

Domestic Worker Stories from Around the World

To illustrate the need for a strong

ILO Decent Work for Domestic Workers Convention and Recommendation.

These come from the personal stories of 80 domestic workers who worked in countries around the world. They were compiled by the National Employment Law Project and the National Domestic Workers Alliance (USA)

Issue Area: Disclosure of Conditions of Work

Many women have been deceived about the terms of their employment by agencies and employers. *Noorjehan*, a migrant worker from India, was not informed that there would be 26 people in the house in which she was employed in Oman. *Milagros* was told she would work reasonable hours, receive minimum wage and benefits, and have her travel and visa costs paid by her employer. When she arrived in Florida, she was told she would work 14 hour days and would receive \$300 US per month, from which \$50 would be deducted to repay the employer for travel and visa costs. *Winda*, from Indonesia, was not told that she would be cleaning a 7 floor home in Hong Kong, caring for a family of five, cleaning their home, three cars and an additional home. She was not told that she would have no days off.

Beatriz is an Uruguayan woman who worked in the United States. “I arrived at my employers’ home after they insisted for months, convincing me of the many advantages I would have...I believed what they told me, that I was the right person, and that they couldn’t think of anyone else to take care of their children....During the day, I’d do my chores, cook, clean and take care of the children – months passed like this, working day and night – I forgot that I was a person, only looking after the children and the housework...When I started asking for time off, Sundays off, the English classes I’d been promised, it all got out of hand...I got fired.”

Issue Area: Hours worked



Anali is a domestic worker in California. She was hired to care for an elderly woman, but ended up cooking, washing clothes and ironing for 12 hours per day. She was paid less than \$4 per hour.

The agency for whom *Maria* works in California, offered to pay her at \$12 US per hour for work between 7a.m. and 11 p.m. for taking care of a comatose patient – work that would require extraordinary physical strength to lift the patient for bathing and moving. When she asked her agency about overtime pay for work from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., *Maria* was told that after 8 hours work, the rate DROPS to \$8.75 per hour. When *Maria* got another assignment from the agency, she learned that the householder was paying the agency \$23.50 per hour, but *Maria* received only \$12.

Mary in California (US) works daily for eleven hours, without overtime pay. The rate of pay for an eleven hour day works out to \$7.00 per hour, less than the California minimum wage.

Merci works in a household in Peru. She was originally told that her hours would be from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., but she is working until 9 p.m. without any extra compensation. With the two hour commute each night, she doesn't get home until 11 p.m.

For 26 years, *Victoria* in California worked 15 hours per day, Monday through Friday, with only a 30- minute break per day. She was a live-in worker and was not allowed to leave the house. The most she received in a week was \$275 US for cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, washing the car, caring for a pet and 6 people. Another California worker was never paid overtime, even though her shift was from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. – with many call outs in the middle of the night to give medication to the lady of the house.

Jennifer, an Indonesian worker in Taiwan, worked for a family with three children and a book shop. She cleaned house, washing all the clothes by hand, and then cooked and cleaned at the bookshop until 10 p.m. She says, "I was not allowed to go out and I didn't have any day off. There was no off hours."



Noorjehan, an Indian migrant worker, says, "I used to get up at 6 a.m. and start working. There would be no rest for me throughout the day as I had to look after a family of 26 people. I had no rest in the afternoon and worked til late at night. No off time was given and I had no weekends off. This was very tiring for me."

Alejandra came to the US from Peru. Her normal shift was from 6:30 a.m. to 1 a.m. She told a newspaper reporter, "It was very hard. I came to this country because they offered me health insurance, and they never delivered. They wanted me to work day and night." A jury recently awarded Alejandra and a co-worker \$125,000 in compensation for their experiences.



Beatriz worked in the United States. She had no hours or days off, "holidays, nothing. I don't think I slept at all during the first three months I was there taking care of the children. If I managed to sleep some at night, my brain would be somewhat alert, listening to their breathing."

Ms. *D. Karki* is an immigrant worker from Nepal employed in Princeton, New Jersey. She says, “I had to start 6 am and finished only at midnight. I worked long hours but if I reached work even 5 minutes late, my employer started yelling at me.... Some time I did work on-call when I had a day off. I did not get compensated. I had no rest hours.”



Lilian worked for an elderly woman that she cared for in the woman’s house in Florida. “I bathed her, changed her diapers, cleaned her dentures, gave her pills, cooked meals, and cleaned a little bit. It is around the clock work, because she would often wake up needed help at night. I slept on a cot in the hall outside her door.”

