



# A Journey Towards Decent Work: Paid Care Work and Myanmar's Domestic Workers

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Economics

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## Introduction

Paid care work performed by domestic workers(အိမ်တွင်းအလုပ်သမား)<sup>1</sup> has been a long-standing occupation for Burmese women and play an integral role in care provision (ILO, 2024), yet it is still undervalued and poorly compensated in Myanmar (Myanmar Labour News, 2024). Predominantly carried out by women, domestic workers provide essential household services like childcare, elderly-care, cleaning, and cooking, allowing family members to participate in paid employment (ILO, 2018).

In recent years, political instability, economic hardships, and the lack of formal economic opportunities have pushed many women into informal work settings in Myanmar, with the domestic work sector regaining prominence, particularly in urban areas. “Yet, in terms of decent work, protections, and labour rights, can the government offer these fundamental guarantees to its informal women workers?”

## Challenges Slowing Progress

Hiring domestic workers, helpers, or 'aunties' for household tasks like cooking, cleaning, and childcare has long been common in Burmese households. As societal norms evolve and more women join the workforce or pursue business activities, the demand for domestic workers to manage household responsibilities has increased. This trend is especially evident in cities like Yangon, where households employ live-in, live-out<sup>2</sup>, or part-time domestic workers.

Recognizing the contributions of domestic workers and addressing the undervaluation of care work, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted Convention 189 in 2011 to promote decent work for domestic workers.

In Myanmar, however, several high-profile disputes between domestic workers and employers have perpetuated negative stereotypes (ILO, 2019). Domestic workers are often unfairly labelled as unreliable or untrustworthy, while employers are seen as overly strict or unkind. These issues stem from the exclusion of domestic workers from labour laws and the perception of their work as unskilled, despite its labour-intensive and skill-demanding nature (ILO, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> The term ein dwin: a lou' tha ma (အိမ်တွင်းအလုပ်သမား) refer to terminology of domestic workers in Myanmar language

<sup>2</sup> 'Live-in' အလုပ်ရှင်အိမ်တွင်နေထိုင်သူ၊ 'Live-out' အလုပ်ရှင်အိမ်တွင် မနေထိုင်ပဲ မနက်သွားညပြန် လုပ်ကိုင်သူ

Adding to the challenge is the lack of proper recruitment platforms for connecting skilled domestic workers with employers (ILO, 2021) and the absence of certified skills training programs to recognize and validate their abilities. Advocacy efforts by local labour rights groups have laid the groundwork for drafting domestic worker protection laws and engaging policymakers (MIZZIMA, 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing political crises have left domestic workers unprotected, highly vulnerable to abuse, and largely invisible contributors to the economy.

### **Exploitation in the Shadows**

Domestic workers in Myanmar are not entitled to minimum wage, standard working hours, holidays, or work compensation. This devaluation of domestic work is deeply rooted in traditional cultural ideologies that associate women with household tasks, which are often not recognized as real work. (ILO, 2019). This legal exclusion exposes them to labour exploitation (Myanmar Labour News, 2024).

One example is Ma Su, a domestic worker who was dismissed after two years of service due to health issues deemed to affect her productivity. She lost her job without compensation, as she lacked a formal contract. Similarly, Ma Khin, a live-in domestic worker, endured verbal abuse and was locked inside her employer's home whenever they were away. She ultimately quit the job due to the harsh treatment. The study was conducted during the Myanmar Domestic Workers Consultation Meeting organized by TGS in November 2024. These cases highlight the systemic exploitation and inequalities faced by domestic workers, issues that urgently need addressing.

Informal employment culture and structural barriers perpetuate these challenges. On the employers' side, unconscious biases and stereotypes, such as viewing domestic workers as untrustworthy, undermine the employer-employee relationship and foster mistrust.

### **Local Initiative Paving the Way**

To address these challenges, local initiatives in Myanmar have begun promoting decent work opportunities for domestic workers. For example, ThreeGoodSpoons, a Yangon-based training center, addresses skills gaps by offering training in cleaning, home hygiene, kitchen safety, and essential cooking (United Nations Myanmar, 2023). Domestic workers also acquire soft skills such as negotiation, communication, and management, transforming their roles into professionalized, valued positions.

Trained domestic workers can earn \$200–\$300 per month with improved working conditions, holidays, and healthy working time. Others pursue part-time work or migrate to countries like Singapore, Thailand, or the Middle East for higher wages. The training also provides awareness of safe migration practices for potential migrant workers.

In the absence of robust government policies supporting women in the informal labour sector, civil society organizations (CSOs) act as policy entrepreneurs, empowering women through

employment, decent work initiatives, and advocacy. However, these efforts should serve as the foundation for transformative actions. Greater policy dialogue, comprehensive collaboration, and long-term commitment are essential for advancing decent work in Myanmar's care economy.

### **Empowering Myanmar Domestic Workers**

Despite the global momentum toward gender equality under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, progress remains slow due to interconnected crises (UN ESCAP, 2024). Providing women with access to decent work can empower them financially, reduce their care burden, and narrow the gender gap (ILO, 2023).

Recognizing domestic work as an integral part of the care workforce is vital. Domestic workers must be included in national labour laws, granting them fair wages, rest hours, and social protections. Accredited skills development programs should be implemented to enhance job security and elevate the status of domestic work.

Furthermore, intergovernmental and multilateral efforts must prioritize the care sector through sustainable funding, innovation, and strategic pathways to support locally led initiatives. In light of Myanmar's failure to provide adequate policy frameworks for women workers, immediate and sustained action is critical for marginalized women. By committing to gender-affirmative economic justice, decent work, and social protection, we can build an inclusive and just sustainable future.

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