

The French Paradox:
Formalization of “Domestic Work,” Migrant Domestic Workers’ Rights and C 189

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The collective action and mobilization of domestic workers in France can be traced back to the early 20th century. Today, with four national collective agreements related to “domestic work”^(*), France is amongst the advanced countries, if not the most advanced, in terms of formalization of “domestic work.” It seems, therefore, paradoxical that to this day France has not ratified C189. What are the reasons behind the lag?

My presentation will be divided into two parts. First, I will give a brief overview of the evolution of formalization of “domestic work,” by looking at the four national collective agreements. I will also discuss the historical contribution of migrant domestic workers to the making of collective agreements and see in what ways these are significant for those who work today as documented or undocumented migrants.

In the second part, based on my fieldwork, I will give a preliminary analysis on the reasons for the French paradox, by raising four points: the understanding that domestic workers are already well protected by collective agreements; the idea that C 189 may threaten the inviolability of home (“*domicile*”) and the respect for privacy; the government’s reservations with regard to the treatment of migrant domestic workers in C 189; and finally, the reluctance expressed toward the English term “domestic work.”

I will conclude by discussing the implications of these four points for (1) the formalization of “domestic work” and (2) for migrant domestic workers’ rights.

(*) C189 Art.1 (a) defines “domestic work” as “work performed in or for a household or households.” Whenever I use the term in the sense of C 189, I will put a quotation mark.