



International
Labour
Organization

► Making the right to social security a reality for domestic workers

A global review of policy trends, statistics and
extension strategies

Executive summary

Domestic work is among the oldest of occupations. The human right to social security was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as far back as 1948. It is unacceptable that domestic workers are over-represented among the 53 per cent of the world population that remain deprived of this fundamental right. Considering the ever-growing number of domestic workers on whom households rely for their most personal and human needs, it is high time for societies to recognize their value and contribution to society, the care economy and social protection systems and to enable them to enjoy their human right to social security.

Seven messages emerge from the report.

- 1. Domestic workers experience significant social security deficits.** Domestic work is a significant source of global employment, accounting for 2.3 per cent of employment or 1 in every 25 employees. In addition to decent work deficits in the areas of wages and working time, as well as the abuses they often face, domestic workers are consistently deprived of social security. About half of all domestic workers worldwide (49.9 per cent) are legally covered by at least one benefit under social insurance schemes. Yet, legal coverage is not consistent across all life-cycle risks. If they are covered at all, they are more likely to be eligible for old-age, disability and survivors' benefits and medical care, and to a slightly lesser degree for maternity benefits and sickness benefits. Most of them do not have access to benefits under social insurance schemes in relation to unemployment or employment injury. This is revealing when considered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which such protection has been and remains crucial. This report identifies important gaps in legal coverage, especially in Africa, Asia and the Pacific and the Arab States, regions hosting some of the largest employing countries of domestic workers. The limited number of countries that provide comprehensive legal coverage for domestic workers translates into a small proportion of domestic workers being legally entitled to the complete range of social security benefits. A mere 6 per cent of domestic workers are legally covered for all the nine branches of social security established under the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102). Effective coverage gaps are even more striking. Only one in five domestic workers worldwide are covered under social insurance schemes in practice. In the Arab States, Africa, and Asia and the Pacific, the effective coverage gap is even higher. Compared to other employees, domestic workers are nearly two times less likely to be registered under social insurance schemes, which is clearly not in line with the principle of "conditions that are not less favourable than those applicable to workers generally", which is set out in the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).
- 2. Domestic workers face multiple barriers to enjoying legal coverage and effective access to social security.** Societies continue to place a low social and economic value on domestic work, not least because it is considered unskilled and an extension of women's unpaid care work. The undervaluation and under-recognition of domestic workers will have to change to reflect their valuable role in supporting households, economies and societies as a whole, as well as their importance for the care economy and social protection systems in particular. Decent work conditions will also have to improve. Yet, if domestic workers continue to work in the informal economy, their access to labour and social security rights will lag behind.
- 3. Social protection has great potential for enabling the transition of domestic workers into formal employment.** However, the barriers standing in the way of domestic worker's access to social protection need to be overcome including legal exclusions; administrative barriers; limited contributory capacities; lack of enforcement of, and low compliance with, labour and social security laws; lack of information and awareness; and limited organization. The additional barriers experienced by certain categories of domestic workers, notably migrant domestic workers, will also need to be tackled.
- 4. The challenges to the effective social protection coverage of domestic workers are real but not insurmountable.** Given the important gaps in coverage, realizing the fundamental right to social security of domestic workers will require that Governments escalate their efforts and place this right high on the political agenda in order to meet the related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals. Many Governments have shown that this is possible through a coordinated whole-of-government approach that is accompanied by adequate financing and increased capacities. Domestic workers are not a homogenous group and the challenges to their inclusion differ among groups and across regions. Comprehensive and coordinated national policies and strategies that amass the insights of all relevant stakeholders, notably representatives of domestic workers and their employers, and that account for specific characteristics and challenges, such as those experienced by migrant domestic workers, will have the biggest impact.

- 5. Ensuring that domestic workers enjoy treatment at least as favourable as other workers should be the beacon of national policy and legal reforms.** Policies and legal frameworks should ensure that domestic workers in all employment arrangements enjoy access to social security in a manner not less favourable than those applicable to workers generally, which is the guiding principle established by Convention No. 189. Legal reforms should therefore address legal exclusions in labour and social security laws alike, including by recognizing the existence of the employment relationship and removing thresholds, such as those related to working time, earnings or multiple employment relationships, in order to account for the particularities of employment arrangements. This also means that inclusive approaches that extend existing schemes to include domestic workers should be favoured over solutions that isolate domestic workers under special schemes. In addition, the extension of social protection to domestic workers should not be tackled as a separate issue. Extension strategies should be conceived within the overall aim of establishing universal, comprehensive and sustainable national social protection systems for all persons and in response to all contingencies, deploying a combination of financing modalities, in line with international social security standards and principles.
- 6. Legal reforms are an essential stepping stone that will need to be accompanied by adapted administrative procedures and improved governance to ensure tangible results.** Simplified, innovative and digital solutions for registration and contribution payments that address limited contributory and administrative capacities of domestic workers and their employers will be essential. Improved compliance with labour and social security legal frameworks will also necessitate strengthened inspection and complaint and appeal mechanisms; sound institutional capacities; and increased awareness and capacity-building of domestic workers, their employers, their representatives' organizations and other stakeholders, in particular NGOs and civil society, as well as the actors designing and implementing such frameworks.
- 7. Social protection extension in practice will require solidarity in financing.** Financing modalities will have to be adapted to the contributory and administrative capacities of domestic workers and their employers. Solidarity in financing can be achieved through collective financing, broad risk-pooling and subsidization from the government budget as a means to ensure that all domestic workers can access social protection when they need it.

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