



**Women in Informal Employment  
Globalizing and Organizing**

WIEGO Workers' Lives N° 3

October 2012

# Organizing the Patience Industry

Profile of a Domestic  
Worker in Maputo,  
Mozambique

**by Ruth Castel-Branco<sup>1</sup>**

Camarada Albertina Mundlovo has been a leader in the struggle for domestic worker justice in Maputo, Mozambique. An Indian Ocean port city a stone's throw from South Africa, Maputo is Mozambique's largest economic node, and home to three domestic workers' organizations. Albertina is a member of the National Union of Domestic Workers (SINED).



Albertina is expected to arrive before her employer leaves for work. Fearful of arriving late, she catches a public taxi in the opposite direction, then doubles back towards the city.

Every morning Camarada Albertina Mundlovo wakes up at the crack of dawn, ready to battle the crowds waiting at her neighbourhood taxi rank. With over a million inhabitants, Maputo is a rapidly-growing city. Urban sprawl, increased congestion and an inadequate public transport system have transformed the daily commute from Maputo's working class suburbs to the cement city, into a costly struggle.

Like most domestic workers, Albertina is expected to arrive before her employer leaves for work. Fearful of arriving late, she catches a public taxi in the opposite direction, then doubles back towards the city. "I end up paying double," she explains. "But if I waited for a direct route, I would never get on. Women have lost their lives fighting for a spot." Employers often turn a blind eye to the transportation crisis, she argues. "Maybe it's because they watch cable news to escape the reality of our country."

The commute from Hulene to the upscale Polana neighbourhood where she works takes Albertina 45 minutes. Covered in a *capulana* (cloth wrap) to guard against the morning chill, she waits outside until 7:30 a.m., when her employer lets her in. With the exception of the occasional guard sweeping the pavement or municipal waste worker picking up yesterday's rubbish, a silence hangs over the city streets. As the sun rises and apartment lights switch on, Albertina is there to greet the waking city.



A view of Avenida Eduardo Mondlane, Maputo. Maputo's cement city, lined with tall apartment buildings, is host to tens of thousands of domestic workers.

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Castel-Branco is a Mozambican researcher and labour activist, currently based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This article draws on her MA field work, which explored the formalization of domestic work in Maputo, Mozambique. She can be reached at [ruthcastelbranco@gmail.com](mailto:ruthcastelbranco@gmail.com). All photos by Ruth Castel-Branco.



6:30 a.m. on a Monday morning. Domestic workers wait at the Museo taxi rank in Maputo's exclusive Polana neighbourhood.

Albertina is one of at least 37,000 domestic workers working in and around Mozambique's capital (INE 2007). They are young and old, urban residents and rural migrants, high school graduates and illiterate workers, both female and male—but mostly female. They work in the homes of millionaires and minimum wage workers, Mozambicans and expatriates, in upper class neighbourhoods and working class suburbs. Rooted in the colonial era, domestic work has become a hallmark of urban living in Mozambique.

During the Portuguese colonial period, domestic work was highly regulated but unprotected. Following independence in 1975, regulation of this sector collapsed but domestic workers were not included into the new labour regime that emerged.

Nonetheless, the number of domestic workers in Maputo continued unabated with the implementation of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank structural adjustment programmes, and mass retrenchments following the privatization of state industries pushed formal sector workers into the informal sector. Estimates suggest that today, over 80 per cent of Maputo's residents rely on the informal sector to survive. Domestic work is the second most important profession for women in the city.

Albertina was not always a domestic worker. Originally from Marracuene, she came to Maputo during the colonial period to complete her studies, moving to a nationalized apartment in the cement city at independence. In

Albertina is one of at least 37,000 domestic workers working in and around Mozambique's capital. They are young and old, urban residents and rural migrants, high school graduates and illiterate workers, both female and male—but mostly female.



Albertina Mundlovo tastes the lunch she's preparing.

