

# Across Borders and Movements: Migrant Domestic Workers Resistance



## Webinar Report On the International Migrants Day 2020<sup>1</sup>

On the occasion of the 20 year jubilee of the adoption of [International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families](#), and the two year anniversary of the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) which was adopted by the majority of UN Member States at an Intergovernmental Conference in Morocco, followed closely by [formal endorsement by the UN General Assembly on 19 December](#), the International Domestic Workers Federation gathered in a webinar to celebrate migrant workers resistance across borders and movements.

The Webinar started with a message from our president, South African Labor Activist and the General Secretary of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU), Myrtle Witbooi:



*“Our message should be clear: We, as migrant workers, need to start educating ourselves, and we must enter the age of technology and the digital world. Our cellphone is ours and we are to start using it. What we have won, in terms of policies, is standing still, and we must make sure that we take it out of the drawers and out of the closets, for these changes to become a reality. We must make sure that we are mobilized. We have to unite all the migrant worker organizations around the world to lobby better and stronger.”*

– Myrtle Witbooi

---

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

There are 11.5 million migrant domestic workers in the world, which represents 17.2 per cent of a total estimate of 67.1 million domestic workers globally. The care work sector is filled with Domestic Workers, and it relies heavily on chains of migration between paid and unpaid domestic labor provided by women throughout the stages of the migration cycle. It is of utmost importance to reflect on what migration constitutes for the domestic work sector and for the economy at large, especially considering the ongoing pandemic as it has increased insecurity with airport closures, needs for repatriation, absence of firewalls, heightened unemployment, and abandonment at borderlands. If we are to build back better and to envision a world where labor is fair and free from violence, we need to reflect on the positionalities of migrant domestic workers throughout the cycle, and examine their unionizing efforts from the pre-departure stage, to integration, to return and reintegration.

## Geography of Resistance: Migrant Domestic Workers' Leadership across the Migration Cycle

The 1<sup>st</sup> Panel reflected on the migration experiences of domestic workers and how they are shaped by their precarious positions in the global labor market. These precarities are experienced at various stages of the migration cycle:

- **Country of Origin:** the indebtedness along with the dependence on middlemen and recruitment agencies, keeping in mind that women have fewer assets to begin with,
- **Country of Destination:** limited term contracts, fragile employment, and employer-tied visas in destination countries,
- **Country of Origin upon Return:** the precarity of future reflected in the limited spaces of return and re-integration.

Across these various geographies, migrant domestic workers and domestic worker leaders provided insight into their unionizing efforts within the contexts of country of origin, of destination, and transnationally.

## From the Caribbean: The Vulnerabilities of Jamaican Migrant Domestic Workers and Venues for Reform



**Nicola Lawson** is the Vice president of the Jamaica Household Workers Union of which she has been a member for over 15 years. She works to promote human rights, especially in the context of economic, social, and cultural rights by engendering policy, law, and practice at local, national, regional, and International levels. As a promoter of the domestic workers sector, she works in all aspects that affects women's life and carries out programs with domestic workers and their children, fighting against discrimination and for women's economic empowerment. Nicola has been a domestic worker for 24 years. Being a member of the union has helped her be a better-rounded individual and household worker.

Domestic work can be regarded as the largest women occupational category of workers. As women workers, we contribute significantly to national development through the performance of our paid and unpaid work. We also must struggle to combine our roles to look after our families. The laws regulating domestic work and concerning domestic workers and their rights are in many instances out-of-date and are in some cases discriminatory. The lack of comprehensive, modern legislation worsens the abuse and exploitation of domestic workers. They often migrate hoping to achieve a better quality of life and to ensure better opportunities for themselves or their family, like acquiring a better education for their children or a more stable and secure job for themselves.

Migration can be rural to urban. Many of JHWU's members migrate to Kingston looking a better paying job, as the rural areas lack such opportunities. Amongst the major problems they face are long hours of work, heavy workloads, lack of privacy, low salaries, inadequate accommodation, and food, forced labor and wrongful dismissal, as well as sexual, emotional, and physical abuse. The two domestic worker categories most exposed to even harder conditions are child and migrant domestic workers, the latter due to inequalities determined by gender, race, background, national origin, and social status. Domestic work remains one of the least protected sectors under national labor laws and suffers from particularly poor monitoring.

