



Women Domestic Workers: Some Insights from the ILO Report “The Road to Decent Work for Domestic Workers”

by Stefania Negri

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Female domestic workers make up a significant share of the labour market. It is a group that is constantly expanding, as a result of the demographic transition and certain societal changes. In 2011, a first legal recognition was made of this category, with [Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers](#), ratified by Italy in 2013. Subsequently, in 2021, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Convention, the ILO published a [report](#) that outlined the characteristics of this work and paid attention to the progress achieved and the challenges to be faced.

Recently, the ILO released another report, titled [The Road to Decent Work for Domestic Workers](#), summarizing domestic workers' occupational conditions. It may be useful to look at it in order to understand the problems and prospects for the development of this category of workers in the coming years.

The report first provides a definition of domestic workers: "domestic workers are those workers who work in or for a household or households on an occupational basis" (p. 4). Working for or with a household distinguishes this category of workers from others. The in-depth analysis on domestic work highlights the socio-cultural characteristics of workers, noting that in 2019, globally, at least 75.6 million men and women over the age of 14 were employed as domestic workers (hired directly by households and/or third parties). The sector features a significant female component (76.2 percent of workers are women), and although males represent a minority of workers, horizontal gender segregation can be seen: female workers are employed as home help and family caregivers, while men are more likely to be employed as cooks, drivers, security workers.

Domestic work, in addition to being characterized by a variety of occupational profiles, is also marked by differences from the perspective of legal and institutional classification and the way the task is performed. Work can be carried out on an hourly, daily or monthly basis, and worker may or may not live with the family they carry out work for. In terms of legal and contractual aspects, domestic workers can be hired through a contract or be engaged in undeclared work. They can then be employed directly by a family or several families or by a third party (e.g., cooperatives, non-profit organizations but also digital platforms).

The report then goes on to analyze the aspects that make up decent work (safe work; adequate earnings; decent working time; stability and security of work; social dialogue; employers' and workers' representation; employment opportunities; social security; work, family and personal life balance; abolishing child and forced labor; and equal opportunity treatment), outlining the current

situation in relation to these factors and putting forward an operational strategy aimed at decision-makers to make this work decent.

A persistent problem of domestic work is the high rate of informal employment, as eight out of ten domestic workers are employed without a labor contract. Working in the informal economy means not having access to the protections provided by the existing legislative framework. A cross-sectional analysis conducted in the report shows that on average, domestic workers earn less than other employees and were among the workers most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of occupational health and safety, which is one of the essential aspects of decent work, the report notes how domestic workers are exposed to different risks, which are exacerbated by certain socio-cultural (e.g., language barriers, low literacy rates). More specifically, this category of workers runs into chemical risks generated by the use of certain cleaning products, ergonomic and physical risks related to the handling of heavy loads or posture, and psychosocial risks such as social isolation. Psychosocial risks, related to incidents of violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment should also be mentioned in relation to the high presence of women workers. According to the report, the most recurrent situations underlying the high prevalence of such risks involve verbal, economic, psychological, physical, verbal and sexual abuse. Other types of violence, though less frequent, include bullying, coercion, breach of privacy and unjustified withholding of pay.

Issues also arise in relation to working hours, since domestic workers work more than sixty hours per week, or very short hours (less than twenty hours per week), which do not allow them to access certain regulatory protection measures.

The report also provides some good practices from around the world and implemented by different actors (the state, employer and employee representatives, as well as individual employers or by workers) that have attempted to close certain gaps. Examples include social dialogue in the process of establishing a minimum wage (Argentina), the active promotion of collective bargaining with the conclusion of national collective agreements (Brazil), the emergence and proliferation of organizations representing employers and domestic workers (Italy is among the nations which witnessed this phenomenon), the creation of tax incentives and subsidies to encourage the regular employment of workers (Costa Rica, France and Finland), simplified procedures for promoting the conclusion of regular employment contracts (Mexico has used specific computer portals), operations to raise awareness among employers and workers about rights and duties (Paraguay, Argentina and Indonesia), and the new role of labor inspectors, by devising inspection rules for domestic workers (Uruguay).

Although some progress has been made and individual countries have taken steps to promote strategies and introduce tools to improve the working conditions of domestic workers, significant gaps remain.

For this reason, in its final section, the report puts forward some concrete strategies to overcome existing issues. In detail, five steps are outlined that can be addressed at the national level by the actors involved in the management: (1) estimating the number of domestic workers and the percentage of domestic workers employed without a labor contract; (2) analyzing the legislation and the social protection system; (3) identifying all malpractices in (4) promoting joint discussions of the results and devising an action strategy; and (5) implementing the plan and monitoring the results.

In conclusion, there emerges a need to question the employment condition of domestic workers in our country and to reflect on the strategies adopted in recent years to protect and improve the employment conditions of workers in this ever-growing sector. In our country, collective bargaining has given new relevance to this category of workers, providing protections, standards and guarantees. To be effective, this process should nevertheless be implemented and supported by all the institutional, political, public and private actors that contribute to the social construction of this type of labor market.

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