



BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Experiences of Latin American domestic workers in the UK

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August 2023



“She saw I was nice and amenable, so she took advantage of me. She always wanted more, more, more. And I always had to be available.”

The Latin American Women’s Rights Service (LAWRS) is a feminist and human rights organisation run by and for Latin American migrant women living in the UK. We support women who are exposed to violations of their fundamental human rights, facing violence against women and girls, exploitation in low-paid sectors, trafficking, and enduring severe poverty and deprivation. We also actively advocate for women’s rights, migrant’s rights and the rights of ethnic minorities at local, national and EU levels, working with sister organisations in the women, migrant, anti-trafficking and racial justice sectors, as well as networks and campaigns, to tackle the vulnerabilities faced by Latin American women, who are affected by intersectional layers of discrimination.

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LAWRS would like to thank the women workers* who participated in this study for trusting us with their experiences and for sharing their views with the hope of helping build a fairer future for migrant women in domestic work.

We would also like to thank Trust for London for supporting this research and LAWRS’ policy work on employment rights and labour exploitation.

*All names have been changed to protect participants’ identities.

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KEY FINDINGS

This report presents the experiences of Latin American domestic workers in the UK. Drawing from 12 in-depth interviews, this study outlines the characteristics of the sector, highlighting the high levels of isolation, exploitation and abuse that are endemic within it, and looks into the specific ways these affect women workers in the Latin American community, overrepresented in this sector.

Some of our key findings were:

- 83% of women were not provided with written contracts throughout their employment and 92% were not provided with payslips.
- All women experienced breaches of verbal agreements.
- 83% were expected to perform different tasks to what was agreed during recruitment. At least 58% were hired as either cleaners/housekeepers or carers but were expected to perform both tasks.
- All participants experienced an increase to their working hours, leading to little to no time off.
- 10 out of 12 participants worked at least 12 hours per day, the longest working day being 17 hours per day.
- 70% of participants did not have a paid holiday.
- At least 58% were not registered with a GP. Some were prevented from accessing NHS services either due to their employers' refusal to provide support with registration, misrepresentation about their right to access health services, or being forbidden from registering.
- At least one participant experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.
- 58% experienced mistreatment, including verbal or physical abuse, and threats.
- At least 25% were tracked or surveilled by their employers, including when they were not working.
- All participants felt they did not have the option of changing their working conditions.
- All participants related signs of isolation and an inability or fear of seeking help.
- 50% of the participants were victims of trafficking for labour exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

The aims of this report are to capture the experiences of Latin American migrant women in domestic work in the UK, to add evidence regarding the high level of exploitation and abuse in the sector which is facilitated by the systemic invisibility of domestic workers, and finally, to raise awareness of the urgent need to address the issues affecting workers in this sector.

Early in 2020 a national lockdown was established to prevent a further spread of Covid-19, which affected the economy and workers in unprecedented ways; the most affected being those from minoritised backgrounds, and in low-paid jobs. Domestic workers, a hidden workforce that is highly at risk, were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in particular ways. Reports started reaching LAWRS in the early days of the lockdown indicating heightened levels of exploitation and further isolation within their employers' homes. Notably, the issues described to LAWRS were not entirely new, but rather a worsening of the regular working conditions of migrant domestic workers.

As this study shows, the UK labour legislation and context facilitate exploitation and abuse of domestic workers. The UK has not ratified the international convention designed to protect them, and domestic work is exempt from the national minimum wage when the worker lives with their employer and is treated 'as a member of the family'. In addition, the sector is highly unregulated, and employers often break labour agreements, imposing long working hours that isolate workers from their family, friends, and wider

community. As a result, domestic workers are amongst the lowest paid in the UK and exposed to high levels of exploitation. The findings of this research, although confined to a small sample of participants, are representative of the general experiences described by domestic workers to LAWRS over the years.

METHODOLOGY

The present report draws on 12 in-depth interviews with Latin American migrant women who either work or have worked as domestic workers in the UK, all of whom have experienced breaches of their labour rights. In this study, 10 out of the 12 participants worked as live-in domestic workers.

Recruitment and interviews were conducted online, between January and June 2022, and in July 2023, considering the health and safety of both interviewers and participants. Only Latin American women with experience in domestic work who are 18 years old or older were interviewed.

The interviews were carried out in Spanish and Portuguese, according to each participant's preference, and were transcribed by volunteers at LAWRS. In total, we interviewed participants from five nationalities (Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, and Panama). At the time of their experience in domestic work, eight participants were EU passport holders or a European family member, three had entered the UK as Standard Visitors and subsequently became undocumented, and one participant held a different type of visa (Domestic Violence Indefinite Leave to Remain - DVILR).

MARTA'S STORY

Marta was hired in Mexico by a family who was looking for a nanny to live with them in London for six months, to look after their youngest child who was three years old. The family promised Marta a monthly wage of 20,000 MXN\$ (approximately £800), working from 6.30 am until the child went to bed, and having Saturdays off. The family also had a housekeeper who would take care of the household chores. When Marta enquired about a visa to work in the UK, they told her that she did not need one. Reassured by the family's promises and in need of a job to support her mother, who was unable to work due to ill health, Marta accepted the job.

Once in London, the job changed. In addition to caring for the toddler - which included feeding, bathing, taking him to nursery and other activities and putting him to bed - Marta was also expected to help the housekeeper with the cooking, shopping and cleaning for the entire family. Marta's day began at 6.30 am and would normally finish around 10 pm. Not invited to join the family during the meals and with a heavy workload, Marta usually only had breakfast. Once the day was over, often there was no food for her, and she would eat biscuits or fruit.

The employers were demanding and controlling, even advising Marta not to speak to anyone on the streets. She felt a lot of pressure to perform all the tasks expected

of her. Once her visitor's visa expired, the family told Marta that she was allowed to stay for longer. Yet, from that point on, any activities that involved leaving the house were performed by the housekeeper.

