



## International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) -

### The Impacts of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers and Policy Responses<sup>1</sup>

#### Summary:

Domestic workers (DWs) have suffered significant adversity from COVID-19. Starting from a weakened position, they find themselves among populations most vulnerable to the crisis. Engaging in domestic and care works puts DWs at the forefront of maintaining livelihoods and economies, and at a higher risk of both being affected by the pandemic and the policy responses to the pandemic, such as border closures, lockdowns, and curfews. Recognizing that the pandemic has social, economic, and legal impacts, this brief lays out the contexts that DWs navigate in different regions. It assesses how they have been affected by the spread of the virus and governmental responses. Finally, it provides recommendations aimed at improving the situation of DWs in different regional contexts, which would alleviate longer standing labour and gender inequalities.

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#### Domestic Workers at the Frontlines

As COVID-19 enters its fourth month, domestic and care work have become increasingly visible. Workers who maintain hygienic environments within households and care for the youth and the elderly are at the forefront of saving the planet, one household at a time. A Domestic Worker (DW) is “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship.”<sup>2</sup> Their chores frequently include labor beyond cleaning and maintenance tasks to encompass care for children, the sick, and the differently abled. We owe the sustenance of our health, nurture and wellbeing, and therefore, lives to DWs.

Domestic work is accompanied by a discursive celebration; instead of “unskilled,” it is more frequently presented as essential, as it makes all other work possible. However, this recognition is only rhetorical:<sup>3</sup> DWs are still denied job security, appropriate wages and associated labor protections. While maintaining the safety and wellbeing within their work environments, their own access to labor rights and protective measures is limited and often denied. Despite the pandemic creating similar public health concerns across the world, not everyone is equally susceptible to being infected or suffering the consequences of the crisis. DWs face a disproportionate vulnerability towards the virus, in addition to the economic burdens and risks in the wake of COVID-19. Governments need to actively work to alleviate the systemic inequalities DWs lay under, which are now intensified by the pandemic.

This brief, formed by the collective experiences of the affiliates of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) around the globe, is set to urge governments and international organizations to collaborate with DW groups who are at the center and the forefront of their plight. DWs are the sole legitimate partner in social conversations on policies affecting their livelihoods: They need a seat on the table.

#### Domestic Workers Fight Multiple Battles

Despite being the basic building block of wellbeing, care work, and the economy at large, domestic work is underpaid and undervalued, as it is oftentimes lead by migrants, women, undocumented people and people of colour. DWs find themselves under compound discrimination: they face structural classism, racism, sexism,

<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Roula Seghaier, Strategic Program Coordinator at IDWF.

<sup>2</sup> ILO C189- Domestic Workers Convention, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> “Femicide does not Respect the Quarantine.” *The Tricontinental*, 2020.



xenophobia, and ableism, which manifest differently depending on the regional, political, and socio-economic contexts of their employment.

The below table outlines the existing conditions of the labor of domestic workers everywhere, and how these variables are affected by COVID-19.

