



The Adversities of Domestic Workers in the City of Yaoundé, Cameroon, 1994 To 2015.

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Abstract: The practice of domestic work is a common phenomenon in Cameroon, whereby under privileged young men and women are sometimes left with no option but to work as domestic servants in affluent urban households. While researchers have explored varied dimensions of domestic work in Cameroon, attempts to understand the dynamics underlying the life of domestic workers in the context of Yaounde are scarce. Hence, this study examines the basis of domestic work and also scrutinises the adversities of domestic workers in the city of Yaoundé. The study also explores the role of state and non-state actors in protecting domestic workers and equally analysis the effectiveness of activities geared towards protection of domestic workers against abuse. Materials from primary and secondary sources were useful in realizing this study. Data were generated using both the thematic and analytical approaches. The results revealed that most domestic workers were mostly people from under privileged backgrounds and most often uneducated, which made them vulnerable for exploitation and abuse by employers. Findings also revealed that most domestic workers in Yaounde are largely young girls between the ages of 15 and 25 years, with a greater proportion coming from the Anglophone regions of the country. After carefully assessing the adversities of domestic workers using the city of Yaoundé as a case study in the existing collective labour regulation initiative, the study underscores the challenges encountered by state and non-state actors involved in labour regulations. In this respect, the study put forward superlative simulations and practices that can help the Cameroon government to attain its development objectives through best labour practices.

Key words: Domestic work, Labour, Employment, domestic servant, ILO.

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic workers are the people who clean for us, cook for us, guard our compounds, and look after our children so that we can pursue our careers. They are the unseen force behind a number of households and their services in some homes are indispensable. According to the International Labour Organisation's (ILO), domestic work is defined as work performed in a household, meanwhile a domestic worker is a person who earns a living in domestic work within an employment relationship.¹ This includes a variety of tasks, commonly involving cleaning and housekeeping as well as caretaking tasks.² In the 21st century, domestic work around the world is still mainly informal and characterised by widespread violations of human and labour rights, ranging from the worst forms of child labour and bondage to the invisibility of the work provided, which results in many domestic workers accepting precarious and irregular employment relations and a life lived at or under the poverty threshold.³ Due to various factors linked to poverty and increase worker mobility, there is a growing demand for domestic work specifically in major cities where most city dwellers are often too busy chasing their dreams. Women represent over half of the population in search of a decent job, and many of them end up doing domestic work irrespective of their qualifications.⁴ They are often exposed to double or multiple discriminations which makes them a particularly vulnerable group of

¹International Labour Organization (ILO), 2010a: *Decent work for domestic workers*, International Labour Conference, 99th session, Geneva, ILO, 2010.

² Ibid.

³A, D'Souza, *Moving towards Decent work for Domestic workers: An Overview of the ILO's work*. Working Paper 2/2010, Geneva, ILO, 2010.

⁴ M, Tomei, *Decent work for domestic workers: reflections on recent approaches to tackle informality*, in *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2011, pp. 185-211.

workers. The lack of awareness and recognition of the rights of domestic workers by governments, employers and domestic workers themselves further contribute to their exploitation.⁵ Since 2009, the ILO solicited countries throughout the world to adopt an ILO Convention on Domestic Work. The Convention recognised domestic work as regular work with the same rights for domestic workers as for other workers. Many domestic workers had joined national and regional trade unions and were mobilised in the global campaign towards advocating for the adoption of this Convention in June 2011 at the 100th International Labour Conference.⁶ Within the informal economy that dominates employment in most cities in Cameroon, domestic workers were particularly invisible and vulnerable. Despite being among the most vulnerable workers, domestic workers have, until recently, been omitted from national labour standards. In order to identify the impact of advocacy and campaigns around domestic work and to map out strategies for strengthening future advocacy and planning, this study presents the adversities of domestic workers in Cameroon with emphasis on the city of Yaounde.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The abuse of workers and challenges they face have remained a major preoccupation for many scholars over the years, with various scholars exploring varied dimensions of this phenomenon. This led to new concepts and theories which created new avenues to better appreciate the realities of working relations across the globe. Various theories have explained in different perspectives the challenges facing domestic workers and other labourers. Some put the liability on policies adopted by the state, and others hold that the ignorance of workers of the activities of agencies protecting their basic rights is a major hindering factor. Meanwhile, other theories argue that the negligence with which issues of rights violations are handled in most cases has led to a situation of gross violation of the rights of workers by employers.

Although these theories explain the broad bases of challenges facing domestic workers, this study is guided by the pluralistic perspective theory of industrial relations. The pluralistic perspective theory of industrial relations could be traced back to Sidney and Beatrice Webb in England, John R. Commons (the father of US Industrial relations), and members of Wisconsin school of institutional labour economists in the early twentieth century.⁷ The theory analyses work and employment relationship from a perspective rooted in an inherent conflict of interest between employers and employees relating in imperfect labour markets. It perceives an organisation is made of dominant divergent subgroups, each with its legal duties and with their own objectives and leaders. The two predominant subgroups were the management and trade unions.⁸ Individual employees and union leaders, according to this theory, are viewed as human agents rather than purely economic rational agents. Relating this theory to this study, the study perceives relationship where excessive corporate power in the hands of employers creates standard wages and appropriate working conditions which influence a positive outcome in an employee. As a result, each employer should seek ways of achieving a working and equitable, balanced employment interests through rules and regulations which must be implemented by both parties. This study therefore, stresses the need for fair treatment of domestic workers rather than the domination and maltreatment which was a common occurrence in Cameroon. From this scenario, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

What were the reasons for the choice of domestic work in the city of Yaounde?

