

New treaty brings hope to domestic workers

Written by New America Media, News Report, Rong Xiaoqing
Monday, 10 October 2011 13:04

NEW YORK -- A newly minted international treaty, the Domestic Workers Convention, gives advocates an immediate opportunity to push for local legislation, even though it may take a long time for domestic workers worldwide to enjoy the treaty's full protection, explained four experts on a panel held by the Open Society Foundation in New York on September 21.

Of the fifty-to-a-hundred million domestic workers in the world, more than 90 percent are women and girls. Many are migrants. Historically, labor laws in their own countries they haven't given them protection. "It's work that happens inside a home. Our society has never seen home as a work place," said Priscilla Gonzalez, executive director of the New York-based Domestic Workers United.

Adopted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in June, the Convention, sets a universal guideline for domestic workers' rights, such as weekly days off, privacy for live-in workers, school time for workers under 18, and equal treatment for migrants.

Swaziland was the only country that voted against it among 183 ILO members, and eight other countries abstained. The Convention was overwhelmingly passed at the conference in Geneva, but all countries have yet to ratify it.

"This is a new treaty and it may take a few years for the nations to prepare for the ratification," explained Nisha Varia, senior researcher for Human Rights Watch. "But the Convention's passage itself is a huge progress. Now whenever the topic (of domestic workers' rights) is discussed, there is a standard to compare with."

"Now we can use the Convention as leverage when we fight across the country," said Gonzalez, one of the people behind the iconic Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York State, the first such bill passed in the nation. Gonzalez is now working with colleagues to push similar legislation elsewhere. A bill passed the Assembly in California and several other states are considering introducing such legislation, raising hope. "We are able to cite the rights adopted in the Convention and use that to push our regulatory agenda," she said.

Worldwide, the early impact of the Convention has also become apparent. For example, Singapore, one of the countries that abstained in Geneva, is trying to bring its own domestic workers protection to a higher level by curbing hefty recruitment fees and offering more rights to foreign workers.

"One of the reasons Singapore chose abstention is it thinks it will not be able to meet all the requirements (of the Convention), said Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, vice president of the board of the Transient Workers Count Too, one of two non-governmental organizations in Singapore focused on the rights of migrant workers. "Singapore is very concerned about its international reputation. It is now reviewing its legislation."

Advocates realize that educating employers, the public and the workers themselves about the stipulated rights still remains a major challenge. "The public opinion front is harder work," said Luna Ranjit, co-founder and executive director of Adhikaar, a New York-based group working with Nepali communities..

New treaty brings hope to domestic workers

Written by New America Media, News Report, Rong Xiaoqing
Monday, 10 October 2011 13:04

Ranjit said many domestic workers from Nepal were highly educated before they came to the U.S. They are not proud of their current job, want to lay low and don't often stand up for their own rights. "The mindset in Nepal that domestic workers are slaves is brought here. It's like you are brought to the U.S. and you have a job. You should be grateful," said Ranjit.

In Singapore, Rahman's organization is also facing an uphill struggle to persuade the public that domestic workers deserve regular days off. According to the group's recent survey, only 12% of foreign domestic workers in the country have a weekly day off. The majority of respondents said if they were employers they wouldn't be open to the idea either. Some employers have an extreme view, claiming that more time off would lead to a surge in affairs and pregnancies among foreign maids.

"In the past ten years, we have come a long way to form public opinion, but we still have a lot of work to do," said Gonzalez.