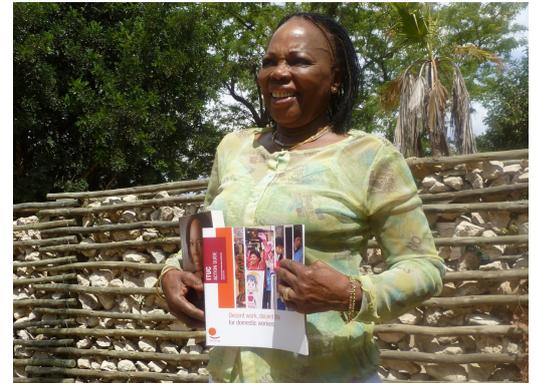


# Namibia Government Commission Tackles Minimum Wages for Domestic Workers



Namibia Minimum Wage Commission for Domestic Workers Chair Dr Libertina Amathila (top) and Dr Hilma Shindondola-Mote (bottom), Commissioner representing the National Union of Namibian Workers . Commission meeting in Katutura Friday 27 October( main picture).

The Namibia Government's **Wages Commission on Minimum Wages for Domestic Workers** held its final hearings this weekend after 6 months of crowded hearings across one of Africa's largest and most sparsely populated countries. Chaired by former deputy prime minister the Hon Dr Libertina Amathila, the tripartite Commission travelled to the remotest parts of Namibia meeting domestic workers to hear evidence from workers and other interested parties on the wages and working conditions of domestic workers.

The community meetings - some over 200 strong - started with singing the national anthem and a strong statement from the hard working Chair saying that the Commission had a tough job and would be making recommendations to the government, employers and unions. She said the Government was determined to look into all the difficult issues raised by domestic workers and take effective action. General discussion and testimonies were followed up by one on one interviews between Commissioners and individual workers, many of whom were more comfortable sharing their shocking experiences with Commissioners in private.

The final hearings over the weekend in Windhoek's Katutura township drew large crowds.

Over 60 people attended the final meeting this Saturday, including the Director of the Social Security Commission and his senior staff, who attended to explain the social security benefits available to workers. And, despite being held during working hours, over 50 women and men came to Freedom Hall for the penultimate meeting on Friday afternoon (26th Oct) in one of the poorest parts of the township near the zinc houses of 'silver city'. The meeting, scheduled to last two hours, had to be extended into the early evening to allow everyone their say. Many complained that wages were too low to support their families and of the impact on their children - school fees and medication could not be afforded, children couldn't be fed properly, and parents couldn't respond to calls from the school because employers would not allow them to take any calls. Children had to be left on their own after school finished at 1.15pm - often young teenagers were left in charge of whole families of siblings while their mothers were working long distances away in the rich parts of town.

Workers described how hard it was to make ends meet - one domestic worker started working for her employer 12 years ago for N\$120 (US\$ 14) per month. After repeatedly asking for a raise her employer cut her hours and pay from 5 days to 2 and then 1 day, but expected the same amount of work to be done. She ended up so sick that she had to stop work and is now unemployed. Ministry of Labour officials at the meeting promised to look into her case - Commission members were shocked at the flouting of Namibia's employment legislation.

Other women told of how they worked for N\$ 350 (US\$ 40.50) per month for many years and had similar stories of their hours and pay being reduced once they requested a raise. A garden worker had worked for the same employer for 20 years on N\$ 500 per month but has had his days cut from 5 to 2 days a week, now earning N\$300 (US\$ 35) per month, not enough to support him. *'The slavery of domestic workers is real. Our white employers have more respect for their dogs than us. The dogs eat the employers' left overs that we have cooked for them while we are given different food to eat'*. A woman who had worked for her employer for 2 years found that a young woman from the north had been brought to the house so she 'wouldn't be needed' until the following January. She had no notice or notice pay. She has two small children and cannot pay for her medication. *'I really want you to help me. My heart is bleeding'*.

The five Commissioners and Ministry of Labour officials were shocked and moved by the stories they heard on Friday - but said they had been hearing similar stories all over the country. The Chair said that it was clear from some of the testimonies of pensioners and other low income employers of domestic workers that the solution to domestic workers' low pay could not be laid solely at the door of employers, even though many paid way below an acceptable level. There were complex social protection and access to education issues that the government needed to address.

The Ministry of Labour official said in an informal interview after the meeting that she was confident that the Government was making good progress towards ratification of C189 but that it could take some time. Dr Libertina Amathila said *'we are determined to find practical*

*solutions to the problems we have in Namibia. We want to put good effective legislation in place. We need to ensure that the law is implemented by private employers. I want to know that when Namibia ratifies C189 the Government will be able to honour all the standards set in this important Convention'*



Dr Libertina Amathila

Report by Jo Morris

Windhoek

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