Marta was severely underpaid and a victim of wage theft. Receiving around £800 to work 16 hours per day for six days a week, her hourly wage amounted to £1.92. She was paid twice: once after the first three months, and once again after the second three months. On both occasions they deducted money for her flights. She worked a further three months without pay. She was also paid to her account in Mexico, meaning that she was expected to pay international fees to withdraw her money, most of which she transferred to her mother.

Marta started to feel frightened because she was not allowed to leave the house. She wanted to leave her job but was scared to tell her employers. She also had no money and when she looked for her passport, she could not find it among her belongings. She looked for it in the house and found it in the employers' bedroom. Marta took it and hid it.

When Marta told the employer that she wanted to leave, the employer verbally abused and threatened her and locked her up in the house. Marta finally escaped when the employer came back in and forgot to lock the door. She ran to the train station, leaving one of her suitcases behind. Marta did not speak English or know her rights.

**DOMESTIC WORK
IN CONTEXT**

LATIN AMERICANS IN THE UK

Latin Americans are not officially recognised as a minority in the UK, therefore gaps in information prevail and the current size and full characteristics of the community are unknown. The most recent and comprehensive research on the Latin American community (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016) estimated that there were approximately 145,000 Latin Americans in London and just under 250,000 in the UK in 2013, making the community the eighth largest non-UK born population in London at the time. Since then, other reports have exposed the community's overall precarious living and working conditions and scant access to services (de la Silva et al., 2019), as well as the negative impact of both Covid-19 (Lopez, 2021) and Brexit (Turcatti & Carlos Vargas-Silva, 2021) on existing vulnerabilities.

Latin Americans are often 'stuck' in the downward occupational mobility they face upon arrival. Discrimination as well as barriers such as language, difficulties in transferring skills and qualifications, lack of recognition of degrees and qualifications, problems in understanding and accessing the welfare system, and financial difficulties (de la Silva et al., 2019) lead many Latin American women into low-paid sectors, such as cleaning, hospitality and domestic work.

These sectors are characterised by fragmented and/or long working hours, as well as abuse and isolation. The unsocial work schedule means that workers struggle to find time to learn English or access vocational training that can allow them to transfer their existing skills to the UK labour market. With precarious contracts and informality as the norm, Latin American women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and often affected by in-work poverty regardless of their immigration status, level of education and previous work experience.

DOMESTIC WORK IN THE UK

Studies on domestic work in the UK have discussed the gendered and racial aspects of the sector which place migrant women in a particularly vulnerable position. Most employers prefer hiring women for domestic work; reasons varying from perceptions about women's natural skills to 'safety' of children and/or wife, due to concerns over sexual abuse (Anderson, 2007a). However, this needs to be situated within employers' overall preference for *migrant* women who are overrepresented in this sector.

Employers often justify their preference for migrant domestic workers by saying that foreigners are more hardworking than 'locals' (Anderson and O'Connell Davidson, 2003). Yet this apparently positive racial stereotype conceals the expectation of an exploitative work relation where workers will demand less and work longer hours due to their immigration status or presumed poor working and living conditions in their country of origin. Importantly, these are not just any migrants. Domestic workers are often recruited from countries outside of the Global North¹, and it is not uncommon for employers to specify their preference for particular nationalities (Anderson, 2007a; Yemane & Mariña Fernández-Reino, 2021).

The domestic work sector is representative of the marginalisation of women, and of migrant women specifically. Domestic work is undervalued, and therefore unpaid or poorly remunerated. Illustrative of the tendency to undervalue domestic work is the fact that it is regulated under Article 57(3) of the National Minimum Wage Regulations, which exempts employers from paying the minimum wage if the worker lives with the employer and is treated 'as a member of the family'².

¹ The term Global North often refers to countries in Western Europe, North America, as well as Australia, New Zealand, Israel, South Korea, and Japan.

² In 2021 the exemption for workers treated 'as a member of the family' was investigated by the Low Pay Commission and found to be 'not fit for purpose'. The Commission recommended to the government that it be removed, and although the government accepted the recommendation and announced the exemption would be removed, no change has been made to this date.

The UK has not ratified the Domestic Workers Convention 189 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) which seeks to guarantee that domestic workers have the right to protection from the excessively long hours, low wages, and informal contracts that ridden the sector. With insufficient and defective domestic law to regulate domestic work, workers are almost exclusively hired through informal agreements, provided with no contract or payslips, and left vulnerable to exploitative conditions of work, isolation and difficulties in exercising employment rights and accessing support.

Although UK immigration legislation includes a visa specific to domestic workers³ accompanying their employers, Latin American domestic workers are seldom here through this route. A large proportion of Latin Americans in the UK have European citizenship and have pre-settled or settled status. Some enter as Standard Visitors, which allows up to six months in the UK, often having been told by their employer that they are allowed to work during that period or that the employer will sort out their immigration status once they have arrived. In many cases, these workers are asked to stay beyond the 6-month limit, a point at which they become undocumented and therefore more vulnerable to exploitation.

DOMESTIC SERVITUDE

Domestic servitude is defined as a form of forced labour that occurs within the home. It is particularly difficult to identify because victims often appear free to leave their employment whenever they so wish. However, and as described below, more invisible forms of coercion are often at play in these cases.

Of the cases analysed in this research, 11 out of 12 included one or more of the indicators of forced labour described by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), namely: abuse of vulnerability, deception, restriction of movement, isolation, intimidation and threats, retention of identity documents, withholding of wages, debt bondage, abusive working and living conditions, and excessive overtime.

³ The Overseas Domestic Worker visa allows employers to bring domestic workers to the UK from abroad. While this visa provides rights to migrant domestic workers, its conditions were changed in 2012 tying workers to their employers on a six-month visa with no possibilities of extension. This change has led to widespread exploitation in the sector and Kalayaan, in collaboration with other organisations, have been campaigning for the government to reinstate the visa's conditions previous to the 2012 change.