	Status Quo	COVID-19 Effects
Labour/ Economy	<p>Despite the ILO Convention 189 (C189) on Decent Work for Domestic Workers that affirms DWs as workers, not all states recognize DWs rights to valuation, recognition and security. It is undercompensated, as most domestic work is performed by women for free outside of the professional capacity, and as manual labour is often considered “low-skilled.” It is also viewed as unproductive, as it is not factored into gross domestic products (GDP).</p> <p>Only 19 out of 65 countries studied by the ILO had regulations protecting domestic workers.<sup>5</sup> DWs are left out of benefits, insurances, pensions, and paid leaves. So, as manual work requires a physical and mental ability from the DWs, once they are unable to physically perform certain tasks, they become disposable to the system, and cannot access any benefits.</p>	<p>The spread of COVID-19 increased the forced and excessive load of domestic work due to the domestic confinement and social distancing. While the ILO Forced Labour Protocol of 2014 requires the prevention of forced labour,<sup>4</sup> and recognizes that “certain groups of workers have a higher risk of becoming victims of forced or compulsory labour, especially migrants,” it is difficult to ensure that DWs are not forced to work under the lockdown. It is especially difficult as their workplace is a “private” household.</p> <p>Albeit possibilities of encountering the virus within the workplace, the employment contracts, if existent, do not consider sickness an occupational hazard or disease. Their contracts are terminated under COVID-19 because of the suspected or feared and non-confirmed infection; such practice should be considered an imputed disability discrimination.</p>
Space/ Geography	<p>On a national scale, domestic work is a source of work for thousands of rural women, who did not have access to formal education. On an international level, a large portion of DWs is also migrant, and its labour is understood as secondary to that of the citizens within the host country. Migrant DWs find themselves under the compound fragility of both their work and citizenship status, which increases barriers towards accessing goods and services reserved for citizens.</p> <p>Work in private spheres is invisible and often susceptible to violence. Migrant DWs are often mandated by the live-in arrangement. Live-in domestic workers face increased abuse, often gendered. It comprises assault and harassment, sexual exploitation, physical abuse, denial of resources, opportunities, and services.</p>	<p>As many shelters around the world are not taking in new arrivals out of fear of virus outbreaks, violence within households becomes unescapable. With lockdowns and curfews, live-out domestic workers cannot easily travel within the same country. Migrants who demand repatriation find themselves jobless and locked within the host country. With airport closures, MDWs, especially those undocumented, are unable to get through the borders.</p> <p>In the wake of COVID-19, many DWs are stuck with their employers and prevented from joining their families. They are denied their earnings, protective gear, and the rightful access to information about the virus, and healthcare services.</p>

<sup>4</sup> P029 - Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labor Convention, *International Labour Organization*, 1930.

<sup>5</sup> “Overview of Key Issues Related to Domestic Workers in Southeast Asia.” *International Labour Organization*, 2006.



## Race

According to the ILO report<sup>6</sup> of 2015, “domestic work is a much higher source of employment for migrants than it is for non-migrant workers.” MDWs represent 92.3% of all migrant workers, and 17.2% of all domestic workers.<sup>7</sup> DWs are mostly migrants in developed countries, especially in the Gulf states, North America, Europe and Asia. This means that the employers of DWs would often be of a different ethnicity or race. DWs experience racism and xenophobia on daily basis by employers and institutions, which severely limits their access to their rights.

Governmental officials in different locations referred to COVID-19 by the geography of its emergence,<sup>8</sup> calling it the “foreign virus” or the “Chinese virus.” Expressions of xenophobia and racism towards Asian populations intensified, in direct contradiction with article 2 of the “International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.” The article states that member states should not sponsor discrimination based on race. However, the allocation of blame over geographic references has contributed to the demonization of Asian populations, provoking hate speech, physical abuse and blatant acts of violence.<sup>9</sup>

## Gender

Women compose 80% of DWs. They are underpaid as domestic work is perceived to be a natural extension of women’s duties. Such labour is bypassed by the macroeconomic analysis, which stands in the way of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on Gender Equality. Domestic work is used to discipline women into gender roles, and societies into classes: it gets work done for free within low-income households, making women at the service of their male counterparts, who, in turn, are at the service of rich classes through performance of manual labour.

Due to the public health concerns brought about by the virus, DWs’ tasks have exponentially increased placing additional burdens on the carers within households. The UN Under-Secretary General and head of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, expressed that the pandemic exposed “the deficiencies of public and private arrangements that currently function only if women play multiple and unpaid roles.”<sup>10</sup> Live-in DWs are also at risk of gender-based violence, including intimidation, humiliation, forced labour, physical and sexual assault, amongst other forms of violence.

