

THE FUTURE OF WORK: WORKER ORGANIZING & POWER IN AFRICA'S INFORMAL ECONOMY

DOMESTIC SERVICES WORKERS UNION OF GHANA (DSWU)

Building Blocks

Ghana's Domestic Services Workers Union (DSWU) was founded in September 2015. The union was established to address the widespread and longstanding exploitation and precarity faced by domestic workers in Ghana's private households. Its formation was catalyzed by the personal journey of its former secretary, Esther Kosi, herself a former domestic worker and trade unionist. Esther repeatedly encountered cases of unpaid wages, religious coercion, social isolation, and extreme employer control, including young migrant women brought from rural communities of the north under the guise of "help" and then denied basic rights. These experiences, combined with the widespread perception of domestic workers in Ghana as "family helpers" rather than employees, limited their recognition and weakened both institutional and structural power within labour markets. This also made conventional union models that rely on employer-employee relationships and formal workplace structures ineffective.

Through her involvement in the Ghana Actors' Guild, which was affiliated with organized labor, she was exposed early to trade union principles, workers' education, and collective bargaining. She earned a college degree in Labor Studies and focused her project work on domestic workers. Her trio identity as a domestic worker, a college-trained labor student, and a union activist placed her in a unique position. She was not an external organizer mobilizing others but an insider who experienced the same precarity, fear, and dependency as the workers she later organized.

Early mobilization and organizing of the Domestic and Social Workers' Union (DSWU) took place in churches, neighborhoods, and personal networks. This process marked the emergence of associational power, transforming isolated experiences into collective consciousness. Through shared stories, the union also leveraged discursive power, reframing individual struggles as collective ones. This early approach later became the union's foundational strategy. The global recognition of domestic work as "decent work" through the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 189 strengthened DSWU's institutional power by legitimizing domestic work as formal labor, providing a global framework for rights claims.

DSWU developed as a locally rooted response that combined rights advocacy with mediation and social support. With support from networks such as Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and later the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), Esther and her colleagues began to see that domestic workers' struggles were part of a broader global movement.

DSWU is a democratically structured, membership-based organization with elected leadership. Its National Executive Council consists of 7 national executives, 5 regional leaders, and 25 zonal leaders. The union's executive body coordinates advocacy campaigns, manages training programs, and represents workers in negotiations and policy dialogues. It currently has around 1,800 members, including domestic workers who live in their employer's home and those who commute from their own homes, primarily in the Greater Accra, Eastern and Ashanti regions. However, estimates suggest that there are approximately 58,000 domestic workers in the country. This highlights the significant gap in reach and underscores the ongoing challenge of worker organizing.

Achievements and Enabling Environment

DSWU has made decent strides in organizing and building worker power through a blend of key enabling factors. Currently 1800 members-strong, the union has brought together workers who have long been unorganized, isolated from one another, and invisible. Because domestic workers are dispersed, isolated, and often fearful of employer retaliation, DSWU recruitment relies mainly on informal word-of-mouth—"tell a friend to tell another friend" and social networks, which leverage trust-based peer-to-peer, door-to-door, and church-based relationships. Besides offering discreet, culturally familiar entry points into the union, these relational approaches have low literacy barriers and bypass the stigma often associated with domestic work. This is especially important because some 80% of the union's membership are not literate, have limited digital access, use phones irregularly, and have low data affordability, making online engagement less feasible. Although DSWU is beginning to employ digital and media organizing through social media, radio, and television, this is aimed more at building public awareness and societal support than at recruiting new members.

The union's current secretary, a journalist and former domestic care worker with a strong media network, has expanded access to radio and TV platforms and improved the union's discursive power. These media partnerships enable DSWU to publicize abuses and challenge stereotypes. These platforms also enhance societal power by attracting public attention and influencing policymakers.

To build member consciousness and unity, DSWU uses a blend of skills training, advocacy, and grassroots education. Its workshops focus on negotiation, financial literacy, leadership development, and occupational safety. To manage its limited resources, the union proactively practices circularity by reusing generic placards, banners, and training

materials. These initiatives have also raised awareness and understanding of ILO Convention 189 among members.

This has strengthened the union's ability to advocate for decent work rights because they are better equipped to recognize violations, assert their rights, and participate confidently in policy campaigns. This shared knowledge builds a stronger collective identity, enhances bargaining power, and positions the union as an informed actor in national labor reform discussions. The union, with support from international movements at the IDWF enabling coalitional power, continues to pressure the government to enforce decent work rights. These include the roadmap to Labour Regulations 2020 (Domestic Workers L.I.2408) in Ghana, which was passed in 2020, and ratification of ILO's C189, which remains ongoing. Consequently, the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations' roadmap is integrating domestic workers into the Ghana Labour Market Information System (GLMIS) and enrolling them in the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT), thereby expanding access to social protection. This marks a significant step toward decent work, dignity, and formal recognition for domestic workers in Ghana. Although enforcement remains slow, the passage of LI 2408 reflects formal recognition of domestic work and has created advocacy space that previously did not exist.

The good political will DSWU enjoys, especially at the Ministry of Labour, Jobs and Employment Relations, has enabled it to participate in policy dialogues on labor reforms and push for the recognition of domestic workers' rights. DSWU is capitalizing on Ghana's enabling legislative and institutional framework for worker unionisation and decent work, including domestic workers.⁴³ The union leverages formal mechanisms for worker representation, including freedom of association and speech under Ghana's 1992 Constitution and ILO Conventions 87 and 98. These rights allow DSWU to organize members safely, advocate in policy dialogues, raise awareness of domestic workers' issues, defend workers' rights, and build national and international networks. The union has built strong working relationships with key ministry officials, which has helped secure political support for its initiatives. DSWU is also supported by a range of legal and advocacy allies, including Alumnae Incorporated,⁴⁴ ActionAid, Netright, and other NGOs working on child labor and forced labor. These partnerships strengthen the union's ability to apply pressure on government, navigate complex legal cases involving members, and access technical and advocacy expertise.

