

# DOMESTIC / HOUSEHOLD WORKERS

## Demand respect and our rights!

**Now is the time for domestic/household workers across the world to mobilise for the rights and respect that we deserve.**

**We want the world to recognise us as workers – for that is what we are!**



**By 2011, the International Labour Organisation will adopt an international standard listing our rights *as workers*.**

**We must make sure this document gives us the protection that we need.**

**Domestic/household workers want the right to be treated properly as workers.**

**We demand respect for the work that we do.**

**We are inviting all domestic/household workers' organisations and our supporters across the world to get involved in our campaign.**

**Let's mobilise for our rights now!**

**SOUTH AFRICA:** After the non-racial government came into power in 1994, South Africa's domestic workers won rights under employment legislation, including trade union recognition. "*But*", says Myrtle Witbooi of the South African Domestic, Service and Allied Workers' Union (SADSAWU), "*we are still trying to get respect, still demanding acknowledgement for our contribution to the economy.*"

**PERU:** After many years of organising, new laws for household workers were passed in 2003, but with weaker rights than for other workers. "*There are also a lot of sexual harassment cases. We defend them, but the majority are not dealt with properly – the employers often win*", says Ernestina Ochoa of the SINTRAHOGARP trade union of household workers in Peru.



# Who we are

In November 2006, domestic/household workers' organisations and networks from across the world sent representatives to a conference in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Also there were many trade unions, support groups, and researchers. It was the first ever global meeting to discuss the situation of domestic/household workers, and start to develop real international action to fight for our rights and respect, as workers and as human beings.



## 'Respect and Rights: Protection for Domestic/Household Workers!'

The report of the 2006 conference is available in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese. Find it at: [www.domesticworkerrights.org](http://www.domesticworkerrights.org) or contact us for a paper copy (see contact details on the back page).

At the conference, we decided to create an international network run by and for domestic/household workers' organisations across the world. The network's Steering Committee includes representatives of:

- Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers (CONLACTRAHO)  
SINTRAHOGARP trade union of household workers, Peru  
National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE), Trinidad & Tobago
- South African Domestic, Service and Allied Workers' Union (SADSAWU), South Africa  
Conservation, Hotels, Domestic and Allied Workers' Union (CHODAWU), Tanzania
- National Domestic Workers' Alliance (NDWA), USA  
Domestic Workers' United (DWU), New York, USA
- Asian Domestic Workers' Network (ADWN)  
Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), India
- Europe – representatives being invited

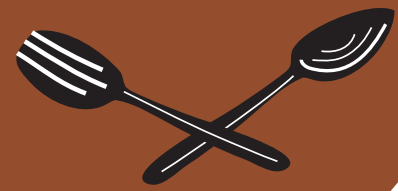
**The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF)** provides the network with an organisational base. The IUF is a federation of 336 trade unions in 120 countries representing over 12 million workers. Where domestic/household workers do not have a union of their own, they are often organised by unions for food, hotel and restaurant workers.  
[www.iuf.org](http://www.iuf.org)

**Women in the Informal Economy, Globalising and Organising (WIEGO)** assists the network with resources and advice. WIEGO is a global research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy.  
[www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)  
We are supported in our campaign by the Global Unions [www.ituc.org](http://www.ituc.org) and [www.world-psi.org](http://www.world-psi.org) and the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (Actrav).  
[www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org)



**We are inviting all domestic/household workers' trade unions, associations and other groups to be in touch and join our activities.**

# Respect and rights!



At the global conference 'Respect and Rights: Protection for Domestic/Household Workers!' in 2006 we decided to fight for an **international Convention that sets out our rights.**

In theory, we should enjoy the fundamental rights that all workers have. But too many governments and employers, and even some trade unions, like to turn a blind eye to the situation of domestic/household workers. In many countries we are not even seen as 'workers'.

In 1948, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) said they would consider a Convention specifically for us, but it was never followed up. So we have been left out from international standards too.

This means that still today – in all regions of the world – there are domestic/household workers in very bad living and working conditions. Many are at risk of extreme abuse. Some are even in slavery.

**A**n ILO Convention would not guarantee an end to slavery or respect for our other rights. But it would be an important step forward. It would tell the world that we exist, that we do have rights as workers, and that we are mobilising to get these rights.

## Why an international convention is needed

We domestic/household workers work hard to feed our families. Like any other worker, we want to earn a living wage. We want to be included in labour legislation and social protection schemes. We want to work ourselves out of poverty.