## Global Responses to COVID-19

As governments struggle to mitigate the outbreak of the virus, they resort to border closures, lockdowns, and curfews to minimize the spread of COVID-19. Governments have responded with city lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus in in Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, in Africa. In Asia, they were imposed in the Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Nepal, big cities in the Philippines, and Singapore. With the largest number of total infections in the world, European countries were fast to take border and airport closure measures. Lockdowns are also prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean, where activities were suspended except for healthcare, production and trade of food and basic goods, and security. Some countries announced penalties for breaching curfews, ranging from fines to imprisonment. In North America, the lack of prompt policy in relation to the virus is causing considerable damage and making New York City an epicenter for the pandemic. Despite going through quarantine measures, the lockdowns are being slowly alleviated in the MENA region for the month of Ramadan.

The logic of the quarantine assumes the availability of accommodation, means of sustenance, and safety of households, all of which are often unaffordable to DWs. And while the UN called for COVID-19 responses “to focus on people – women, youth, low-wage workers, small and medium enterprises, the informal sector and on

<sup>6</sup> “Migrant Domestic Workers Across the World: global and regional estimates.” *International Labour Organization*, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> ILO Global Estimates on Migrant Workers: results and methods, special focus on migrant domestic workers.” Labor Migration Branch, *International Labour Organization*, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> “States should take action against COVID-19-related expressions of xenophobia, says UN expert.” *Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights*. United Nations, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> “WHO issues best practices for naming new human infectious diseases.” *World Health Organization*, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> “COVID-19: Women front and center.” Statement by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Women Executive Director, 2020.



vulnerable groups who are already at risk,”<sup>11</sup> state responses depended on their level of recognition of informal sectors of labor and their governmental capacity. In short, COVID-19 was spread through international travel, carried by the rich through airports into countries around the globe. Its cost, however, is most clearly and painfully paid by those impoverished who do not have access to proper quarantining measures.

Across the world, DWs pay the cost of the pandemic in multitudes of ways.

- They face the termination of their employment and unpaid leaves, as they are no longer allowed within the households of their employers.
- Even when DWs remain employed, they suffer from salary cuts and denial of payment.
- Live-in domestic workers face increased and uncompensated loads of labor, and sometimes violence.
- DWs are often not provided with protective gear by their employers. Worse, they are at risk of contracting the virus from their employers who do not respect quarantine measures. In Brazil, the first case of infection was a DW who contracted it from her employers who were in Italy. Similar cases were reported in Hong Kong, Singapore and South Africa by our affiliates.
- Employers who fear contracting the virus from their workers exacerbate their racist and xenophobic treatment. The perception of the infection as a one-way street from worker to employer speaks of the class bias within the understanding of working people as carriers of disease.
- Some DWs are forced to quarantine with their employers. Others are locked out of their countries.
- Awareness campaign and services oftentimes do not reach DWs due to language and technical barriers. Many governments leave DWs out of their relief plans, including their advocacy efforts.
- Most DWs cannot access governmental relief packages and subsidies, depending on multiple factors such as the governments recognition of the informal sector, regular/irregular employment, and the documentation status of the workers.
- Migrant DWs face additional disparities due to border closures and their migrant status, as the neo-liberal economic model relies on displacement and mass migration for the provision of cheap, flexible, and transitory labor for profit.<sup>12</sup>

Unable to find means of subsistence, DWs are evicted from houses, struggling to pay for rent and other necessities such as food, medication, and protective gear. The decrease of income is met with an increase in the price of goods and services. DWs find themselves ill-equipped to endure the pandemic in the absence of radical changes to their situation.

## Regional Contexts: DWs under COVID-19

### In Africa:

The African economy has been experiencing modest, yet stable, economic growth pre COVID-19. With the informal economy accounting for the employment of 85.8 % of the population and providing employment for 89.7% of the employed women,<sup>13</sup> COVID-19 responses must focus on the informal sector, including domestic work. Apart from Guinea, Mauritius, and South Africa, no country has ratified C189,<sup>14</sup> sustaining the state of injustices faced by DWs. Even the three countries who ratified the convention are experiencing implementation challenges.