What was the situation (adversities) of domestic workers in the city of Yaounde?

What measures were adopted to protect domestic workers in the city of Yaounde?

What were the limitations of protection mechanisms put in place for domestic workers in the city of Yaounde?

3. APPROACH AND DISCURSIVE FRAMES

⁵D, Boutin, *La transition des jeunes Camerounais vers le marche du travail*. Pessac, Grouped'conomieLare-Efi du developpement; 2010. Report No. DT/152/2010.

⁶Ibid.

⁷J,Budd et al, *why a balance is best: the pluralist industrial relations paradigms of balancing competing interest*, Minnesota, Minnessota University, 2004, p.3.

⁸Ibid.

The study adopted both the thematic and the analytical approaches. Data was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included question guides and interviews. Question guides were available in English and French in order to ease understanding. Face to face interviews were conducted with employers of domestic workers, domestic workers and administrative authorities, institutions and individuals having link with protection of rights of domestic workers (workers). Secondary sources consisted of information that had already been produced. The study also made use of both internal and external secondary sources such as institutional reports, employees' regulation documents, ILO reports, Journal articles, books and unpublished sources. Ethical issues were observed all through the research process. Consents were not only sought, but participation was based on respondent's free will. The researcher observed confidentiality by assuring respondents that the information provided for the study would be used only for other academic research. Venues and time for interviews were determined by participants. Mixing different methods strengthened and revealed various aspects of empirical reality and defused the shortcomings of using a lone method in a research study.⁹ Moreover, social phenomena are so complex that different kinds of methods are needed to enhance understanding of these complexities.

4. FOCUS OF THE STUDY

4.1. Basis of Domestic Work in the City of Yaounde

Domestic work in Cameroon has always been viewed as an occupation for the less privilege in the society. This notion was due to the horrendous condition domestic workers endured in affluent urban households while executing their duty. Domestic work was mostly championed by people with no education or professional skills and equally people who had searched for jobs in other sectors to no avail.¹⁰ In the city of Yaounde, domestic work was the most common form of employment which employed people irrespective of age, sex, educational achievements and professional training. Most common form of domestic work ranged from baby seating, house cleaning, cooking, gate keeper and yard cleaning.¹¹ Several factors motivated the choice of domestic work in the city of Yaounde as examined subsequently.

Horizon femmes a Non-Governmental Organisation that seek to protect the rights of women (female workers) argues that poverty was a crucial factor fuelling the "modern day slavery" domestic work in Cameroon. The organisation revealed that even among grown-up domestic servants, 90% were school dropouts and lacked knowledge of their basic rights as such leading to gross abuse and violation of their basic rights by employers. Less privileged families that could barely meet up the needs of their children or loved ones most often sent them to work as domestic workers for friends and relatives in major cities. In the course of this, they were systematically abused at will and threatened dismissal every time they dare raise their voices.¹²

It was equally noted that illiteracy was a common factor that influenced the choice of domestic work in Cameroon. Most domestic workers in Yaounde were uneducated and as such could not obtain decent jobs for themselves. Given that becoming a domestic servant required no formal training or academic certification, it made the grounds fertile for young people with no education to embark on such occupation.¹³ The end result however was usually exploitation and violation of their basic rights due to ignorance. It is important to note that uneducated domestic workers were more exposed to exploitation and abuse by their employers compared to those who had a certain degree of education.¹⁴ Without accurate knowledge on their rights and duties, at times they were exposed to untold suffering and misery.

Some domestic workers in the city of Yaounde laid emphasis on the fact that difficult access to decent employment due to corruption and favouritism left some of them with no choice than to become a

⁹Tim Cresswell, *Embodiment, power and the politics of mobility: the case of female tramps and hobos*, Wales, University of Wales, 1999, 67.

¹⁰International Labour Organisation, *Domestic workers across the world: global and regional statistics and the extent of legal protection*, International Labour Office. Geneva: ILO, 2013.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Horizon Femmes, *Report on challenges of female domestic workers*, Yaounde, 2011.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴R, Nganzi, *Travail domestique: Bamenda, championne de l'exploitation des enfants*, cameroon-info.net, June 16, 2010, cited February 20, 2013.

domestic worker despite their level of education as certificate holder.¹⁵ They further noted that the problem of difficult access to decent employment was a common phenomenon amongst young people which required prompt intervention from stakeholders.¹⁶ This state of affairs also accounted for youth migration for better opportunities, who in most cases preferred to engage in domestic work in order not to remain dependent. For this reason, despite the atrocious working conditions experienced, other aspirants were ready to still embark on domestic work.¹⁷ Note worthy is the fact that most of these domestic workers eventually raised funds which permitted them to establish their own small businesses and provide the needs of their families.