Cahyani from Indonesia came to Taiwan through an agency. She worked every day from around 6:00 to 8 or 10 p.m., with no day off. She wasn’t allowed to leave the house, and says, “I was on duty every day until all the work was done.” Similarly, *Unipah* was expected by her Taiwanese employer to be on call every day for 24 hours, without being allowed to leave the house.

Maria in Peru works 12 to 16 hours a day, even though Peruvian law is that a normal workday is 8 hours. If the couple that she works for goes out at night, they wake her up to take care of them when they return. *Fanny*, a 15 year old domestic worker, from Peru, is required to be on call for the family for whom she works 16 hours every day. Neither receives extra hours or time off for their extra work.

Ms. B. Malla worked for a family in Scarsdale, New York as a live –in domestic worker. “I had to wake up 2 or 3 times at night to feed the child, change diaper and I had to carry the baby 15 to 20 minutes till baby fell asleep. I suffered from lack of sleep. I wanted to do my best work but all the time my employer used to yell at me... When I was at work, I had no rest time to work my own things. I worked continuously from morning to night.”



Iliana from Guatemala worked in the United States. Her job was a 6th floor townhouse with a basement. “The first thing my employer asked me too much to do and didn’t treat me like a human being. She used to give a list of things I had to do every day and they never understood the time ... It was a weekly salary (\$600 US from 9-6 Monday to Friday) but I always worked more than the hours I had agreed to... they never respect our lunch time and a lot of times we would start eating and she would call down to us to bring her cell phone to her or her notebook or something.”

A.Nhung is a Vietnamese worker in Taiwan. She worked for a full year without a single day off. “In the night time, I had to get up every 3 hours to help the old man drink some milk and change his diaper. For that reason, I was not able to sleep, my eyes got hurt.” After one year of work, Ms. Nhung still could not pay off her debt to the labor broker.

Apart from nonpayment for extra hours, many workers receive very low pay. In some cases, the pay rate violates minimum wage laws. *Piedad* worked in the United States from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. for a total of \$250 per week. *Christmas* worked 12 hours per day five days a way for \$500 US per week.



Emelia worked 7 days a week, fourteen hours per day, for \$500 US a month. Another Mexican worker in Florida worked for an entire year without being paid at all.

Issue Area: Payment in Kind—Deductions for Meals and Lodging Furnished by Employers

A male domestic worker employed to keep house and cook for his Coral Gables Florida employer was paid only \$190 US per week. His employer said that the housing was worth \$900 per month, and deducted that amount from his pay.

For many workers, food and housing that is furnished is inadequate and substandard. *Unipah* is a migrant worker from Indonesia. She worked in Taipei for a private household, taking care of an elderly sick lady. She says that very often the food was not enough and that she was only allowed to eat what the family left over. She subsisted on rice, potatoes and green vegetables and was often hungry. Like many other live in household workers, Unipah slept on the floor in the same room as her patient, and kept her belongings in boxes and plastic bags. *Noorjehan* was required to sleep in the children’s room on the floor, and was given mainly khubz (A flat bread) to eat by her employer in Oman. *Arcela* slept on a storeroom floor. *Lilian* slept on a cot in the hallway near her elderly patient’s room. *Sugyianti* rotated between the five houses of the five family members for whom she worked, and never had a place to call her own or keep her things. *Cita* slept in the children’s playroom. *Milagros* was required to sleep in the same bed as her employer, and told that she was costing too much money by drinking too much milk and using too much toilet paper.



Otilia is a Bolivian woman who came to the US to take care of a diplomat's family. After working seven days a week, for 12-14 hours a day, forbidden to leave the home or make phone calls, she and her young daughter lived in a basement corridor next to the laundry room.

Other employers make deductions from pay for other reasons. *Regina's* employer routinely deducts \$30 to \$70 per month from her pay. She has had pay deducted for failing to say good morning to her employer, or for breaking anything. *Ika's* employer deducted for waking up late, even though she was only allowed two hours of sleep at night.

Issue Area: Agencies

Cahyani from Indonesia was told by her broker that engaging in a fraudulent marriage is a good way to go to Taiwan. She had to pay, out of her monthly wage of NTD 22,000, 14,000 in the first year of work, and 11,000 in the second. In addition, the employer paid NTD 300,000 to the broker, and then deducted that amount from her salary.

Jennifer from the Philippines had to pay 10,000 Philippine pesos to her agency for her loan payment to travel to work in Taiwan, but the agency never repaid the loan on her behalf. *Unipah's* employer in Taipei never paid her, and her agency did not help her find a new employer, even though she was working from 5 a.m. until 11 p.m., caring for an elderly woman, washing, cleaning and cooking for the whole family. Because she didn't receive her pay, she was afraid to run away.

