

*New Scholars*

**NEPALI FEMALE MIGRANTS AND  
INFORMALIZATION OF DOMESTIC CARE WORK:  
SERVICE OR SERVITUDE?\***

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**ABSTRACT**

Nepali female migrants are among the fastest-growing immigrant workforces in the South Asian community, particularly in service and domestic work in big cities of the United States. However, there has not until now been a study investigating the work experiences of Nepali immigrants/migrants employed in the service and domestic sectors in these cities. This article investigates the work experiences of Nepali female migrants who work in service and domestic/child care work in Boston and New York, focusing on examining the type and nature of women's work, labor practices, work and living conditions, women's experiences and views about their work, and their responses to labor policies. The data for this research were collected through semistructured, informal, in-depth interviews and narrative collection in 2005-2006. Twenty research participants (16-65 years of age) were selected using snowball sampling. The cases of Nepali women reported here support existing literature asserting that migrant/immigrant women are greatly involved and preferred in domestic (including child care) work, and that they encounter labor exploitation, emotional abuse, and prejudice. By demonstrating the downward occupational mobility/status of educated professional Nepali female migrants, however, this study also deconstructs the myths

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about domestic/child care workers (for example, that they come from impoverished and nonprofessional backgrounds; this is not necessarily true). The downward mobility of Nepali immigrant women is a significant factor in leading women to quit their jobs, as a last resort, when work conditions and labor relations become unbearable. Since quitting a job does not solve the underlying problems in these women's work lives, I suggest that these women need to become active in community-based social and political organizations to learn about workers' rights.

## INTRODUCTION

The fact that domestic work is one of the two forms of work historically accepted as "women's work" (the other being prostitution), together with the fact that it has an ancient and modern association with slavery and is manual and dirtying, makes this occupation universally despised and ensures that those who are involved in it are universally dehumanized. (Rollins, 1985: 59)

With the acceleration of globalization and global restructuring, the dynamics of labor and gender have taken an interesting turn. Women in general, and immigrant/migrant women in particular, have now become the most preferred form of labor of the global economy, particularly in the industrial manufacturing and the informal service and domestic sectors (Chang, 2000; Ching Yoon Louie, 2001; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parrenas, 2001; Sassen, 2006; Ward, 1990; Wichterich, 2000). Each year, more and more women from poor nations migrate/immigrate to rich nations, and the majority of them work in the informal service and domestic sectors. Nepali women are no exception to this global process; their lives have been touched by this phenomenon. Nepali women's migration/immigration began at a time of major political, economic, and social changes in Nepal in the 1990s. Nepali women's international migration, therefore, should be understood within the context of both global and national structural changes.

There has been a long history of male Nepali international labor migration, particularly among those who have served as soldiers in the British and Indian armies. These soldiers have been known as Gurkha warriors due to their heroic fighting in both world wars. The immigration/migration of the Nepalese to the United States, however, is a recent phenomenon (Dhungel, 1999), and the Nepalese community is smaller than other South Asian communities in the United States. However, since the 1990s, the flow of Nepalese immigrants/migrants into the United States has increased significantly because of combined factors such as the diversity visa lottery system (introduced and implemented by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) and the restoration of the democracy movement in Nepal in the 1990s (Dhungel, 1999).

It is important to discuss the social, political, and economic ramifications of the democratic revolution as they relate to both internal and international

migration. The effects have been phenomenal and often contradictory. Scholars have noted that “the democratic movements in Nepal since 1990 and globalization have been contributing to an increasingly diversified pattern of destinations by migrants” (Thieme & Wyss, 2005: 1). Politically, Nepal has been transformed from an absolute monarchy to a republican state. The main changes in the economic arena have been privatization, deregulation of the labor market, and the introduction of free trade. The globalization of information, technology, and communications has touched the lives of most people. The social changes include those demanded (and to some extent achieved) in the area of equality and social justice, for example, ethnic rights, women’s rights, religious rights, human rights, and environmental justice.

While most caste-, ethnicity-, culture-, gender-, and sexuality-based changes have been positive, other changes have ironically put Nepal in a state of crisis. The Maoist insurgency, armed conflict, the depressed economy, poverty, unemployment, and increased political violence and insecurity—all of which have disrupted daily life—have presented people with serious challenges. Nepal as a political, social, and cultural entity has been in a state of turmoil and transition, and so, naturally, have its people.

The ongoing political conflicts and violent upheavals have displaced many people from their places and communities, resulting in forced migration on regional and international levels. The frequent and lengthy strikes initiated by various political parties have at times paralyzed the whole of Nepal and adversely affected its economy. Given the unstable economy, the increasing unemployment, the political violence, and the uncertainty of their day-to-day existence, people started to migrate within and across global boundaries. While some people migrated in search of economic opportunities and better livelihoods, many others migrated to escape from the political violence and the Maoist threat (Hamal Gurung, 2003).

In the case of Nepali women, the global labor market, particularly in the informal sectors, had an added dynamic—the increasing demand for female labor in these sectors in cities worldwide. Nepali women’s migration/immigration is thus a result of both the political, economic, and social changes in Nepal and the global restructuring process. Nepali women’s migration/immigration to major cities in the United States, such as New York, Boston, and Los Angeles, became visible in the early 1990s.