Most often than not, life circumstances such as the loss of both parents usually exposed especially minors to domestic work. Nfor Carine, a domestic worker at the Obili neighbourhood in Yaounde revealed that when she lost her parents, she had no one to turn to for help, as such making her vulnerable to undesirable domestic work.¹⁸ Her case was similar to that of many children particularly from rural areas. Children with no parents were contracted into domestic work without their consent most often. In such a situation, negotiations were done by relatives without the consent of victims.¹⁹ Monthly payments for work done were most often done through those giving out the children for domestic work. This amounted to exploitation and child abuse which traumatized most victims leading to health complications and deaths in some cases.²⁰

For some domestic workers especially young boys, erroneous ambitions influenced by the quest for better living standards also led them into domestic work in Yaounde. This case was peculiar with those aspiring to be domestic workers for rich and influential people in the society. Some of these young boys believed that by working with rich and influential people, they would be exposed to better opportunities for a brighter future.²¹ In this situation, a domestic worker was ready to face his job with all seriousness and commitment in order to be recognised by his/her boss. For some, these ambitions were attained meanwhile in other situations this was not the case.

Domestic workers from rural areas specifically embarked on domestic work because of the desire to travel and live in big cities. Carried away by thoughts of high living standards in big cities, most young people resorted to domestic work as a means to travel and live in Yaounde.²² These arrangements were most often made by friends and family members living in Yaounde, who linked them to potential employers. Despite the fact that most expectations were usually not the reality, the satisfaction of living a city life always remained the motivating factor in such cases.²³ In some situations, domestic workers eventually found more decent jobs when their services were no longer needed.

Furthermore, some domestic workers embarked on domestic work due to fake promises given to them by their potential employers (work-study, huge benefits and comfortable working conditions).²⁴ This was usually a common occurrence especially in cases of family relations. In the case of minors, parents of such victims mostly fell within the ambit of the country's poorest demographic groups and were easily cajoled and hoodwinked by promises of monthly returns and education for their kids. Sometimes, the sweet-talkers were even close kin of the naïve kids, some of whom ended up as sex workers in covert beer parlors, while others were trafficked out of the country.²⁵ Most domestic workers were usually carried away by these promises so much that by the time they found themselves in the reality it was already too late. For those coming from far off rural areas, since they could not

¹⁵Kenneth Nchoji, domestic worker, Yaounde, interviewed 25 May, 2019.

¹⁶Nicoline Ebot, domestic worker, Yaounde, interviewed 15 April, 2019.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Carine Nfor, Domestic Worker, Yaounde, interviewed 27 July, 2019.

¹⁹Let's Protect Our Children Coalition. *Campaign Against Child Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation*. Yaounde, 2010.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Auriel Suh, Domestic Worker, Yaounde, interviewed 20 July, 2019.

²²E, Nkereuwem, *A haven for child traffickers*, Yaounde, 2011.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Divine Ntarike, *Domestic work in Cameroon*, Daoula, 2011.

²⁵Republic of Cameroon. *Etude Pilote sur L'Exploitation Sexuelle Commerciale des Enfants au Cameroun en 2010*. Yaoundé, Institut National de la Statistique, 2010.

afford the expenses to travel back to their places of origin they were left with no choice than to submit themselves to their abusive employers.

In the case of women in particular, the overwhelming proportion of women in domestic work could be attributed to the fact that traditionally, household work was the woman's role. Moreover, the weaker bargaining position of women forced them into the low paid occupations. Meanwhile in the case of children between the ages of 12-18, some of them were usually forced into domestic work against their will by irresponsible parents or carers.²⁶ Some parents who found education expensive usually saw domestic work as a way out to free themselves from sponsoring their children. In these cases, the children were sent to work for urban households most often as baby sitters and house cleaners.²⁷ Coupled with the complicated circumstances leading to domestic work, the outcome was usually a night mare for victims.

4.2. The Life (Adversities) of Domestic Workers in the City of Yaounde

Despite being one of the oldest and most important employment sectors for millions of people all over the world, domestic workers are often undervalued and poorly treated. In Cameroon, over four thousand domestic workers amongst whom were mostly women and children toiled in appalling conditions in major cities. The challenges facing domestic workers in the city of Yaounde were enormous and among these include the following:

The situation of domestic workers in the city of Yaounde lived much to be desired, domestic workers were under constant scrutiny and at the same time subject to a very rigid form of apartheid. As a domestic worker, you were bound to live very close to a family that is not yours and worse still being constantly reminded of the fact that you were not a member of it. This was a traumatic situation which made domestic workers in this situation felt stigmatized and loose self-confidence.²⁸ Constantly, mockery from relatives of the employer at times played on the psychology of the domestic worker. It was common for a domestic worker to be assign to more than one task at a time.²⁹ Up to the 1990s, it was common to beat domestic servants without any redress. It was common to order them to accompany their masters to far away farms where they worked for long hours. At times these servants were sent to work in residence of their master's relatives and friends. In such cases no additional benefits were attached and by so doing further putting the servant in desperation. While with their masters, servants were often told to stay silent and invisible as much as they possibly could.³⁰