FINDINGS

Alarming levels of exploitation are described by migrant domestic workers to supporting organisations on a daily basis. The invisibility of both the Latin American community and the workers in this sector, compounded with intersecting characteristics such as gender, race, immigration status and nationality, among others, give domestic workers a place among the most vulnerable to exploitation.

The experiences described in this research evidence that domestic workers do not tend to access support services until the situation becomes too much to bear, which can often take years. When they do seek help, they opt for community organisations, revealing a stark failure by the UK State to reach and protect these workers.

The issues described below are those that are most reiterated in different cases, yet these reflect only a snapshot of the experiences that migrant domestic workers in the UK may have. Although we have made an effort to divide them in a structured way, the issues are all interconnected and, in general, each implies the existence of several others.

DECEPTIVE RECRUITMENT

Recruitment of domestic workers within the Latin American community often occurs through word of mouth and advertising through social media, with recruitment agencies also used on occasion. A large proportion of them are recruited in their country of origin, often because the hiring family seeks someone who speaks Spanish or Portuguese: 50% of our participants came to the UK having been offered a position as a domestic worker.

It is consistently the case that during the recruitment process, employers describe the job in vague terms and provide little detail. Once employment starts, conditions progressively deteriorate, and workers face a growing list of tasks and excessive working hours. This was the case in all of the experiences collected in this research.

"I contacted this lady and she told me that we would have an interview, etc. I went to the interview. In the interview, we went through things that we were going to do, which were fine by me. But once in the house, [...] everything changed and there was no rest."

Leticia (Bolivian)

"They did not mention a specific name for the position. What he told me was 'Isabella, we are looking for somebody to live in the house, it's a lovely house, you will have your own bedroom, we will give you food, you won't need to buy anything [...] My parents are absolutely independent, you won't need to do anything, you will keep them company because they are lonely. We are looking for somebody to live there because they are leaving the phone off the hook. The only thing you need to do is look after the phone' [...] We were having coffee, a lovely house, a lovely neighbourhood with gyms and colleges, it all sounded like paradise."

Isabella (Brazilian)

Once in the UK, migrant domestic workers tend to find that salaries that appear suitable upon recruitment are in fact inadequate for life in Britain. When taking into account the excessive working hours, salaries are also well below the national minimum wage, and in some cases, payments are delayed or not paid at all, characterising wage theft. All things considered, it is hard for workers to save money and even travel within the city to socialise, access services, or look for new employment.

"At the time it seemed good, we would be travelling between here and there and it wasn't bad. But here it is impossible to live on that, I mean, U\$800, £600 (per month), it was impossible."

Amanda (Panamanian)

Once Leticia (Bolivian) started working, her tasks increased dramatically, and she found herself working every Saturday to achieve the workload and deadlines expected of her by her employer. Despite demanding far more than what had initially been agreed, when Leticia left, her employer refused to pay for the extra hours worked on Saturdays, alleging these were not part of their contract.

In some cases, wages can also be reduced after a while. When Rita (Ecuadorian) decided it was time to bring her daughter to live with her in the UK, something that had been agreed with the employer beforehand, she found that it was impossible to legally rent accommodation without a contract and payslips. Instead of providing the necessary documents, Rita's employer said she

could bring her daughter to live with them in exchange for deducting £350 from her monthly salary of £1350. For the last year of her employment, Rita earned £1000 per month, working a minimum of 12 hours per day.

EXCESSIVE WORK

Most participants in this research (10 out of 12) expressed working 12 hours or more, with the most extreme case working up to 17 hours a day. Two participants reported having agreed to the 12-hour day before accepting the job; however, in every other case this was the result of a progressive addition of tasks to their workload.

Rita (Ecuadorian) was hired as a housekeeper, and the tasks initially agreed included cleaning and cooking for 7 hours a day. Upon starting her job, Rita found that she was responsible for cleaning to a very high standard, doing the shopping, cooking three meals a day - including regular and vegetarian options - looking after the pets, tidying up and picking up after all the members of the house, washing and ironing clothes, driving the children to their activities and picking them up at late hours, amongst other ad hoc tasks. Rita regularly worked for over 12 hours with no breaks. Although she was told that she could take a 2-hour break in the middle of the day, Rita found that in practice this was impossible due to the amount of work expected of her.

Rita's story is common. The excessive amount of working hours does not tend to follow a new explicit agreement with employers to expand the workload, but rather an inability to stop working due to the progressive addition of new tasks. The invisibility of social reproductive work⁴ means that these tasks are often taken for granted, the time required to complete them is unacknowledged, and the work itself is undervalued.

"No, I never took (a break during the day). They never told me not to do it, but that comes from something personal because the work was so much, the house was very big [...] So, if I wanted to sit down and have a coffee I could do it. I was always free to eat, have a coffee, or sit down... But really there was no time."

Sofia (Panamanian)

"There was always something else to do, right? If you want to have everything ready, I've done 13, 14 hours to leave everything ready because if they had dinner late, leaving things in the sink, I would have to do it anyway the next day, right? And the girl was awake by then so it would be more... It's not that they said it, but it's there. They don't say to you 'go, it's past your time.'"

Amanda (Panamanian)

For domestic workers who live with their employers the pressure and expectations are increased, as their presence is taken as a synonym of round-the-clock availability. For workers caring for children or elderly adults, this situation tends to be worse, as babies, young children, and elderly people often require care during the night. Days off are also regularly not respected. Consequently, live-in domestic workers are effectively expected to be 'at work' 24/7.

"When I was told that I had to be available, I did not imagine that this included my days off [...] I did not imagine late nights. 'Available' means I am there, in the house. I will be living in the house so I could, if she needed something, be available. But not 24/7. So I accepted, but I never thought that things would change later."

