

Falling Through The Cracks

Domestic Workers and Progressive Movements

by *Felicita O. Villasin and
M. Ann Phillips*

Cet article est basé en grande partie sur les réflexions de l'une des auteures qui agit en porte-parole des droits des travailleuses domestiques. Les auteures

Only recently has the struggle for fair and equitable working and living conditions for domestic workers in Canada become a visible part of the agendas of the women's movement and the labour movement.

documentent la lutte que ces travailleuses qui viennent de l'étranger doivent mener contre un gouvernement discriminatoire ainsi que celle d'avoir leurs problèmes reconnus par le mouvement féministe et celui des travailleurs du Canada.

In Canada, foreign domestic workers are on the front-line of the struggle for equality rights as women of colour and workers. Through groups like INTERCEDE (the Toronto organization for domestic workers rights) they have consistently demanded that the Canadian government end discrimination against foreign domestic workers and discontinue a system of indentured labour. Their demands have so far gone unheeded.

Foreign domestic workers have been a part of the Canadian reality for many decades, yet issues surrounding foreign domestic workers' rights have historically not been adequately addressed by either the women's movement or the labour movement. Only recently has the struggle for fair and equitable working and living conditions for domestic workers in Canada become a visible part of the agendas of the women's movement and the labour movement. Why has it taken so long to recognize that

these women deserve a place within the women's and the labour movements?

This article developed out of a discussion between the two authors. It is based largely on the reflections of one of the authors who is an advocate for domestic workers' rights. Through personal accounts, the authors explore the struggles of foreign domestic workers as participants in the feminist and labour movements.

Most foreign domestic workers are women of colour from the Caribbean, from Asian countries like the Philippines, Thailand, India, Bangladesh, from Latin America and from Africa. They enter Canada through an immigration program called the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). The LCP was introduced in April 1992 to replace the 10-year-old Foreign Domestic Movement (FDM) program. Although the LCP removed some of the criteria a domestic worker had to meet in order to become a landed immigrant in Canada, it essentially perpetuates the same system of indentured labour and discrimination that characterized the FDM program. This system is maintained through the following conditions which are imposed exclusively on women entering Canada as domestic workers:

A foreign domestic worker is the only worker applying to come to Canada required to prove that she has the equivalent of a Canadian grade 12 education as well as six months of training in the work she is intending to do here. Despite the consistently high demand for domestic workers, she is the only worker who is admitted not as an immigrant but as a "temporary" visitor. Furthermore, she is only allowed entry on the condi-

tion that she agree to work as a "live-in" caregiver in her employer's household. She must obtain a valid work permit which restricts her in the type of work she is allowed to do, namely caregiving combined with housekeeping. Lastly, she cannot work with any other employer except the one whose name is specified on her work permit.

A foreign domestic worker who has performed 24 complete months of live-in caregiving then earns the right to apply for immigrant status. But, until she has been granted an "open employment authorization" or open work permit, she is not free to take any other type of job. Also, she cannot move freely from one employer to another without getting prior authorization from Canada Immigration (in the form of a new work permit).

The LCP, like the FDM before it, favours single women because of the temporary status and obligatory live-in work. The meager pay and often poor, and potentially exploitative, working conditions do not encourage married women to bring their families along. Thus, married women who enter the program face the prospect of five years or longer of separation from their spouse and dependent children.

Domestic workers through INTERCEDE have sought to stop the discriminatory treatment of domestic workers as women, as workers, and as immigrants by recommending the elimination of the "live-in" requirement (which makes domestic workers extremely vulnerable to many types of abuse including sexual abuse); and that foreign domestic workers, like other occupations in short supply and requiring foreign workers, be granted landed immigrant status upon entering Canada.

While the Canadian government's resistance to addressing foreign domestic workers' rights is not surprising, what is surprising is the fact that

it has taken progressive movements, such as the women's movement and the labour movement, a long time to pay serious attention to the plight of foreign domestic workers.

