

Work Like No Other:
Domestic Employment, the ILO, and the Recognition of Home Labors

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This presentation provides historical perspective on the stunning 2011 victory of domestic workers at the ILO for a convention of their own. Since the founding of the ILO after WWI, equal rights at work for household and domestic workers had seemed impossible. The developing global labor standards regime took the conditions of industrial workers in the global North as the norm, turning the woman worker into a problem of difference and treating women in colonized and developing nations difference's other, distinct from those in industrial nations. Even though men as well as women labored as household employees throughout the world, policymakers considered domestic service to be a feminized occupation, comparable to the unwaged work of wives and mothers and not equivalent to industrial labor, the kind of jobs that provided the template for the evaluative schemes used for the development of equal remuneration between men and women. Despite affirming in 1944, "labor is not a commodity," the ILO remained reluctant to address home spaces as places of employment until the self-activity of home-based workers forced the issue, first in the 1980s and then in the 2000.

Before WWII, household employment as domestic service only tangentially entered ILO discussions, usually as a low waged occupations that pushed some women into prostitution or as a stigmatizing labor that women would flee from when given an alternative. Despite scattered attempts to place such workers under labor standards, domestic work entered serious study by the ILO's Women and Young Workers Division in the late 1940s. Labor feminists and women trade unionists from other sectors spoke for domestic workers at this time. The history of equal pay and domestic work became entangled—though not for the benefit of household laborers. To understand this outcome, and the operation of discourses about women and work in the international making of labor standards, I consider institutional arrangements and definitional conceptions. First, I provide background on the ILO that situates the bureaucratic and organizational context of this story. Then, I set forth some of the discursive and ideological positions toward domestic work, which reverberate across the decades to separate such labor from standard conceptions of employment. Finally, I consider the question of standpoint: who spoke for domestic workers and how that mattered. Together institutional barriers, ideological blinders, and representational limits overdetermined the lack of equal rights on the job for domestic workers.