Most immigrant Nepali women work in the informal service and domestic sectors as restaurant workers, as cashiers in convenience stores and coffee shops, as nannies, and as workers performing household tasks. In big cities like New York and Los Angeles, Nepali women also work in beauty parlors; the majority of them provide eyebrow designing service. Feminist and sociological scholars have documented the work experiences of other women of color and immigrants/migrants (Chang, 2000; Ching Yoon Louie, 2001; Colon, 1986; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parrenas, 2001; Romero, 1992) who work in the

informal service and domestic sectors in U.S. cities. These studies have focused on Mexican American, Latina, Caribbean, and Southeast Asian immigrant/migrant women. Until now, there has been no systematic study investigating the work experiences of Nepali immigrants/migrants who work in the service and domestic sectors in U.S. cities.

The objective of this article is to document the work experiences of this particular group of South Asian immigrant/migrant women, who have not yet received attention in sociological, feminist, and human rights scholarship. This article highlights women's voices and visions in relation to their work experiences. Women's narratives and analyses illustrate the fact that women resist and take action on an individual level with regard to unfair labor practices. Women's individual actions, however, have very little effect. When labor practices and conditions become exploitative, oppressive, and unbearable, as a last resort women quit their jobs. Quitting a job, I argue, does not liberate women from the abuse and the exploitative labor conditions in the long run. If they continue working in the informal service and domestic sectors, they will again be caught up in a similar cycle. Building on existing accounts of immigrant/migrant women's work experience, I suggest the need for women to engage with community-based social and political organizations. Such associations will give these women avenues and platforms with which to voice and share their labor conditions/practices, learn about workers' rights, and mobilize for justice.

In the following pages, I provide a brief theoretical discussion, share my methods, and then follow with an outline of the demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds of the female Nepali migrants. This article focuses on labor conditions, practices, and relations in the context of women's experiences in the labor market, and it explores and addresses the following questions from women's perspectives: What are the typical labor conditions and practices? How do these labor conditions and practices affect women's emotional and social well-being? How do women perceive their work? What do women experience in their relationships with their employers? What structural and cultural factors shape women's labor conditions? How do women respond to unfair labor policies and work conditions? Do women have the leverage to bring about a change?

### **IMMIGRATION, MIGRATION, AND DOMESTIC WORK: RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND NATIONALITY**

Scholars, particularly feminist sociological and intersectionality theorists, have examined women's inferior position and exploitative labor conditions in relation to women's race, class, gender, nationality, and legal and citizenship status. For intersectionality scholars, race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and legal/citizenship status are sources of power, privilege, oppression, and marginalization, and it is the intersection of these factors that creates a matrix

of domination (Collins, 1990; Glenn, 2002; Zinn & Dill, 1993). According to this framework, the effects of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and legal/citizenship status are experienced simultaneously, not separately. Hence, one cannot fully capture a person's experience, power, privilege, marginalization, or state of oppression based on only one of these categories. The intersectional framework allows us to analyze the interrelationships between race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and legal/citizenship status. It also reveals how these factors function together and create multiple layers of power, privilege, marginalization, and oppression.

Romero (1992), in her study of female Mexican American domestic workers, discusses the ways in which the U.S. labor force has historically been stratified along race, class, and gender lines. Drawing examples from African American, West Indian, Chicana, and Japanese American domestics, Romero documents women's everyday lived realities of hardships and struggles in domestic work including domestic child care. The tasks of the domestics include housework, laundry, child care, cooking, and shopping, as well as anything else asked of them. Since domestics are doing work that used to be done without pay by a family homemaker their jobs are sometimes treated as nonwork, which can put much more stress on the women workers. The chores that homemakers used to tackle daily can now be dumped upon lower-class immigrant workers who need whatever money they can make. The lower-class status of the domestics often encourages employers to treat the women disrespectfully, which reinforces the barriers of race, class, and gender already seen in our society.

Scholars who examine the gendered effects of globalization also document the feminization of international migration and the feminization of the labor force, particularly the feminization of informal service and domestic work. In *Doméstica: Immigrant workers cleaning and caring in the shadow of affluence*, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) reports that the growth of paid domestic work relies on the labor of immigrant/migrant women. By analyzing the lives of the Latina immigrant/migrant domestic workers in the Los Angeles area, Hondagneu-Sotelo is also able to point to the racialization of such work.

The cases and stories of Filipina and Latina immigrant/migrant domestic workers on the West Coast, Mexican domestic workers in the Southwest, and Caribbean immigrant/migrant domestic workers in New York have been well documented (Chang, 2000; Cohen, 1986; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parrenas, 2001; Romero, 1992; Sassen, 2006). Although immigrant women who work in the domestic sector are a vital workforce in the global economy, they are also a disposable and vulnerable workforce (Chang, 2000). Gender and racial ideologies are used to exploit the labor power of women and racial and ethnic minorities for profit (Moghadam, 1999). In the introduction to their edited volume, *Global woman: Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy* (2002), Ehrenreich and Hochschild also report the extent of the feminized service and care work that rests on the labor of immigrant/migrant women, and the dependency of

“affluent and middle-class families in the First World” on migrants from poor regions for care work. Yet these workers are invisible; they work behind closed doors and are subjected to sexual abuse (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002: 11).