Rita (Ecuadorian)

"I do feel that there has been abuse in terms of the working hours... because the first day they say 'oh sorry', but then the next day it's all the same, and it goes on and on and on, and it becomes your obligation and your responsibility. So the child was up at 6 am, at 7, at 5, at 4, and it was my responsibility, 100%. The child didn't go to his mum's room, he came to mine."

Sofia (Panamanian)

"I said (to my employer) 'you are out every night, I can't work from 7 am until midnight', she said 'but there is no problem, the girls go to sleep at 8, you don't need to be looking after them'. But I would be anxious knowing that they are there and I'm alone with the children. 'No, there is no problem, you just stay in your room, if

⁴ Social reproductive work is work related to the domestic sphere, such as caregiving of children and adults and household tasks like cleaning and cooking. This work is traditionally performed by women as unpaid labour and historically undervalued.

anything happens you come down, give them a bottle' and this and that', so it was work, that's working."

Leticia (Bolivian)

"There were times when I would think 'I better leave the house at that time, so I'm not available'. But literally, I had to go out in the rain, it didn't matter the weather in London, imagine, it's about to rain, and I'm going out because if I stay I'll be receiving deliveries from Amazon, or looking after the girl who woke up. That's what it was like. And when the second one was born it was more difficult, because she literally said 'you need to do the cleaning when the children sleep, when they take their naps.'"

Amanda (Panamanian)

"The lady wouldn't let me sleep. I didn't sleep at all for 3 months: 1 or 2 hours each night tops, because she wanted me to serve her during the night. I would have to stand beside her bed all night. She would give me silly tasks like to change the water in the glass because it had been sitting there for too long, or to change the glass because it was too expensive. During the day, I had to serve tea about 30 times a day, cook breakfast, lunch and dinner, wash up after each meal, give her a shower, wash her hair, dry her hair, do her make up, dress her, put her jewellery on. The man would soil himself and the bed. I would have to shower him, clean the mess wherever it happened; I basically had to be cleaning after them the entire day."

Isabella (Brazilian)

LACK OF BASIC RIGHTS

Domestic work is a sector plagued with informality and lack of regulation. Unsurprisingly, this informality commonly leads to an inability to access labour rights. In our study, 83% of the participants were not provided with written contracts throughout their employment and 92% were not provided with payslips. In many cases contracts and payslips were repeatedly requested by the workers and denied by the employers. It is often

the case that employers simply delay the provision of a contract indefinitely until the worker stops asking for one. Without a contract, workers find it impossible to argue that the job and amount of hours of work are different from what was initially agreed.

"(When I asked for the contract), she would say later, later. It was like that with everything. With studying, with the contract, until I grew tired of asking."

Rita (Ecuadorian)

"Months went by and I wasn't signing a contract or getting payslips, I didn't know anything about my tax, my pension [...] They said that the accountant would be in touch with me, that he was on holiday, that he was back, that he's not back, and months went by like this. I was very worried about the issue with tax. And in the meantime, getting my salary on very irregular dates, and irregular amounts."

Sofia (Panamanian)

"I asked for a contract and they said that here in the UK there is no obligation for a contract, so I said it's not about the obligation [...] They never gave me a contract."

Karina (Ecuadorian)

Taking breaks during a working day can be an issue for domestic workers. The excessive working hours described above leave little to no time for rest, even in the cases in which time off was agreed prior to employment.

"But I had to tidy up, wash - all in my time off. When it was my time to eat or rest, (my employer) would ask me to do the shopping. So, when can I take the time off I supposedly have? [...] In the beginning she told me that around noon I had two hours to rest, but those hours never existed [...] I could not rest. I was there. It seemed hypocritical to me, because she would say 'you can go rest now', and 5 or 10 minutes later she would call me."

Rita (Ecuadorian)

70% of participants were not able to take paid annual leave during their employment. Marta (Mexican) described how, when her employers went on holiday and she was given annual leave, she was still required to stay in the house and look after her employer's father who was recuperating from heart surgery. This took up her entire day during the month she was supposed to be on annual leave.

An inability to easily access information due to a lack of knowledge of the language, isolation and lack of resources, make it difficult for migrant domestic workers to know what their rights are in the UK. It is thus unsurprising that the underpayment of the national minimum wage is seldom mentioned by them as an issue, in particular considering that their salaries are often higher than that of a domestic worker in Latin America. However, as mentioned above, once the cost of living and the amount of hours worked are factored in, these salaries are invariably well below the legal entitlement. Out of the 9 participants who received a regular salary, only one was paid above the national minimum wage. The remaining 8 participants' pay varied between £1.05 and £5.77 an hour.

When Sofia's (Panamanian) employer's partner died, she stopped receiving a salary. The employer continually told Sofia she would be paid, and that they were making changes in their lifestyle such as selling the car and moving home to be able to afford keeping her. However, almost a year went by and Sofia received no payments. Sofia did not want to leave and risk not being paid what she was owed. She stayed in that job for 2 and a half years.

COERCION AND CONTROL

For migrant women in the UK, coercion and control can be exerted indirectly, when employers take advantage of existing vulnerabilities. The fear of having nowhere to go and no means to rely upon should they leave their job is often all that is needed for a domestic worker to remain in an exploitative situation. In such cases, although workers seemingly have decision power and appear to be agreeing to certain working conditions, systemic vulnerability acts as a subtle but highly effective control method.

"So when people see that you are in need, they abuse (the situation) more. They start saying 'do this other thing, do this as well', so, it increases to the point where once she said the kitchen was dirty. I had just cleaned it."

Leticia (Bolivian)

"I didn't think that even on my days off I had to be available. My day off is my day off, I have my things too, right? I need to go to the bank, do my things. But I couldn't because (my employer) needed me... One day I said no, she made a face and started throwing things around. It made me feel so bad that I thought 'next time I can't say no'. The girls would see me cry and ask 'Rita, what's wrong?' I would say 'nothing girls, I just have the flu.'"

