



Domestic Workers at the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis



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No Solution to the Crisis without the Informal Economy:

Domestic workers in Africa Under COVID-19

A common tale states that crises create insecurities. Oftentimes, however, these insecurities predate the emerging crises and are perhaps their source. Today, we are witnessing how the spread of COVID-19 has made the struggles of Domestic Workers (DWs) more visible. Structural in nature, they are amplified by the public health crisis.

In this endeavor, we hope to shed light on individual contexts of the regions domestic workers work in and come from. The below briefs are prepared based on information provided through the tireless and relentless efforts of our affiliates and domestic worker groups working on achieving labor justice around the world.¹

#CareForThoseWhoCareForYou

Informal economy is not a marginal phenomenon within the African continent, as it accounts for the employment of 85.8 % of the population. It provides employment for 89.7% of the employed women and is thus responsible for their livelihoods². The African economy has been experiencing modest, yet stable, economic growth, pre COVID-19³. Governments, hence, have the dual task of sustaining and salvaging the acquired economic growth while limiting the transmission of the virus and minimizing its harm. As lockdown limit both formal and informal economic activity, governments have been attempting to bridge the gap of productivity, which often pits life against profit under the existent economic system. The policy focus of African countries has been to facilitate business continuity, in upper-middle-income economies, at the expense of fields of employment that fall outside of the spectrum of fiscal and monetary economies, and that require urgent attention. Albeit the infection numbers being relatively smaller than in other regions, the scarce availability of testing kits overshadows the real threats

¹ Prepared by Roula Seghaier, Strategic Program Coordinator at IDWF.

² “The impact of the COVID-19 on the informal economy in Africa and the related policy responses.” *ILO Africa*, 2020.

³ “African Economic Outlook 2020.” *African Development Bank Group*, 2020. Accessed on: <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/african-economic-outlook-2020>

the virus poses in human fabric of the continent. Multiple populations remain susceptible to vaccine preventable diseases due to histories of colonialism, uneven development, and global inequalities. Those living with chronic and preventable illnesses are more vulnerable to the outbreak, and with high rates of immunodeficiencies, the impact of COVID-19 could be lethal. COVID-19 remains prevalent in much of the African region, with the numbers of infected cases increasing in South Africa, Guinea Conakry, Zimbabwe, Benin, Kenya, Madagascar, and Nigeria, amongst others. COVID-19 will be affecting the region so long a vaccine or cure has not been developed.

People are relying on improvised hygienic measures, often insufficient. This is particularly true where social distancing is neither a viable nor a realistic option. In areas with large population density, such as slums and townships, a conversation around self-isolating is ignorant at best, and complicit at worst. The push to confine workers within these premises is unaffordable and does a disservice to the efforts in halting the spread of the pandemic, as the chances of it spreading within the zones of confinement grows and targets those economically impoverished. In other words, 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, as they do not have access to proper quarantining measures, means of sustenance, and safe housing. Employers frequently breach the contracts with the domestic workers, on social security. Many of our affiliates report working for decades for the same employer, and yet being laid off without compensation, sous-pretext the economic challenges brought about by COVID-19. The economic difficulties are real. Employers of domestic works are oftentimes lower-middle and middle-class, as they work in the service industry in hotels, are government employees, or have small businesses. Many of them lost their houses and jobs, which affected their ability to make adequate payments for their workers. With mass losses of livelihoods and increasing wage and health uncertainties, families might not afford to send their children to schools, which in turn increases the prospects of child labor.

Apart from Guinea, Mauritius, and South Africa, no country has ratified C189⁴, sustaining the state of injustices faced by domestic workers. The ratification of C189 would have facilitated the domestication of the international laws into national recognition of domestic work as work. However, ratification in the said countries did not translate into adequate implementation, as social protection and minimum wages are yet to be enforced. Starting from an already disadvantaged base, domestic workers are subjected to increased abuse during COVID-19, due to misinformation and discrimination, paired with language barriers at times. Our affiliates in Kenya report the need for accurate and accessible information to target employers of DWs, as some of them have suffered ill-informed and perhaps ill-intentioned judgment. One such example is the employer mistaking COVID-19 for cholera. In addition to the economic costs of dismissal from work due to inaccurate information and myths about the virus, the health costs of misinformation are high. Protective measures are only possible to the extent verified and timely information about the virus is available. In South Africa, two domestic workers have contracted the virus from their employers as reported by our affiliates. While it is possible in the country to

⁴ Kanyoka, V. "Organizing domestic workers across Africa: a regional view." *Open Democracy*, 2017.

pursue a sick leave, considering COVID-19 an occupational disease, this situation is untrue for most DWs in the continent. Instead, they are subjected to immediate dismissal from jobs, sick or not. In Zimbabwe, the deputy Secretary General of the DWs union explains that while the workers are lobbying for the minimum wage, whereas prices are exponentially increasing, as a “loaf of bread costs 51zim dollars when a 30 day pay is 1500zim dollars only.”

Domestic workers in Africa migrate internally and externally, facing various challenges in their countries of destination, ranging from starvation, discrimination by employers, and death. Outside of the continent, African domestic workers have their rights breached on the daily under the sponsorship system in Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait. Those who wish to be repatriated cannot afford the airfare, transportation within their countries, and substance for self-quarantine. Hundreds of MDWs are cuing in front of embassies in deployment countries, and are contacting our affiliates, KUDHEIHA- Kenya, CHODAWU-Zanzibar, HTS -Uganda for legal support. DW leaders from KUDHEIHA, Kenya, and DWUZ, Zambia, report that workers are in forced leave, or working on reduced days, or with salary cuts while the workload has not changed, if not increased due to homeschooling of children. Lockdown is another issue complicating internal in search of employment in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Uganda, Kenya, and other countries.

With the massive loss of jobs for domestic workers and the unavailability of alternative sources of income, lockdowns are difficult to maintain. The ILO Africa brief mentions the domino effects of COVID-19 which include the prospect of the sudden increase of urban-rural migration if the needs of people employed in the informal economy, such as domestic workers, are unmet. Such untimely migration would exacerbate the spread of the virus. It is thus essential to include informal economy and domestic work within relief and government assistance plans both from a labor justice and public health perspective. It is necessary to pay additional attention to feminized struggles, to attend to the needs of working women, mothers, and pregnant women who are subjected to a discrimination that is based on class and intensified by the absence of care service to their families. Our affiliates have joined hands with unions and other allies to help alleviate the burdens of the crisis on DWs. We need to meet the care needs of those who care for us.

Read IDWF’s full report and global recommendations in our brief: [The Impacts of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers and Policy Responses](#).

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