

Home Is Where the Work Is: The Color of Domestic Labor

By Preeti Shekar

In 1998, 48-year-old Parvathi Ammal came to Cupertino, California from Madurai, India, to visit her distant but well-to-do relatives on their invitation. During her originally planned three-month stay, she helped the Gopalan family with household chores, including taking care of their two children and occasional cooking. At the end of her stay, the family invited her to continue living with them as a domestic help for a monthly payment of \$300, convincing her that working informally and overstaying her visitor visa, were not crimes.

Unfortunately, within a few months, her sweet deal turned into a nightmare as she realized that her “employers” were out to exploit her. “At first, my work was well-defined—daily light chores like doing the dishes, and taking care of the kids when both [parents] were away at work. But within weeks, the work started piling up.”

Ammal’s work load ranged from doing the laundry and mowing the lawn, to cooking three meals a day for a family of five, and constantly cleaning up after them. Her health deteriorated, she was paid irregularly, and she was not allowed to call anyone. With her scant English skills, Ammal was helpless and endured the abuse until some friends helped her escape back to Madurai, where she now makes Indian pickles for a living.

Exploitation Begins at Home

Parvathi Ammal, it turns out, is one of the lucky ones because her story of abuse and exploitation, unfortunately, is not unique.

Every year millions of Asian women migrate from their home countries to work as domestic workers, service workers, and sex workers in the United States, Canada, Europe, and the Middle East. This international flow of labor, so to speak, is set in motion by the harsh domestic and trade policies of the first and third world governments, which systematically disempower the poor.

In the United States, cutbacks in healthcare and inadequate access to affordable childcare have made the middle-class desperate for cheap household labor.

Consequently, immigrant women constitute a major proportion of the growing domestic workforce in the United States, with Latinas making up a majority in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area. Sadly, a growing number of these immigrant domestic laborers frequently find themselves in inextricable situations of exploitation and abuse.

Domestic work is probably the most taken-for-granted labor worldwide. Yet, it is the most crucial and time-consuming and it fuels the economic engine of any society. In the United States, the history of domestic labor is a study in racism. The first domestic laborers during the colonial period were African slaves. With the abolishment of slavery, at least on paper, Black women provided the next round of domestic labor from the early 20th century up until the 1970s. Now, it is the turn of immigrant women of color to serve as the backbone of the United States economy. A detailed study of domestic workers in New York found that 95 percent of them are people of color, and 93 percent are women.

Sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo notes that while the structure of domestic work poses considerable obstacles to traditional organizing, it can open the door to new tactics and strategies that take advantage of women’s ability to network, connect, and draw strength from each other. Since the women are in vulnerable positions and cannot confront their employers, they have to be organized through self-help seminars that raise consciousness around issues of exploitation and

teach strategies for negotiating better wages and benefits.

As for the feminist response to the problems of domestic workers in the United States, it has been lukewarm at best. Even the National Organization for Women has declined to comment on the issue of global trafficking of women, notes activist Grace Chang. “Perhaps the real issue is that privileged women of the First World, even self-avowed feminists, may be some of the primary consumers and beneficiaries in this trade,” she adds.¹

Ultimately, these women’s struggles to live a life with dignity point glaringly to the flawed structures currently in place that are predicated on a system of exploitation of the marginalized. While policy reform is the goal of many of these struggles, and would indeed help alleviate the hardships of many an immigrant woman laborer, it is still

an inadequate solution in the long run.

The greater need is for widespread, sustained mass movements of resistance that challenge the currently accepted norm of top-down capitalist economic paradigms with their many inequities—ranging from the disproportionately high income levels of corporate executives to the alarming increase in defense expenditure at the cost of national health and education programs. Worker-owned cooperatives are one alternative to the capitalist model of ownership, but service labor in a capitalist framework will always remain open to exploitation, as long as manual labor is rendered invisible and not valued by mainstream socio-economic systems. ■

1. Chang, Grace, *Disposable Domestics: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, South End Press, 2000.

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The Domestic Worker Coalition of the San Francisco Bay Area

In 2004, a triad of Oakland-San Francisco Bay Area grassroots groups consisting of Mujeres Unidas Activas, the Women’s Collective of La Raza Centro Legal, and People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER) designed a participatory research project, comprising of over 250 surveys, to analyze the working conditions of household workers. The surveys revealed that most Bay Area household workers typically support two adults and two children on average, but more than 80 percent of them do not earn enough to support a family of this size. One in three workers reported that in the last three months they had worked more hours than agreed. There were also claims that employers shame and bully their workers, so they are too intimidated to fight effectively for their rights.

In addition to documenting the abuses and outlining the demands of

household workers, the Coalition sponsored a six-part study to examine sexism and the division of labor, the history of domestic work in the United States, and household worker movements in other countries.

This participatory campaign, which explored the state of wages, benefits, and other issues that could help workers unite and effectively organize in the long run, is a successful example of outreach that’s driven by research and activism generated from within. The surveys reflect the extreme marginalization experienced by domestic workers: More than 95 percent of the surveyed women attested to the dire need for better wages, safer workplaces, paid overtime, sick days, holidays, health benefits, and the right to unionize and protect their rights. Other concerns expressed included not being paid on time, or being paid less than the agreed amount. And almost 10 percent reported that they had been sexually harassed or experienced some sort of violence on the job, while about a third reported

being insulted or threatened by employers.

