PEACE THROUGH EMPOWERMENT: ADULT EDUCATION AND DOMESTIC WORKERS' RIGHTS IN TUNISIA

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Domestic workers travel daily across Greater Tunis, often at the expense of their health and rights

Introduction

The home is universally perceived as a refuge, a private space where one is supposed to be safe. Yet, for hundreds of thousands of women in Tunisia, this same space becomes a place of vulnerability hidden from public view. As an invisible pillar of the economy, domestic work is carried out behind closed doors, in a grey area where fundamental rights too often cease to exist. This article explores how, through a significant initiative led by DVV International Tunisia and the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT), those most affected have been able to challenge exclusion and strengthen their agency. The article argues that adult education is not merely a form of learning but a catalyst for transformation, enabling 'invisible' workers to become active and empowered citizens who can challenge the structural inequalities and violence that shape their lives.

Domestic work: An invisible source of national wealth

Whether paid or unpaid, domestic work is a vital pillar of the Tunisian economy. It encompasses a wide range of demanding tasks, including cleaning surfaces requiring specialised care, handling hazardous products, ironing, caring for older persons, and raising children. Yet because this work takes place within the private sphere and is performed predominantly by women, it remains invisible in official statistics and public policy. As a result of this invisibility, domestic workers often lack adequate legal and social protection. Limited access to paid leave, a minimum wage, social security, and retirement benefits, combined with the widespread use of informal employment arrangements, creates conditions in which exploitation can flourish. These systemic inequalities constitute a form of structural violence, perpetuating exclusion by denying

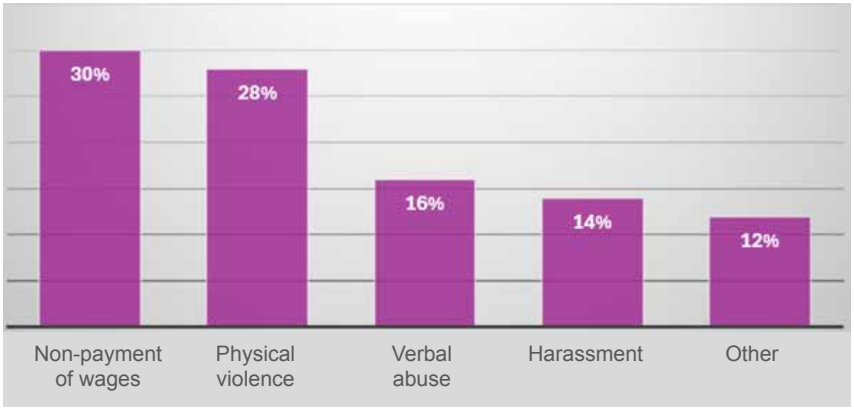

Figure 1: The types of problems and violence experienced by domestic workers from their employers (%)

women equal rights, protection, and opportunities. Abuse ranges from severe forms of forced labour to more commonplace but deeply entrenched violations, such as unpaid wages, excessive working hours, and the denial of weekly rest days.

Field research

To understand the extent of this insecurity, DVV International Tunisia and the National Union of Tunisian Women conducted a survey of 100 women in Greater Tunis, divided into two groups: 50 paid domestic workers and 50 unpaid housewives. Conducted in late 2020 , during the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (curfews and social distancing), the research required an innovative approach. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and random sampling. Most were recruited through the UNFT's existing network, including its support and listening centres for women in vulnerable situations and survivors of violence. Researchers also conducted field visits to streets, transport hubs, shopping centres, and mediation agencies[1] to reach domestic workers. A smaller number of housewives were approached randomly in local markets, souks[2], and supermarkets during weekday morning shopping hours (9:00-11:00 a.m.).

The predefined selection criteria required participants to come from modest or low-income socio-economic backgrounds, and deliberately included women with educational levels ranging from illiteracy to higher education, to capture the diverse realities of women whose domestic work remains largely invisible.

The face of precarity

The survey findings present a stark picture of the realities faced by domestic workers in Tunisia. Many women come from economically disadvantaged regions, particularly the North-West and Central-West, and enter domestic work as a result of poverty or decisions made by male guardians rather than by choice.

