

This publication discusses the effects of COVID-19 as an entry point to make substantive policy interventions to realize both an equitable and sustainable recovery, and proposes a definition of care economy that centers domestic workers as a necessary building block for truly transformative policy.

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A Paradigm Shift for

THE CARE ECONOMY AND DOMESTIC WORKERS



International Domestic
Workers Federation

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A Paradigm Shift for
the Care Economy and
Domestic Workers

written by Roula Seghaier

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It takes a village.

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My ultimate tribute goes to our affiliates, the domestic workers composing this movement, and through the lived experience and wisdom of whom we can conceive better horizons.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IDWF (www.idwfed.org) is a membership-based global labor organization of domestic and household workers, comprising over 650,000 members worldwide.

The world is being cared for by workers of the formal and informal economy, however, only the former has recognition, albeit incomplete. With the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping the world, the already feminized workforce in Asia and the Pacific sustained deep repercussions. On the one hand, massive losses of jobs caused deep disenfranchisement to domestic workers with no safety nets to fall back on in the absence of social protection. Many domestic workers suffered job losses (ILO, 2020) which is exacerbated by their inability to access governmental provisions such as social security: 84,3% of the domestic workers in Asia are informally employed and have no access to benefits whether

or not they have the legal right to social security (ILO, 2021). On the other hand, domestic workers that have not lost their jobs saw their hours increase inhumanely (UNESCAP, 2019).

The pandemic has certainly brought to light deep-seated issues in the policy landscape surrounding domestic work in Asia and the Pacific. This publication discusses the effects of COVID-19 as an entry point to make substantive policy interventions to realize both an equitable and sustainable recovery. The publication proposes a definition of care economy that centers domestic workers as a necessary building block for truly transformative policy.

INTRODUCTION

Domestic work is the most basic building block of wellbeing, care work, and the economy at large, as it enables the daily functioning of individuals, communities, and states. Facing a major shock such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asian continent has high stakes in a transformative recovery as over 50% of all domestic workers are in the region (ILO, 2021). The number of domestic workers in India alone borders five million (ILO Website). In Indonesia, it is at two and a half million (MFA website), and at least one and a half million in the Philippines (Department of Labor and Employment of the Republic of the Philippines, 2020)¹. Furthermore, women in the region work the longest hours in the world (UNESCAP, 2019). This is especially true for unsupervised sectors such as domestic work: the sector has very little recognition in Asia and the Pacific, making controls and standardization of working hours and benefits nearly impossible.

Domestic work, however important, is not recognized as work in most Asian countries, thus nega-

tively affecting the equal access to job securities, pensions, and other social protection schemes. With the ongoing disenfranchisement, women and their labor must be placed at the center of any recovery roadmap.

While the rhetoric on investing in care is on the rise, it seldom refers to investing in decent work conditions for domestic workers, despite it being central to care. This is because care workers usually encompass people who had a more formal access to education: nurses, educators, formal medical aids, etc. The distinction is not free from socio-economic prejudice and requires reinvestigation, especially in Global South contexts where a domestic worker performs ALL labor.

To do so, I created the matrix below to visualize the hierarchical valuation of labor². Outlined within the inner circle are the qualifications of the labor valued by the existing systems of oppression such as classism, racism, xenophobia, ableism, etc. In the outer layer, I place the properties of labor that

¹ The latest press release of the Philippines ministry of labor estimates that 1.4 million Filipinos work as kasambahays in the country. This constitutes half of a million decrease in the reported number of domestic workers in the Philippines compared to the ILO 2011 report on “Domestic Workers in the Philippines: Profile and Working Conditions.” Some domestic workers might have traveled, and many lost their jobs due to the pandemic, however, the discrepancy remains great.

² Gayle Rubin has created a charmed circle, a visual explanation of sexual hierarchies. The matrix is inspired by her effort as applied to “outcasts” of the labor sphere.



Circle of (Un)Valued Labor, by Roula Seghaier

remain disadvantaged by the systems in place to employ the matrix to the analysis of the situation of domestic workers.

