact finding missions and embarks on corresponding advocacy campaigns. The Sri Lankan Women's Society in Lebanon organises around gender and nationality, although it is an association of mostly domestic workers, and The Domestic Workers Solidarity Network in Jordan represents Ethiopian, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Sri Lankan and

Filipina domestic workers. The network organises worker literacy programmes and legal clinics.

The Middle East has also experimented with hybrid forms of organising. With Anti-Slavery International (ASI), the Lebanese NGO 'Kafa (enough) Violence & Exploitation' supported the establishment of a self-help group of Nepalese women working as domestic workers in Lebanon (NARI) in 2012. NARI members are affiliated to GEFONT, becoming trade unionists at origin and civil society activists at destination. NARI advocated for the establishment of a Nepali embassy in Lebanon.

### **IDWF: A middle out approach to organising?**

The IDWF is a membership-based "global union of domestic workers" with 62 affiliates in 50 countries, and almost 501,000 individual domestic workers as members. Most of its members are trade unions or national trade union federations while the rest are membership-based associations and worker cooperatives. IDWF's objective is to build a strong, democratic and united organisation to protect and advance domestic workers' rights everywhere. IDWF has been present in the Middle East since 2017.

Given the web of challenges facing the labour movement generally and domestic workers specifically in the Middle East, the IDWF is investing in 'middle-out' approaches to organising where the emphasis is on building strong, membership-based organisations of domestic workers until unions are legally, organisationally and culturally able to host them and integrate them within their ranks/leadership. At the same time, IDWF works with unions in the region to lay the groundwork for formal unionisation.

Specifically, IDWF supports networks of domestic workers in defining: vision and mission statements; leadership structures, bylaws, and election systems; and membership fees, payment methods, and benefits.

It also helps with developing recruitment drives. The establishment of membership-based organisations outside the union structure prepares a critical mass of domestic workers to hit the ground running when trade unions are ready to host them.

In working with trade unions to lay the groundwork for formal unionisation, IDWF, in collaboration with the ILO, is using the My Fair Home (MFH) campaign to raise the awareness of trade unionists to the working and living conditions of domestic workers, as well as to encourage them to invite the workers in their own employ to discussions on trade union premises. When trade unions join the campaign their members pledge to: pay fair wages to domestic workers (at least the minimum wage); ensure fair working hours and rest periods; negotiate the terms of employment with the domestic workers themselves and to set those terms in writing; ensure access to decent healthcare and a home free from abuse, harassment and violence; provide a safe, secure and private bedroom; and safeguard domestic workers' right to spend their free time wherever and however they choose.

In March 2017, FENASOL joined the MFH Campaign. FENASOL affiliates from sectors as diverse as hotels and restaurants, garment and construction took the pledge to respect domestic workers' rights in their own homes. The General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions joined the MFH one month later.

IDWF's affiliates in Asia and Africa have broadly national memberships. IDWF is encouraging these affiliates in the countries of origin to extend membership to co-nationals and co-workers abroad, especially to places where such individuals are not allowed to join trade unions. IDWF union affiliates in Africa, for example, are beginning to lobby their governments to negotiate MoUs with the countries of destination that promote protections for domestic workers abroad in addition to facilitating labour market access.

