

A perspective on domestic work based on interviews in Lima, Peru

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Summary

This policy brief aims to spark reflection on the conditions of domestic workers, and the importance of independent institutions like trade unions for protecting their rights. Drawing on conversations with domestic workers in Lima, Peru, it shows how particularly those who live with their employees are often subjected to maltreatment. Trade unions perform essential services by informing domestic workers of their labour rights, empowering them to demand these from their employers, and providing legal aid.

Parallels are drawn to the au pair programme in Norway. Despite a comprehensive legal framework, au pairs may face similar problems associated with living in the home of the employer, with the additional insecurity of working and living in an unfamiliar country. It is vital that independent organizations for the protection of the rights of au pairs in Norway can continue their work, to limit abusive labour conditions.

'I suffered a lot because I worried ... my children ... how are they, have they eaten, have they got out of bed? The worrying was very difficult' – Luz¹, domestic worker in Lima

Work in the informal sector is precarious, and domestic workers, the majority of whom are female, are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Many housekeepers have intersecting identities that place them at a disadvantage: gender, ethnicity, class and migratory status. Globally, one in every 13 females who performs paid labour is a domestic worker. Women constitute 83% of this sector, as well as more than 70% of the population of international migrant domestic workers (ILO 2015a; ILO 2015b). Drawing on conversations with domestic workers and employers in Lima², this brief aims to illustrate some of the problems housekeepers face and how they deal with them. The aim is to provoke reflection

on the conditions and empowerment of Peruvian domestic workers as well as au pairs in Norway.

Domestic workers, *trabajadoras del hogar*, are widely employed in Peruvian homes and indeed throughout Latin America. They are responsible for a range of services, which often include cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare and care of elderly members of the family. It is estimated that 357,141 people carry out domestic work in Peru, making up about 2.3% of the working-age population. Women constitute 95% of the sector (Defensoría del Pueblo 2016: 9–11). This brief is based on interviews with five of these domestic workers and five middle-class women whom at some point in their lives have employed housekeepers to assist them in their homes. The considerations raised here arose from our conversations, and echo the findings of more extensive studies of domestic work in Peru, such as those of Valdez Carrasco (2014) and MIMDES (2007).

The lay of the land: domestic work in Peru

The unequal distribution of resources amongst Peru's demographically varied population is clear from the picture of domestic workers and their employers. The former are predominantly female, of indigenous ethnic origin, and have migrated to Lima from rural areas to obtain work. Their employers have higher education and come from urban areas, often the capital (MIMDES; Valdez Carrasco).

The domestic worker may live with (*cama adentro*) or away from (*cama afuera*) the family she is working for. The first arrangement places the housekeeper in a particularly exposed position of isolation and dependency. Women employed under this mode frequently work more than eight hours a day, and little is known about the standard of the accommodation and food provided by their employers. This modality is convenient for those who have migrated to the cities to work as they avoid having to pay

rent, but leaves them in a highly vulnerable situation, far from home, without a network of friends and family, and often unfamiliar with the city where they work (Valdez Carrasco: 28). The Peruvian Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations found a significant correlation between domestic workers who live with their employers and those who experience physical abuse (MIMDES). However, this arrangement is becoming less common: the number of housekeepers working *cama adentro* in Peru fell by ten percentage points between 2004 and 2010, decreasing the proportion of domestic workers living with their employers to 20% (Valdez Carrasco: 28).

The existing legal framework in Peru is inadequate as a normative and protective mechanism of the labour rights of domestic workers. This impacts those employed under both modalities, but the current brief is mainly concerned with the conditions of the women working *cama adentro*. The standard rights guaranteed to the rest of the workforce do not encompass housekeepers, relegating them to a status as second-class citizens. The government has not ratified the 2011 ILO Domestic Workers Convention 189, which extends basic labour rights to domestic workers. Peru has no minimum-wage legislation, and domestic workers are currently legally eligible for only half of the benefits that other workers receive, for example half the number of holidays (Ministerio de Trabajo y Promoción del Empleo 2012). The ratification of ILO 189 is currently the primary concern of the political lobbying conducted by domestic workers' trade unions in Peru, complemented by heavy emphasis on educating their members on housekeepers' labour rights. I return to the importance of this after recounting some of the experiences of the women who were interviewed.

2

The interviews were conducted in Lima, in August and September 2016. Respondents were recruited through snowball sampling, with a trade union for domestic workers as an entry point to the community. I also visited the union twice to attend their weekly workshop on labour rights.