It is precisely because half of all domestic workers in the world are in Asia and the Pacific that we need to prioritize reforming the labor conditions of domes-

tic workers in this region. As health systems collapse, we need not only to recognize domestic workers as workers, but also as care workers. We need to address the long-seated issues surrounding the collapsing care-systems and starting domestic workers as both providers and recipients of care.

Economic and Socio-political Trends



During the pandemic, alongside inhumane work hour increases of those who remained employed, domestic workers suffered massive losses of jobs with no safety nets to fall back on in the absence of social protection. With no immediate resources to spend on their livelihoods, domestic workers found themselves battling long-seated structural barriers to decent life: displacement, food-insecurity, risks of homelessness, amongst other.

In comparing the pandemic to fire, Roderick Wallace writes:

Context counts for pandemic infection, and current political structures that allow multinational agricultural enterprises to privatize profits while externalizing and socializing costs, must become subject to “code enforcement” that reinternalizes those costs if truly mass-fatal pandemic disease is to be avoided in the near future (Wallace, 2020).

The landscape of the labor market in Asia and the Pacific is not equipped to valorize the workers, their working and living conditions. It is not equipped to prevent those metaphorical fires, rather, it expects domestic workers among other informal workers to be putting them out. A few examples follow:



Demographic Pressure between Population Displacement and Aging

Commenting on the romanticizing of poor working conditions, radical geographers Alexander Liebman, Kevon Rhiney, and Rob Wallace state that “the discourse of the ‘essential worker’ is inseparable from racialized essentialism that deems some bodies naturally disposed to risk and premature death. While workers are applauded “for their ‘sacrifices’, they are actually being sacrificed” (Liebman et al., 2020). Similarly, domestic workers are oftentimes sacrificed.. The fast-growing GDP in the continent motivates the rapid urbanization and feminization of labor, as more women acquired mobility in the economic sphere, along with climate change precipitating the sectoral and geographical displacement of people (ADB, 2012): as the agricultural opportunities decrease, women migrate to find alternative livelihoods in domestic work. This is paired with the aging demographic of the population which is “expected to increase from an estimated 548 million in 2019, to nearly 1.3 billion by 2050” (UNDESA, 2019) and will create further need for domestic workers.

Without attending to the environmental concerns dispossessing entire sectors of the economy and without public investments in infrastructures of institutional care such as affordable nursing homes, educational facilities, and healthcare, more and more women will carry the weight of environmental and demographic rapid changes with their bare hands. The combination of rapid urban growth and the aging population requires investment in care and domestic workers.

Invisibility to Labor Laws and Lack of Social Protection

The rampant flaw in labor laws and the structure of the economy is that it does not recognize domestic workers as workers. Henceforth, they have no infrastructure of work-related social protection or care to fall back on. Social protection, as a concept, encompasses three components: i. **social services** (i.e., public healthcare and education), ii. **social assistance** (i.e., unemployment benefits and relief), and iii. **social insurance** (i.e., labor protection, health insurance, pension).

First, when care institutions are privatized,

low-waged workers, such as domestic workers, cannot access social services. With a low per capita expenditure on healthcare services, it is barely possible for meagerly paid unrecognized workers to access any health provisions. For example, in Delhi, India, domestic workers were excluded from humanitarian relief such as food rations and emergency assistance (WIEGO, 2020c). **Second**, when governments narrow social assistance and only provide it to select vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities or orphaned children, many impoverished people, such as domestic workers, do not “qualify” for humanitarian relief. During the pandemic, most domestic workers did not receive aid. And **third**, when domestic work is not recognized at work, the sector does not qualify for social insurance. For example, in Bangladesh, the Labor Act (2006) explicitly excludes domestic workers. Aside a small and technical Protection and Welfare Policy (2015) with no legal backing and limited implementation, domestic workers have no access to healthcare or work-related social protection (WIEGO, 2020a). In Nepal, 90% of domestic workers are informal, and while the Labor Act (2017) stipulates that a minimum wage can be set for live-in workers, those who are both working and

The rampant flaw in labor structure of the economy: don't recognize domestic workers

living with the employer, traditionally compensated in-kind and by non-monetary arrangements, this has not been done to date (WIEGO, 2020b). Domestic workers in Nepal are similarly excluded from the Elimination of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act, 2071 enacted in 2014 (ILO, 2019). In India, none of the propositions advanced by the government address domestic workers as workers. Ultimately, they remain excluded from minimum wage and basic protection (WIEGO, 2020c). In Hong Kong as well, domestic workers are excluded from the mandatory pension scheme.

