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For immediate release

Landmark Arab trade union meeting on formalizing domestic work

International Convention on domestic work discussed by Arab trade unions

Beirut (ILO News) – The inclusion of domestic workers in labour protection regimes may soon be the norm in Arab states, as the international campaign ‘Decent Work for Domestic Workers’ gains regional momentum.

Arab and international workers’ organizations, including the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, the International Trade Union Confederation, domestic workers, human rights NGOs, women’s rights groups and other partners are gathering in Beirut, Lebanon on November 11-12 to discuss the International Labour Organization’s *Third Report on Decent Work for Domestic Workers*.

The meeting marks an important step towards Arab trade union engagement in domestic work issues, viewed by the ILO and other advocates as key to improving work conditions.

“We still lack adequate regulatory frameworks for domestic work in Arab countries,” said Suad Mubarak Mohamed of the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions. “The inclusion of domestic workers under national labour laws or the adoption of legislation specific to them would be integral to our efforts for the promotion of decent work more generally.”

Organised by the ILO Regional Office for Arab States and the ILO Bureau for Workers’ Activities, and opened by Lebanese Minister of Labour Boutros Harb, the workshop will enable Arab trade unions to contribute to the setting of international labour standards and to formulate a regional position in support of a landmark international treaty on decent work for domestic workers.

“It is time to act to regulate the domestic work sector through legal, administrative, and cultural measures” said Boutros Harb. “We are in the process of reviewing a (national) draft law prepared in collaboration with the ILO, the human rights institute of the Lebanese Bar Association, and civil society partners.”

Participants will debate a proposed Convention and supplementary Recommendation – due to be considered at the 100th session of the International Labour Conference in June 2011 – that would set labour standards for domestic work worldwide.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) last October endorsed the adoption of an international Convention and Recommendation on domestic work – urging governments, workers and employers to participate in the drafting process.

“Trade unions have been at the forefront of supporting domestic workers’ rights in recent decades,” said Marieke Koning of the ITUC. “This a unique opportunity to

influence the development of a Convention that will – for the first time – recognise domestic workers as ‘real’ workers and grant them the rights that they deserve.”

Despite being part of an expanding global workforce numbering over 100 million, domestic workers remain underpaid, overworked and unprotected. Most are migrant women from poor backgrounds who are excluded from national labour law and social security regimes in both industrialised and developing countries, as well as from occupational safety and health legislation. The informal, unregulated and isolated nature of their work – which takes place in the home – makes them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The adoption of a Convention on domestic work would complement existing international labour standards by taking into account the specific context in which domestic work takes place.

“Our working conditions are often very poor,” said one migrant domestic worker and activist living in Lebanon. “Exploitation and abuse are common but often unaddressed. That is why this entire process is so important. We hope that it will lead to meaningful change.”

Women constitute a third of some 22 million migrant workers in the Arab region, the majority of whom are domestic workers originating from Asian and African countries such as Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Ethiopia.

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