

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Jennifer N. Fish.** *Domestic Workers of the World Unite! A Global Movement for Dignity and Human Rights.* New York: New York University Press, 2017, pp.320, \$30 paper (9781479877935)

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**I**nternational Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 189 stands as a landmark in international labour law history, but still Jennifer Fish treasures the foundational efforts of domestic workers in setting up worldwide advocacy groups for universal labour standards for domestic work. This research describes how actual domestic workers stood up to negotiate their rights and mobilized international organizations to standardize paid domestic work in private households. Fish adopts an innovative perspective by analyzing how domestic workers made their amazing journey from the employer's kitchen or backyard to the conference room in Geneva. Over six years, Fish followed activists, organizers, unionists, and visionary leaders and documented their contributions to the global domestic workers' movement across five continents. In addition to conducting traditional observation and interviews, their conversations pertain to various rights-based topics across contexts from multiple vantage points and are intertwined with the specific dynamics of movement building at particular times. This participatory research provides concrete evidence and strong emotional connections for readers to understand the achievements of domestic workers in turning a world of exploitation into one with dignity through the adoption of the international convention.

Fish gives high remarks to domestic workers for their success in claiming a public voice at the ILO – the largest international institution dedicated to setting international labour standards – which is far removed from their private household workplace. Fish applauds domestic workers' efforts in forming transnational alignments: organizations at the grassroots level were effectively connected to create a powerful global network. More concretely, Fish depicts domestic workers' struggles, such as striving to continue schooling while performing domestic duties, not being recognized by children upon returning after years of separation, and being cut off from other domestic workers. The scarce resources that domestic workers possess further underscore their re-

sounding success in managing to place domestic workers' rights at the top of ILO's agenda.

Voicing their stance at the ILO has great symbolic and strategic significance. ILO is a time-honoured tripartite UN agency specialized in setting and evaluating labour standards and practices. Fair work conditions and human rights frequently stand at the center of ILO's mandate. Allying themselves to the values of the ILO, domestic workers argue that their work in private households should be considered as an employment relationship. Furthermore, domestic workers also seek to assign moral meanings to their work: domestic workers sacrifice their own family responsibilities to promote employers' home harmony. This effort upholds a moral responsibility of the privileged class and increases their sympathy for domestic workers. Fish also highlights several specific requests of these domestic workers. The initial requests concentrate on employment conditions, such as clarifying the domestic work as an employment relationship, counting standby hours to work, and monetary payment as the only payment method. The subsequent requests also extend to broader social, economic and political rights, such as connections to sister domestic workers, accessible education and development opportunities, and decent treatment for aging domestic workers. Additionally, Fish mentions how the bureaucratic procedure at the ILO impedes grass-level representatives from verbally expressing their stances at the conference table. Therefore, Fish introduces other efforts made by domestic workers through the frequent use of body language, solidarity songs, and visual slogans at the conference. These more concrete requests and visible efforts provided fertile grounds for legal professionals to draft the text of the Convention and corresponding recommendations. In the final chapter, Fish notes down the five outcomes of this movement pertaining to bridging various stakeholders, documenting domestic work, and mindset changing. The work of domestic workers and the final adoption of ILO convention provides a strong international reference for states to establish national labour standards for domestic workers.

The NGO officials found domestic workers' exploitative situations touch the spirit of ILO. Their exploitative experience alludes to a wider scope of disadvantaged identities such as gender, race, class and migration status. For instance, the disproportionately high percentage of women of color in this occupation intensively exacerbates the gender and racial inequality. The poorly resourced households which domestic workers are born into constrain them into a marginalized class in contrast to their privileged employers. The migrant status of many domestic workers makes international standards their last hope, as their countries of origin and employment rarely provide them with adequate protection.

Fundamentally, domestic workers' situations could worsen if the efforts of ensuring social justice disregard domestic workers rights as an essential component of human rights. Considering all these aspects, I disagree with Martin's criticism about the lack of a theoretical framework for this book.<sup>1</sup> Actually, I found Fish has interwoven various theoretical lenses that have profound implications on a wider spectrum of scholarship on human rights. Indeed, one could emphasize any particular aspect of this issue to examine the broad concept of human rights; however, none of these aspects could claim itself as the only appropriate way to offer explanations. I found Fish's approach to present various theoretical sources of this issue very informative. This approach effectively presents various relevant theoretical approaches, which allows readers to consider the overall situations of human rights issues.

Whilst being genuinely cheered up by domestic workers' success worldwide, I maintain my concerns about the effective translation of this international commitment to national protections. On this point, I mostly agree with Lapp's criticism that this book is relatively weak in reflecting the efforts at the national level.<sup>2</sup>

As Fish mentioned, domestic workers' journey to the international conference has already been impeded by the policy stance of their countries of employment. Considering this fact, how could we expect national administrative bodies not to be a roadblock for the implementation of these international standards? In my view, this book would benefit from strengthening the discussion about the role of national administrative bodies. For instance, how did domestic workers become caught between the margins of national protection from countries of origin and employment? To what extent would the countries involved be willing to support or oppose the standardization of domestic workers' employment conditions? What measures could be taken to ensure the national implementation of international agreements? How effective were measures that have already been employed, and what may future trends be? Considering the fact that Convention 189 was adopted and came into effect a few years ago, national efforts to ensure its implementation would be a crucial step to promote the continued success of domestic workers' advocacy. As Fish mentioned: "[T]he real measure of the movement will be in the

1. Andrew W. Martin, "Book Review: Domestic Workers of the World Unite! A Global Movement for Dignity and Human Rights," *Social Forces* 96, no. 3 (2018): 2.
2. Simca Simpson Lapp, "Book Review: Domestic Workers of the World Unite! A Global Movement for Dignity and Human Rights, by Jennifer N. Fish," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 1 (2018): 104.

changes domestic workers experience in their everyday lives.”<sup>3</sup> Broadly referring to international human rights standards risks rendering empty promises. Domestic workers’ everyday lives within the boundaries of their country of employment provide the most explicit reference.<sup>4</sup> More analysis of the national practices would better direct readers, researchers, officials, and policymakers to evaluate the outcomes of the current efforts and anticipate the future trend of advocacy.

University of Ottawa

Chen Wang-Dufl

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**Chen Wang-Dufl** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Ottawa in Canada. She is a socio-legal researcher committed to the following areas of research: public international law, immigration and refugee law, feminist theory, and qualitative research methodology.

**Email:** [CWANG149@uottawa.ca](mailto:CWANG149@uottawa.ca)

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3. Jennifer N. Fish, *Domestic Workers of the World Unite! : A Global Movement for Dignity and Human Rights*. New York: NYU Press. 248.

4. Gay Seidman, “Book Review: Domestic Workers of the World Unite! A Global Movement for Dignity and Human Rights by Jennifer N. Fish,” *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* 71, no. 2 (2018): 559.