



Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing

Ten Years Since Winning C189:

Domestic Workers Become an Unstoppable Movement

*“C189 is ours. It was not won for us.
We won it, and we have to guard it and use it.”*



C189

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About the Authors

Georgia Montague-Nelson is a researcher and writer with a background in gender equality and human rights. She is a staff member of the Global Labour Institute (GLI) in Manchester, which undertakes education and research with the trade union movement, specializing in the organization and representation of informal economy workers. She has previously worked closely with women's and equalities departments of the global union federations and has undertaken participatory research and education on gender with unions globally.

Celia Mather has been a writer on workers' rights in the global economy since the early 1980s. She was the report-writer for the European (2005) and global (2006) conferences for domestic workers' organizations, and then supported the International Domestic Workers Federation (formerly IDWN) by writing leaflets, newsletters, policy documents, presentations and speeches, including during the process of winning their ILO Convention C189 in 2011.

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Manchester, M2 7EN
United Kingdom
www.wiego.org

International Domestic Workers Federation Limited
Unit 13, 13/F, Kwai Cheong Centre,
50 Kwai Cheong Road,
Kwai Chung, N.T., Hong Kong
www.idwfed.org

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Copy editor: Karen McCabe

Translation management and editing: Renata Farias

Design and layout: Julian Luckham

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**“C189 is ours. It was not won for us.
We won it, and we have to guard it and use it.”**

Yes, we are excited by all the ratifications we have achieved. But there is still a lot of work to do to turn the paper into reality, to make sure all its clauses benefit all domestic workers. We have to make C189 available in a language that all domestic workers can understand and then use to fight for their rights to be respected.

With our federation we have also made history: women-led, growing rapidly and making big progress for some of the most marginalized workers. And we are so grateful to all the organizations supporting us, especially WIEGO and the IUF.

COVID-19 put a stop to a lot of our activities, but we have also learned things. We have entered a digital world where domestic workers communicate and collaborate in new ways, more than ever. They are saying ‘My phone is not my employer’s. It is my freedom’.

There is so much more in the pipeline we want to do, of course. So we must continue to support each other, stay strong and carry on.”

**Myrtle Witbooi, President,
International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)**



*Myrtle Witbooi, President,
International Domestic Workers
Federation (IDWF). Photo: IDWF*



“We see many possibilities as well as challenges.”

The ten years since ILO Convention 189 was won have seen a fast expansion of domestic workers organizing and gaining visibility. It is extremely challenging for them to do so, but C189 has empowered them, and every day some domestic workers somewhere are joining a trade union and demanding their legal rights. The movement of domestic workers worldwide is unstoppable.

Founded by 47 domestic workers’ organizations in 2013, the IDWF has grown to represent over 590,000 domestic workers in 81 affiliates in 63 countries today. As a Global Union Federation, led primarily by women, of many nationalities and colours, we are proud to drive this movement alongside domestic workers of the world. Thanks also to the support of our many allies whose solidarity and support – financially and otherwise – has been vital.

As we look to the next 10 years, we see many possibilities as well as challenges. In too many places domestic workers still have no rights and no freedom. We need more ratifications of C189 and effective legal changes. COVID-19 has devastated many domestic workers’ livelihoods and organizations. The silver lining is that we are even more convinced that a powerful global movement of domestic workers will provide us with the best protection to face any future crisis.

This report aims to provide some key reflections and stories to help people see this global movement of domestic workers. It is by no means a full record of all our achievements and challenges, but we hope it will inspire domestic workers and their allies to celebrate their successes and continue to move forward until domestic workers everywhere are truly free.”

**Elizabeth Tang, General Secretary,
International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)**



Elizabeth Tang, General Secretary, International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). Photo: Sofia Trevino



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*Domestic Workers at the ILO
in Geneva Switzerland, in June
2011. Photo: Sofia Trevino*

1. About C189

16 June 2011 was a very significant moment for the lives of the 70 million domestic workers across the globe. Finally, they had won the right to be recognized as workers, with the basic rights of all other workers. That day, the International Labour Organization – the part of the United Nations which deals with employment rights – agreed to adopt a new Convention No.189 Decent Work for Domestic Workers which sets out their rights.

Domestic workers are not “helpers”, nor “servants”, and of course they, like anyone else, should never be slaves. They are workers who make a massive contribution to our lives and to the global economy. They are the ones who care for our loved ones – our children, our sick, our elderly, our pets – as well as our homes, enabling the rest of us to go out to work as well as to socialize. They deserve our respect, and their rights to a safe and rewarding working life.

It was a huge amount of work to achieve C189, along with its accompanying Recommendation 201. Representatives of governments, employers and even some trade unions had to be persuaded that agreeing to this Convention was the right thing to do. So, when the final vote was revealed, great celebration broke out in the Grand Plenary Hall of the United Nations in Geneva.

International Domestic Workers Day: 16 June

To celebrate the historic achievement of C189, the date on which it was adopted at the International Labour Conference in Geneva is now celebrated as International Domestic Workers Day. Events are held across the world on that day each year, especially to pressure more governments to ratify and implement C189.



Domestic Workers celebrating International Domestic Workers Day June 16.
 Photo credits clockwise from the top: Sofia Trevino (at the IUF in Geneva, Switzerland in 2019); Assétou Traoré-Dabiré (Burkina Faso in 2017); GKS (Gurgaon, India in 2018); Mariela Acuña (Kuwait in 2018).



1.1 What C189 says

C189 affirms that domestic workers have the same fundamental rights as all other workers to:

- freedom of association and collective bargaining
- the elimination of all forms of forced labour
- the effective abolition of child labour, and
- the elimination of discrimination with respect to employment and occupation.

It tells governments to set, for example, a minimum employment age for domestic workers no lower than for other workers, and to make sure they are protected from all forms of abuse, harassment and violence. They should ensure (not a complete list) that domestic workers:

- have the same normal hours of work, overtime compensation, periods of rest (including a weekly rest of at least 24 hours), and annual leave as other workers
- are covered by minimum wage legislation
- have the right to a safe and healthy working environment
- are protected from exploitation by private employment agencies
- are informed of the terms and conditions of employment, preferably through written contracts
- are free to reach agreement with their employer on whether or not to reside in the household
- have access to the courts, labour tribunals or other dispute mechanisms

What Recommendation R201 says

The accompanying Recommendation (R201) gives governments guidance on how to support decent employment for domestic workers: not what they “must” do but what they “could” (and should) do.

It includes such things as promoting model employment contracts and health and safety training for domestic workers and providing information to migrant domestic workers.



For more information

“**Convention No.189 - Questions and Answers**”, factsheet, ILO, August 2011: https://www.ilo.org/travail/info/publications/WCMS_161104/lang--en/index.htm

Available in English, Spanish, Filipino, French, Indonesian and Portuguese

“**Your Toolkit on ILO Convention 189 – The Domestic Workers’ Convention**”, WIEGO, October 2018: <https://www.wiego.org/resources/DWToolkit>

1.2 How was C189 won?

It took some five years of very intense organizing by domestic workers around the world and their supporters.

In fact, it was only in 2006 that domestic workers’ organizations from across the globe first came together at an international conference, held in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and hosted by The Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV). They included a wide range of support groups and associations, as well as some officially established trade unions for domestic workers. There, they shared their stories of success and failure, and their deep frustration at the widespread lack of respect and even abuse, despite the essential work they do.

It was at this conference that a decision was taken to fight for an International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention specifically for domestic workers’ rights, and also to use this as a way of building even more and stronger domestic workers’ organizations, at home and internationally. Also present were officers from some global and national unions, along with labour/migrant/women’s support networks,

ILO staff, and academics. This laid the foundation for a collaboration which became essential to building the international domestic workers’ movement and achieving the Convention.

Taking the lead over the next few years were the IUF (the global trade union federation for workers in food and allied sectors) and WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing). They helped set up an Interim Management Committee to oversee the development of what became the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN), which in turn ultimately became the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). They sought the necessary funding, kick started the gathering of data, spread the news through their member organizations, allies, social media, and so on.

Other key partners included the International Confederation of Trade Unions (ITUC), whose support was vital in promoting support for a Convention among formal trade unions. The ITUC serves as the Secretariat for the ILO Workers’ Group, which represents workers’ and its organizations in the ILO.

As “informal” workers in most countries of the world, domestic workers and their organizations had no experience with the very formal procedures of a global standard-setting body like the ILO. Many had never been part of collective negotiations with their government, let alone with employers. Many were not even recognized yet by the trade unions in their country. So a lot of preparation, training and support had to be done so that domestic workers’ representatives could be present at the negotiations, have their voice heard, and even ensure that some of them had the status to actually take part in the deciding vote. And so history was made.

The fact that C189 and R201 were necessary may today seem strange. The reality is that before the adoption of C189, in many countries domestic workers were specifically excluded from labour laws and worker social protections. It was necessary to have a global Convention to direct governments to move away from the treatment of domestic workers as informal “helpers” or “servants”.



For more information

“Yes We Did It! How the World’s Domestic Workers Won their International Rights and Recognition”, Celia Mather, WIEGO, October 2013: https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/Mather_Yes%20we%20did%20it!_2013.pdf



“C189: Conventional Wisdom”, video by Prof. Jennifer N. Fish and Sisi Sojourner Productions, 2012: <https://vimeo.com/41958928>

1.3 Fighting for Ratification and Implementation

What is ratification?

This is when a government agrees to put the contents of a Convention into its national legislation. It is then legally bound to respect and implement those rights, and to report on its progress to the ILO.

In the 10 years since C189 was adopted, **32 Governments have ratified C189**. The first was Uruguay, and most recently Namibia and Mexico in 2020 and Malta in 2021 .

Ratifications by region:

Latin America:	13
Europe:	9
Africa:	5
Caribbean:	4
Asia-Pacific:	1
North America:	0
Middle East:	0

For the full list of countries which have ratified C189 see Appendix.

Thirty-two ratifications of C189 in 10 years is in fact a big accomplishment: in the history of ratification, it is relatively fast, and it is a testament to the huge efforts of domestic workers and their supporters worldwide.

Argentina shows the way

Argentina was an early country to ratify C189, in 2014, at the same time as it was already bringing in changes to the law.

In April 2013, a law was passed (Law No. 26.844/13) which required employers of domestic workers to register them with the social security system. This gave domestic workers the right to retirement packages, vacation days, days of leave and minimum salaries. The law also led to the creation of a tripartite commission (including representatives of workers, employers, and governments) responsible for establishing the wages and working conditions of domestic workers.

Traditionally in Argentina, only the largest trade unions are invited to participate in tripartite negotiations. But then a more inclusive approach was taken, inviting some trade unions representing domestic workers to take part. In 2015, tripartite negotiations began and domestic workers' organizations reached a ground-breaking collective bargaining agreement which immediately and significantly raised their wages. In addition, they get annually negotiated raises: 30 per cent in 2019.

Also, under a labour law modified in 2013, specific labour courts provide complaint mechanisms and dispute resolutions systems to resolve conflicts between workers and employers. "Domestic Work Tribunals", unique to the domestic work sector, have been set up in the capital city Buenos Aires, and other provinces have developed similar systems.

As IDWF General Secretary, Elizabeth Tang, says, "*Where there is a will, it is possible. Argentina shows the way for treating domestic workers*". (See also pages [23] and [30].)

Namibia is, at the time of writing, the most recent country to ratify C189, in December 2020 (to come into force in December 2021). Neline Dina Kahua, General Secretary of the Namibia Domestic and Allied Workers Union (NDAWU), says:

"In 2012 we thought, now is the time to organize ourselves. We were tired of having to listen to men in the male-dominated unions, who don't know the challenges we domestic workers face. Most of us are poorly educated and NDAWU had big financial problems. But we used the radio to show that domestic workers play a major role in society. We started to gain the trust of domestic workers, and some other unions began to stand by our side, encouraging us to do things we didn't know about.

