Item 4 (e): Report for the Europe Region, 2009 – 2013

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1. Introduction

First, we need to clarify what we mean when we are talking about ‘Europe’. Is it the ‘European Union’ or Europe in a more geographical sense? The EU is an economic and political union of 28 member States. However, there are some States which belong to Europe but are not members of the EU – like Switzerland, Norway and Iceland. Plus some Eastern European countries are also not part of the EU - like the Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Albania. Then there are countries which have parts in Europe and Asia - like Russia and Turkey. Although we do not yet know of any organized domestic workers in Eastern European countries, we do know there are organized domestic workers outside the EU, as for example in Switzerland and in Turkey. Therefore, so as to be as inclusive as possible, in this report ‘Europe’ is used in the broader, geographical sense.

Exact figures are not available. However, many domestic workers in European countries are migrants. Within Europe there is a clear East-to-West flow of women seeking domestic work. Also women from outside Europe, for example from the Philippines or other Asian countries and from Latin America, seek work as domestic workers in Europe.

If there is one dominant sector in which work is done informally in Europe by women, it is domestic work. ‘Undeclared work’ (European terminology) done by men is mainly in the construction sector.

As in other regions, the IDWN in Europe is working closely with organizations which support us politically and financially. The latter is of special importance for Europe, as traditional donors do not see the necessity to give financial support to working with informal workers in Europe. The global research and policy network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) has been instrumental from the very beginning in giving political and financial support. The work in Europe is mainly possible because WIEGO is prepared to include the work of IDWN Europe into its core funding structure. Therefore the WIEGO Regional Advisor for Europe is at the same time serving as the IDWN European Coordinator.
Legal framework

In many European countries, domestic workers have the same rights as any other group in the workforce in the country where they work, regardless of their status (nationals, migrants with residence and work permits, migrants without papers, etc.) and regardless of the nature of their employment status (informal/formal, part-time, full-time, live-in, live-out, etc.). In Switzerland, domestic work was the first ever sector to be covered by a binding minimum law regulation at federal level. It came into force 1 January 2011 and has to be re-negotiated by the end of 2013 by the Swiss Tripartite Commission.

However, across Europe, enforcement of legal rights is very low or non-existent. This is particularly true for undocumented migrant domestic workers who, if they try to enforce their rights, are automatically expelled from their host countries. So they are de facto deprived of their labor rights.

In many European countries, there is a history of strong collective agreements covering also low paid sectors and thus ensuring higher level of pay and protection than provided by law. Interestingly, there are quite a number of good collective agreements covering domestic workers as well, for example in Italy, Belgium, France and Germany. But also here the de facto coverage varies enormously as informal domestic work is widespread.

2. How domestic workers organize in European countries

Among domestic workers in Europe, the ones best organized are generally migrant domestic workers. Very often, they start to organize around church communities, or as self-help groups, often along countries or regions of origin. In some countries of Europe, these groups have reached out to trade unions, and have been developing their collaboration.

The nature of this relationship varies between countries. Some domestic workers’ groups are integrated into existing union structures, as for example in the Netherlands, Italy, France and Belgium. Elsewhere, organized domestic workers have close ties through individual membership and union support but prefer to have a structure outside of the unions, as for example in the UK and Ireland. In Ireland, there is a development to intensify the link to the union with the view to becoming an integrated part of it (see below), and then there are other smaller groups which prefer to stay independent and possibly engage with unions on an ad hoc basis.

There are also national domestic workers organizing. However, they are much fewer and many do not seem to have the desire to become very active in the unions.

Nevertheless, across Europe trade unions are opening up their doors to domestic workers. In many countries, service and hotel workers’ unions also organize domestic workers or have domestic workers in their jurisdiction. The most recent success story of organizing domestic workers is in Sweden, where the Kommunal union has organized over 600 domestic care workers in 2013. They are part of the public service sector, and Kommunal is affiliated to the Public Services International (PSI). All of the other unions organizing domestic workers in Europe are affiliated to the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Union (IUF) and to its European structure, the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Unions (EFFAT).
Unions vary very much in scope and level of activism. For example, the Belgium Foodworkers’ and Service Union, ACV-CSC, organizes as many as 20,000 domestic workers, and the Italian Commerce, Tourism and Service Workers Union, FILCAMS-CGIL, organizes 15,000 domestic workers.

