

fact sheet

today's fight for tomorrow's freedom

Domestic Work

What is domestic work?

Domestic work is one of the oldest occupations in the world and is an important job for millions of people, representing up to 10 per cent of total employment in some countries. Domestic workers perform a range of tasks in private homes including cooking, cleaning, laundry, and taking care of children and the elderly.

Who are domestic workers?

Women and girls make up the overwhelming majority of domestic workers worldwide, although in some countries a significant number of men and boys are domestic workers. Some are migrant workers from other countries. Others have moved within their own country, often from rural areas to the city, or they work in their home community.

What problems do domestic workers face?

Domestic work is poorly regulated, undervalued, and many domestic workers are subject to serious abuses. They often work excessively long hours, without breaks, days off or holidays. The pay is very low and some domestic workers may not be paid at all or only receive 'payment in kind' such as food or housing. Many domestic workers face verbal abuse such as insults and threats, alongside physical and sexual abuse.

In many countries they are not considered as 'workers' but rather as informal 'help' and are excluded from national labour legislation. In countries where domestic workers are covered by national labour laws, they often do not enjoy these rights in practice. Working behind closed doors in a private household, domestic workers fall outside of the normal regulatory and inspection framework applicable to other places of work.



Pete Pattison

Domestic workers like Mecheleine (above) work long hours for little or no pay and are vulnerable to abuse.

When is domestic work slavery?

Domestic work is a sector which is particularly vulnerable to slavery, such as forced labour, trafficking, and bonded labour, due to the unique and specific circumstances of the work inside a private household combined with the lack of legal protection and regulation.

For some domestic workers, the circumstances and conditions of their work amount to forced labour: where employers have forbidden them from leaving the home; withheld or not paid wages; used violence or threats of violence; withheld their passports; or deceived them about their rights in order to compel them to work.

Migrant domestic workers

Migrant domestic workers are at a heightened risk of exploitation and many are trafficked for forced labour. They often fall victim to deceptive job offers while in their home country and are coerced to work in conditions upon arrival to which they did not agree. Some fall into bonded labour as a result of the transportation and recruitment costs incurred in taking up a job abroad.

In many countries their right to work is tied to a specific employer, meaning that they are less likely to leave a slavery-like situation since they will be deported and lose their livelihood if they leave that employer. Language barriers and their isolation in the community also make it much more difficult for them to seek help in cases of abuse.

Child domestic workers

Child domestic workers are also extremely vulnerable to slavery. Due to their young age and separation from their family they are inherently easier to coerce and control. Some are trafficked, while others are in bonded labour, forced to work to pay off a loan their parents have taken.

In most countries the minimum age for employment is 15 years old. Yet child domestic workers are often younger with some starting work as young as six years old. Whilst domestic work is conventionally regarded as formative for girls, in reality many suffer from violence at the hands of their employers. Their conditions of work are frequently hazardous involving the use of chemicals such as bleach, and hot and dangerous instruments such as irons, often without training or protective clothing. Many are denied their right to go to school and lack the opportunity to make friends.



END DOMESTIC SLAVERY
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International protections for domestic workers needed!

Anti-Slavery International is calling for the International Labour Organization (ILO) to adopt a new convention on domestic work to protect the rights of domestic workers worldwide.

Overworked, undervalued, and lacking sufficient legal protection, domestic workers are among the most exploited and abused workers in the world. In the worst cases, they are subjected to slavery.

Action at the international level is needed to address these gaps in legal protection and end their abuse. Domestic workers need effective laws and regulations which are tailored to the unique nature of their work inside a private household.

What is the International Labour Organization?

The International Labour Organization is the UN agency devoted to labour rights. It is a tripartite organisation, comprised of national governments, workers and employers. It holds some of the most important international conventions on slavery and will be discussing creating a new international convention on domestic work at its annual conferences in 2010 and 2011. If agreed, it would be adopted in 2011.

How would a new ILO convention protect domestic workers?

The new convention would set out the employment rights of domestic workers. All countries which ratify the convention will have a legal obligation to ensure that these rights are granted.

A new convention would recognise that domestic work is 'work' –



Voices of domestic workers

“My employer would shout at me for being too slow and was always complaining about my work and ordering me around. I would get up at 6am and work all day until after midnight. I never had any breaks or the time to take a bath, or sometimes even to go to the toilet. I was only allowed one day off a month and I was never allowed to leave the house.”

Poulin, a 35 year old Indian domestic worker in the UK

“I was brought to Port-au-Prince when I was nine and I haven't been home since. The family I am staying with make me wash the floor, the clothes, the dishes, everything. I get up 5am and work till 11pm. There's always something to do. During the school time I escort the children to school but don't attend myself. They mistreat me a lot; they beat me, pinch me, pull my ear, slap me and yell at me. We sleep in one room, but I sleep on the floor. The children sleep on the bed. I feel angry because the other children in the family are living well.”

Mideleine, a 13 year old domestic worker in Haiti

addressing perceptions that domestic work is informal labour and not 'proper' work - and that domestic workers deserve the same employment rights as any other worker. It would set out strict rules to prevent abuse and make it clear that domestic workers deserve respect and dignity. It would also provide important guidance to employers of domestic workers, many of whom are currently operating in an absence of rules and regulations.

By addressing issues unique to domestic work, such as live-in arrangements and how to regulate and monitor work that is taking place within a private home, the adoption of a new convention is a crucial opportunity to achieve increased legal protection for domestic workers and deliver real change to the lives of millions worldwide. If successful, the process will significantly contribute to the eradication of the forced labour, trafficking, debt bondage and child slavery to which many domestic workers are subjected.

Anti-Slavery International's work to protect child domestic workers

Our project, 'Protecting child domestic workers from abuse and exploitation', is delivered with local partners in six countries: Peru, Costa Rica, Philippines, India, Togo and Tanzania. We are conducting research on the psychosocial impact of domestic work on children, assisting and supporting groups of child domestic workers through a programme of small grants, and undertaking advocacy work at local, regional, national and international levels to raise awareness about child domestic workers, strengthen actions that support them and influence law making processes.

Join the campaign! HOME ALONE: End domestic slavery

Anti-Slavery International is campaigning for the International Labour Organization to adopt a new convention on domestic work which would protect the rights of domestic workers worldwide.

Please join us and help **END DOMESTIC SLAVERY**. Visit our website and call on governments worldwide to support the adoption of a new ILO convention on domestic work by 2011. Lend your voice to the millions of domestic workers **HOME ALONE**:

www.antislavery.org/homealone