Rita (Ecuadorian)

In other cases, control can take more direct forms. Control methods include but are not limited to: the promise of paying a salary that has been owed for months; threats related to immigration status; the threat of physical assault; the retention of passports; telling workers not to make friends or speak to strangers; the control of food consumption; adding of tracking devices to worker's phones; and locking up the worker in the employer's home - all of which we found in our study.

"She humiliated me and kept track of how much I was eating. I was vegetarian at the time, but I was forced to eat meat because I was not allowed to cook anything different. [...]

I would have to tell them where I was going to be and the time that I would be back. It was crazy. When I left the house for anything, to go shopping or to go to the gym, the lady would scream, and I would hear from inside the bus. I would hear it constantly."

Isabella (Brazilian)

"It's not like other jobs where it's just you and the child, no, (my employer) was always there 24 hours. There were even cameras, so you know you are being watched 24/7."

Amanda (Panamanian)

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Rita's employer put a tracking device on her phone with the excuse of being able to help her should she get lost, since she was new to the UK. However, the employer used the device to monitor Rita's activity. On one occasion, the employer called Rita when she was on holiday abroad to let her know she was still being tracked, allegedly as a joke.

In a more extreme case, an employer locked a participant inside her house, after the worker gave her notice.

“(My employer) said ‘you are crazy if you think you are leaving the house. You are not leaving!’ [...] She said to (the housekeeper) ‘go and take Marta’s passport because she is not leaving this house’. So I said ‘there is no need to take my things, I’m simply saying, I have a flight, if you can look in my bag to see that I’m not taking anything so I can go [...] She said ‘I paid for half of your flight here [...] if you give me the £500, you can get out’. When she left, I saw that she locked the door (from the outside). She locked it with a key, and I was like... how can she have locked the door?”

Marta (Mexican)

MISTREATMENT AND ABUSE

Employers often treat domestic workers in a dehumanising way, disregarding their basic needs and devaluing their work. This treatment, as well as the quantity of work and the long working hours inevitably have consequences on the health and well-being of domestic workers. Most of the women interviewed for this study relayed not having time to eat a full meal or feeling uncomfortable in the house.

“She wouldn’t shout, but she would look at me in silence with hatred and speak in a very low voice, saying horrible things, but very softly.”

Leticia (Bolivian)

“I had to ask (my son for money) and go to Primark because it was cold and I had no clothes. It’s tough thinking that people... I mean, you don’t expect people to think about you, but when the people who demand so much, who need and want everything... 4 phones, 8 computers, ‘I need, I need’. So, how do they not realise that you need your things too?”

Sofia (Panamanian)

“When I finished cleaning, she would say ‘you can go rest now’. But I said I’m used to eating something at noon. She said ‘oh well, make yourself something’, but in such a way as someone thinking ‘I have to feed this one...! I would feel bad sometimes, I couldn’t, I was so embarrassed because I am not used to being someone who doesn’t care, who will open the fridge and eat. I mean, I am in someone else’s house, I like being respectful. So I would just go to my room.”

Rita (Ecuadorian)

ISOLATION

A further key element habitually present in the lives of domestic workers is isolation. Very often the incessant work schedule does not allow for time off to socialise with anyone outside of the employers’ family. Making plans can be difficult because employers can change working days without notice or ask workers to stay on a day off to ‘help’.

“I never had any annual leave during the (2.5 years) period that I worked with them. After (the employer’s partner) died, there were two occasions when I was able to visit my son in Surrey. But I had to bring the child, I always had to be with the child.”

Sofia (Mexican)

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Furthermore, employers can deliberately prevent domestic workers from engaging in services and activities and making friends and connections. In this way, the worker has more difficulty in accessing information on, for example, employment rights, and less people to turn to should they want to leave their employment. It was often the case that participants were not allowed to take English classes, despite employers promising the contrary upon recruitment. It is not uncommon, for instance, for employers to change working days and times to ensure that attending classes is not possible. The language barrier thus becomes insurmountable, hampering the domestic worker's ability to make connections outside of the home, learn about their rights or seek support.

"(I was told) the boy would eventually go to nursery and I would have a few hours free, in which I could learn English. But that never happened [...] I worked from 7.30 am to 8, 9, 10, 11 pm. It was a very long working day. I was dedicated to the child and the house. Then the boy started going to nursery, but still, the working day was long. I would not leave the house at all."

Karina (Ecuadorian)

"I even asked her if I could sign up for a [English] course, when I allegedly had my time-off, after 5pm, I could go study. 'Oh no, not now because I have so many things to do and you have to take care of the children'. This meant I could not study because I had to be always in the house, working. She never allowed me [to study]. Every time I brought it up, she would say: 'later on, later on, we will see it later on'. It was embarrassing for me to say 'so what happened?' I want to learn, even when I go buy something in the supermarket it is difficult. I mean, if I cannot find something I cannot ask for it. 'Please', I would say, 'I want to learn English'. [...] Eventually I got tired of bringing it up because it was always the same story."

Rita (Ecuadorian)

Similarly, over half of the participants were not registered with a GP. In some cases, this responds to an inability to deal with the required paperwork in English and a reluctance to help on the part of the employer. In other cases, employers either persuade workers that there is no need to register, or explicitly prohibit it. This situation is often replicated when workers want to open a bank account in the UK.

"When we left London, I went to the GP and (my employer) told me I could not register, because no one could know where we were living, or that she had bought a house there."

Sofia (Panamanian)

"Thankfully I did not get seriously ill, but I had told them that I had high blood pressure. I needed to find out how to get a prescription for my pills, but they would say 'no, you can't, where are you going to get that? Better to wait until we are back in Panama', etcetera. When I started having problems with my hand, because I could not move it, and I showed them, 'look how swollen my hand is', I could barely move it. 'No, you need to wait, we are going to Panama soon'. It was always 'maybe the following month'. And so time went on and on and on. And it's not so difficult here, right? But they always kept me from going to a doctor."