In the face of abuse

Sitting in the corridor of the offices of a trade union for domestic workers, Ana clutches the handbag in her lap, speaking softly, her voice muffled by the heavy traffic outside, and in competition with an eagerly barking dog. She talks about her experiences from 14 years of doing domestic work for various families, all of whom violated her labour rights. Her first employers, a woman and her elderly mother, treated her like 'an animal', she says. She would often begin to work at 03:00, and finish late in the evening, around 22:00. Consequently, she was left with five hours of 'leisure time' per day, a third of the 16 hours that should be free for someone with an 8-hour workday. Ana is not alone in having a working day that vastly exceeds her time off. Claudia and Luz both confirm that they would work some 12–15 hours a day, and MIMDES found that the majority of housekeepers who lived with their employers worked between 12 to 17 hours (2007: 40). As Ana was working *cama adentro*, every aspect of her pro-

fessional and personal life depended upon how her employers treated her. The woman who was her primary employer did not provide her with enough food, to the extent that the employer's mother thought it insufficient and would give Ana a little extra to eat, without her daughter knowing it. Ana's small room was infested with insects, and she was afraid to sleep there.

Relations between domestic worker and employer are often permeated by a lack of trust – which, due to the asymmetrical power relationship between the two, primarily affects the housekeepers. Flor, an older woman who had been a domestic worker since her early teens, tells how her previous contract ended. When she was preparing to leave her former employer, she was concerned that he would hide valuables in her bags, in order to accuse her of stealing and thus not have to pay her settlement payment. The employer refused to pay the money she was owed, upon which she reported him, with the assistance of the union. In the end, she agreed to a settlement that accorded her half of her original settlement payment. Flor did not want to take the case further, out of respect for her employer. The personal bond between domestic workers and their employers often complicates the assertion of their rights. Relationships characterized by distance and not personal friendship, increase the chances that the housekeeper will demand her rights, and that the employer will fulfil them (Valdez Carrasco: 107).

Working-class breadwinners

The domestic workers whom I interviewed all had a pragmatic relation to the concept of working, including those who had a partner and children. The fact that they were working for wages was not something they were particularly proud of or expected praise for. In comparison, both the younger and older middle-class women with whom I spoke expressed pride in their work, or a slight regret that they had given it up to raise their children. The working-class women did not have the same choice, as their contribution to the family economy was a necessity, often making up at least half of the couple's total income. Flor expressed her philosophy succinctly: 'Life is working. If you want to live, you have to work, isn't that so?'

Luz, who had been the primary breadwinner of the family for many years, spoke openly about the problems she had faced as a mother and a domestic worker. Her husband had a serious accident, which left the family in financial difficulties. During the three-year period in which he was recovering, he took care of their children. When he had recuperated, he moved back to their natal village to work on a farm. As Luz worked *cama adentro*, their oldest son was charged with the primary caretaking responsibility for his siblings. Although she is proud of having supported her family for a great number of years, this was not a choice arising from feminist convictions, but a product of necessity.

The working conditions of housekeepers, particularly those working *cama adentro*, affect not only their rights, but also those

of their children. As many are internal migrants, assistance is not available from a network of women such as mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, sisters and sisters-in-law that often take part in childcare duties. Thus, it is not uncommon that the older children take on significant responsibility for their younger siblings. Luz's teenage boy took care of his younger sister and brother; Luz describes her son as being 'in charge of everything'. He would collect the children from school, cook breakfast, lunch and dinner – 'my oldest son performed the role of the parents', she says. Luz describes living and working away from her children as very difficult, but her employers demanded a *cama adentro* housekeeper. The worst thing was the constant worrying about how her children were doing, not knowing whether they were well, if they had eaten, or even got out of bed to go to school. Inability to access public childcare facilities and not having family members nearby often lead to such situations. Sometimes the housekeepers have to take their children with them to work, as was the case with Juana, who used to take her young son with her when she was working.

These women perform vital work for Peruvian families, helping to make it possible for middle-class women to enter the workforce. Childrearing is largely performed by a network of women, and homemaking is still often classified as a female responsibility, independent of whether or not a domestic worker is employed. Julia, a doctor in her late twenties and mother of two young children, feels that her partner assumes that household chores are her responsibility. If the domestic worker does an unsatisfactory job, he considers that to be Julia's fault. In terms of childrearing, the middle-class women interviewed prefer to hire a domestic worker to take care of their children, as they are highly sceptical to the quality of the local nursery schools. They worry the children will be mistreated, insufficiently fed, or that the caregivers are incompetent. However, when a domestic worker must take care of another woman's children, her own children might be placed in a difficult situation.