## **Selected IDWF affiliates in countries of origin for domestic workers in Asia**

Bangladesh	National Domestic Women Workers Union (NDWWU)
Indonesia	Jaringan Nasional Advokasi Pekerja Rumah Tangga (JALAPRT) - National Network for Domestic Workers Advocacy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SPRT SAPULIDI, Sapulidi Domestic Workers Union, Jakarta</li> <li>• Serikat PRT Tunas Mulia, (Tunas Mulia Domestic Workers Union)</li> <li>• KOY, (Yogyakarta Domestic Workers Organisation)</li> <li>• Serikat PRT Merdeka Semarang, (Merdeka Domestic Workers Union)</li> <li>• SPRT Sumut/North Domestic Workers Union in North Sumatra</li> </ul>
Nepal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home Workers Trade Union of Nepal (HUN)</li> </ul>
Sri Lanka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domestic Workers Union (DWU)</li> </ul>
India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gharelu Kaamgar Sangathan (GKS)</li> <li>• National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM)</li> <li>• National Domestic Workers Federation (NDWF)</li> <li>• Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)</li> </ul>
Philippines	<p>United Domestic Workers of the Philippines (UNITED) has the following chapters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Murphy Domestic Workers Association</li> <li>• Roxas Domestic Workers Association</li> <li>• Samahan ng mga Manggagawasa Tahanan ng Payatas</li> <li>• Veterans Domestic Workers Association</li> <li>• San Dionisio, Paranaque Domestic Workers Association</li> <li>• Samahan ng mga Nagkakaisang Manggagawa sa Tahanan ng Amparo</li> <li>• Bagong Silangan Domestic Workers Association</li> <li>• Tunasan Domestic Workers Association of Munitilupa</li> <li>• Poblacion Domestic Workers Association of Muntlupa</li> <li>• Amytville Subdivision Domestic Workers Association</li> </ul>

## **Selected IDWF affiliates in Countries of Origin for Domestic workers in Africa**

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Benin	• Syndicat des Employés d'Hôtel et de Maison (SYNEHM)
Cote d'Ivoire	• Syndicat des Travailleurs/ses Domestiques et des Travailleurs/ses de l'Economie Informelle de la Côte d'Ivoire
Kenya	• Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA)
Senegal	• National Hotel Trade Catering, Cafe, Bar and Allied Workers (domestic and informal)
Tanzania	• Conservation, Hotel, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHODAWU)
Uganda	• Uganda Hotels, Food, Tourism, Supermarkets and Allied Workers Union (HTS-Union)
Zanzibar	• Conservation Hotel Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHODAWU-Z)

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## **Conclusion: a non-traditional sector in a non-traditional context needs to think outside the box, not dig its heels in**

There is a general obsession with structure when discussing the organising of domestic workers in the Middle East. This causes us to lose sight of context, of how migration, care and employment regimes and their institutions intersect, and of existing ad hoc forms of solidarity. Development actors working in the sector want quick and simple models of organising for replication across the region without considering both the intended and unintended consequences of their interventions. They are either opting for trade unions models or civil society models of organising, and establishing their respective fiefdoms in one or the other of these two realms.



My Fair Home campaign pledge cards in FENASOL. Photo by Marie-José Tayah. All rights reserved.

The two systems are not, however, mutually exclusive. They each bring an added value to workers in the sector and must work in conjunction with one another until the opportunity to build a strong sectorial union for domestic workers presents itself in each national context. Migration and domestic work are hot topics that attract the attention of many donors. Organising domestic workers in the Middle East should not be understood as an activity fitting of project lifecycles and donor time frames. Organising is a bottom-up, long-term and ever-transforming process, especially in domestic work, a highly technical subfield that straddles borders and policy areas.

To push token representation from domestic workers' communities into unions transforms the latter into a golden cage for workers, one that that is totally dependent on funding and technical assistance from donors because it lacks the knowledge and momentum of committed and knowledgeable workers. It is one thing to create a structure and

another to create a social dynamic or organising within that structure. Similarly, the rush to set-up migrant or domestic workers' associations in complete isolation from the labour movement transforms these associations into support groups that work apart from other sectors of the economy and leaves them excluded from important policy discussions that have significant implications for the sector.

Organising is an organic and naturally evolving process that is shaped by how the political, economic and demographic situation in a country develops. Organising also requires solidarity building between labour and diaspora, labour and NGOs, across sectors and borders. It took 22 years for the Jamaica household workers' association to register as a formal union; 25 years for the national domestic workers' movement in India to organise domestic workers into state-level unions; almost 10 years for domestic workers' organisations to consolidate in a regional grouping in Central and South America; and 30 years to organise globally. To do it right takes time.

*All views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the IDWF and other institutions with which she is affiliated.*

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## Sisters in solidarity: the communal care of domestic workers in the Middle East

*Jordan has recognised domestic workers in local labour laws, but many workers are still stuck in dire situations with few good options available to them.*

Sara Khatib • Solidarity Center (Jordan)

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Since the 1970s, domestic workers have been migrating to the Middle East for work, often enduring exploitation, abuse, and even human trafficking in the process.