Amanda (Panamanian)

"In that house I also asked them if they could help me open a bank account, and (my employer) said 'no, it's impossible to open a bank account, we have asked, but no.' The husband did say that we could open one, but then she said 'no, it's not possible, we can't.'"

Leticia (Bolivian)

"I tried to register in the GP close to the house, but I had to ask the family for proof of address, which I was never given. I wanted to go to the GP because I hurt my back the day that I arrived. I kept insisting that I needed proof of address, but they would tell me to go to the gym and my pain would be gone."

Isabella (Brazilian)

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In some cases, activities where workers are likely to interact with other women who speak their own language and/or are in the same line of work are also generally discouraged.

“She told me that on Saturdays I could go to a park that was nearby, but she always said not to talk to anyone, not to establish any communication with other people because it was dangerous, so during the first month I didn’t really feel like going outside because I felt like... also I thought, well everyone here speaks English and I don’t speak any, right? So for the first three weekends I didn’t leave the house.”

Marta (Mexican)

BARRIERS TO LEAVING

A common assumption made in cases of exploitation in domestic work is that it was ultimately the worker’s decision to stay. However, in addition to the coercion and control described above, other more subtle barriers can prevent workers from leaving an employer, even when their immigration status is not tied to them.

As a result of the intensive and intimate nature of domestic work, workers often report forming a deep bond with the child or children, or a sense of obligation to the elderly person or people they look after, and a feeling that they are the only ones responding to all their needs. This feeling often mitigates the desire to leave even despite an excessive workload.

“One becomes fond of people. One respects people. And one expects something like that for oneself. The child used to wake up with me and I felt the need that the child had. He was practically alone [...] He was very attached to me and the child needed a lot. He depended a lot [on me]. We got too close. And the separation with the child affected me a lot, a lot, a lot.”

Sofia (Panamanian)

A further barrier preventing domestic workers from leaving their employers, and therefore enduring hard conditions and mistreatment for longer periods, is the need to send remittances to their families. 83% of participants in this study reported sending money back home to elderly parents or children. Leaving a job generally entails a risk that another one may not be found for an indeterminate amount of time, making themselves and their loved ones unable to make ends meet.

“I would use most of the money to help my family (in Brazil); I didn’t need the money in the UK at the time. I just hoped I would get my documentation sorted.”

Isabella (Brazilian)

Finally, some domestic workers also relayed feeling like they had no options, something that employers were keen to exploit. This responds both to the fact that they had often been kept isolated, and therefore had no knowledge of where to seek help, and also without the necessary means to find alternative accommodation if they were to leave the employer, due to underpayment of wages.

“I was forced to stay there. She never gave me a contract so I couldn’t rent a room, so I was forced to stay there. Even though I wanted to leave. I don’t know if you will understand my situation, but I could not allow myself to go out in the street and look elsewhere, I didn’t have that luxury because if I left, I knew that the money I had saved up, the little I had, would run out immediately.”

Rita (Ecuadorian)

IMMIGRATION STATUS

Compounding the imbalance of power between employers and employees is the fear or worries about immigration status, which can affect migrants with either secure or insecure status⁵. As described above, a large proportion of Latin Americans in our study have dual-nationality and are here with pre-settled or settled status as European citizens. In many cases, however, women are brought to the UK either with the promise that the employer will regularise their status once here, or with the misinformation that they are allowed to work as a standard visitor. In such cases, domestic workers are fully dependent on the employer, and more vulnerable to immigration abuse and exploitation.

“You never knew how they would behave. I’ll give you an example, when I travelled with them, we came on a humanitarian flight. They had the tickets, at one point (they said) ‘have you got your passport?’ I gave it to her because they needed all the information for this and at one point, she would not give it back and I started feeling afraid, right? What if they don’t return it? Like those things you hear about, where they keep your passport. So, yes, there was a moment of fear [...] There were times when, if we were flying, or were going through security, ‘give me your passport, because we are going through here as a group’. [...] It was like a psychological thing.”

Amanda (Panamanian)

“I asked if I needed any documents to work, and she said only my passport. [...] I only knew it when I was landing. [...] (My employer) asked me ‘do you know what you will say [when we land]?’ I said ‘yes, that I’m coming with you and that I’m going to take care of the child’. He said, ‘no, you can’t say that because otherwise the police will catch you and they’re

not going to let you in’. [...]

When I told her I was worried that I had to leave because I only had 6 months and we were getting close (to the expiration date of my visitor’s visa), she said ‘no, it’s alright if you stay, and I will give you a raise.’”

Marta (Mexican)

“He asked which visa I had, and I told him I was on a tourist visa. I asked him if he knew how I could have a work visa and stay in the UK for longer legally. He told me he had a friend who was an immigration lawyer that could help us. He also told me not to worry as he had someone else from my country working for him.”

Isabella (Brazilian)

The majority of participants in this study held European citizenship and therefore had a right to work in the UK. Nevertheless, many expressed having issues with regularising their status in the face of Brexit and the EU Settlement Scheme. As information was not easily available in their own language, they were reliant on support for completing the application.

“I knew I could get my (pre-settled status), from what I would see in groups, that you only need to apply for it. I would speak to my boss. He would say ‘I don’t know about that, but I’m going to ask my assistant’. And time passed, and time passed, and time passed. [...] Nothing was ever done so that I could have...be here legally. And I told them, ‘later on, this is going to be a problem, they are going to tell me I can’t come in. How is it justified that I come here every 6 months with or without you or whatever? It was always ‘no, no, wait and we will look into it later’. Until they went back to their country in November, I started finding out [...] I went to a library and they did it for me.”

