[**Domestic workers**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629271/domestic-workers)

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IT is no secret that domestic workers in Pakistan work overtime, are underpaid, and often mistreated. It is also tragic that most who employ domestic workers do not view them as equal human beings, and often believe they are doing them a favour by offering employment; never mind the acute dependence on them. Treating domestic workers with respect includes paying them at least the minimum age, not just polite conversations.

It is therefore necessary that the rights of domestic workers, like any other workers, be regulated in Pakistan and enforced by law. This is exactly what the Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Bill 2020, proposed by elected MNA Mehnaz Akber Aziz of the PML-N and passed by the National Assembly seeks to do. The bill now awaits approval in the Senate of Pakistan.

There are several important stipulations in the bill. It prohibits bonded labour, and outlaws discrimination “on the grounds of religion, race, caste, creed, sex, ethnic background, and place of birth/residence/domicile, migration or any other reason”. It stipulates referring to domestic workers as that and not “servants”, and requires employers to “provide dignified working conditions and occupational safety and health measures” to domestic workers, as well as “sickness benefits and medical care during sickness and injury”.

It seeks to enforce minimum wage for domestic workers, a critical responsibility of the government which it so far has not been enforcing and in effect perpetuating poverty and exploitation of the working classes. The federal government has set the minimum wage at Rs20,000 per month in the 2021-22 budget presented this week; it’s essential that this is enforced for full-time work which is defined as eight hours a day. If the minimum wage requirement is violated, employers face a fine of Rs10,000 in addition to compensating the domestic workers the difference between the amount paid and the minimum wage.

A bill to protect domestic workers is awaiting Senate approval.

There is also a very important clause related to the gender pay gap whereby women cannot be paid less than men for the same work, and vice versa. Moreover, it stipulates six weeks paid maternity leave for women, as well as maternity benefits.

The bill also proposes a mandatory letter of appointment through a prescribed form which must be filled and signed by the employer and domestic worker which will specify the terms of conditions of employment including the nature of work and wages amount. It says no domestic worker can be asked to perform duties beyond what is stated in the letter of appointment, which must be registered with the commissioner of Islamabad or any other official appointed by the government.

The bill also seeks to enforce a cap on the maximum number of working hours for domestic workers, which is eight hours a day, with at least one full day off in a week, and a maximum of 56 hours worked in a week if overtime work is solicited, which must be compensated by additional wages.

The minimum age of domestic workers is to be set at 16 years, which is important considering the high incidence of cases where children are employed in homes, with several cases of torture as well, as, for instance, in the Tayyaba case. This is in line with the amendment pushed for by Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari to the Employment of Children Act, 1991, passed in August 2020 whereby child domestic labour was proscribed for the first time, something that provincial assemblies can also adopt through a resolution.

It is encouraging that the government supported and helped pass a bill moved by an opposition member, under the policy that human rights bills will not be opposed by the government.

This bill, once passed by the Senate, will only apply to Islamabad Cap­ital Territory because of devolution of power to the provinces post 18th Amendment. Sindh already passed a law in 2018 to protect domestic workers, followed by Punjab in 2019. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan do not have laws protecting domestic workers yet.

It is of utmost importance that these laws now ensure protection of domestic workers across the country. A starting point would be to take steps to inform both employers and domestic workers about the existence of these protections through mass media, apart from encouraging unions of domestic workers that can enable a network of workers to collectivise to push for ensuring protection. The first domestic workers union was registered in Lahore in 2015. More need to be registered.

Enforcement of these laws are fundamental to making the elite and middle class realise that they cannot exploit the poor anymore through meagre pay and long working hours which constitute modern slavery. The poor are impacted the most by rising inflation, the least they deserve is dignified workplaces that value their hard work.

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