Migrant domestic workers suffer from human rights abuses such as wage theft, absence of a contract, passport retentions, large fees paid to employment agencies, violations of human dignity and freedoms, degrading treatment and violence, forced labor and trafficking for labor exploitation. The situation is critical particularly for Migrant Domestic Workers with an irregular or undocumented migration status or those who are live-in workers. They often have limited access to communication devices, like mobile phones or internet bundles, and are thus secluded from their communities and families.

The JHWU has been advocating for the implementation of Decent Work for domestic workers and Free Movement of Domestic Workers within the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Single Market and Economy (CSME)<sup>2</sup>. Persons from CARICOM member states can travel within the Caribbean islands and remain there for 6 months without working. However, it is not true for Jamaicans. Therefore, the union is lobbying CARICOM governments to ratify and implement the ILO Conventions 190 and 189, to support the formation of DW associations throughout the Caribbean along with the training and capacity-building for national associations. The CSME is an inclusive development plan, which is intended to benefit the people of the Caribbean by providing more and better opportunities to produce and sell goods and work. However, domestic workers are sidelined. The union is hence fighting for the full implementation of the CSME regime for DW so that they may enjoy their rights in the same manner as the other categories of workers.

Given the weak social security protection available to migrant workers in the region, it is necessary to put in place the balancing of independent, joint, and multiparty interventions. Governments need to adopt streamlined and realistic responses to this issue across Member States, which will require the coordination of immigration, labor, and social security legal and policy frameworks and best practices developed in the region. They also need to supervise employment agencies that provide misleading information about the job offer and exploit aspiring migrant workers through false promises. For example:

- An overseas employer requested the service of one of JHWU members to work as a live-in caregiver to 2 elderly men. The pay and benefits sounded good but upon arrival of the worker, it was found out to be false information given to the union. The worker was placed in a home with 8 elderly men to care for and had no proper accommodation for herself. The house was infested with rodent and roaches and the food was limited. She had to use her money to feed both herself and the elderly she took care of. As her documents remained with her, she was able to reach out to the union that assisted her to return home.
- Another member was sent by the union to Mexico to work as a housekeeper. She was sexually abused, her documents were taken away from her, so she was unable to return on her own. The union was contacted and, in turn, reached out to Jamaican consulate in Mexico to facilitate her safe return.

These are only but few hostile ordeals migrant workers face and there are many more stories to tell. Governments in the Caribbean need to:

1. Background-check employment agencies.
2. Ministries of labor must have awareness raising campaigns on the Support Service agencies present in each country so to assist the domestic workers who would like to move within the CSME to work.
3. Provide guidance and referrals to domestic workers so they can obtain information on employment opportunities in their countries of residence, accommodation and housing information, and advice and information on applying for the Regime and obtaining the necessary certification

---

<sup>2</sup> The CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) is an arrangement among the CARICOM Member States to create a single enlarged economic space by removing of restrictions on the free movement of goods, services, persons, capital, and technology.

4. Partner up with employment agencies, in models like those created for farm workers.
5. Regularize the informal workers across the Caribbean.
6. Ensure access to information and legal advice for Migrant DW.
7. Train immigration officers on the laws of the free movement of skills/labor included in the CARICOM under Article 46 of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas to seek work and/or engage in gainful employment in any of the participating CARICOM member States, as Migrant DW who are documented still face harassment upon entry by immigration officers.
8. Treat all workers with equality, dignity, and respect, irrespective of their gender and migration status.
9. Ratify and implement the ILO Conventions C189 and C190 across the Caribbean.
10. Align the policies to facilitate the enjoyment of mobility rights under the free movement regime by domestic workers. Those who have migrated since 2009 until today cannot fully enjoy their rights because of gaps in policy and policy alignments. For example, domestic workers need to acquire the skills certificate through the Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ) regime, which has not been properly implemented.

*“The main cause of irregular migration is not the migrants disregard of regulations, but rather the growth of inequality within and between countries and inability of states to meet the needs of the workers. It is time to open the doors for domestic workers so they can walk through.”*

– Nicola Lawson.

### From the Middle East: Migrant Domestic Workers Resilience Under the Kafala System



**Rahel Zegeye** is a domestic worker, a human rights activist, and a filmmaker from Ethiopia who has lived in Lebanon for around 20 years. She founded *Mesewat*, an organization in Lebanon in 2014 to support the victims of the kafala system; a sponsorship system that links the residency of migrant domestic workers to their employer and facilitates exploitation.

