EALIER THIS YEAR, the International Labour Organization (ILO) at its annual conference in Geneva agreed to a groundbreaking Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. The Convention establishes international standards to improve working conditions for as many as 100 million domestic workers worldwide, the majority of whom are women and young girls.

The Convention defines domestic work as “work performed in or for a household or households.” This definition includes paid caregivers of children and the elderly, as well as workers hired to perform general household tasks such as cleaning, laundry, shopping, and cooking. Delegates to the conference also adopted an accompanying Recommendation. While the Convention is an international treaty that is binding on member states that ratify it, the nonbinding Recommendation provides detailed guidance on how to apply the Convention.

In the United States as well as in many other parts of the world, the provision of paid domestic work is essential. It serves as a vital source of employment for low-income women and provides an indispensable service for countless families. Absent the availability of domestic work, many families would be left in a crisis. While not all households employ a domestic worker, for the many who do, the availability of services represents a significant coping strategy in response to the lack of adequate public support to care for children and the elderly. In the coming years, more and more families will rely on domestic workers for the provision of critical care.

The urgency for access to paid domestic services is matched by the urgent need to provide domestic workers with access to fair and decent work. Despite its importance, domestic work remains an economically marginalized job. Throughout the world, the work is poorly paid and offers workers few if any benefits such as access to health care or maternity leave. Workers are also routinely subjected to harsh working conditions, including sexual harassment and other forms of physical abuse, exposure to health and safety hazards, inadequate accommodations for live-in work, and excessive working hours. In addition, because labor legislation in many countries denies coverage to domestic work, workers are especially vulnerable to exploitative labor conditions.

To be sure, the structure of domestic work does not fit comfortably into existing models of workplace protections. Unlike the majority of workers, domestic workers remain invisible, laboring in the private setting of the home and without the support of co-workers. For too long, the uniqueness of domestic work has been used to deny workers basic labor rights extended to the general workforce. The new ILO standards recognize that domestic work is no less valuable because of its location within the private sphere of the family, nor is it any less sheltered from the harsh realities that often accompany waged work. Indeed, working within private households behind closed doors has left domestic workers more vulnerable than most workers to abuse and labor exploitation.

The ILO standards aim to help rectify the deplorable conditions in domestic work and to recognize that domestic workers are indeed workers, not servants or members of employing households. Key elements of the Convention require governments to accord domestic workers substantive labor rights that are equivalent to those extended to other workers, including overtime compensation, minimum wage coverage, regular rest periods, social security, coverage under safety and health provisions, and respect for fundamental principles and rights at work, including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

The Domestic Workers Convention will come into force after it has been ratified by two countries. Although delegates from the United States played a leading role in rallying support for the Convention and advocating strong protections on behalf of workers, it will take a Herculean effort to achieve decent work for domestic workers in the United States. First, the United States must be willing to ratify the Convention. Second, assuming ratification, a long road must be traversed in order to ensure that national labor laws meet the level of protection mandated by the Convention’s provisions. At present, none of the major pieces of federal labor legislation in the United States comply with the standards in the Convention.

Even as it remains to be seen if the United States will ratify the Convention, the ILO standards expressed therein, as well as those contained in the Recommendation, now stand as the benchmark by which to measure the treatment of domestic workers and by which to hold policymakers accountable. The ILO standards provide a useful framework for member states, including the United States, to make meaningful strides toward achieving decent work for domestic workers. Policymakers must be continually reminded of the value of domestic work and constantly pressed to regulate such work in a manner that acknowledges domestic workers as real workers who deserve respect and inclusion in the scope of general workplace protections.

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