Domestic workers may pay high recruitment fees to labour brokers, essentially paying for a position that will trap them in debt bondage. Vague employment contracts – or contract terms that change once they arrive in the country – allow for abuses such as excessive hours, the denial of requests for time off, dangerous working conditions, forced labour, and wage theft to occur. And migrant workers in Jordan and other Middle Eastern countries are subject to the kafala (sponsorship) system, which ties work and residency permits to a single employer who consequently has near-absolute power in the employer-employee relationship.

Migrant domestic workers often face extreme isolation in the workplace, i.e. their employer's household. They often experience verbal, physical, and sexual violence, as well as inappropriate housing and sleeping conditions, and are therefore denied their dignity and their safety. If they are undocumented, they are even more vulnerable to exploitation.

There are also Jordanian women and Syrian refugee women who work as domestic workers, but do not gain their positions through recruitment agencies. They are day workers, and their work is not governed

by written contracts. They are not subjected to the kafala system, since they are not linked to one employer by a work permit, but they suffer from other problems: low wages, instability at work, the absence of contracts, among others. They are not unionised, as Jordanians' right to organise and to form trade unions is very restricted.

An estimated 80,000 migrant domestic workers – mostly from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Bangladesh – currently live in Jordan. Domestic workers were historically excluded from Jordanian labour law, until [certain amendments](#) were passed in 2009. However, the rights of domestic workers continue to be violated and there have been no significant improvements regarding the regulation of employee-employer relationships. There are not enough tools and procedures to enforce the law, and domestic workers still suffer from kafala practices and various forms of discrimination. For example, they are not registered in the social security system; they are neither allowed to get married during the employment period nor have children (which means they cannot take maternity leave); they are excluded from the minimum wage for Jordanians; and their wages are decided in a bilateral agreement between Jordan and the sending countries.

Workers' unfamiliarity with Jordanian labour law makes it difficult to access the justice process. In addition, employers fail to understand and accept the nature of the contractual relationship that stipulates the rights and obligations of both employers and employees, and instead adhere to the exploitive kafala system and the slavery-like practices that come with it.

It was within this context that in 2014, the Solidarity Center took the initiative to create the Domestic Workers Solidarity Network in Jordan. This was the first initiative of its kind in the country and one of few such initiatives in the region. The network, whose motto is "Sisters in Solidarity", aims to serve and support domestic workers through awareness-raising activities, legal assistance through the Legal Clinic

Initiative, and roundtables in coordination with the Adalah Center for Human Rights Studies. The network also strives to detect cases of forced labour and other forms of labour trafficking and severe exploitation, and refer them to the proper authorities.

The network has so far reached out to almost 400 domestic workers, and around 150 are involved, active, and continually looking to expand our membership. The majority of our members live inde-

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*It is difficult, if not impossible, to reach domestic workers who are locked in the employers' homes.*

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pendently because they work on a part-time basis. Their employers do not know about their activism outside working hours. It is difficult, if not impossible, to reach domestic workers who are locked in the employers' homes, and if they were lucky enough to be allowed to leave their employers wouldn't let them participate in activities that raise awareness of their rights. Until the law

in Jordan changes to make it safer for migrant domestic workers to organise, the Domestic Workers Solidarity Network members need to be careful about being too public about their activities.

### **Knowledge is power**

Many migrant workers receive no training prior to their departure and often have limited information about the country of destination, the local customs, and the conditions and nature of their work. On other occasions, workers are described one job, which turns out to be dramatically different when they arrive on site, far from their support networks and with little knowledge of their rights. In worst-case

scenarios, unscrupulous labour brokers deceive migrant workers and traffic them into situations of forced labour.

Lacking awareness of the regulations, laws, procedures, and services available to domestic workers who find themselves in exploitative situations, many workers leave the workplace to escape violence and improper working conditions. They usually go to their embassy or to the recruitment agency that brought them to the country. However, given their weak position and subjection to the kafala system, they are usually returned to the employer to work under the same exploitative conditions.