Foreign domestic workers have faced and still face many forms of discrimination, as women and as workers. They have had to struggle not only to address discrimination at the governmental level but also to have their issues taken up and sup-

ported by the women's movement and the labour movement. The complex intersection of gender, race, and class have worked together to make foreign domestic workers invisible to the very movements that champion the rights they are fighting for. Foreign domestic workers, because of their location as working class and mainly women of colour have found their inclusion in the women's movement uneasy, at best. Their gender and the "feminized" nature of their labour has also excluded them as a "natural" or "accepted" constituency of the labour movement. Like other groups that have fallen outside the realm of traditional progressive movements, foreign domestic workers have struggled hard to organize themselves and to make their voices heard, forcing these traditional movements to become aware of and begin to address the complex issues of gender, race, and class.

mothers of Canadians. They would blend in. The restrictions on immigration worsened as the women's colour changed. As the restrictions increased, domestic workers came to see the value of organizing. Ironically, the more we have organized the worse restrictions have become.

One of the most uncomfortable issues is the way in which darker and lighter colours get played off against one another in relation to "employer preferences." While the women coming into Canada now are still women of colour there has been a switch in "preference" from darker-skinned to lighter-skinned women.

More and more Filipino workers have been brought in while the number of Caribbean workers admitted remains the same. Filipino domestic workers currently make up more than half of the women who come in as domestic workers. There is a demand for them because they are believed to be more obedient, submissive, and flexible. Employment agencies have taken on the role of "gatekeepers" in the way that they choose to abide by "employers' racial preferences" in hiring.

There is another dynamic involved. The work domestic workers do is considered women's work. Societal attitudes towards women's work have had an impact on the rights these women have and how their work is valued. The work they do is like any other kind of service. What is needed is to establish reasonable conditions for women to work in and to have the work they do valued.

In the early 1980s, I was an activist in the anti-Marcos movement. Our main area of work was within the Filipino community. It was there that we began to become aware of the increasing number of domestic workers entering our community. I got involved in their issues because to me it was part of being an activist within the Filipino community. Our group was the first to organize the Filipino

domestic workers. By 1980, there must already have been about 5000 Filipino domestic workers in Canada, and they were very isolated even within our community. There seemed to be an idea that domestic workers were hard to organize, first because they were only "visiting" foreigners and, second, because they lived in their workplace and as such were isolated.

At that time I was not active in the women's movement, nor was the women's movement aware of the anti-dictatorship movement. The women's movement needed to see that they were part of an international movement. They were not really connecting with us. It's not that we didn't have support from outside but no one was taking responsibility for the domestic workers as a movement. This issue was uncomfortable for the women's movement especially when you consider that it was a mainly a white middle class women's movement. Many of these women were the same ones who were hiring foreign domestic workers, thus putting them in a somewhat contradictory location in relation to domestic worker's rights.

In terms of the labour movement the issue was really whether what was perceived as women's work in the home was "real work" and any of their business. I think that things have changed now. These women are finally acknowledged as workers, although I don't think that the labour movement would have paid much attention to the plight of the domestic workers if we had not done the organizing ourselves.

As more domestic workers became part of INTERCEDE, the nature of the organization really changed. INTERCEDE was formed by researchers and advocates who believed in "wages for housewives" and in fighting for the rights of housewives. They saw the connection to the issue of domestic workers' rights. This was a problematic connection because of issue of class and the fact that while housewives had certain choices around, and a different relationship to, their working conditions, domestic work-

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Reflections of an advocate for domestic workers rights

Felicita Villasin:

Race has played a significant role in the history of domestic workers entering Canada. When domestic workers were white they were looked upon as women acceptable to be the future

ers as a group do not. As a result of the involvement of domestic workers, the focus of INTERCEDE's work now more concretely reflects the class, gender, and race issues that affect them.

When I became the coordinator of INTERCEDE in 1989, I felt we needed to bring these issues to the attention of the largest women's group in Canada. One of the reasons I joined the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was to activate these issues among mainstream feminist movement. When I looked at NAC's resolutions book I found only one resolution that had something to do with domestic workers. It asked for a lowering of immigration fees. Immigration fees are a serious concern, but there were also many other concerns which were not addressed, including discrimination against these women as immigrants and as women workers.

