

Domestic workers are on a mission to be treated like other workers, writes Simphiwe Rens



THEY may play an important role in many households but many domestic workers feel underappreciated and unhappy. They are calling on the government to heed their call for better working conditions and urge employers and the Labour Department to: "Start talking to us instead of talking about us."

Nomfundo Ngubane, Miseka Mhlanga and Millicent Mothubisi, who all work as domestic workers in a Joburg suburb, claim there is a lot that still needs to be done in order to deal with challenges faced by domestic workers across the country, including improving working conditions.

Mhlanga, who has been working as a domestic for over 30 years, says: "The working conditions are tough. The government keeps on promising that they'll sort out our grievances but we still find ourselves working under difficult conditions."

"But when it comes time for voting, you'll hear them promising us everything just to get our votes. For many years, they've been promising door-to-door campaigns where they'll come and listen to our concerns but that hasn't happened yet."

Ngubane says working conditions in this line of work differ for each person.

"Sometimes it is tough and sometimes it is easy. In some cases you would find that a worker does not even have a tea break and they have to work long hours," she claims.

Muzi Mkhwanazi, UIF spokesman at the Department of Labour, says it is challenging to assess the working conditions of domestic workers. "Suffice it to say domestic work needs to be professionalised and treated just like all workers (sic) in the country," he says. "For instance, issues such as employment contracts – some domestic workers have contracts of employment while others do not."

This is an issue for Mothubisi, who does not receive a monthly payslip and claims

“**R1 200 is an insult. They are looking down on us**”

she is given her wages in her hand. "It's a problem. I can't even open accounts at stores because they all want a payslip."

According to the International Labour Organisation's website, South Africa ratified Convention 189, a treaty aimed at improving labour standards for domestic workers, in June last year.

The website states that the convention is due to come into force in the country this month. This, according to the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (Sadsawu), is a key driving force behind the fight by domestic workers to be regarded as "equally important" as other workers in the country.

Former domestic worker and Western Cape provincial organiser for the union, Sindi Ningiza, claims that domestic workers can anticipate positive developments after the ratification of the convention.

Ningiza emphasises however that unions still have a critical role to play in further improving working conditions.

"Some workers are still scared to join unions. This is why it is so important that we reach as many domestic workers as possible so that we get an opportunity to explain to them the importance of joining a union, as well as explaining to them their rights."

While Ngubane and other workers are aware of unions such as Sadsawu, they are apprehensive about joining these affiliations.

"I know of instances where people have joined and later lost their jobs but then the unions did not help in getting their jobs back," Ngubane says.

"When reporting to the union about having lost their job, a domestic worker would find the employer hires a lawyer to fight the union and this ends up working against the employee because the union may not have enough resources to hire



TOUGH: While not all domestic workers are treated badly, many are exploited by employers who pay them poorly, abuse and disrespect them and force them to work long hours. But now they are speaking out, calling on the government to help improve their working conditions.

POSED PICTURE: MINDENI VILAKAZI

DON'T TALK ABOUT US, TALK TO US

good lawyers that can fight the issue in the same way as the employer can."

These fears, Ningiza warns, prevent many domestic workers from benefiting from the services being offered to them.

"I was also a domestic worker before, and I didn't even know that I could sit down and share my views and feelings with the employer. I think that is what gives many of the domestic workers the idea that the employers are far more powerful than they are and not even a union could assist in handling their grievances."

The Department of Labour has held imbuzos in order to address some of these issues, including the most recent which took place in April at Mdantsane's NU10 Stadium in the Eastern Cape.

Although some domestic workers are unaware of these imbuzos, they still believe that this sort of engagement with the government is important in addressing their problems.

"That's exactly what we want because here we don't have a say. We're unable to approach the employer with certain claims, unless we want trouble," says Mothubisi.

According to Mkhwanazi, apart from informing domestic workers about their rights, the department uses the imbuzos to communicate improvements that are to be made to UIF benefits for domestic workers.

"The UIF Amendment Bill proposes an increase in the payment of ordinary unemployment insurance from the current eight

months to a year. The minister (at the imbuzos) was also informing (domestic workers) about the training interventions funded by UIF such as the Training Lay-Off Scheme and the fact that it also covers domestic workers," he says.

The minimum salary for a domestic worker in South Africa stands between R1 146.50 and R1 877.70, depending on the areas in which these workers are based; as has been determined by the Labour Department.

"What can one do with R1 200 nowadays? Even the groceries at home are really expensive and that's not enough. Some of us come from places far away and we have to pay for bus and train fares which can even come up to R1 000 for going

and returning, leaving one with nothing," says Mhlanga. "R1 200 is an insult, really. They're looking down on us."

Sadsawu claims that while these rates have improved, especially when compared to pre-1994 salary rates, more can be done. As a result the union is in negotiations to increase the minimum wage to at least R2 500 by next year.