Governments have the dual task of sustaining and salvaging the acquired economic growth while limiting the transmission of the virus and minimizing its harm. However, policy focused on facilitating business continuity in upper-middle-income economies, at the expense of fields of informal employment. The fulfillment of the dual task is particularly difficult as: (i) the regulatory frameworks governing the economy are inconsistent, and (ii) the

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<sup>11</sup> “Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.” *United Nations*, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> “The Right to Unite: a handbook on domestic workers rights across Asia,” Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> “The impact of the COVID-19 on the informal economy in Africa and the related policy responses.” *ILO Africa*, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Kanyoka, V. “Organizing domestic workers across Africa: a regional view.” *Open Democracy*, 2017.



infrastructure within which the pandemic spreads is prone to larger outbreaks in the absence of adequate water resources, hygienic products, and protective gear.

Multiple populations remain susceptible to vaccine preventable diseases and have high immunodeficiencies due to histories of colonialism, uneven development, and global inequalities. The unsanitary conditions of the water resources worsen the matter. Governments need to pursue the Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) to ensure the availability of water and sanitation for all. Currently, people are relying on improvised hygienic measures, often insufficient. The chances of the pandemic spreading within the slums and townships targets those economically impoverished, as social isolation is not a realistic option in areas of high population density. As governmental outreach often leaves out rural areas with the least infrastructure, it is necessary to cater Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials to formal and informal workers and disseminate them through media and mobile vehicles to ensure their accessibility, which some governments started doing. On a longer term, no recovery is possible without improving sanitation systems and ensuring that clean water resources are readily available for use.

### **In Asia:**

The legal conditions governing domestic work are diverse across countries. Asia is increasingly urbanizing, which in turn increases domestic work as a source of wage employment for women. There is an estimated 860,000 to 1,400,000 DWs in Indonesia, and 860,000 to 1,400,000 in the Philippines, most of whom are women and girls.<sup>15</sup> The increase in the numbers of DWs led by urban growth requires immediate attention. Today, laws fail domestic workers in multiple instances and add to their vulnerability to COVID-19 induced conditions. Singapore excludes DWs from the protections outlines in its Employment Act and Workmen's Compensation Act. Malaysia, in turn, excludes MDWs from its Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Indonesia, as it considers them "unskilled" laborers. The MoU also forbids DWs from collective organizing. Indonesia has no legislation that protects DWs. Malaysia has also banned workers considered in "unessential" sectors from coming back to the country to pursue their work, thus dispossessing MDWs and abruptly terminating their employment. Hong Kong is an exception, as the labor ordinance protects MDWs side to side with local workers.

Even when governmental policies provide some form of financial assistance to disenfranchised workers, the scope of the assistance is limited. For instance, in South Korea, part-time domestic workers are not eligible for unemployment benefits because they are considered employed. Another limitation is that they need to be registered in the social security system, and most informal workers are not. Bureaucracy and policy loopholes stand in the way of achieving equal and just access to rights and benefits for DWs. A best practice, however, exists. In Thailand, workers can register for a relief package of \$150 per month if their ability to work and access income has been affected by COVID-19. Another best practice, in Hong Kong due to the Disability Discrimination Ordinance: it is unlawful for employers to (i) dismiss DWs if they contract COVID-19; and/or (ii) based on imputed disability discrimination.

### **In Europe: DWs under COVID-19**

Domestic work, dubbed as Personal and Household Services (PHS) in the European Union, currently provides 8 million jobs across Europe.<sup>16</sup> Women comprise 91% of the total number of DWs. Migrants, with various documentation status, comprise half of the number of DWs. However, estimates show that 70% of domestic work is delivered by undeclared workers under informal employment.<sup>17</sup> Most European governments regard domestic workers as workers. Nevertheless, DWs are often excluded from general Occupational Health and Safety regulations or working time regulations. Eight countries, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, have ratified C189, and need to enforce their commitment to treat domestic workers equally to workers in other sectors. However, immigration regulations prevent those undocumented from claiming their rights out of fear of deportation. Hence, domestic workers suffer different consequences, depending on (i) the specific situation in

<sup>15</sup> "Overview of Key Issues Related to Domestic Workers in Southeast Asia." *International Labor Organization*, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> "PHS Industry Monitor: statistical overview of the personal and household services sector in the European Union." *European Federation for Services for Individuals*, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



each country in terms of existent legislature, (ii) the documentation status of the worker as to whether the employment is informal or contractual.