The *Kafala* is a sponsorship system put by the Lebanese government to govern the work of migrant workers, including domestic workers. It is not a law, as it exists outside of national and international laws. It allows the employer to decide on all matters of life on behalf of the workers who have no negotiation power over the workload, the breaks they can take, the time that they sleep. The employers are in control of the entire lives of Migrant DW starting from the moment of their arrival to the airport. Our passports are often taken away. We have no visibility on when we can return home, we wait for years at a time. I have been in Lebanon for 20 years now and



nothing has changed during this period. The Lebanese people are not interested in a change to the system: those who employ domestic workers benefit from it, and those who do not are unaware of its atrocities. It is estimated that 75% of the Lebanese population does not fully understand what the Kafala system is. The Kafala system hence protects and benefits the employer, not the employee. Only Lebanese citizens can sponsor a worker, and the workers who need sponsoring come from various backgrounds from the countries of the South and perform manual labor. The Kafala system treats us as commodities, as things not as people. We work like slaves, especially now with the ongoing crises.

Ten months ago, a political crisis has started with ongoing protests to the economic situation. The Lebanese economy has been collapsing since. COVID-19 has made things worse. There are no prospects of work in the country, and thousands of domestic workers in Lebanon still have their passports confiscated and have no access to food or housing. All migrant workers are asking for repatriation, but there is little will to assist them from both local government and their own governments. They are stuck in Lebanon. Of course, there are organizations working to support us, such as the International Domestic Workers Federation and the Anti-Racism Movement, but this is not a job we can do on our own. When domestic workers have no money for transportation inside the country, how are they expected to gather the funds for tickets for repatriation. To make things worse, the Lebanese government is still issuing work visas for new migrant domestic workers to come into the country when they know too well that with the economic, political, and public health crises, there are little prospects for the workers, and that the Kafala system is not reformed yet. There are many domestic workers thrown on the streets by their employers or dropped in front of their embassies with no food and no money, and yet, the government does not intent to put a halt on more migrant workers coming. Entire populations are living on aid. This is not sustainable.

At *Mesewat*, we work to support migrant domestic workers through humanitarian aid and lobbying our governments to abide by international standards for domestic work as stated in the Domestic Workers Convention. We, migrant domestic workers, are organizing to our fullest power, but this is a job we cannot do alone. We need to come together.

### **From Africa to the Middle East: Kenyan stories of Migration and Return**

*“Who can better educate the prospective domestic workers from Kenya than those who have pursued their migration dream? Those of us who have had a migration experience as domestic workers need to be responsible to share their insights on what to expect about the host country’s culture and the existing labor laws. It is also the migrant domestic workers themselves who are best equipped to inform the Kenyan government of their situation so they can act in accordance with their needs.”*

- Margaret Kabue

### **Margaret Kabue**

She grew up in Kajiado County in Kenya. She has been in Qatar for 8 years, working as a nanny and a home therapist (Applied Behavior Analysis). She has also been an active community leader for 5 years and in June 2020, they started organizing a Kenyan domestic workers group, the Kenyan Household Service Workers. The purpose of the group is worker education about their rights and the provision of support in times of crisis.



### **Zainab Ekumba**



She has been a migrant worker and a member of returnee network in Kenya Union for Domestic Hotels Educational Institutions Hospital and Allied

Workers union (KUDEIHA). She worked as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia from 2014 to January 2020, she recently came back from Riyadh in early February. She has had both good and worst experiences in her quest to secure employment in the gulf.

### **Push Factors behind Kenyan Migration to the Gulf**

Kenyan workers migrate as they suffer under poverty line and lack job opportunities locally. Well-educated Kenyans find themselves working in low-paid jobs and sometimes become Migrant DWs. Alcoholism is also a factor in migration, as it leads to the separation of spouses, and single mothers' migration to single handedly raise their children. Some women are escaping abusive marriages or getting away from the prospects of early marriage. Compared to European countries, the Middle East and Gulf require less complicated paperwork and overall process for relocation, which is why it is a popular destination, in addition to the marketing strategies employed by recruitment agencies. They promise the workers higher wages and better living and working conditions, especially for Qatar, a country promoted as peaceful and prosperous. These marketing strategies often prove wrong, which is why we need to organize transnationally as domestic worker unions between country of origin and country of destination, for better collaboration.