**In 1990, Albertina's husband passed away. As is customary, her three young children went to live with his family. She had two options—either marry one of her late husband's brothers and live with her children, or fend for herself.**

1977 she signed up for the Mozambican army and rose to the rank of platoon commander before getting married and being discharged.

In 1990, Albertina's husband passed away. As is customary, her three young children went to live with his family. She had two options—either marry one of her late husband's brothers and live with her children, or fend for herself. Influenced by her time in the army, Albertina, who had always been stubbornly independent, opted for the latter. "I was unwilling to bow down to anyone, to make myself inferior."

First, she tried her luck at making coal—a traditionally male profession. Then she became a trader at the local bus depot where miners, waiting for armed escorts to take them to the South African border during the civil war, were willing to buy virtually anything.

Eventually Albertina re-married and moved back to Maputo. However, she refused to stay at home. She worked at a café, but was forced to stop when she fell ill with malaria. She then started a small corn grinding business. She would wake up in the morning, pound corn all day using a mortar and pestle, and sell it to neighbours in the evening. It was a successful business,

but a serious hemorrhage forced her to shift to a less strenuous job. After recovering from surgery, Albertina's sister, who was working as a domestic worker, found her a job in the home of a recently arrived expatriate.

Nicknamed the "patience industry" by domestic workers, it is characterized by low wages, long hours and rigorous schedules, humiliating tasks, unhealthy working conditions and vulnerability to abuse. Albertina finds this paradoxical given the intimate nature of the profession.

"We are the pillars of their households. We protect their belongings, their families, even the money they leave lying around. I raised a child from when he was born until he was ten," Albertina recalls. However, even after being like a second mother to children, she says that domestic workers get no respect. "We have the same blood running through our veins but we are treated as an alien species."

Until recently, domestic workers in Mozambique were excluded from labour protections. In 2008, Mozambique's National Assembly amended the Mozambican Labor Law through *Decree 40/2008*, extending protection to domestic workers. For Albertina this was an important first step towards improving working conditions. "We were treated as invisible, neutral. We knew we existed but the government didn't recognize us. The state treated our work as voluntary work and therefore felt that they didn't have to provide any labour protections."

Framed in terms of rights and responsibilities, domestic workers now have the right to a contract, set schedules, breaks, one weekend day, time off, social security and workers' compensation. In exchange, domestic workers have the responsibility to be punctual, obedient, hygienic, loyal, and maintain good relationships with other employees, visitors and third parties.

"We are the pillars of their households. We protect their belongings, their families, even the money they leave lying around. I raised a child from when he was born until he was ten," Albertina recalls.



SINED members on International Domestic Workers' Day on June 16, 2012 call on the Mozambican government to ratify Convention 189.

The approval of *Decree 40/2008* reflects a growing recognition by unions, policymakers and academics of domestic workers' contributions to the household and the economy at large.

The approval of *Decree 40/2008* reflects a growing recognition by unions, policymakers and academics of domestic workers' contributions to the household and the economy at large. According to the National Assembly, "domestic labor is a highly important sector in Mozambique, regarding the number of jobs this sector encompasses, as well as the social and economic implications" (Boletim da Republica 2008: 2). For a weakening labour movement, this growing sector has become the newest front for organization.

Today, there are three organizations in Maputo that represent domestic workers: the *Associação de Empregados Domésticos de Moçambique* (Mozambican Domestic Workers' Association—AEDOMO); *Associação das Mulheres Empregadas Domésticas* (Women's Association of Domestic Workers—AMUEDO); and the *Sindicato Nacional de Empregados Domésticos* (National Union of Domestic Workers—SINED). All three organizations are affiliated with the labour movement.

Notably, *Decree 40/2008* does not include a minimum wage. Given that employers' incomes vary widely, the National Assembly argues that a minimum wage would undermine the employer's ability to secure care



Luisa Nhabanga, SINED Executive Secretary of the National Council of Youth Domestic Workers, with Albertina Mundlovo, below the 12 x 12 Campaign poster. The 12 x 12 Campaign seeks 12 ratifications of Convention 189 by 2012.



