



PLIGHT OF THE DOMESTIC CHILDCARE WORKER

I am more than a pair of hands: Letter from a childcare worker

Dear Employer,

I am writing this letter with hands that have cradled your children through fevers and nightmares; hands that have prepared thousands of meals, folded countless loads of laundry, soothed tantrums, and wiped away tears you never saw. These same hands are trembling now, not from exhaustion, but from the courage it takes to ask for what I should never have had to ask for in the first place: To be seen, to be valued, to be protected.

Let me begin by saying that I am grateful you opened your home to me when I had few options; thankful that you trusted me with what matters most to you – your children. I have watched them grow, celebrated their first words, soothed their fears, and loved them as if they were my own. This work is not just a job; it is my calling, and like all work, it deserves fair pay and dignified conditions. My love for this profession should not require “sacrificial wages”. It should not mean choosing between safeguarding my health and putting food on the table.

When your two younger brothers moved in, my workload increased significantly. There are now more people in the household to care for, more meals to prepare, and more cleaning to do. My days, which begin at 4am and end near midnight, have grown even longer. I wake before dawn to prepare breakfast and ensure everyone is ready and out the door on time. The day continues with laundry, cleaning, preparing lunch, caring for the baby, and running errands. Then comes dinner preparation, and after dinner, there are dishes to wash, the kitchen to scrub, uniforms to press for the next morning, the house to tidy, and the baby to settle before I can finally collapse into bed near midnight, only to wake again at 4am again. Yet, my salary – **Ksh7,000** per month – remains unchanged. It has never been enough, but now it is laughably inadequate. Let me show you the math: **rent is Ksh2,500, food Ksh2,000, and school fees Ksh5,000.** That's al-

ready **Ksh9,500**, which is **Ksh2,500** more than I earn. And I haven't even accounted for clothing, healthcare, transport, or emergencies. So I borrow from mobile lending apps and microfinance institutions, each loan carrying interest rates that devour the little I have. No grace period, no mercy. Each borrowed shilling digs me deeper into a hole I cannot climb out of. I am living one emergency away from losing everything.

Under Kenyan labour law, the current minimum wage for domestic workers is **Ksh16,113** per month. This is not a favour I am asking for. It is my right. I am asking you to pay me what my labour is worth. I am asking you to see that I am not just a helper, not just a pair of hands always available, always working.

When you leave for work each morning, you carry with you the gift of peace of mind, the knowledge that your children are in loving hands, that your home is running smoothly, and that the people you cherish most are safe and cared for. That peace of mind is the work I do. It is what makes it possible for you to walk out that door and earn your living, to focus on your career, attend meetings, meet deadlines, and build the life you envision for your family. I take pride in being part of that foundation. But I am also a mother, a daughter, a woman with dreams deferred and bills that don't care about my kindness, and my work should sustain my world as it sustains yours.

Last year when I collapsed from exhaustion and illness, you helped me get to the hospital, a kindness I will never forget. But the aftermath was a nightmare. I spent two months recovering, watching my savings disappear under the weight of medical bills, terrified I would lose my job because I could not work. I had no health insurance, no safety net, nothing to fall back on. When I finally returned, I was weaker, poorer, and more afraid than ever before.

This year, I am asking for health-care coverage as part of my em-



PHOTO COURTESY OF UNSPLASH

ployment. Not as charity, but as basic protection that every worker deserves. I am asking for a written contract that clearly outlines my duties, working hours, and days off, so that I am not constantly walking on eggshells, wondering whether asking for what is rightfully mine will cost me everything.

In line with my statutory rights, I am requesting my annual leave of 21 days. Over the two years I have been working for you, I have, without complaint, worked on Sundays, a day many reserve for family. But I am tired of feeling invisible, even to my own children. I have missed birthdays, school events, and moments when they needed me most, because work has always come first. I therefore request to take a portion of my cumulatively accrued leave, a few days each quarter, so that I can rest, heal, reconnect with my

family, and remember what it feels like to be more than just a worker.

I am not asking for anything extraordinary. I am asking for what is right: Fair pay, protection of my health, and time to rest. I am asking to be seen not as a convenience, but as a human being whose labour has value, whose life has worth, and whose dreams matter.

You have been a kind employer in many ways, and I believe you are a good person. I believe that if you truly understood what it means to survive on Ksh7,000 a month, to work without rest, to live without safety, you would not hesitate to make these changes. I believe you want to do right by me, just as I have always tried to do right by your family.

So I ask, will you meet me halfway? Will you recognise that caring for your children is skilled,

demanding, and exhausting work that deserves a living wage, basic protections, and human dignity? Will you help transform this job from one of survival into one of security?

I hope your answer is yes. Because I want to stay. I want to continue being part of your children's lives. I want to keep doing this work I love, but under conditions that allow me to live with dignity.

I am ready to discuss these requests at your earliest convenience. I hope we can find a path forward that honours both the trust you have placed in me and the rights I am finally brave enough to claim.

Respectfully,

Your Childcare Worker.

NOTE TO READERS:

This letter represents the voice of thousands of women childcare workers across Kenya; women who are indispensable yet invisible, valued yet exploited, trusted with our children yet denied basic dignity. The challenges highlighted here are not isolated incidents but systemic realities. As Kenya advances its National Care Policy 2025 and works toward ratifying ILO Conventions 189 and 190, this letter is a call to action, not just for individual employers, but for a nation ready to recognise care work as the essential infrastructure it has always been.