The International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) surveyed its membership in 17 in Asia and the Pacific over a period of a year, to document the struggles and demands arising with the pandemic. The survey revealed that even where social security schemes exist, most domestic workers remain unregistered for various reasons. For example: 1) In the Republic of Korea, they cannot register for it due to low income and are excluded from the country's labor law (ILO, 2021), 2) In Indonesia, they need a proof of employment to register for it, which is not acces-

sible, 3) In Thailand, rural domestic workers keep their registration as farmers to get a better insurance scheme. 4) In the Philippines and Nepal (WIEGO, 2020b), employers of domestic workers do not register them into social security, which calls for closer implementation.

Reforming the care sector through public institutions of care will enable domestic workers to access social services and social assistance, whereas recognizing them as workers will entitle them to social security. Thus, domestic workers can be understood as both givers and recipients of care service.

Complex Residency Status for National Workers

From the 70 million global total of domestic workers, 11.5 million are migrants and 24% of them are in Asia (ILO 2018), which indicates that the bulk of the service is performed by local and national domestic workers in the continent. Albeit being citizens of their countries, many suffer from policy discrimination in access to protection and relief from the state, be-

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cause their residency is tied to their village. Domestic workers coming from rural areas with no residency in the city of their work are directly affected. In Vietnam and Mainland China, social security is linked to the residency. In India, domestic workers do not get ration cards to access governmental food subsidies meant for the impoverished. Similarly, in Indonesia, they cannot access food packages when they are rural to urban migrants.

Issues of class, caste, and even religious belonging feed into the racism: urban employers spray disinfectant over the bodies of rural domestic workers who desire to return to their villages but are stuck in the cities under lockdown. In South Asia, caste plays into the perception of “untouchability,” a racist/classist standard that distinguishes and discriminates between people. Aside from descendance and ancestry, “lower-castes” have been shaped by their occupation, usually jobs that are understood today as 3D: dirty, demeaning, and dangerous. The category includes many sectors of the informal economy such as domestic work.

Laws and provisions must provide access for rural domestic workers to goods and

services from the state, irrespective of their residency ties to their hometowns. It is also necessary to look at the push factors that displace the rural workers, such as rapid urbanization and environmental deterioration. A reform that favors people, not profit, must also favor the environment. It is crucial to ensure that labor protections are provided to the workers horizontally, irrespective of their class, race, religion, and area of residency.

Regional Reliance on Remittances and the Push to Migrate

While the expansion of industries and urban growth contribute to the overall GDP growth in the continent, the remittances of migrants to their home countries, such as Sri Lanka, Philippines, and Nepal comprise the largest part of the GDP, a GDP incognizant of labor, women, and environmental issues. Governmental policies push women to migrate. The design of labor markets that sustains the male-female opportunity and wage gap, the limitation of women’s access to land, credit,



It is crucial to ensure that labor protections are provided to the workers horizontally, irrespective of their class, race, religion, and area of residency.

to education based on gender all serve as push factors (ADB 2015) deliberately excluding women from the local economy, which in turn sustains countries' inflow of remittances: they "are estimated to amount to US\$7-8 billion to the Philippines and US\$2 billion to Indonesia" (ILO, 2006). So, the migration cycle of domestic workers in Asia is not solely prompted by individual financial need, but is rather a result of an intricate web of governmental policies, economic, demographic and climate fluctuations.