In 2015, we affiliated to the IDWF and this was our biggest "backbone", giving us more motivation and capacity-building, including in how to lobby the mostly men politicians who don't see talking to domestic workers as important. With the help of other unions, I got nominated onto the Labour Advisory Council, a tripartite body in the Ministry of Labour, and there I could raise the voice of domestic workers. We argued for C189 and also C190 against violence and harassment in the world of work, to go hand-in-hand. The LAC agreed to submit a recommendation to the Minister of Labour, and so the process for ratification began, and we won both! Now NDAWU will be using our seat on the LAC to argue for proper implementation."



Training workshops in Namibia. Photos: Vicky Kanyoka

However, there are still 162 countries yet to ratify.

This even includes some countries whose Governments voted “Yes” to C189 at the ILO.

In **Trinidad and Tobago**, Ida le Blanc, General Secretary of the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE), explains her frustration:

“We were able to convince our Government to vote for C189 at the ILO. But now, ten years on, our country is yet to ratify, and still anyone working in someone’s private home and paid by the householder is excluded from the definition of “worker”. They have no access to social security when their employers do not register them with the National Insurance Scheme, which of course made the impact of the COVID pandemic even harder on them. One big stumbling block is the huge turnover in Ministers of Labour over our years of advocacy. We think we are making headway with one and then they are gone, replaced by another, and we have to start all over again.” (For more on Trinidad and Tobago, see page [23]).

Meanwhile, some governments decide first to reform their national laws and only ratify later. But the fact that C189 is there gives domestic workers and their allies extra pressure to make those legal changes.

Brazil: Still a Long Way to Go

In **Brazil**, C189 was ratified in 2018. But domestic workers in the *Federação Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas* (FENATRAD), the National Federation of Domestic Workers, had been organizing for many years before this to win labour protections, including by building alliances with other social movements working on gender and race.

Policy changes started in the country back in 1988, when Article 7 of the new Constitution guaranteed domestic workers 10 out of the 29 fundamental labour rights. This was followed by laws being introduced and amended in 2006 and 2013 which gave domestic workers more rights, including job stability for pregnant domestic workers, and a 44-hour working week. A law followed in 2014 that imposes fines on employers who fail to register their domestic worker(s).

Then, in 2015, Law No. 150 was passed which, among other things, prohibited domestic work for minors under the age of 18, and established an 8-hour working day, the right to paid vacation time, paid overtime, compensation for unfair dismissal, and access to social security benefits for domestic workers who work more than two days a week for the same employer.

These policy changes set the agenda and ultimately led the way to the Government’s ratification of C189 in 2018.

Despite these strong reforms, however, there is still a long way to go. Many domestic workers are actually excluded because these rights are only guaranteed to those who work at least three days a week in the same job, leaving the many who work for multiple employers throughout the week excluded from protection. And, even when conditions are met, often the rights are not enforced as monitoring compliance is not strong enough.

FENATRAD is now fighting for the realization of these rights. Through the campaign “Essential are our rights”, the union is fighting for employers and the state to recognize their obligation to respect domestic workers’ rights. FENATRAD has also developed an innovative training course via WhatsApp through which 400 workers have been trained on labour rights, social security, and trade unionism.

Other governments have decided not to ratify, claiming that their national laws already offer enough protection for domestic workers.

However, as Natalia Robledo-Contreras from the Migrant Domestic Workers Network, part of FNV, in the **Netherlands**, explains, this is often not the case:

“After the Convention was adopted, domestic workers started campaigning for ratification. We held our first demonstration with undocumented domestic workers to promote the cause. We received a lot of attention from the Government, even being invited to speak with government representatives who were carrying out research on ratifying C189.”



But then the Government decided not to ratify because they believed it was unnecessary. In the Netherlands, we already have a regulation on house services and the Government thinks that this is good enough. But that regulation does not include any labour rights, and workers still have to negotiate for everything with the employer because nothing is guaranteed. Still ten years later, we have not won anything. The Government has not ratified or implemented any part of C189 and there is no legal support for domestic workers.

Many of us come to the Netherlands in the hope of a better life. But now we find that the home countries that we left are ratifying and implementing C189, while the Netherlands is not. We are still fighting but sadly we are still at step zero because the Government does not want to listen to domestic workers. In fact, undocumented workers have been taking the lead in fighting for the recognition and ratification of C189, even though ratification of C189 might not give them any rights at all.”

This is why “**Ratify C189**” is a significant and on-going campaign worldwide.

Changing the law to fit C189

After ratifying, a government then has to change its national laws to fit what the Convention says. But this can take a lot of on-going lobbying by domestic workers and their supporters.

South Africa: Falling On Deaf Ears

South Africa was another early country to ratify C189, in 2013. However, it became a real struggle to get the Government to include domestic workers in two areas of legislation: the national minimum wage and compensation for occupational injuries and diseases.

When the National Minimum Wage was introduced in January 2019, domestic workers and farm workers were set at a lower rate than other workers. The Department of Labour argued that, if they got the same wage, there would be massive job losses, although it promised parity in the future. Now, from March 2021, farm workers get the same rate as others but domestic workers are still at only 88 per cent, with their parity “expected” in 2022. The South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) has never accepted the logic of a lower rate for domestic workers and, in any case, the minimum wage of R19.09 (US\$1.30) per hour is not a living wage for any workers in South Africa.

“This R19.09 an hour is an insult... We don’t know what more we can do. We march, we send letters and memorandums to the Department of Labour to put our complaints in writing, but this has fallen on deaf ears. Nobody is listening to us.”

Eunice Dhladhla, SADSAWU <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/domestic-worker-unions-slam-minimum-wage-increase/>

As for compensation for occupational injuries and diseases, change was only triggered after a domestic worker drowned in her employer’s swimming pool while on duty, but the daughter was denied any compensation because her mother was a domestic worker. Supported by SADSAWU and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI), she took her case to the High Court in Pretoria and won. Then the Constitutional Court ruled in November 2020 that the Government should amend the Occupational Illness and Diseases Act (COIDA). That process is still in Parliament at the time of writing.

Let’s Make C189 a Reality for All!

Despite the difficulties in getting C189 put into national legislation and then properly implemented, it is vital to get more countries to ratify, or at the very least start the process of legal as well as cultural change (see pages [21] and [22]).

2. Domestic Workers Organizing: From Strength to Strength

- There are some 70 million domestic workers globally.
- About 1 in 25 of all women workers are domestic workers.
- Migrant domestic workers number about 11.5 million, nearly 75 per cent of them women.
- There are some 7.4 million children under the age of 15 doing domestic work.
- As more people live longer, there is ever more need for domestic workers to help care for the elderly.

2.1 From Network to Federation

IDWF Founding Congress, 2013

Two years after winning C189, the time had come to turn the IDWN loose network into a formal organization, the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF).

So, in October 2013, about 180 domestic workers' representatives from some 56 organizations in over 40 countries gathered in Montevideo, Uruguay. This country was chosen because it was the first to ratify C189 and, even before that, the first country in Latin America to have a formal collective agreement between a domestic workers' union, employers and government. The President of Uruguay, José Mujica, even came to give the final address as the Congress came to a close.



IDWF Founding Congress 2012, in Uruguay. Photo credits clockwise from the top: Olga Abizaid; Marty Chen; J. Shenker [Courtesy NDWA]; Marty Chen



There, Elizabeth Tang was elected as its first General Secretary, with the IDWF Head Office to be based in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, Myrtle Witbooi, leader of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) and who had gained huge recognition for her ability to voice the concerns and demands of domestic workers, was elected IDWF President.

It was the first new global union federation to be set up for many decades. Very significantly, it was also the first one ever to be led by women, and by members mostly from the Global South.

Becoming a formal global union federation gave the IDWF the status now to take a full role in global structures, such as in the international trade union movement, the ILO and other bodies of the United Nations. Finally, domestic workers had the right to represent themselves there (see pages [9] and [10]).

Importantly, it also meant that domestic workers' own organizations and their elected representatives would be in charge of making decisions on the international strategies that they wished to pursue to protect and advance respect and rights for domestic workers everywhere.



For more information

'Domestic Workers of the World Unite: Founding Congress of the IDWF', October 2013:
<https://idwfed.org/en/resources/idwf-congress>

IDWF 2nd Congress, 2018

In November 2018, the IDWF held its second Congress, in Cape Town, hosted by the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU), and attended by 207 delegates and observers. As well as achieving the formal business of electing representatives from its affiliates to its governing bodies and agreeing upon the federation's priorities and strategy for the next five years,



IDWF 2nd Congress 2018, in South Africa. Photo credits clockwise from the top: Jennifer Natalie Fish; Sofia Trevino; Jennifer Natalie Fish; Sofia Trevino

those present again brought huge, vibrant energy, sharing their experiences through workshops and also songs. It was a reminder of how strongly domestic workers from across the world hold the same view that “Our Time Has Come!”.



For more information

“Five Years a Federation: the IDWF Second Congress 2018”, November 2018: https://idwfed.org/en/2018-congress/five-years-a-federation-the-idwf-second-congress-2018/@@display-file/attachment_1

Membership Growth and Affiliate Development

In becoming a Federation, it was decided that only domestic workers’ organizations, led by domestic workers themselves, could become members. Other organizations which support domestic workers are of course welcomed and valued as close allies (see page [11]).

At its founding in 2013, the IDWF had 47 domestic workers’ organizations affiliated, representing about a quarter of a million domestic workers.

By April 2021, this had grown to 81 affiliates from 63 countries, representing over 590,000 domestic workers around the world, which is an enormous achievement.

For a regional breakdown (as at October 2019), IDWF affiliates reported this number of dues-paying members:

Africa	66,654
Asia-Pacific	202,607
Caribbean	6,073
Europe	45,334
Latin America	111,870
North America	106,000
	538,538

Then, at the beginning of 2021, the IDWF was very proud to welcome its first affiliates in the Middle East, one in Kuwait (see page [31]) and one in Jordan.

Meanwhile, under the leadership of General Secretary Elizabeth Tang, the IDWF has developed its staff team at its headquarters in Hong Kong, as well as its Regional Coordinators, the most recent one being appointed in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region.

2.2 What the IDWF brings to its affiliates

A Seat at the Table

Becoming a formal trade union federation, rather than an informal network, has given the IDWF the status to take part in official international events, processes and policy negotiations. So domestic workers now have the right and the opportunity to represent themselves there and have their voices heard. Some recent examples of this include:

- **“Champion” in the process to achieve C190, June 2019**

Domestic workers are among those most at risk of severe violence in the workplace. So, when a new ILO Convention against violence and harassment in the world of work was proposed, the IDWF was adamant that the private household had to be included in the definition of a workplace.

Using their experience of the intense organizing necessary to achieve C189, the IDWF compiled responses from affiliates to ILO questionnaires, produced a “Platform of Demands”, and mobilized affiliates to inform other trade unionists, lobby their governments and employers, become official Workers Representatives at the two years of negotiations, and so on. Also, the IDWF was officially accepted as Observer at the 2018 and 2019 sessions of the International Labour Conference where the proposed Convention was negotiated.



As a result, the final text of the Convention, agreed upon in June 2019, clearly includes informal workers and informal workplaces, including “private spaces when they are a place of work”, as well as the impact of domestic violence on the world of work. This was based on Article 5 in C189 which stipulated that “Each Member shall take measures to ensure that domestic workers enjoy effective protection against all forms of abuse, harassment and violence”. It was the first time that such a clause was part of an ILO Convention.



