

Domestic workers *Imbizo*

Space to engage

With regard to the issue of safety, all women reported feeling unsafe at work. This issue was of concern to the female taxi drivers since they were vulnerable. However, for female operators, even though they acknowledged high rates of hijacking and rape, safety is a thing of the past that they reminisced about. The biggest fear they now have is that their taxis can be stolen and their drivers killed.

Rape is one of the pressing challenges that South African women and children face. According to Rape Crisis between 2011 and 2012 there were 64,514 sexual offences reported and that in South Africa, the official statistics say 'a person is sexually assaulted or raped as often as every eight minutes'. Due to stigma attached to rape, many incidents of rape go unreported. Rape Crisis states that the numbers could be higher.

CONCLUSION

Due to the exploitative nature of the minibus taxi industry where employers do not adhere to the law, which is meant to protect the employees, female taxi drivers find it difficult to balance their highly competitive jobs and family responsibilities. With regard to safety issues, female taxi drivers experience 'double vulnerability' compared to their male counterparts, as they are more likely to be hijacked and raped. ^{LB}

Patricia Pinky Nkete is a Sociology masters' student at the University of Johannesburg. This article is based on a presentation made at the South African Sociological Association Annual Congress at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth.

It was a day of solidarity, organising and fun at the Gauteng domestic workers, *Imbizo* in Soweto, Johannesburg in September. **Janet Munakamwe** writes on some of the issues that were discussed.

ISSUES

The *Imbizo* gave the 1,000-plus domestic workers who came – organised and unorganised, locals and migrants – a rare opportunity to talk to the Minister of Labour, Mildred Oliphant, who was in attendance together with labour inspectors who advised on pressing issues for the workers.

In a question and answer session various issues emerged mostly to do with unfair working conditions and lack of clear job descriptions.

Said one worker: 'I don't know my job really, whether I'm a cook, gardener, and security guard, nanny or dog carer. I really need your advice on this.'

Other issues that were raised included:

- Sexual harassment – where extreme cases reported involved rape.
- Working more hours without being paid for overtime.
- Wage cut-offs including irregular pay.
- Employers' resistance to register workers for UIF. If employers did not register workers for UIF, workers were encouraged to call labour inspectors to come and assist.
- Divided solidarity between locals and immigrants.
- Immigrant workers being reportedly scared of joining unions because of documentation problems and therefore preferred to organise as social, ethnic or national networks. Immigration problems to some extent also account for failure to access UIF and maternity benefits.
- Employers' preference of immigrants with the aim of exploiting them.
- Department of Labour (DoL) inspectors should also visit domestic workers' workplaces.
- Labour offices are for all workers to freely consult.
- Skills training should be encouraged so that domestic workers can move to other jobs.



Official advice: Domestic worker talks to a labour inspector.

- The law deals with unfair dismissals and workers can contact 080 084 3843 for details.
- 663,000 domestic workers are currently registered for Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF).
- According to the law, domestic workers benefit from the Compensation for Occupational Diseases Act (COIDA) but that is not the case. In practice this is not happening.

'PARTICIPATE AND EMANCIPATE YOURSELVES'

The minister encouraged domestic workers to participate towards transforming their working lives.

'If you do not participate, you cannot speak for yourselves – tell us your challenges,' she said.

She traced back women's struggles to the 1955 pass laws which led to improvements in legislation 'from being called kitchen girls to becoming professional domestic workers. Indeed, we have witnessed law amendments for the better over the years'.

She narrated how her mother in spite of harsh working conditions as a domestic worker ensured that she went to school. Her mother was able to do this despite traditional beliefs which prioritised boys' as opposed

to girls' education: 'My mother made sure that even under harsh conditions she endured domestic work,' she said saluting domestic workers as 'executives and advisors'.

The minister announced the national minimum wage for domestic workers as R1,877 for 27 hours of work per week. Oliphant also mentioned various existing laws and policies for domestic workers, which include the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), Labour Relations Act (LRA), and the Sectoral Determination (SD) as well as the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF).