Scholars have consistently reported that from colonial times through to the present global era, women in general, and women of color and immigrant/migrant women in particular, have disproportionately shouldered the burden of domestic and reproductive labor in the United States (Glenn, 1986; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992). Studies have also consistently reported that among migrant/immigrant women workers, women of color and those who have no legal permission to work and have no political and legal rights are subject to the most dehumanizing abuse and exploitation. Rollins, in her classic book *Between women: Domesticity and their employers* (1985), reports on the growth in the numbers of Caribbean and Latin American women in U.S. domestic employment in the 20th century. Referring to these women’s labor conditions, Rollins (1985: 57) reports that “because of their precarious material and sometimes legal status, they are the most exploitable group within the domestic servant sector; and because they are Third World women, they will be vulnerable to the ‘occupational ghettoization’ European immigrant women of the nineteenth century escaped.”

Similarly, quoting the International Labor Organization, Piper (2004: 72) states that “among the most vulnerable groups of migrants in terms of inadequate protection and limited legal rights today are domestic workers, irregular workers, and temporary workers.” Along the same lines, Anderson (2002: 107) states: “Undocumented workers in particular have extremely limited access to their own families or really, to any life outside the employing home. . . . Such women, however, isolated in private households, without papers or legal protection, are strikingly vulnerable to abuse.”

Studies examining the work experiences of women of color and immigrant/migrant women in the domestic sector in the United States have so far documented how those from poor nations or from relatively low socioeconomic backgrounds take jobs in this sector. Studies have rarely examined why and how educated and professional women in their country of origin immigrate/migrate and take such jobs. This study expands on the current scholarship, addressing a significant gap: the experiences of immigrant Nepali women. Specifically, how do educated Nepali female migrant/immigrant workers experience the vulnerability, oppression, and abuse that has been so widely documented in the literature on domestic work?

## DATA AND METHOD

During my stay of more than a decade in Boston, I witnessed a gradual flow of migration/immigration of Nepali women working in informal economic sectors in the cities of Boston and New York. My familiarity with the cities and communities and my observation of the influx of women over the years were the

determining factors for my choice of these cities and these particular groups of Nepali women. Being an active member of the Nepali community and a former resident of Boston and Connecticut helped me to locate and approach the research participants. Of the 20 Nepali immigrant women that I interviewed, 10 lived in Boston and 10 lived in New York City. All were between the ages of 16 and 65. I used snowball sampling to locate and select the research participants. My personal contacts and social networks were instrumental in identifying research participants. However, because of the women's irregular work schedules and the nature of the study, which involved immigration issues, the rapport building necessary for these interviews was especially time consuming. It was important to me as a researcher that women should be able to narrate their own stories. Interviewing and communicating with the women's employers was not within the scope of this study. This is because it was essential to provide the women with a safe and comfortable space to share their visions, which would enable the garnering of truthful information and thus allow a better understanding of the women's experiences from their perspectives; and because of the sensitive nature of the immigration issues involved in this study. The women's lived experiences and voices are central to the study and at its core; and their interpretations and perspectives are the basis for this study.

I collected data through in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews; I also used end-of-interview questionnaires to gather information about women's demographic profiles. Interviews and narrative collections were tape recorded with participants' consent, and Nepali was the primary language used during the interviews. The interviewing process was made possible because I am a Nepali national—we shared the same first language, the same culture, and the experience of diasporic migration. Also, the fact that I am a mother, like the women I interviewed, helped to facilitate conversations. Conducting research about women's work and labor conditions, especially with undocumented workers, would otherwise not have been possible. Being a researcher from the same ethnic community as the women I interviewed, I definitely enjoyed some advantages because of my "insider" position, as discussed by Zinn (1979).

In order to ensure confidentiality, the participants have been given pseudonyms. Although the sample size is small, the study is a vital exploration of emerging trends and patterns of migration among Nepali women and their positions/roles in the informal labor market and in domestic work.

### **CONDITIONS AND WORK**

The women I interviewed all expressed a combination of economic, political, social, and personal reasons for migration. The economic reasons included the obligation to earn money and support their families and communities back home (investing in their children's education, buying properties, supporting social organizations). Political reasons mainly involved the safety and security

of everyday life and of business and property. The social and personal reasons included family conflicts, a broken family life, single motherhood, a desire for economic autonomy, and a desire for personal growth and freedom. In many cases, social, economic, political, and personal reasons were interconnected. Migration, whether regional or international, entails not just a geographical move and displacement but also a series of shifts in social, political, and economic conditions. This means changes in personal, work, family, and community domains. Sometimes the change is drastic; the work lives of Nepali migrant women reveal this type of change.

Most of the women I interviewed were married, mothers, and middle-aged (in their 40s). Perhaps most surprising, Nepali women who migrated/immigrated and work in the informal economic sectors enjoyed better socioeconomic circumstances in Nepal than they do in the United States. The majority of them had four years of college education in Nepal. Prior to coming to the United States, they had been employed as teachers, social workers, or NGO workers. The nature and types of work women did in Nepal prior to their coming to the United States and the nature and types of work women they done since their arrival in the United States are very different. Out of 20 research participants, 17 were working in professional fields and in formal sectors in Nepal. Upon their arrival in the United States, their world of work changed to the informal service and domestic sectors and has remained there. Table 1 illustrates this remarkable shift in women's work.