For more information

“Gender-based violence and harassment against domestic workers: Case stories from Asia”, IDWF 2020: <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/gender-based-violence-and-harassment-against-domestic-workers-case-stories-from-asia>

“Gender-Based Violence in Paid Domestic Work in Latin America and the Caribbean: Experiences, Voices, Actions and Recommendations of Workers’ Organizations to Eliminate It”: <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/gender-based-violence-in-paid-domestic-work-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-experiences-voices-actions-and-recommendations-of-workers-organizations-to-eliminate-it>

- **UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, July 2018**

It was, of course, vital that migrant domestic workers be clearly included in the first ever international agreement for better management of migration, at local, national, regional and global levels. The IDWF took an active role including, for example, co-hosting and participating in Civil Society Organization (CSO) Consultations in the Asia-Pacific and MENA regions. After 18 months of negotiations, the Agreement was signed on 13 July 2018, and migrant domestic workers are specifically included. For more on organizing migrant domestic workers, (see pages [28] and [29]).

- **Qatar: Bi-annual ADLSA/ILO/GUF meeting on Labour Reform**

Since 2018, the IDWF has been participating in bi-annual meetings between the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Qatari government (ADLSA), the ILO, and other Global Union Federations (GUFs), including the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), UNI Global Union, a global federation for the services sectors and Building and Wood Workers’ International (BWI). Led by the ITUC, the bi-annual meetings are a space to review and provide input on the Labour Reform programme of the government. Key achievements include the cancellation of the Exit Visa and No Objection Certificate in early 2020, which enabled migrant domestic workers to freely change employers and return to their home countries as they wish. If successfully implemented, this would be a concrete step in abolishing the Kafala system in employment of migrant domestic workers.

Learning from other Domestic Workers

The initial huge challenge is to bring isolated domestic workers together to learn how to form and run their own sustainable, membership-based organizations. Skills and confidence are needed to engage with others, to lobby and to argue one’s case carefully, whether with fellow trade unionists, politicians and government officials, employers’ associations, or the general public. Those who have been isolated, discriminated against, or abused in particular can find this not at all easy.

So, a key aspect of IDWF activities, like the IDWN before it, is to provide opportunities for domestic workers to share their experiences and learn from each other. This can be, for example, exchanging “local recipes” for how to recruit new members. They have greatly benefited too from guidance and training from skilled professionals, particularly from WIEGO (see page [11]) and the ILO (see pages [10], [13] and [31]).

Developing more ways to reach out to domestic workers and their groups and supporters is key for the IDWF and its affiliates. So the IDWF has very much increased its use of Facebook, Twitter, videos, and webinars to spread more widely the message of what domestic workers and their supporters are achieving across the world. And it has started training for its affiliates too in how to better use social media and online communications.

Radio has long been known as a very useful tool for reaching out to domestic workers isolated in the homes of their employers. But now, since many domestic workers have mobile phones, it is easier to make contact via Facebook and Twitter. There was even one migrant domestic worker in Saudi Arabia who found the IDWF via Facebook and was helped to escape. Then, once communication has been established, apps like WhatsApp help keep them in touch with their local groups.

Meanwhile, domestic workers have gained much greater coverage in recent years in TV and radio news broadcasts, film documentaries, and so on, with their situation now far better understood as a significant topic. This may well have been enhanced too by the global #MeToo and “Black Lives Matter” campaigns against gender and racial discrimination.

2.3 Collaboration Strengthens Global Solidarity

Domestic workers know that they and their organizations could never have gotten to where they are today without the support of numerous others: from community-based groups at the local level, to national bodies such as other trade unions, professional academics and human rights lawyers, through to global networks and organizations. Such alliances remain of vital importance to this day.

From the very beginning, the International Union of Food and Allied Workers (IUF) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) were key to the development of the IDWN and winning C189 (see Section 1). Throughout the decade since then, they have continued to work together and alongside the IDWN-IDWF, providing a wide range of essential support.

- **IUF global union federation**

The IUF has continued, for example, to urge its affiliates to collaborate with domestic workers’ organizations, particularly in capacity-building activities, lobbying for legal changes and implementation in each country, and to support domestic workers in C190. In the run-up to and during discussions for C190, as it did for C189, it hosted meetings and training sessions at its headquarters in Geneva. To amplify this collaboration, domestic workers’ organizations have been encouraged to affiliate to the IUF as well as to the IDWF. In Europe, the IUF European regional body European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT) has taken the lead among European trade union organizations in bringing domestic workers’ organizations there together. In November 2019 the EFFAT Congress took the decision to make domestic work one of its sectors and to initiate a liaison committee with other European trade union organizations which are also organizing domestic workers. EFFAT is committed to working very closely with the IDWF, which includes coordination of campaigns and activities (see pages [14] and [15]).



- **WIEGO**

Meanwhile, WIEGO kept domestic workers as one of its four main occupational groups of workers in the informal economy (see page [23]). Its role in gathering data on, for example, the size and composition of the domestic workforce, migrant domestic workers, legal improvements, wage levels, the gig economy, and the economic contribution which domestic workers make, has continued to be very significant. Through its success in raising funds, it has also provided vital human resources, particularly language interpretation, training support in how to form and run democratic member-led organizations, and staff time for the IDWF’s General Secretary and European Regional Coordinator. It has continued to publish reports and awareness-raising publications with the IDWF. <https://www.wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/domestic-workers>



The three other groups of informal workers which WIEGO currently focuses on are street vendors in part via StreetNet International (SNI), home-based workers (those working in their own homes) in part via HomeNet International (HNI), and waste pickers in part via the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers. Collectively WIEGO refers to these organizations and the IDWF as network organizations, or “the Nets”. Collaboration between them was important, for example, during the discussions in 2014-15 at the ILO on the transition from the informal to the formal economy, and again in 2018-19 on C190 against violence and harassment in the world of work (see page [9]). Then their solidarity as informal workers became even more vital in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic (see page [20]). Given such shared experiences that all informal workers face, WIEGO intends to develop such exchanges even more. In the words of Jane Barrett, Director of WIEGO’s Organization and Representation Programme: “Just as the pandemic has exposed the global fault lines of poverty and inequality, it has also positively reinforced the need for organized solidarity between all workers, but particularly between informal workers

across the sectors in which we work. To this end, WIEGO will continue to coordinate frequent meetings of the leadership of the sector-based global network organizations. We will continue to encourage and support joint global actions and activities, in the interests of building the counter power of organized informal workers.”

- **International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)**

The ITUC, a global confederation of national trade union federations, was another important ally from the beginning. Via its affiliated union federations in each country, it provided channels of communication for the domestic workers’ organizations to get recognition by the trade union movement. With its strong role at the ILO, it provided support and channels of access for domestic workers in the lead-up to and during the C189 negotiations.



After C189 was adopted, the ITUC led a global campaign called “**12 by 12**” (aiming for 12 ratifications by the end of 2012) in collaboration with the IDWF, IUF, Public Services International (PSI), and other international organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Anti-Slavery International, Solidarity, Migrant Forum Asia (MFA), World Solidarity, and Caritas. The campaign has been instrumental in promoting alliances between trade unions, national centres and domestic workers’ unions in many countries.

Then the ITUC’s support for including the private home in the definition of “the workplace” in the C190 Convention Against Violence and Harassment in the World of Work was also key. As with C189, it made sure that its affiliated union federations across the globe supported the specific inclusion of domestic workers and the private home in C190.

- **UNI, EI and PSI global union federations: collaborating on the Care Sector**

Across the world, domestic workers are an essential part of the care workforce. In many countries, especially where healthcare and elderly care services are inadequate, and as the ageing population grows, helping to look after the sick and elderly becomes part of domestic workers’ role. This is even though they often have little or no professional training or indeed recognition for this. And for many, their informal status gives them no access to social security for their own health and well-being, a situation that became even more serious during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To amplify the need for a just care system, the IDWF has started collaborating more closely with UNI, Education International (EI) and Public Services International (PSI), the global union federations which represent workers in the formal care sector, (see page [34]).

- **International NGOs**

Many other international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a very significant role too. They range from organizations involved in human rights such as **Human Rights Watch**, to migrants’ rights such as the **Migrant Forum Asia**, labour rights such as the **Solidarity Center**, and women’s rights such as the **Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women**, and many more.

Providing training for domestic workers’ groups, co-hosting meetings and webinars, raising public awareness, and collaborating in international policy processes are just some of their valuable contributions.

- **Academics**

Providing essential research throughout the C189 process, growing networks of academics across the world continue to add their knowledge, skills and resources into the movement. Recent collaborations with the IDWF include joint participation at global webinars on gender issues faced by domestic workers at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) sessions, and the process to achieve C190. Such networks include, for example:

Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL), Rutgers University, USA. Since 2019, the IDWF has joined the Global 16 Days Campaign, launched by the CWGL, to call for the elimination of gender-based violence (GBV), and in 2020 included the call for ratification of C190: <https://cwgl.rutgers.edu/>

Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) - an international feminist, membership organization committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women’s human rights. In 2016, for example, an IDWF delegation participated in and led two workshops at the AWID forum, which takes place every four years: www.awid.org

- **Employers**

Supporters of domestic workers’ rights can include their employers: people who see it in the interest of themselves and their families, too, to treat those who do such vital work for them with dignity and respect.

Building on some good initiatives in a few places around the world, such as in New York and Uruguay, in 2015 the IDWF and ILO-Asia launched a joint project: **“My Fair Home”**. Later, with the ILO-MENA, this included a training programme for employers to treat their domestic workers fairly, with pay at least at the minimum wage, a weekly day off, reasonable working hours, access to decent healthcare, etc. Some employers in Kuwait actually went on to form a “good employers” network. The IDWF also asked employers to sign up to pledges, and nearly 1,000 supporting individuals sent in their pledges and selfies: <https://idwfed.org/myfairhome>. This was featured in the International Domestic Workers Day celebration in Qatar on June 16, hosted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (ADLSA) and the ILO.

- **Funders/Donors**

It is extremely difficult for underpaid domestic workers to fund their own organizations. So they are very grateful to all those others who provide support, whether grant funding or in-kind support such as free space for meetings and training, so that they can continue to build their movement and achieve their goals (see more on page [11]).

Such supporters include trade union bodies, human rights and migrant rights supporters, women’s groups, and other anti-discrimination groups, as well as funding agencies and government aid programmes. Domestic workers feel these funders/donors should be proud of the support they give.

“The financial support of an increasing number of funders has enabled us to test new and bolder programmes, to grow leaders and drive advocacy campaigns, at all levels. Some funders have also become our partners in advocacy, helping us to venture into new ground. We are so very grateful to them all.”

Elizabeth Tang, General Secretary, IDWF

2.4 More and better organizations

Over the past 10 years domestic workers across the world have continued to organize in new and innovative ways to win the rights and respect they are entitled to – and deserve – at a national and local level.

Italy: Winning a Collective Agreement for Domestic Workers

In **Italy**, the *Federazione Italiana dei lavoratori del Commercio, Alberghi, Mense e Servizi* (FILCAMS-CGIL) has been organizing domestic workers for many decades. In 2020, the union won a collective agreement which identifies key elements that individual employment contracts must contain. This includes overtime, night work, holidays, permits, illness, accidents at work, the right to study, severance pay, and a wage increase of four per cent for every two years of service with the same employer. The agreement also implements legislation that gives three months of paid leave to women victims of violence, and includes a commitment to training against gender-based violence – a key part of ILO C190 (see page [9]).

The union also has built an extensive network of welfare and tax assistance centres to which domestic workers can turn for social assistance and social security practices, including applications for resident permits and citizenship, and family and unemployment allowances.

