Ratifying ILO Convention No. 189:

Advancing Decent Work and Social Protection for Domestic Workers in Lesotho

A Policy Brief by Kopanang Domestic Workers Association of Lesotho (KDWAL)



KDWAL members
Photo: KDWAL

01. Executive Summary

Domestic work makes an essential contribution to households, communities and the economy of Lesotho but remains a deeply gendered and often exploitative sector characterized by low pay and poor working conditions. Performed overwhelmingly by women, many of them single mothers and sole breadwinners, domestic workers continue to face significant gaps in the enforcement of labour rights and access to social protection, despite progress in their legal recognition.

ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers was adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2011. The Convention establishes international labour standards to ensure that domestic workers enjoy decent working conditions and labour and social protections comparable to those of other workers. The core objective of ILO Convention No. 189 is to guarantee that individuals working within private households enjoy the same fundamental labour rights and protections as other workers.

Ratification and effective implementation of ILO Convention No. 189 by Lesotho would provide an important framework for strengthening domestic workers' labour and social protection, including access to social security and maternity protection and protection against abuse, harassment and violence.

Drawing on research conducted with domestic workers, the Kopanang Domestic Workers Association of Lesotho (KDWAL) calls on the Government of the Kingdom of Lesotho to ratify ILO Convention No. 189 and work in consultation with domestic workers' organizations to ensure its effective implementation, including access to comprehensive social protection.

02. Key Statistic

M911.24 – M1005.29

monthly minimum wage

According to the Government Gazette of Lesotho, Legal Notice No. 54 of 2026, Labour Act Wages (Minimum Wage) – published in May 2026, domestic work remains the lowest-paid sector, with the lowest regulated minimum wage. The statutory monthly minimum wage for a domestic worker in Lesotho is set between M911.24 and M1005.29 (depending on whether they have served 12 months or less, or more than 12 months, with the same employer), significantly below the minimum wages in other sectors.

03. Background

Despite existing legal protections, including requirements under the Labour Act concerning employment terms, research by KDWAL highlights that many domestic workers lack written employment contracts, leaving them highly vulnerable to unregulated working hours, lack of rest days, and abrupt dismissals without severance pay.

Domestic workers face systemic exploitation in part because of informal employment arrangements and weak enforcement of existing protections. The low minimum wage perpetuates working poverty for domestic workers. Live-in arrangements can blur personal boundaries, leaving workers on call around the clock, often enduring poor living conditions, unpaid overtime, and sexual harassment. Pregnancy can result in dismissal, while the isolation of working in private homes heightens vulnerability to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and creates barriers to accessing justice.

The Labour Act of 2024 represents important progress by granting domestic workers legal recognition and protections, including statutory minimum wages, regulated working hours, severance pay and access to dispute resolution through the Directorate of Dispute Prevention and Resolution (DDPR). However, significant gaps remain in practice. Domestic workers face substantial barriers to accessing comprehensive social security protection, leaving many without adequate pension, maternity, and unemployment protection. Furthermore, the lack of cross-border social security agreements leaves Basotho migrant domestic workers highly vulnerable, while weak local enforcement contributes to the persistence of unwritten contracts and unchecked labour violations.



KDWAL members
Photo: KDWAL

04. Evidence from Our Research

Research conducted by KDWAL found that domestic workers in Lesotho had limited awareness of existing social security provisions, and many faced barriers to accessing digital information and services, including limited digital literacy and internet access. KDWAL's findings also highlight significant gaps in domestic workers' access to formal social security protection, leaving many without adequate pension, maternity or unemployment benefits.

KDWAL'S RESEARCH FOUND THAT:

97.7%

of domestic workers surveyed did not have written employment contracts.

98%

were unaware of available social security provisions.

83%

of domestic workers surveyed were women who lacked access to social protection.

CASE STUDY

Molefi Sechemane, Domestic Worker in Maseru

"I am Molefi Sechemane, and I have worked as a domestic worker and driver for 10 years. Despite this long service, I have no written employment contract, and I am not enrolled in any social security scheme. During the recent research campaign on digital social protection conducted by KDWAL, it was the first time I ever heard about such schemes. In Lesotho, social security programmes, apart from funeral schemes, exclude domestic workers entirely. These funeral schemes are left to workers themselves, without any government subsidy or employer contribution."

This experience illustrates the reality for countless domestic workers in Lesotho, who continue to be left outside the reach of labour protections and digital social protection systems.