Also, destination countries in Asia highly depend on migrant domestic workers: one out of six families in Singapore employ domestic workers (Ho, 2019). Similarly, in Hong Kong, economically disadvantaged families are employing domestic workers, as their labor is at least three times cheaper than alternatives institutional care services as observed by Fish Ip, IDWF Asia Regional Coordinator (Personal Interview, 2020). The total earnings requirement for a local family to be able to employ a domestic worker set by the government Commission on Poverty is 2,000 USD, a little above the poverty line, and about half of the family median income of almost 3,700 USD (Hong Kong Immigration Department, 2017).

A major challenge in this context is xenophobia, which finds its way to governmental decrees and provisions. Our COVID-19 impact assessment survey showcases a rising discrimination. A striking majority, 58% of surveyed domestic workers in Hong Kong expressed that xenophobia and racism

are on the rise against the migrant domestic workers particularly in public (26%) and by employers (16%), in addition to street harassment (17%) and at home (13%) (IDWF, 2022).

The Ministry of Manpower in Singapore, has released an advisory on June 17, 2020, suggesting that migrant domestic workers do not "gather or loiter public places" (Ministry of Manpower of Singapore, 2020). Beyond the illusion of harmless public health advice, employers could be encouraged to withhold the day-off from their workers. Similarly, in Malaysia, the governmental discourse holds that migrant workers live in poorer and less hygienic areas, and hence are more susceptible to carry the virus. The prejudice of migrants as agents of "loitering" resonates in class-based and xenophobic racist discourse.

With the lockdown, many migrants are unable to make the money transfers, influencing their entire families in Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Nepal in particular, which creates a domino effect movement. With the ongoing crisis, an economic imperative becomes more visible: no recovery of the Asian economy is possible unless migrant workers' remittances are sent. "Cohesive and Responsive Labour Migration Policy for Future Preparedness in ASEAN" is a must for the well-being of the workers, the sector, and the economy at large as advocated by the ILO's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (2021).





THE PARADIGM

*A Care Economy
Cognizant of
Domestic Work*

Shift

IDWF affiliates continue to fight for a just world of work. They are creating innovative solutions for the sustainability of livelihoods: producing their own masks in India, creating a mutual help-center in Sri Lanka, leading the organizing of districts and sub communities in Indonesia, increasing their membership in Malaysia, and organizing in a decentralized manner based on villages in the Philippines. It is crucial for governments to use the gains achieved by the domestic workers' movement, be it the ratification of the ILO conventions, the decentralization of organizing, or the intersectional lens that seeks to dismantle labor injustice from its roots. This vision for change is based on the needs of those on whose shoulders lays the displaced care labor without the protections and who are unrecognized: domestic workers.

(Micro) Sectoral Reform: Labor Policy and Representation

While the world is busy discussing a recovery, mutated variants of the virus continue to come to light, and lockdowns are becoming more prominent. We are not yet in a post-pandemic world, and some demands speak to this urgency (IDWF, 2020; 2022).



IDWF affiliates continue to fight for a just world of work.

AREA	DEMANDS
Protective Measures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote precautionary and protective measures in all public spaces through the free provision of facemasks, bleach, hand sanitizers, and alcohol to various facilities, especially medical institutions. 2. Monitor the fulfillment of the hygienic standard in all public spaces. 3. Continue to provide the necessary services to migrant domestic workers, including complaint mechanism for workers and orientations for employers.
Income Security	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide unemployment benefits, social security, food, and livelihood support to domestic workers, local and migrant, who have lost their jobs. Provide financial assistance and livelihood support to domestic workers, local and migrant, who remain employed, as they have experienced a decrease in their income. 2. Include DWs, local and otherwise, in the food relief plans. 3. Impose a halt on rent to exempt workers in impoverished urban areas from additional financial burdens during the lockdown.
Working Conditions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enforce paid leaves with provision of food and accommodation for domestic workers who are in quarantine. 2. Implement domestic workers' rights to days-off fully, ensure freedom of movement, and respect domestic workers choices of how they spend their holiday. 3. Educate the public on the necessity of sharing the burden of heavy cleaning and hygiene. Penalize employers who overburden the workers with cleaning and caring workloads.
Health and Benefits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure the provision of protective gear for the occupational health and safety of domestic workers by their employers, through the awareness raising and imposing consequences on employers who fail to fulfill to comply. 2. Ensure access to health facilities, including decent quarantine arrangement, and free COVID-19 testing for all, including irregular migrant domestic workers. 3. Recognize COVID-19 as an occupational illness in the labor law and ensure that domestic workers infected from the employers, or the field of work receive a paid sick leave and medical coverage for COVID-19 treatment and its side-effects.