Working in partnership with the IDWF and the National Employers' Association of Domestic Labour (Domina), the union has also launched an information campaign for migrant domestic workers planning to travel to Italy to work there, about their rights as workers and the responsibilities of the employer.



For more information

'Domestic Work in Italy': A good practice and a good model: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-q8frLpkUU>

Nicaragua: Fighting for the Rights of Trans Domestic Workers

In **Nicaragua**, transgender domestic workers are abused, exploited, and excluded. In 2015, the *Sindicato de Trabajadoras Domésticas Transgénero* (SITRADOTRANS), the Union of Transgender Domestic Workers, was founded to promote and protect the labour rights of trans domestic workers. The union builds alliances with the LGBTQI+ movement to reach out to excluded workers, and advocates for sexual, reproductive, and labour rights. The union also carries out training and education to enable members to understand legal frameworks and labour rights, and to strengthen union power. The union now has 200 members.



Transgender Domestic Worker. Photo: Sofía Trevino

"We created it because we saw the need for an organization that would ensure labor rights and access to employment for trans women. We realized that most trans women in Nicaragua were engaged in domestic work and various trades, and that they did not have any protection. We discovered this reality by working closely with people with HIV. That eye-opening experience sparked an idea, and the idea became a union... The lack of knowledge that some trans workers have about the legal framework that protects them in their countries and about international instruments leads us to reflect on the urgency to export the SITRADOTRANS model to the whole world and work with allied organizations from other countries on strategies according to each context. Knowledge is the basic tool in the fight for our rights."

Francia Blanco, General Secretary, SITRADOTRANS



For more information

<https://lgbtiworkers.org/resources/news/knowledge-against-discrimination-transgender-domestic-workers-lead-the-way?id=11709>

Domestic Workers in EFFAT: From Platform to Sector

In **Europe (EU)** there are about eight million domestic workers - four per cent of total employment. 70 per cent of all domestic workers are undeclared (informal). Though they represent a vital workforce, and in many countries they are recognized in law and some have trade union representation, in many others their organizations have remained largely informal networks and their legal rights very weak. There is a vast difference between the different countries and the majority is not organized in trade unions, associations or networks.



EFFAT Congress. Photo: Karin Pape

In 2013, at the Congress of the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT), a motion was adopted to create a “platform for domestic workers” in EFFAT. This was the first step to recognize domestic work as a significant sector in EFFAT. Over the years that followed, EFFAT has been building support, organizing meetings of European level affiliates and domestic workers’ organizations, and carrying out more research into the many ways that domestic work is organized, in law and practice, across the region.



For more information

“**Domestic Workers in Europe: Getting Organized!**”, EFFAT, 2015: <https://effat.org/uncategorized/decent-work-for-domestic-workers/>

Then, at its Congress in 2019, EFFAT members unanimously adopted a motion put forward by the Women’s Committee entitled “Strengthening the Domestic Work Sector in EFFAT”. The motion intensifies the support for domestic workers, which is now manifested officially in the new EFFAT statutes, political framework, and its action plan. Elections were held in May 2021 to elect representatives for domestic workers, after which they will have equal rights to other sectors in EFFAT. This is a huge step in formal trade unions recognizing domestic worker organization in Europe, as Karin Pape, European Regional Coordinator for the IDWF, emphasizes:

“It has taken about ten years to reach the point where the EFFAT Congress decided to take up domestic workers as a proper sector. Now domestic workers have the same rights as other sectors. But the most exciting part is still in the making. One of the biggest challenges that still remains in Europe is organizing and reaching out to already established domestic workers’ organizations which are currently not part of trade union structures. With this new sector in EFFAT we can now start to reach out to these groups at the European level.”

Indonesia: Taking Action at the Community Level

Sapulidi is a domestic workers’ union based in the capital city of Jakarta in **Indonesia**, and it has achieved remarkable growth since it was established in 2014, now with 5,285 members. It has a solid and democratic structure from below, with a team of 254 strong leaders active at the local community level to recruit members, conduct union education, and mobilize domestic workers to join in campaigning on the National Domestic Workers Protection Bill. Despite the absence of legal and social protections, in just two years Sapulidi has managed to get over 1,000 members registered in the employment security scheme, through a voluntary registration scheme paid by their employers.



For more information

“**Decent Work for Domestic Workers: Eight Good Practices from Asia**”, ILO, 2017: https://idwfed.org/en/resources/decent-work-for-domestic-workers-eight-good-practices-from-asia/@@display-file/attachment_1

India: Organizing from the Bottom Up

The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in **India** is the largest affiliate of the IDWF. The union has long been organizing to advocate for domestic workers’ rights, running recruitment campaigns and undertaking national advocacy through the National Platform for Domestic Workers Rights, a national coalition of domestic workers’ unions.

SEWA has also established “domestic worker trade committees” at the district and state level, where around 70 domestic worker leaders and organizers from all over India come together to share experiences, learn to handle local issues, and establish plans for collective action to strengthen their rights. The committees include domestic workers of all ages, which has enabled older, more experienced domestic worker leaders to pass on their wisdom to new generations of younger leaders. As a result of these programmes, domestic workers in 10 states have formed unions. The committees have also enabled domestic workers to bring their issues to the national SEWA union, and from there to get representation on the national labour front.

Being part of the IDWF and sharing experiences with other domestic workers around the world has enabled them to better understand their issues in the larger system of labour exploitation.

Jamaica: The Time Has Come, Action Now

There are an estimated 60,000 domestic workers in **Jamaica**. Domestic workers are covered by national laws and qualify for benefits, including social security. But implementation continues to be a problem. Few employers respect the law or contribute to national insurance on behalf of their domestic worker(s). Many domestic workers do not have formal contracts, they are not properly covered by occupational safety and health law, and often cannot access government benefits.

The Jamaica Household Workers' Union (JHWU) started as a group of women fighting for the rights of domestic workers. Following a series of trainings sponsored by the Bureau of Women's Affairs in 1990, domestic workers formed the Jamaica Household Workers Association, which officially became a union in 2013. The union now represents 6,900 domestic workers across 13 chapters. Led by Shirley Pryce, JHWU has become a powerful force in the Caribbean and globally.



Shirley Pryce of the Jamaica Household Workers Association at the ILC discussions in Geneva in 2011. Photo: Sofia Trevino

In 2016, after a strong advocacy campaign by JHWU, including protests, marches and workshops, the Jamaican government ratified C189. In announcing ratification, Prime Minister Andrew Holness recognized the hard-fought battle of domestic workers led by Shirley Pryce and said: *"I'm pleased to announce that Jamaica has signed by virtue of her (Ms Pryce) instrumentality, we have signed, and we are ratifying the ILO Domestic Workers Convention C189."*

Domestic workers' unions across the Caribbean have now come together with the ILO and UN Women to form the Caribbean Domestic Workers' Network to advocate for other Caribbean countries to ratify. So far, four Caribbean islands have ratified.

The union is also campaigning for ratification of C190 and for improvements to occupational health and safety provision for domestic workers, as Shirley Pryce explains: *"We have made a lot of progress over the last 10 years – moved from association to union, gained membership, launched new chapters and educated many domestic workers. We have also strengthened our social dialogue with the private and public sector. We launched a 'worker of the year' award, sponsored by one of the biggest food giants across the Caribbean, Grace Kennedy Ltd. Each year we give a domestic worker of the year the honour.*

We also launched the 'Invisible Giant Award' where we honour 30 domestic workers each year for long service working in one family. This initiative was endorsed and has been supported by the Bureau of Gender Affairs and the Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport.

We have also strengthened our ties with international partners: UN Women, the ILO, civil society organizations and global unions. Collaboration and social dialogue are vital for success. We have also been fighting to address occupational health and safety and gender-based violence and have made many submissions to parliament to highlight the gaps we see in our national laws. After fighting for ratification, domestic workers, and our cause, became so visible. We told the government – the time has come, action now. They finally listened. We now work closely with the government who are willing to accommodate us. We have now become champions of enforcement to ensure that what is written on paper happens in reality."

2.5 And Winning Yet More Legal Improvements

With or without actual ratification of C189, there have been big steps forward in the laws and regulations related to domestic work in some other 30 countries, plus progress towards achieving this in about 20 more. This would never have happened without the success of achieving C189 and the ongoing mobilization of domestic workers for their rights as workers.

USA: Domestic Worker Bill of Rights

Although the US Government representatives were very supportive during the convention negotiations, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) has for strategic reasons been focusing on passing Domestic Worker Bills of Rights state-by-state, instead of working on ratification of ILO Conventions.



NDWA activists in the USA promoting their campaign 'Families Belong Together'. Photo credits clockwise from the top: Jennifer Natalie Fish; Jennifer Natalie Fish; IDWF; Jennifer Natalie Fish

The bills vary state-by-state but are guided by the fundamental principles contained in C189.

The contents of the Bill focus on a) including domestic workers in worker rights and protections, b) establishing industry standards to address the unique challenges of domestic work, and c) developing mechanisms and pathways to facilitate enforcement and implementation to ensure that rights do not just exist on paper.

After the passage of the first few bills, the challenges of implementation and enforcement emerged and, in response, NDWA began to include measures and mechanisms to facilitate enforcement, organizing and workers being able to negotiate for rights, protections, and standards in the industry. As Mariana Viturro, Deputy Director of the NDWA explains:

"We also wanted to think how we could leverage legislative victories to build worker power to enable domestic workers to shape the industry. For example, the first municipal bill in Seattle established a bipartite standards board, coordinated by the local labour authority. It is a mechanism for workers and employers to discuss and develop recommendations for improving the industry. In California, we were able to win a co-enforcement model funded by the state labour authority to support outreach and education to workers and employers and enable effective implementation."

Up to now, 10 states and 2 cities have passed Bills of Rights, which is a considerable achievement, the most recent being Virginia in 2021.

Based on this success at a state level, the NDWA has worked to bring a bill at the federal level to extend worker rights and protections and set minimum standards across the country. The bill will be reintroduced this year, adapted in light of the pandemic. Among other things, it includes measures for co-enforcement, and a Standards Board to enable domestic workers not only to negotiate wages but also to tackle occupational safety and health issues.

Middle East: Ending the Kafala System

In many countries of the **Middle East**, one of the biggest challenges and threats to workers' safety is the Kafala system. This requires foreign migrant workers to be sponsored by their employer, and they cannot change jobs or leave the country without their sponsor's permission. If they challenge their employer, they can be threatened with deportation. They have no legal standing as a "worker" and are not covered by labour laws. Domestic workers become trapped in the household in which they work, subject to abuse and exploitation. It is a form of slavery. At last, however, Kafala is starting to be phased out. In **Qatar**, new laws were passed in 2019-2020 giving migrant workers, including domestic workers, more rights such as to change their employer and be paid a better wage. Many problems remain, though, in getting full legal reform and in getting employers to respect these changes as Kafala is deeply embedded culturally.



For more information

"Following the Money: the Kafala System", IDWF panel discussion at the Global South Women's Forum (GSWF), December 2020: <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/following-the-money-the-kafala-system-and-chain-of-domestic-workers-migration-report-of-the-idwf-panel-at-the-global-south-womens-forum-gswf-december-14-2020>

"In the Middle East and Gulf Countries: 'Corona is not the virus, Kafala is'": <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/in-the-middle-east-and-gulfcountries-201ccorona-is-not-the-virus-kafala-is-201d>

Despite all the huge problems which migrant domestic workers face under such a situation, they are now organizing themselves in many MENA countries, with active support from the IDWF and allies, including trade unions in the migrants' home countries (see page [30]).