With one exception that we know of, there is no union in Europe which is only organizing domestic workers. The exception of the rule is Turkey, where domestic workers founded a union in June 2011. This is despite the fact that under Turkish law they are not allowed to organize in a trade union. This union consists mainly of Turkish women.

Organizing at European level

From very early on, EFFAT has been supporting collaboration among trade unions in Europe which already organize domestic workers or which have been increasing their efforts to do so. At the EFFAT Women’s Committee in 2009, there was a side event on domestic workers, attended by 20 participants from 13 different unions. The event was sponsored by the German Commission for Justice and Peace, a catholic organization which promotes political dialogue on the rights of informal workers worldwide and which has been a supportive ally of domestic workers worldwide. Since then, domestic workers have been on the agenda of EFFAT Women Committee sessions and also of the EFFAT Executive Committee meetings. The Chairperson of the Belgian union ACV-CSC (see above), Pia Stalpaert, is also the Chairperson of the EFFAT Women’s Committee, and has been instrumental from the very beginning to have domestic workers on the agenda. Also supportive of the domestic workers’ inclusion in the unions has been Franz-Josef Moellenberg of the German Foodworkers and Hotel Workers Union (NGG). As President of the IUF, he requested that domestic workers should be on the agenda of all Executive Committee meetings of both the IUF and EFFAT.

Until today, though - unlike our Latin American, Caribbean, African, and Asian sisters - European domestic workers are not organized at regional level. One reason for this is that IDWN funds are restricted to activities in the global South and thus IDWN is not able, for example, to organize its own meetings in Europe. From the beginning of the IDWN in 2009, the IDWN could fund Coordinators in Latin America, Asia, and Africa but not in Europe. Since I, as the IDWN International Coordinator at that time, am based in Europe, I tried to also cover Europe. But this meant that human resources were also scarce because the top priority was the process to get an international Convention for domestic workers. Only after international coordination was handed over to Elizabeth Tang in 2011, was it possible to spend more time and efforts on Europe.

However, more importantly, it seems as if until today organized domestic workers in Europe are tied up in their struggles at home and don’t see an advantage yet in organizing at regional level. Little-by-little, though, this is changing. By August 2013, five trade unions in Europe had affiliated their domestic worker membership to the IDWN: the ACV-CSC union in Belgium, FNV-Bondgenoten in the Netherlands, FILCAMS-CGIL in Italy, and SIT and UNIA in Switzerland.
3. Highlights of activities in Europe

Ratification of C189: Since the adoption of C189 in June 2011, there have been strong lobbying efforts in several European countries and also at European level to ratify it at national level, with some success:

- **Italy**: The Italian unions have a long history in organizing domestic workers and concluding collective agreements covering domestic workers. Through their efforts, Italy was the first European country to ratify C189 on 22 January 2013.

- In **Germany**, the unions organized a working group on C189, in which the IDWN was included. As part of the lobbying efforts, IDWN Europe targeted key Members of the German Parliament and personally lobbied for their support for ratification. At the time of writing, the ratification process there has been concluded, though not yet made official by registering the document in the ILO.

- **Belgium** has announced it will ratify C189 by the end of 2013.

- **France** has indicated that it will conclude its ratification process in the first half of 2014.

- **Ireland** announced in April 2013 that it will ratify C189, though there is no news of progress yet.

5 November 2010: The IDWN, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), and the Commission for Justice and Peace (Germany) organized a European Conference on domestic workers’ rights during the ILO process for a domestic workers’ Convention. The EU governments were no easy negotiating partners during the ILO process, and so it was important to create opportunities for exchange and discussion between trade unions and government representatives. Unfortunately, it was the only conference at EU level of such a nature.

2012: ILO ACTRAV Turin, jointly with the ETUC and EFFAT, carried out a European project ‘Decent Work for Domestic Workers’. This ran three regional workshops and one concluding conference in Turin, Italy, aimed at affiliates of those organizations, with EFFAT and the IDWN jointly trying to get as many domestic workers’ representatives there as possible. The project was closely tied to the ITUC ‘12 by 12’ C189 ratification campaign, and helped to achieve better coordination among European countries. The project meetings also discussed issues beyond ratification, such as how domestic workers can better organize, and how to work towards implementation of C189. The project concluded with a report ‘Decent Work for Domestic Workers: The state of labour rights, social protection and trade union initiatives in Europe’.

