

Campaign Victory:

Ireland's ratification of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention



CAMPAIGN GOAL

To strengthen laws and protections for domestic workers in Ireland by convincing the Irish government to ratify the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention.

BACKGROUND

MRCI has worked with domestic workers since our earliest days when large numbers of migrant women were coming to the Drop-In Centre with complaints of excessively long hours working hours, sub-minimum wage pay, and harassment and bullying by their employers. We began assisting individual domestic workers to take employment cases, but in order to tackle the root causes of the issues, domestic workers themselves had to be part of a sustainable solution. Using a community work approach underpinned by principles of participation, empowerment and collective action, MRCI established the Domestic Workers Action Group (DWAG). Women began meeting on Sundays – when most had a day off – creating a safe space to come together and work collectively for fair and equal treatment and working conditions. This fight was happening in a larger context. Globally, domestic work has a high incidence of trafficking, domestic servitude and child slavery. In many countries domestic workers are either partially or completely excluded from labour laws, leaving them open to exploitation and without even the most basic employment rights and protection. In this oppressive climate, domestic worker organisations, trade unions and community activists began to organise, kicking off a campaign to put domestic workers' rights on the international agenda. With the use of both bottom-up and top-down approaches, rights for domestic work began to emerge as a key human rights and gender equality issue internationally. The global campaign to get an ILO Domestic Workers Convention adopted began.

APPROACH, STRATEGY AND TACTICS

In 2010, DWAG decided to join the global campaign to get domestic workers' rights set out in international law. Connecting with domestic worker organisations around the world, DWAG began mobilising migrant women working as childminders, carers, and cleaners in Ireland to get involved in the international campaign to get domestic work recognised as real work and ultimately to win an ILO Domestic Workers Convention.

Building the Movement: Creative Approaches

Since its inception DWAG has used dynamic and creative tools to build the critical participation of domestic workers in collective efforts and to engage the public, the media and decision makers in vital awareness-raising and advocacy exercises. The campaign to win a UN ILO Convention for Domestic Work, and in turn see it ratified by the Irish government, colloquially became known as DWAG's ILO campaign. The ILO campaign used both art and music to build awareness of the

need for greater protections for domestic workers, as well as to engage domestic workers in deeply empowering and politicising creative processes.

Acting out — using drama to tell stories and raise awareness

In 2011, DWAG used Forum Theatre and drama to expose the exploitation experienced by many migrant women in Ireland. Over a three-month period, women worked with writers to develop a stage production—a tool to highlight the campaign which then gave women access to mainstream media to promote and discuss the play, the issues and the campaign. The play and production was accompanied by a well-planned media and campaign strategy with clear political asks and targets. By June 2011, the Domestic Workers Convention (C189) was adopted by the International Labour Organisation, with Ireland voting in favour of the adoption. The next phase of the international campaign was the ratification campaign to get individual governments to commit to ratify the convention.

Soul Workers Session—building momentum through music

In 2012, as part of the follow-up ratification campaign, DWAG teamed up with musicians to engage new audiences through music and spoken word. The culmination of a three-month creative process, the Soul Workers Session was a concert of music and poetry, supported by local musicians and artists, where DWAG performed a song and spoken word poetry composed collectively by members. Again, this created multiple platforms to discuss the issues, build support for the campaign and our ask, whilst also breaking down barriers and empowering women to represent their own issues through music, on stage, and in the media at a local and national level. These tools were part of a broader campaign plan which agreed a set of strategic objectives and identified the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation as a key target.

Timely direct and public actions — linking the local to global

By August, the international campaign was reaching a climax; a global end date of December 12th 2012 (12:12:12) was set as the deadline to get governments to commit to ratifying the convention.

DWAG organised a number of strategic political and direct actions in a final push to get the Irish government to commit. Allies of the campaign were invited to join a global day of action calling on the Irish government to ratify. The Solidarity Stroll saw domestic workers, trade unions, employers, civil society



organisations, community and voluntary groups, supporters and even children take to the street to walk in solidarity with domestic workers around the globe.

A petition was launched calling for the same using the deadline of 12:12:12. Signatures gathered from the online petition were gift wrapped in boxes and delivered to the Minister on December 12th by 12 domestic workers with the message Give domestic workers a gift this Christmas: commit to ratification. These colourful actions provided excellent photo call moments to engage Irish media and sustain pressure on the Minister and government to respond, and proved very engaging exercise to build participation and leadership with domestic workers.

