

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DOMESTIC WORKERS IN AFRICA

International Domestic Workers Federation
March 2021



Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disastrous impact on employment and working conditions across the globe (ILO 2020a). This study explored how the pandemic has affected the lives of domestic workers and their families on the African continent. Drawing on 3,419 surveys across fourteen African countries, it set out to answer the following questions:

- What was the impact of lockdown measures on domestic workers' working conditions?
- What kinds of State support did domestic workers receive during the lockdown period?
- What alternative sources of sustenance did domestic workers turn to in the absence of State support?
- How have domestic workers navigated the ongoing occupational health and safety hazards of intimate work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How can the experience of domestic workers during the first waves of the pandemic shape State policy and union responses towards a post-pandemic recovery?

- 29% of domestic workers were suspended or laid off, 85% of whom received no severance pay; and 18% of domestic workers experienced a reduction in income.
- Although many countries introduced income support measures during the lockdown period, only 14% of domestic workers received some form of support due to strict eligibility criteria and onerous application processes.
- In the absence of state support and families pushed to the limit, 67% of domestic workers received in-kind support from domestic workers' unions.
- Although most domestic workers have returned to work, 58% of domestic workers reported that they felt safe or very unsafe, due to the lack of provision of personal protective equipment, safe transportation and the intimate nature of domestic work.

Nearly half of surveyed domestic workers experienced a reduction in income, the temporary suspension of work or layoffs. Layoffs were most common in countries which applied strict lockdown measures such as South Africa, Senegal and Kenya. 85 percent of domestic workers who were laid off, received no severance pay whatsoever and a quarter of workers remained unemployed following a period of six months. Because domestic workers are generally the primary breadwinners, the reduction in income had a dramatic impact on the household. The negative impact was further exacerbated by rising food and fuel prices, amidst price speculation.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of income-support measures as states scrambled to respond to the socioeconomic fallout from lockdown measures. Because 70 percent of surveyed domestic workers do not contribute to social insurance – and many social insurance schemes for domestic workers exclude unemployment benefits – few received unemployment payments via the contributory system. While many African governments did introduce income-support measures – for example, the suspension of utility bills, the distribution of food and emergency cash transfers – most measures were highly targeted and overlooked the “missing middle,” of which domestic workers are a part. Consequently, only 17 percent of domestic workers received some form of state support.

In the absence of widespread state support, 67 percent of domestic workers reported that they turned to trade unions for help. After all, support from friends and family was hard to come by because they too faced similar crises. With assistance from the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), domestic workers' unions launched awareness-raising campaigns, distributed food and personal protective equipment, and trained domestic workers in complementary economic activities such as making masks and soap, in order to make ends meet during the lockdown period.

Although most domestic workers have now returned to work, 58 percent declared that they felt either unsafe or very unsafe due to the lack of personal protective equipment, safe transportation and the intimate nature of domestic work. In addition, 53 percent of domestic workers do not have access to paid sick days, which increases the risk of infection and undermines their ability to take care of themselves and their families. Given the stressful nature of domestic work, many workers have preexisting conditions including high blood pressure, respiratory diseases and diabetes. The risk of succumbing to COVID-19 is further exacerbated by the deterioration of health care services and access to medication. Although many of the issues raised in this study are not new, they have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study proposes the following recommendations for the State, employers and domestic workers' organizations in response:

- Recommendations for the State, in articulation with domestic workers' organizations:
 - Awareness-raising campaigns regarding occupational health and safety standards, workers' rights and employer responsibilities.
 - Distribution of personal protective equipment, including gloves, masks and hand sanitizer, at key access points such as bus and taxi ranks.
 - The introduction of price controls and subsidies to ensure that basic products including food, utilities and transportation remain affordable.
 - The extension of emergency income-support measures to domestic workers through non-contributory social welfare.
 - The extension of contributory social insurance to domestic workers and the adoption of an enforcement framework which encourages employer compliance.
 - The introduction of a contributory unemployment benefit, where absent.
 - The ratification of Convention 189 and 190, the adoption of complementary national legislation and the implementation of an appropriate enforcement framework.
 - Improved access to medical assistance and safe public transportation.
- Recommendations for employers:
 - Greater communication with domestic workers regarding occupational health and safety measures, the health condition of household members, etc.
 - Provision of adequate personal protective equipment and safe transportation to and from work.
 - Provision of paid quarantine leave during lockdown periods or in the case of infection.
 - Compliance with international norms and national regulations related to domestic work, including written contracts, working time, wages, paid leave – e.g. daily rest, weekends, holidays, sick days and maternity leave– employer contributions to social insurance schemes, occupational health and safety standards, and severance pay.

- Recommendations for domestic workers' unions:
 - Awareness-raising campaigns regarding occupational health and safety standards, workers' rights, and employer responsibilities for domestic workers.
 - Recruitment drives to expand membership, retain members and improve the collection of dues.
 - Consolidation of unions' emergency welfare funds through the improved collection of union dues and periodic grassroots fundraising campaigns, to distribute food and personal protective equipment on a more sustainable basis.
 - Expansion of the union training program to include "know your rights", leadership development and income-generating workshops.
 - Campaign to pressure states to ratify Convention 189 and 190, adopt complementary legislative reforms including the effective expansion of social protection to domestic workers, and to implement an enforcement framework appropriate to the sector.