In other cases, an abused worker may escape her employer-sponsor and go underground, working without a passport or without valid work and residency permits on an hourly or daily basis. In this case, the worker is breaking the law and risks being tracked by the police, detained, and deported. She then becomes an easy target for black-market brokers of work permits and at risk of greater exploitation.

Towards the end of last century, 'human trafficking' began to be recognised as a serious crime, and the United Nations negotiated international conventions to address it. These conventions require member states to incorporate international standards into their domestic legal frameworks. Jordan was one of the first states in the Middle East to cover domestic workers by local labour laws. Jordan also issued a special regulation on domestic workers in 2009, as well as a law to prevent human trafficking. In addition, the country established a special unit to combat human trafficking within the Criminal Investigation Department and, by the end of 2015, the government established a shelter for victims of human trafficking, among other legislative and procedural advancements.

To provide workers with the information to protect themselves and to understand their rights, the Domestic Workers Solidarity Network

holds awareness-raising sessions that focus on labour legislation to clarify the nature of contractual relationships in domestic work, under Jordanian labour law and domestic worker regulations. It runs programmes to educate workers on the terms and conditions of their contracts, and how to terminate a contractual relationship or change employer through legal channels. In addition, the network coordinates with the [International Domestic Workers Federation](#), which supports efforts to communicate with workers, coordinate and organise efforts on the ground, and conduct outreach to workers before they leave their home country.

Network members learn about and discuss how labour violations and breaches in human rights can be identified and dealt with, and how to refer problems to authorities, security centres, embassies, and legal-aid centers. The network stands with workers that have been victimised in the workplace and helps them exercise their legal rights. The network also supports workers who are in conflict with the law and helps them, to the extent that is possible, resolve legal matters.

And with the support of Jordanian and international NGOs, the network has trained domestic workers from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka to become leaders and ambassadors in their labour communities in raising awareness and providing support, guidance, and labour solidarity in accordance with available legal procedures.

## The difference self-organising makes: the creative resistance of domestic workers

*Informal networks of self-help and mutual care have given rise to a workers-led alliance in Lebanon to fight for the rights of domestic workers.*

Rose Mahi • Alliance of Migrant Workers and Domestic Workers in Lebanon

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Many conditions play into the exploitation of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Lebanon. Most of the time, MDWs are women, and some of us are illiterate. And at times, this illiteracy furthers existing exploitation, which is already embedded in sexism, classism, and racism. These factors are present in our home countries, and migration renders us even more vulnerable to them.

Our employers often believe that people migrate because they had nothing to do, were not qualified, or lacked opportunity in their home countries, and that we therefore owe them for saving us. The vicious chain of exploitation begins in the home countries of MDWs, where some agencies attract domestic workers and facilitate their migration in exchange for a commission. To put it bluntly, 'traffickers' take advantage of domestic workers and sell them to host families, who continue this practice of exploitation. For example, the families we work for might keep our money in their pockets because they belittle us, or because they believe that we do not have any urgent bills to pay since we are living in their house.

There will always be people who will benefit from the exploitation of others. This means that there will always be resistance to changing the laws surrounding the rights of MDWs, since there are people who get rich on the backs of these workers. At the end of the day, it is always the women domestic workers who pay – both materially and figuratively. While legal discrimination can end with the adoption of proper laws, personal discrimination will not simply come to an end suddenly, be-

cause the stereotypes that exist in people's minds cannot so easily be erased. Laws nevertheless have the power to influence people – regardless of their prejudices – to change their behaviour towards MDWs out of fear of punishment.

### **On hope and activism**

Nevertheless, we believe that the day will come where everything will change, where the cage will be opened and the bird will be able to fly freely once again. We organise ourselves in collectives, unions, and alliances, so we can fight for our rights and thus be prepared for that moment of desired freedom. There is a saying that goes: 'one hand cannot clap alone'. If I were on my own in claiming my rights regarding my paycheque, vacation, and insurance, I would be viewed as the exception, and no one would take my demands seriously. But if more and more MDWs combine forces and we start screaming in demand of our rights, one person might hear us, and then a second and a third, and the movement would snowball from there. And who knows? One day: bam! The authorities would decide that they are tired of hearing us and that they need to respect our rights.

