

Domestic Work: An Emerging Issue at The Commission on the Status of Women 2017

Emerging strongly from the myriad issues to do with women's economic empowerment at this year's UN Commission on the Status of Women is that of the domestic worker.

A few statistics to set the scene – 83% of the world's cleaners, cooks, nannies, child and aged carers are women. More than half of these women are not registered, are without contracts and have no legislative protection regarding their hours of work, payment, insurance, maternity and sick leave. The Asia-Pacific region has the largest number of domestic workers, around 22 million, many of whom leave countries, such as the Philippines to work in the Middle East and Europe. Brazil, with a population of 200 million, has 7.2 million domestic workers most of whom are women – low paid and casualised.

Behind the doors of private houses these women are frequently exploited and abused. In the world of work, they are the most vulnerable. Take the case of 24 -year-old Indonesian worker, Erwiana, hired to cook, clean and mind the children of a Hong Kong family. Beaten almost daily, starved, unpaid and her front teeth broken, Erwinia finally escaped and ran to the neighbours for help. During a subsequent court case Erwinia braved the threats of the family and, in this case, some justice was achieved. In her summary the Judge said: *The defendant had no compassion for the people she considered beneath her. It is regrettable that such conduct, attitude and physical abuse is not rare.*

Domestic work is one of the most important sources of income for women and it is on the increase as economies improve and more women move into the work force. One of the ironies, pointed out by a speaker at CSW, is that, each year, thousands of women depart their countries and homes leaving their children with relatives in order to look after other people's children in foreign lands. Free trade agreements, natural disasters, corruption and exploitation by multinational companies leave developing countries, in many cases, unable to employ their populations. Exporting these women overseas is an important source of income for the sending countries. Filipino overseas workers, for example, contribute around \$27 billion dollars a year, 8% of GNP to the national economy.

SDG 1 No poverty
Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable



3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



SDG 3 Good health and well being

Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all

SDG 5 Gender equality

5 GENDER EQUALITY



Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth



Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment

Shielded from public view, increasingly essential for their home economies of a voice, in search of their basic human rights. Over the past three years membership of the Domestic Workers Association has risen to half a million and significant legislation has, in many countries, recognised the rights of domestic workers. But there is still much to do.

Cloaked in invisibility domestic workers are found in every country – do we ever ask about their rates of pay or how they are treated by the families or companies employing them? What about our cleaners, gardeners, drivers, nannies – are we paying them adequately, ensuring they have time off, caring for their health and working conditions? Change cannot happen unless we become involved in the human rights of these the most vulnerable of workers.

**SDG 10
Reduced inequalities**

By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average



What Action Can Civil Society Take?

Note the following checklist related to domestic workers. (cooks, cleaners, gardeners, nursing home aides.....)

When employing domestic workers do you ensure that they:

- are paid at least the minimum wage
- have health insurance
- work the legislated hours
- have the legislated time off
- are entitled to maternity and sick leave
- have healthy, safe working/living conditions
- are entitled to join a union

If some of these basic work requirements are not legislated for in your country what can you do to improve the pay and conditions of these most vulnerable workers?

- Ensure that you do the best for your workers
- Support a union or Workers' Alliance campaign
- Contact your local member of Parliament or State representative and ask them about workers' rights
- Human Rights and Legal Groups often have campaigns for workers' rights – check out what they are doing
- Research what the International Labour Organization (ILO) has said about domestic workers