



# BEHIND CLOSED DOORS:

## Working Conditions of California Household Workers

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A report by Mujeres Unidas y Activas, Day Labor Program Women's  
Collective of La Raza Centro Legal, DataCenter

# Introduction



Photo: Jill Shenker

**H**ousehold workers work in the private homes of their employers, performing tasks such as in-home child, patient, and elder care, housework, and cooking. They are primarily female immigrants; some live in the home of their employer working around the clock, while others work in various households where the work is temporary and sporadic. Many are “unaffiliated” workers, meaning they have no connection to a hiring or temporary agency. The independent, private, often isolated nature of domestic labor means that household workers often lack information about their rights or knowledge of the laws of this country and are frequently exploited by employers. Those who are undocumented live in constant fear of being deported. While supporting their employers’ homes and families, household workers frequently find themselves working in sub-standard and often exploitative conditions, earning poverty wages too low to support their own families, and lacking access to basic health care. Their vulnerable situation subsidizes the productivity and affluence of the U.S. economy and yet this occupation is little understood and marginalized by the larger society and policymakers.

## About the Study

In 2002, Mujeres Unidas y Activas and the San Francisco Day Labor Program Women’s Collective of La Raza Centro Legal came together to analyze and to strategize to improve the household work industry. Because there is no official data available about the number of household workers or information about their work conditions in California, these membership-based and membership-led organizations of low-income immigrant Latina women, many of whom are household workers, joined with the DataCenter and the San Francisco Department of Public Health to create a participatory research project to assess the industry. Over thirty immigrant women were trained to administer the survey and together they collected two hundred and forty surveys from their peers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The hour-long surveys were conducted on buses, in parks, at laundromats and in the homes of household workers. As the Household Worker Rights Coalition Survey (HWRC Survey) results make clear, this is a very vulnerable industry. Rampant abuses of household workers must be addressed.

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# Household Workers Have Families to Support

**B**y definition, household workers support their employers’ families—they care for children, patients, or the elderly in their homes; they clean houses, do housework, or cook for their employers, often providing a combination of household services. Household workers also support their own families. Currently, as has been the case historically, household workers are women of color who work in the industry for many years.

## Workers Play Critical Role in Providing Family Income

- Over half of survey respondents (54%) are primary income earners for their families and twenty one percent (21%) are joint income earners.
- Household workers support on average two adults and two children.
- Additionally, seventy two percent (72%) of workers also support family in their countries of origin.

## Immigrant Women of Color Workforce

- Ninety-eight percent (98%) of survey respondents are women and ninety four percent (94%) are Latinas.
- Nearly all (99%) were born outside the United States.

TABLE 1

| Role in family income support                    | %   |
|--|-----|
| Primary income earner                            | 54% |
| Joint income earner                              | 21% |
| Average # of family members supported            | #   |
| Adults   | 2   |
| Children (under 18 years old)                    | 2   |
| Support additional family abroad                 | %   |
| Send money or packages to family in home country | 72% |
| Gender, race and country of origin               | %   |
| Female   | 98% |
| Latina   | 94% |
| Born outside of the United States                | 99% |
| Years worked in industry                         | %   |
| 1 year or less                                   | 28% |
| 2-5 years  | 41% |
| 6 years or longer                                | 31% |

Source: HWRC Survey 2007

## Household Work is a Career

- Survey results show household employment is a long-term occupation for a significant portion of the workforce. One-third (31%) of the workers have been in the industry for 6 years or longer.



Photo: Andrea Cristina Mercado



## Household Workers Face Financial Hardship

Like other low-wage workers, household workers are excluded from the rising tide of prosperity in San Francisco and California as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Almost all household workers earn wages that are too low to adequately support their families.

TABLE 2

| Worker Hourly Wage   |     |
|--|-----|
| No wage earned (\$0.00)                                    | 3%  |
| Earn less than minimum wage (\$0.01-\$6.74) <sup>2</sup>   | 11% |
| Earn below poverty line (\$6.75-\$9.06) <sup>3</sup>       | 23% |
| Earn low wage (\$9.07-\$14.26)                             | 44% |
| Earn self sufficiency wage (\$14.27 & higher) <sup>4</sup> | 19% |

### Higher wages needed to adequately support families

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Wage earned NOT sufficient to pay for living expenses (rent, groceries, childcare, bills) | 93% |
|---|-----|

Source: HWRC Survey 2007

### Workers Earn Low Wages and Face Wage Violations

- Low wages are endemic to the industry—two thirds (67%) of household workers earn low wages or wages below the poverty line.
- In addition, eleven percent (11%) of workers earn less than minimum wage.