### **Shifting Work, Shifting Status, and Work Experience**

As women moved from Nepal to the United States and as they started to work in the informal service and domestic sectors, they became more than transnational workers; a shift also occurred in their occupation, social class, and gender position. These shifts also created new identities, images, and categories. It is within this new context that these college-educated Nepali women became "women of color" working in service and domestic work in informal economic sectors where they encountered oppressive and exploitative labor conditions. The abusive labor conditions included longer working hours than those agreed upon, work during the weekend, additional work such as cooking and cleaning, and emotional abuse. Studies show such labor conditions to be typical features of the domestic employment sector. Women domestic workers in studies by Romero (1992) as well as Rollins (1985) persistently reported these same work conditions.

The majority of women were drawn to these jobs because of a combination of factors such as the availability of work that does not require training or a license; easy access to such work, with women's friends and relatives becoming the main sources of job placement; and the fact that proper legal documents are not required. Of all these factors, the last one—Nepali women's immigration status—was the one that most clearly set severe limits on their work options.



Table 1. Women and Work: Types and Nature<sup>a</sup>

	Types of work women did back home	Types of work women are doing currently
1.	High school teacher in a private American school	Child care
2.	Nurse	Child care (worked previously in a restaurant)
3.	NGO worker	Child care
4.	NGO worker	Restaurant and child care
5.	Housewife	Child care
6.	NGO worker and teacher	Child care and work in a laundromat
7.	High school teacher	Cashier in a convenience store
8.	Government job	Child care
9.	Police	Work in a coffee shop
10.	Police	Restaurant work
11.	High school teacher and social worker	Child care
12.	Coordinator, international student exchange program	Child care
13.	High school teacher	Child care
14.	NGO worker	Child care
15.	High school teacher	Child care
16.	Founder of a high school and teacher in that school	Child care
17.	Housewife	Child care
18.	NGO worker	Child care and work on a jewelry shop
19.	Teacher	Child care
20.	Housewife	Child care

<sup>a</sup>Although women were precisely hired to provide child care only, nearly all of them were required to cook, clean, and perform other domestic duties. Their narratives mirror this reality.

Like the women in Piper's (2004) study, many of the Nepali women had few opportunities to select a job beyond the service and domestic sectors. Consequently, they worked in these low-paying sectors, at a level well below that of their educational and skills levels.

Sarina, a 40-year-old woman who had been an NGO worker in Nepal, cleaned tables and washed dishes in a Boston restaurant on weekends. On weekdays she worked as a full-time nanny for a toddler. Sarina had a college education, and through her NGO work in Nepal she had visited other countries as well. Although she had previously been exposed to foreign countries and encountered different cultures, she had not experienced the life of a restaurant worker and child care provider. The work culture in service and care work was new to her. Sarina found her child care job socially alienating and monotonous and her restaurant work physically exhausting. She had no power to bargain with regard to her wage and working hours in either job. This is Sarina's description of her downward occupational shift in the United States:

I have become a wage worker here; there is no possibility for upper mobility. I worked in an NGO in Nepal, and my job was respectable. I used to travel a lot. My education and skills are useless here. It would be nice to have a good job, but I don't have a work permit. So I am stuck in such jobs.

International migrants are generally believed to travel and move from one place to another for better jobs. Sarina's case, however, was different and complex. Her job in Nepal was higher in social status, but the cash income that she made from her work in America was higher, especially when converting U.S. dollars into Nepali rupees. The factors (social or economic) that have the most influence on women in their decision to work in a foreign country depend on a particular woman's social, economic, and political conditions.

Tara, a 41-year-old nanny in New York, was a teacher and a social worker in Nepal. Prior to coming to the United States, she taught in a high school. As a social worker, she worked for five years instructing illiterate older women. She came to the United States to earn money and support her children because her earnings in Nepal were not adequate. When asked why she took a nanny job, she explained:

I was very happy with my job in Nepal. That job and the job that I'm doing now are definitely very different. I've come here to help my children get a good education and provide other necessary financial help. Since I don't have legal documents to work, I took a child care job. I have seen that a lot of women who don't have a work permit work in either nail salons or in housekeeping.

### **Employers and Workers: Work Relations and Work Conditions**

The employment and hiring process in the informal labor market, particularly in service and domestic work, is done through both employers' and workers'

social networks and through word of mouth. All the participants in this study obtained employment through their friends and their families and through word of mouth. In such employment/hiring practices, first, an employer has complete autonomy in hiring and deciding the wage, working hours, and any other work-related policies and decisions. Second, the employers can change their work policies and rules at any time without any consultation with the workers. These jobs are unregulated and workers are left unprotected. There is an unequal power relation between employers and workers. This relationship becomes more complex if the workers are undocumented migrants/immigrants, of a different race, and women. The extent of labor abuse and exploitation is related to workers' race, class, gender position in the labor market, nationality, and legal/citizenship status. As mentioned above, studies have consistently shown that domestic workers, both women of color and immigrant/migrant women, are at the very bottom of the job hierarchy and that they have no control over their labor and labor conditions (Chang, 2000; Glenn, 1986; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992). The cases of Nepali women follow this same pattern.