Mexico: The Fight for Social Security

In **Mexico**, the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores del Hogar* (SINACTRAHO), the National Union of Domestic Workers was established as a union in 2015, with the support of the IDWF. Since then, and working closely with other social movements, the union has challenged existing laws to win social protection for domestic workers.

In 2016, a law was introduced which classifies domestic workers according to their responsibilities. It also requires employers to provide domestic workers with contracts and establishes an 8-hour working day. Then in 2018, the Supreme Court ruled the exclusion of domestic workers from Mexico's mandatory social security system unconstitutional. As a result, the Government initiated a pilot project to enroll domestic workers, including an electronic registration system which enables employers to easily register and pay social insurance contributions for their domestic employees. So far, 27,295 domestic workers have been registered. SINACTRAHO is now working to inform more domestic workers of their new rights and get them signed onto the pilot scheme.

In April 2019, domestic workers achieved another major success: an amendment to the law that grants domestic workers the same basic labour rights as other workers, including a minimum wage, social security, health care and maternity leave. It also includes protections for migrant domestic workers. Mexico then ratified C189 in 2020, and in 2020 a minimum wage of \$154.03 per day was set for domestic workers. But there is still a long way to go as Norma Palacios Trabamala from SINACTRAHO explains: *"Although we consider this amount to be insufficient, the fact that domestic workers' salaries have entered the public agenda is progress. We continue to advocate for this amount to be readjusted based on the reality of domestic workers."*



Representative from SINACTRAHO.
Photo: Jennifer Natalie Fish

Belgium: Service Voucher System

In **Belgium**, a service voucher system was created by the government in 2004 which created an official sector for documented domestic workers. Domestic workers are hired by a company that provides cleaning services in private households.

Within the system domestic workers are contractual employees and are officially recognized as workers and enjoy the same labour and social security rights as any other worker. This means they have the right to organize in unions, are represented in bipartite and tripartite decision-making commissions, and have collective bargaining agreements signed with employers' federations of household employers. This includes migrant workers who are "documented" or come from other EU countries.



Belgium Service Vouchers Campaign; Photo: ACV-CSC

Every two years, the three unions that represent domestic workers, CSC Alimentation et Services (ACV-CSC); Centrale Alimentation-Horeco-Services FGTB-Horval (ABVV-FGTB Horval) and Centrale Générale (ABVV/ACCG FGTB) come together with the employers' federations to negotiate to increase the salary scale and improve working conditions. On top of this, in each company, workers can elect shop stewards every four years. Belgium ratified C189 in 2015 and has implemented the provisions of C189 in the service voucher system.

The system has formalized the work of domestic workers and improved their conditions and wages. But problems still remain – organizing domestic workers continues to be difficult, undocumented workers are excluded from the system, and domestic workers continue to be some of the lowest paid workers in Belgium, as Grace Papa from ACV-CSC highlights: *“Although it is a formalized sector, it remains scattered. This means that organizing is difficult, and it is difficult for shop stewards to connect with domestic workers. Many domestic workers do not have the time to be involved in the union because many have other family duties. The system also only works for documented domestic workers, because undocumented domestic workers are not yet recognized, valued or professionalized. The biggest challenge we face is increasing the wage. Domestic workers continue to work for low wages and it is really hard work. Because it is a subsidized sector, the subsidies the government gives are not enough to secure the wages domestic workers deserve. This all depends on political will. Although the system we have has been really useful for the last 17 years, we have now achieved the limits of the system and we are now working to review the system as well as the subsidies. Even though it is difficult to organize domestic workers, CSC A&S still have thousands of shop stewards elected in many companies in Belgium. We are very representative. Shop stewards have official meetings every month with the employer to talk and negotiate for their colleagues, solving individual problems as well as collective issues. Thanks to the shop stewards, we have been able to improve working conditions and increase salaries in companies.”*

In times of crisis – like the COVID-19 pandemic – the low wages that domestic workers continue to face plunge them into poverty, as Stefan Van Linden from ACCG FGTB notes: *“Many domestic workers do not work full-time. This means that their monthly wage is barely above the poverty line. When a crisis hits, domestic workers are able to get a temporary unemployment grant, but that only works out as 70 per cent of their wages. With a high wage this would be sufficient, but this is not the case for domestic workers. This means that many domestic workers have fallen into poverty. So our biggest focus now is increasing wages to prevent domestic workers facing poverty while working, and when a crisis hits.”*

3. The Challenges We Still Face

Since C189 was adopted, and through their energy and commitment, over the past ten years domestic workers worldwide have made significant progress for their rights. However, huge challenges remain.

COVID-19 Unveils the Reality of Domestic Workers' Lives

Never have the inequalities that domestic workers face been more apparent than in the COVID-19 pandemic. Domestic workers are central to the fight against the pandemic, working on the frontlines and keeping families and communities safe. But domestic workers have also faced a disproportionate risk of contracting the virus. In fact, the first person to die from COVID-19 in Brazil was a domestic worker who caught the virus from an employer who had returned from Italy.

Without basic rights and protections afforded by the law, domestic workers have faced increased workloads without overtime pay and no paid sick leave or protection against workplace accidents and injuries. Many domestic workers have not been provided with even the basic personal protective equipment to shield them from the virus in clients' homes. On the other hand, many employers have insisted domestic workers wear masks while working in their homes, but have seen no need to protect domestic workers by doing likewise. This has left many with no choice but to continue working in dangerous conditions, or else lose their livelihoods completely. Many domestic workers also faced job losses, often dismissed without notice. Without access to unemployment insurance, the vast majority have been left in desperate situations.

The pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for governments to protect the basic labour rights of domestic workers, including safe and hazard-free workplaces, paid sick leave and access to health care. As Martha Dolorier, General Secretary of the *Centro de Capacitación para Trabajadoras del Hogar* (CCTH, the Training Centre for Domestic Worker) in Peru highlights: *"In Peru, the pandemic unveiled a reality that nobody wanted to see: it made apparent the lack of protection and the risks to which the domestic sector is subject, both in terms of health and labour rights. I feel that every cloud has a silver lining. This situation has given visibility to the domestic workers' problems and has triggered huge tokens of solidarity, sisterhood and humanitarian aid. Additionally, all existing domestic workers' organizations have mobilized their members in different ways in the context of the pandemic and this allowed us to see the strength and possibilities we have to keep fighting together to materialize essential labour rights for domestic workers"*.

At the outbreak of the pandemic, the IDWF set up a Solidarity Fund of US\$ 2 million to respond to the needs of domestic workers on the ground. By the end of 2020, \$1 million had been raised and \$750,000 handed out to 71 affiliates and other domestic workers' organizations worldwide. With these funds, affiliates have been able to support domestic workers. Almost 20,000 domestic workers have received PPE, food packages and cash. The money has also helped domestic workers to advocate for their inclusion in government relief programmes and enabled domestic workers to buy data to be able to communicate with members and participate in virtual meetings and trainings.



Domestic workers in Mexico City at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Photos: César Parra



For more information

“The Impacts of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers and Policy Responses”, IDWF: <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/idwf-policy-brief-the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-domestic-workers-and-policy-responses>

“Strong and United Facing up to the Pandemic: the Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers in Latin America”: <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/strong-and-united-facing-up-to-the-pandemic-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-domestic-workers-in-latin-america>

3.1 Lack of legal reform and implementation

When C189 was adopted at the ILO, domestic workers revealed a banner which read “C189 – Congratulations! Now comes the domestic work for governments: Ratify – Implement.” They knew that the real struggle would come once they began to fight for ratification and proper implementation at the national level.

In many countries, there remains a huge gap between the hope of ratification and the reality of those rights being implemented and enforced. This means that most domestic workers continue to face huge inequalities at work.

- They continue to struggle to be included in occupational safety and health compensation schemes and protective legislation, despite being exposed to many risks. Many governments continue to argue that they cannot regulate conditions within private homes.
- They remain among the lowest paid workers and an estimated 21.5 million domestic workers are excluded from minimum wage protection.
- Over half of domestic workers have no legal right to weekly limits on working hours. Live-in domestic workers often work more than 60 hours per week.



“C189 – Congratulations! Now comes the domestic work for governments: Ratify – Implement”. Photos: Sofia Trevino



Although at least 70 countries have legislation which provides domestic workers with social security, something like 90 per cent of domestic workers continue to be excluded from social security protections, either fully or in part.

Once laws and regulations are in place, getting them properly implemented is a huge hurdle faced by most workers across the world. It is especially hard for domestic workers, for many reasons.

Many domestic workers lack information, representation, or organization to claim their rights. Employers can be discouraged from contributing due to costly or difficult to understand procedures. There may be restrictive criteria to make workers eligible, such as minimum working hours or earning thresholds that domestic workers fail to meet. Often it is just down to a lack of political will.

Domestic workers have been informal workers for so long, largely hidden behind the doors of the homes where they work and struggling to organize. This contributes to laws being ignored or going unenforced.

The **Philippines** was the second country to ratify C189, in September 2012, and massive changes to labour policies soon followed. Now domestic workers became included in the Labour Code, with the rights to the minimum wage, an employment contract, and so on.

However, Josua Mata, Secretary General of the national labour centre SENTRO, says that little has changed in reality. *“Yes, wages have improved. But the levels are set at the regional level, by a tripartite body, and domestic workers are often not represented there. The trade unionists there are usually men, many still patriarchal in their views.”*

The United Domestic Workers of the Philippines (UNITED), founded in 2015, is growing but it is not yet as strong as it could be, he says, especially outside the capital, Manila. Many domestic workers still have little knowledge of their legal rights, and they need to be much better organized and trained to ensure effective implementation.

Another reason is because the employers are private households. Often it is part of the culture not to think of those who employ domestic workers actually as “employers”, therefore with legal responsibilities. Many who pay people to look after their children, elderly or sick, don’t see themselves as “employers”. Trade unionists are known to struggle to see themselves as “employers” in this context.

Labour inspection of private homes is another hurdle. When the Government of the **United Kingdom** refused to vote “yes” for C189, one of its main arguments was that it is unrealistic to commit to sending labour inspectors into private homes. For them, the privacy of homeowners was more important than the safety of domestic workers.

By contrast, **Uruguay** has developed some innovative ways to do inspection of private homes. To raise public awareness and curb any hostility to changes in the law, they carried out carefully managed doorstep visits. As a result, more employers also formalized the relationship with their domestic workers. Now, when the authorities get a claim against an employer, a first step is to invite him/her to a meeting outside of the house. If unhappy with the employer’s response, they can get a court order to enter. It sends a clear message to all employers.

On top of this, in many countries the job is still not considered work, or it is undervalued or dismissed as “women’s work.” There are also inequalities due to gender, class, caste, and race. Often these power inequalities are reflected in laws.

The change needed to overcome these issues will not happen overnight. It may take years of sensitization and awareness-raising. This means that domestic workers need to continue the struggle to fight for their rights.



For more information

“**Domestic Workers and C189: Power and Skills to Make it Real**”, training manual developed at the Africa Regional Workshop, Tanzania, May 2019: available in English, Kiswahili, French, Portuguese and Amharic: <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/africa-regional-workshop-domestic-workers-and-c189-power-and-skills-to-make-it-real>

Formalizing Domestic Work

The exclusion of domestic workers – either in law or practice – means that domestic work remains largely informal. The ILO estimates that 75 per cent of the sector is informal. This figure is likely to increase with growing privatization and weakening of labour rights globally. So domestic workers need to continue their fight to win secure and decent work.

