

Domestic Workers: A Victory for Decent Work

On June 16, 2011, domestic workers around the world celebrated as the International Labour Conference (ILC) adopted a Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (C189). It was a leap forward for the estimated 50–100 million people, most of them women, who work in the homes of their employers. Many of these workers are very vulnerable migrant workers. And it did not come easily.

The victory was the result of a years-long, coordinated effort by domestic worker organizations – national, regional and international – and their allies. WIEGO was a proud partner in those efforts. We continue to support organizing and advocacy as domestic workers strive to secure C189's ratification and implementation in their own countries. (As of May 2013, seven countries have ratified C189.)

Marcelina Bautista's Story

Marcelina left her home in rural Mexico at the age of 14 and traveled alone to Mexico City in search of work. With no contacts in the big city, no Spanish and little education, her options were limited: live on the streets or take work as a live-in domestic worker.



Marcelina was a Mexican delegate at the ILC in Geneva, June 2011.

She soon discovered the harsh realities of the profession. She worked a gruelling 15 hour day with only one day off every two weeks. Her list of tasks seemed endless. Additionally, she was responsible for taking care of the children. It was difficult—Marcelina wanted to play as a child herself, but she had the responsibilities of an adult worker. However, she didn't have the rights of one.

For all her hard work, Marcelina earned low wages. Because her employer did not allow her to go to school, she had to put her studies aside. To escape the drudgery, she sought the opportunity to learn handcrafts and became involved in a church group, where she joined a Christian youth group. The group learned about religion and the Bible, but also discussed their labour conditions.

Marcelina says she learned that domestic work wasn't only a mission to serve but also about reclaiming rights. "For household workers, human rights in the workplace are particularly important as they are the least respected."

The group leader, a priest, was unfamiliar with the legal aspects of domestic work so he directed her to a group of older domestic workers. Marcelina learned about issues particular to women and household work and

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Significance of Domestic Work

Domestic workers provide necessary services that allow others to work outside the home, facilitating the operation of the labour market and the functioning of the economy.

This occupation involves a significant proportion of the workforce worldwide—4 to 10 per cent of the total workforce in developing countries and 1 to 2.5 per cent of the total workforce in developed countries (2010 ILO estimates). C189 and the accompanying Recommendation (R201) on Decent Work for Domestic Workers recognizes the "significant contribution of domestic workers to the global economy," and says this work is "undervalued and invisible, and is mainly carried out by women and girls, many of whom are migrants or members of disadvantaged communities."

From the beginning, the campaign for a Convention gave the IDWN a clear goal around which to mobilize, and a defined global forum in which to engage. The IDWN is led by women who have strong views on the need for domestic workers to speak for themselves, which they have demonstrated on the international stage. They continue to use that potent collective voice in national advocacy efforts.

Following the C189 victory, the IDWN shifted its focus to supporting national organizations as they fight for ratification of the Convention and other legal protection in their national laws. It encourages organizing of domestic workers' unions where they do not yet exist, shares information and represents domestic workers at the international level. IDWN is also strengthening its own structure as an autonomous, membership-based network. The IDWN's Founding Congress will be held in Uruguay in 2013.

WIEGO's Part in this Story

While it was domestic workers and their organizations who led the campaign to achieve the international Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, WIEGO provided technical expertise, a strategic knowledge of organizing and practical assistance in many forms. Combined with our

longstanding commitment to see informal workers realize workers' rights, that support has proved vital.

In 2006, domestic worker representatives came together for the first time at a conference convened by the Dutch-based NGO IRENE and the Dutch trade union federation FNV. WIEGO was part of the steering committee. The conference recommended steps be taken toward formation of an international network for domestic workers. The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF) agreed to host the new network under its auspices, and WIEGO worked

closely with IUF to mobilize resources and strengthen links between domestic worker organizations, trade unions and support organizations. Domestic worker' representatives met again in 2008 in Geneva to formulate the campaign for an ILO Convention. In 2009 the International Domestic Workers' Network was named and interim rules drafted. Significantly, it was agreed only membership-based organizations representing domestic workers could make decisions within IDWN.

*We are no longer crying
in our back rooms. We are
coming out to demand
recognition as workers and
demanding equal rights
like other workers.*

~Ip Pui Yu (Fish),
IDWN Regional
Coordinator for Asia

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continued to find out more about labour law. By age 17 she was organizing other groups of household workers.

In 1988, Marcelina participated in a Congress of household workers from Latin America and the Caribbean. "It was an interesting experience to work in leadership with other women in other countries... They experienced the same conditions of exploitation in relation to labour laws and the conditions of the work." Marcelina returned to Mexico with a greater commitment to organizing.

Marcelina has great empathy for the domestic workers she so fervently supports. In her 22 years of household work and lobbying for legal reforms, she has seen much suffering and hardship among the workers, particularly in regions of great poverty.

"I believe it is very difficult to find work to earn a living and (women) are willing to accept any conditions. Con-currently, the employer exploits the situation by saying they are doing them a favour and that in their house the conditions are better than in their towns where there are no conditions for a dignified life."

In September 2000, she founded a support, training and personal development centre for domestic workers in Mexico City. A decade later the organization is thriving. It extends an open invitation to workers to attend training or get help finding positions with better working conditions. The centre also plays an advocacy role, fighting to reform the chapter of the law relating specifically to household workers. Currently, there is no relationship between the written law and actual rights, so there is a need for action to ensure legal rights can be enforced.

Marcelina served as the General Secretary of CONACTRAHO [Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers] for many years. Today, she is the Latin American Regional Coordinator for the IDWN.

*Condensed from an article
by Steffany Sinclair in 2010*

**Meet other informal workers and learn about their lives:
wiego.org/informaleconomy/workerstories**

Meanwhile, the plight of domestic workers and the forthcoming ILC negotiations captured the interest of funders. WIEGO helped raise funds to support and international coordinator and part-time coordinators in three regions, provide for international and regional meetings, create a website (www.idwn.info) and campaign materials, and cover administrative and financial management costs. Most importantly, sufficient funds were raised to secure the participation of a sizeable number of domestic workers' representatives at the ILC in both 2010 and 2011.

In the lead up to the adoption of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (C189), WIEGO seconded a team member, Karin Pape, to act as IDWN's International Coordinator for two years. Karin played an integral part in network development and the campaign for a convention. At the same time, WIEGO supported (and still supports) IDWN in the creation of educational/awareness materials and with communications, translation, and reporting.

WIEGO continues to play an important role, providing financial resources through multi-organization global projects and offering ongoing strategic and technical support.