

[Back to Article](#)

Goar: World's domestic workers toil in penury and danger

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The [International Labour Organization](#) calls it the “invisible” workforce.

It is huge. It includes caregivers, housekeepers, maids, servants, gardeners, drivers and other domestic staff. They work behind the closed doors of private households, shielded from scrutiny and often unprotected by national labour laws. They toil long hours for low wages facing a high risk of physical, mental and sexual abuse. Eighty-three per cent are woman. Most are migrants.

Officially, the head count is 53 million. But that excludes child workers (roughly 7.5 million) and undocumented immigrants. When they are taken into account, the figure balloons to almost 100 million, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The agency’s mission is to tear away the veil of secrecy and win support for an international [treaty](#) requiring all nations to set a wage floor for domestic workers, ensure them decent working conditions — including one day off a week — and protect them from human rights abuses.

So far, just three countries — Uruguay, the Philippines and Mauritius — have signed on.

Hoping to speed things up, the United Nations agency has just released its first comprehensive report on domestic workers. The 146-page study, [Domestic Workers Across the World](#), shows the size of the sector, pinpoints the principal concentrations and explains why these workers are so susceptible to exploitation. It also gives future researchers a benchmark against which to measure progress — or regression.

Canada is not one of the big culprits. Domestic workers make up just 0.4 per cent of national employment. They have most — though not all — of the legal safeguards available to other workers.

But the ILO raised two red flags. Most in-home workers come to Canada under the [Live-in Caregivers](#) program, which requires them to live in their employer’s residence for a minimum of two years. In practical terms, the ILO says, that means they’re available around the clock, regardless of Canadian law. In addition, many have a limited command of English or French and little knowledge of Canadian law, which “makes them especially vulnerable to abusive practices such as physical and sexual violence, psychological abuse, nonpayment of wages and abusive living and working conditions.”

These risks are not just theoretical. The Toronto Star has [documented cases](#) of live-in caregivers who were forced by their employers to hand over their passports, work 12 to 16 hours a day, perform extra duties ranging from heavy cleaning to yard work. They were reluctant to speak out for fear of losing their livelihood, their housing, their right to stay in Canada.

Conditions are far worse in Asia and the Middle East, which account for almost half of the world’s domestic workers. Most countries in these regions have no limitation on hours of work, no minimum wage, no maternity leave and no entitlement to time off. In Malaysia, for example, the average domestic employee works 66 hours a week. In Saudi Arabia, the average work week is 64 hours. Essentially, they’re at their employer’s beck and call.

“Domestic workers are an indispensable part of the social fabric,” says Sandra Polaski, deputy director-general of the ILO. “But the isolated and unprotected nature of domestic work can render them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.”

That is why employment standards are so important — and so unwelcome in countries where women remain subservient.



A migrant domestic worker from Southeast Asia participates in a protest in Hong Kong in December. The International Labour Organization calls domestic workers the ‘invisible’ workforce. (Dec. 16, 2012)

ANTONY DICKSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Canada could show some leadership by ratifying the ILO treaty. It would give it some badly needed momentum and help push the issue out of the shadows.

We have nothing to lose. The world's poorest, most powerless workers have so much to gain.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.