



**Empowering Migrant Domestic Workers  
through Collective Action:  
A Community Work Approach**

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The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland

Accra, Ghana, Sept 22 2011



# Migrant Rights Centre Ireland

## Justice, Empowerment & Equality

- Established 2001 to bridge gaps in information services available to migrant workers.
- Campaign with migrant workers for positive policy changes to improve their living and working conditions in Ireland.
- Monitor trends and patterns in the issues facing migrant workers in Ireland

# Domestic Workers Action Group



**Rights Recognition Dignity**

# Domestic Workers Action Group





# Background of DWAG

- DWAG established in 2004 after MRCI study of 20 migrant domestic workers and in response to the growing number of migrant domestic workers coming into the centre with employments complaints
- Set up to respond to the exploitation and unfair treatment that many domestic workers experience in Ireland
- To empower domestic workers to campaign for improved protections and standards and ultimately to bring positive change.
- 250 members from Asia, South America, Europe and Africa.



# Issues

- Low pay - below the legal minimum
- Work excessively long hours, 60 plus hours per week
- No contracts
- Being undocumented
- Unfair and illegal deductions being taken from worker's pay
- No breaks, no time off, no holiday pay
- No extra pay for extra hours worked
- Feeling disrespected, threatened and treated badly by their employers
- Fearing the consequences from their employer if they complain.
- Fear leaving exploitative situation incase they become homeless and undocumented
- Unaware of their legal rights and entitlements.



# Community Work Approach

- Community work is a process that addresses the root causes of poverty, inequality and exclusion. It seeks to support people and their communities to develop an analysis of their situation and take collective action to address it. Community work seeks to bring about the active participation of people experiencing exclusion in decision making structures



# Community work

## Principles and values

### ■ Participation

- Recognises that people have the right to participate in decisions and structures that affect their lives

### ■ Social Justice

- Belief that every community can play an active role in creating the conditions for a just and equality society where human rights are promoted and all forms of oppression or discrimination are challenged





# Community work

## Principles and Values

- Equality and Anti Discrimination
  - Whilst people are not the same they are all of equal worth and importance
- Empowerment
  - Working with people to build an analysis of their situation, analysis of power, supporting them to take action on issues
- Collective Action
  - Moving from the individual to the collective

**Participation,  
Empowerment  
&  
Collective  
Action**





# Participation

Building participation is vital and central to all of DWAG's work.

Creating space to support participation is done practically through:

- Start where the community are at
- Regular Sunday meetings when most domestic workers have a day off
- Providing a safe sharing space
- Making content relevant – find out what problems domestic workers are facing ie. workplace rights and immigration issues
- Providing assistance with immediate needs ie. Information on accessing housing, health etc.



# Participation

- Requires time and resources to move beyond consultation process to genuine participation
- Building relationships and trust with individuals
- Maintaining contact – the power of the phone call/a cup of coffee
- Encouraging individuals to move towards collective participation to campaign for change
- Supporting on-going group and one-to-one leadership development
- Establishing roles and responsibilities – creating ownership
- Identifying different levels of need and moving forward according to the needs of the group







**SWINE FLU**  
If you have travelled from an area affected by swine flu...



# Empowering Domestic Workers

## Participation & Developing Critical Analysis

- Blurred Boundaries Awareness Raising Campaign to show exploitation in domestic sector and call for legally binding standards for regulating the domestic sector.



# Blurred Boundaries Project





# Blurred Boundaries Campaign - Building Political Capacity & Developing Critical Analysis

- Powerful group experience
- Creative means to explore issues and engage members to participate
- Move from individual problem to collective issue
- Develop critical collective analysis creating awareness and understanding of issues.
- Generate solutions
- Recognise power imbalances, identify own power and use it strategically to generate positive change.
- Develop political message
- Link with policy makers
- Used as awareness raising tool to aid campaign for improved conditions in the domestic work sector.



# Result: Code of Practice

- As a result of the project and negotiations with the trade union movement and government 'Code of Practice for Protecting Persons Employed in Other People's Homes' (2007) published.
- Sets out legislation and recommendations for employers and employees working in the private home sector in Ireland.
- Great achievement for DWAG, consulting at high policy level with stakeholders.
- Code is disseminated by Department of Enterprise Trade and Innovation with all new work permits issued.



# Achievements

- €1.2million in back payment of wages from labour courts since 2006
- Established public voice to represent migrant domestic workers in Ireland
- Developed and delivered strong political messages
- Code of Practice (2007)
- Highlighting Misuse of Diplomatic Immunity (2009- on going)
- Labour Inspections (2010)
- Government Support for ILO Convention (2011)
- Established strategic relationship with Trade Union Movement

# Naming and Shaming Campaign Migrant Domestic Workers Activists Not Victims

Protections for domestic workers employed in diplomatic households.





**SOUTH  
AFRICAN  
AMBASSADOR:**  

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**STOP  
CLAIMING  
DIPLOMATIC  
IMMUNITY!**

**SOUTH  
AFRICAN  
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DOMESTIC WORKERS ACTION GROUP  
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CENTRE IRELAND

MRCI  
MIGRANT RIGHTS  
CENTRE IRELAND

Small blue flyer or pamphlet with text and a logo.

# Active Participation in Justice Movements

## May Day Rally – Rights 4 Domestic Workers





Domestic Work

Dundrum 14  
Dún Droma

Protect Domestic Workers Rights



# Supporting Leaders – ILO meeting in Geneva



# Awareness Raising Drama Production 'Acting Out for Hope and Change'





MIGRANT

SISTER

WOMAN

DAUGHTER

PERSON

WORKER

FRIEND

MOTHER





# Challenges

- Mainstreaming rights for domestic workers
- Identification & outreach to new members
- Funding
- Pushing through policy in anti-migrant climate
- Victim Protections – immigration/health/housing
- Community work is a slow process. It requires time and resources to be successful.



# Conclusion

- **Participation is actively supported by overcoming barriers** – for example, by holding meetings on Sundays which is commonly a day off for domestic workers and through using “soft” approaches to consciousness-raising, like the quilt project
- **Much time is invested in empowering the women by linking** their lived experiences with an analysis of power inequities which require structural changes. A powerful way to do this is through creative projects such as drama, art and film.
- **Our community work efforts fostered the evolution** of DWAG from a support group to a strident campaigning group.
- **The focus on relationship building and sustainability shows** how community work practice values process as much as outcomes; not only why we do things, but how we do things.



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