



**Advancing Labor Protections for Domestic Workers in Ethiopia Gaps, Challenges and the Way Forward.**

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**Executive Summary**

Domestic workers in Ethiopia remain among the most vulnerable segments of the workforce. They are systematically excluded from key labour protections, leaving them exposed to exploitation, long working hours, low wages, and abuse. This policy brief highlights key findings from recent research, reviews international and comparative experiences, and outlines practical recommendations to extend legal recognition and protection to domestic workers. Ensuring decent work for this group is central to Ethiopia’s commitments to human rights, gender equality, and sustainable development.

**Introduction**

Domestic work is essential to many Ethiopian households, yet domestic workers—who are often women and young

individuals—remain one of the most vulnerable, unprotected labour groups. Without formal regulation and inclusion into Labour Proclamation 1156/2019, domestic workers face risks of exploitation, discrimination, abuse, and lack of social protections. Besides, despite pledges to enact a specific regulation for domestic workers, it remains unrealized for over 20 years, and the ILO’s Domestic Workers Convention (C189) has not been ratified. This exclusion undermines Ethiopia’s international obligations under instruments such as the ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, and the African Charter. Consequently, the working conditions of domestic workers in Ethiopia are characterized by low wages, excessive hours, lack of social protections, and frequent verbal and physical abuse. Addressing these gaps is urgent to advance social justice, protect vulnerable populations, and align with global labour standards.

## Problem Statement

The absence of formal protection for domestic workers creates systemic vulnerabilities:

**Legal Exclusion:** No enforceable rights on wages, hours of work, occupational safety, or social protection.

**Human Rights Violations:** Evidence of irregular pay, excessive hours without rest, lack of privacy, and exposure to abuse.

**Institutional Weakness:** Weak enforcement and lack of clear regulatory mechanisms.

**Social Marginalization:** Domestic work is undervalued and stigmatized, disproportionately affecting women and girls.

## Findings

The study confirms that Ethiopia's exclusion of domestic workers from its labor law framework leaves them without adequate protections. Workers often endure exploitative conditions, including poor pay, long hours, and abusive treatment. Stakeholder consultations revealed strong demand for legal clarity: domestic workers seek fair wages and protection; employers want standardized frameworks to reduce mistrust; civil society organizations advocate urgent reforms; and government institutions acknowledge delays but have yet to act. Comparative experiences from South Africa, the Philippines, and Uruguay demonstrate that integrating domestic workers into labor laws with provisions for contracts, minimum wages, and social security is both feasible and effective.

## Policy Recommendations

### 1. Enact a Domestic Workers Regulation

- **Objective:** Ensure that domestic workers receive equitable protections, including minimum wages, regulated hours, and safe working conditions.
- **Implementation:** The Ministry of Labor and Skills, in collaboration with key stakeholders, should prioritize the issuance of a comprehensive regulation to formally include domestic workers in Ethiopia's labor protections.
- **Rationale:** A Domestic Workers Regulation would establish a formal legal framework tailored to the unique needs of domestic workers, ensuring consistency with Ethiopia's Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019 and alignment with international standards, such as ILO C189.

### 2. Ratify ILO Convention No. 189

- **Objective:** Align Ethiopia's labour standards with international benchmarks for fair treatment and protections for domestic workers.
- **Implementation:** CSOs should collaborate with Ethiopian government to initiate campaigns highlighting Convention No. 189's benefits. Gradual implementation can address employer concerns while ensuring compliance.
- **Rationale:** Ratifying ILO C189 signals Ethiopia's commitment to international labor standards and human rights, elevat-

ing the status and protection of domestic workers. This approach has shown positive outcomes in Uruguay and the Philippines, where C189 ratification significantly improved protections for domestic workers.

### **3. Consolidate the Formalization of the Employment Contracts.**

- Objective: Mandate standardized, written contracts that outline workers' duties, wages, hours, and termination terms.
- Implementation: Develop model contracts to facilitate compliance and establish penalties for employers who fail to formalize agreements.
- Rationale: Written contracts provide clarity on the terms of employment, preventing misunderstandings and reducing exploitation. Standardized contracts are supported under ILO C189, and similar provisions are required in South Africa and the Philippines, where contract formalization has enhanced employer accountability.

### **4. Establish Fair Wages and Payment Standards**

- Objective: Set a minimum wage standard and ensure timely, direct payment to domestic workers to promote economic security.
- Implementation: The Ministry of Work and Skills should establish and regularly adjust a minimum wage standard for domestic workers, enforcing timely and direct payment.
- Rationale: Minimum wage and timely

payment practices prevent wage exploitation, improving financial security. Kenya and Uruguay have implemented minimum wage standards for domestic workers, demonstrating positive economic impacts and aligning with Article 41 of the FDRE Constitution on economic rights.

### **5. Implement Standard Working Hours and Rest Periods**

- Objective: Regulate working hours to protect domestic workers from excessive hours, providing rest days and fair overtime compensation.
- Implementation: Employers should limit domestic work to a standard 48-hour workweek with one full day of rest, and overtime should be compensated at 1.5 times the hourly wage.
- Rationale: Standard working hours support the physical and mental well-being of workers, consistent with Ethiopia's labour laws and ILO standards. Countries like the Philippines and Namibia enforce similar standards, ensuring fair work-life balance for domestic workers.

### **6. Include Domestic Workers in Social Security and Health Coverage.**

- Objective: Extend social security and health coverage to domestic workers, reducing their financial vulnerability.
- Implementation: Domestic workers should be included in the national social security and health

insurance schemes, with shared contributions from employers and workers.

- Rationale: Social protections, as mandated in Article 41 of the FDRE Constitution, support long-term economic stability for workers. Uruguay's social security inclusion for domestic workers demonstrates the value of such protections, improving the welfare of vulnerable labor groups.

### Conclusion

Domestic workers are indispensable to Ethiopian households, cities, and the broader economy, yet they remain among the least protected workers in the country. Correcting this legal gap is not only a matter of justice but also a national obligation, given Ethiopia's commitments

to international human rights conventions and global labour standards. Encouragingly, there are ongoing government efforts to draft and pass a regulation aimed at addressing this long-standing exclusion. These efforts are an important step forward but must be expedited to ensure that protection reaches domestic workers without further delay.

The task of protecting domestic workers cannot rest with government alone. Civil society organizations, workers' associations, and international partners have a critical role to play in raising awareness, advocating for reform, and supporting the effective implementation of new laws. Employers, too, must be engaged in creating fair and respectful workplaces that set the foundation for trust.

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