“All of a sudden, I found myself surrounded by a group of women who called me ‘colleague’. They shared their stories. I learned about my rights. I had no idea that I actually had rights!”

At a meeting in Mexico City, members of the Mexican National Union of Domestic Workers put the gloves on to gear up for claiming their rights. They have driven a new national agenda to fully protect the rights of 2.4 million domestic workers, including through a collective labour contract.

Norma Palacios used to find it hard to talk about her life as a domestic worker in Mexico City. But after years of enduring arduous days and diminishing comments from her boss, she decided to speak up and became involved with an association for domestic workers. Palacios went on to become one of the founding leaders of the national union of domestic workers, SINACTRAHO, where she has worked to shape a new national agenda for 2.4 million domestic workers, drawing on support from the Instituto de Liderazgo Simone de Beauvoir, which is funded by UN Women’s Fund for Gender Equality. In 2017, for the first time, government, civil society, trade unions and employers came together around ratifying ILO Convention 189, on the rights of domestic workers. They developed a legislative proposal backed by 18 senators to align the Federal Labour Law with the Convention in order to reduce poor work conditions and discrimination.

Further progress came through joint advocacy by the Institute and SINACTRAHO, which led to the adoption of a collective labour contract for domestic workers, a significant advance in a mostly unregulated area of work. Yet there is more to achieve. Palacios would like to see formal legal recognition of the basic rights of domestic workers, including a minimum salary, paid leave, and access to basic social security services for them and their families. She is hopeful their struggle will bring changes. “We are not going to disappear any time soon because our work is important,” she says. “Sooner or later they’ll have to recognize our rights.”

In 2017, the Fund for Gender Equality managed a portfolio of USD 8.1 million with 26 projects designed to benefit a collective labour contract for domestic workers, a significant advance in a mostly unregulated area of work. Yet there is more to achieve. Palacios would like to see formal legal recognition of the basic rights of domestic workers, including a minimum salary, paid leave, and access to basic social security services for them and their families. She is hopeful their struggle will bring changes. “We are not going to disappear any time soon because our work is important,” she says. “Sooner or later they’ll have to recognize our rights.”

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In 2017, the United Republic of Tanzania, the Pastoral Women’s Council has helped 4,400 Maasai pastoralist women improve their livelihoods and economic status through greater control over water, land and livestock. Access to clean water has given women more time to attend community meetings and literacy classes. The strengthening of 56 village community banks has opened access to credit and loans, and members of savings groups are now better able to purchase food, and pay school and medical fees. This reduces dependency on their husbands and improves their status in the household.

An initiative by Atiika linking migrant domestic workers to business opportunities at home in the Philippines has allowed 145 workers to save and invest USD 690,000. Fifty women have set up or expanded businesses such as small shops, Internet cafes and enterprises marketing agricultural products.

Nearly 500 women from the poorest, most remote municipalities in the Bordj Bou Arreridj region of Algeria are producing cheese, honey and wool with assistance from El Ghaith. Greater incomes have empowered them as active community members. Impressed by the results, the Ministry of National Solidarity plans to replicate the initiative in other areas.

In 2017 the Fund commissioned its first independent evaluation to assess USD 84 million invested in 121 grants to civil society organizations across 80 countries since its creation in 2009. The evaluation indicated that the Fund has increased the visibility of women’s human rights, forged stronger civil society networks for gender equality, and established local partnerships for women’s empowerment, directly reaching over a half million women and men and benefitting millions more through policy shifts. In 2018, the Fund will provide grants and specialized training to 10 grantees to upscale their projects and use social innovation approaches such as design thinking and behavioural insights.