



Covid-19 dispatches:

Domestic workers in Chile in the pandemic of the 21st century

Luz Vidal Huiriqueo

Talking about the pandemic is alarming, but it is even more alarming if a mother is told about hunger.

There is still a huge difference between the wages many women earn and those earned by men. In recent years millions of women - worldwide, but also in Chile - took to the streets to voice their call for equal rights, decent pensions and the freedom and autonomy to decide about their bodies, and against harassment at work - in short, against all forms of violence which are inflicted on women.

When we talk about domestic workers, this kind of violence is even more evident due to their condition as lower-class women, added to their indigenous or migrant background, as is so often the case in Latin America. Their situation has worsened due to the covid-19 pandemic.

No protection

As the Minister of Labour herself recognised before the Labour Committee of the Chilean Senate, in March 2020 there were 180 000 domestic workers without contracts and, as a result, without any social protection at all. However, she went beyond recognising this number by putting the blame for this situation on domestic workers themselves, despite Act 20786, which establishes, first, the employers' responsibility to declare the employment relation by notarial recording; second, the responsibility of public authorities to verify compliance with the law; and third, that it is the workers' duty to request that their working relation is declared by notarial recording, thereby highlighting the asymmetric power relationship

in this kind of working relation. This was the violent response domestic workers received from the Chilean government when we asked for protection, a response that felt like a slap in the face - just another form of violence, in this case institutional violence - when we were facing an imminent health, labour and economic crisis.

At the time of writing, two months after the declaration of a state of catastrophe due to the pandemic in the country, our situation is unchanged. We still remain in a state of invisibility. As a union, we joined ranks with related organisations to knock at every possible door, of course within the limits imposed by the current pandemic. According to the authorities which govern this country, we do not deserve to be included in or to apply for the measures supporting the economy and protecting jobs, which are granted to all other workers. As a result, women engaging in domestic work, who tend to be heads of their families, are deeply concerned. They wonder how they might manage to comply with one of the measures to slow down the spread of the virus - mandatory quarantine or confinement to their homes - when an almost total quarantine had already been imposed on the country's capital city.

These workers are afraid they might not be able to feed their children, because they don't have access to social protection. Not only do domestic workers earn low wages; their work also tends to be informal, leaving them without protection in cases such as the current pandemic.

Migrant workers are another considerable group of domestic workers, for whom the Chilean state refuses to

take responsibility. In recent years, poor migrant policies led to the entry of numerous people from other South American countries whose economic situation was much weaker than that of Chile. However, the necessary measures for protection and inclusion at different levels were not taken.

Institutional vulnerability

There has always been an institutional aspect to the state of vulnerability of this group of women in Chile. It was not until 2011 that the Chilean state passed legislation to match the minimum wage of domestic workers with that of all other Chilean workers; until then, it had been legal to pay domestic workers only 70% of the minimum wage. However, the infringement of domestic workers' rights continues. In 2015, Chile ratified ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers, yet five years later, many measures which were established by the convention, still need to be implemented.

Some of the workers who get in touch with our union wonder what we could do in order to be listened to, and their questions are the same as we ask as union leaders. How is it possible that although each household employs a woman as employee in charge of taking care of everything to make sure that their house is functioning

without problems, there is no empathy or sense of responsibility to make sure that these women are included in public protection measures to allow them to remain safe in quarantine? Which variable bars them from the right to receive state protection? Is it due to the fact that they are women? Is it due to their economic situation? Or maybe because they are indigenous or migrants? We are convinced that each and every one of these conditions should be sufficient reason for the state to protect these women, who carry out the tasks of domestic work.

On 8 May 2020 the Chilean Superintendent of Pensions reported that 12 386 workers had applied for protection under the employment legislation. This means that they did not receive any wage and had to use their savings from compensations they had obtained – that is, money that had to be set aside in case the worker should lose her job. In other words, the pandemic has created an economic crisis, which domestic workers have to face without support.

Luz Vidal Huiriqueo is a member of the Mapuche indigenous community in Chile. She is a trade union activist and the president of the Union of Domestic Workers (SINTRACAP) of Chile. She's been fighting for women's rights and sustainable development throughout her life.