Social Protection as an Approach to Addressing Poverty and Vulnerability Among Women Domestic Workers in Zambia

A Study of Lusaka and Chipata Districts

Background

Despite being one of the oldest and most important employment sectors for millions of people, all over the world, domestic work is often undervalued and poorly regulated. Thus, in addition to being underpaid and overworked, many domestic workers do not have access to social protection (Klemm, et al. 2011). This is because most domestic work, especially by women, is informal. That is, it is performed outside the realm of labour regulations and social protection. Women domestic workers suffer significant “decent work deficits” as defined by the ILO, which coined the term, including deficits in employment opportunities, legal rights, social protections, as well as organization and representation (WIEGO, 2012).

In Zambia, women domestic workers face various challenges such as poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, human rights abuses, economic and social injustice, including deficits in legal rights and social security protection. Under the current Minimum Wages and Conditions of Employment Order 2011, domestic workers are guaranteed rights such as decent work for equal pay, paid annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave and separation package. However, due to the invisibility of domestic work and low levels of literacy among workers, there are rampant cases of non-compliance by employers. Domestic workers work long hours with little pay (as they exceed eight hours each day of work), and usually have no maternity leave, health care, or pension benefits. More so, they do not have sick leave, disability insurance, unemployment insurance, old age benefits, occupational health and safety protections and job security as one can be fired without notice and benefits at all. Even the establishment of minimum wage by the Zambian government does not meet the cost of living needs of domestic workers (Global Network, 2011; Chanda, 2014).

Preliminary Results (Work in Progress)

1. Impact of Domestic Work on Poverty and Vulnerability among Women Domestic Workers and their Families

Preliminary results so far indicate that domestic employment perpetuates poverty and eventually results in family poverty because it deprives women of lifelong skills, schooling and employment opportunities which they can use to move out of poverty. Domestic work limits women’s freedoms, that is, opportunities, choices, privileges, and the full development of their capabilities which they can use to realize their future aspirations. Consequently, domestic work results in poverty as women are deprived of capabilities or vocational skills which they can use to fight poverty and become socially and economically empowered. The implications of domestic work for women’s rights and welfare is that women are subjected to poor terms of employment and working conditions which deny them the right to better salaries, social and economic security. Hence, women are trapped in the vicious cycle of family poverty. In this regard, domestic employment is a violation of women’s right to adequate standard of living as they struggle to earn a living. They hardly survive because their monthly income is not enough to cater for large families. Domestic work therefore perpetuates socio-economic inequalities and injustice among women. This in turn results in women becoming vulnerable to various forms of abuse, discrimination, marginalization and oppression in society.

Domestic work also results in income poverty since the income that women get through domestic employment is not enough to sustain the social and economic inequalities of women and their large families. Hence, women and their families hardly survive as they are not able to meet all their basic needs. Thus, domestic work results in family poverty, and eventually families remain in the vicious cycle of poverty.

Preliminary results also indicate that social insurance schemes such as unemployment benefits, old age benefits, pension provisions and minimum wage would sustain income and promote financial security among women and their large families. Hence, women and their families hardly survive as they are not able to meet all their basic needs. Thus, domestic work results in family poverty, and eventually families remain in the vicious cycle of poverty.

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Preliminary results also indicate that provision of health insurance for domestic workers would promote health care, address health shocks and reduce vulnerability during sickness and child-bearing. Access to good nutrition by women domestic workers who are child-bearing would address gender related vulnerabilities and fight the cycle of poverty among women and their families. More so, access to savings, disability insurance and health insurance schemes would give women access to health care services in case of illness or accident at work. Additionally, paid sick leave and maternity leave would improve maternal and other reproductive health services, promote income and job security for women domestic workers.

3. Measures that would Promote Gender-Sensitive Social Protection for Informal Sector Women Workers

Data analyzed so far indicate that the Zambian government should scale up the already existing education programmes and policies that are aimed at preparing women and girls for better employment opportunities. Social protection programmes should ensure that women and girls have access to early education programmes, primary and secondary school education, and vocational education. Therefore, the Zambian government should scale up existing education programmes and policies that are aimed at addressing child labour, abuse and economic exploitation that would perpetuate poverty and vulnerability.

The Zambian government should enforce already existing labour laws and policies (wage and income policies) that should promote domestic workers’ access to health services, savings, disability insurance, maternity and other reproductive health services. Specifically, the Minimum Wages and Conditions of Employment Order, 2011, which fixes basic terms and conditions of work: a minimum wage and age, working time, sick leave and maternity leave, and severance pay should be scaled up so that it covers women domestic workers who are the most vulnerable among informal workers. The Zambian government should scale up the already existing programmes for social protection, including wage and income policies that should ensure a secure old age and promote financial security. This would help in breaking the cycle of poverty among women domestic workers and their families.