Tara, the 41-year-old nanny in New York quoted above, is a live-in nanny. Her employers hired her knowing that she didn't have a work permit. She was hired to work Monday to Friday, from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm. The arrangement was that at the end of her work day on Friday, she would leave her employer's home and stay with her friends, and come back to work on Sunday night. The reality was different. On weekdays, although her work day was supposed to start at 8:00 am and end at 6:00 pm, she always worked longer than these set hours. She would normally start working before 7:00 am and continue until 7:00 pm, after dinnertime. Sometimes, even during the night, if the employer's child could not go to sleep, the mother would bring him to Tara, and Tara would be back on the job trying to make the child go to sleep. As a live-in nanny, she was pressured to provide her services whenever there was a need. Household tasks were not discussed during her hiring and were not part of her job description, but she had to perform them. Clearly, Tara had no control over her labor and labor conditions. Here is what Tara said:

I earned \$250.00 per week, I also did household chores. . . . The child was very close to me. He would even sleep in my room. The child would cry in the middle of the night and the mother would bring the child into my room and leave him there.

Tara accepted another live-in nanny position in another household, where she took care of three children. Her work schedule and work arrangements were similar to those of her previous job. The working hours were longer—from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm. Although the arrangement was that she could leave on Friday night and come back on Sunday night, any social event taking place at her employers' house and any social engagement of her employers outside their house would restrict her free time during the weekend. On such occasions, she

had to look after the children and could not leave the house. Working these extra hours did not increase her salary, and none of these work policies were discussed during her hiring. During the hiring, the employers did not ask whether she was eligible to work; nor did they check any of her documents. As with her previous employer, Tara was hired with the employers knowing that she did not have work documents. Referring to her reason for being in such work and enduring such work conditions, Tara said:

I don't have a work permit. I have seen that a lot of women who don't have a work permit work in either nail salons or in housekeeping. It is very difficult to be under the control of another person, because sometimes I have to work on the weekends when I want to go out to Nepali gatherings.

Tara was connected to these employers through her circle of friends who were doing similar work. During the interview, her employers asked her how long she had been in the United States and whether she had ever had a child care job. Once they knew she had been in the country for 17 to 18 months and that she had already been employed in child care, they asked her to come to work on the following Monday (she was interviewed on Saturday). Tara's employers knew about her social and political background, nationality, and immigration status through the friend who introduced her to them.

Tara's background and immigration status may have made her an ideal worker. In her first week on the job, Tara found out that the people who had hired her were looking for someone who would stay in the job for a long time and take care of their disruptive children. On Tara's first day at work, a neighbor warned her about the children's wild and violent behaviors. As Tara recounted:

The neighbor told me that they've already had 12 nannies. I was kind of nervous. Later, I understood why there were 12 nannies. The children really were very wild. They would throw anything and everything at each other. They would fight with each other and they even hit me so many times. One of my best friends had to look after them for a day because I was sick, and she told me that she couldn't deal with those kids.

During the job interview, Tara's employers did not mention anything about their children's personalities and behaviors. Tara experienced many of the children's unpleasant and violent behaviors, but she took care of the children with a great deal of patience and tolerance. At a certain point, however, she felt as though she would lose her sanity. Once, when she was not well and was trying to rest in her room, the children came to her room and started to jump around her room and on her bed. They were shouting and throwing things at each other.

What bothered Tara the most was that the parents neither said nor did anything to stop their children's behaviors, and they did not apologize for these behaviors. Their attitude was that if Tara was hired for care work, she had to bear with it. Tara suffered silently; her problems were invisible. Piper's research in this context is relevant: "Seeking new sources of migrant labour, however, is not

only related to demand in terms of numbers, but also to demand of a different kind of worker—one who is less expensive and more docile (less ‘rights’ conscious)” (Piper 2004: 77). Tara’s silence, docility, and lower consciousness about her rights, however, can also be attributed to her immigration status. This seems to be a pattern across different continents. Referring to migrant domestic workers in Southeast Asia, Piper and Ball (2001) suggest that not having legal immigrant status excluded migrant domestic workers from the protective labor laws of the receiving nations. However, even a temporary work permit will not grant domestic workers labor rights. As Piper and Yamanaka (2003: 10) put it, “Being a non-citizen temporary worker puts any migrant in an extremely vulnerable position in relation to the state.”

As previous studies reported, female migrants without proper work documents have less say than all others about their work conditions; they are afraid to bargain and negotiate with employers about work policies because of the fear of deportation. Instead of negotiating, and as a last resort, they typically quit the job. Such was the case of Seema, a 41-year-old nanny in New York. Seema did not have her work documents, and her employers did not enquire about her immigration status. Her employers made all the work-related policy decisions, such as those regarding the days and hours of work and the workload. In practice, however, the employers did not adhere to these policies. Like Tara, Seema was expected to work during weekends. In addition, she was also asked to make up for those days when the family was vacationing away from home. Her work experience was one of oppression and abuse, particularly emotional. This factored into her decision to quit the job. This is how she expressed her work experience and work relations:

When I took care of the child, I thought of him as my own kid. It really hurt me when the baby cried, and I wanted to take care of him. But the employers think of child care as a business because they can say I pay you for this and I pay you for that. This kind of attitude really hurts my feelings. One time they had gone for a vacation and she asked me if I could work and make up one Saturday. I really didn’t like that. Finally, I had the courage to tell her that I couldn’t convince my heart about what she had said. I was always ready to work and I considered them like my family, and why should I work for a makeup when they had gone for a vacation?