Quarantine enforcements on shutting down workplaces is inconsistently applied, as it is unclear whether private households as a place of work are included in health and safety measures by governments. DWs' unions are demanding to temporarily shut down the sector of domestic work, except for care work, while (i) banning the termination of contracts and (ii) guaranteeing the payment either by the employers or government support systems. Those who must remain employed, as they provide care for the elderly and the differently abled, should be considered as part of the health system and eligible to the same rights as other workers in the sector. Governments should also ensure the equal access of emergency childcare centres to children of DWs who engage in care work, as for children of employees of other essential sectors, to enable a fast recovery from the crisis.

Regional governments of Wallonia and Brussels in Belgium have halted the activity of DWs while ensuring the continuation of the payment of their contractual salary. The French government also adopted a compensation mechanisms for DWs, urging the employers to (i) declare and pay the hours worked in the month of March, (ii) declare planned but unfulfilled work hours for the same month and compensate 80% of the corresponding net wage, subject to reimbursement to the employers.<sup>18</sup> Albeit responding in part to workers' demands, these measures only encompass formally employed DWs. Nevertheless, a few countries have demonstrated an acute understanding equal labour rights. The Migrants' Rights Center in Ireland allocated a Supplementary Welfare Allowance, to which undocumented MDWs who have lost their jobs are eligible.<sup>19</sup> Portugal, in an admirable move, has granted to all migrants and asylum seekers, including MDWs, temporary access to citizenship rights<sup>20</sup> during COVID-19.

### **In Latin America and the Caribbean: DWs under COVID-19**

Most of in these regions have a lot in common: they are the breadwinners in their families, they live in precarious areas that lack of basic sanitary structures including running water and are located remotely from their workplaces. The workers need to travel by several means of public transport to get to work, a practice unsafe during COVID-19, and often impossible with quarantining measures affecting the availability of public transportation. Employers should provide the DWs with free alternative means of transport, if they wish to keep their services. With DW unions' loss of their usual resources due to the lockdown, DWs find it increasingly difficult to access forms of assistance formerly provided by such organizations.

The law does not oblige employers to pay the full salaries of DWs during the lockdown in countries, not even for regulated workers. Informal workers, constituting 60% of all DWs in the region, find themselves most affected, for they are not able to place claims through legal channels. Similarly, in the absence of a signed contract with the employer, DWs cannot claim social benefits, as the employer would not be making contribution to social funds through paying taxes. For example, Peru has approved an urgent decree to provide vulnerable families with \$110 for 15 days for them to observe the quarantine, for which only families registered with the government for social support are eligible, which excludes informal workers. While Brazil recognized DWs as eligible for social benefits, the online system is difficult to navigate, requires having a bank account, and is saturated by log-in demands.

Governments in a handful of countries decided to waive payments of rent and essential services of their citizens such as electricity, water, gas and Internet for period of the quarantine. Bolivia prohibited cutting essential services if people fail to pay, El Salvador suspended payments for utilities for several utilities, and Venezuela did the same for an undetermined period. Other admirable examples exist: (i) Jamaica developed a relief program for informal workers including DWs,<sup>21</sup> (ii) the Argentinian government allocated financial support per child to all families irrespective of their employment sector. The government will also pay a lump sum of 160 USD to informal workers

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<sup>18</sup> "Un dispositif exceptionnel d'accompagnement pour les particuliers employeurs, les salariés à domicile, les assistants maternels agréés et les garde d'enfants." *ACOSS*, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> "COVID-9 Social Welfare Supports for Workers." *Migrants Rights Centre Ireland*, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> "Portugal to treat migrants as residents during coronavirus crisis." *Reuters*, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Statement by Finance Minister, Dr Nigel Clarke on March 26, 2020.