### Wages Insufficient to Meet Family Living Expenses

- More than eighty percent (81%) of workers do not make a sufficient wage. Only 19% earn a per adult wage high enough to adequately support a family of four, although more than half of household workers (54%) are primary income earners (see Table 1).
- Nearly all workers (93%) are unable to pay basic living expenses such as rent and groceries.



“Because I care for their children, both my employers are able to work full time, but I struggle to buy groceries for my family and pay rent each month.”

—Reina Flamenco, Mujeres Unidas y Activas member



Photo: Claudia Reyes

## Household Workers Are Mistreated by Employers

Household workers rarely receive paid breaks as legally required. Moreover, many contend with unscrupulous or uninformed employers who violate workers’ rights to be paid as agreed for work performed and to receive overtime pay as stipulated by law. More disturbingly, emotional and physical abuse of household workers by their employers is prevalent in the industry.

### Workers Experience Violations with Remuneration, Overtime Payments and Work Hours

- Almost all (90%) of workers who worked overtime did not always receive overtime pay.

#### During a two-month period:

- Thirty one percent (31%) worked more hours than agreed upon.
- Nearly one-quarter (22%) of household workers were paid less than agreed upon with their employer.
- Sixteen percent (16%) were not paid for their work at all or paid with a bad check.

### Paid Rest and Meal Breaks Are Withheld

- Eighty three percent (83%) of workers do not always receive a 10-minute paid break after four hours of work.
- Seventy eight percent (78%) of household workers do not always receive a 30-minute meal break after five hours of work when working shifts of more than six hours.

### Workers Experience Verbal & Physical Abuse During a Two Month Period

- Twenty percent (20%) of household workers are insulted or threatened by their employers.
- Nine percent (9%) of workers are sexually harassed.
- Nine percent (9%) experience violence.
- More than one-third (35%) of workers did not respond to survey questions about workplace abuse, a substantially higher non-response rate than the rest of the survey that indicates a high level of discomfort with the questions (corroborated with survey collectors).<sup>6</sup>

TABLE 3

### Violations with Pay, Overtime and Hours

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Did not receive overtime pay when work overtime <sup>5</sup> | 90% |
| Worked more hours than agreed                                | 31% |
| Paid less than agreed upon                                   | 22% |
| Not paid or paid with bad check                              | 16% |

### Lack Breaks

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Do not receive paid work breaks | 83% |
| Do not receive paid meal breaks | 78% |

### Abused by Employer in last 2 months

|                        |     |
|------------------------|-----|
| Insulted or threatened | 20% |
| Sexual harassment      | 9%  |
| Violence               | 9%  |
| No response            | 35% |

Source: HWRC Survey 2007



“We want better wages, safe workplaces, respectful treatment, paid vacation, sick days and holidays, health care and the right to join a union.”

—Yesenia Perez, La Raza Centro Legal Women’s Collective member



# Household Workers Are Exposed to Health and Safety Hazards

Most employees expect and are entitled to workplaces that seek to protect their health and safety. Survey findings show household workers commonly contend with workplace hazards, yet rarely receive safety training or protective gear to prevent injury or illness. Very few workers receive health insurance benefits from their employers. Lack of regulatory protection from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration also jeopardizes the health and safety of household workers. The majority of workers who are ill or injured do not receive necessary medical care, primarily due to the inability to pay.

## Lack of Occupational Health and Safety Protections

- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of household workers consider their jobs hazardous, citing concentrated exposure to toxic cleaning chemicals and human contagions, risk of injury from cleaning high or difficult-to-reach places, and heavy lifting.
- Three-quarters (75%) of household workers reported not receiving protective gear such as facemasks or gloves to prevent workplace injuries.
- Most workers (86%) do not receive training in job safety or workplace injury prevention.

## Lack of Access to Medical Care

- Ninety-five percent (95%) of household workers work for employers who do not provide health insurance coverage.
- Nearly one-third (30%) of workers had suffered an injury or illness requiring medical attention in the past year.
- The majority of workers who suffer an injury requiring medical attention or treatment go without professional medical treatment (or self-treat) due primarily to inability to pay. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of workers who were injured or ill never receive medical care needed.
- The majority of workers (68%) who did receive medical care paid for it themselves or through friends and family.