Women who are hired for child care are automatically expected to combine their child care work with other domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning. Labor exploitation of women occurs when workloads are increased without any commensurate increase in pay. Meena, a 54-year-old nanny in New York, was subjected to an increased workload. Meena was hired to look after a child, but what she did not know was that she would also be expected to cook and perform other household tasks. She enjoyed cooking; cooking was not a problem. In fact, she enthusiastically combined her care work with cooking. But she decided

to quit the job when her employers demanded a totally different kind of extra work that took a long time to complete and had to be done in excessive heat. In Meena's own words,

I was hired to babysit the kid. I decided to quit because they asked me to do more than they had hired me for. The kid that I babysat had grown up, and now I had to cook for the kid. I liked cooking. I'm a vegetarian and my employers are also vegetarians. I enjoyed cooking. Not everyone can prepare vegetarian meals. If they hired Spanish people then they would be non-vegetarians. I can cook vegetarian food very well because when I was in Nepal, I used to do a program on television relating to cooking. That's one of the reasons why they didn't want to let go of me, because their son got good food to eat every day. Something happened that made me want to quit. Last June, they brought 40 to 50 flower pots and they asked me to water them every day and it was so hot outside. Toward the end of June, I told them that I couldn't do that job anymore. I told them that I was hired to care for their son, not to water their flowers, so I ended up quitting.

The gradually increasing workload on the one hand and the demand for a totally different kind of work on the other contributed to Meena's decision to quit her job. Initially she was not hired to cook, but when cooking was added to her tasks, she did not mind—she was used to doing it for her family back home. But she could not bear the demand that she should spend such a large part of her day watering plants in hot weather. This seemed to be the last straw that led to her quitting the job. This is not to imply or suggest that care work was compatible with her family and professional background, but the demand that she should water plants was insulting and added to her humiliation. When she was cooking and cleaning, she thought of herself as a family member, but when she was asked to water plants she felt like a servant.

### **The Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality: Prejudice, Attitude, and Discrimination**

In their studies, feminists who are women of color have “analyzed domestic work as a reflection of national race relations; . . . [and] argued that the personal subordination embedded in employee-employer relationships was grounded in race relations” (Romero, 2007: 268). In addition to labor exploitation, oppression, and emotional abuse, Nepali women workers also encountered racism, classism, humiliation, and prejudice because of their nationality and legal/citizenship status. Nepal's geopolitical position, its economic condition, and power relations in the world's political economy have shaped employers' attitudes and perceptions toward women workers. Women in this particular study came from higher socioeconomic positions than they now occupied; however, because of their national identity, race, and class positions in the labor market, they were lumped together into a single category: poor Third World women

migrating/ immigrating to the United States, desperate to earn dollars. Referring to her employer's prejudiced attitudes toward her, a 42-year-old nanny in New York said:

People think of Nepalese as very poor. Like, when I went to work in my first job, the employer was showing me the microwave, washing machine, and dishwasher like I had never seen such things before. I humbly told her that I had all of that in my house in Nepal because I could afford it. I really don't like the way they try to demean us. Furthermore, I heard a similar story from the lady who got me started in child care. She said that her boss would try to make her feel inferior by saying that a dollar in the United States was 70 rupees in Nepal, which is beside the point because she's living here and she's spending dollars here and not rupees. The fact that racism exists is very sad.

Syama, a 47-year-old nanny, came to the United States in 2002. Originally, she came to visit her friends and look around, and she intended to stay for only a short time. A friend in the New England area invited her to come and sent her the required documents, which included an invitation letter, a bank statement, and proof of the friend's residency in the U.S. and yearly income. These documents helped Syama to get a visitor's visa. Syama was a nurse and social worker in Nepal. As she was planning her return trip to Nepal, her friends and family suggested that she should stay in the United States and work for a while. One of her friends got her a live-in child care job in a Boston suburb. She started to work for \$300 per week, with Saturday and Sunday off. On her second day in the job, her employer revealed a condescending attitude. Syama explained:

I was feeding the child, and the mother came and started to talk with me. She told me I would be rich pretty soon, then she asked me, "Do you know how much a dollar is?" Then she told me it's almost 80 Nepali rupees. Then she said, "You haven't seen a dollar in Nepal, have you? You came to the U.S. to earn dollars, right? So you have to work hard to earn this much money: you have to please us, you have to follow our instructions, and you have to obey us. Otherwise you won't earn dollars and will remain poor forever."

Syama's case illustrates the racist and classist attitude of her employer. For the employer, she was merely a servant, there to serve and please. Not surprisingly, her experience was similar to that of the other nannies mentioned above. Whenever there were house parties or the child became sick, even during what was supposed to be her weekend off, Syama had to work. Moreover, since she did not drive she was at the mercy of her employers for the provision of transportation to the commuter train station on Friday evening and from the station on Sunday evening. Often, she went nowhere.

Another 42-year-old New York-based nanny, who encountered a similar racist and prejudiced attitude on the part of her employer, quit her job within a month. As she recounted:

When I went to this family to work, they were very prejudiced about Nepal. They thought that all Nepalese were poor and couldn't afford food or clothing and were only suitable as servants. They showed this attitude toward me as well, and it was very difficult for me. I stayed there for three weeks and after that I lost my patience with them so I left that place.

