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**Achieving Gender equality and Workers’ Rights for Economic
Empowerment for Domestic Workers**

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¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

According to the ILO, there are over 67 million domestic workers globally, of them 17% are migrants, 80% are women. Domestic work is an important source of wage employment for many women. Some women make this work their lifetime occupation. It accounts for 7.5% of women's wage employment worldwide. In Asia, domestic workers amount to one third of all female waged employment. Therefore, any assessment of the situation of the right to work and women's rights, should consider the situation of domestic workers.

The work of domestic workers is critical to the functioning of households, society and the economy as it makes all other work possible. It makes a very significant contribution to the rearing of children and caring for the elderly. It is also an essential source of income for many poor families who receive remittances from female family members working as domestic workers overseas.

Yet, despite the importance of domestic work, the working conditions of domestic workers are very poor, their wages are very low and work without any legal protection. In many countries, domestic workers lack national legal recognition of their status as a 'worker' and therefore they are not entitled to the usual legal protections afforded to workers. According to the ILO estimates, 30% of the world population of domestic workers are excluded from labour legislations coverage including those on minimum wages, 45% do not have weekly rest and 35% are not covered by maternity protection. The gaps are much wider for migrant domestic workers who are unfamiliar with the local situation, face more legal restriction such as mandatory live-in arrangement, manipulation of employment agencies, lack of access to legal justice, etc.

The adoption of international labour standards on domestic work (Convention No. 189 and its accompanying Recommendation No. 201) by the ILO in June 2011 (which came into force in September 2013) was a very significant advance towards the realization of the right to work for domestic workers. It affirms domestic work is work and domestic workers are workers and should be afforded with the same rights and protection as all the other workers. Until today, there are 22 ratifications and a number of States pass new laws recognizing domestic work and extending legal protections to those workers.

To enable domestic workers to achieve decent work standards, ratification and implementation of the C189 is a key and practical step, bringing domestic workers into the framework of minimum standards such as conditions of employment, working hours, remuneration, occupational health and safety and social security.

However labour rights legislations alone will not be sufficient to bring about change to domestic workers. They must be accompanied by policies, legislations and social programs (e.g. community education) to address the issues and challenges of gender-based discrimination. Generally, domestic work is being perceived as "women's" work and work in "private" sphere. This is based on sex-role stereotypes that portray the home and work in the home as the woman's domain and responsibility and outside the productive workforce. Little value is ascribed to this work as it is seen as women's responsibility. For the same reason domestic workers are not valued workers and their employers do not see the reason of paying them a serious salary.

In some places, domestic work is over-represented by women from marginalized communities such as migrants, ethnic minorities, low or out-of castes and so on. Prevailing discrimination has

prevented women of these communities to obtain formal education and hence they are usually illiterate and low in self-esteem. Domestic work which is unrecognized is very often the only available job option to them. The end result is low paid, no rights and no respect in the sector.

Domestic workers have been attempting to assert their rights through engaging in various forms of organizing since long. They reached momentum when they formed the first global federation, the International Domestic Workers Federation in October 2013. Since then, fast expansion of organizing has been witnessed in many places of the world. Through their organizations, with support of their allies and partners, signs of change are emerging. It is important to continue to support these initiatives and fights until rights and protection become reality for domestic workers.