Amanda (Panamanian)

⁵ Insecure immigration status refers to migrants whose status is temporary or insecure due to waiting for a decision about their permission to stay, because their status is dependent on someone else or because they lack permission to enter or stay in the country. Examples of migrants with insecure status include people who are dependent on their partner, spouse or other family member’s status, people whose permission to work ties them to an employer, limits their working hours or restricts them from working in other sectors (e.g. seasonal workers, students, overseas domestic workers, etc.) It also includes those with undocumented status, such as people who have entered or stayed in the country irregularly, whose leave to enter or remain has expired or has been denied (e.g. refused asylum claims).

EXITING EXPLOITATION

“So I wasn’t even speaking freely with my mum, because I never told my mum anything about what was happening to me because, in the end, what could she do?”

Marta (Mexican)

When workers experience exploitation it often takes them a long time to seek support. An element of shame for feeling that they put themselves in that position can keep workers from even confiding in members of their family or close friends about the issues they are experiencing. Isolation, compounded with the coercion and control exerted by employers, also act as deterrents that keep them from identifying themselves as victims of exploitation. The lack of self-identification, coupled with the institutional failings that make domestic work one of the least regulated sectors, means that the majority of domestic workers will never get the support they need.

Due to lack of access to information and the complexity of the UK’s inspectorate system, workers have no knowledge of statutory organisations that regulate the labour market and support workers, or the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)⁶. Often the fear and mistrust of authorities, in particular when employers have told workers that if they seek support they will not be believed, deter them from going to the police. This is exacerbated in the case of victims who are undocumented, as they fear that approaching the police

or other statutory services would put them in danger of detention and/or deportation, due to the lack of safe reporting mechanisms that would prevent statutory services from sharing victims’ data with Immigration Enforcement.

Thus, at the point of seeking support, migrant domestic workers most often seek help with grassroots and community-based organisations. It is typically at this point that workers identify their experience as exploitation and/or modern slavery and can then discuss their options.

“It wasn’t easy asking for help, and I think that’s what we need to do, reach people at least, that they can get advice, that they can feel that they have someone to count on, because it was through those long conversations we had for a long time, because the process of accepting that I needed help was long.”

Amanda (Panamanian)

“The only thing I want out of this experience is that if anyone hears of other people in my same situation, that they ask for help, that they speak to another Latin American, that they spread the word, but that they don’t stay silent. To disclose this so that other people learn from my experience and don’t go through what I went through.”

Rita (Ecuadorian)

NATIONAL REFERRAL MECHANISM (NRM)

At the point of seeking help, victims of exploitation should be offered the option of being referred into the NRM to receive support. While this has been a vital source of support for many victims through the years, it is often the most vulnerable of workers who choose not to be referred. For those who do, this framework is plagued with issues, such as delays in receiving a response and in receiving support, not being contacted to inform them about a decision, lack of support for processing reconsideration requests, being offered

⁶ The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the framework for identifying victims and processing claims of trafficking and modern slavery, ensuring that they are able to receive the appropriate support. First responder organisations, including the police, social services workers, NHS employees, immigration officers, NGOs, immigrant community organisations, are the only ones with the authorisation to complete a referral to the Single Competent Authority or the Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority, who will make a decision about each case.

accommodation far from their community or the services they are accessing and very limited financial support. In the case of those who are undocumented, being in the NRM does not provide them the right to work, making them reliant on the community and organisations to avoid destitution. These conditions often leave workers vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation⁷.

Organisations supporting migrant victims of exploitation recurrently find that among undocumented workers, it is common to choose not to be referred into the NRM for fear of immigration consequences. The current intensification of the hostile environment, which seeks to establish a discourse of criminalisation of immigration portraying victims of exploitation as migrants who abuse the system, further impacts labour sectors in which they are overrepresented and discourages victims from seeking support.

Through recent changes introduced by the Nationality and Borders Act that seek to reduce the number of migrant victims accessing support through the NRM, first responder organisations are already seeing an increasing number of negative decisions - meaning that victims are being left out of this framework and unable to access support.

In the same vein, the Illegal Migration Act will further reduce access to the NRM, by denying support to victims who have entered the UK through irregular routes, and allowing for their detention and deportation, in breach of Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT), the Human Rights Act (HRA, 1998), and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, 1950).

THE 'PART OF THE FAMILY' LIE

"Here they sell you the idea that you are family, and you are not family. (My employer) made me eat somewhere else, for example. She would cut 4 portions of salmon and did not count me, she

would make 3 steaks and would not count me, so different food, everything. I'm not saying that I wanted not to work, or that they loved me, right? But she was very different, I mean, she made a difference that you are this and I'm this [...] She wouldn't even invite me or let me eat with the children."

Alejandra (Mexican)

"You are not someone they treat as an equal, you know?"

Amanda (Panamanian)

Domestic workers do not generally have the means, knowledge or time to bring a claim to the Employment Tribunal. In the rare occasions in which they do, employers' solicitors argue that they were treated 'as members of the family' and are therefore exempt from the National Minimum Wage legislation.

LAWRS strongly rejects the use of this argument. Migrant domestic workers are expected to be available 24/7 ('like family') to their employers, but in reality, the power imbalance between employer and employee makes it hard for workers to refuse any requests from their employers, and facilitates abuse and exploitation.

"She said 'no, no, you need to be always there when you are needed, that's why you are a live-in maid.' I said 'no, because live-in maids get to sleep.'"

Leticia (Bolivian)

Furthermore, as noted in our findings above, the experiences of domestic workers clearly evidence that far from being treated as a member of the family, living with the employer tends to mean quite the opposite. Migrant domestic workers are most often overworked and underpaid; prevented from accessing healthcare, and vocational and language training; kept in isolation from wider society and their families. In many cases they are also monitored, harassed and threatened with unemployment and deportation.

⁷Further urgent problems with the NRM have been highlighted by Kalayaan in their report ['The National Referral Mechanism: near breaking point'](#).

⁸*Hostile environment* is a concept widely used to refer to policies and legislation that seek to make life for migrants in Britain increasingly difficult, including the introduction of immigration control in every aspect of daily life, such as renting accommodation, working and accessing vital services such as the NHS. It also includes a highly divisive and dehumanising public rhetoric against migrants.