The work lives of Seema, Tara, Meena, and Syama mirror the lives of many female domestic workers reported in the Rollins (1985) study. In both the Rollins study and the present study, the women experienced feelings of servitude, social isolation, dependency, marginalization, and humiliation. The desire to be treated as a human being was reported in both cases, and some women quit their jobs, not only because the work conditions became unbearable but because their human dignity had been violated and the psychological exploitation had become unbearable.

### **Gender, Sexuality, and Vulnerability**

Women's gender and sexuality take their vulnerability to another, even higher level—sexual exploitation. In addition to labor and emotional abuse, immigrant/migrant women workers in the domestic sector live in constant fear of sexual harassment and encounters. Undocumented, live-in domestic workers are the most vulnerable workforce, and are particularly subject to sexual assault and exploitation (Rollins, 1985). Based on reports by domestic workers on the occurrence of sexual harassment and sexual advances, Rollins (1985: 151) reports that “my research indicates that this unspoken problem . . . does exist and is widespread enough for all of the domestics I interviewed to give it as the reason for now avoiding male employers.”

In a chapter in *Global woman: Nannies, maids, and sex workers*, Zarembka (2002) reports the slave-like work conditions of migrant/immigrant care workers who are subjected to both labor and sexual abuse and exploitation. Here is Zarembka's (2002: 142-143) report on the case of a Bolivian care worker:

once her plane landed in Washington D.C., her employer, a human rights lawyer for the Organization of American States, confiscated her passport and forced her to work days more than twelve hours long, for less than one dollar per hour. She was not allowed to leave the house without her employer. When a friend of her employer's raped her, the human rights lawyer refused to take her to the hospital, claiming that medical care would be too expensive.

Nepali women in this study also felt vulnerable to sexual abuse. Most of the women were alone and without their families in a foreign land. As live-in nannies, they were working in a stranger's house. Out of 20 women in this study, five of them were living and working in constant fear of being sexually harassed and abused. When asked about the possibility of sexual abuse and exploitation, one respondent replied:



When I worked in New Jersey as a live-in nanny, I couldn't help but ask myself whether I would be safe when the mother of the baby was gone and only the father was home. I didn't know what I would have done if the man grabbed me, because they pay you and if you say something then they let you go. Fortunately, I didn't experience any harassment of this nature from my employers. This is a big issue for women. For example, there was a Polish lady who came to clean the house where I worked before. I asked her how she felt to be in the house alone with the man. She did say that she was harassed by the man. She said the man would compliment her and rub her, pat her, and next time her paycheck would be higher. She didn't know what the message was. She felt very powerless and as if she didn't have a choice because she needed the money to survive. I also feel like that sometimes.

### **TOWARD THE EXPERIENCES, VOICES, AND VISIONS OF NEPALI WOMEN WORKERS**

Immigrant/migrant women's work experiences in the domestic/child care sector reveal some interesting and similar patterns. Unlike other such workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Rollins 1985; Romero, 1992), the Nepali women in this study came from professional occupational backgrounds and experienced downward occupational mobility in the United States. Yet, like the other women, Nepali women encountered unfair labor conditions and practices that led to the exploitation of their labor and to emotional and psychological abuse. What this suggests is that although these women come from different nations, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds, common factors—gender, color, status as a Third World national, and immigration status—make them highly vulnerable to labor exploitation and emotional abuse. The irony is that the reasons why they are exploited—that is, their gender, race, cultural background, and nationality—are the very same reasons why these women are preferred and sought out in such jobs. It is within these intersections of gender, race, cultural background, nationality, and immigration status that women domestic and service workers in the labor market become ideal workers as well as victims—employment and exploitation thus occur simultaneously!

Compared to other racial/ethnic migrant/immigrant groups in the United States, Nepali communities are relatively new, and Nepali women working in the service and domestic care work sectors are a new workforce. As Nepali women enter the workforce, their presence increases employers' options, as they can select a care worker from among people of a wider range of race, gender, and nationality. This generates competition among immigrant/migrant women themselves and gives more bargaining power to employers. Given their choices, unscrupulous employers seek out those immigrant/migrant female workers who, they think, will accept the lowest pay and are most exploitable; who are obedient, docile, gentle, and polite; who are not aware of their rights and might therefore be controllable; and who are good caregivers. For employers, these are the criteria for ideal

workers. It is within this context that such women become the most vulnerable workforce. As Rollins (1985: 130) puts it: “Foreign-born women, more vulnerable and less angry (or, at least less apt to show it), are attractive to employers because of their docility and more subservient manner.”