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Undervalued and unprotected: Inside Kenya's paid childcare sector

At just 29, Jane (not her real name) carries a lifetime of scars from work she thought would offer her a future but has instead trapped her in cycles of exploitation, violence, and fear. Orphaned in her teens, she was sent from her rural home to Nairobi with the promise that a "good family" would educate her. Instead, she found herself doing domestic work: Cooking, cleaning, and caring for children for up to 16 hours a day, without pay, rest, or protection. Any mistakes she made were met with insults, beatings and threats.

As one would expect, Jane, then a teenager, tried to escape by changing employers, only to find the same pattern repeated: Extreme hours of work, less than Ksh5,000 a month as pay, no written contract, and constant verbal or physical abuse.

Marriage did not deliver safety either. It brought new forms of intimate partner violence. With children to feed and no savings, she returned to the only work available to her; low-paid childcare and domestic service in Kenyan homes, where the line between employment and exploitation is dangerously thin.

Jane's experience is far from unique. According to a 2024 baseline study conducted by the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) for the Action for Paid Childcare Sector Transformation (ACT) project in Kenya and Malawi, 75.8 percent of childcare workers in Kenya earn below Ksh10,000 per month. This is below the national minimum wage of Ksh16,113 for domestic workers. To put this into perspective, of the respondents, only 13 percent reported that their income was enough to meet basic expenses, leaving most constantly exposed to economic shocks and coercion.

The study also revealed that childcare work is highly feminised, with 95 percent of paid childcare workers in Kenya being women, most of them young adults between 18 and 35.

A 2024 capacity assessment survey on the paid childcare ecosystem in Nairobi, Kisumu, and Kakamega, conducted by the Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW), paints an equally stark picture. According to the study, over 88 percent of childcare workers lack formal contracts, 70 percent have not received any training on how to prevent or respond to sexual and gender-based violence, 59 percent are unaware of existing childcare policies, and 75 percent lack access to financial services, with only two percent using formal banking.

Despite this, Kenyan parents express strong satisfaction with childcare. WUSC's baseline revealed that 88.2 percent of Kenyan parents are satisfied with the quality of paid childcare services, demonstrating the contradiction at the heart of this sector. Women like Jane are indispensable, yet they remain invisible.

Unfortunately, this contradiction does not apply to Kenya alone. A gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) technical brief titled *"From Local Realities to Global Lessons"*,



Representatives of World University Service of Canada, the Coalition on Violence Against Women, and the Women's Legal Resources Centre during an ACT Project Knowledge Exchange Forum held in Nairobi in October 2025. PHOTO | COVAW



An ACT Project community dialogue in Nairobi, in 2025. PHOTO | COVAW

produced under the ACT project, compares Kenya and Malawi to other African countries such as Ghana, Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda, and Mozambique.

According to this GESI brief, Ghana has one of the most dynamic emerging private childcare markets in West Africa, with an expanding network of centre-based care. However, quality remains constrained by weak regulation and reliance on household fees.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, has invested in a stronger pre-primary framework, with accredited early childhood programmes and short professional courses for caregivers, though services for children under three remain largely informal.

The same study showcases promising models in Rwanda and South Africa. Rwanda's national standards, short accredited training programmes, and government-supported community

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childcare centres, have helped raise the status and skills of childcare workers. South Africa's public subsidies to community-based early childhood

centres, combined with clear licensing and staff-to-child ratios, demonstrate how targeted public investment can stabilise a sector that would otherwise rely on underpaid labour from poor women.

Put together, these examples show that Kenya has a clear roadmap for success if it chooses it: Set national standards, expand accredited training, and invest public resources so that childcare is recognised as essential social infrastructure, and not an afterthought.

The ACT project, which is being funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by WUSC as the lead partner, COVAW, and other partners, aims to push Kenya in that direction. Its goal is to transform paid childcare from a job of last resort into a professional, equitable sector by improving wages and working conditions,

strengthening worker networks, and expanding access to finance for women-led childcare enterprises.

Kenya is making significant strides in recognising the care economy as a key driver of social and economic development. At the national level, the draft National Care Policy 2025 aims to formalise caregiving and early childhood development, ensuring that care work is no longer invisible but central to national planning. In Nairobi, the county government, in collaboration with key stakeholders such as COVAW, has been developing the Childcare Facilities Regulations to guide the effective management of childcare services within the county.

The ACT Project is playing a pivotal role in this shift. By supporting the development of regulatory frameworks, facilitating capacity-building for childcare providers, advocating for quality standards, and promoting social and financial support for women caregivers, ACT is contributing directly to a more sustainable and equitable care economy.

The combined efforts of national policy, county regulation, and targeted projects like ACT are redefining care work in Kenya, transforming it from invisible domestic labour to a recognised, regulated, and valued part of the country's economic and social infrastructure.

For Jane, the turning point came when she attended a community dialogue organised under ACT, where she learned that the violence and harassment she had faced were not "just part of the job" or "her fault", but violations she could report. The project is now supporting hundreds of women to understand their rights, organise into collectives, and demand safer, better-paid childcare work, driving the transformation of a sector that Kenya depends on, yet has long undervalued.

As Kenya advances its care economy, this is the moment to match progress with bold legal reform. The government's ongoing efforts must now be anchored in stronger protections for the care workers who sustain homes, families, and the productivity of the nation. This includes the long-overdue ratification of ILO Convention 189, which guarantees domestic workers fair wages, written contracts, rest periods, and social protection, rights that remain elusive for most paid childcare and domestic workers in Kenya. Equally urgent is the ratification of ILO Convention 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work. President William Ruto has repeatedly affirmed Kenya's commitment to gender equality, safe workplaces, and the dignity of labour. Advancing these ratifications would transform those commitments into action. By aligning with international labour standards, Kenya would send a powerful signal that care work is not casual labour but essential, skilled work deserving of protection, respect, and fair compensation.