The minister acknowledged migrant domestic workers as part of the country's working class indirectly denouncing xenophobia. In her speech, she mentioned how neighbouring and other African countries helped sustain South Africa's struggles against apartheid.

ILO CONVENTION 189

Oliphant spoke on the importance of national, regional and international labour laws and policies. According to ILO, the Domestic Workers Convention is a 'key instrument to ensure that workers in informal and precarious jobs enjoy decent work and have effective access to the same rights afforded to workers generally'.

In addition, Inviolata Chinyangarara comments that the adoption of C189 'was an important development because domestic workers, mainly women and girls who have been historically excluded from protection by the law, were now recognised. The standards sought to correct the continued exclusion, to address exploitation, and violation of human and trade union rights'.

The minister commended Cosatu for the role the federation played as the key convenor of organised labour towards the adoption of ILO Convention 189. She was proud to announce that South Africa is one of the ten countries which have ratified the convention thus far. In 2011, the department in collaboration with organised labour and civil society organisations hosted a domestic workers' summit to raise awareness on the Convention.

STAKEHOLDERS

Various stakeholders gave solidarity speeches including the Minister for Women in the Office of the President, Susan Shabangu, and the Deputy Minister of Labour.

The City of Johannesburg's Member of the Mayoral Committee (MMC) for Health and Social Development, Councillor Noncebo Molwele, opened the event and paid

a special tribute to the role played by domestic workers in 'sustaining families'. She added that domestic workers constituted part of the City's 2014 Development Strategy which promoted women's social mobility.

The national organiser for the South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union (Sadsawu), Eunice Dladla, said domestic workers were VIPs in the home yet they were always the last to be recognised. She thanked the minister for the *Imbizo* and suggested that the process be continued into the future.

'We would like to see inspectors in our workplaces. And they should not only speak to the employer but to us as well,' she said. She hoped that Sadsawu submissions for the amendment to the Labour Relations Act will be considered.

Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu)'s deputy general secretary, Bheki Ntshalintshali, acknowledged the 'significant social reproduction role' played by domestic workers in sustaining the working class. Of course, for a minister or lawyer or doctor to be able to leave their homes and perform their functions, the 'chief executive officer (CEO)' of the home oversees all that, said Ntshalintshali.

Federation of Unions of South Africa (Fedusa)'s Edna Bokaba reiterated the significance of domestic workers in working-class households. A speaker from the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) – product of a domestic worker – also acknowledged the role of domestic workers and the need to get these workers organised into trade unions.

Cosatu's Vulnerable Workers' Task Team (VWTT)'s chairperson Jane Barrett said her task team supported Sadsawu's efforts. 'This is an opportunity to demonstrate that the VWTT means business when we say we support Sadsawu in its organising and recruitment efforts.'

RECRUITING MEMBERS

Sadsawu used the opportunity to recruit domestic workers in the province and close to 300 workers signed up. This not only demonstrated the workers' need for a 'voice' but also refuted conventional knowledge that women, in particular domestic workers, were unorganisable.

While domestic workers have their own social networks and self-help initiatives, this event, proved that trade unions are still the dominant vehicle of transformation

for the 'voiceless'. Indeed, unions' associational power still plays a momentous role in the lives of domestic workers.

CONCLUSION

The Gauteng provincial *Imbizo* generated an extraordinary platform for domestic workers to collectively engage with the minister in an effort to devise lasting solutions to the challenges they face during work in private homes. Oliphant publicly declared her support towards domestic workers' struggles and promised to deploy inspectors. To this end, a toll-free number was provided to the workers.

The *Imbizo* also made it possible for Sadsawu to meet and speak with workers about the importance of joining a union in order to use their associational power to transform their lives. As workers joined Sadsawu the onus is on the union to take up practical struggles for the vulnerable domestic workers. ¹⁵

Janet Munakamwe is a researcher with the International Centre for Development and Decent Work, Chris Hani Institute in Johannesburg and a Phd candidate at the African Centre for Migration & Society at the University of the Witwatersrand.



Hear our grievances: Domestic workers queue to lodge complaints to be addressed by the Department of Labour.