aged 18 to 65, thus inaugurating “the Family Emergency Income” Program,<sup>22</sup> (iii) Brazil approved a temporary universal income of US \$125 per person for 30 million people for the period of 3 months. It includes domestic workers after pressure from unions and other organizations. Brazil also suspended evictions from houses for 180 days.<sup>23</sup> It is worthwhile noting that the proposed \$125 is insufficient for informal workers residing in urban centers, as the minimum wage is approximately of \$200. Colombia announced an emergency assistance to informal workers, of \$40 per person for 3 million impoverished families, based on its poverty identification system, SISPEN. DWs were not explicitly mentioned, however, the arrangement recognizes their eligibility in practice.

### **In the Middle East and North Africa: DWs under COVID-19**

Domestic Workers have been historically struggling under the *Kafala* system, an exploitative sponsorship that links the residency of DWs to their employer. The legality of the DWs depends entirely on the employers’ decisions; the workers themselves are denied multiple rights and at the mercy of the sponsor. Henceforth, MDWs are vulnerable to legalized exploitation. In Lebanon, for example, DWs are not included within the labor law, by virtue of being migrants. Simultaneously, international law does not protect them, as the host countries do not ratify the conventions protecting this form of labor. As workers are expected to be under a live-in arrangement, when they leave the employer’s house or quit their jobs, their legality is questioned, as their employer is the sole guarantor of their legal standing in the country. The situation of both live-in and live-out DWs has worsened under COVID-19: the former are often denied their salaries and the latter are unable to access jobs altogether, intensifying their financial hardships. With financial crises, MDWs are also unable to efficiently send remittances to their countries of origin.

Domestic workers’ health is also at risk. While documented workers are required to have an insurance paid by their employer, it only covers the bare minimum. They would still be dependent on their employer granting them access to health facilities. With the lockdown in place, shelter closures, and complicated accessibility of reporting mechanisms, violence has increased. Unregulated or undocumented MDWs face the exponentially increased difficulty of accessing medical services and testing. Furthermore, access to health facilities is challenging even when it is not the legal regulations that stand in its way: guards and receptionists at governmental hospitals often prioritize citizens over migrants. Undocumented workers, on the other hand, cannot access hospitals as governmental health clinics also report their data to governmental agencies, revealing the identity of the workers they have serviced. This becomes a barrier to access to healthcare, as while there is a current halt on expatriation and imprisonment out of fear of exacerbating outbreaks, there is no guarantee that, once the quarantine is over, MDWs would not be subjected to punitive measures if their documentation is expired or inadequate. Those who do not have documentation are not able to access hospitals altogether. The only other option of accessing already scarce tests is through expensive private clinics: no option at all. While COVID-19 has tremendously affected the lives and livelihoods of MDWs in the MENA region, its temporality might bring relief. However, the *Kafala* system is long-lasting. It leaves MDWs distressed and in danger in ways that humanitarian relief cannot mend. No recovery is possible without working on ending the *Kafala* system, actively and urgently.

### **In North America: DWs under COVID-19**

The government in the United States was late to respond to COVID-19, as its administration attempted to keep to stock market functional and downplayed the virus while contributing to racist rhetoric. The UN Special Rapporteur on racism, E. Tendayi Achiume, noted that “states should take action against COVID-19-related expressions of xenophobia,”<sup>24</sup> a commitment failed by the US government. The US imposed measures to curb the spread of the virus comparatively late. As a result, today, New York City is the epicenter of the pandemic. Queens is disproportionately affected, shedding light on racial capitalism’s effect on health and sustenance of livelihoods.

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<sup>22</sup> “Coronavirus en Argentina: el Estado les pagará 10 mil pesos a trabajadores informales y monotributistas.” Clarín, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Mazieiro, G. “Câmara aprova auxílio de R\$ 600 a trabalhadores durante crise da covid-19.” Economia, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> “States should take action against COVID-19-related expressions of xenophobia, says UN expert.” *Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights*, UN, 2020.



