

Catholic Groups and Partners Call for Ratification of ILO Convention on Domestic Workers

For Immediate Release

Geneva, 21 June 2011—"After adoption, ratification!" was the call of over 70 NGOs and labour groups from 5 continents, including domestic workers themselves, at a conference hosted by the International Catholic Centre of Geneva on June 3rd and 4th, 2011.

Organized by a network of Catholic-inspired NGOs and their partners, the consultation was held in anticipation of the adoption of the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers and the advocacy for ratification needed ahead. The Convention was adopted on June 17th at the conclusion of the ILO Conference, opening it up for ratification by state parties. In order for the standards to take full effect, state parties must ratify the Convention and commit to converting it into its national laws and ensuring its effective implementation.

Domestic work has long been excluded from traditional labour protections such as minimum wage and access to labour courts, leaving domestic workers without social protection. With 80% of all domestic workers worldwide being women, domestic work is often seen as "women's work" undeserving of real wages, remarked Ip Fish of the International Domestic Workers Network based in Hong Kong. John Bingham of the International Catholic Migration Commission presented reports from the field of the mistreatment of domestic workers, such as being burned with a hot iron as punishment, and the common practice of not letting domestic workers have time off.

Jules Hounkponou of the International Coordination of Young Christian Workers (CIJOC) reflected that the world is at a defining moment for domestic workers rights, a "domestic worker spring," given the international and regional attention to the issue. In addition to the recently adopted ILO Convention on Domestic Workers, the UN Committee on the Migrant Workers Convention published a "General Comment" last year providing legal jurisprudence specifically on the rights of migrant domestic workers. Finland, Brazil, and the states of New York, and California recently passed legislation that better protects domestic workers.

The conference focused on developing strategies to encourage ratification of the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers as well as the complexities of organizing for domestic workers rights. The field of domestic work itself poses a challenge to labour organizing as its employers do not constitute an "industry," and labour unions struggle to recognize and accept domestic workers as members. Migrant domestic workers face distinct obstacles, from job discrimination in national laws to racial and social discrimination, and the lack of diplomatic support from their states of origin in the face of some of the most harrowing cases of abuse in the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere.

Led by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and international organizations in Geneva, speakers and participants emphasized the essential sequence of achieving adoption, ratification, national legislation, actual implementation and monitoring of the new Convention; with the organizing and participation of domestic workers, women's organizations, the labour movement and the Church important at national as well as regional and international levels.

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