Yet our work is hardly valued, and poorly paid. It is often seen as just something that women, or too often children, do in the homes of others to 'help out'. Yet we are often looking after other people's most precious things – their children.

**M**any of us come from the poorer sections of society. Many are migrants within our own countries. Many, many migrate to other countries. We become viewed as 'second class citizens', or even not as 'citizens' at all.

Domestic/household work could be 'decent' work – if the workers who do it are paid and treated properly. The work itself is not 'indecent'. What is indecent is the way that many of us domestic/household workers are treated around the world.

Getting an international convention that sets out our labour rights would be an important step towards getting more governments to recognise us and include us in national employment laws and social protection schemes.



**Mobilising for this is one way to put ourselves firmly on the map of the world.**



# “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights



## That includes us – the domestic/household workers of the world.

All workers have rights, in whichever country we are, wherever we work. It is the fundamental right of all workers:

- Not to be subjected to forced labour or slavery
- To have just and favourable conditions of work
- Not to be discriminated against
- To have an adequate standard of living
- To form and join trade unions, which have the right to negotiate with employers.

These and other rights are laid down in Conventions of the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation. The fact that we work in the private homes of others is no justification for denying us these rights.

So far, however, almost nowhere are these rights recognised for the millions of domestic/household workers in the world. Even today, many people – and governments – deny or fail to recognise that domestic/household workers are workers.

Only in some countries – like South Africa, Brazil, Bolivia and Peru – are we included in employment laws. When we are, it is often with lower standards than for other workers and it is not properly enforced. Servitude is often built in to the legislation!

Even today there are many domestic/household workers living and working in slavery. Many more suffer gross exploitation, abuse and harassment from their employers. Migrant workers are especially at risk.

Yet governments and even others who should – such as trade unionists – are not giving us the support we need and deserve.

### No more!

**We demand respect** for the work that we do, caring for others' young, elderly and infirm, cleaning others' homes and cooking so that they can go out to work. We are the oil in the wheels of the economy, and we must be recognised.

### We demand our rights!

**USA:** The National Domestic Workers' Alliance was born in June 2007 when 13 organisations met up at the US Social Forum. “*We wept, we laughed, shared our strength and organised*”, says Guillermina Castellanos of the NDWA. They are now extending across the country the campaign of the Domestic Workers United in New York City for a Bill of Rights. They are also looking for more collaboration from the trade unions.

Photo by Jill Shenker





**Asia:** According to the Asian Domestic Workers' Network, employment in private households accounts for about one-third of all women's employment in Asia.

Jacob Silberberg/Panos Pictures

# About the ILO

The **International Labour Organisation (ILO)** is part of the United Nations. Most countries of the world belong to it.

It is the organisation that sets standards on international labour rights, and monitors how well they are applied.

Its headquarters are in Geneva, Switzerland, and it has activities in many countries. [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org)

The ILO is 'tripartite' which means that employers, governments and workers sit down together there. Workers are represented by national and global trade unions. The three parties discuss, negotiate, and vote – each country in the pattern: government (2 votes), employers (1 vote), and workers (1 vote). This shows how important it is to lobby our governments, and try to influence employers.

**ILO Conventions:** These are standards that guarantee labour rights. In its long life since 1919, the ILO has passed nearly 200 Conventions.

The eight 'core' ILO Conventions set out the fundamental rights that all workers everywhere have, whoever and wherever we are, whether or not we have a formal contract, whether or not our governments or employers agree. They include an end to forced labour and the worst forms of child labour, no discrimination in the workplace, and trade union rights.

Other ILO Conventions are for certain types of workers such as homeworkers or seafarers. Or they cover particular issues such as night work, or health and safety at work. With these, national governments are invited to 'ratify' – they agree to put them, one by one, into national legislation and then report back to the ILO about how well they are implementing them. Workers and unions often need to bring a lot of pressure to make sure their governments do this.

**ILO Recommendations:** These are weaker than Conventions. They are only guidelines to help governments shape their national labour laws, if they want to use them.