I was an activist since my childhood. When I was in primary school, I was a tomboy, and I always defended others. When my friends were being harassed, they would look for me, and my fists would go looking for the boys who were responsible. I grew up that way. When I arrived in Lebanon, I couldn't wrap my head around the atrocities committed against MDWs. While I hesitate to say that the family in which I first landed was the worst, they were certainly not perfect. Looking around me, I thought that it was not possible for people to live in such conditions. Thus, I started my activism in my employer's household.

I began by talking to my employer openly, but she did not appreciate my honesty. She would scream at me and we would quarrel, but that did not stop me from expressing myself and my needs. One day, she asked me what my expectations for her were, and, having heard them,

she told me there was nothing she could do to change the situation. While I understood the limitations she faced, I asked her to at least use her power to talk to other women employers, her friends. For instance, my birthday was coming up and I asked her to convince her friends to give their domestic workers a day off to visit me at her house, so we could celebrate my birthday. Then little by little, my sisters and I began to form a community of MDW leaders.

### **Creative resistance**

Over time, we developed subtle ways of resisting. There was a MDW from Sri Lanka who lived in the building across mine, and another one from Ethiopia who lived on the floor below. We were able to see each other when we stood on our respective balconies, but we could not speak to each other due to the distance. In order to not attract unwanted attention of our employers, we intuitively started communicating in non-verbal gestures. We were able to understand each other without prior agreement on the meanings of the gestures we used.

I lived on the fifth floor of my building and we used a rope to send food to the girl who lived on the second floor and that was being starved by her employer. I would put the food in a plastic bag, tie it to the rope, and slowly glide it down the outer wall of the building. When the food would arrive to the second floor, I would make a sound with the pans in the kitchen, so she would know that the food had arrived. Then, she would take the food and send the container back to my floor using the same rope.

This is how she managed to eat without anyone noticing. At times, we also used the elevator: I would call the elevator, put the Tupperware inside, and she would receive it on the second floor. She would eat it quickly without anyone noticing – what the eyes do not see, the mind does not know. Then, I would receive my Tupperware the same way I sent it. There is always a way. Despite not being able to communicate verbally, we managed to develop these techniques of mutual care. We

were able to achieve this organic way of communicating our needs because our lived experiences were similar: I lived what she lived, and vice-versa. She didn't need to explain her situation to me with words: her gestures sufficed for letting me know if she was in trouble, if she was left starving the day before, or if she hadn't had breakfast yet.

### **Organised resistance**

We have developed techniques to mend the conditions that increase the exploitation of MDWs in Lebanon. We offer English, French, and Arabic language classes, as well as courses for people to learn computer skills and how to play the guitar for both men and women, old and young. Our work contracts are written in Arabic rather than French or English, but if you know the rights have, and you have them written somewhere, you can back up your claims when you demand your rights regardless of whether you can read Arabic or not.

Otherwise, you are obliged to believe and accept whatever your employer tells you, since they can read better than you do. We also started giving courses on MDW rights, in order to spread this knowledge through the networks of people that we were able to reach. For the types of discrimination that are not visible or codified, it is very difficult to come up with techniques to fight against them. We try to provide support for these cases, but so far our support remains moral, operating through networks of mutual care. Our outreach methods include online work and word of mouth. We establish trust with communities and have workers get their friends and circles to learn about us and to join, or to refer cases that require help and intervention in the future. It is like a water bubble that is growing and expanding with time, and that relies on trust and confidence in the leaders who are at the heart of the alliance.

Since May 2016, we have been organised in an alliance: the Alliance of Migrant Workers and Domestic Workers in Lebanon. While we are based in Beirut, our members are working in different regions in Leba-

non. We are a group of women who share one voice, because we all undergo similar problems and have had enough with the way things are. We trust each other and we are ready to walk the whole distance. At this stage, we are small and do not yet have access to funding, but this does not stop us from being very active in strategising and planning.

Our alliance's work is different from the work of different organisations we have witnessed in Lebanon, and this is mainly due to one reason: we are domestic workers. Many organisations that work for our cause consist of individuals who have never been subjected to what we experience with our flesh, bones, and blood. Our alliance mirrors who we are and our shared experiences. It is our bread, blood, sweat, and life.