It was quite common to have certain abusive names associated to some domestic workers by their employers. This caused inbuilt frustration and low self-esteem in some of these servants who had no other option. Domestic workers working with families that didn't have much money to spare couldn't depend on being given enough to eat. Several cases of servants who were constantly malnourished were recorded.³¹ If a servant became sick, he had no job security because he could be turned down by his employer. Most employers were mainly concern about the job to be done and not the welfare of the servant. More specifically with lived in domestic servants, most of them were tended to be remote from their own families and friends.³² Often the servant was restricted from visitors because they wanted to avoid a situation whereby friends and relatives of the servant start trooping in to their residence. This was further complicated by the fact that the servant was not even allowed to go out and spend time with his relatives and friends. In some cases, servants were restricted from having a boyfriend or girlfriend.³³ Of course, it was not feasible to prevent especially teenage girls from having boyfriends. This encouraged deceit from the servants who kept such relationships as top secret.

There was very little public interest in the activities of domestic workers in the city of Yaounde, but yet there was so much reliance on their services. On average, working hours stood at 54 hours per

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷William Esomo, social affairs worker, Yaounde, interviewed 12 May, 2019.

²⁸Global Welfare Association Cameroon, *GLOWA Strategic Planning Workshop Final Report*. Yaounde, GLOWA, 2011.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Mercy Ayuk, domestic worker, Yaounde, interviewed 24 August, 2019.

³¹U.S. Department of State. *Cameroon in Trafficking in Persons Report- 2012*. Washington, DC, 2012.

³²Ibid.

³³Carlson Ndi, rights activist, Yaounde, interviewed 18 September, 2019.

week for domestic workers, but considering that they were often themselves family heads and mothers in some cases whose children needed their attention, their families were bound to bear the harsh realities that accompanied their long absence from home.³⁴ However, this situation was due to the fact that most employers didn't respect the labour code which stipulated that working hours should be at most 40 hours. The situation was further complicated by the fact that national legislation did not particularly address domestic workers in a special way. In Cameroon, the labour code doesn't address domestic work specifically. The only law that addresses domestic work is the obsolete 1968 law with inhumane provisions regarding wage, suggesting a monthly salary starting from less than ten Euros. The 1976 ordinance also does not adequately address burning issues of social protection as work hours.³⁵

Another major challenge facing domestic workers in Cameroon and Yaounde city precisely dwells on the fact that till date the Cameroon government has not ratified the ILO conventions 187 and 189 on decent work for domestic workers, although it's been many years since the convention was signed.³⁶ This alone limited the right of domestic workers to seek redress at the international level especially at a time when national laws did not favour them. Consequently, there was hardly any social protection in cases when risks or work related accidents occur. Unfortunately, these cases happened often, as domestic workers were not sufficiently equipped with adequate working instruments like gloves, booths, masques, insecticides or pesticides. This was even worsened by the fact that labour inspectors and bailiffs who could defend domestic workers against flagrant crimes, were not granted access into homes to investigate.³⁷ This however required a cumbersome and expensive legal procedure that domestic workers could not afford anyway.

Many domestic workers faced physical and psychological violence, ranging from sexual abuse, insults to disrespect even from children and other relatives of the employers. There were also cases where domestic workers were hired and paid through intermediaries who never passed on the salaries and instead fill their own pockets. There were even cases where relatives working as domestic workers were thrown out of a home after several years of serving without any kind of compensation.³⁸ Every day the life of a domestic worker was over loaded by household tasks (cooking, shopping, babysitting, laundry etc.) which often exceed their physical capacities. This was especially true for live in domestic workers who were confronted with unlimited working hours and were not given off days. Statistics revealed that less than half of domestic workers in the city of Yaoundé had contracts and three out of four earned less than the actual guaranteed minimum wage stipulated by the Cameroon labour law. Only 3% of domestic workers could boast of social insurance coverage, with an estimate of about 75% that go for months without pay and note wealthy was the fact that 12% of domestic workers in the city of Yaounde were aged below 18years.³⁹

Efforts had been made at various levels by different actors to lobby for parliament to elaborate and adopt legislation safeguarding the rights of house help professionals across the country. Several surveys conducted in recent years by rights and watchdogs had indicated that the bulk of domestic workers serving in major cities in Cameroon, especially Douala and Yaoundé were natives from the Anglophone North West and south west regions.⁴⁰ Domestic workers lived in a situation of marked personal subordination. The members of the household sometimes issued instructions at any moment. In other sectors, workers follow pre-established rules but in the case of domestic work, instructions came at random. The different situation prevailing in households created problems causing domestic workers to be ill-treated or even abused.⁴¹

Given that most domestic work was informal, performed outside of labour regulations and social protections, pundits posit that domestic workers were exploited and undervalued. One major plight of domestic workers in the city of Yaounde was that of isolation in private homes unlike their

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Cameroon Labour Code, 2011.

