

Jane Xavier, Domestic Workers Action Group, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland

Good afternoon panellists, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Domestic Workers Action Group, thank you for inviting me to discuss Overcoming Poverty and Achieving Women's Economic Independence. It is essential that grassroots organisations like ours that represent marginalised voices of women in our community are actively supported to participate in high level dialogues like this.

Recognition of domestic work is a fundamental gender equality and women's human rights issue. The sector has over 100 million workers; 82 percent are women and children. Many are migrants. Demand for domestic work is increasing rapidly across Europe and also in Ireland, driven by ageing populations, increasing childcare needs and the struggle to achieve greater work-life balance. As female participation in the labour force increases, so too does the need to outsource care and domestic work, traditionally seen as unpaid women's work.

Domestic workers are a historically vulnerable group. Despite doing essential and important caring and cleaning work in all societies, facilitating others to work outside the home, domestic workers are undervalued, underpaid and overworked. Domestic work is perceived as a low status occupation; terms and conditions of work are poor and high levels of exploitation exist.

Migrant women experience triple discrimination based on their gender, race and socio-economic status. The sector has high reports of trafficking for forced labour and domestic servitude.

I'm going to read you Sarah's story – not her real name:

Sarah was brought to Ireland by her employer to work as a child minder when she was 17. Her passport and documents were taken from her when she arrived. She worked from 5.30am until midnight daily. She shared a bed with the children. She received 1 day off every 5 months and she was not allowed to leave the house. She never received a wage and was forbidden to contact her family. The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland assisted her to escape and referred her case for investigation as a suspected victim of trafficking for forced labour. Today, Sarah is an active member of the Domestic Workers Action Group, campaigning for stronger protections for victims of trafficking for forced labour, sharing her story and lobbying politicians.

Sadly, Sarah's is not an isolated case; there are other women like Sarah, with similar stories, suffering physical and psychological abuse on a daily basis here in Ireland and around the world.

The Domestic Workers Action Group

The Domestic Workers Action Group (DWAG) was established in 2004 by the Migrant Rights Centre to empower domestic workers to campaign for rights, dignity and recognition for domestic workers and to lobby for better terms and conditions for the sector.

Today, we have over 350 members. DWAG has become a strong political voice representing domestic workers in Ireland, and our 10 years of campaigning have impacted positively on both policy and practice here in Ireland.

Key achievements include:

- A Code of Practice for the sector

- Labour inspections in private homes
- New Department of Foreign Affairs guidelines for protecting domestic workers in diplomatic homes
- And last year Ireland ratified the International Labour Organisation Domestic Workers Convention in July, a milestone for domestic workers after years of DWAG campaigning nationally and globally for this convention.

But new trends are emerging that are forcing migrant women into precarious situations.

Despite demand for migrant women to provide care and domestic labour, Ireland does not have a work permit for domestic work. Our broken immigration system has resulted in a domestic work sector that is largely facilitated by informal and irregular workers. We know there are thousands of non-EU migrant domestic workers working every day in thousands of homes across Ireland. The work they do is vital, but they are vulnerable, unprotected workers who cannot access their rights. Many of these domestic workers are au pairs.

My experience

I worked as an au pair in 2006. I was fortunate as the family I worked for paid me the minimum wage and treated me with respect but for many others this has not been the case.

Some Brazilian au pairs and I set up the Au Pair Rights Association Ireland in 2012 because of the huge number of Brazilian au pairs looking for help: their problems are almost identical to the problems faced by domestic workers in the earlier days of DWAG.

For example Anna, from Brazil, was recruited through an online au pair site in 2013 to work in a family home in rural Ireland. She looked after three children and the running of the house. She was working five days and doing an average of 70 hours weekly. She started at 7

a.m. and finished at 10pm every day and she was paid €120 a week. She finally left as she could not live with the poor working conditions and low pay.

To conclude, valuing domestic work is a fundamental gender equality issue. It is an issue that disproportionately affects women, not just in Ireland but globally. Failing to recognise the importance of care and domestic labour results in practices that facilitate exploitation, poverty and isolation, and blocks women's ability to achieve secure jobs that have economic stability.

From early childhood education to elder care, the domestic work sector is vital to the function of our whole society.

It's essential that women in the sector continue to be visible and continue to be part of decisions which will impact them: yes we need quality affordable childcare, yes we need quality affordable elder care, but not at the expense of other, more vulnerable women. We need to stand in solidarity on these issues, lobbying the state to invest in sustainable childcare and care infrastructures. We need to recognise demand for migrant domestic workers and create safe regular channels of migration into the work, so workers can provide quality care and enjoy decent working conditions. We need to end the practice of au pair exploitation and pay workers according to the law. We need to continue to address extreme exploitation and violence against domestic workers in situations of trafficking for forced labour, to ensure that those who are identified as victims of trafficking have full state support and can access justice.

It's important we don't work against each other and that we come together and demand that care be valued, and not seen as emotionally priceless but economically worthless work. And

it is important that we continue to support and invest in grassroots organisations working on women's issues on the ground, because without the people, there will be no change.

Thank you.