

What is Domestic Servitude

The term “domestic work” refers to work performed in or for a household. While information specific to “domestic servitude” may be limited, it is often discussed under the broader concept of “exploitation in domestic work” or “labor trafficking for domestic work”.

What is Domestic Servitude?

Domestic servitude is a form of human trafficking in which individuals are exploited through domestic work in private homes. Victims are coerced, deceived, or abused into performing household tasks.

Common Forms of Domestic Servitude



Care work

People are forced to provide in-home childcare, elder care, or support for people with disabilities.



Household Labor

Includes cleaning, cooking, laundry, and other household tasks, often under exploitative conditions.

Key Indicators

- Debt bondage
- No or low income (or work in exchange for shelter / food)
- No access to personal documents and a threat of deportation
- Constant supervision; rarely left alone, always accompanied outside (or refused permission to leave)
- Exposure to violence and threats
- Requirement to perform all household tasks, often around the clock (24/7)
- Separate meals, with less or lower-quality food
- Isolation from family and friends (limited or no private communication)
- Restricted access to parts of the home or basic facilities (e.g., bathroom)
- Denial of independent medical care
- Inadequate sleeping conditions (e.g., no proper bed, storage space)
- Lack of privacy and personal space
- Exposure to Gender Based Violence and sexual exploitation

Legal Frameworks



The Palermo Protocol (2000) explicitly includes “forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, and servitude”. Domestic servitude is not named directly but falls under these categories.



The US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) expanded the definition of coercion and strengthened prosecutions of forced labor, especially domestic servitude. Previously, cases required proof of physical force for involuntary servitude.



The EU Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings defines domestic servitude as a form of exploitation where victims are forced to work in private households, often under coercive conditions, with restricted freedom, and without proper pay or legal protections.



In terms of regulating the situation of domestic workers, a significant step was the adoption of the 2011 International Labour Organization Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (No. 189).

Employers often describe workers as “one of the family”, but this often hides unpaid wages, restricted movement and forced overtime.

Scale

The data about domestic servitude is underrepresented in trafficking data, research and analysis.

- Globally, 75.6 million people — mostly women and many migrants — are estimated to work as domestic workers, making up 4.5% of the global workforce. **81% of them are estimated to be informally employed.**
- The Global Estimates of Modern Slavery (2022) identified that **1.4 million** (of the 17.3 million) people identified in forced labor in the private sector are exploited in domestic work.

This is only an estimation, as the real numbers are unknown.

Who Are the Victims?



According to the ILO, 70% of the 70 million domestic workers worldwide are women.

- Women and girls make up the majority of domestic servitude victims
- Migrant and irregular women migrants are particularly vulnerable
- Research shows that victims of domestic servitude often share gender, age, and regional profiles with victims of sexual exploitation, more so than other forms of labor trafficking.

Where?

The clandestine nature of domestic servitude, occurring “behind closed doors” or “in private homes,” is a primary factor enabling exploitation.

- Globally present, across all regions
- In upper-middle and high-income countries, including through migrant labor
- In elite households in low-income countries
- In diplomatic households, where oversight is limited



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