The 'we' in this article refers to the common voice of the members of the alliances and their domestic worker comrade, the 'I's refer to the personal voice and story of Rose Mahi.

## Contributors

**Aubrey Abarintos** is a second-generation migrant in Italy, and the current secretary and trainer for different seminars of the Filipino Women's Council. She engages especially on issues about gender politics, migration, international relations and development. At present, she also works in a diplomatic office in Rome.

**Lourdes Albán** has been a paid domestic worker for almost 23 years. She currently combines office work with housework. She graduated from college with a specialisation in commerce and administration, and has taken courses in file management, commercial writing, basic accounting, crafts, dressmaking, and hairdressing, among others. She has been very active in and is currently an essential member of the Asociación de Trabajadoras Remuneradas del Hogar in Ecuador. For more information on the organisation, please visit: <https://ww.facebook.com/atrhecuador/>

**Charito Basa** is a freelance development and research consultant and the founder and current vice chair of the Filipino Women's Council. She is author of several publications on migrant workers and has become one of the major spokespersons on women migrants' issues. She has worked as a resource person and trainer for many Italian and international organisations.

**Marcelina Bautista** is General Secretary of the National Domestic Workers Union in Mexico and a former domestic worker. She is the founder of Centro de Apoyo y Capacitación para Empleadas del Hogar and until December 2016 was the Latin American regional coordinator for the International Domestic Workers Federation.

**Marissa Begonia** is a mother of 3 children, a domestic worker, and an organiser of the self-help group Justice For Domestic Workers. J4DW provides education and training to empower domestic workers, as well as basic services for those escaping abusive and exploitative employment. Begonia represented the UK Trade Union Group in the tripartite negotiations for ILO Convention 189, and represented the UK in the High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development at the UN in New York, 2013.

**Chen Betty** 陳容柔 has been the coordinator of the Taiwan International Workers' Association since 2009. She is also the director of the documentary 'Run away'.

**Pina Brustolin** moved from a small town to the city of Bologna at the age of 13 to work with a family as a colf (family collaborator), or 'at service' as they said at the time. At the age of 20 she met the ACLI, and since then she has been an activist and an organiser for domestic workers, in different roles, including as a national secretary of ACLI Colf between 1971-1976.

**Zita Cabais-Obra** is an activist for the defence of domestic workers' rights in France. She arrived in France from the Philippines in 1994, and she is a unionist at the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) in the region of Paris since 2000 and a part of the Syndicat des Assistants Maternels et Salariés des Services à la Personne Ile de France.

**Dona Rose Dela Cruz** is a second-generation migrant in Italy and is the current chairperson of the Filipino Women's Council. She continues to work in the mission of the organisation to facilitate the integration of Filipina domestic workers into Italian society through various forms of empowerment and outreach activities. She also works as an employee for an Italian bank.

**Ana Carolina Elías Espinoza** is a lawyer from El Salvador who has been living in Spain since 2009. She has been an advocate for women's rights in her country of birth and she is currently an activist for the rights of migrant domestic workers in Spain. In 2015 she was appointed President of Active Domestic Service (Servicio Doméstico Activo, SEDOAC).

**Phobsuk Gasing (Dang)** is currently the chairperson and founding member of Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Worker Unions (FADWU) and Thai Migrant Workers Union (TMWU) in Hong Kong. She is also an elected executive committee member of International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). She has been working as a live-in domestic worker for 26 years, (two years in Taiwan and the rest in Hong Kong).

**Giulia Garofalo Geymonat** one of the editors of this volume and a researcher and activist in the fields of labour, gender, sexuality and disabilities.

**Fish Ip** is currently the regional coordinator (Asia) for IDWF. She started to be a union organiser for domestic workers in 1999. She is the founding organiser for HKDWGU and FADWU.

**Ruth Khakame** is a Chairperson of the National Domestic Workers Council, Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospital and Allied Workers, and is a former domestic worker.

**Vicky Kanyoka** is the Africa regional coordinator the IDWF. She formerly served as the Director for Women and Organisation of the Conservation, Hotels, Domestic and Allied Workers' Union (CHODAWU) of Tanzania and as the Chair of the IUF African Regional Women's Committee.

