

# It is time for the world to start caring for the caregivers

*The ongoing coronavirus pandemic underlines the urgent need for safety nets for domestic workers.*

By Nisha Varia

Al Jazeera (01.05.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2A1rBN5> – Few workers have cause to celebrate May 1, International Workers' Day, this year. COVID-19 has been accompanied by another pandemic – of job loss and economic insecurity. Domestic workers, primarily women, have particularly precarious jobs and often do not qualify for government support.

In mid-March, as New Yorkers prepared for a mandatory lockdown, a person posted on my town's Facebook group asking what type of protective equipment she should provide to her house cleaner. Replies came fast and furious. "Clean your own home and pay them anyway!" "Cancel and pay!" But in many other communities, and around the world, the response is different.

Domestic workers' organisations and the media are reporting devastating stories of domestic workers catapulted into economic crisis across every region. Faced with lockdowns, social distancing restrictions, and in some cases their own economic hardship, many employers have dismissed their domestic workers or suspended them without pay. The loss of income is devastating for many domestic workers who may have little or no savings.

Others, especially live-in domestic workers on migrant visas such as those in the Middle East, might find themselves with extra responsibilities and longer hours, with children out of school and other household members at home.

The International Labour Organization estimates that there are 67 million domestic workers globally and that 80 percent of them are women. Yet 90 percent of them are excluded from protections such as paid sick leave and unemployment benefits. This is particularly the case in Asia, Latin America and Africa, where the largest numbers of domestic workers are concentrated.

Despite this bleak picture, there are also promising examples of action by private employers, governments and labour groups to create safety nets for this vital group of workers.

In South Africa, domestic workers who are registered with the government are provided six weeks of paid sick leave in a three-year period, and are covered by the Unemployment Insurance Act, which provides up to 238 days of unemployment benefits. Gaps remain – those workers who are not formally registered with the government cannot access these benefits.

France uses a voucher system for social security safety nets and paid leave for domestic workers, easing administrative formalities for employers and contributing to relatively widespread coverage.

A World Bank compilation of emergency relief measures during the pandemic shows that many exclude domestic workers entirely. But some countries are taking steps toward inclusion. Argentina's president, Alberto Fernandez, issued an executive order providing approximately \$155 to domestic workers and other low-wage workers as emergency financial relief.

Spain extended unemployment benefits for the first time to domestic workers on March 31. Registered domestic workers can receive 70 percent of one month's salary if their hours have been reduced or they lost their jobs since the lockdown began. This benefit is smaller than for other workers and not enough to sustain workers through an indefinite crisis but is a step towards bringing domestic workers' benefits closer in alignment to those of other workers.

Workers' organisations are campaigning to end these gaps, pressing governments to include domestic workers in their relief measures. They are using social media and other means to urge employers to continue paying domestic workers even when they cannot work due to social distancing restrictions. In Brazil, the National Federation of Domestic Workers and Themis, a gender equality group, is campaigning for employers to suspend domestic workers with pay or to provide them with adequate protective equipment. Their high-profile webinar explained domestic workers' rights, with speakers including former President Dilma Rousseff.

In the United States, the National Domestic Workers Alliance is well on its way to raising \$4m to distribute to domestic workers. While domestic workers may qualify for economic relief varying by state, a significant proportion are

undocumented migrants who cannot access government benefits.

Domestic workers perform essential work, caring for the most important parts of peoples' lives – our children, our parents, our homes. Once restrictions lift, employers would do well to remember how much they missed these services.

These caregivers deserve safety nets on par with other workers and treatment with dignity. The few positive models should become the new norm.

If you are an employer, pay your domestic worker full wages during lockdowns. If you are a politician, push for the full inclusion of domestic workers in emergency relief funds, including direct cash assistance that does not require formal employment registration or migrant status.

And we should all push for longer-term change. In 2011, the International Labour Organization adopted the Domestic Workers Convention, now ratified by 29 countries. These countries are obliged to ensure that domestic workers have legal protections on par with other workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted deep inequalities in how women's work is valued and compensated, and the dire consequences when crises hit without safety nets. But the pandemic also provides an opportunity to make long-overdue changes so that women workers emerge stronger than before. And that would give us a real cause for celebration next Labour Day.