Domestic workers organizations, representing immigrants from Latin America and African Americans, witnessed the heightened risk of COVID-19 on black women domestic workers.<sup>25</sup> Mechanisms need to be urgently put place to counter the effect of the virus paired with systemic inequalities. The present injustices that make domestic workers in the US context disproportionality vulnerable include labor trafficking: a grassroots organization representing Filipino workers reports that, 65% out of an 80% of its members who have been fired or their work hours reduced, are labor trafficking survivors. They “were trafficked by ambassadors and diplomats who work in the consulates and the United Nations, or were trafficked by placement agencies, hotels, resort owners and rich professionals.”<sup>26</sup> Many of the workers are also undocumented and cannot even receive the stimulus package, or, needless to mention, pursue justice for the survivors of labor trafficking.

Some laws, such as the Fair Labor Standards Act, purposefully leave out DWs. But even when the laws consider the sector by putting a limit of 44 working hours a week for domestic work, live-in arrangements create an unequal environment prone to dozens of unpaid hours. In the US, there are approximately 530,000 DWs providing In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) to low-income seniors and people with disability, as reported by the Union of Domestic Workers (UDW). Immediate assistance to their need a crucial matter for public health concerns. US policies also affect DWs migrating from central America to the US get stuck in transit countries on the Southern and Northern Mexican borders. Revising these policies would alleviate injustice beyond the geographical scope of the US.

## Recommendations

While contexts are diverse across the regions, the core demands of domestic workers movements are the same and resonate with one another. Aside the urgent alleviation of the COVID-19 induced hardships, they look into the deeper-seated injustices, to make sustainable change towards the alleviation of economic and gender inequalities of the sector. The recommendations are as follows:

### Information and Outreach

1. Ensure the timely, transparent and rightful access to information, that accurately reflects the figures and cases related to COVID-19.
2. Protect the freedom of expression as crucial for the mutual learning and public sharing of knowledge and information from the ground.
3. Make available information on the symptoms and the prevention of COVID-19 in the languages of DWs, including helplines financially and linguistically accessible to DWs who are migrants
4. Lead awareness raising campaigns aimed at employers, DWs, and the society at large about DWs rights under COVID-19.
5. The concerned authorities or executives to delegate the identification of informal DWs to workers’ organizations in order to facilitate aid distributions.

### Protective Measures

1. Use international standards, namely C189 and C190, as frameworks of reference in order to guarantee equal labor rights and freedom from harassment for DWs.
2. Monitor employers through reinforcements of direct inspections and legal and financial consequences if the employers:
  - fail to provide food, water, protective gear and necessary hygienic products to the workers,
  - expose the workers to dangerous environments, by not following quarantine measures or forcing workers to perform excessive and unsafe tasks,
  - force workers to quarantine in the workplace and deny their rights to enjoy days-off fully through limiting their freedom of movement.

<sup>25</sup> “Coronavirus Pandemic Shows Black Women Workers Face Heightened Risks.” *National Domestic Workers Alliance*, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> “Organizer: Domestic Workers Make All Work Possible, But the Coronavirus Relief Bill Discounts Them,” *Democracy Now*, 2020.





- Discriminate against the workers in any shape or form.
- 3. Provide effective means and procedures for DWs to report labor abuses, unfair dismissals and violations of their rights, through the ministries of labor and domestic workers unions and groups.
- 4. Engage domestic workers in dialogue with trade unions, employers, and other organizations to design emergency policies in a participatory and informed manner to respond to COVID-19.
- 5. Issue domestic worker specific guidelines on working during COVID-19.
- 6. Enforce paid leaves with provision of food and accommodation for domestic workers who are in quarantine. Enforce paid sick leaves for workers who contracted the virus.

#### Accommodation and Safe Housing

1. Allocate alternative accommodation for DW under the “sleep-in” modality, including migrant workers, as they are locked out of their countries due to border closure.
2. Suspend rents and impose consequences on landlords who evict those unable to afford rent during the lockdown.
3. Release domestic workers from detention centers, make safe housing available for them to quarantine in.
4. Allow the opening of shelters and introduce preventative health care services and medication within all these spaces.

