



# ► Beyond contagion or starvation: giving domestic workers a third option

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**In the wake of COVID-19, governments around the world have called on people to take one most important action: to stay home. But for many workers, staying home has meant losing their jobs, or worse still, losing their livelihoods.**

**Domestic workers are among those workers.** There are over 67 million domestic workers worldwide, 75 per cent of whom are informal. These workers play a key role in ensuring the health and safety of the families and households for which they work, from cleaning and cooking, to caring for children, the ill and the elderly. Their physical proximity to the families in their care put them at an elevated risk of exposure to COVID-19. This risk is compounded when they care for the ill, have long commutes on public transportation, or work for multiple households. If they become ill, many domestic workers do not have access to medical care, sickness benefits or employment injury benefits. Without these protections, the virus risks spreading even more widely, including to those in their care. Yet, many domestic workers and their employers are ill-informed about the measures that must be taken to prevent transmission.

**Loss of jobs, loss of livelihoods.** For many domestic workers, loss of employment has become as threatening as the virus itself. Fear of spread of coronavirus has caused many domestic workers to stay home from work, whether at the request of their employers, by personal choice, or in compliance with lockdown and other containment measures. Increased controls to enforce such measures have provoked employers of undeclared or irregular migrant domestic workers in particular to sever the employment relationship for fear of sanctions. Migrant domestic workers, numbering around 11 million, who have lost their residence permit along with their job can find themselves unable to find either new employment or to return home, as countries close their borders. At the same time, many migrant

domestic workers in an irregular status fear the increased risks of deportation should they be caught in breach of quarantine.

For the vast majority of domestic workers who are informal, staying home from work has meant a loss of livelihood without any income replacement. Many only earn as little as 25 per cent of average wages, and only 10 percent have access to social security, meaning no paid sick leave, no unemployment insurance, and no savings to fall back on in case of a financial emergency. This lack of margin has driven many domestic workers to continue to go to work, despite having little or no access to personal protective equipment, endangering themselves, and the people they care for.

## **Giving domestic workers a third option**

To ensure the protection of all domestic workers, and in the interests of public health, it is essential that they be given a third option, affording them protection equivalent to those enjoyed by other workers. Such an approach is consistent with the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

### **Extending unemployment benefits to domestic workers.**

To curb the spread of novel coronavirus, governments have taken measures to enable most (non-essential) workers to stay home, normally by putting them on temporary unemployment benefits. Some governments (e.g. France, Portugal, Belgium) have included at least specific categories of domestic workers, at times taking special measures to ensure such coverage. In each case, workers' and sometimes employers' organizations have played decisive roles. Spain, for instance, extended unemployment insurance to domestic workers in light of the crisis (Real Decreto-ley 11/2020, de 31 de marzo), following calls from trade unions and civil society. More often than not, however, these measures apply only to those domestic workers who are already declared and contributing to social security, leaving a crushing majority with no protection.

**Extending social protection coverage to informal domestic workers.** To cover the sector effectively, measures taken must be accessible to informal domestic workers. In Argentina, all domestic workers, whether in informal or formal employment, and whether they are providing essential services or not, have effective access to income support measures amounting to 10,000 Argentine pesos pesos (about US\$ 150) for the month of April (Decree No. 260/20), in addition to their full salary, whether or not they go to work.

**Providing assistance to households as employers.** To help households pay for domestic services without interruption, the government of France, at the behest of the employers' organization, the Fédération Des Particuliers Employeurs De France (FEPEM), has committed to reimbursing up to 80 per cent of the wages an employer has paid to a domestic worker who is unable to work due to lockdown and other containment measures.

**Providing domestic workers with protective gear and adequate information.** Where domestic workers must continue to go to work, they must be able to do so fully informed and fully protected. Targeted information campaigns, in languages spoken by the domestic workers, specifying the measures domestic workers should apply in the household, in particular when caring for the ill, have helped protect domestic workers on the job. In this respect, the WHO has produced [important guidelines](#) on home care for patients with suspected novel coronavirus. Finally, it is imperative that domestic workers receive personal protective equipment such as gloves, masks, and hand sanitizer as a matter of priority, particularly if they are classified as essential workers. In France, domestic workers providing homecare for the elderly have access to protective masks from the national stock, available free of charge at pharmacies.

## Protecting domestic workers, now and in the future: how the ILO assists

To address the most urgent needs, the ILO is working with domestic workers' unions around the world to assist them in ensuring the health and livelihood of domestic workers. Awareness-raising materials on health and safety measures to apply within households have also been developed and disseminated in several countries, with ILO support. To support governments, the ILO is undertaking rapid assessments of the number of domestic workers at risk, and the nature of these risks, to help governments devise policies that effectively ensure all domestic workers have at least basic social security guarantees, including access to essential health care and basic income security.

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the particular vulnerability of informal domestic workers, emphasizing the urgent need to ensure they are effectively included in labour and social protection. In recent years, the ILO has supported roughly sixty countries to close these gaps. Twenty-nine countries have ratified C189, and many more have otherwise taken concrete measures to extend social security coverage to domestic workers. While these measures have increased the number of domestic workers in formal employment, the overall rate of informality remains too high. Efforts to formalize domestic work must urgently be accelerated if we are to protect domestic workers from future shocks, and achieve SDG target 8.3.

Domestic workers have proven essential in the work they do for households around the world. The current pandemic has laid bare their vulnerability to crises, and the impact that can have both on their own families, and on the families for whom they provide care. By ensuring their health and livelihoods, we can ensure a healthier world and social justice for all.

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