### **Factors behind Kenyan Repatriation & Return**

Sharing her personal story, Zainab explained how DW frequently migrate more than once, despite knowing the conditions of labor in the Country of Destination. Zainab has been in and out of Saudi Arabia for several years. During her first stay, she was not paid for 10 months. She was told to wait for two years till the end her contract to be given the money she is owed. She went back to Kenya, with no savings and having to support her family, she had to return for work again. The second time, she left Saudi Arabia due to sexual abuse, mistreatment, and violence. She also had no cellphone to communicate her struggle and decided to go back home.

Back in Kenya, the problems Zainab left were still there. She wanted to complete her education and get a college degree which is why she returned to work. COVID-19 happened, and her plans fell through. This is when she met Ruth from KUDEIHA and started organizing with DWs and being trained about her rights. She now organizes with returnees.

While the Kafala system persists in the Middle East and Gulf countries, successful organizing has enabled some recent changes in Qatar. The law number 17 of 2020 has determined a national minimum wage for domestic workers and other workers, it will be effective in March 2021. Another change is stated in the law number 18 which allows the domestic worker to terminate the employment, and finally, the law number 19 which removes the No Objection Certificate (NOC) requirement that used to force the workers to obtain such document from their employer prior to leaving a job. These laws have given the migrant domestic workers who are in dire situations a chance to unchain themselves from a dreadful *Kafeel* (sponsor). While some has successfully transferred, other domestic workers still struggle as the Kafala system still exists.

## Carving out Space in Sectors and Movements: Migrant Domestic Workers' Strategies

Migrant DW's resistance is not only shaped through geography, as they carve out spaces for themselves within sectors and movements. **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Panel** dived into how domestic workers build transnational communities, challenge hostile immigration policies and borders, re-imagine an economy of care where care is mutual, visible, and valued, and form alliances across sectors and themes to join their sisters in various struggles of racial, feminist, indigenous, and labor justices.

This panel spoke truth to power and sheds light on the multitudes of battles Migrant DWs are fighting, highlighting their victories. What can we learn from their experiences?

### From Latin America: A Migrant DW Experience in Leading the Union



**Diana Soliz de Garcia**, a Bolivian living in São Paulo for 25 years, is the indigenous immigrant director of the Union of Domestic Workers of the Municipality of São Paulo (STDMSPP). She is also the Director of the National Federation of Domestic Workers of Brazil (FENATRAD) and Secretary of Presence of Latin America

With a song as a small tribute to migrant domestic workers' lives that were lost during the pandemic, especially those who were unable to reunite with their families back in their countries of origin, Diana Soliz de Garcia opened the floor to discuss the structure of the department of



immigration at her union. She herself has come to the union and was provided with legal counsel when she has first arrived in Brazil. It is mandatory for the union to shed light on the vulnerable situation of migrant domestic workers, as they have suffered exceedingly difficult situations within their daily lives in ways that no human being should be treated.

Migrant workers have every right that a Brazilian domestic worker has, and both should be on equal footing and must not be treated differently based on race, nationality, or background. However, it is the migrants who suffer the most. Their country of origin might offer them no accommodation and no employment, so they move to find better opportunities then find themselves confined with no privacy and heavy workloads. The union understands the peculiarities of the needs of these migrants and keeps in touch with them through the phone. “I used to cry when I first came here as an immigrant. The first people I spoke to, played the role of a therapist. They supported me, and that is a role the union takes up,” said Soliz. The complaints the union handles are not only related to abusive employers but also the situation of migration itself. Migrant domestic workers are caring for their families and must send remittances to their home countries, children, and elderly parents. Migrant DW might get sick, but they do not pass on that suffering to their families and do not let them know of the moral, physical, and psychological harassment they encounter. “We suffer in silence, we go through hunger, we find ourselves with no cleaning supplies, no food. We feel humiliated. This makes me angry. When people find out when we are migrants, they feel that they can violate our rights despite the law protecting us,” she continued. The union thus works on identifying ways the law protects DW and on making that information and strategies accessible to their membership. In fact, this union is the only one in Brazil to include migrants and hopes to serve as a precedence for other institutions to include migrant workers within their scope and reach as well. Migrant domestic workers come to a new country to work and become partners and allies within the union and the domestic workers movement, and it cannot be had in any other way. Thanks to them there is more care work in the economy. Therefore, the union created a department on migration instead of an international secretariat and changed its structure in response to the dire demands of Migrant DW. When they arrive at the country of destination, leaving their families in their home countries, the union becomes the family of choice for many migrant DW.