Photo: Jill Shenker

**TABLE 4**

| Occupational hazards   |     |
|--|-----|
| Consider household work dangerous or hazardous                     | 63% |
| Did not receive safety equipment                                   | 75% |
| Did not receive job safety training                                | 86% |
| Lack of Access to Medical Care                                     |     |
| Health insurance not provided by employer                          | 95% |
| Suffered injury or illness requiring medical care in the past year | 30% |
| Never receive medical care needed for injuries or illness          | 64% |
| Worker, family or friends paid for medical care received           | 68% |

*Source: HWRC Survey 2007*

# Conclusion

Household workers are not earning sufficient wages, are exposed to significant health and safety hazards and are experiencing high rates of worker abuse. Despite these substandard workplace conditions, household workers in California are specifically and practically excluded from many labor protections. California must change these inadequate and unfair laws to be inclusive of these workers. Through enforcement of existing legal rights and organizing for more protections, we can improve working conditions for all household workers and combat the racism, sexism, and worker exploitation that create these conditions.

## What we need to ensure decent conditions for household workers

- Equality:** Household workers should have the same labor rights as workers in other industries.
- Health:** Household workers lack basic health care coverage and preventative care services. Like all other workers, household workers and their children deserve access to quality health care. Preventative care is critical for ensuring that workers are able to do their jobs well without unnecessary injuries.
- Safety:** Household workers are exposed to many health and safety risks in their jobs. Household workers should be guaranteed a safe and secure workplace, just as any other worker. Currently, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration does not regulate the household work industry. In addition, Workers

- Compensation laws should be made accessible to people working multiple part time jobs in various households.
- Accountability for Employers:** Household workers are particularly vulnerable to employer abuse because they work in isolated workplaces where there is no regulation. Agencies and individual clients should be jointly liable for the worker's rights.
- Protection from Discrimination:** Household workers commonly face race, gender, and age discrimination in their jobs. However, they rarely work for employers with more than five employees so discrimination protections do not include them. All workers deserve protection from discrimination.

## Endnotes

1. The population, wealth, and cost of living in the Bay Area has continued to grow over the last three decades in the midst of general economic downturn. The population of residents earning over \$100,000 a year ballooned from seven percent to twenty-six percent from 1990 to 2000. Source: US Census Bureau's 2003 American Community Survey.
2. During the time of the survey, minimum wage was \$6.75.
3. Federal poverty threshold 2004 for two adult, two-child families. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division.
4. Per-adult hourly wage of \$14.27 and higher required by a two adult, two child working family to pay for the basic needs of rent, food, child care, health care, transportation, miscellaneous costs and taxes in San Francisco County in 2003. Source: Diana Pearce & Wider Opportunities for Women, *The Self-Sufficiency Standard for California 2003*.
5. Figures exclude personal attendants of the elderly and disabled who normally do not have the right to overtime pay under current federal and California law.
6. To correctly interpret the statistics above, it is important to keep in mind that abuse of women is culturally normalized, to such an extent that women may not identify experiences such as verbal harassment as abuse. Women who experience abuse are not likely to talk about it with family members, much less with strangers on a survey. Household workers are in an especially vulnerable position, often the only worker at their workplaces, and dependent on their employers for the income to support their families. Thus, they are more likely to put up with abuse to keep their jobs.



Photo: Francisco Dominguez

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The DataCenter is a fully-integrated

research, training, and strategy center serving poor and working class communities of color organizing for social justice. In partnership with grassroots social justice organizations, the DataCenter plays an integral role in making information accessible, engaging communities in research, recognizing and drawing out community expertise, and building community capacity to strategically apply research in organizing and policy work.

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San Francisco Day Labor Program Women's Collective of La Raza Centro Legal is an organization of immigrant workers,.

Workers lead our organization, especially those who have chosen to work collectively to improve our situation. We prioritize the voices of homeless workers, undocumented workers, and women workers. We combine service provision with community organizing, empowering workers to take strategic action around issues that affect us.

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Mujeres Unidas y Activas is a grassroots organization of Latina immigrant women with a dual mission of personal transformation and community

power. Creating an environment of understanding and confidentiality, MUA empowers and educates our members through mutual support and training to be leaders in their own lives and in the community. Working with diverse allies, MUA promotes unity and civic-political participation to achieve social justice.