Although employers were not interviewed in this study, the Nepali women interviewed all clearly felt that the work relations between them and their employers were unequal and highly stratified. Employers’ treatment of the women and some of the things they said indicate a colonial attitude—Nepali women were meant to serve. This is due to the women’s race, class, gender position, and immigration status in the labor market, but also due to the women’s national identity and citizenship status—they are Nepali. Nepali women’s experiences illustrated employers’ prejudice and stereotypical attitudes toward Nepal and Nepali people, regarding them as poor and deprived. Employers, based on their privileged class and race positions, were quick to degrade and humiliate the women. It is within this context that the Nepali women’s issues and experiences resonate with those of the women domestic workers of Rollins’s (1985) study. The domestic workers in Rollins’s study had also experienced violations of their civil rights, extreme forms of mistreatment, accusations of stealing, sexual harassment and psychological exploitation. As Rollins (1985: 156) poignantly says in her analysis:

What makes domestic service as an occupation more profoundly exploitative than other comparable occupations grows out of the precise element that makes it unique: the personal relationships between employers and employee. What might appear to be the basis of a more humane, less alienating work arrangement allows for a level of psychological exploitation unknown in other occupations. The typical employer extracts more than labor.

In a manner consistent with the experiences of Latinas (Romero, 1992), other women of color, and other immigrant/migrant domestic workers (Chang, 2000; Parrenas, 2001; Rollins, 1985), Nepali women’s accounts affirm employers’ sense of entitlement and power, and their sense of having the right to make or change any work policy at any time—expecting the women to perform additional household tasks such as cooking, demanding extra hours of work without raising wages, and changing work schedules without consulting and coming to an agreement with the women. Tara and Meena, whose accounts were discussed above, were hired for child care but were expected to do additional tasks that had nothing to do with child care. Many Latina immigrants (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001) also faced similar labor conditions: they were hired for one position but then were expected to perform additional tasks without being given a raise in pay. Many domestic workers in Rollins’s (1985) study experienced similar work conditions and labor relations. Like other domestic workers, Nepali women had no control over their labor or labor conditions. Domestic workers who were women of color and immigrants/migrants (especially undocumented) had the same experiences of

degradation, exploitation, oppression, and prejudice, and feelings of vulnerability, despair, risk, and inferiority.

The main reasons women were stuck in care jobs were (1) the fact that they had no legal permission to work; (2) their credentials and skills did not count in the United States; and (3) the easy availability of care work. In these jobs, however, women were deprived of their basic civil and human rights. Although women are likely to quit their jobs when work conditions and relations become unbearable, quitting is not a long-term solution. This is because when a woman takes another job, she finds herself in similar or even worse work conditions. So what alternatives exist for these women? Is there any solution to this vicious cycle of circumstances?

Women were drawn to these jobs for a variety of reasons: some women did not have the proper legal documents to work in formal sectors, some were drawn to these jobs because their credentials and skills did not count in the US, and in some cases they lacked required English proficiency.<sup>1</sup> The easy availability of such jobs through word of mouth was an important factor.

Although the choices for women seem limited, women's own political mobilization and activism at the personal and the grassroots level could eventually help them to recognize and obtain their rights. The first thing these women should do is take the initiative to form their own support groups and networks; this will provide them with a platform to share their problems and identify their goals. For example, their goal could be to find an advocate. While listening and talking to each other, women will learn that they are not alone in their plight—this will give them the strength to deal with their problems. Interaction and dialogue in a support group will create awareness among its members about their social and working conditions. Together, women can identify their challenges and obstacles and try to explore solutions.

Second, once women establish their support group and network, they should try to do some volunteer work in local political and community-based organizations. Moving beyond their support group and engaging in community-based organizations and local politics will give women opportunities to work with and hear from local community organizers and political leaders. This will help the women to become aware of their civil and human rights, and it will help them approach concerned people and organizations. The shifting of women's personal issues and problems into public arenas and into the political discourse will make their issues visible and enable their voices to be heard.

While working closely with local communities and leaders, women could collectively find and approach a domestic worker's social organization such as Domestic Workers United or the National Domestic Workers Alliance in New

<sup>1</sup> In some cases, women overstayed and in some others they were in the country legally but were not allowed to work according to their visa types.

York. These organizations represent domestic workers and they demand fair labor conditions. These organizations have also brought many domestic workers together and have started a nationwide campaign to pass the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights (Domestic Workers United, 2010). Associating with such organizations will allow women to connect with other immigrant domestic workers, on local and global levels, who may have experienced similar challenges and succeeded in obtaining recognition for their labor rights. Both Domestic Workers United and the National Domestic Workers Alliance in New York are partnered with Adhikaar, a New York-based Nepali nonprofit organization that works in particular on human rights and social justice issues (Adhikaar, 2010). With the help of these organizations, women can advocate for their labor, civil, and human rights on local, national, and international levels.

Community-based grassroots-level organizations such as the Brazilian Women's Group in Boston and Domestic Workers United in New York have already illustrated the power of domestic workers' social and political initiatives and activism. These women are not just passive victims of exploitation and oppression; they are powerful agents of social change. Gender, race, class, nationality, cultural background, and immigration status are sources of exploitation and oppression, but these conditions also generate resistance, the desire to mobilize for change, and action.

Women's own support groups and networks, as well as their involvement in local politics and communities, will give them the strength to mobilize collectively and politically. That there is an urgent need for fair work conditions and workplace rights, however, has to be acknowledged, acted upon, and advanced locally and globally. Women's economic contributions transcend national boundaries; many transnational communities have benefited from their labor. Women's labor contributions to both the local and global economy, therefore, should be recognized and their labor rights respected. Workers' rights should be the subject of a global campaign: all concerned parties, people, organizations, and transnational communities should work together for workers' rights. It should be remembered that these are not just women workers' rights—these rights are also civil and human rights.

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