05. Social Protection as a Right

Social protection is a fundamental right and a cornerstone of the transition of domestic work into formal, dignified employment. Social protection provides economic security and resilience by ensuring income security during illness, unemployment, or old age, helping prevent the loss of livelihood during crises such as COVID-19. It advances gender justice by supporting access to maternity protection, so women do not have to choose between health and livelihood. It also contributes to poverty alleviation, enabling workers to invest in their children's health and education, and helping to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Under ILO Convention No. 189, domestic workers should enjoy conditions no less favourable than those applicable to workers generally in respect of social security protection, including maternity protection. ILO Recommendation No. 204 on the transition from the informal to the formal economy further supports the extension of social protection to workers in informal employment. Together, these international labour standards provide an important framework for advancing the formalization of domestic work and ensuring effective access to social protection.

It is also important to establish or strengthen bilateral social security agreements between countries (such as Lesotho and South Africa) to support the portability of social security rights and benefits for migrant domestic workers, including the recognition of contribution periods and access to benefits across borders.

Domestic workers and their representative organizations must be meaningfully involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of social protection systems to ensure that these respond to workers' realities and needs.

06. Key Challenges

Three barriers must be addressed to make social protection effective for domestic workers:

1. Inclusion requires accessible and simplified enrolment processes tailored to domestic workers and others in informal and household-based employment, considering limited digital access and literacy.

2. Affordability demands accessible contribution arrangements, including consideration of subsidized contributions for low-income workers, while ensuring that employers fulfil their responsibilities.

3 Enforcement must move beyond awareness campaigns to effective labour inspection, accessible complaint mechanisms and appropriate monitoring of employment conditions in private households, while respecting workers' safety and privacy.

Other challenges include the lack of written contracts, low awareness of labour rights, difficulties registering for social security, limited employer awareness of their rights and responsibilities, and weak labour inspection in private homes. These barriers are compounded by limited access to information, effective remedies and opportunities for domestic workers to participate in decisions affecting their working conditions and social protection.

07. Recommendations

The Government of Lesotho	should lead the way by ratifying ILO Convention No. 189 and developing, in consultation with domestic workers' organizations, a national implementation plan to strengthen labour protections, extend social security coverage and ensure effective enforcement of domestic workers' rights.
Employers and their representative organizations	should formalize employment relationships through written contracts specifying wages, working hours, rest periods and other conditions of employment, and comply with applicable labour laws, including social protection obligations.
Domestic workers' organizations and unions	should raise awareness among domestic workers about their rights and mobilize them to secure protections, strengthen collective organizing and representation, and participate in policy dialogue, implementation and monitoring of labour and social protection reforms.
International partners	should provide financial and technical support for the extension of inclusive social protection to domestic workers, strengthen the capacity of domestic workers' organizations, and support efforts to align Lesotho's national legislation and implementation mechanisms with ILO Convention No. 189.

Formal recognition should be coupled with effective enforcement mechanisms to guarantee minimum wage compliance, mandated rest days, and defined working hours. Domestic workers should be integrated into national social protection schemes with affordable and accessible contribution arrangements, including subsidies where appropriate. Monitoring systems, including accessible complaint mechanisms and adequately resourced labour inspection, are needed to ensure compliance with labour standards in domestic employment. Finally, unions and grassroots organizations should be resourced to provide education, support workers in accessing dispute resolution mechanisms, and undertake collective organizing and advocacy.

08. Conclusion

Domestic workers make important contributions to families, communities and the economy of Lesotho. They deserve decent work and social protection. Ratifying ILO Convention 189 and investing in inclusive and accessible digital social protection systems will help ensure that domestic workers are recognized, protected and able to exercise their rights.

KDWAL urges the Government of Lesotho to take immediate action to ratify ILO Convention No. 189 and strengthen protection for all domestic workers, including through effective implementation of existing labour laws, universal access to social protection, and meaningful consultation with domestic workers and their representative organizations.

Decent work for domestic workers cannot be achieved without their collective voice and participation in shaping the policies that affect their lives.

About This Policy Brief

This policy brief was developed by the Kopanang Domestic Workers Association of Lesotho (KDWAL), drawing on research conducted with domestic workers and relevant stakeholders in Lesotho. It was produced under the Digital Social Protection (DSP) project, with support from the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).



KDWAL members
Photo: KDWAL

ABOUT THE IDWF

The IDWF is a membership-based global organization of domestic and household workers. Since its inception as a network in 2006 and its official establishment as a federation in 2013, the IDWF has evolved into a key advocate for the rights of domestic workers globally. We believe domestic work is work, and all domestic workers deserve to enjoy the same rights as all other workers. As of July 2026, the IDWF is made up of 96 affiliates from 73 countries, serving a membership of 680,000 domestic/household workers' members (IDWF, 2026).

Visit www.idwfed.org

ABOUT WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network supporting the movement of workers in informal employment, especially women and people living in poverty. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights and protections. WIEGO works to expand research and statistics on the informal economy, promote change through policy advocacy, and build collective voice by supporting, strengthening and connecting organizations of workers in informal employment.

Visit www.wiego.org