SINED leadership train domestic workers on their rights. (Left to right) Secretary for International Relations, Francisco Sambo; Secretary for Organizing, Pedro Sacla; Secretary General, Maria Joaquim.

for the young and elderly, and also trigger mass retrenchments. Some advocates argue that it could even reduce wages: “We have some colleagues who earn Mts<sup>2</sup> 3000, Mts 4000, even Mts 5000, and I doubt that minimum wage would be set at more than Mts 2000,” speculates Luisa Matsinhe, the Secretary General of AEDOMO. “A minimum wage will encourage employers to fire current workers, and hire new ones at the lower minimum wage.”

However the National Union of Domestic Workers (SINED) contends that a minimum wage is necessary given the extremely low salaries in this sector.

Albertina says that in practice, *Decree 40/2008* has had no impact on her working conditions. The state has done nothing to educate domestic workers, employers or state officials about their rights and responsibilities. Rather, it has relied on unions and workers’ associations with very limited resources to perform this role. Furthermore the regulation lacks teeth. The *Comissão de Mediação e Arbitragem Laboral* (Commission for Labor Mediation and Arbitration—COMAL) provides a cost-effective and comparatively quick extra-judicial process for mediating conflicts. However, if employers do not comply with decisions, or if an impasse is declared at the mediation stage, it is very difficult to hold them accountable. Labour court proceedings are slow and expensive. While public legal assistance is available for low-wage workers, in practice services are very uneven.

Albertina was recruited to SINED by her neighbour shortly after it was formalized in 2008. Based in the suburb of Urbanização, SINED members initially met at the Sal do Mundo Church, before affiliating with OTM and relocating to the federation. By 2012, the union had 2,035 members. SINED has three main pillars of work. The first is membership

Albertina says that in practice, *Decree 40/2008* has had no impact on her working conditions. The state has done nothing to educate domestic workers, employers or state officials about their rights and responsibilities. Rather, it has relied on unions and workers’ associations with very limited resources to perform this role.

<sup>2</sup> Mts: abbreviation for the Mozambican currency; 1 Mts = USD .0349; 3000 Mts. = USD 104.70, based on a mid-market conversion rate on September 18, 2012 (source: www.xe.com).

“Some workers refuse to talk to us,” adds Luisa Nhabanga, SINED Executive Secretary of the National Council of Youth Domestic Workers. “It’s only when they have a problem that they come running. Frankly I understand it.”

recruitment. Three times a week, rain or shine, SINED organizers reach out to domestic workers at the taxi rank. “Maintaining a constant presence is very important,” explains Celia Mucambe, SINED’s Executive Secretary for the province and city of Maputo. “It’s not only about recruiting members. It’s also about helping domestic workers navigate problems at work. This establishes confidence in the union.”

Competing unions and fraudulent workers’ organizations have made some domestic workers skeptical of unions. “Some workers refuse to talk to us,” adds Luisa Nhabanga, SINED Executive Secretary of the National Council of Youth Domestic Workers. “It’s only when they have a problem that they come running. Frankly I understand it. Since we started mobilizing publicly, recruitment has gotten easier because they see that we’re serious.”

Once a member, domestic workers are given an ID card by the union. The ID card also helps to legitimize the union.

SINED members pay monthly dues equivalent to 1 per cent of their salary. With no access to payrolls, the union relies on workers to report accurate wages. However, the dues structure creates an incentive for members to underreport their salaries. Also, with no ability to



SINED members show their union ID Cards, Museo Taxi Rank, Maputo.

deduct dues automatically, SINED struggles to collect dues from its membership. “Some people sign up and then disappear,” remarks Camarada Francisco Sambo, SINED Secretary for International Relations. This poses challenges for the financial stability and sustainability of the union—a common challenge among workers’ organizations in general.