As part of the work in following up the survey, the San Francisco Bay Area Domestic Worker Coalition has forged alliances with the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) and the Los Angeles Pilipino Workers’ Center to form the California Household Workers’ Coalition. Coalition members co-wrote Assembly Bill 2536, which would have extended the right to overtime compensation to household workers and fined abusive employers and those who fail to pay their employees. The proposal passed both houses, but was vetoed by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Despite the veto, the household workers see this proposal as the first step towards gaining respect and putting an end to the abuses in the industry.¹ In the future they hope to address issues of occupational safety and health, health-care access, and protection from discrimination. —P.S. ■

1. www.mujeresunidas.net

Nahar Alam and Workers' Awaaz: Protestor Prototype

Nahar Alam migrated to the United States from Bangladesh under the assumption that this transatlantic journey would help her escape the cycle of alienation and abuse she had experienced as the wife of an already married man since the age of 14. But without money, a knowledge of English, or friends, she soon found herself powerless again—as a domestic worker in New York City.

Nahar found lodging with a family in Astoria, Queens, and began work as a garment worker, earning 35 cents per finished piece. When in 15 days she had made only \$35, she realized that she would have to find other sources of income. Nahar then embarked on a series of jobs cooking, cleaning, and baby-sitting, often working 12-hour days for as little as \$50 a week. Meanwhile, she also spent long hours at the public library, teaching herself English. Finally, a couple who had hired Nahar to tutor their daughter in Bengali, introduced her to Sakhi, a non-profit organization for South Asian women. Through them, Nahar found full-time babysitting work at a decent wage, with a family that treated her with dignity and allowed her time to volunteer at Sakhi and learn English at Hunter College.

Sakhi eventually hired Nahar Alam to organize a group of South Asian immigrant women in exploitative, underpaid, and abusive domestic work situations. Many of these women were denied basic privileges, such as the use of a phone, days off, or even their promised pay. "They are isolated, they don't know English.



Many come to America because of problems at home and are afraid that [if they complain] their employers will send them back," explains Nahar.

Nahar organized demonstrations outside homes of exploitative employers, implemented innovative outreach methods, and handed out flyers on legal minimum wage and unjust working condition regulations. She conducted training workshops on workers' and immigrants' rights, on labor laws, and on negotiating with employers. In 1997, her group split from Sakhi and renamed itself Workers' Awaaz (Workers' Voice). With the help of Mike Wishnie, an ACLU attorney specializing in labor rights, Workers' Awaaz sued on behalf of an exploited member and succeeded in getting a \$20,000 settlement in back pay from the employer.

Fighting legal battles for workers' compensation is not the primary goal of her organization, explains Nahar, but she wanted to set a precedent that would demonstrate to the women of Workers' Awaaz that their rights were very real, and that they

should not be afraid to exercise them. Today, Workers' Awaaz is made up of 30 domestic workers and a dozen volunteers and receives funding from several foundations and public service organizations.

Nahar Alam continues to work on reaching out to other exploited, low-wage immigrant communities. She helped start Andolan (Movement), a grassroots group that organizes low-wage South Asian women workers—mostly domestic, but also restaurant and retail employees—from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Andolan has helped its members resist a range of violations by their employers—from federal and state minimum wage laws, to sexual harassment and abuse, to assault and false imprisonment. Because of the power disparity between employer and worker, Andolan will sometimes resort to protests outside employer homes and workplaces to get a response to specific grievances and to raise public awareness. Successful cases have resulted in payment of back wages and other damages. —P.S. ■

Photo: (From left to right) Murshida Begum, Board Member of Andolan and domestic worker, stands with Nahar Alam, Founder and Executive Director of Andolan.

Courtesy of Workers' Awaaz

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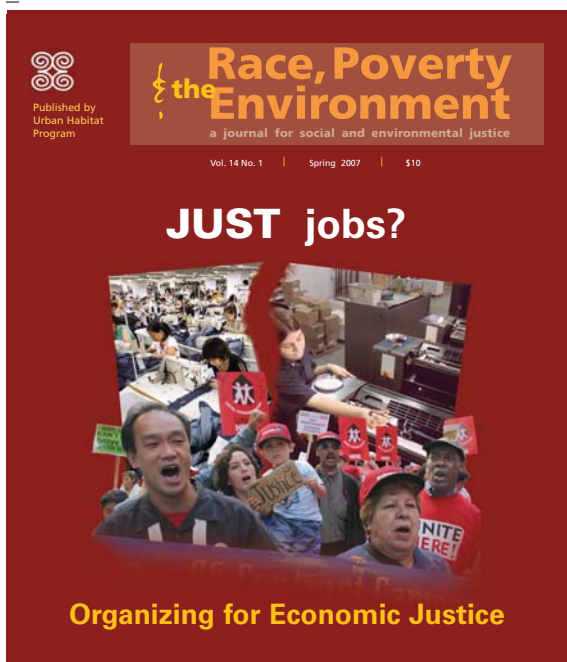
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