

Ms. Foundation for Women

Building women's collective power to ignite change

November 21, 2008

*Testimony before Labor Committee of the New York State Assembly
in support of a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights*

Good morning. My name is Susan Wefald. I am the executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Ms. Foundation for Women. We support building women's collective power to ignite social change. We fund Domestic Workers United and their efforts to pass a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. I am here to urge you to support this bill on behalf of this valuable work force.

Domestic workers have long been an important part of our economy, and have become even more so in recent decades as more and more women have joined the paid workforce. This increase in women's workforce participation has been a significant factor in our economic expansion. Sixty-four percent of women with children under age 6, and 56 percent of women with infants (under age 1)—now work outside the home. A full seventy-seven percent of women with children age 6-17, and eighty-one percent of single women with children that age, are in the labor force. Significantly, seventy-six percent of employed mothers of children under eighteen work full time.*

As our parents live longer, women increasingly find ourselves "sandwiched" between caring for our children and our parents. Already working a "double shift" of our day jobs and coming home to care for our children, we don't have any time left for housework. Without nannies to care for our young children, caregivers to care for our aging parents, and housekeepers to keep our homes clean, many women could not work, could not contribute to our society and our economy, as well as to their families' incomes.

Why is it that domestic workers were deliberately written out of the Fair Labor Standards Act? Isn't this class of workers deserving of the protections afforded other workers? They work just as hard, their work just as valuable. Ask a parent looking for someone to entrust with the care of their precious young children, and you will be told what an important job it is. Ask an adult daughter or son looking for someone to care for their beloved elderly parent, and you will be told what an important job it is. Ask someone looking for a person they can trust to come into their home and clean and care for their valuable possessions, and you will be told what an important job it is. And yet this workforce often cannot afford childcare for their own children, cannot save for their own retirement, cannot even pay the rent on their own home.

We know this workforce is primarily employed by private individuals. Unfortunately there are private employers who take advantage of the fact that these workers have little power and visibility, and exploit

*Cited by the National Women's Law Center from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Employment Characteristics of Families in 2006, Tables 5 and 6, available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf> (last visited January 16, 2008). These percentages understate how many women raising children are in the paid labor force because they reflect only women raising their own children, and do not include the many women who are raising grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, or other related children. Note that the labor force includes those who are working and those who are looking for work.

them, pay them low wages, abuse them verbally and physically, require impossibly long hours, refuse to give them days off when their workers are sick. These workers need the protection this bill will offer, to give them redress when such exploitation occurs. At the same time, there are many private employers who would like to do the right thing, but don't know what that is. Having clear standards would be a significant help in letting people know what they should pay, and what benefits they should provide.

I speak not only as an officer of the Ms. Foundation, but also from personal experience. I am a single mother by choice. I decided to have children on my own when I reached my forties didn't want to go through life without the joy of having a child. I won the fertility clinic lottery and wound up with twins, a son and a daughter, now 10. I feel extremely privileged to have a job that I love, and the ability to share my life with my wonderful children. Some people think I am a super woman raising twins by myself while holding down a full time job. But I could not have managed even one day of returning to work without the wonderful nanny I hired to take care of my two 5-month-old infants. And my 86-year-old mother, who has Alzheimer's, is able to continue living at home in Maryland with my 81-year-father because of the two amazing women my brother hired to help with her care. I used word of mouth and various online Brooklyn parents groups to figure out what a fair wage and benefit package was for my nanny. We new parents felt like we were winging it as new employers. A Domestic Workers Bill of Rights would help both worker and employer – those employers who are committed to fairness and justice. And those that aren't need the Bill of Rights to make sure they do the right thing anyway.

Thank you for your time.