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Caught between the double myth that they are not workers, and that families are always caring and respectful, migrant domestic workers are effectively exempt from labour and human rights in the UK.

THE AFTERMATH

The experiences of exploitation and abuse on which this report attempts to shed light, undoubtedly left psychological impact in the people we interviewed. We recognise that any attempt to capture the harm done by these experiences will be imperfect and far too limited to do justice to the stories shared with us. What we recount below are a few of the ways in which the migrant domestic workers themselves tried to articulate the effect of these experiences as they moved on.

“I would prefer to eat separately, as we got to the point where she would mistreat me while I was eating. This is very difficult for me to even think about, it makes me feel sick.”

Sofia (Panamanian)

“I was fascinated by it, by the way that he described everything and said that I would be like family in there. He played me well, he knew my story with my grandmother, that I missed her and that I cared for her until she died [...] They would say that they were good Christians. But they broke me, not only physically and emotionally, but spiritually as well.”

Isabella (Brazilian)

“When you are yelled at and mistreated psychologically, you are not going to be happy, even if you know that’s just what that person is like.”

Rita (Ecuadorian)

“There are moments when you are afraid, you are anxious, especially those moments when you don’t know what will happen (...) I was so physically and mentally exhausted at times, I felt this is what it will always be like. I didn’t feel capable of carrying on like this, but I also felt I had no way out. Where would I go?”

Amanda (Panamanian)

“I feel that I changed a lot, in the sense that when I was in that house, I couldn’t talk, or laugh or cry, I was always silent, silent, silent. And I realised after, when I started socialising, going to church and talking to other people, I saw myself not talking, not talking, unless someone said something to me, but I would never take any initiative.”

Marta (Mexican)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Latin American women are overrepresented in domestic work in the UK, a highly feminised and unregulated sector where work is seen as unproductive and unskilled, and where the workforce is virtually invisible. Domestic workers are often faced with a long list of tasks and are expected to work long hours with little or no breaks. They are regularly overworked, underpaid, isolated and abused. Exploitation is endemic in this sector, and a large proportion of our community is exposed to experiences that amount to domestic servitude.

The difficulties in identifying exploitation and abuse in the sector, coupled with a lack of options and understanding of how to access support by workers, lead many women to remain in these conditions for long periods of time. Whilst many never seek support, and eventually leave their employment to find another job, those who do find that the framework specifically designed to support them, the NRM, may not work for them, and choose not to be referred into it.

This most often responds to fears about their immigration status, and it is the same reason why victims of exploitation do not approach the police for support. Adding to their vulnerability, migrant domestic workers in the UK are exempt from essential labour rights and are subjected to an anti-migrant rhetoric and environment that creates fear and anxiety over their immigration status, regardless of their situation.

Furthermore, support through the NRM is continually shrinking through pervasive legislation aimed at strengthening the hostile environment that seeks to discourage migrants from entering and settling in the UK, whilst curtailing the rights of migrants already here. Thus, rather than protecting victims of exploitation, the UK is endangering all marginalised communities such as migrants and racialised minorities. For migrant domestic workers specifically, UK legislation and overall discourse of migrants abusing the UK system leaves them more exposed to trafficking and exploitation. Crucially, traffickers and exploiters benefit from this system that allows them to use workers' anxiety over immigration status as an effective form of control and coercion, all the while knowing that they will not face any consequences for their actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As this report evidenced, community-based organisations are crucial for supporting vulnerable migrant women workers and their communities. For several years, these organisations have been the only safe haven for migrant domestic workers escaping exploitation, abuse and isolation. Whilst we are working to continue providing vital support to Latin American women in all areas of their lives, including access to their employment rights, we are concerned that for too long the government has relied on underfunded organisations to fill the gaps left and created by ineffective labour legislation and policies.

The disregard for the working conditions of migrant domestic workers goes against the UK's goal to end modern slavery, and there is much that the government can do to ensure that workers are treated fairly and do not fall into exploitation, such as:

- Improving regulation of the sector to ensure that workers are treated fairly and have full access to their employment rights, with particular efforts to understand the gendered dynamics of domestic work and other feminised sectors of the economy.
- Providing adequate funding to labour inspectorates so that they are able to effectively tackle exploitation in precarious sectors such as domestic work.
- Establishing a firewall that separates labour market enforcement and policing from Immigration Enforcement, so that victims can feel safe to report exploitation without fear of being detained and deported.
- Urgently removing the exemption under Article 57(3) of the National Minimum Wage Regulations which exempts employers from paying domestic workers the minimum wage, to ensure that all workers are paid a fair salary.
- Ratifying the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention 189, as well as complying with international obligations

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and responsibilities to victims of trafficking under European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT), which the Illegal Migration Act breaches.

- Taking urgent action to improve support for victims of trafficking through the NRM following Kalayaan's recommendations to appoint more specialist front line organisations as First Responder Organisations; establish a recruitment process for prospective organisations to apply; develop and maintain a nationwide training programme for both statutory and non-statutory First Responder Organisations; provide funding for First Responder Organisations to carry out their roles.
- Providing the right to work to undocumented victims of trafficking and exploitation with a positive Reasonable Grounds decision from the NRM.

- Improving communication and collaboration with community-based services to input into national and localised strategies to enhance migrant women workers' access to information and rights.

- Developing funding strategies that are long-term and sustainable, so community-based services are able to access grants for the provision of support to victims of labour exploitation and modern slavery.

We acknowledge that the recommendations above are not exhaustive of the ways in which the government can positively impact the current condition of migrant domestic workers.

The issues highlighted in this report must be understood in light of existing misogyny, racism, discrimination and anti-migration narratives. Recognising these issues and tackling them across society is essential for any long-term solution which ensures the rights of all workers are improved and guaranteed.

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