

# Bringing an end to modern-day slavery

They come to Ireland in search of new opportunities - education, jobs, money or just a fresh start. But instead they are given a false sense of hope and security. Domestic workers are common targets for exploitation and unfair treatment, writes **ALYSSA GOLDMAN**

**A**CTIVISTS ON behalf of domestic workers describe Ireland as the perfect breeding ground for what has been deemed 'modern-day slavery'. In most cases it is difficult for a domestic worker – as a cleaner or an au pair, for example – to prove their former employment to a family. The evidence can be hard to trace: no cheque deposits, no contract, no legal documentation or place of residence.

It is difficult for the Government to police or monitor domestic work since it takes place in the privacy of families' homes, which leaves many workers in the industry vulnerable to exploitation.

As immigration to Ireland has been on the rise, more domestic workers and child-minders have been desperate to find work. With a poor economy, finding a job – any job – is key.

Many migrant women come to Ireland without knowing the country's minimum wage. Some don't even give their hourly wages a second thought since they have just arrived from other nations where pay is even less. An overwhelming number of domestic workers are unaware of their rights, and due to language barriers, they don't always understand what their employer tells them, says Gregoria Gunpal, a member of the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland's Domestic Workers Action Group (DWAG).

#### Mariaam's story

In July 2010, Mariaam Bhatti, a 32-year-old from South Africa, found an opening for an au pair on a job listing website. She was promised a place to live, a salary for her work as a child-minder and, most importantly, an education.

But soon after arriving in Ireland, it was clear that schooling would not be a part of Bhatti's weekly schedule. How would she even have time



for classes? She worked six days a week from 7am to 10pm, or whenever her boss dismissed her to her room. On Sunday, her "day off", she would typically be ordered to take on some household duties.

Bhatti's employer revelled in control, she says. When she first arrived in the country, she put faith in her employer for necessary documentation. But after only a month of work, her visa expired. Bhatti found herself illegally working and living in Ireland.

"It was really hard to be undocumented," Bhatti said. "I couldn't go to the clinic for my sore back because I'd be asked where I'm from. I was afraid to even say 'My name is Mariaam.' Because I was undocumented I wouldn't be able to find another job and in the end, this made me more vulnerable for exploitation."

Bhatti felt like a prisoner in her employer's home. She didn't have possession over her

own passport, was constantly questioned about her whereabouts, had limited contact with friends, received only €400 per month and had virtually no privacy. Her employer once barged into her room while she was changing clothes.

But her life changed for the better five months later when she tried to fly to Cork to visit a friend. She was unaware that for intra-country flights there would be immigration checks. However, instead of feeling fear, she was relieved to speak to the immigration officer and finally tell her story. Her secret no longer weighed her down. She moved out of her employer's home and into a refugee hostel for eight months while awaiting a verdict on her case and student visa.

Today, with two new jobs and a place to herself, she now has full control over her life. And through her participation in the DWAG, she is using her

experience to teach and help others.

"I'm turning my negative experience into something positive," she says. "I want to help better the country."

#### Helen's story

Helen Gurtiza's experience is similar to that of Bhatti. Both women have chosen to be advocates, not victims.

The now 41-year-old suffered from exploitation at the hands of her employers for seven years. Her work permit was designated to her particular employers, so leaving was not an option.

She would work up to 57 hours a week for a maximum of just €275 – which she would receive inconsistently for her first two years. A typical workday would begin at 7:45am and continue till 8pm. She did this every day of the week except for Saturdays, which were half days.

Sometimes her bosses would

have her babysit after hours without any consideration. She would also conduct tasks outside of her job responsibilities, including grooming her employers' horses.

Although she had been involved with the Migrant Rights Centre since 2003, Gurtiza did not tell anyone her situation.

"Without my job or work permit, I would've been nothing here [in Ireland]," she says. "I didn't have the guts to say anything. It was as if they owned me."

In 2009 she finally left the family and took up a case against them – and she won. "I wasn't looking for the money, I wanted them to know that I knew my rights."

Now that she works for employers that respect her, Gurtiza is finally happy and at home in Ireland.

"I have self-confidence and am not afraid to speak up for myself anymore," she says. "I

finally feel free."

#### Changing Ireland for the better

Bhatti and Gurtiza, along with other members of the DWAG, don't want anyone else to go through what they have. Since the group formed in 2004, it has made many strides to end the exploitation and unfair treatment of domestic workers in Ireland.

The International Labour Organisation now recognises domestic work as actual work, says Gurtiza. Protection is now given to domestic workers employed by diplomats.

Gurtiza stayed with her employers because that is the only place her permit allowed her to work, but now no one else in Ireland will have to suffer that same fate. Today, the DWAG has helped ensure that domestic workers have greater permit mobility. If a woman wants to change employers, she will now be able to do so without as much fear, says Gurtiza.

The group will also offer leadership training in January because many women working in private homes are unaware of the DWAG and its mission.

This past April, some of the group's members participated in Acting Out for Hope and Change, an initiative that included provocative dramatisations of issues domestic workers face in Ireland. These performances called for action to be done within this legislative sector.

Aside from doing advocacy work, the DWAG offers domestic workers a safe haven.

"The DWAG is a kind of social networking where people from all over the globe meet," says Gurtiza. "Although we are different, we are a group of people in which many have suffered abuse and essentially we all share the same story."

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