

How unionization is empowering Jamaican domestic workers to demand decent work

November 8 2023, by Simon Black



Jamaica has the potential to become a regional leader in advancing decent work for domestic workers thanks to unionization efforts. Members of the Jamaica Household Workers' Union pose for a photo. Credit: Author provided

In thousands of households across Jamaica, domestic workers do the work of cooking, cleaning, gardening and caring for children, the elderly and people with disabilities.

While this work is essential to the functioning of the economy and to the well-being of many Jamaican families, domestic workers often

experience low pay, poor working conditions and informal work arrangements. Due to their isolation in the home, they're also vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse.

[Estimates put the number of domestic workers in Jamaica at around 56,000, 80% of whom are women.](#)

In 2016, [Jamaica ratified](#) International Labor Organization Convention No. 189, the Domestic Workers Convention. The landmark convention is the first international legal instrument to recognize [domestic work](#) as equivalent to all other kinds of work [and is founded on](#) "the fundamental premise that domestic workers are neither 'servants' nor 'members of the family' nor second-class workers."

Jamaica is one of only 36 countries to have ratified the convention. To its credit, the Jamaican government has made progress toward making decent work a reality for domestic workers, [including by raising the national minimum wage.](#)

Decent work deficits persist

[A study I conducted with Lauren Marsh, of the Hugh Shearer Labor Studies Institute at the University of the West Indies,](#) has been published to coincide with the seventh anniversary of Jamaica's ratification of the convention. It finds that domestic workers continue to experience deficits in decent work.

Without government action, we fear that progress toward achieving decent work for this marginalized, but essential, workforce will stall.

We surveyed more than 200 domestic workers, held focus groups and interviewed key stakeholders in government and civil society.

Overall, we found that while domestic workers are generally covered under Jamaica's labor laws, many experience an "enforcement gap"—the difference between the rights and protections established in law and those that are actually respected by employers in the workplace.

And while the [Ministry of Labor and Social Security is sensitive to the challenges facing domestic workers](#), it currently lacks the capacity to adequately promote and enforce compliance with labor standards in the sector.

Furthermore, far too many domestic workers lack awareness of their rights. Just over half of survey respondents said they were not aware of any laws that protect domestic workers in Jamaica. This finding is troubling, as workers' awareness of rights is key to their realization.

Domestic workers are generally frustrated with Jamaica's slow pace toward making decent work a reality in the sector. For instance, nearly 90% of domestic workers surveyed believe the government doesn't adequately inform domestic workers of their rights; 82% would like to see the government do a better job at enforcing laws that protect domestic workers.

Raising awareness

There is some good news. The [Jamaica Household Workers' Union](#), with 7,280 members across 13 chapters, has done excellent work in raising domestic workers' awareness of their rights and protections.

We found that domestic workers who are members of the union are more likely than non-union domestic workers to contribute to Jamaica's social security scheme, twice as likely than their non-union counterparts to possess a written employment contract, making enforcing rights easier, and are far more likely than their non-union counterparts to be

aware of their labor and [social security](#) protections.

These findings suggest that strengthening collective representation for domestic workers is a promising route to ensuring that rights on paper are rights in practice.

Our report includes several recommendations that may act as a guide to action for achieving decent work for domestic workers in Jamaica.

First and foremost, the Jamaican government must invest in building the capacity of the [Ministry of Labor and Social Security](#) to enforce and promote compliance with labor standards in the domestic work sector—including through the creation of a domestic work section—and through public awareness campaigns to ensure employers and workers alike know their rights and responsibilities.

Collective bargaining needed

To strengthen collective representation and worker voice, the government should also work with employers' groups and the Jamaica Household Workers' Union to establish the legal and institutional framework and conditions necessary for [collective bargaining in the domestic work sector](#).

Decent work is fundamental to social justice, gender equality and fulfilling Jamaica's commitments under the national development plan, [Vision 2030 Jamaica](#).

Relative to its Caribbean neighbors, Jamaica is making slow but steady progress toward making decent work a reality for domestic workers—and the Jamaica Household Workers' Union is establishing best practices in domestic [worker](#) organizing and collective representation.

That means Jamaica has the potential to become a regional leader in advancing decent work for domestic workers. It's a [leadership role](#) the [government](#) and civil society should fully embrace.

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