For paid domestic workers, insecurity is absolute. Half are paid on a day-to-day basis, earning as little as 10 to 40 dinars[3] with no guarantee of employment from one day to the next. Their economic precarity is compounded by difficult working conditions. Many spend more than two hours commuting each day without reimbursement, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, purchasing protective masks at their own expense. The absence of social protection further deepens their vulnerability, with 80% reporting that they have no health insurance and are therefore left to cope with illness or injury on their own. Unsafe working conditions also pose significant health risks. Limited awareness of occupational safety standards exposes domestic workers to occupational health risks, such as musculoskeletal disorders, skin irritations, and respiratory illnesses caused by prolonged exposure to cleaning chemicals.

Most alarming is the widespread experience of abuse and violence. The survey revealed that 34% of the women experienced problems with employers in this regard:

- Refusal to pay wages (30%)
- Physical violence (28%)
- Verbal abuse (16%)
- Harassment (14%)
- Other (12%).

The above offers a stark glimpse into the harsh realities many domestic workers endure behind closed doors. In the face of such violence and exploitation, silence too often prevails.

While limited or a lack of education contributes to many women's ability to understand and claim their rights, it is not the only factor. Their precarious situation and vulnerability arises from the intersection of multiple forms of disadvantage. They are women from impoverished backgrounds working for employers who almost invariably possess greater social and economic power. Fear, shame, economic dependence, and the absence of family support frequently prevent them from reporting abuse. Even among the few who seek assistance from the police, justice is rarely obtained. Their vulnerability is further exacerbated by the practices of mediation agencies. Among the 34% of women who paid registration fees in the hope of securing employment, only half ultimately found work, exposing another dimension of economic exploitation. The dependence on poorly regulated mediation agencies reinforces structural violence by entrenching unequal power relations in the recruitment process and deepening workers' economic vulnerability and exploitation.

Yet even within this system of exploitation, quiet forms of resistance emerge. More than half of the women surveyed (54%) refuse to work on Sundays, asserting their identity as mothers and caregivers before that of subordinates.

Unpaid housewives - every one of whom comes from a modest household - experience a different but equally harmful form of invisibility. They devote an undefined amount of time to household maintenance and childcare, often without access to information (62% read neither books nor newspapers) and disconnected from their family's financial realities (60% do not know their spouse's income). Their labour is unpaid, unrecognised, and unvalued.

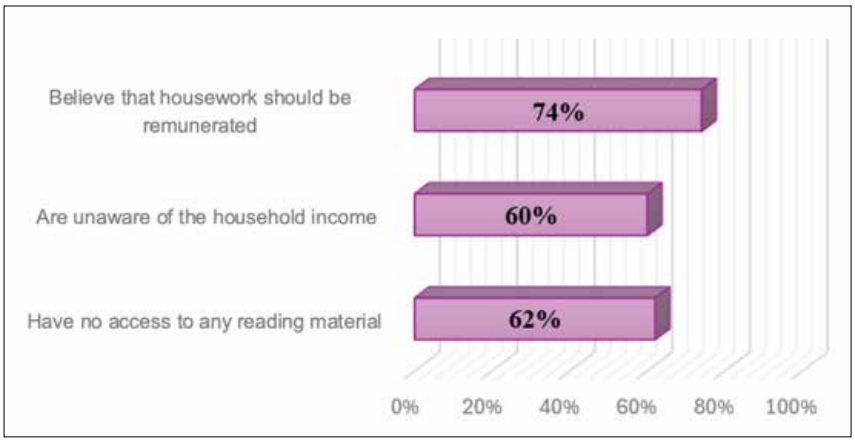

Figure 2: The housewives' paradox: Isolation and awareness (in %)

A clear majority (74%) believe that domestic work should be remunerated. Their responses reveal differing perceptions of who should provide this compensation:

- 38% believe it is the responsibility of the state, in recognition of their contribution to society and the economy.
- 16% believe their husbands should compensate them.
- The remainder (46%) expect support from other family members.