Resolution time, on the floor of the NAC Annual General Meeting, is a forum for education. It is not in-depth nor satisfactory, but bringing issues forward in front of a large group of active feminists seems to make them "mainstream." It is a modest but significant step. At the NAC Annual General Meeting there may be 300 women present. If there are 300 women, they usually represent about 300 different women's groups. The first time we raised the foreign domestic workers' issues there was considerable discussion around them. When we introduced a resolution calling for the government to give these women immigrant status and eliminate the "live-in" requirement as a condition for their stay, I felt that we were exposing this issue to white women. I felt that this was a women of colour issue and that I was bringing it to the attention of white women. At this point, in 1990, there were not very many women of colour in NAC.

It came as a challenge. I didn't know how these issues would be received. Sometime later, a Toronto Star column written by Michelle Landsberg addressed the dilemma facing progressive and middle class

Canadian women who felt they had a responsibility for domestic workers, but who were also in the more privileged position of hiring them. To me that said something—the "dirty secret" was out and we could talk about the issue. It was becoming a part of white women's consciousness and about time, too.

From my own personal experience within the women's movement I know women for whom it is becoming more and more of a struggle to look at their privilege and their responsibility. Many of them now recognize that these women must be paid a fair wage. They admit to themselves that they cannot function without hiring someone and they are better employers than those who are not aware of domestic workers rights. I used to be bothered when women called me and almost asked my permission to hire a domestic worker. We cannot be purists and idealists. In many ways we need the services of others.

What this issue of domestic workers' rights really does is highlight how fundamentally racist Canadian immigration policy is. It also brings into focus the impact of exporting labour from countries of the South to advanced and newly industrialized countries. It is convenient to say that migrant labourers are not citizens so we don't or can't have responsibility for

should be a continuum of thinking that solidarity should extend to the people who are forced to leave their home countries and to come here to work. This has real consequences that bring us all together and closes the circle.

Some of the worst attacks against the type of advocacy work we have been doing comes from right wing members within our own community who say that we are giving the government a reason to close the doors on these women. We say that if there is a demand for domestic workers, bring them in with the same rights as other immigrants. When we give some women less rights than other women, less rights than for ourselves, we are losing our own hard-won rights and losing in our struggle for equality.

If the government closes its doors to these women, it will have to offer other alternatives and there might just be added pressure for it to support be universal child care and elder care. The government will have to provide these services. I am not advocating for women to leave their homes, their countries, to find work. Women need to fight to improve the conditions at home where they live. It is a racist argument to believe that as long as you are in a white country you are going to be better off than in your own country. It is a very patronizing response rather than an informed look

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them. But the consequences of economic inequalities around the world come down to our own backyard. The whole issue of the expansion of labour migration poses difficult questions to activists and progressive people doing "development" and solidarity work. It is easier to extend solidarity work outside of the country. This is not a bad thing, but there

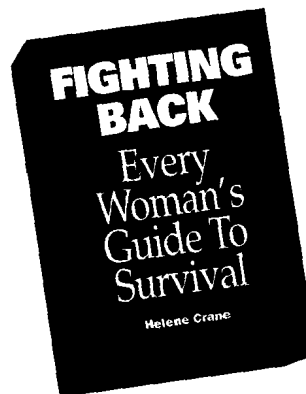
at the reasons behind why women have to leave their countries.

I am glad that there is more information out there now and more willingness to support this work. Our affiliate group in Vancouver, the Committee for Domestic Workers and Caregivers Rights, began to organize already having the support and involvement of the local labour

and women's movements. These new groups that are being formed already have some support because there is some consciousness out there about domestic workers' rights. Now, when we get calls from women in Alberta, in Saskatchewan, in Manitoba, from domestic workers asking for information about INTERCEDE's work in a particular area, we find that most of them are already connected to a women's group or an immigrant women's organization. By their own efforts, domestic workers are getting the support they deserve.

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