The formalization of domestic work is a central goal of C189. Plus it has since been reinforced with the adoption of **ILO Recommendation Concerning the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy (R204)** in 2015: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R204

Formalization in domestic work can take many different forms; for example:

For some domestic workers' organizations, having representative bodies for employers with whom they can negotiate collective bargaining agreements is an important step towards formalization. Such arrangements exist in **Uruguay**, and in **Sao Paulo, Brazil**, as Silvia Maria da Silva Santos, President of STDMSPP, a trade union of domestic workers of Sao Paulo explains: *"The first collective agreement was signed in 2016...It was possible because of our advocacy actions, but also because of the social dialogue maintained with the employer sector, which is grouped in a union. Collective bargaining allowed us to agree on a salary floor for each category of domestic worker...Our collective agreement even includes a clause exclusively dedicated to migrant workers..."*

In **Argentina**, where reliance on domestic workers is common for wealthier households, the burden of proof has been reversed. Middle- and high-income households are presumed to employ a domestic worker unless they prove otherwise. In 2017, the national tax office asked households for sworn statements confirming that they employ a domestic worker, and warning that there were significant penalties for providing false information. As a result of this and other measures, the number of registered domestic workers has increased more than threefold.

In **Trinidad and Tobago**, NUDE has been advocating for the inclusion of domestic workers under the Industrial Relations Act for years, with little success. Domestic workers continue to face informal working arrangements. The union developed the idea of a workers' cooperative to provide a route towards formalization. The cooperative is owned by and employs domestic workers. Employers can then hire domestic workers from the co-op. NUDE is also promoting skills training of domestic workers to "professionalize" the sector.

Domestic workers are frequently either legally excluded from certain worker rights and/or benefits or excluded practically because of the nature and structure of the work. For example, most house cleaners work for multiple employers. To overcome this, in **Philadelphia, USA**, the NDWA's Bill of Rights included a mandate to establish a portable benefits system. The system, modelled after the **Alia** platform, would enable domestic workers working for multiple employers to accrue paid time off. Each employer would contribute a pro-rated proportion into a worker's account and the centralized system would aggregate it for the domestic worker to be able to access when she needs to take time off.



For more information

"Between Regularization and Informality: European States Need to Meet their Commitment to C189": <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/between-regularization-and-informality-european-states-need-to-meet-their-commitment-to-c189>

It is important for domestic workers' organizations to share their experiences to enable more formalization. Building connections with other informal sectors to understand how they have secured better rights is also important, and something very much supported and enabled by WIEGO: <https://www.wiego.org/rethinking-formalization> (See also page [11].)



Dominican Republic: The Struggle for Social Protection

In the **Dominican Republic**, the *Asociación de Trabajadoras del Hogar* (ATH), the Domestic Workers Association has long been fighting for the inclusion of domestic workers in social security. The union has built strong advocacy campaigns led by empowered leaders, which is why C189 was ratified in 2015.

Despite the ratification of C189, domestic workers continue to face barriers to getting the rights and protections they deserve, largely due to lack of political will and effective implementation as Elena Pérez García, General Secretary of ATH explains: *“Being a woman, a young woman, a domestic worker and a trade unionist has been one of the biggest barriers, because I had to earn respect in a world of men, where it was seen as ridiculous for us to demand equal rights. For society, cleaning has historically been a women’s thing and housework was not a job. It was difficult to make our way in this context, but through time and strong awareness-raising work we have achieved recognition of our work as a job, and that is a great advance. We still have before us the enormous challenge of complying with C189 in the country, starting with the definition of a minimum wage for the sector and the guarantee of access to Social Security...Recently, a bill for the sector was presented to Congress, which seeks to operationalize this binding international instrument...We also continue to train and empower our colleagues on their rights and how to defend them...”*

The union now holds meetings with Ministries to find concrete ways to implement C189.

3.2 Organizing/Building for the Future

Strengthening Domestic Workers Organizing

The unique nature of the worker-employer relationship, and the fact that domestic workers are isolated and spread out, pose barriers to organizing, particularly using traditional approaches. In some countries, domestic workers continue to not be allowed to join trade unions, or trade unions do not prioritize the organizing of domestic workers.

But the main role of unions, supported by the IDWF, is to build and sustain a vibrant membership base capable of winning rights and protections for domestic workers. Around the world, innovative organizing techniques are taking place to build this domestic worker power. The impact that COVID-19 has had on membership numbers only reinforces this urgent need.

Some unions are building alliances with domestic workers through outreach to civil society, women’s groups, local community groups and faith-based networks; for example:

In the **Netherlands**, the FNV has been helping to organize undocumented migrant domestic workers by reaching out to their self-help community organizations, most of which are based on the countries from which they come, such as the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union – Netherlands (IMWU-NL), which was itself based on a similar model in **Hong Kong**. Domestic workers are now an official subsector within the FNV, and are given official membership cards, an important piece of recognition for undocumented workers.

In **Belgium**, the ACV-CSC reaches out to domestic workers through their local national communities, particularly where they congregate in faith-based groups. On Sunday mornings, the union attends church services and gives presentations to inform domestic workers about the benefits of the union.

Some unions have found success in building new models for recruitment, such as door-to-door campaigns or providing services for domestic workers; for example:

In **Namibia**, NDAWU has a 1 to 10 recruitment formula to build its membership base. Each domestic worker activist commits to recruiting 10 members in her neighbourhood. She then acts as the Section leader, and on a monthly basis collects dues from members and provides updates to/from the union. This helps to strengthen trust in the union.

Some unions use social media and online communications to build platforms to raise awareness of the benefits of the union, as well as to inform domestic workers about their rights; for example:

In **Belgium**, the ACCG FGTB focuses on organizing domestic workers online. The union has a popular Facebook page, with more than 50,000 followers, which gives domestic workers general information about the rights and information about what is happening in the sector. At the time of writing, this is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Turkey: “Loophole” Found and Trade Union Registered

In Turkey, a trade union for domestic workers came out of a women’s community-based organization. The Women’s Research and Solidarity Centre (KADMER) was founded in 2001 to reach out to women in Istanbul and mobilize them to fight for their rights. They focused on violence against women as well as the paid and unpaid labour of women. After learning about the large number of fatal accidents of domestic workers, they decided to form a cooperative called IMECE (meaning “everybody working collectively”).

In Turkey, domestic workers are not recognized as workers. The state continues to insist that the domestic sphere should be defined as women’s labour, as Sinem Atakul from IMECE explains: *“If the indoor area becomes a professional area, men will also enter that area. Then childcare, home cleaning and elderly care will not only be the definition of a woman’s job. So, there is a gender-based problem here.”*

Although the rights of domestic workers are still not officially recognized in Turkey, IMECE managed to find a loophole and became officially recognized as a union in 2012, and it held its first Congress in 2013. The union has been supporting domestic workers to fight individual legal cases and has been winning. Through the Broom Academy, the union has also been training domestic workers to build their confidence and to encourage women to recognize themselves as workers. This has enabled them to be better equipped to obtain their rights. IMECE Domestic Workers Union now has about 400 members, mostly part-time domestic workers with several different employers.

USA: “We Dream in Black”

With deep roots in the enslavement of African peoples, the domestic work industry in the USA was built on the centuries-long economic exploitation and social subjugation of Black women. The leadership and courage of Black domestic workers over many generations have paved the way for contemporary domestic worker organizing. NDWA believes that Black women must continue to lead domestic worker organizing, and that the organizing must center on the lives of Black women.

In 2015, NDWA launched We Dream in Black (WeDiB) to build the collective power and visibility of Black caregivers, nannies, and professional cleaners. WeDiB, working at the intersections of race, gender and class, pushes for transformative change for domestic workers. WeDiB’s approach includes building a strong and active membership, training, organizing for policy change, and shifting cultural norms and narratives about care work.

WeDiB’s growing base of members range from young workers to elders; members who are U.S.-born and immigrants from across the African diaspora; people of multiple gender identities and sexualities; and individuals of varied class backgrounds and abilities.

In 2020, We Dream in Black released its “Unbossed Agenda” which outlines economic and social policies that aim to transform domestic work and infrastructure to support Black domestic workers and their communities.

Learn more: domesticworkers.org/unbossed



NDWA activists take part in the We Dream in Black initiative. Photo: Sofia Trevino

Strengthening Domestic Workers' Leadership

Of course, the hard-won achievements need to become a lasting reality and not disappear as leadership changes. This means building a strong and sustainable movement. Domestic workers need to be empowered to become the next generation of leaders, and IDWF affiliates are eager for opportunities to develop their skills and resilience. Capacity-building, education and leadership training are crucial to sustaining domestic workers' organizations at all levels.

*“As leaders, we need to support each other,
and pass on to the next generation.”*

Myrtle Witbooi, President, IDWF

Strengthening the power and knowledge of domestic workers is also crucial to enabling legal change and implementation, as Marcelina Bautista from the SINACTRAHO union and *Centro de Capacitación para Empleadas del Hogar* (CACEH), the Domestic Workers Training Centre in **Mexico** explains:

“Well, realistically, achievement of legislation is one thing and its impact on the ground is other. How to make sure laws are implemented? Domestic worker organizations need to share information and need to empower domestic workers. Empowering domestic workers and building leadership is of vital importance. A domestic worker needs to have tools to defend her rights. That is the most important thing in enforcing law...”

Over the past decade, many education and training initiatives have been held to realize these ambitions. This includes workshops to foster leadership among domestic worker organizations, training on negotiation skills, and membership mapping and recruitment methods, as well as training on issues such as migration, child labour, gender-based violence and harassment, and access to social security.



2019 Hong Kong Training. Photos: Sofia Trevino

For example, in 2016, a **“Domestic Workers Leadership Formation Programme”** was initiated by the IDWF to strengthen the power of affiliates’ leadership skills. Aimed at producing manuals to be used in training of trainers’ workshops, a draft training manual on **“Planning for Empowerment and Change”** was produced and used in two 4-day intensive regional workshops in Indonesia and Uganda. There, 30 domestic worker leaders were trained, who were then able to take the knowledge and skills learned back to build domestic worker power in their home countries.



For more information

“Planning for Success: A manual for domestic workers and their organizations”, 2018:
<https://idwfed.org/en/resources/planning-for-success-a-manual-for-domestic-workers-and-their-organizations>

“Domestic Workers Practicum in Asia (follow-up to Training for Success)”: <http://www.idwfed.org/en/resources/domestic-workers-practicum-in-asia>



IDWF Luna training retreat for affiliates from Latin America and the Caribbean in 2019. Photos: IDWF

Leadership Unity, (re)Novation, Amplification (LUNA)

In 2019, a major new training initiative was held in Latin America. Forty domestic workers from 17 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean came together to take part in LUNA, a one year- leadership training programme. Originally created by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) in the USA, the programme was a collaboration between the IDWF, the *Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar* (CONLACTRAHO), the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers, Generative Somatics, the Solidarity Center, and other donors.

The programme consists of three multi-day workshops, supported by ongoing mentoring. It focuses on political education, technical training in organizing strategies, and building new models of leadership.



The training recognizes that the traditional, male-dominated, and hierarchical leadership structures are often not relevant for domestic workers. It supports domestic workers to create new models that work for them.

Domestic workers also take part in exercises to enable them to heal from trauma. This is particularly important for domestic workers who frequently face multiple oppressions and endure abuse, violence and other types of exclusion.

The programme has had a very positive impact, and the IDWF plans to hold LUNA every two years, as Francia Blanco from the *Federación de Trabajadoras Domésticas y Oficinas Varios "Julia Herrera Pomares"* (FETRADOMOV), a federation of domestic workers' unions in Nicaragua explains: *"As a trans woman, it was so important to be in such a space with so many leaders across Latin America, to be able to centre ourselves in our own bodies and presence, to be able to draw on our own resilience and on the resilience of our compañeros."*



For more information

"Latin America: Domestic Workers - Healing, Growing, Taking Action", 2020: <https://idwfed.org/en/updates/latin-america-domestic-workers-healing-growing-taking-action>

Financial Sustainability: An Ongoing Struggle

The struggle of domestic workers is fought by workers with limited financial resources.