³⁶ILO Committee of Experts,*Individual Observation concerning Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, No. 182, 1999.*

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Horizons Femmes, annual report, Yaounde, 2010.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰R, Nganzi, *Travail domestique: Bamenda, championne de l'exploitation des enfants*, Yaounde, Cameroon-info.net, 2010.

⁴¹Ibid.

counterparts in firms and enterprises. They were mostly invisible as workers and isolated from other sectors. They were dependent on the good or bad will of their employers. Despite the concept of the home as ‘safe haven’, growing evidence suggested that domestic workers were exposed to a range of unhealthy and hazardous working conditions.⁴² Domestic workers often had a personal, intimate knowledge of their employers, but the relationship was highly unequal, leaving many domestic workers vulnerable to verbal, physical, or sexual abuses. Often differences in class and status increased this inequality.

Also, most of the tasks involved in domestic work were seen as ‘women’s work’, so were considered of low status and value. Tasks such as gardening, driving or guarding had higher status and more were typically done by men. A widespread perception that labour standards could not be enforced in private homes meant that many employers did not comply and the government did not enforce laws regarding wages, benefits, and working conditions.⁴³ According to Divine Ntarike an investigative journalist of Canal 2 English, some domestic workers faced multiple forms of violence: physical abuse, intimidation, threats, bullying, sexual assault, being provided poor quality food and lack of privacy.⁴⁴ Severe instances of violence, including murder had been under reported over the years. Certain categories of domestic workers faced greater disadvantages. Live-in domestic workers experience more isolation, less privacy and more limited mobility, longer working hours, and receive a larger share of payments in kind. Living conditions were frequently poor and they were also more vulnerable to physical/sexual abuse by employers.

Specifically, in situations where domestic workers were hired by third-party agencies, most of these third-parties were technically the employer. But however, the role of some agencies ended only as negotiating the placement, not overseeing working conditions. Otherwise, some agencies acted only as ‘brokers’ and sometimes were linked to criminal activities and charged domestic workers a lot of money, promising services that were never delivered.⁴⁵ From previous reports on the abuse of domestic workers in Cameroon, data on the wages of domestic workers are scarce. The few existing data reveals that women employed in domestic work received lower wages than women in most other jobs, and lower wages than men working as domestic workers.⁴⁶ A compilation of data from six neighbourhoods in the city of Yaounde indicates that earnings of domestic workers were among the lowest of all occupations.⁴⁷

Most domestic workers were usually compelled to stay indoors carrying out various tasks in the house as such has limited time to join a union which tended to be considered unacceptable by most employers and was often penalized by dismissal. It should be noted that in Cameroon, laws protecting against dismissal did not apply to small workplaces with only one or two workers. Resistance to inadequate working conditions was therefore possible only in an informal manner for example, work could be performed less conscientiously but the limits of such behavior were very soon reached. In many cases, domestic workers had no vocational qualifications one worker can, therefore, easily be replaced by another. Even where this was not the case especially in the case of personal care workers their position on the labour market remained weak. Be that as it may, a wider picture of the situation of domestic workers in Yaounde reveals how domestic workers were vulnerable, as they worked under precarious conditions, mostly disrespected and granted no recognition either by law or by society.

4.3. Protection of Domestic Workers in Cameroon

Role of the State

Based on the horrible working conditions of domestic workers in Cameroon, there was an urgent need for social protection mechanisms for domestic workers. This was because domestic work was the largest sector of employment in major cities like Yaounde. Several Cameroonians with limited educational background were employed by private households. Thus, working conditions and social

⁴²U.S. Embassy- Yaounde. *reporting, January 30, 2013.*

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Divine Ntarike, Report, Yaounde, 2012.

⁴⁵Government of Cameroon. *Troisieme Edition du Tableau de Bord Social sur la Situation des Enfants et des Femmes au Cameroun.*, Yaounde, 2009.

⁴⁶World Bank, *Cameroon Social Safety Nets*, Washington, DC, 2012.

⁴⁷Ibid.

protection needs in this form of work had significant ramifications for worker's welfare. Over the years, state and non-state actors adopted measures to combat abuse of domestic workers. In 2014, the minister of Labour and Social Security threatened repressive actions on employers of domestic workers. The minister called upon individuals who employ the services of domestic servants to register them with the National Social Insurance fund (NSIF).⁴⁸ Amongst other things, emphasis was also made on the fact that those who employ domestic servants should pay their taxes, based on the argument that employment of domestic workers was an economic activity and employers must therefore pay taxes to the state. In order to firmly implement the resolutions guiding decent employment, the minister stated that employers of domestic workers must also pay Social Insurance funds for their employees so that at retirement the workers would be due pension allowances.⁴⁹ As a means to enable employers meet up with these regulations, the government gave a three-year period of grace for all employers of domestic workers to regularise their situation with the state even though many failed to do so. In order to implement these regulations, labour inspectors were deployed to the field to put order and summon abusive employers and those who violated the rules. This led to an improvement in the working conditions of domestic workers to an extent. In addition to these measures, the role of national laws remains supreme in guiding the employment sector in Cameroon across various sectors.