Figure 2 illustrates this paradox - despite being excluded from informational and financial spheres, the women clearly recognise the economic value of their daily labour.

Breaking free from submission: The role of adult education

Far from being passive victims, the women demonstrate remarkable resilience. The survey data - of which only a small part is presented in this article - reveals signs of change emerging beneath the surface. Sixty-four percent of respondents expressed a strong desire for training opportunities to improve their circumstances, while every 'illiterate' woman surveyed stated that she wished to learn to read and write.

Experiences from non-formal education initiatives elsewhere in Africa[4] demonstrate that everyday challenges can provide a powerful foundation for designing effective community learning programmes. In Tunisia, the findings of this survey should not remain merely as documented evidence. Rather, they should prompt broader research into the realities faced by women working in this largely unregulated sector and inform the development of educational and support initiatives grounded in the priorities that the women themselves have identified.

Responding to these findings, DVV International and the National Union of Tunisian Women translated the findings into concrete action. In 2025 a training programme was developed to benefit 60 women across four governorates[5], with a particular focus on raising awareness of the new Law No. 37 on domestic work. The broader initiative is structured around three complementary pillars: professional qualification, rights awareness, and financial autonomy. Together, these pillars seek to equip women not only with practical skills but also with the knowledge, confidence, and economic independence needed to exercise their rights and gain greater control over their lives.

Firstly, a recognised certification mechanism should be established. Domestic workers are too often regarded as 'unskilled labour,' despite performing tasks that require a wide range of practical and interpersonal skills. Formally recognising these competencies would strengthen the legitimacy of their profession and improve their social and economic standing.

Secondly, raising awareness of labour and legal rights is essential. Limited knowledge of existing rights is both a symptom and a driver of the women's vulnerability. Equipping them with an understanding of the protections to which they are entitled is a crucial first step towards challenging the silence, exploitation, and impunity that too often characterise the women's working conditions, including abuse and violence they endure.

Finally, functional literacy could reinforce women's autonomy in managing contracts, wages, and personal finances. These educational measures should be complemented by legal reforms that guarantee access to social protection, and establish a fair retirement system.

Together, these interventions would provide women with the skills, knowledge, and institutional support needed to exercise their rights and build more secure futures.

Adult education provides a space for rebuilding self-confidence and learning about one's rights

Conclusion

The stories of these 100 women from the Greater Tunis area are more than a collection of troubling statistics: they constitute a call to action. A non-formal education programme rooted in participants' lived experiences has the potential to become a catalyst for change, enabling women to move from invisibility and vulnerability to empowerment and active participation in shaping their own futures.

In Tunisia, it is time to recognise domestic work for what it truly is: skilled, essential work that deserves the same legal recognition,

labour protections, and social security afforded to other forms of employment. Transforming the home from a site of exploitation and violence into a place of safety, dignity, and decent work requires more than education alone. It also demands decisive political action, including dedicated legislation, effective regulation of mediation agencies, robust enforcement of labour standards, and the establishment of comprehensive social protection systems.

Ensuring the full social, economic, and civic inclusion of domestic workers is an urgent matter of social justice. It is a vital step towards building a more equitable and inclusive society - one in which women's rights are protected, all forms of violence and exploitation are eliminated, and invisible labour is recognised, valued, and afforded the dignity it deserves.

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Endnotes

1 Many domestic workers are recruited through mediation (or placement) agencies that act as intermediaries between workers and households. In the absence of effective regulation and oversight, some agencies have been criticised for facilitating exploitative practices, including misleading recruitment, excessive commissions, and placements without adequate legal safeguards.

2 An open-air marketplace or commercial quarter found in Arab and North African cities, typically featuring stalls selling items such as spices, textiles, and crafts.

3 Official monetary currency.

4 See, for example: Lekoko, R. N., & Kebatenne, O. (2025). *Entrepreneurial seniors: The role of out of school education and training (OSET). MOJA Journal of Adult Education (3)* - about successful non-formal education and training initiatives in Botswana.

5 An administrative land division similar to a province or a state.