

In Mexico, domestic workers are defending their labour and human rights

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A 2013 [study](#) by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that there were at least 52 million domestic workers in the world, the majority of them women. According to the study, domestic work accounts for 7.5 per cent of women's wage employment worldwide, with a much higher percentage in the regions of Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean.

According to the ILO : "Domestic workers are frequently expected to work longer hours than other workers and in many countries do not have the same rights to weekly rest that are enjoyed by other workers. Combined with the lack of rights, the extreme dependency on an employer and the isolated and unprotected nature of domestic work can render them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse."

In Mexico ([a country where 4.2 million people live under the poverty line](#), roughly 3.3 per cent of the population), domestic workers face a reality similar to that described by the ILO. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), 2.3 million people in Mexico are engaged in domestic work, nine out of ten of which are women. The country has yet to ratify [ILO Convention 189](#) on domestic workers.

The economic, social and cultural rights project ProDESC ([Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales](#)) is one of the main promoters of domestic worker networks and organisations in Mexico, providing support, training and workshops. [SINACTRAHO](#), the first domestic worker trade union, began its official activities in 2016.

ProDESC's coordinator, Norma Cacho, notes that female workers face similar conditions throughout the country, though their wages vary significantly from state to state. In poor states such as Chiapas and Guerrero, where labour inequality, poor treatment and longer working hours are more pronounced, daily salaries do not exceed 100 pesos (€4.5 or US\$5), while domestic workers in Mexico City can earn between 300 and 400 pesos, generally working eight-hour days.

"Many of these workers are [internal] migrants, who come from rural areas or are indigenous, so they are confronted with all kinds of racist and patriarchal stereotypes," says Norma. Furthermore, "domestic workers don't have written contracts [and] are often dismissed with no compensation [because] they are not recognised as having an existing employment relationship," she explains.

In Mexico, the working hours of domestic workers depends on whether or not they live in their employers' homes. For those who do, the working day never truly ends and they remain at the disposal of their employers. For those who don't, working days often exceed the eight hours mandated by law.

In 2001, a group of women in the state of Guerrero founded *Red Mujeres Empleadas del Hogar en Guerrero* (the Guerrero Network of Female Domestic Workers), legally recognised in 2006, in order to inform women of their rights as domestic workers and provide them with the tools for defending

those rights.

In 2005, the group compiled and submitted to the local parliament a public policy proposal for the implementation of a programme called *Atención a Trabajadoras del Hogar* (Attention to Domestic Workers). The proposal called for training in workers' rights, measures for self-esteem building, the right to day-care centres, scholarships for the children of domestic workers and the creation of a fund to aid those who are dismissed without receiving any legal benefits. The programme was approved but could only be partially implemented due to the lack of funding.

Today, the network has some 247 members in the capital city and 667 throughout Guerrero, out of a total of more than 67,000 women employed in private homes in that state, according to INEGI.

According to Petra, many of her fellow domestic workers, either out of necessity or because they are minors, work for as little as 50 pesos (roughly €2.25 or US\$2.50) – half the minimum wage – for working days that often exceed the eight hours mandated by law. This daily wage is barely enough for one kilo of beans and one kilo of tortillas.

Yazmín, thin with long hair and a dark complexion, is now 32 years old and has two daughters who she cares for alone. Her life as a woman, mother and domestic worker has not been easy. At her first job, she received a wage without benefits such as bonuses, utility payments or holidays. She nonetheless liked her employer because she was allowed, among other things, to bring her daughters to work when they got out of school or didn't have classes.

From then on her journey as a domestic worker was not easy. At her new jobs, in addition to not being allowed to bring her daughters to work, she experienced harassment and verbal abuse. Furthermore, she was locked inside for supposed security reasons (i.e. to prevent her from stealing anything). "The man treated me like I was his property," she remembers.

When she arrived at *Casa Solidaria* just two years ago seeking help, she discovered that she wasn't the only one to have suffered such violations. After hearing the same stories repeated by other women, she decided to become an activist. After receiving training, she founded a recreational-psychological branch of the Casa in order to help her fellow domestic workers face their fears and cope with the problems they live with on a daily basis, both at work and elsewhere.

In order to balance employment, activism and family life, Yazmín has to organise her time in an intense day that starts at 7am. After picking up her daughters from school, she brings them to work with her. When she returns home at the end of a working day, she takes care of her daughters and spends time with them until they go to sleep. She then has time for herself, fixes her hair and nails and finishes her household chores. At midnight Yazmín finally goes to sleep. She has Sundays free for herself and her daughters but the chores never stop.

This article has been translated from Spanish.

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