National laws

The preamble of Cameroon's constitution of 1996 states that every person has the right and the duty to work, the Cameroon labour code also identifies the right of every citizen to work and stipulates that the state should do everything possible to support a citizen in finding employment and keeping it once s/he has obtained it.⁵⁰ Section 2 of the Cameroon labour code adds that work is a national duty for every adult citizen. The rights recognised by the 1996 constitution among others include; freedom of association (including rights to form a union), the right to work (including rights to strike). Specific definitions of these principles were spelled out in eight ILO core employment standard conventions, also known as fundamental human rights conventions.⁵¹ On this matter, Cameroon had enacted the four core significant conventions and further total of 43. A few were the freedom of association and protection of the rights to organise convention and also rights to organise and collectively bargaining convention.⁵² The enforcement of labour laws in Cameroon was done by the ministry of labour and social security, the minister and his labour inspectors had the vital responsibility to see the enforcement and application of national labour code respected in all employing organisation. Some elements in the Cameroon labour code defining terms of employment in Cameroon are discussed as follows:

As concerns contract of service and terms of employment, the 1992 labour code in section 23 (1) defines a contract of employment as an agreement by which a worker undertakes to put his services under the authority and management of an employer against remuneration. Even though a greater number of domestic workers had no contracts of employment, section 25 of the CLC provided critical terms of employment, which stipulated the duration of a contract between the employer and the employee. It should be noted that even in cases where by a domestic worker had no contract of employment, s/he could still seek for justice before the law under certain provisions on human rights violation.⁵³

Meanwhile, on the aspect of termination of contract, termination of contract could be affected by either party but matters most of which had legal standing and reason for termination. Section 32 of the CLC made it possible that termination could only be permitted on situations such as misconduct or failure on the part of the worker to honour obligations under the employment contract, interruption of activity by the employer, force majeure, normal expiry of the employment contract or at completion

⁴⁸Government of Cameroon, *Cameroon's Strategy to Implement its Trafficking in Persons ("TIP") Action Plan and to Seek Removal from the TIP Tier 2 Watch List*. Yaounde, 2010.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Cameroon Labour Code.

⁵¹UN Human Rights Committee, *Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 40 of the Covenant : International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights : 4th periodic reports of States parties : Cameroon*. Geneva, Report No. CCPR/C/CMR/4, 2009.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Cameroon Labour Code.

of the contract for which the worker was recruited.⁵⁴ Some stances might equally merit notice from either party before termination such as voluntary employee resignations and economic dismissals to state the reason and provide the other party with consent and preparation. Section 84 (1) and 85 (3) of the CLC provided special protection for maternity and certified pregnant women, they were free to terminate any working contract even without notice to an employer and no burden of compensation to the other party.

Looking at Calculation and payment of salary, in section 61 of the CLC elaborates that wages were to be evaluated in terms of money or collective agreements which were payable under a contract of employment by an employer to a worker and calculated for work done or to be done.⁵⁵ In respect, payment for the same type of work must be equal to workers irrespective of their sex, origin, status and religion. The minimum wage rate in Cameroon stood at FCFA 36,270 (2015). An employer could not pay below this stipulated amount monthly pay.

On the aspect of hours of work, overtime and rest days, Section 80 of the CLC reiterated that in both public and private organisations, a working day comprises of 8 hours with a mandatory 60 minutes break per every shift of work. On night work, the code stipulated it span a period from ten p.m. to six a.m. Workers on overtime was paid a wage of an hour and a half each extra hour worked. The labour code acknowledged a typical working day to be Monday to Friday, with at least 12hours or rest daily.⁵⁶ Saturdays as a work day differed with employers and based on the employees work contract. Sunday is stipulated in section 88 as the general rest day for all type of workers.

Finally, regarding Disputes settlement and complaint procedures Section 131 of the CLC made provision on an individual dispute arising from a contract of employment between workers, and their employers fall within the jurisdiction of the competent court dealing with the labour disputes by the legislation in a judicial institution situated in Cameroon.⁵⁷ Employees were expected to first lay their complaint to the employer, and at this point, unions could be of great help to liaise a worker to an experienced and professional labour attorney (lawyer) to represent the worker in court sessions concerning employer maltreatments. All these legal dispensations provided hope for domestic workers to seek redress in case of abuse by their employers.

Role of Non-State Actors

In 1994, the organisation Horizon Femmes was established to advocate and speak up for domestic workers. It was established as a non-governmental organisation that equally worked on economic and social issues in the Cameroonian society. In 2011, Horizon Femmes carried out a study on domestic workers in Cameroon, and the research got the organisation involved in drafting of a law that touched on the protection of labour rights of domestic workers. Among the domestic workers, 78% had low level of education and belonged to the vulnerable groups of society, including marginalised women and girls, some below 15 years of age.⁵⁸ Through the study, RENATRAD, a network of Associations that supported domestic workers was born. Two more organisations were prominent members and represented this network which were; AMCY (Association for Housewives and Cooperating Partners of Yaounde) and Association for supporting Domestic Workers-ASDAM.