At the grassroots, the union also employs cultural engagement tools, such as dramatized role-plays in various workplace scenarios, to help its members understand their rights in simple, relatable language. These participatory methods enhance inclusiveness and enable members with low literacy to grasp complex ideas. Through cross-border exchanges, media storytelling, and solidarity actions, DSWU has made progress in building a strong, credible foundation for domestic worker

organizing. Its engagements on radio, on TV, and in community drama challenge traditional perceptions of domestic work, positioning it as valuable, legitimate labor deserving of dignity, respect, and protection. As a result, domestic workers are increasingly gaining greater public visibility, increased confidence in asserting their rights, and stronger support from allies, policymakers, and the broader community.

DSWU's ongoing partnerships and alliances with other worker groups, traditional labor unions, civil society organizations, and government ministries in Ghana and abroad form the backbone of its growth, strength, and voice. The union has significantly advanced the visibility and recognition of domestic work within Ghana's labor discourse. Its advocacy has further influenced national discussions about domestic workers in labor law and raised awareness about ILO Convention 189 in Ghana.

Nationally, DSWU is an affiliate of the TUC and, internationally, a dues-paying member of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). These relationships have broadened its access to resources, including knowledge exchanges, finance, and legal and logistical support. These alliances have strengthened its social and political capital, although some challenges still remain. Regionally, DSWU's collaborative approach and participation in African and global domestic worker networks have helped build shared strategies for organizing and contributed to a growing continental movement for domestic workers' rights. Its collaboration with sister domestic worker organizations in Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda has enabled it to build transnational alliances and develop a shared repertoire of organizing practices adapted to the African context.

Challenges

Several structural and operational obstacles persist, nonetheless. The slow ratification of ILO Convention C189 by the Government of Ghana, similar to most African countries, remains a legislative gap that continues to enable violations of domestic workers' rights across the country. When seeking affiliations with trade union federations, bureaucratic or stringent membership requirements may inadvertently create dissonance among affiliate member unions. In this case, DSWU was once an associate member of the TUC, then reclassified as a member of UNIWA which is in turn an associate member of the TUC. However, this reclassification under Ghana's Union of Informal Workers Associations (UNIWA) threatens DSWU's autonomy, its leadership says. It complicates its direct access to TUC leadership and risks diluting its representation.

Second, varying literacy levels and language barriers make it difficult to fully utilize the resources offered by international partnerships. Although DSWU's partners, including the IDWF, provide the union with resources and materials, varying

literacy levels among members make adaptation to suit each member's needs challenging, constraining both associational and discursive power. Many members struggle to understand materials written in English, French or Spanish, and require translation into local languages. Disseminating information through multiple layers such as from international offices to national executives and then to grassroots members sometimes lead to delays or distortions in understanding, especially where digital or literacy barriers exist. These barriers limit members' ability to fully understand key advocacy issues, such as ILO Convention 189, and reduce their ability to engage actively or deeply in policy discussions. In other cases, there may be disparities in how effectively different countries or unions can adapt, reproduce, and use materials shared by international partners. Translation aside, not all resources or tactics are easily transferable given the context of work in a given country.

Third, organizing migrant domestic workers in Ghana remains difficult owing to their high mobility and employer-controlled living arrangements. This makes identification and sustained engagement challenging. Most domestic care workers in Ghana are rural-urban migrants. Fourth, DSWU continues to struggle with weak institutional memory because most of its documentation and organizational resources were lost after the death of its former general secretary, who had been the sole custodian of union records. This loss created a major operational gap undermining its institutional power. Although efforts are underway to rebuild a centralized system, recalling past financial logs and membership data remains challenging. Finally, limited financial resources and the absence of a formal secretariat further restrict the union's ability to coordinate activities, support members, and strengthen organizational systems.

Lessons Learned

- Strong, equal partnerships with established labor unions and civil society organizations build coalitional power, enhancing legitimacy and access to resources. When collaborations are co-designed rather than top-down, new worker groups like DSWU gain legitimacy, access to resources and meaningful support that they would otherwise lack.
- Participatory tools such as drama and role-play enable discursive power and inclusive engagement in low-literacy contexts. They simplify complex ideas, making learning engaging, and help workers internalize rights, responsibilities, and organizing strategies through relatable storytelling and shared experiences.
- Leadership transitions pose risks when institutional knowledge is poorly documented or not shared, reinforcing the need to plan for succession in advance, robust documentation systems, and distributed responsibilities to preserve organizational memory and avoid dependence on individual leaders. The same may be said for stakeholder relationships, which can facilitate cooperation with relevant government ministries and decision-makers.
- With low-cost strategies such as reusing placards, banners, and training materials, unions can stay visible, active, and consistent even on modest financial resources. This shows that efficient use of existing resources is itself a power-building strategy, enabling sustained mobilization despite financial constraints.
- Cross-border linkages and learning between global, regional, and local worker groups expand coalitional power, helping both sides to anticipate employer strategies, strengthen their collective voice, and build more powerful alliances.
- Finally, narrative reframing that dignifies informal work shifts public attitudes, strengthens worker identity, and wins broader societal support.