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**Ending exploitation**

In the poshest areas of Pakistan’s cities stand large houses, with marbled pillars and floors studded with elaborate mosaics. But the beautiful facades of these homes conceal a reality that is almost too ugly to imagine.

Inside one such home last year, eight-year-old Sana was starving, having been deprived of food for five days by her employers. Her body was bruised and burned from being tortured with scalding water, heated knives, and beatings. Her alleged crime was stealing milk from her employers. While Sana was eventually rescued by the Punjab Child Protection and Welfare Bureau when neighbours reported her situation to the government agency, other domestic workers who are subjected to similar inhumane conditions or unfair treatment are not always so fortunate.

As we mark International Domestic Workers Day on June 16 (today), we must turn our attention to the exploitation of the estimated 8.5 million women, men, and children who are involved in paid domestic labour in Pakistan. They frequently endure unhygienic and cramped living conditions, limited rest or leave, outrageously low wages, and abuse that goes unnoticed behind closed doors.

Women and children, who comprise the majority of domestic workers, are also the most vulnerable, with the Alliance Against Sexual Harassment, a group of organizations fighting sexual harassment in Pakistan, finding in 2009 that 91 percent of the female domestic workers they surveyed had experienced sexual harassment in their workplace. There is a dearth of publications on the abuse of domestic workers in the past decade, but given the continued news reports of those who have been tortured, raped, or even killed, it can be assumed there has not been much progress on this front.

This lack of progress is evidenced by a comprehensive assessment of the existing policies in Pakistan to protect unpaid family caregivers and paid domestic careworkers conducted by the Global Care Policy Index (GCPI) project this year. The GCPI found that Pakistan continues to lack policy protections for its domestic workers on multiple fronts.

However, there is hope of change. The Punjab Domestic Workers Act passed by the Punjab Assembly in 2019 was the first time domestic staff were officially recognised as workers anywhere in Pakistan. The Act also set out a minimum wage and other rights such as maximum working hours, right to rest and leave, decent living conditions and other provisions for domestic workers in Punjab. Islamabad is also taking steps to move towards implementing a similar act, with the National Assembly last month approving the Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Bill 2021, which would set a maximum limit on working hours, raise the minimum age of employment in domestic work to 16 years, and provide other fundamental rights to domestic workers. It has now to be passed by the Senate before it can be enforced.

However, despite the fact that strong policies now exist in Punjab, they continue to be unimplemented and unenforced. While the aforementioned Act states that a Dispute Resolution Committee must be established for workers to bring forward their complaints, no steps have been undertaken to create this mechanism. Without a robust channel for bringing infractions of the law to the attention of the Punjab government, workers in distress have little hope of receiving aid. So, what can be done to help these workers?

One solution could lie in setting up a 24-hour helpline allowing domestic workers to call in and report any abuse or mistreatment they suffer. The Child Welfare Protection Bureau in Punjab, which safeguards the rights of children, including child household workers, has been able to save a small number of children from torture or violence when they receive reports of abuse. However, the Bureau deals only with children and receives reports about a minuscule number of those who work in households. A broad-based hotline to handle reports of abuse of all domestic workers is essential.

Increasing domestic workers’ awareness of their basic rights is another approach that would complement the helpline. Many domestic workers are illiterate or semi-literate, and do not even know there are laws that are supposed to protect them. A media campaign to educate domestic workers about their rights, while also humanizing them in the eyes of employers, could be helpful. Domestic work occupies such a low status in Pakistan that it will take significant effort to change people’s mindsets that this type of labour is ‘real’ work and worthy of respect.

Unionization of domestic labour is also a possibility, but with the status of labour unions extremely precarious in Pakistan, it is unlikely that domestic workers can undertake the task of self-organizing in this fashion. It does not help that domestic work is often a solitary and isolated type of labour, making it hard to organize in groups.

The Domestic Workers’ Union was established in the Punjab some years ago and is undertaking important initiatives such as working with the Labour Department to devise a model employment contract. However, with only a few hundred members, there is a need for a much more large-scale effort to register and formalize the highly scattered domestic work sector.

At the national level, Pakistan should ratify the ILO’s Domestic Workers Convention (No 189) and implement national legislation in line with the Convention. It is important that we all raise our voices for these often-invisible workers. If we do not, there will continue to be thousands more domestic worker victims like Sana, helpless in the face of exploitation and abuse.

Many may not be fortunate enough to survive this abuse and, while their names may be remembered for a few days or weeks, society will simply move on to the next trending topic. But for domestic workers, without adequate policies and protections, there is no way to escape or move on. This must change.

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