



SweepSouth

SweepSouth highlights the pay and working conditions of domestic workers

In South Africa, 2019 was a landmark year: the country’s first ever national minimum wage came into effect on January 1 and with it, hopes that the now-mandated rate of R 20 (\$1.09) per hour signified increased policy attention for low wage earners. For SweepSouth—a platform that connects domestic workers with individuals seeking their services—the new law, although promising, was also somewhat disappointing as domestic work was one of the industries excluded from the new minimum wage legislation.

To better understand the needs of domestic workers and to advocate for change in workers’ pay, SweepSouth conducted a survey of more than 1,300 domestic workers across South Africa. This survey included users on the SweepSouth platform, which connects independent domestic workers with customers, as well as across the sector. It found that standard industry rates are not sufficient to cover workers’ basic needs. The company is using this data to better understand domestic workers’ needs and to advocate for change in the sector.

THE DOMESTIC WORK INDUSTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Domestic work in South Africa can be a volatile sector in which to be employed. The sector recorded job losses of up to 15,000 in 2019, despite 45,000 joining the sector in the previous year.¹ The majority of domestic workers in South Africa do not have contracts, and although their work is intensive, they tend to be paid low wages. In addition to lack of minimum wage coverage, legislation leaves domestic workers outside of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, which mandates a minimum of four months’ maternity leave after childbirth. Finally, many domestic workers are migrants—either internal migrants from different provinces in South Africa or from neighboring countries, most notably Zimbabwe and Malawi.² Given national unemployment rates of 27.6 percent, many women are drawn to domestic work by the sector’s low regulation and even lower barriers to entry.³

SWEEPSOUTH’S APPROACH

SweepSouth wanted to find a way to improve conditions for domestic workers. However, the company survey finds that most domestic workers face substantial challenges. Up to 71 percent of respondents were single mothers and 79 percent of them were sole breadwinners in their households. The average domestic worker supports four people on an income of between R 2,001 (\$109) and R 3,000 (\$160) per month. Transportation forms a major part of domestic workers’

Quick facts about SweepSouth

SweepSouth is a cleaning service company that connects clients to on-demand domestic cleaners through an online booking platform.

Founding year: 2012

Footprint: Kenya, South Africa



Case Study: SWEEPSOUTH

expenses, with 47 percent of domestic workers choosing taxis for safety reasons.

Despite those struggles, a large share of domestic workers either do not know about or have access to government grants, insurance, or savings. Overall, SweepSouth finds that the average cost of living for domestic workers in South Africa tends to outweigh their average income.

SWEEPSOUTH'S FINDINGS AND IMPACT

"SweepStars" receive an average of 80 percent of the cleaning fee and earn an average of R 42 (\$2.29) an hour—well above minimum wage. SweepSouth's findings reiterate the need to consider the totality of people's lives in policy development.

While the average domestic worker earns above the minimum wage in the areas studied, SweepSouth's research indicates that this is not enough to cover their average expenses. Coupled with high levels of job insecurity, this places many in this highly gendered industry at risk of being trapped below a living wage. Moreover, 16 percent of domestic workers surveyed also reported being verbally or physically abused at work—a 3 percent increase over the previous year.⁴

It is essential that employers learn and understand their legal obligations to the domestic workers they employ.

—Aisha Pandor, Chief Executive Officer, SweepSouth

Figure 1: Average monthly expenses for a South African domestic worker



NOTE: TOTAL AVERAGE MONTHLY BASIC EXPENSES: R 3,147 PER MONTH;
DOMESTIC WORKER MONTHLY MINIMUM WAGE: R 2,699 PER MONTH
(AS OF JANUARY 2019).

SOURCE: SWEEPSOUTH SURVEY OF DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA, 2019.

Case Study: SWEEPSOUTH

Addressing the pay and working conditions of domestic workers in South Africa will require the collective effort of on-demand platforms like SweepSouth and policy makers in addition to domestic workers and their collectives and unions. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the ability to earn money and the living conditions for many domestic workers in South Africa. As government-mandated social-distancing protocols were enacted in South Africa, SweepSouth saw an opportunity to continue supporting domestic workers by spearheading an initiative to build a pool of funds that will be made available to SweepStars. The fund, which seeks to raise R 12 million (\$624,000), allows corporations and the public to make donations with the hope of preventing vulnerable families from being unable to meet their basic needs during the pandemic.

- 1 SweepSouth, "Report on Pay and Working Conditions for Domestic Work in SA 2019," SweepSouth, Cape Town, South Africa, May 2019, https://blogdotssweepsouthdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/report-on-pay-and-working-conditions-for-domestic-work-in-sa-2019__final-report-1.pdf.
- 2 Abigail Hunt and Fortunate Machingura, "A Good Gig? The Rise of On-Demand Domestic Work," working paper 07, Overseas Development Institute, London, December 2016, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11155.pdf>.
- 3 Statistics South Africa, "Migration Dynamics of Women, Children and the Elderly in South Africa," report no. 03-51-04, Statistics South Africa, Pretoria, 2020, <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-51-04/Report-03-51-042020.pdf>.
- 4 James de Villieers, "16% of South Africa's Domestic Workers Are Abused at Work, According to a Shocking New Report," *Business Insider South Africa*, May 19, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.co.za/16-of-south-african-domestic-workers-report-being-abused-at-work-sweep-south-report-said-2019-5>.