

Racialiation, exploitation and fear: the reality of domestic work in the US

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I must admit, Mariaam Bhatti's column is always the first item I turn to when I get my hands on a freshly printed copy of Metro Éireann. It provides a unique insight about domestic work in Ireland. But living in the US now I have asked myself: how is the situation here?

I will try to address this question, not in the least claiming that I can provide such a perspective as Mariaam does. I know what it is like to face racism, and to be a female migrant, but I do not share the experience of being a domestic worker.

However, they have in some cases been able to tell of their own experiences. One said: "My employers held my passport, prevented me from leaving the home alone, and forced me to sleep in the room with the baby rather than having my own bed. They paid me far less than I was promised when I left my home country they told me that immigration police would come arrest me if I tried to leave."

These are among the most common complaints the US National Alliance for Domestic Workers has heard from domestic worker trafficking survivors.

Domestic work is a significant and growing sector in the United States. The American Community Service found that in 2010 the number of nannies, housecleaners and caregivers working in private households was 726,437 – an increase of 10 per cent compared to 2004. It can be assumed, though, that the real number is greater, since many workers are undocumented.

Like everywhere else, in the US domestic work is nearly exclusively female, and 65 per cent of domestic workers are immigrants or people of colour. Moreover, although domestic work is critical to the US economy, labour protections are few and hardships are many.

Domestic workers are not covered by the protections of key federal labour and employment laws and standards, such as the National Labor Relations Act or the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

According to a 2012 survey, 48 per cent of workers are paid an hourly wage that is below the level needed to adequately support a family. The same survey indicates that 25 per cent of live-in workers had responsibilities that prevented them from getting at least five hours of uninterrupted sleep at night during the week prior to interview, and 91 per cent of workers who encountered problems with their working conditions did not complain because they were afraid they would lose their job.

The survey also found that 20 per cent of respondents had no food to eat in their homes in the previous month because they had not enough money to buy any.

There is much more that needs to be said about the immigration system, and about the racialisation of domestic workers, but let me end for now with the words of Daniela, a domestic care worker who worked 17 hours a day for just \$3 an hour: "You can't say anything, move, or do anything because of your fear. The fear should end." There is nothing to add. That fear has to end.

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