

FULL STORY

16.03.10

It's time to give Namibia's domestic workers their due

BY: CINDY CHO



FOR the 38 000 domestic workers in Namibia – most of whom are women – observing International Women's Day last week was not an option.

Most are unable to obtain schooling past the junior secondary level or to earn enough to feed themselves. Some endure physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. Those who serve as live-in workers often abide by a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week work schedule.

The Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) conducted a study of domestic workers in 2008 – the first of its kind since 1996, when the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) and the Social Science Division (SSD) of the University of Namibia published an initial report on the sector.

According to the LaRRI report, the majority of domestic workers are single women between the ages of 21 and 40 who support, on average, two to six dependants.

Most of them work long hours without breaks or meals. Social security benefits, medical aid and pensions are largely non-existent in the industry. For the 20 per cent who live in the houses of their employers, the likelihood of unpaid overtime, lack of benefits, low wages and abuse is even higher on average than for non-live-in workers.

Domestic workers are clearly some of the most neglected and vulnerable women in the country.

SIGNIFICANCE

The theme for the 2010 International Women's Day, as articulated by the United Nations, was 'Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities: Progress for All'.

In Namibia, this theme has particular significance for domestic workers in light of two recent legal developments.

First, in 2003, the Government set and gazetted a minimum wage for farmworkers. This development came on the heels of the 1996 LAC-SSD report and a subsequent 1997 Presidential Enquiry into Labour-related Matters Affecting Agricultural and Domestic Employees.

In recommending a minimum wage for both sectors, the Presidential Commission recognised the historical marginalisation of these workers. However, the recommendation was implemented only for farmworkers; in fact, they achieved a hard-earned victory this past year, when their minimum wage was increased by more than a third, from N\$639 to N\$860 a month.

Domestic workers have yet to receive any minimum wage or any other special legal protections.

The inequality inherent in this lopsided recognition is highlighted by a second, more recent, legal development. The National Assembly recently tabled for adoption the ILO Convention 100 on Equal Remuneration, which provides for equal pay between men and women who perform work of equal value.

Farmworkers effectively serve as the male counterpart to domestic workers; the majority of farmworkers are men, while most domestic workers are women. Although the sectors do not perform identical work, they are comparable industries that are often categorised together. They fall within the spirit, if not the letter, of Convention 100.

Convention 100 calls for objective appraisals of work performance without any regard for the sex of the individuals who perform the work. A nation adopting this provision is bound to eradicate the gap in pay between men and women who serve in the same job capacities.

In keeping with this directive, the women who serve as domestic workers deserve the same recognition and pay as the men who serve as farmworkers.

Formulating a minimum wage for domestic workers will not be easy. Given the disparities in income levels between rural and urban areas – and even within these respective areas – along with the diversity of tasks and skills involved in domestic work, arriving at relevant and applicable wages will require research, prudence and sincere effort.

Despite the challenges posed by this necessary reform, numerous willing and able stakeholders in Namibia, including unions like the Namibian Farmworkers Union (NFWU),

OTHER NEWS

Deductions and Seductions
Idols: Bye bye vuvuzela,
hallo Idols!
Political Perspective
Notable Quotes
Ithana loses Shaanika battle

A Day In The Life Of Namibia



VALUABLE

With the support of NFWU and other groups, affording domestic workers legal protections is not an insurmountable task. In fact, neighbouring South Africa provides an example: in 2002, domestic workers in that country were granted formal labour market protections, including a schedule for minimum wages.

Their experience might yield some valuable insights into the process. That domestic workers provide a valuable service to society is an obvious point to any resident of Namibia, yet it bears reiteration. Many of these women are entrusted with the most intimate aspects of their employers' lives, including the preparation of meals and the safeguarding of valuables. They are, even more importantly, entrusted with their employers' families, caring for young children and grandparents.

Besides the clear value contained in the service results provided by domestic workers, we must also recognise the value inherent in the great efforts required to undertake their jobs.

EQUAL VALUE

Many women suffer from occupational injuries involving cooking, cleaning, and other repetitive tasks. Moreover, because most families rarely go on holiday, many domestic workers are unable to take their own annual leave. Some report that they only see their own children once a year, at Christmas, while they spend the rest of the time caring for the children of their employer.

Approximately 32 per cent of the domestic workers surveyed by LaRRI receive a wage of below N\$100 to N\$300 a month. This is inadequate and unfair. Wages like these do not reflect the weight of the work performed, in terms of both effort expended and value added. If employers were to give an honest assessment to the wage paid to domestic workers in terms of the value of their own households, families, and routines, N\$300 a month would quickly appear insufficient.

With International Women's Day behind us and Independence Day just ahead, it is an important time to reflect on the idea that all members of society have value, and that their work has value. At the heart of this year's International Women's Day was the idea that all work, regardless of whether it is performed by a woman or a man, has equal value. Domestic work is frequently, although not necessarily rightfully, viewed as "woman's work".

What better way to celebrate women and freedom than by recognising that woman's work deserves respect and improved legal protection?

* Cindy Cho is an American Fulbright scholar and visiting attorney at the LAC.

[<- Back to: Top Stories](#)