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**Penelope Kyritsis** is one of the editors of this volume and assistant managing editor at Beyond Trafficking and Slavery.

**Andrea Londoño** is a journalist and political communications specialist, with a background in community management and gender studies. She is the founder and coordinator of the Hablemos de Empleadas Domésticas project (2010) and serves as a board member for the Fundación Bien Humano.

**Rose Mahi** is a migrant domestic worker from Cameroon. She has been living and working in Lebanon for 16 years. She is a community leader and human rights activist. She has led many initiatives, projects and campaigns and continues her work as a community mobiliser with her community and beyond.

**Raffaella Maioni** is an organiser and researcher who lives between Padova and Rome. As a student, she worked extensively as a baby sitter. After her studies in politics and intercultural studies, she got involved with ACLI services for migrants and domestic workers and took on various leadership roles in ACLI Colf. She is currently national secretary.

**Sabrina Marchetti** one of the editors of this volume and Associate Professor in Sociology at University Ca' Foscari in Venice.

**Geeta Menon** is a social activist, co-founder of Stree Jagruti Samiti, and joint secretary of Domestic Workers Rights Union. Three decades ago she began to fight injustice and the exploitation of the working and toiling people, inspired by the strong, working class women in India who laugh, love, and live in spite of caste and patriarchal oppression. She is the recipient of many local and national awards for empowerment, achievement, and social entrepreneurship.

**Migrant Domestic Workers network FNV** is part of the Dutch Federation of Trade Unions; FNV. It represents the interest of Domestic Workers working in the Netherlands and campaigns for the ratification of the ILO Convention 189. The publication 'Words of Labour' is based on the words from ILO Convention 189, accompanied by stories from organised domestic workers in the Netherlands. With a written preface by Catelene Passchier, the vice-president of FNV, it was conceived by Cecilia Vallejos and Matthijs de Bruijne as well as designed by takeadetour.eu.

**Himaya Montenegro** is currently programme staff of the Labor Education and Research Network (LEARN) and organiser of UNITED, the domestic workers' union in the Philippines. Himaya is a former domestic worker who continued her studies as a daycare teacher sponsored by LEARN. She was then recruited in LEARN as the lead organiser for domestic workers in the Philippines.

**Lulu Omar** is a part time domestic worker from Zanzibar (Tanzania), where she has lived and worked her entire life. She is a Gender Coordinator of the trade union organisation "CHODAWU" Zanzibar and a human rights activist fighting for the rights of woman and children, especially domestic and Migrant domestic workers. She is the founder of the Migrant Domestic Workers Union in Oman.

**Bobo Lai-wan Po** is the founding member of Hong Kong Domestic Workers General Union (HKDWGU) and Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Worker Unions (FADWU). She was the chairperson in 2003-2007, 2009-2012 and vice-chairperson in 2012-2017, and chairperson for FADWU in 2010-2012. She was a local live-in domestic worker for four years when she was 18 years old. From 1985 to 2008 she worked as a part-time domestic worker for multiple employers. She then she lost her working ability as a domestic worker because of occupational illness. She now runs a vegetable store.

**Ai-jen Poo** is an organiser, social entrepreneur and author. She is the Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance and Co-director of Caring Across Generations.

**Rosalud Jing de la Rosa** is a public health and development specialist. She is a Filipina migrant in Rome and volunteer consultant of Filipino Women's Council supporting the research and training needs of the organisation. She currently works as consultant with Rome-based United Nations agencies. She holds a masters degree in international public health in developing countries from Columbia University in New York and has worked with the UN system and development NGOs for the past 30 years.

**Ok-Seop Shim** is now the Chairperson of the Incheon (South Korea) Branch of the National House Manager's Cooperative. She started her career as a domestic worker in 2009 and was elected to Chairperson of Incheon Branch in 2011. She has been re-elected four times since.

**Marie-José L. Tayah** is the regional coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa at the International Domestic Workers Federation.

**Verna Dinah Q. Viajar** work as a trade union education programme coordinator for LEARN from 1991 to 1998. She has worked for the labour movement since her time as a student activist in late 1980s at the University of the Philippines. She is currently finishing her PhD dissertation on migrant domestic workers in Malaysia at the University of Kassel, Germany.