OUTCOME

In 2013, DWAG received commitment from the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation that Ireland would ratify the convention as soon as legally possible. On July 9th 2014, domestic workers in Ireland celebrated a milestone in the struggle for domestic workers' rights, nationally but also globally, when Ireland became the 15th country to ratify the ILO Domestic Workers Convention – and only the third European country to do so. A significant victory for the Domestic Workers Action Group, after a ground-breaking campaign which cemented key relationships with allies and supporters across civil society and the trade union movement in Ireland and saw the empowerment and leadership development of migrant domestic workers.

CHALLENGES

- The reality of engaging workers in low-paid work: many domestic workers could not attend meetings due to work commitments or needing to take up part-time work at weekends for extra cash.
- Community work is labour-intensive and both time and resources were needed to properly support the participation and empowerment of domestic workers



in vulnerable situations. Starting where people are at in situations of severe exploitation requires supporting the individual's personal needs and providing ongoing support and access to services to ensure immediate needs, such as housing and food, are being met.

- Working collaboratively with other organisations with diverse organisational cultures, values, and approaches that differ from community work.
- Facilitating DWAG leaders to participate at international events and meetings was difficult due to immigration restrictions of undocumented workers and general immigration requirements for non-EU workers.

LESSONS LEARNED

For campaigning

- Developing strategic allies in the trade union movement and in civil society helped to build support and momentum for the campaign.
- Constructing a strategic media plan in tandem with all creative and strategic campaign plans is crucial.
- Engaging in an international campaign is an excellent vehicle for connecting the local to global. DWAG has developed strong international allies, sustained involvement in the global domestic worker movement, developed a strong political voice to represent domestic workers in Ireland and become a recognised voice for domestic workers internationally.
- Using a variety of tools and methodologies when campaign planning allows for targeted strategic engagement on multiple levels, from grassroots, to political engagement, to alliance-building.
- Working closely with trade unions requires a shared understanding of resources involved (time and money) and a shared commitment from both parties to deliver specific work objectives.
- Campaign strategy. The tools were dynamic and creative (and a lot of work) but were just that: tools. A broader campaign strategy proved really important in keeping us on track with the bigger picture and overall campaign goals.

For community work

- Short creative projects enabled women to engage on a continued basis, facilitating them to develop their analysis of the issues facing domestic workers and to connect with a complex international process.
- Drama and music as tools created a great platform for domestic workers to share their stories and build their analysis in a creative and empowering way, resulting in a shared story to be used as a campaign tool. Combined with organising direct actions, they also encouraged a cultural shift in the perception of domestic workers from vulnerable passive agents to empowered active agents for change (both internally in DWAG for the women, and externally in public perception). and to build support for the campaign.
- Connecting the local experiences of domestic workers in Ireland to the global problems faced by domestic workers around the world created a strong sense of solidarity and ownership over the campaign.
- Building leadership development into all aspects of the campaign – from one-to-one meetings to structured leadership workshops – facilitated leaders with strong analysis and skills to emerge.

For community workers

KEY KNOWLEDGE:

Community work theory, principles and processes

Poverty, inequality, discrimination and social exclusion and its impact on women (men, children and young people, families and communities)

Empowering methodologies, approaches and practices for working with communities and groups

KEY SKILLS:

Use of creative and innovative methodologies

Critical social analysis and policy analysis

Capacity to make national and international human rights and equality frameworks relevant, developing consciousness, understanding and associated actions

KEY QUALITIES

Commitment to social justice including global justice

Commitment to rejecting and challenging oppression, discrimination and prejudice in all its forms

NEXT STEPS

AU PAIR RIGHTS & RECOGNITION: Au pairs have become synonymous with a cheap supply of childcare, domestic work and increasingly other forms of care work. The pattern of exploitation, neglect and precariousness experienced by this group of vulnerable workers replicates the experiences reported by domestic workers generally in MRCI's early years and is a matter of serious concern. In March 2015, au pairs, carers, and domestic workers launched Labour of Love, a new campaign focusing on the rights of workers in private homes across Ireland. The campaign aims to combat the widespread underpayment, exploitation and abuse of au pairs and other workers who provide essential care and housekeeping services.

CARE WORK: Care is an issue that affects us all. Migrant women are employed as carers at all stages of life, minding children in private homes and working in home care for the elderly. It's time to build a quality care system that ensures dignity for workers and service users alike, and DWAG is engaging in strategic work with workers, employers and stakeholders to progress these issues.

WORK PERMIT FOR DOMESTIC WORK: Given the ongoing level of demand for domestic workers in Ireland, DWAG will continue to campaign for the establishment of a work permit category for workers who provide Personal and Household Services in the private home.