Since its creation in 2012, ASDAM made great strides which especially owed to its president, Claude LucieMoudouMballa. Inspired by her own experience as a care worker, she embarked on supporting over 120 care workers, between 21-25 years of age, coming from different regions of the country. They worked to create solidarity amongst the association members, provided thrift and loan assistance which rendered care work more professional, thus bestowing it with more value.⁵⁹ Hence, the training ASDAM provided added emphasis on household activities such as cooking, laundry, cleaning, ironing, baby sitting and taking care of the elderly.

One of the activities of the organisation was to make domestic workers aware of their rights, helping them to understand the national and international legislation governing domestic work. It equally

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Abel Neweh, Labour inspector, Yaounde, interviewed 12 September, 2019.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷LovertaManjong, labour law teacher, Yaounde, interviewed 25 October, 2019.

⁵⁸Horizon Femmes, report, Yaounde, 2012.

⁵⁹Ibid.

educated domestic workers on the need to better organise themselves in associations striving for solidarity and joint action to push for their labour rights and labour protection. As a result of ignorance, domestic workers were not often aware of their specific rights, they did not know that forming alliances with other domestic workers could bolster their political voice in their call for more and better labour rights.⁶⁰ Thanks to the efforts of the organisation, domestic workers were able to join trade union movements to better articulate their labour rights through collective bargaining and participated in tripartite dialogue.

The organisation made efforts to provide infrastructures and financial means which enabled labour inspectors to support in legal proceedings even though many domestic workers undervalued their profession and considered it as last resort, efforts were made to help them realise that dignity could still be restored to the profession. Considering that only few domestic workers had legal employment contracts, ASDAM took the initiative to register its members directly to the National Social Insurance Fund which provided and administered social protection.⁶¹ Follow ups were also made to ensure that employers signed contracts which obliged them to pay their employees the minimum wage as prescribed by the Cameroon labour legislation.

On November 13, 2012, the National Association Supporting Domestic Workers (RENATRAD in French) organised a walk to raise public awareness and widen advocacy efforts for the specific problems linked to domestic employment across various regions of Cameroon with huge participation in the city of Yaounde. This manifestation was mobilised a group of exploited domestic workers in who sort to defend their rights. This organisation was aimed at supporting and promoting solidarity amongst exploited domestic workers. After being abused and exploited by her employer's right from the beginning of her work-life, MbidaFelicite, a domestic worker for more than twenty years as part of the association was committed to fight for the rights of domestic workers in Cameroon. In affiliation with RENATRAD, the Association for Housewives and Cooperating Partners of Yaounde (AMCY in French) was born and rapidly grew to include 50 members in its fold. Encouraged by its success, the initiative was integrated into RENATRAD, a body bringing together 65 associations with an average of 20 to 50 members.⁶²

Supported by the fund for gender equity, RENATRAD organised training sessions on labour legislations, the drafting of work contracts, as well as professional ethics. With this training, domestic workers were able to affirm their social status and better defend their rights. Negotiation was made such that domestic workers could benefit from social security through joining the National Social Security Service (CNPS). The programme greatly changed a lot of things for domestic workers as compared to what was the case in the previous years. The large scale mobilisation of domestic workers could be explained notably by their status in Cameroon society. It was estimated that domestic workers represented 3 percent of all workers in Cameroon of which 80 percent are women.⁶³ Of recent, domestic workers could consider themselves to be just like anyone else, given that their voices could now be heard and the number of abuses at work reducing at a considerable rate. Amongst other achievements, RENATRAD contributed to the implementation of a national network of domestic employment regulated by the programmes Technical Monitoring Committee CTC, as well as the preparation of draft legislation on domestic employment that is now with the government for implementation. As a result of such advocacy efforts, pundits hopes that Cameroon will soon ratify the convention 189 (Decent Work for Domestic Workers) of the International Labour Organisation. However, the effort to address the situation of domestic workers in Cameroon was not without flaws and challenges.

4.4. Assessing the Protection of Domestic Workers in Cameroon

Cameroon remains very strategic in terms of institutional arrangement, which also covers issues of rights violations of workers and specifically domestic workers. Over the years, efforts have been

⁶⁰Claude L, Moudou, president of ASDAM, Yaounde, interviewed by Divine Ntarike, 24 April, 2012.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²FeliciteMbida, former domestic worker, Yaounde, interviewed by Divine Ntarike 12 April, 2012.

⁶³ILO-IPEC, *Global Action Program on Child Labor Issues*, Technical Progress Report. Geneva, 2013.

made to address the poor treatment of workers through adoption of new laws and policies. The problem in Cameroon has never been the lack of institutions, policies and laws on labour regulations, but rather the absence of political willingness to effectively monitor and implement these laws and policies. The abuse of domestic workers in Cameroon seems to be a forgotten crime which has received limited attention from both public and private institutions. In the city of Yaounde, a vast majority of domestic workers toiled in the hands of their employers with no intervention from rights protection agencies. It is essential to highlight that poor implementation of labour regulations laws by employers is a major challenges facing domestic workers in Yaounde. Past research holds that the lack of adequate attention accorded to this problem by the government had far reaching consequences on domestic workers through various forms of abuses.