### **From Asia: Filipino Migrant DW Create a Transnational Community**



**Shiella Estrada** has been working as a migrant domestic worker for 35 years in Hong Kong and Singapore. She has been a union leader for 31 years, and the founding leader for several migrant workers unions including the Progressive Labor Union of Domestic Workers in Hong Kong (PLU) and Hong Kong Federation of Domestic Workers Unions (FADWU) as well. Her rich union organizing experience as a worker has brought up many worker leaders in Hong Kong and abroad. She is a main leader for IDWF and SENTRO, a trade union center in the Philippines, to support Filipino migrant domestic workers groups and unions in Macau, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Kuwait, Jordan. Workers now have their voices at home in the Philippines and at their second home in the destination where they work.

Organizing in transnational communities is an important strategy for SENTRO. In 2004, it tried to organize another labor movement with the Filipino DW in Hong Kong, and after years of learning through trial and errors, SENTRO was finally able to reach the progressive labor union in 2012. The union is only 8 years old, but its work speaks volume. It is affiliated with the Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Union and with the Center of United Progressive Workers in the Philippines. They work with the Hong Kong trade union, which provided them with political and organizational support. They raised awareness of thousands of MDW on rights, reaching populations beyond the Filipino communities, as “solidarity is not country bound,” Shiella Estrada said.

It is no secret that many recruitment agencies violate migrant workers’ rights and subject them to exploitation through collecting excessive fees and confiscating documents. SENTRO works on shutting down these agencies and have some active campaigns that research the exploitative practices against Migrant DW in HK to prove to the government the necessity of reform. They have had a great achievement recently, when for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in history, the existing law was amended to increase the penalty of abusive employment agencies. The union does not limit its scope to focusing on the recruitment agencies, it also has an annual consultation on wage increase and food allowances. Beyond that, SENTRO and PLU aim to build a transnational union for Filipino workers. In 2015, they have expanded in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, as well as Macau and Singapore in 2017. In early 2019, a group of caretakers in Taiwan reached out to PLU and requested assistance with their worker education programs. Governments and embassies have recognized this form of organizing, culminating in a start of a collaboration in 2018 in Kuwait and Jordan with the support of IDWF support and another LEARN. Sandigan, a domestic workers’ group, was officially formed and registered in Kuwait. In 2019, domestic worker leaders traveled from these different countries to form an International Union for Filipino Workers. Since overseas employment opportunities remain attractive for some given the increasing economic crises, the need for transnational organizing will not witness a recess.

“We will continue setting the political agenda for migrant domestic workers’ justice throughout this pandemic. All the groups met in Manila last year. We have more voices, more numbers. We are more united, strong, and a powerful lobbying platform,” Shiella Estrada added. It is worth noting that all this work is carried out by volunteers, for free. They believe in the power of transnational organizing.

## From Europe: Migrant DW Fight COVID-19



Originally from Ecuador, **Wendy Galarza** lives, works, and organizes in Italy. She is the regional officer for *Federazione Italiana dei Lavoratori de Commercio Alberghi Mense e Servizi* (FILCAMS CGIL) in Italy and a board member at the International Domestic Workers Federation.

Opening her speech by the question “how do we fight to eliminate frontiers,” Wendy Galarza explored the identity of migrant domestic workers as a border-challenging entity by default, especially through the extraordinarily strong unity of DW, perhaps due to the bond of womanhood in the sector, which creates an added value.

Moving to share significant examples from the strategies they have employed facing the pandemic, Galarza discussed the medium- and long-term initiatives adopted across Europe. In the Netherlands, Migrant DW have created a crowdfunding platform through which they gathered and divided resources with their colleagues throughout the worst of the lockdown period. They provided medicine and food for workers struggling to access the livelihood. Most of the live-in workers were not allowed to leave the household of their employers in fear of COVID-19 transmission, which has greatly affected their mental health. In Spain, Migrant DW have organized awareness campaigns since 2014, together with other migrant and refugee women, to acquire rights through a systematic lobbying the government. It is due to such effort that DW were able to dispute some policies in the country that prevent them from having a day off per week. In England, Middle Eastern and Asia Pacific workers have also had a long-term campaign requesting the British government to include them in the Visa process in 2012, to allow migrant workers to arrive in England and have rights right away. With Brexit, the visa process was suspended, and some workers would lack documentation in its aftermath. During the disaster, the situation in Europe is “semi-privileged,” as unionized and organized Domestic Workers groups have met with the governments in question and demanded access to rights to state-subsidies. In Italy, the workers were provided with a bonus of 1000 euros divided into twelve months, which was not much but has improved DW access to basic sustenance.