Members in good standing can access the union’s mediation services for free. Non-members are charged 15 per cent of the settlement fee. SINED’s emphasis is on conciliation rather than confrontation.

“No one wins if a domestic worker is dismissed,” explains Sambo. “So we first encourage workers to think about ways to de-escalate the situation by communicating with their employer on a one-on-one basis.” If this does not work, employers are summoned into the union. “We speak in a soft tone, we try to understand employer’s point of view, we try to remind both parties of the long history they’ve had together,” adds Sambo. Only a small fraction of cases are forwarded to COMAL.

The final pillar of SINED’s work is mobilization. SINED relies heavily on worker leaders like Albertina to help organize actions. “You have to be an active member,” Albertina argues. “We want to move this union forward, to expand ... from Rovuma to Maputo. Many of our colleagues are really suffering and they have nowhere to go, they don’t know that there’s a union.”

Albertina has a wish list of improvements. First and foremost are salary increases. “Low salaries are what kills us,” she says. Salaries range widely in Maputo, with some domestic workers earning as little as Mts 500 (less than US\$20) a month, others as much as Mts 8000 (almost US\$300). Though Albertina earns well above average, she struggles to make ends meet. She pays Mts 500 monthly in rent, Mts 3000 to the *xitique* (a rotating savings association), Mts 250 for electricity, Mts 680 for a bottle of gas, Mts 200 for water. This leaves very little for food, transportation and other incidentals. “It’s a miracle that I can even make ends meet,” Albertina reflects, “Without the *xitique* I wouldn’t be able to do it.” With six people in her *xitique*, every six months one member receives Mts 3000.

Second on her wish list is a less rigorous schedule. Albertina herself works an eight-hour day but many of her colleagues far exceed the nine hours mandated by *Decree 40/2008*. As more and more women enter the labour force and public care facilities deteriorate, households increasingly rely on domestic workers to perform the reproductive functions. One colleague, Albertina recalls, had to work until 9:00 p.m. because her employer, a single mother, was in night school and had no one to look after her child.

Third, breaks. “My *patrão* (male employer) tells me that I am entitled to a 30 minute break but it’s impossible to take because of the intensity of work. If I’m able to, I rest in the corner for a few minutes because I get dizzy ... If I’m resting, my boss will come and order me around. He says one thing but he does another.”

“My *patrão* (male employer) tells me that I am entitled to a 30 minute break but it’s impossible to take because of the intensity of work. If I’m able to, I rest in the corner for a few minutes because I get dizzy ... If I’m resting, my boss will come and order me around. He says one thing but he does another.”



SINED Secretary for International Relations, Camarada Francisco Sambo.

“When I got sick, my employer allowed me to take time off to go to the hospital but expected me to come back to work afterwards. He clearly didn’t treat me like I was sick. I did not challenge him directly. Instead I pretended that I’d gotten confused and gone straight home.”

Lunch breaks are particularly challenging because in many households domestic workers are not allowed to eat the same food as the employer. With no time to cook their own meals, many workers labour from early in the morning until late in the evening with no sustenance. “Even a telephone needs to be recharged,” asserts Albertina.

Fourth, paid time off. Though mandated by *Decree 40/2008*, Albertina has to negotiate paid sick days, “When I got sick, my employer allowed me to take time off to go to the hospital but expected me to come back to work afterwards. He clearly didn’t treat me like I was sick. I did not challenge him directly. Instead I pretended that I’d gotten confused and gone straight home.” Negotiating paid time off is particularly contentious for unexpected emergencies such as illness, funerals or other family occasions, “Let’s say your father dies today, then in two weeks it’s another family member ... the employer will refuse to let you go to the funeral. He’ll say, ‘How is it that in your family people are dying everyday? Soon it will be you who will die.’”