Domestic workers were largely absent from state policy in Cameroon, be it labour legislation or social policy. Pundits blame the plight of domestic workers in Cameroon on the fact that government ministries in Cameroon tasked with protection of rights of workers does not give enough attention to the situation, and equally adds that legislation governing the domestic servant's profession in Cameroon dates as far back as 1968 (with an amendment in 1976).⁶⁴ In some respects, the Cameroon government's failure to comply with its international obligations and protect its citizens from exploitation, trafficking and forced labour is a direct result of its failure to properly implement its own domestic legislation. According to the CLC, the Government has a responsibility, either directly or through the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, and the Ministry of Social Affairs, for regulating and supervising the placement and protection of domestic workers, and investigating and punishing employers and recruitment agencies which do not comply with the Law.⁶⁵ But this has not been the case over the years by so doing living domestic workers to suffer with impunity.

The government failed to discharge its responsibilities adequately and, as shown by Amnesty International's research in 2011, numerous procedural and substantive provisions of the law are not being implemented on a routine basis.⁶⁶ There is little evidence of effective investigation of these issues by the authorities or of the imposition of sanctions against employers and recruitment agencies which are breaking the law. For example, the law obliges recruitment agencies and employers to treat prospective domestic workers "humanely and in a normally acceptable manner". Failure to do so is punishable with prison sentence of between one and five years. "Normally acceptable and humane treatment" should, at a minimum, include the protection of human rights, such as the rights to freedom of speech and movement, equal pay for work of equal value, adequate food and protection from threats, abuse and forced labour, and reproductive autonomy. The evidence collected by horizon femmes, however, indicates that a significant number of employers falls far short of the standard set as well as of Cameroon's international human rights obligations.⁶⁷ Yet as far as horizon femme's findings were concern, the Government had not taken effective action against those employers who were not complying with the law.

Moreover, the labour inspectors under the ministry of labour and social security were responsible for monitoring employers to ensure that they adhere to the laws when recruiting a domestic worker. But evidence abound attesting to the gross violation of labour regulations, showing total negligence on the part of labour inspectors to take actions against such employers. Report from past findings noted that the most labour inspectors in Cameroon were corrupt and impartial, which remained an impediment to increased effectiveness in anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.⁶⁸ Statistics on the total number of investigations undertaken and prosecutions involving the maltreatment of domestic workers were very scarce and unavailable in most cases. There was need for the Government of Cameroon to robustly monitor employers who violate the law. Without adequate sanctions, which are dissuasive and properly enforced, there is no effective deterrent against unscrupulous employers using forced labour practices. The consequences that this had for domestic workers were only fully seen once they began work.

⁶⁴ILO Committee of Experts, *Individual Direct Request concerning Labour Inspection Convention in Cameroon, No. 81, Yaounde, 2013.*

⁶⁵Yves Eloundou, law student, Yaounde, interviewed 18 November, 2019.

⁶⁶Amnesty International, report, Yaounde, 2011.

⁶⁷Horizon Femmes, report, Yaounde, 2011.

⁶⁸Ibid.

In 2013, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MINLSS) employed 81 labour inspectors, which was an insufficient number, according to MINLSS official reports. Additionally, inspectors often did not have the means of transportation or fuel they needed to conduct inspections. A 2011 ILO review of Cameroon's labour inspectorate found that few workplace visits occurred. Labour inspectors were informed of the ILO's core conventions during their initial training, but they did not receive any further training on these issues. The ILO Committee of Experts had expressed concern that inspectors are not sufficiently familiar with the labour laws.⁶⁹ The numbers of inspections conducted in the last few years are unavailable. There were no official comprehensive statistics on the number of domestic workers abuse found. From the aforementioned, this study puts forward the following recommendations:

Workshops should be organised at both national and regional levels to educate domestic workers on their basic rights and obligations.

Community based institutions should be empowered to oversee issues of abuse of domestic workers.

Training centers should be created to enhance the training of domestic workers on the execution of domestic work in urban households. This because most often the urban home setting is different from the rural setting which has no modern equipment.

The government of Cameroon should ratify the ILO convention on protection of domestic workers in order to better appreciate the abuse of domestic workers.

Adequate measures should be implemented to punish corrupt labour inspectors who cover up for abusive employers.

5. CONCLUSION

In light with the appraisal of tendencies of challenges facing domestic workers in the city of Yaounde, the plight of domestic workers was real, but yet it had not seen the deserved policy attention. In contexts where occupational injustice prevails, a dominant social groups' (such as employers) occupational needs may be privileged over marginalised people, contributing to conditions which may perpetuate occupational injustice. The lack of regular, consistent and reliable data of relevant statistic to monitor challenges facing domestic workers and its effect on national policy is a reflection of the neglect of the adversities facing domestic workers.

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⁶⁹ILO Committee of Experts, *Individual Observation concerning Minimum Age Convention, Cameroon, Report No. 138, 2011.*

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