“We speak the same language: the language of rights. We break the barriers: we ask for employment security, access to health services and rights,” concluded Galarza. While COVID-19 persists, so does the strength of Migrant DW in the region, lobbying the governments for inclusion in the pandemic relief and beyond.

## From the United States: Domestic Workers Form Alliances to push for Justice for All



**Ai-jen Poo** is the co-founder and Executive Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, a non-profit organization working to bring quality work, dignity, and fairness to the growing numbers of workers who care and clean in our homes, the majority of whom are immigrants and women of color.

At the National Domestic Workers Alliance, we organize nannies, house cleaners and homecare workers to be powerful in our economy and democracy. We honor all the Migrant DW all over the world who are facing unprecedented crisis with strength. There are 280,000 DW in the US: this workforce is essential, yet systematically devalued and excluded, particularly those undocumented who are at the frontlines both in terms of the loss of lives and livelihoods. The majority of DW in the US are and have always been Black women, migrants, and other women of color. We are the sector of the economy with the largest undocumented number of workers. And this part of our workforce not only has not received any relief from the government but also relied heavily on unions for support. Central to our strategy to create change is to work as one with other social justice movements in the US. We have fought alongside survivors of sexual harassment and violence in the *#MeToo Movement*, Family Caregivers as part of our campaign “Caring across Generation,” mobilizing women-of-color voters to understand their power as voters in our democracy. We have led efforts to stop family separation at the borders through our campaign “Families Belong Together” to fight for families at the borders and in detention, and we are part of the Movement for Black Life, which is sought to divest resources from abusive policing and reinvest them in programs that care for our communities. Our black DW are organizing the “We Dream in Black” campaign have launched their agenda articulating a five-year vision for Black DW in the US. We have fought for an essential workers’ bill of rights in the US and for the world to see DW as essential workers, so they are protected as they protect us during the pandemic. We have fought for a seat at the table for DW. Cross-movement work is at the DNA of our movement because we have always seen DW as whole human beings: as workers, voters, mothers, caregivers for their own families, etc., dating back to the 1960s when Dorothy Bolden founded NDWA: She was a key leader in the civil rights movement. We are working now with professors at Smith College to tell these histories to generations to come.

What we are fighting for is not about just workers’ rights, but about our shared humanity and our right to live full joyful lives as protagonists in our lives, communities, and countries. Our workers are suffering in unprecedented ways, more than 40% are unemployed and those who still work must pay out of their own pocket for their own Personal Protective Equipment and COVID-19 testing. It is a full-blown depression for DW in the US. We found by a research project done by “We Dream in Black,” that Black Immigrant DW have struggled with multiple crises such as the ongoing police violence and policing, the violence of our immigration policies, the lack of access to healthcare and relief or the protection of safety net and equal protection as

workers. At the same time, we remain incredibly hopeful because we are united, and we are organizing, and our membership has grown in this crisis. Our members are more active and engaged. With this new administration and the new vice-president Kamala Harris, who was the lead sponsor of our national domestic workers bill of rights, we have new allies including our own deputy director for civic engagement Nikema Williams who was elected to the US congress. We continue to build our movement and all the movements we are connected to. Change is on the horizon and we can achieve long overdue change for domestic workers.

---

## Questions & Answers Session

1. How did you get started and did the government oppose your work or try to intimidate you to stop organizing and unionizing?

### **Rahel Zegeye:**

When I first arrived in Lebanon 18 years ago, no one was interested in migrant domestic workers outside of some humanitarian or faith-based organizations such as Caritas. But they did not have access to information on what difficulties domestic workers face inside the private households. Many were dying at their employers' residence or are imprisoned, and we would not hear about them. If Migrant DWs need hospitalization and do not have the required paperwork, they also might end up in jail. It was also not allowed to congregate for domestic workers. Even the Ethiopian government was not able to assist. We faced intimidation and defamation. We were concerned about retaliation because once we spoke up, we were more visible and easier targets for the anti-migrant sentiments. Some accused us of trafficking when we would assist a migrant domestic worker to escape an abusive situation. There was a resistance to making all these breaches of human rights public to preserve the image of the country. Now things have improved because we many collective emerged, such as the Migrant Workers Task Force, the Anti-Racism Movement, and the International Domestic Workers Federation. We were able to remain resilient because of this solidarity.