Domestic workers' unions rely on membership dues to fund their vital work. But with extremely low wages and families to support, payment of membership dues can seem an impossible task.

This means that financial sustainability remains one of the biggest challenges that the movement faces. But this is a challenge that needs to be overcome to protect the millions of domestic workers whose livelihoods are at stake.

Over the years the IDWF and its affiliates have built strong links with supportive organizations which has helped to provide the resources needed for this important work (see page [11]).

The 2nd IDWF Congress determined financial sustainability as a key priority, and since 2019 the IDWF has embarked on a sustainability programme to find innovative methods for improving financial systems for itself as a federation and for its affiliates. As well as securing membership dues by expanding membership, and funding from supportive organizations, private foundations, and trade unions, other potential sources identified include generating income through selling products and services.

Such innovative ways of increasing financial sustainability include:

In **Nigeria**, the National Union of Hotels and Personal Services Workers (NUHPSW) registered a company to generate income for the union. The company secured a cleaning contract to manage waste and clean drainage, and the income was reinvested in a project to provide catering services, and operate a staff canteen where service employees can eat at a subsidized rate. The space is hired out for events, and the business also provides employment opportunities for union members.

In the **Philippines**, the UNITED Domestic Workers Union has worked with the municipal government in two districts to provide community cleaning work to domestic workers who lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this initiative, domestic workers have been able to earn money to relieve their families of economic hardship.

Organizing Migrant Domestic Workers: a truly international challenge

It is now acknowledged that there are hundreds of thousands of migrant domestic workers working in countries far away from their own families and communities. The growing demand for domestic workers in countries of the Global North, alongside increasing informality in the sector, are attracting huge numbers of migrants to do domestic work, often migrating out of desperation to find work outside their home country. Often trafficked by illegal networks, many migrant domestic workers live/

work in situations of isolation, neglect, abuse and even slavery. With limited rights and legal protection, and often very poor, migrant domestic workers frequently lack power, leaving them unable to access decent work opportunities or escape exploitative work situations.

Unions also face challenges in organizing migrant domestic workers, including legal barriers and migrant workers' distrust of union organizers.

But the past decade has seen many new initiatives and even successes in tackling this situation.

More migrant workers have found ways of coming together in their country of destination. Sometimes this is based on their shared occupation, but more often it is their shared nationality which brings them together. From these loose social groups, some have developed into formal organizations, become members of the IDWF, and also achieved recognition and support from trade unions in their home country.

Providing information for migrant domestic workers about their rights and where to go for support in their country of work is vital. Now that many do have mobile phones, social media has come to the fore, with many domestic workers' groups and support networks providing such information in appropriate languages.

Meanwhile, in some countries and regions from which large numbers of domestic workers are known to leave, trade unions and other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), such as human and women's rights associations, have become increasingly active in supporting migrant domestic workers. Some have teamed up with government departments and the police to confront trafficking gangs. Some have engaged in public awareness-raising, particularly to inform workers pre-departure of what they are likely to experience in their country of destination. Workshops have been held with returnees to learn more about the conditions in the country where they worked, to help develop even better strategies for those about to go there. Increasingly domestic workers are realizing they have to fight for their rights and recognition not only in their own countries, but also for their fellow nationals who are working abroad.

Between 2017 and 2019, the IDWF collaborated with SENTRO, a national trade union centre in the Philippines, and Labor Education and Research Network (LEARN), a workers' NGO in the Philippines to provide leadership training and mentorship to groups of Filipino migrant domestic workers working in Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia and Singapore. This has improved leadership skills among migrant domestic workers and resulted in the formation of a transnational organization of Filipino migrant domestic workers. It is hoped that this new structure will enable domestic workers to be better coordinated in their advocacy and build power.

Switzerland: Winning Protections for Undocumented Migrant Domestic Workers

In theory, C189 offers protections for all workers, including those who are undocumented. But in reality, if undocumented workers claim their labour rights, they become "official", and the risk of being denounced and expelled from the country is greater.

In Geneva, Switzerland the Interprofessional Union of Workers (SIT), jointly with the Swiss union UNIA and with the support of many migrants' groups and allies has been working to address this problem. It has been organizing mainly undocumented migrant domestic workers and has built strong alliances with migrant grassroots organizations. As a result of an agreement with the authorities, they have created a voucher system through which employers can register their domestic workers, including undocumented domestic workers. The workers are then entitled to, for example, healthcare and pension benefits, and they can access them without fear of being deported.

In 2017, "Operation Papyrus" was initiated – a regularization scheme aimed at granting residence permits to the estimated 13,000 undocumented people living in Geneva, among them many domestic workers. This was not a new law, but the proper application and implementation of existing laws. Geneva is at the forefront in Switzerland to apply it because of the strong movement there bringing pressure on the authorities to do so. SIT has been supporting workers with their applications. So far 3,000 people have been regularized, 80 per cent of whom are domestic workers. SIT is now helping to renew the permits of domestic workers.

But the struggle for regularization remains difficult; to receive documentation, workers must prove that they are able to live without support from the state. Domestic workers are some of the lowest paid workers and so this remains a struggle. In 2020, residents of Geneva voted to adopt a law



introducing a minimum wage for all workers. This is a huge win for domestic workers and was likely spurred on by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Mirella Falco from SIT explains: *“This is an amazing victory for domestic workers. Before this the salary was fixed by the local authorities and was very low in relation to the cost of living in Geneva despite the demands of the union. The introduction of the law means domestic workers’ salaries have increased a lot. This law is now written into the model contract, setting their minimum wages. We now must see if this new law is respected because controls are difficult. This was adopted just after the start of the pandemic. I think that the pandemic showed people the need for a minimum wage to protect the lowest paid workers from falling into poverty. We are also now continuing the fight for the recognition of care work and the need for care workers to also have a better income and to reduce working hours.”*

In **Europe**, PICUM (Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants) is an NGO network which aims to promote the rights of undocumented migrants, including domestic workers across the region. Its 162 member organizations include IDWF affiliates such as ACV-CSC (Belgium), SIT (Switzerland), and many other migrant support and human rights organizations: <https://picum.org>

Argentina: A Mobile App for Domestic Workers

The *Unión Personal Auxiliar de Casas Particulares* (UPACP, the National Union of Domestic Workers) in Argentina has worked with the Ministry of Labour and the ILO to launch a mobile application for migrant domestic workers in the region. The interactive resource provides accessible information on rights and legal protections, as well as support networks and contacts available locally for domestic workers.

Costa Rica: Organizing Across the Migration Corridor

In Costa Rica, many of the domestic workers are migrants from Nicaragua. For over 20 years the *Asociación de Trabajadoras Domésticas* (ASTRADOMES), the Association of Domestic Workers, has been fighting for the rights of migrant domestic workers.

ASTRADOMES is an association, rather than a union, because in Costa Rica migrant workers are not allowed to be union leaders. But this has not stopped domestic workers from fighting for their rights, as María del Carmen Cruz Martínez, President of ASTRADOMES and General Secretary of the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers (CONLACTRAHO) explains: *“Our organization was born with the spirit of supporting migrant workers. Since then, all of our actions have had migrant workers as a primary objective, always on the basis that the laws should protect them in the same way as national workers. Labour human rights have no borders. Our greatest achievement in relation to migrant workers is having to obtain a work permit for those who do not have a residence permit.”*

Organizing Migrant Domestic Workers in the MENA Region

According to the ILO, there are some 1.6 million migrant domestic workers in the Arab States region. Saudi Arabia has most, followed by Kuwait. Large numbers come from countries in Asia, such as the Philippines, as well as from East and West Africa.

Domestic workers there face many difficulties, particularly those under the “Kafala” system of sponsorship which keeps them subject to their employer. While this is starting to be phased out (see page [18]), numerous other problems remain. However, the past decade has seen significant advances.



For more information

“A Job at Any Cost’: Experiences of African Women Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East”, IDWF, January 2020, based on research by the IDWF and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) with IDWF affiliates in Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zanzibar: <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/a-job-at-any-cost-experiences-of-african-women-migrant-domestic-workers-in-the-middle-east>

“Across Borders and Movements: Migrant Domestic Workers Resistance”, IDWF Webinar Report on the International Migrants Day, 2020: <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/across-borders-and-movements-migrant-domestic-workers-resistance>

ILO FAIRWAY Programme on migrant workers in the Arab States and Africa, 2019-2023. It has led to the establishment of the Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association (SKDWA) (see pages [31]), and continues with outreach to African communities in Kuwait; for example: https://www.ilo.org/beirut/projects/WCMS_520336/lang--en/index.htm

Kuwait: Overcoming the “Culture of Fear”

In late 2020, the IDWF welcomed the Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association (SKDWA) as its first affiliate from the region.

May Ann Abunda and Chito Neri say that from about 2008 they started organizing activities for Filipino migrant workers during their days off, forming an informal group called Sandigan. Through this, they learned a lot about the serious abuses that many face. They travelled around Kuwait and gathered more data, and this helped get them credibility with the Philippines Embassy, which then agreed to provide travel documents to undocumented workers, enabling many to return home. But they realized more pressure was needed on the Embassy to find lawyers and get active on workers being detained, physical and mental welfare, the welfare of undocumented children (many born after rape by employers), and more. Over the next few years, some 3-4,000 workers were rescued.

In about 2015, they were approached by the IDWF and ILO to get involved in the ILO FAIRWAY Programme. This led to training in organizing and how to develop a formal organization for domestic workers. They had to challenge the lack of freedom of association in Kuwait, but they founded the SKDWA, and the Kuwaiti authorities started to acknowledge them. *“They felt our presence”*, Ann says. In 2018, they were the first organization in the MENA region to celebrate International Domestic Workers Day, attended also by representatives from several Embassies.

“Before, no-one was brave enough to talk about domestic workers; there was a culture of fear, and it was a challenge to help them think freely.” But they reached out and started building their membership. The SKDWA’s founding Congress was in November 2019, and they are now up to about 400 members.

Among their activities is providing skills training in, for example, hairdressing and sewing, as well as in Arabic language. SKDWA believes this is a good strategy to help “professionalize” domestic work, potentially increasing salaries, and they believe it has helped impress some employers in Kuwait.

Recently, they also founded the Integrated Community Centre (ICC) to bring together migrant workers from other countries too. Now they want to focus on those from Africa. Research they did during the FAIRWAY Programme showed higher levels of abuse among African domestic workers: over 60 per cent without a weekly day off, 70 per cent with no access to their passport, and over 50 per cent experiencing racism since their arrival. *“We have met with workers from Sierra Leone who, having been trafficked via Guinea Bissau, actually have Guinea Bissau passports!”*



For more information

“Silicon Valley’s Online Slave Market”, BBC News Africa, November 2019: an undercover investigation into the use of Google and Apple apps in modern slavery; it focuses on Fatou, a 16 year-old from Guinea working in Kuwait, and features the work of Ann Abunda from Sandigan: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ldll_n28e0&t=110s



Kenya: “We have to be creative”

The Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA) has been active in organizing domestic workers there for many years. But they knew they needed to do more about those who are leaving to work in the MENA region. Ruth Kakame, Chairperson of the National Domestic Workers Council of KUDHEIHA, says that, in about 2015, they started doing public awareness-raising to fill the gaps not covered by the Government and recruitment agencies about what workers should expect to find in their new jobs. They held public forums, put up billboards, went on the radio, and offered a free telephone service for advice. *“It can be a culture shock when they get there, with many language and communication issues”,* Ruth says.