Fifth, improvements in occupational health and safety conditions, adequate tools and compensation for workplace accidents. “I work meat and bones, absorbing toxic substances,” says Albertina. “When the *patrão* fumigates or paints the house they go on holiday, they stay in a hotel. But they expect that I should work. Then I get sick, have to go to hospital, and don’t have money to pay.” In addition to safety equipment such as masks and gloves, Albertina argues that domestic workers should be provided with the adequate tools to perform the necessary tasks. For instance, her employer likes to have his clothes washed by hand. The apartment does have a clothes-washing tank but it leaks. Despite numerous requests, her employer has not fixed it, so Albertina is forced to wash the clothes in plastic tubs. Hours of crouching down, with cold water splashing on her feet, have worsened a pre-existing problem with her uterus.

Finally, Albertina stresses the importance of a written contract. Under *Decree 40/2008*, domestic workers have the right to a contract. However, the contract can be verbal in nature. During conflicts, a verbal contract has no standing, ultimately placing the burden of proof on the domestic worker. In this way, *Decree 40/2008* does not account for the unequal power relationship between employer and employee. Domestic work is extremely precarious and workers are easily fired. A signed contract, argues Albertina, would clarify the terms of employment, formalize the employment relationship and outline disciplinary procedures.

The passage of *Decree 40/2008* coincided with a global resurgence of interest in extending labour protections to this historically marginalized sector. A sustained campaign, led by domestic workers from around the globe, culminated in the 2011 adoption by the International Labour Organization (ILO) of Convention 189 on Decent for Domestic Workers. In Mozambique, as in countries worldwide, domestic workers’ organizations are currently pressuring the state to ratify C189.

Albertina Mundlovo recognizes that it will not be easy to secure improvements in working conditions. Ultimately, she argues, only domestic workers themselves can transform the employer-employee relationship.

“They [employers] don’t have a problem with the way things are. We need to be strong, to fight, peacefully. Victories require sacrifice, people died for May 1<sup>st</sup>,” she says, referring to International Workers’ Day.

When the stress of negotiating working conditions overwhelms them, many domestic workers choose to leave their job. However, Albertina counsels against this. “You’re never guaranteed that your next employer will be better than your last, so you set yourself up for a very unstable situation. I always say, you shouldn’t fear your employer, they are not animals. You should have respect and demand respect.”

Albertina does not believe that the transformation of working conditions will take place overnight. Most employers still do not recognize domestic

“I work meat and bones, absorbing toxic substances,” says Albertina. “When the *patrão* fumigates or paints the house they go on holiday, they stay in a hotel. But they expect that I should work. Then I get sick, have to go to hospital, and don’t have money to pay.”

Willing employers may promise improvements in working conditions, but in the absence of adequate state regulation, it is a choice rather than obligation, and promises often go unfulfilled. Domestic workers walk a very thin line in demanding access to their rights, and concerns over job security often win out in the “patience industry.”

workers’ rights. While Albertina emphasizes the importance of open communication, she also recognizes that employers have discretionary power to refuse to dialogue, sometimes violently.

With experience, Albertina herself has been able to negotiate better working conditions by cultivating a good relationship with her employer and communicating one-on-one.

“Pick a day when you see that your employer is calm and explain your problem,” she recommends. “He’s likely to apologize ... but if he tries to justify his actions, to elevate himself, you need to bow down to him because he can’t accept that you’re equals. You need to be patient.”

Willing employers may promise improvements in working conditions, but in the absence of adequate state regulation, it is a choice rather than an obligation, and promises often go unfulfilled. Domestic workers walk a very thin line in demanding access to their rights, and concerns over job security often win out in the “patience industry.” Nonetheless, Albertina has hope that slowly, conditions will improve.



### References

- Boletim da Republica. 2008. *Decreto No. 40/2008: Regulamento do Trabalho Domestico*. I Serie, Numero 48. Maputo, Republica de Mocambique.
- INE. 2007. *III General Population Census, 2007*. Maputo: Instituto Nacional de Estatistica.

**About WIEGO:** Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO draws its membership from membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy. For more information see [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).