Anti-Discrimination Regulations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Educate the employers on proper and proactive measures of combatting COVID-19 to alleviate negative attitudes towards and treatments of domestic workers. 2. Educate the public to fight COVID-19 and discrimination at once. The pandemic is not an excuse for discrimination.
Migration Status	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Facilitate, with embassies and consulates, easy and accessible measures for migrant domestic workers to process their new or renewal of employment contracts. 2. Grant automatic visa extensions in countries of destination and facilitate document renewals. 3. Support workers who are returning to their countries of origin, facilitate proper quarantine arrangement and transportation, and exempt them from paying penalty associated fees.

(Meso) Public Administration Reform: Infrastructure of Investment in Care

Despite social protection being 3-fold, it is often spoken about in its limited scope social security associated with employment or hazards that happen at work. First, a social security scheme is often contributory, where it exists, between governments, employers, and workers. With the existing infrastructure of care, where care services are privatized, where low-waged workers cannot access health-

care and education for themselves and their families, a social security system that asks them for an additional expense is discouraging. A contribution from domestic workers to social security schemes is an unaffordable commitment. Second, despite, social assistance being a non-contributory governmental aid form, it is inaccessible to domestic workers because it does not include labor-centric definition of vulnerability. This means that these services, such as unemployment stipends, disregard the precarious nature of informal employment. Third and last, social services is where the traditional understanding

of the care economy intersects with domestic workers, for the institutional services of care must be provided at affordable costs for all. Investing in care means investing in its accessibility and fighting back privatization. It is possible based on a progressive taxation system.

(Macro) Economic Shift: A Feminist and Green GDP

From a standpoint of ethics, care has been defined to include, maintain, and repair the world we live in, which encompasses our bodies, environments,

relationships, etc. (Engster, 2007;2009) Instead of a fragmented economy that has dichotomies such as productive/unproductive labor, we ought to see the synergy between the three building blocks of the economy: market, public sector, and household. The macro-economic unrecognition of the labor nature of domestic work and its high level of informality set it aside representative endeavors in labor unions. However, and despite the ILO Domestic Workers Convention C189 remaining unratified in most countries of the region, basic yet instrumental changes

have been seen in the membership of trade unions. Domestic workers are now unionizing (Seghaier, 2021) A cultural change regarding domestic work is underway and almost complete.

For this change to happen, economists must follow the lead of the workers, women, People of Color, migrants, people from the Global South in understanding what prosperity truly signifies.

“The network of caring relationships describe interdependence among human beings and between human beings and other living things. These interdepend-

ent relationships exist within a dynamic ecosystem across space and time placing the short history of humanity within the longer trajectory of the cosmos.” (Durano, 2021)

Feminist economists have long called for a rupture with longstanding standards of inclusion/exclusion into the labor force, access to services, and mere entitlements to dignity in livelihood and life. This is possible through redefining the “what” and “who” of the care economy by recognizing domestic work as a central block or central piece to the puzzle.

Conclusion

For the Asia Pacific region to regain its economic power and truly outline the roadmap to a prosperous growth against the odds of uneven resource and wealth distribution between the Global North and South, it must show political will to recognize this labor for what it is: the source of all livelihoods, the cornerstone of every economy, and the

paradigm shift we have been craving for centuries. It would not be sufficient to pick up from where we left off, to continue a “business as usual.” Rather, the recognition of domestic workers as workers, and their recognition as part of the care economy by being both providers and recipients of care is necessary for a healthy recovery.

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05

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