January 2012: The Dutch union FNV-Bondgenoten, which organizes cleaners and domestic workers (among other categories of workers), held one of the longest strikes in the history of the Netherlands. The cleaners went on strike because working conditions and the level of wages were very low. Domestic workers stood side-by-side with their colleagues from the cleaning sector and joined the strike! The IDWN supported them by sending a solidarity letter and a video from Hong Kong domestic workers, which was shown on a big public screen during a demonstration by the striking cleaners and domestic workers. Domestic workers’ leaders proudly sat at the negotiating table and won inclusion of domestic workers in the collective
agreement of the cleaners' industry. However, this only covers domestic workers employed by agencies, not the vast majority who work without any contracts. So Dutch domestic workers continue to demand ratification and implementation of C189.

17 February 2013: Rebeca Pabon, organizer of domestic workers in FNV Bondgenoten, Netherlands, and the IDWN European Coordinator were invited by the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) to Dublin, Ireland, to conduct a seminar with the Domestic Workers Action Group (DWAG). As there were moves to work closer with SIPTU, the largest union in Ireland, the domestic workers wanted to learn more about the role and limitations of trade unions and from the experiences of the Dutch domestic workers who had gone through a similar process. The DWAG still works as a loose group without a set of rules and decision-making structures and so is not yet eligible to join IDWN. For now, they prefer to concentrate on the process to establish closer links to the unions. The IDWN is nevertheless happy to further assist DWAG and we hope to welcome them soon as an affiliate.

19 June 2013: At the EFFAT Women’s Committee’s annual meeting in Brussels, the main topic was domestic workers, and for the first time ever domestic workers’ representatives – from the Netherlands and Ireland - were present to share information first-hand with the delegates. There was a broad understanding and commitment that EFFAT will continue to provide a platform for domestic workers at European level for mutual exchange and cooperation. EFFAT has applied for an EU project which targets domestic workers, and would provide funds for regular meetings for at least a year. The next EFFAT Congress, to be held in October 2014, will be a good moment to strengthen domestic workers as a sector within EFFAT.

August 2013: A training workshop on C189 for domestic workers’ leaders in the Netherlands was held, for which the IDWN European Coordinator prepared a training module. Jointly with the domestic workers’ leaders, preparations are also under way for a comprehensive ratification campaign based on experiences so far. It is intended to share the materials and discussions of that workshop with other domestic workers groups in Europe.

4. Future Plans

The overall goal in Europe (as in other regions) is to help build strong domestic workers’ organizations so that domestic workers speak for themselves and are part of decision-making processes to ensure their rights are as protected as other workers.

Ratification and, more importantly, implementation of the ILO Convention C189 for domestic workers will be high on the agenda in all countries.

Bringing pressure on national States not only as legislators but also as employers of care workers is important. Due to demographic changes and austerity policies which are reducing public services in Europe, more families who need support in caring for the elderly are having to turn to the private sector. Many such care workers are migrant workers, hired under conditions which are favorable for the employers but not for the workers. However, low-income families need affordable services provided by the State, and so care workers in private homes should be part of the public service sector, as is the case in Sweden, for example. This means that in implementing C189, each State should carry out its responsibilities not only as an enforcer of legal standards but also as an employer of domestic/care workers.
Conditions and circumstances for domestic/care workers vary widely in the various countries of Europe. So there is a need for more exchanges and to join forces at regional level.

There is a common understanding among organized domestic workers in Europe that these long-term goals can best be achieved within the existing union structures, which for Europe is the European Federation for Food, Agriculture and Tourism (EFFAT). ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’, as the saying goes, and certain developments need time, particularly when facing financial constraints. However, we have started a discussion process in the Women’ Committee of EFFAT, and this needs to be continued on a broader basis, which means involving more domestic workers’ leaders from more European countries. We hope that the European Union will provide funding to help to facilitate this process. However, even without this, we will continue the broader discussion within EFFAT.