### **Diana Soliz de Garcia:**

Initiating work with Migrant DW through our union in Sao Paulo has been easy as we have always had many migrant members, the number of which has increased significantly in the last years. When Michel Temer came to office, our union felt the need to create a special department for migrant and indigenous DW to protect them and attend to their demands. As I was part of the



union for many years, I was appointed Director of that department in December 2017. The current Brazilian Government is unfavorable to unionizing, as well as organization domestic and migrant workers. That is precisely why our Migrant and Indigenous Department started playing a more active and key role in the union. As a result, the collective bargaining agreement for DW includes a specific clause about Migrant DW, which establishes that when employers hire a Migrant DW, they must communicate it to our union, so we, in turn, inform the employee about her labor rights.

2. How to create a network where we can provide accompaniment to our fellow migrant domestic workers? A successful story from Jamaica was shared, where fortunately the union enabled a migrant worker to return to her country. But I think of other cases where the migrant colleagues know that our federation and the unions exist around the world. How to weave these networks with the embassies where migration has a greater presence? (Norma Palacios)

### **Diana Soliz de Garcia:**

In Brazil, the struggle of DW started in 1930, leading to a strong organization capacity and a solid structure. Before the proclamation of the Brazilian Constitution, in 1988, DW were not allowed to organize, but they did it anyway by founding associations instead of unions, and even organizing big meetings and events across the country. Those actions strengthened us to fight for our rights and to demand the Constitutional Assembly to respect them, including our right to organize and unionize. The new Constitution, known as “The Civic Constitution of 1988,” allowed workers to organize. Then, almost all the nets and associations in Brazil turned into unions in the 90s. That process demonstrates that organizing is possible and fruitful, no matter the circumstances, and encourages us to continue struggling, despite the adversities. Our Domestic Workers Union in the city of Sao Paulo is a member of several national and international federations and confederations for a long time: CUT, CONTRACS- CUT, FENATRAD, CONLACTRAHO, and IDWF. These alliances are essential because they reinforce and empower our demands at national and global level. We need to strengthen those alliances and partnerships, as well as our relationship with other sectors of national and migrant workers to fight together for our rights and demand for respect and equality. No matter your social class, gender, color, race, or citizenship, we are people.

3. Is it possible to talk about comprehensive immigration reform, where the long-term migrant workers become residents, with rights of residents? Ending “migrant workers” to become “immigrant workers,” residents empowered with residence rights? - By Sudarat Musikawong

### IDWF:

The solution described by Sudarat describes a radical change that requires global commitment to democratize access to resources and livelihoods, since if we look at the subject from an ethics perspective on the principle of the moral equality of people, it is difficult to justify immigration controls over who can cross borders and live or work within a given territory. In this sense, immigration controls are acts of power that attempt to keep the global disenfranchised within the geographies of disenfranchisement in the global south and protect the resources of the global north. That outlines the reasoning behind many migrant workers never attaining a long-term residence or a citizenship status, because they are meant to provide labor without receiving guarantees of better livelihoods within the place of residence. Their migration is understood as temporary, if they can return to the country of origin if they want to. However, many cannot return because of the lack of options for livelihood. We must think of migration as a spectrum which allows various mobilities from temporary migration to permanent immigration. While there is little power over individual states’ policies in relation to the acquisition of a citizenship status for migrant workers, which is usually tied to marriage, we can work on regularizing migrant DW’s status: this includes work on the Global Compact on Safe and Regular Migration, and more generally on comprehensive labor rights. Moreover, there are countries that allow Migrant DWs to have full residents' rights - e.g. Canada and Argentina. While it is disheartening that there only a few of them, they do show such solutions are possible, nevertheless.

In conclusion of our webinar, the participants in the webinar not only had questions, but also solutions to some of the discussed dilemmas:

*“We can clearly see that the experiences of Jamaica, Lebanon and Qatar show that the situation of domestic workers is first and foremost a matter of political will. The Qatari authorities, for example, despite the persistence of the Kafala system, have been able to establish legislation in favor of these workers: the minimum wage, termination of the contract if the worker is not satisfied. Whether in the fight against fragile contracts or the unionizing fight, we believe that if there is internal political will and international solidarity, migrant domestic workers will have their rights.” – Rodolphe from Cameroon*