Marivic took out a loan of HK \$15,000 to pay her placement fees, but the job provided to her lasted only a week. The recruiter took her passport, and used the placement fee to secure a personal loan. After a month at her second job, she was terminated because of the loan and harassing calls made to the employer from the person who had made the loan. When the employer paid *Marivic*, the recruiter took all the money.

The domestic workers' union in Peru SINTTRAHOL, has filed complaints against two agencies for their abuse of domestic workers. Through their investigation, they have found two dozen other workers who say they have also been abused by the agency. When *Maria* was unfairly fired from her employment, her

employer told her to go the agency to get her salary, and the agency told her it was the employer's fault. It took legal action for her to receive her pay.

Lory is an Indonesian migrant who most recently worked in Hinschu. "I stayed in my Illegal Broker house. I paid for him NT\$ 6,000 for job. Not only once I paid for him, but every time I have a new job I have to pay for him NT\$ 6,000. My work is always changing. Sometimes taking care of old people and sometimes I work at fruit farm. Sometimes there is no work. If there is no work but I still stay in my Illegal Broker house and I have to pay NT\$ 250 per day for him for staying there. ...When I stayed in my Illegal Broker house I cannot go out and there is no day off. I felt unhappy. I could not leave the house and could not do my own things. I stayed in his house from March 22, 2009 to October 6, 2009. We were 40 people staying in that house; 38 Indonesian, 1 Vietnamese, and 1 Thailand. On October 6, 2009 around 7:00 A.M there were 10 people from Hsinchu Immigration came to the Illegal Broker house and arrested me and 39 of my friend. So we were all arrested."

Relative Responsibility of both the Agency and the Household. *Phat* from Cambodia worked through an agency to get a domestic job in Malaysia. The recruitment agency took her travel documents and passport. She was mistreated in Malaysia both by the recruiter and her employer. Her employer required her to work from 5 a.m. to midnight, sometimes sleeping only two hours a night after she cleaned the house of her employer and the houses of eleven of his relatives. She was beaten by the recruitment agency's partner in Malaysia as well as by her employer. *Arsela* from Indonesia was also brought to Taiwan through a fraudulent marriage. The employer paid the broker for her work, but she received only about half of the amount of her actual wage, NTD 21,000. After she was no longer needed in that household, the broker sold her to another broker for NTD 300,000. *Lima*, who was from India to Oman to work for a family there paid her broker approximately \$1,000. In order to make the payment, she sold her own gold and her mother's.

She says, "I want to go home. When I go home, I will tear up my passport and not leave my country again."



Ari's broker in Indonesia told her that she would work as a caregiver, and she signed a contract to that effect. But when she arrived in Taiwan, the broker there took her to work in a factory, where she worked 18 hours per day and without a day off. She was not allowed a rest time until each order was finished. *Vero's* broker in Taiwan took all of her personal things like her passport, address book, and mobile phone. The broker also searched her pockets and took anything that looked like an address or phone number. Her employer worked her seven days a week, including night work two or three times a night to change her patient's diaper. The employer did not allow her to leave the house.

When *Isukapalli*, an Indian migrant worker who went to work in Oman, complained to her broker that her employer was beating her, the broker simply stopped picking up the phone when she called. Even though her contract provided for a monthly salary of \$195, she was only paid \$104 for the first three months and then \$117 for the next four. She eventually ran away from her abusive employer and sought refuge in the Indian Embassy.

Recruitment Fees. *Mariani's* employer in Singapore paid the entire first six months of her salary to the recruitment agency. After she asked for payment for the second six months, "she sent me straight to the airport." *Sriyani's* salary was supposed to be HK \$1800, but her employer gave her \$20 per month and paid the rest to the agency. *Siti* paid her agency three months' salary. After her contract was over she got another job and paid another HK \$4000 to the agency. *Yuli* paid a total of HK \$10,000 to her agency – her entire salary for five months. *Nur* paid HK \$21,000 to the agency that placed her in a job in Hong Kong, with only HK \$670 left to her.



Donga's agent has kept her passport, and told her employer in Oman to beat her if she doesn't work, and they did. She says, "My Madam pushed me and the Boss kicked me. The Boss' sister also beat me. They beat me very hard. I have bruises all over my back, arms and legs. I cannot even sit properly or lift my arms."

Issue Area: Protection from Physical and Sexual Abuse, Limits on personal Freedom

An Indian worker, *Mrs. G*, was told by her broker that she was being brought to Oman as a housecleaner, but she was kept with 7 women as live in sex workers in her employer's villa. "From the airport the agents brought me straight to the villa and locked me up. There were surveillance cameras to keep a watch on us. We were not allowed to go out and were kept locked in a room with one small window. We are scared of the agent (though he is in prison now) as he has threatened to "get us" through his contacts in India. We don't want our names mentioned to anyone."