"(In the past) people got paid about R500 on a monthly basis. You'd find that a woman or man with many children to take care of had to pay for things like school fees, as well as buy groceries and even get transport money out of that to travel to work. This forced a lot of workers to run to loan sharks for financial assistance," Ningiza explains. However she further

emphasises that these rates are just the proposed minimum wage and do not necessarily mean that employers must not pay more than the suggested amount.

When it comes to the job Mhlanga says there are certain things to be appreciative of although the same cannot be said for all domestic workers.

"You know, I can't speak for other people... For instance, for some workers, when they're sick they are immediately taken to a doctor for medical attention. But we can't say it's for everyone because it's not all domestic workers that get treated in such a manner by their employers – it's just the luck of a certain few."

Ngubane's message to employers is to treat domestic workers with respect.

"Speak to us in an appropriate and civil manner. Certain employers tend to have an abusive approach to their domestic workers," she says.

Ningiza believes domestic workers should be treated like the "queens" they are, and that their value to the country's economy is key.

"Imagine if domestic workers can come together and say 'we're not going to work'; that would be a disaster."

The true identities of all domestic workers interviewed for this article have been altered as requested.

Simphiwe Rens is a Master's student at Wits. He wrote this piece for Media Monitoring, Africa's Youth News Agency.

Answer to poverty, inequality, unemployment is elusive



The triple challenges of Zuma's quest can't be viewed in isolation, writes Jonathan Wolff

IN HIS State of the Nation Address last week, President Jacob Zuma set out the priorities for his government over the coming years. As a British political philosopher, shortly to make my first visit to South Africa, it is interesting to see what I can learn about the country from Zuma's words. How different are the challenges faced by South Africa from those elsewhere in the world?

Zuma is worried by poverty, inequality and unemployment. Of 200 or so countries of the world, how many can say they have conquered poverty, defeated inequality and have no problem with unemployment? These are universal themes, albeit shaped in South Africa by its own recent history, the legacy of apartheid and its effect on land and business ownership, among many other factors.

For any citizen, the closely related problems of poverty, inequality and unemployment are of great concern.

As a political philosopher, I am also interested in the question of why they are so damaging. What is so bad about poverty, inequality and unemployment? Why do

they demand solutions?

Poverty can be understood in two ways. A life of absolute poverty is one in which a person lacks the resources to meet the very basic needs of life, such as adequate nourishment. One study suggests that in 2011, 13 percent of South Africans regularly went hungry. A dispiriting statistic, but a vast improvement on the 30 percent from only 10 years before.

Relative poverty is defined in a different way. According to the sociologist Peter Townsend, people can also be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to participate in the normal activities of their society. They are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.

The economist Adam Smith suggested people could be counted as poor if they could not afford the clothes that would allow them "to appear in public without shame".

Perhaps this is why all human beings, at all times and in all places, care so much about how they look: we all want to fit in, to be included.

How many people in South Africa suffer from relative poverty? It is a difficult question to answer, but it must be a substantial number, however it is measured.

Poverty is often a consequence of unemployment, but the problem of unemployment, for many people, goes much deeper. Just as most of us want to fit in, most of us also want to work, and not only for the wages. We want to be able to contribute to

Of 200 countries, how many can say they have conquered poverty?

the life of our communities. We want to be needed. To be unemployed is another way of being left out, of being excluded from the main life of our society.

Disadvantage compounds. A society where some are in poverty or unemployment while others prosper is a society of inequality.

And those at the bottom are disadvantaged in another way. People in a desperate

situation will take risks others would not. Perhaps they will turn to crime. Perhaps they will take dangerous jobs. If caught, they will go to jail. If injured at work, they may die or not work again.

Zuma tells his audience he is taking steps to reduce crime and improve the situation of people with disabilities. He must, of course, be aware that crime and disability are often a consequence of the risks taken by people in poverty. If the only way you have of trying to improve your life runs the risk of making it even worse, you are truly disadvantaged. And this is the situation many unemployed people in poverty face, here and all over the world.

What does Zuma propose to do to overcome the triple challenge of poverty, inequality and unemployment? No society has found an easy way out, but Zuma proposes economic growth, though this faces its own challenges, such as energy shortage and infrastructure deficit. Economic growth can create jobs, but it will only overcome poverty if those jobs are well paid.

For this reason, Zuma says he will con-

sider introducing a minimum wage. He also emphasises the creation of highly skilled jobs and a labour force educated to a level that will allow these jobs to be filled.

Will economic growth address inequality? This is less likely. If anything, it could increase inequality, if the business class keeps most of the benefits to itself, as happens so often elsewhere. But perhaps this is less important if poverty can, over the next 10 years, fall at the impressive rate it did over the previous 10.

We can only wish Zuma every success in his goal to address poverty, inequality and unemployment and to preside over a South Africa moving forward economically, politically and socially.

Professor Jonathan Wolff of University College London has advised the UK government on gambling, drugs and homicide. He will speak on poverty and social equality at the Social Equality Conference at the University of Cape Town from August 15 to 17. Visit SocialEqualityUCT@gmail.com. He is the author of *The Human Right to Health* and co-author with Avner de-Shalit of *Disadvantage*.