More needed to be done at an official level too. Together with human rights organizations, they engaged with the Government, as well as with registered recruitment agencies although that was not easy. Now there is an official body, the Migrant Workers Coalition, which includes government departments, with sub-sections which deal with particular issues such as tracking the human traffickers and the social welfare of returnees, including support for those suffering from trauma.

Then, knowing that unions in other countries such as in the Philippines have more experience in organizing migrant workers across borders, they got in touch to learn more from them. In 2020, KUDHEIHA started contacting Kenyans working in the MENA region, whom they already knew by other means. They then linked them to the IDWF Regional Coordinator for more support and ideas, and they have started to plan for training community leaders there, and better engagement across borders. *“We have to work in secret in some places, before we can find trusted institutions”,* Ruth says. *“WhatsApp groups in the different countries are helpful. As organizers, we have to be creative.”*

Guinea: Confronting the traffickers

Guinea is another of the African countries from which large numbers of women, men, and children go to work as domestic workers in the Gulf region, including many in transit from elsewhere in West Africa.

Since 2016, the *Syndicat National des Employés de Maison de Guinée* (SYNEM-GUINÉE) has been working alongside others to support abused returnees, and to confront and block the criminal gangs responsible for trafficking. Asmaou Bah, SYNEM General Secretary, says,

“We work with a wide range of other bodies to combat trafficking, including women’s rights NGOs who help find and support victims/survivors, as well as the police and other official bodies to track down the traffickers. So far about a dozen trafficking networks have actually been dismantled. On 8 September 2020, a national platform - the National Committee for the Fight against Trafficking in Persons and Similar Practices (CNLTPPA) - was launched, in which we are involved along with the Government, other trade unions, and civil society organizations. There followed a 4-day seminar with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and in February 2021 we had a workshop in the city of Mamou to focus on the ways that domestic workers are recruited.”

Child Domestic Workers

Millions of children work in paid or unpaid child labour in domestic work. Forced into child labour due to poverty, social exclusion, violence or discrimination, child labour in domestic work is often spurred on by the cultural acceptance of domestic work as suitable work for children, especially girls.

Because domestic work is hidden and concentrated in the informal economy, children frequently face exploitative and abusive work situations. National laws and policies in place to protect children are usually inadequate, or not effectively implemented.

Child domestic work is a barrier to children getting an education. It also hinders their potential to escape from poverty long-term. Tackling child labour in domestic work remains a challenge facing domestic worker organizations.

India: Building a Child Rights Movement

In India, state-level branches of the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) have been trying to abolish child domestic work from society by organizing a child's rights movement.

The NDWM focuses on sensitizing local communities, families, and employers about the fundamental right of children to participate in education, through individual and group discussions, meetings, and training sessions. The union also works closely with local authorities, child welfare committees and police to rescue children who are being exploited by employers. The NDWM is also campaigning to implement compulsory school attendance until the age of 15, working closely with schools.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the union's key demands was for local authorities to consider having a "fee free" year so that children could finish their education. Many child domestic workers have become active in the campaign and have formed a child rights movement, holding meetings with key stakeholders to promote the importance of a child's right to education. Some authorities and employers are starting to collaborate with the network around child protection.

The NDWM also provides services for child domestic workers, ranging from enrollment and educational support for them in schools (including night schools) to skills training, rescue and crisis intervention, mutual support and counselling, and participation in street theatre and sports activities. Ashish Shigwan from the NDWM explains:

"The children of domestic workers drop out because they cannot afford to pay school fees, and then they go into domestic work. It is a vicious cycle. Many employers continue to have the mentality that because children can easily work but are unable to demand higher wages or better conditions, they should exploit them. We are trying to break that mentality. Sensitization is still ongoing and we are aware that it will take time to change. We are trying to involve different agencies and stakeholders with children domestic worker rights and promoting the need for better protections for the fundamental rights of workers and children..."

There are still many challenges, particularly in fighting for improved legal frameworks. Although the Child Labour Act prohibits child labour for child domestic workers under 14 years of age, implementation of the law is not good enough. There is also no protection for youth aged 15-18.

- In **Sri Lanka**, the National Child Protection Authority now has the authority to enter and search premises where it has reason to believe child abuse is occurring. This includes private homes.
- In **Cambodia**, the Inter-Union Committee for Child Labour has a policy on child domestic labour which states that no union member can employ a child domestic worker younger than 15. Those aged 15+ have a specific minimum wage and receive benefits including education materials.
- In many countries, including **Bangladesh, Brazil, Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, Morocco, the Philippines** and **Turkey**, governments provide stipends to poor families to alleviate financial pressures to send children to work. This has resulted in reduced rates of child labour.
- In **Tanzania**, the Conservation, Hotels, Domestic, Social Services and Consultancy Workers Union (CHODAWU) has established Child Labour Committees in local villages to help identify cases of exploitative labour, withdraw children from exploitative situations, and initiate legal action against employers when necessary.



For more information

"Hidden Slavery: Child Domestic Workers – Study on the situation of child domestic workers in Bangladesh", 2016 https://idwfed.org/en/resources/hidden-slavery-child-domestic-workers/@@display-file/attachment_1

"Tackling Child Labour in Domestic Work", handbook by ILO in collaboration with IDWF, 2017, translated into Nepali, Khmer and Bengali <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/tackling-child-labour-in-domestic-work-a-handbook-for-action-for-domestic-workers-and-their-organizations-1/english/cldw-handbook-may-2017-low-res-web.pdf>

"PROMOTE: Decent Work for Domestic Workers to End Child Domestic Work", a training programme in Indonesia in 2018, supported by the US Department of Labor: https://www.ilo.org/jakarta/whatwedo/projects/WCMS_210965/lang--en/index.htm



The Care Economy: Campaigning for a Just Care System

Across the world, domestic workers are an essential part of the care economy. The “Care Economy” is the sum of all forms of care work – it can be paid or unpaid, in public or private places. Domestic workers are an essential part of the care workforce, making up 23 per cent of the global care workforce.

In many countries, particularly where healthcare and elderly care services are inadequate, and as the ageing population grows, the demand for care work is increasing, and helping to look after the sick and elderly is becoming a key part of a domestic workers’ role. This is even though they often have little or no professional training or indeed recognition for this.

But the protections offered for workers have not matched the demands for care. Those who provide care face huge costs – they lack protection, experience exploitation and abuse, and suffer from low wages and poor conditions. Care workers’ work is undervalued and is often not seen as a “real job”, synonymous with “women’s work” or that of charity work.

But domestic workers as providers of care should have their labour rights and care needs recognized, particularly after the pandemic which shone a light on the essential caring role of domestic workers. The growing demand for care also means that conditions for workers in care needs to improve to attract and retain workers in care jobs.

Domestic workers across the world are coming together to campaign for domestic work to be re-imagined as care work and for a comprehensive system of care.

In the **USA**, the NDWA and the United Domestic Workers of America (UDW) have both launched care campaigns to fight for better wages and benefits for care workers. On 1 April 2021, they were pleased to hear President Biden announce that he would include caregivers in his new plan for the country. He said, *“For too long, caregivers who are disproportionately women, and women of colour and immigrants, have been unseen, underpaid and undervalued. This plan, along with the American Families Plan, changes that, with better wages, benefits and opportunities for millions of people who will be able to get work in an economy that works for them.”*

In 2020, the IDWF launched the **#CareForThoseWhoCareForYou** campaign to raise awareness and advocate for professional recognition of this essential care work that domestic workers do, with the urgent need for appropriate wages and social protection: <https://idwfed.org/en/campaigns/invest-in-care-decent-work-for-domestic-workers>



For more information

IDWF online Global Meeting on Care, 25 October 2020, with 150 participants from 47 countries: <https://idwfed.org/en/updates/idwf-global-meeting-on-care-october-25>

The IDWF is now collaborating more closely with other Global Unions including UNI, EI and the PSI (see page [12]), to amplify the demands. For example, they ran a joint **Invest in Care Now! Global Day of Action, on 29 October 2020**: <https://idwfed.org/en/campaigns/invest-in-care-decent-work-for-domestic-workers>.

Understanding Care, IDWF <https://idwfed.org/en/resources/understanding-care>



*Domestic Workers at the ILO in Geneva Switzerland,
in June 2011. Photos: Sofia Trevino*



Appendix: Ratifications of C189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)*

Country	Date Ratified	Status
Argentina	24 March 2014	In Force
Belgium	10 June 2015	In Force
Bolivia	15 April 2013	In Force
Brazil	31 January 2018	In Force
Chile	10 June 2015	In Force
Colombia	9 May 2014	In Force
Costa Rica	20 January 2014	In Force
Dominican Republic	15 May 2015	In Force
Ecuador	18 December 2013	In Force
Finland	8 January 2015	In Force
Germany	20 September 2013	In Force
Grenada	12 November 2018	In Force
Guinea	25 April 2017	In Force
Guyana	9 August 2013	In Force
Ireland	28 August 2014	In Force
Italy	22 January 2013	In Force
Jamaica	11 October 2016	In Force
Madagascar	11 June 2019	In Force
Malta	14 May 2021	Not in Force (will enter into force on 14 May 2022)
Mauritius	13 September 2012	In Force
Mexico	3 July 2020	Not in Force (will enter into force on 3 July 2021)
Namibia	9 December 2020	Not in Force (will enter into force on 9 December 2021)
Nicaragua	10 January 2013	In Force
Panama	11 June 2015	In Force
Paraguay	7 May 2013	In Force
Peru	26 November 2018	In Force
Philippines	5 September 2012	In Force
Portugal	17 July 2015	In Force
South Africa	20 June 2013	In Force
Sweden	4 April 2019	In Force
Switzerland	12 November 2014	In Force
Uruguay	14 June 2012	In Force

*Ratifications as of May 2021

For an up to date list of ratifications see: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO::P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551460

Awards Won

2018

- IDWF selected as one of the 12 Winning Changemaker Organizations of the Challenging Norms, Powering Economies Initiative
- Myrtle Witbooi: Finalist for the Challenging Norms, Powering Economies Challenge awarded by An initiative of Ashoka, Open Society Foundation and UN Women

2017

- Shirley Pryce is CARICOM "Woman of the Year"
- Sr Jeanne Devos Award, awarded by CSC Service Union
- The 20th Justice and Peace Award, awarded by The Bishop Tji Haksoon Justice & Peace Foundation

2015

- Global Fairness Award, awarded by Global Fairness Initiative
- Silver Rose Award, awarded by SOLIDAR

2014

- Order of Distinction, awarded by Governor General of Jamaica
- Jaap Kruithof Award
- Marcelina Bautista receives the Mexican National Award for Equality and No Discrimination

2013

- George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award, awarded by AFL-CIO



2015 Silver Rose Award, 2017 Sr Jeanne Devos Award, 2013 George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award, 2017 CARICOM "Woman of the Year". Photos: IDWF



Domestic Workers at the ILO in Geneva Switzerland, with the ILO Director General in June 2011. Photo: Sofia Trevino



About IDWF

We are a membership-based global organization of domestic and household workers. A domestic or household worker is any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship. We believe domestic work is work and all domestic and household workers deserve to enjoy the same rights as all other workers.

Our objective is to build a strong, democratic and united domestic/household workers global organization to protect and advance domestic workers' rights everywhere.

As of April 2021, the IDWF has 81 affiliates from 63 countries, representing over 590,000 domestic/household workers' members. Most are organized in trade unions and others, in associations, networks and workers' cooperatives. Visit www.idwfed.org.



About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org