

'Informal workers' around the globe face a stacked deck, but labor organizing has led to wins

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Members of the National Domestic Workers Alliance during their march to see Pope Francis in September 2015. Credit: National Domestic Workers Alliance

A [UCLA-led study of informal laborers](#) in six countries found that despite differences in local laws and cultures, domestic workers and construction workers in each of those countries, who are most often

migrants, are often exploited by their employers because government labor protections are weak or not enforced.

Definitions of informal employment vary but the key feature is that they do not have access to protection by standard employment laws and social security-like programs.

The authors of the report, which was a collaboration between the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, or IRLE, and the Center for Global Workers' Rights at Penn State, also found that the workers, who came from China, India, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea and the United States, share common organizing strategies to improve their [work conditions](#) and their lives.

"This research confirms that informal workers can successfully organize and win rights," said report co-author Chris Tilly, professor of urban planning in the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and an expert on [labor](#) markets. "It offers lessons on strategy for workers in these two sectors and beyond, and it helps us understand how and why organizing approaches differ across sectors and countries."

The reason the report focused on people working in these two sectors was their distinct gender differences: [construction workers](#) tend to be mostly men while domestic workers are primarily female. Researchers conducted the case studies through interviews with key actors inside and outside the organizations, site visits or participant observation, and information from media reports and other secondary sources.

According to the study, the gendering of these sectors plays a role in the types of legal protections afforded to the workers. The high concentration of women in paid domestic work, with its similarities to women's traditional roles such as caregiving, helps explain why domestic workers are excluded from some or all labor protections in half the

countries studied.

"Domestic work continues to be plagued by patriarchal norms and gender discrimination," said Justin McBride, UCLA researcher and report co-author. "Furthermore, even when legal protections are in place, domestic workers tend to fall through the cracks due in part to patriarchal biases in implementation of the law."

Tilly pointed to the United States as an example of a country where domestic workers continue to be excluded from core labor standards laws such as meal breaks, overtime pay and an eight-hour work day. Even in China, where such workers are in theory covered by the Labor Contract Law, there is almost no enforcement of the requirement of a written employment contract, Tilly added.

By contrast, construction workers were covered by labor laws in every country in the study, yet, they were still often victims of exploitation. In South Korea, for example, informal construction workers are located at the tail end of chains of subcontractors, where neither union contracts nor employment laws get enforced, so workers typically lack safety provisions, overtime pay, and other protections—unless they mobilize to demand them.

"Between multiple layers of subcontracting and exploitation of vulnerable populations such as migrants and marginalized racial and ethnic groups, many construction jobs simply ignore basic legal protections," Tilly said.

The report's authors say that migrant status is also an important part of the story, like in China or India, where the most heavily exploited construction and domestic workers are migrants from rural areas to the cities, or in the United States, where migrants from Latin America and elsewhere fill [domestic work](#) jobs and the least-protected construction

jobs.

Ethnic and racial status is also a factor. Informal construction and domestic workers in the United States are overwhelmingly people of color, and in South Korea, ethnic Koreans who are migrating from China, occupy the worst jobs in both sectors, the report states.

Researchers found that regardless of the sector or nation, by banding together, informal workers have been successful in expanding their rights and building power. In South Africa and Mexico, domestic workers have formed unions, South Korean domestic workers have formed a cooperative, U.S. household workers have banded together in associations, and their counterparts in China and India have organized in both associations and unions.

These organizing efforts have delivered important victories. In India, informal construction and domestic workers were able to access state benefits. In the United States, construction workers established day labor centers to set wage standards, and share work fairly. In South Korea, domestic workers delineated minute-by-minute standards for household work rather than let employers dictate their work.

The combination of nation-specific strategies and common trends identified through this research offer lessons for organizations around the world as well as others studying [worker](#) movements. The researchers hope the lessons of the 12 [case studies](#) can provide an avenue for future research and a better understanding of the challenges facing workers in these sectors of informal work.

"Domestic and construction workers all over the world are standing up for their rights," said Jennifer Jihye Chun, UCLA associate professor of Asian American studies and one of the report's co-authors. "A key goal in doing this research was to identify global best practices, but also

diverse practices that work in diverse settings, so that organizers can learn from each other's experiences."

The study forms part of the wide-ranging labor research agenda the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment has advanced for years and reflects the institute's commitment to the study of low-wage sectors.

"I am proud to direct an institute that sponsors rigorous social science research with an eye to real world solutions and actions, especially on vulnerable workers who toil globally in some of the most precarious labor markets in the world," said Abel Valenzuela, director of the institute and a national expert on day labor. "This study is an example of research and policy-driven analysis that aligns well with our institute's increasing attention to the global economic implications of COVID-19."

More information: Organizing Informal Workers to Win: Lessons from Informal Domestic and Construction Workers in Six Countries. Justin McBride, et al.: [irle.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploa ... in-Six-Countries.pdf](https://irle.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Workers-to-Win-in-Six-Countries.pdf)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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