For many domestic workers, physical and sexual abuse are part of their job. *Mildred*, a Filipina worker in Saudi Arabia, says, “the male employer is displaying barbaric acts like seducing me or intentionally showing indecent acts...I cannot anymore stand his malicious acts on me.” *Isukapalli*’s 80 year old employer would come to her room and harass her. “When I complained to [his wife], she made fun of me and laughed at me. She told the children and even the children laughed at me. I felt very humiliated.”

Garychel’s Hong Kong employers would push, slap, pinch and even bite her until she finally took her case to the police. The charges were denied for lack of evidence. *Robelita* was also punched, slapped and kicked by her employer’s wife. *Beth*’s employer’s fiancée would punish mistakes first with foul language, but later in beatings. *Beth* was hit in the face with a book, and had a knife drawn in her face. *Ria* was not allowed to do anything unless she was clearly instructed – the employer slapped and punched her once because *Ria* washed one pot, but not the other. *Phat*’s employer beat her with a stick, sprayed boiling water on her hands, threw her to the ground and pulled her hair. When *Mae*, new to Hong Kong, tried to explain to her late return to work because she had gotten lost on the way to the pet shop with the dog, the employer hit *Mae* with an iron on her face, arm and buttocks. In her case, a hospital worker called the police and the employer was eventually fined.

Limitations on freedom of movement. Workers employed in many countries, from the United States to Saudi Arabia to Hong Kong, told us that their employers did not allow them to leave the house. A Peruvian worker employed in Florida, *Milagros*, was never allowed to leave her employer’s house. *Victoria* and *Mildred*, both Filipinas working in Saudi Arabia, were also prohibited from leaving the house. *Winda* was allowed three rest days throughout a 22 month period of employment, but she was not allowed to leave her employers’ homes on any other single day, and passed money over an outdoor property wall for neighbor’s domestic worker to send home to her family. *Jennifer* never had a single day off, and was not allowed to leave her employer’s home in Taiwan. Nor was *Victoria* allowed to leave her employer’s house in California. *Leah* was not allowed to use her mobile phone even during rest periods.

Retention of the passports of migrant domestic workers is a standard practice around the world. Four workers from both coasts of the United States had their passports confiscated by their employers. The employers for whom *Emelia* worked told her they had the right to keep her passport and identity documents because they had paid for them, and that she would be arrested if she tried to leave their home.

The agency employing *Yuli*, an Indonesian worker, seized her passport and employment contract the day she arrived in Hong Kong, as did *Phat*’s agency in Malaysia. *Vero*’s broker in Taiwan did the same. *Noorjehan*’s employer in Oman also took her passport.

Issue Area: Retaliation

Emanuela's employer in Florida was not paid her final paycheck. Her employer told her that since the employer had contacts with the U.S. military, she could have Emanuela arrested and deported at any time. Emanuela did not pursue her claim. When *Milagros* left her employer, her family in Peru was visited at the employer's request. The employer threatened to have her deported from the United States and to pursue claims against Milagros and her family.

Kim visited her home in India during an annual leave. While she was gone, her employers canceled her contract without notice, and she was detained by Immigration authorities when she tried to return to her job in Hong Kong.

Issue Area: Safety and Health

Mira used to get headaches and stomach aches and dizziness at work, because she was only allowed to sleep for a few hours a night, and was given only a little vegetable and rice to eat, which she divided with her ward.

Lucy worked 12 to 14 hours per day, Monday through Friday, for her Florida employer. When she was injured on the job, her employers refused to get medical help for her. When she eventually received help, she found that her arm was fractured. Her employer fired her. *Maura* also broke her arm while working, and was put out on the street, after six years of employment in the same household. *Beatriz* had an accident on the job and was hospitalized for three days. Because she had no insurance, she had to seek help from the hospital's social assistance program. Another domestic worker fell down a flight of stairs while cleaning, and broke two ribs. Luckily, her employer did not fire her.

Iris was employed as a domestic worker, but was required to do hazardous cleanup from the employer's renovation of their home. "There would always be a lot of dust that I would breathe in, along with cuts and wounds that the owner would not let me treat.... Whenever I got ill or any injury all I was given to take care of myself was rubbing alcohol and band aids."

Imelda, a migrant worker in Hong Kong was diagnosed with breast cancer. Just after her surgery and while she was in chemotherapy, she was still required to work. When her cancer worsened, and she lost her job, she relied on donations to pay for her treatment.