**Myrtle Witbooi** is President of the International Domestic Workers Federation and General Secretary of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union. Born outside of Cape Town, South Africa, she became a domestic worker in 1962 due to the lack of opportunities and apartheid laws that prevented her from pursuing a medical career. She has worked to improve domestic workers' rights since 1971.

## About the editors

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Giulia Garofalo Geymonat is a researcher and activist in the fields of labour, gender, sexuality and disabilities. She has conducted extensive participant research on intimate labour and social movements in Europe, especially in relation to issues of sex work, migration/trafficking, and disabilities. In 2016 she co-edited *Sex Workers Speak. Who Listens?* for openDemocracy, as well as ‘Exploitation and Its Opposite. Researching the Quality of Working Life in the Sex Industries’ (*Sociological Research Online*, 21, 4). She joined the DomeQUAL Project and Ca’ Foscari University of Venice in 2017.

### Sabrina Marchetti



Sabrina Marchetti is Associate Professor in Sociology at University Ca’ Foscari in Venice. She earned her PhD in Gender Studies at the University of Utrecht in 2010 after which she has specialised on issues of gender, racism, labour and migration. She wrote “Black Girls. Migrant Domestic Workers and Colonial Legacies” (Brill, 2014). She one of the founders of the Research Network for Domestic Workers’ Rights. She is currently the Principal Investigator of the ERC project “DomeQUAL: A Global Approach to Paid Domestic Work and Social Inequalities” (2016-202).

### Penelope Kyritsis



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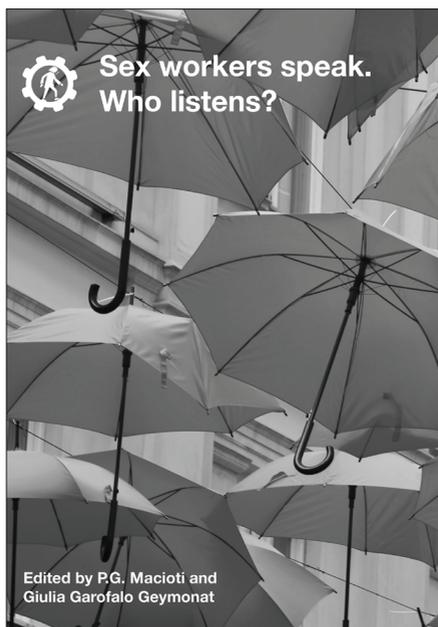
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Cameron Thibos is the managing editor of *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery*.

## Other titles available from BTS

Gendered, racist, classist, homophobic, and transphobic violence haunts the world of sex work, and many of us believe that states, inter-governmental organisations, and NGOs should do more to help. Yet a lot is being done, the problem is the efficacy of these interventions. *Sex Workers Speak. Who Listens?* addresses the violence, exploitation, abuse, and trafficking present in the sex industries, but it does so from



the perspective of sex workers themselves. These are the women, men, and transgender people who are directly touched by interventions made 'in their name', and they are the people who actively and collectively resist all forms of violence against them. We hope that their voices will help readers resist indifference, on the one hand, and to become more critical of states' interventions, which are widely regarded and legitimated as necessary to combat 'trafficking', on the other.



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Awareness has greatly increased over the past decade about the living and working conditions of the world's 67 million domestic workers. We now know that abuse and exploitation, child labour, discrimination, starvation, violence, and debt bondage are disproportionately represented within this traditionally unorganised and invisible sector. What is less known is that the grassroots mobilisation of workers resisting their exploitation and stigmatisation has, against all odds, also been growing over the past 20 years. In order to get a better understanding of some of these issues that often remain hidden, we asked domestic workers' rights activists themselves to tell us directly about their movement – their struggles, their experiences as domestic workers, the reasons for their ongoing exploitation, and the strategies to fight it.

“Making invisible labour visible, domestic worker activists not only demand recognition and rights on the job but also offer a vision of a new society that celebrates human dignity, interdependence, and care. These powerful and brave stories inspire and give hope that together a different world is possible.”

—Eileen Boris, coauthor, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State*

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