

TESTIMONY: DOMESTIC WORKERS BILL OF RIGHTS SUBMITTED BY AMANDA MORAS

I am writing this testimony in support of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.

As a sociology professor and someone who has studied the history of paid domestic work and its current state, I believe the need for legal protections of domestic workers is urgent.

The rapid increase in middle-class women entering the workforce in recent decades (Anderson, 2001), coupled with growing income inequality (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001), has caused an increase in the demand for paid household labor. In 2005, just over 59% of women were in the labor force, and since 1975, the number of working women with children under the age of 18 has increased from 47% to 71% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). While it is clear that some women have long worked in wage labor (often not having the class privilege of not having to work), recent decades have revealed a large influx of class-privileged women into the white-collar and professional sectors. This movement of upper- and middle-class women into the workforce creates a demand for others to take on caring labor in the home (Hochschild, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

The current rates of paid domestic work are difficult to ascertain given the large numbers of under-the-table transactions. However, it is clear that domestic workers are disproportionately women of color (Duffy 2007). Until the 1970 census, domestic service represented the largest occupational category for Black women in the US. Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many Black American and Mexican American women left domestic work for jobs in the public sector (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Around this same time, the percentage of foreign-born Latinas working in domestic service jumped. Gender, race, and class divisions have always been instrumental in determining who performs both paid and unpaid domestic work, however today nationhood and citizenship are also increasingly central issues. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas' (2001) analysis of paid reproductive work emphasizes this shift, highlighting that globalization has transformed the politics of reproductive labor into an "international transfer of caretaking." Those performing paid domestic work are often women who are especially vulnerable because of their class and/or immigration status and/or family responsibilities.

This bill is necessary to protect those people working in paid domestic labor. Likewise, paid domestic work is uniquely situated labor. Because it takes place in private homes and is usually associated with women and unpaid labor, it is often treated as a labor of love rather than "real work" and is thus devoid of many legal protections that traditional employment offers. Although both minimum wage laws and Social Security laws have been extended to cover most domestic work positions, many employers do not meet these standards. Instead, domestic work positions are often negotiated within the informal labor market, regulated by community norms and values (Romero, 2002). Most employers and employees remain unaware of the legal regulations governing domestic work, most obviously because there has been too little done to inform domestic workers or employers about these regulations (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001).

Too often the work domestic workers do is rendered invisible, its' value ignored by labor rights activists and political leaders. It is domestic workers that sustain families, and take care of children, both their own and others. In order to combat this invisibility, legislation protecting the rights of domestic workers is especially important. My own research echoes the calls of many other scholars and activists highlighting the need to transform the exploitive aspects of domestic work. This transformation requires multiple structural changes including formalization, expanding the application of Social Security to support more domestic workers, large-scale reforms in immigration laws geared toward attaining legal status for undocumented migrants, and the continued growth of domestic work unions. The formalization of domestic work could substantially improve the working conditions of domestic workers, creating opportunities for labor organizing and holding employers responsible in terms of labor regulations (Meagher, 2002).

A report entitled "Domestic Workers Working Hard to Sustain American Families, Compromising Their Social Security," published by the National Council of La Raza (Grillo-Chope & Ramos, 2006), points out that because domestic workers are unlikely to have enough private savings to build a "nest egg" for retirement, access to Social Security is critical to their well-being. Furthermore, nearly 96% of domestic workers lack any kind of pension coverage, further emphasizing the urgency of accessible Social Security. Currently, there continues to be a higher threshold level for domestic workers to receive Social Security credit when compared to other workers, representing a difference of over \$500. In addition, in order for domestic workers to actually receive Social Security, employers must pay Social Security tax. Because of the informal structure of the occupation, many employers fail to do so. Therefore, regardless of the threshold, even workers who far exceed the earning requirements may never actually receive Social Security benefits (Grillo-Chope & Ramos, 2006).

Addressing all of these issues is a difficult task but the Domestic Workers Rights Bill is a clear step in the right direction. Connecticut needs to follow the lead of other states such as NY and move towards protecting the rights of this invaluable and vulnerable work force.

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