

Voices of Domestic Workers

March 2, 2009

A weekly series highlighting issues faced by domestic workers, in support of A1470/S2311, the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights.

DOMESTIC WORK IS...

- vital work
- a labor of love
- precarious
- physical abuse
- **DEMEANING TREATMENT**
- emotional abuse
- mistreatment
- racism
- **SEXUAL HARASSMENT**
- long hours
- low pay
- **NO REST**
- no food
- **NO RIGHTS**
- no privacy
- **NO RESPECT**
- exhausting
- isolated and invisible
- manipulation based on immigration status
- no holidays
- no sick days
- no vacations
- no recovery time
- no time off
- no healthcare
- **GETTING FIRED FOR SPEAKING UP**
- a mental health crisis
- unsafe
- **UNPROTECTED**
- left to chance
- arbitrary
- on-the-spot firing
- eviction if fired
- no safety net
- bad for self esteem
- barely regulated

... A WORKFORCE IN CRISIS



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“When a person goes to work in someone’s house, she doesn’t know what she’ll find.”

- Elizabeth, domestic worker
in Manhattan



Elizabeth’s story:

“I worked with a family in Manhattan for three consecutive years. **The second day on the job, the employer started in on me.** I was in the living room when he went to shower. From there, he called out to me, ‘Elizabeth, please get me the phone.’ I entered the room and responded, ‘Where are you?’ ‘In the shower,’ he answered. When I entered, he had the curtain opened completely. I was shocked. I grabbed the phone and threw it. I was furious.

“During the day, three of us would work there. My daughter would arrive at 8am. The employer’s wife would leave for work at 8:30-8:45. He would stay in the house alone with my daughter and the children. In that interim until 9:30 **he would take out his penis and walk around the house.** He would call her to the bedroom and she would find him in there with his pants down. My daughter kept this to herself for a long time until she finally told me about it one day. And then she would plead with me, ‘Mom please be on time, I can’t be alone with him for a long time.’ I was supposed to start work at 11am; although they didn’t pay me for these hours, I would arrive early to be with my daughter.

“That is when I approached DWU and asked them to write me a letter. I gave it to him and **just like that he fired me,** saying that he no longer needed my services. I was also demanding holidays, sick days, and vacation because in all the time I worked with them I never once got to rest; I was exhausted.

“The other workers said, ‘That man is fresh. But **we have to pretend that we don’t see anything...because we really need this job.**’ He continues doing what he does, and his wife is none the wiser. When he fired me, she begged, ‘Elizabeth don’t go,’ because she knew that I was good at my job.

Working behind closed doors, without the legal protections guaranteed to other employees, domestic workers are extremely vulnerable to abuse.

The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights would protect workers like Elizabeth, providing the security she needs to assert her rights.

Those interested in co-sponsoring A1470 or S2311 should contact Assemblymember Keith L.T. Wright or Senator Diane Savino, sponsors of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.