

ployers, are the women they know from home who are also working as domestics. But usually they are not allowed or don't feel comfortable having friends visiting at the homes of their employers, so must find other places to meet. In nice weather they can visit parks and other outdoor places, but when the weather is bad, there is not much available. Sometimes all they can do is to buy a Sunday pass for the buses, and ride around the city talking to each other. Other social contact comes from church on Sunday, which some women attend regularly, others only occasionally.

The livelihood of these women depends on their being healthy and able to do hard work. If they become sick and cannot work for any length of time they are likely to be fired and have no compensation or sick leave available to them. You simply have to work when you are sick, or risk losing your job and your immigration status.

People come to Canada with high hopes of earning money and providing for themselves and their families in the West Indies. But when their visas expire most people find themselves in virtually the same economic position they were in when they arrived. And they have often suffered miserably during their time in Canada. Still, some people maintain that it is better to be in Canada on an Employment Visa than to go back to the West Indies and struggle to survive there. Others say that if they had known what they would face in Canada, they would never have come.

Landed Immigrant Status

Many of the women who come to Canada on Employment Visas would eventually like to become landed immigrants and settle permanently in Canada. In order to apply for landed immigrant status they must have a job offer from a Canadian employer. This is another reason why a domestic will hesitate to complain about working conditions or wages or to make demands of her employer — she does not want to alienate the employer on whom she is relying for a job offer.

To make her application for landed immigrant status, a woman must return to her own country. Very few of these women achieve the number of 'points' necessary to immigrate to Canada and many, if they return to Canada at all, come back on another Employment Visa. By denying these women landed immigrant status and maintaining the Employment Visa system, the government maintains a captive labour pool, with no power and no rights.

Changing the Situation

It is clear then, that an individual domestic worker on a work visa is quite limited in what she can do to improve her situation. If she is lucky she will be paid a living wage and will manage to negotiate a reasonable working arrangement with her employer. If she is being underpaid, overworked, or otherwise abused she can, again, if she is lucky, change jobs without a huge amount of hassle from the Employment and Immigration Commission, and, hopefully, get into a better situation.

More militant methods of dealing with the problem do exist. Some women have begun to take *legal* action against employers who abuse them. In a recent case in Vancouver, a domestic was being paid \$150 a month instead of the \$350 her employers had put on the Manpower job offer form. This woman went to Immigration and made a formal complaint. She found a new job and was issued a new visa. She then sued her former employers for the back wages she was owed. After an extremely time-consuming and emotionally exhausting process, she reached an out-of-court settlement and was awarded approximately \$500. There have been similar cases in Eastern Canada. Hopefully the courageous actions of these women will alert other employers of domestics to the illegality of their actions, and will encourage other domestics who are being underpaid to take action against the injustices being done to them.

Unionization and Association

Domestic workers are employed in a variety of different situations. Some work in private households for private individuals; some work through large employment agencies. Others are employed either directly or indirectly by the government. It is in this latter area that most gains have been made in actual union organizing. In 1974 the California Homemaker's Association was recognized by Sacramento County as the bargaining agent for domestics employed by the government. In Powell River, B.C., a group of 'homemakers' employed

A Seventeen-Hour Day Isn't Really Work Mabel Itzcovich

A small farmer in El Salvador, the father of sixteen children, nine living, was asked by a social researcher, 'What sort of work does your wife do?'

'She doesn't do anything, she stays at home,' he answered. Asked how she spent her time at home, the farmer said:

She gets up at four in the morning, fetches water and wood, makes the fire and prepares breakfast. Then she takes the washing down to the river and goes to the market to buy whatever we need. After that she gets lunch ready and brings it to me in the fields, about three kilometres from our house. Then she has the chickens and pigs to look after, and the children, of course. She has supper ready when I get home. After supper, when the rest of the family has gone to bed, she finishes any housework that is left over and then she goes to bed herself about nine o'clock.

'She does all this and you still say she doesn't work?' the researcher asked. 'Of course she doesn't,' the farmer said, 'I told you: she stays at home.'



An Andean mother and daughter