#### Income Security

1. Enforce the payment of full salaries to formal and informal DWs. Provide additional compensations to caregivers who continue working during the lockdown.
2. Prohibit forced leaves, dismissal and suspension of DWs during the lockdown.
3. Place additional protective measures for women domestic workers who are pregnant and risk the termination of their contracts.
4. In case the rightful impossibility of continuation of payment of salaries by employers, governments to:
  - facilitate DWs’ access to short-time-work regimes equally to other workers in countries where such measure is applicable,
  - guarantee DWs’ access to unemployment allowances, paired with additional income (i) provided by employers where appropriate, or (ii) from other basic income grants, existing or created in response to COVID-19.
5. Create emergency funds specific for DWs, formal and informal, to assist them with temporary wage support and relief packages.

#### DW with Migration Status

1. Grant automatic amnesty and visa extensions to MDWs whose documentation has expired and facilitate their acquisition of new paperwork.
2. Collaborate with embassies to support MDWs looking to return to their countries of origin, facilitate their travels, and exempt them from paying any pending fees associated to their documentation status.
3. Make available safe shelters with proper quarantine measures, food, protective gears, and medical equipment for MDWs waiting to return to their countries of origin.
4. Facilitate travel and provide legal and financial exceptions for DWs to cross national borders, during their closure, so they can reach their countries of destination and deliver essential work.
5. Guarantee the safety of irregular MDWs from deportation and arrest after the crisis is alleviated.



### Health and Social Benefits

1. Upscale health systems and infrastructure, including water and sanitation provision. Exempt, waive, or reduce the payments of essential services such as water, electricity, and gas for unemployed DWs, formal and otherwise.
2. Include DWs in Occupational Safety and Health law coverage as a priority, extend social security services to DWs - and recognize COVID-19 is an occupational disease.
3. Cover the cost of COVID-19 tests and treatment of the virus and its side effects for DWs, irrespective of their documentation status.
4. Ensure the unconditional provision of health services free of racial discrimination, institutionally and individually, to domestic workers. Provide undocumented migrant DWs with the same access to the health system as for residents and formal workers and guarantee their safety from deportation and arrest risks in the present and the future.
5. Enforce the employers' contributions to Social Security Funds where applicable and enforce the payment of DWs health and travel insurance by the employers.

### Anti-Discrimination Measures

1. Educate the public to fight COVID-19 and discrimination at once. The pandemic is not an excuse for discrimination.
2. Respect and implement the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.
3. Terminate unfair immigration laws through reference to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families as a framework.

### **Rising from the Disaster Stronger**

The pandemic has created a state of emergency recognized by states. However, domestic workers have long lived under emergencies, as women, migrants, working class and from the Global South. Their labor is vulnerable in a system that interested in sacrificing health and rights for the sake of profit. Racist rhetoric targeting MDWs on COVID-19 is used to justify the normalization of the mistreatment of these workers as casualties of disaster. We are witnessing how corporate opportunism is turning workers into commodities, but we are also seeing glimpses of hope, of what is possible through this crisis.

Economies and societies are only as strong as their most vulnerable. Beyond surviving the storm, we need to lift bold demands that not only feed into humanitarian relief in relation to COVID-19, but also build towards a future where we make sure these atrocities do not happen again. We need to push forward radical alternatives with courage and power. As witnessed through this crisis, workers' demands are urgent; without them, the social fabric of our communities and our economy is damaged. We need to recognize that no sustained or equitable recovery after the pandemic is possible without ensuring decent work for all workers, including DWs. Domestic workers need to be included in the creation and implementation of policies that affect them, as they are the sole legitimate partners in such social dialogues.

COVID-19 has not achieved a presumed equality between people where everyone is equally effected. The virus treats humans as a medium for spreading. Equality and equity, in turn, are a matter that societies need to work on. It is up to us to ensure that we treat COVID-19 as an opening to redress the long-standing inequalities preventing entire populations from access to basic rights and services, and a decent life overall.



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