TIME TO CARE FOR THE CARERS

Ending the domestic workers' exploitation



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Care work sustains homes, societies and economies, yet those who do it for pay are among the least protected workers in the world. Domestic workers make up 25% of the global care workforce, and the International Labor Organization (ILO) projects that 2.3 billion people, one in five of the world's population, will need care by 2030.[i] This paper argues that domestic work is work like any other and is indispensable. States must therefore treat care as a human right and public good, not a private responsibility or market commodity.

The exploitation is structural. One in 11 employed women works in paid domestic work,[ii] yet the work is undervalued and legally marginalised. Around 79% of women domestic workers are informally employed,[iii] they earn 56% of the average worker's wage[iv] (under one-third in low- and middle-income countries), and only 6% of domestic workers are comprehensively covered by social protection.[v] Only 40 countries have ratified ILO Convention 189.[vi] Gains in Uruguay, South Africa and Colombia are real but undermined by weak enforcement.

Colonial legacies shape who does this work. Migrants are about 15% of domestic workers (11.6 million),[vii] and racialized, Indigenous, Afro-descendant and Dalit women are overrepresented. In 17 high income countries, migrant women care workers earn 57% less than the comparator group.[viii] *Kafala* and tied visas deepen dependency: by binding a worker's legal status to a single employer, they leave workers unable to leave abusive conditions without risking their residency, and make exploitation easier to sustain.

Neo-liberal economic policies drive this exploitation. Austerity and structural adjustment weaken public care and push women into precarious work and migration, while states such as Sri Lanka promote overseas employment for remittances, worth USD7.8bn in 2025.[ix] Digital platforms extend the model. The number of platforms for taxi, delivery, homecare, and cleaning services grew from 128 to more than 650 between 2010 and 2025;[x] these classify workers as independent contractors and charge commissions of up to 30%. Fairwork found only 20 to 25% of platforms met minimum standards and 2 to 8% met higher ones, while value flows to investors and private equity.[xi]

Domestic workers' own organizing, led by the International Domestic Workers Federation, secured ILO Convention 189 and pressed for later standards, including Conventions 190 and 193, while the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' 2025 Advisory Opinion 31 now recognizes care as a human right.[xii] Yet these movements face suppression, as states and employers use immigration controls and criminal law to make organizing too risky. Unions that support migrant workers are dissolved, workers who speak out can have their visas cancelled and be deported, and those who flee abuse can be reported as criminal absconders, so collective action is deterred before it begins.

The paper calls for recognition of care as a human right and public good; an end to discriminatory labor and immigration laws; protected freedom of association; universal social protection; regulation of platforms and the capital behind them; and universal public services. Domestic workers' leadership must be central throughout.

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