FEATURE

The women organising homes and labour

Domestic worker activism is on the rise in Kenya – and across the continent.

LIAM TAYLOR IN NAIROBI

TURN left at the football field, cross a drainage ditch, and there, overlooked by apartment blocks, is the Dhobi Women Park. For the domestic workers who created it, this is the one place in Eastleigh, a busy corner of Nairobi, that is entirely their own: a set of children's swings, a picnic table, a water tank for washing clothes. And then there are the trees.

Shady trees, planted when a dhobi woman is killed, to give shelter to her family. Fruit trees, for those who die before having children, to show the life they would have brought to the world. Medicinal trees, for the women raped or abused, so they may heal.

In Eastleigh, cleaning other people's



PHOTO: YASUYOSHI CHIBA

Grassroots activism: *Despite challenges, domestic workers are gradually becoming unionised in Africa.*

houses is dangerous work. As it is elsewhere.

The International Labour Organisation counts about 10-million domestic workers in Africa. That's 16% of all women in paid employment.

Those numbers are almost certainly underestimates – domestic workers are often isolated, informal, and invisible.

For the same reasons, they are unusually vulnerable to abuse – and very difficult to organise. But collective action, from trade unions to grassroots activism, is growing.

In 2009 there were just nine unions of domestic workers on the continent. Today, the International Domestic Workers Federation, a global alliance, has affiliates in 30 African countries, representing more than 100,000 workers.

Recruiting takes ingenuity.

"We meet domestic workers in shops, in markets, even in a bus stop early in the morning," says Francisco Sambo, one of the leaders of Sindicato Nacional de Empregados Domésticos in Mozambique.

The union has recruited 7,000 workers since it was founded in 2009. Members pay 1% of their salary to join and are given training in how to negotiate for better treatment.

Joan Gloria Cherop, assistant secretary-general at Kudheiha, which represents domestic workers in Kenya, says that the union reaches new members on their lunch breaks or through churches.

'Unity is a very powerful thing'

The women of Eastleigh are a small but instructive example of this growing organising – its benefits, sacrifices, and current limits. In 2022 they formed the Dhobi Women Network, which now has 30 members and tries to help others when they run into trouble.

"Women were going through so much injustice," says Sellah, one of the founders, who asks that we only use her first name. "Some are killed, others are raped. Others are beaten and their salaries are taken away. So that's why we came together."

Domestic workers are often isolated, informal, and invisible. For the same reasons, they are vulnerable to abuse.

Employers and officials used to ignore domestic workers' complaints: if a woman alleged sexual assault, for example, police officers would say she was just a disgruntled sex worker.

The dhobi women sought support from the Mathare Social Justice Centre, a community hub in the area where they lived, and made connections with sympathetic lawyers. When possible, they try to resolve grievances through alternative dispute mechanisms; when necessary, they go to the courts.

In one case, a teenage girl was beaten and raped repeatedly in the house where she worked. Sellah helped to get her to a safe house and pushed the

police to pursue the case in court.

In another incident, Sellah rescued her friend Esther from an angry mob, who had falsely accused her of stealing phones.

"When you were a single voice, it wasn't heard," says Esther, who is also part of the network. But now the police "can't ignore you because they know you're many people".

"Unity is a very powerful thing," says Saadiya, another organiser in the network. "If you have unity, you have power on your hands."

Still, justice is not always done.

In one harrowing case, a woman died after falling from a 15th-floor balcony. Her boss said she had stumbled while trying to hang out a heavy carpet. Witnesses said she had been pushed, but were too scared to testify and the case collapsed.

Sellah knows of four women who she thinks were killed by their employers.

Collective action is not always possible for all workers. The dhobi women have seen their bargaining power eroded by an influx of workers from Karamoja, northeast Uganda, who accept lower wages.

The rate for washing utensils, for example, has fallen from 100 Kenyan shillings to just 50. The Ugandans are fearful of being sent back home, so are reluctant to join the network or take complaints to the police. Many are teenagers; some have been trafficked.

Organising can also be costly. It got Sellah a reputation as a "troublemaker". It means she can no longer find employment as a domestic worker, and has turned to waste-picking instead.



PHOTO: LIAM TAYLOR

Solidarity: *Domestic workers created a park dedicated to dhobi women in Nairobi.*

Even established organisations struggle. If workers ask an anti-union employer for a day off or for protective equipment "they will lose their jobs", says Cherop.

Government indifference doesn't help. In 2011 the International Labour Organisation adopted Convention 189, which lays out basic rights for domestic workers worldwide, including a written contract and a weekly rest day. So far only eight African countries have ratified it, most recently Angola last year.

Where laws do exist, enforcement often falls short. Although domestic workers in Kenya are covered by the minimum wage, hardly any employer pays it.

That is where grassroots organising comes in, but also why it goes only so far. ■