Empowerment through the union

These conversations were conducted under the aegis of a trade union that actively promotes the rights of domestic workers by providing legal assistance, awareness-raising workshops on labour rights, political lobbying, as well as company and support. Every Sunday morning – the only day off for many domestic workers – the union welcomes some 15 women to a presentation and discussion of their labour rights. A lawyer gives a presentation on a specific issue, accompanied by the active participation of union members. They ask questions, as well as answer them, and engage with the material through their own experiences and those of their friends. They stressed the importance of the women themselves sharing the knowledge they have gained about their rights to their *compañeras* (fellow housekeepers). Unfortunately, younger women are often the least aware of their rights and are poor at demanding them, even though they comprise the largest proportion of domestic workers (Valdez Carrasco: 144). This was striking at the two meetings I attended, where all but two or

three were older than 40. The union is a space of mutual respect, care, and practical and legal advice that catalyses the empowerment of many of its members, by demanding that their labour rights are respected. The women I spoke with had all improved their working lives, and thereby their own lives and those of their families.

Luz explained the transformational experience of becoming a union member. She spoke of herself as previous being 'blind', unaware of her rights as a domestic worker. In fact, deciding to join the union was a minor feat in itself, as it meant acknowledging and embracing her role as a domestic worker. Due to discrimination, many are embarrassed to identify themselves as domestic workers, and also Luz worried what others would say if they knew her occupation. By becoming involved with the union she received the support and knowledge needed for her to demand the rightful pay she was not receiving. Luz made it clear that she was no longer 'blind' at the union meetings by frequently responding to questions raised by the fellow members. Few housekeepers are aware of their rights, and unions help them to know of their rights, and to demand them. Without possibilities for comparison with the working situation of others, they often accept the conditions offered by the employer without further ado (Valdez Carrasco: 117).

Au pairs – a Norwegian parallel?

Norway today has few domestic workers, as is also the case in the other Scandinavian countries. In part this can be explained by the public provision of services that domestic workers otherwise often perform, like childcare and taking care of the elderly (ILO 2013: 37). On the other hand, the number of au pairs has increased from about 700 at the turn of the century to more than 3000 today, sparking a public debate on their role within the Norwegian family structure (Eraker 2014). Interestingly, in Norway the au pair scheme is classified as educational immigration, not labour immigration.

In her report from 2009, Cecilie Øien concluded that not having an independent body working to protect the rights of au pairs, apart from the immigration authorities (UDI) and the police, left au pairs vulnerable to abuse, as many hesitate to contact the above-mentioned two institutions. Since the Au Pair Center was established in 2012 by Norwegian People's Aid and the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees to assist in protecting the working rights of au pairs, it has provided arbitration and legal assistance, capacity-building workshops, a Sunday café, and courses in self-defence and in reproductive health awareness (Norsk Folkehjelp 2015). The Center receives about 100 inquiries from au pairs and host families every month, which shows the need for the services it provides. However, the Center will be forced to close in 2017, as the government has decided to terminate the financial support to the Center (Norsk Folkehjelp 2016).

Despite the apparent differences between the situation of Peru-

vian domestic workers and Norway's au pair scheme, I would argue that there are lessons to be learned from the work of the housekeepers' labour union in Peru. Although the Norwegian legal framework covering the au pair scheme is comprehensive in comparison to Peruvian legislation on domestic work, the potential for exploitation of their labour is the same. A significant majority of au pairs in Norway are Filipinas, who are obliged to live with their host families, in a country where they are unfamiliar with the language and the official bureaucracy, and who have few networks, if any. Working and living in the same home can give rise to special challenges, with many possibilities for hiding abuses, and raises the stakes for demanding one's labour rights. In early 2016, 45 families in Norway were being considered for quarantine by the UDI, for breaches of the rules of the au pair scheme (Hartwig 2016). Instead of closing down the Au Pair Center, the government should ensure continued support for au pairs in Norway. The examples presented here, showing how significant the labour union in Lima has become for the protection of the rights of domestic workers, could serve as a reminder of the importance of having an independent body that can provide support to housekeepers – which is the main role performed by au pairs in Norway today.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms, to ensure the anonymity of the respondents.
2. It should be stressed the housekeepers and the women who employ domestic workers interviewed here have no connection with each other.

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