**We want a binding ILO Convention for the rights of domestic/household workers, with strong wording to protect us.**



# Steps towards an ILO Convention for Domestic/ Household Workers' Rights

January – August 2009	Get in touch with the trade unions, government, and employers (if appropriate) in your country to make sure they know of your presence. In this period they will get a draft 'Law and Practice Report', produced by ILO experts about the laws and practices in your country relating to domestic/household workers, and they will be answering an ILO questionnaire. It is an opportunity to see they give accurate information to the ILO. Deadline: end August.
September – December 2009	Continue building relationships with the trade unions, lobbying government/employers, and public awareness-raising.
January – June 2010	Ask the trade unions for a copy of the revised ILO 'Law and Practice Report'; check that what it says about your country is accurate; if not, prepare your arguments and inform the unions. Try to get advisors onto your country's official workers' delegation to and/or send representatives to our network's activities at the <b>International Labour Conference</b> in Geneva in June; here the first official discussion on a Convention or a Recommendation will take place.
August – November 2010	Ask the trade unions for a copy of the ILO's third report which will have a draft of the instrument(s). Check it and make sure the trade unions and government know your views on any changes that are needed. Deadline: end November.
January – June 2011	In March, ask the trade unions for a copy of the two new ILO reports: one on the replies received from the three parties: governments, unions and employers; the other a revised text of the proposed instrument(s). Try to get advisors onto your country's official workers' delegation to and/or send representatives to our network's activities to our network's activities at the <b>International Labour Conference</b> in Geneva in June; here the <b>Convention and/or Recommendation will be agreed</b> .



**Hong Kong:** The Hong Kong Domestic Workers' General Union was formed in 2001 to represent the mostly local women workers who are employed mostly on a casual basis, with irregular hours or only short-term contracts. The union collaborates with migrant groups such as the Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union and the wider trade union movement in Hong Kong.



# What you can do



## Ideas for action which domestic/household workers' organisations can take in your own country

- Get in touch with us for more information on the global campaign for an ILO Convention in 2011 – and on how your own activities can add strength to it.
- Plan your activities in line with the steps in the ILO process (see opposite).
- Build an alliance of the domestic/household workers' organisations, trade unions and supporters – of all sorts – in your country, to speak with one voice.
- Develop stronger links with the trade union movement in your country, asking them for:
  - Contact with the trade union leaders who go in your country's delegation to the ILO so that you can become part of their advisory team for the Convention and represent domestic/household workers in Geneva;
  - Support with access to government officials, members of parliament, and employers' bodies where relevant, to persuade them to support the Convention; unions could hold joint information seminars with you, for example;
  - Access to organising facilities, such as room space and computers;
  - Coverage in the trade union media for union members;
  - Education among union members about how to employ domestic/household workers with respect and fairness; circulation of model employment contracts.
- Find out if there is an ILO office in your country, especially if it has a 'Decent Work' programme; if so, make sure they are including the new Convention for domestic/household workers in their programme.
- Hold public awareness-raising events and do media work.
- Consider sending representatives to our network's activities at the International Labour Conferences in Geneva in 2010 and 2011.
- Lobby after the Convention is adopted in 2011 to make sure it is ratified and implemented by your government.

## Please let us know about the actions you take, especially your successes:

- Arguments raised against you, and how you overcome them.
- What you have done to build the strength of your own organisations, and your alliance with others.
- The position of your government on the proposed Convention.



**We domestic/household workers want to speak for ourselves.**

**We want others to cooperate with us, to strengthen our voice.**





**Latin America/Caribbean:** The CONLACTRAHO confederation has been bringing together household workers' organisations in the region for the past twenty years.



**United Kingdom:** Kalayaan, a migrant domestic workers' association in London, so impressed the Unite-T&G trade union with their activism that the two organisations have built an alliance. The union offers political support, access to meeting rooms, union membership ID cards, and more. *"In return, we get their enthusiasm, energy and a stronger union"*, says the union's Assistant General Secretary for Equalities Diana Holland.

Photo by Audrey Wade



**Switzerland:** In Geneva, the SIT union has been defending the rights of migrant domestic workers, especially those called 'illegal' because they don't have the right documents. To strengthen their lobbying for legislation, they called on friends in the trade unions, left-wing political parties, and others who employ domestic/household workers to form an 'employers' association'. Meanwhile, another Swiss union UNIA is negotiating an agreement for the household sector with the Swiss Government, including minimum wages and working hours.

## For more information

To get more ideas about how you can add your voice to the global campaign for respect and rights for domestic/household workers, please see the network's website:

**[www.domesticworkerrights.org](http://www.domesticworkerrights.org)**

Or contact:

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