



How do we ensure domestic workers in the UK enjoy the same labour and employment rights as other workers?

This briefing provides a summary of survey research¹ conducted by Selim Yilmaz and Dr Caroline Emberson of the Rights Lab published in October 2023 into the nature of labour exploitation among migrant domestic workers in the UK.

Executive summary

This year-long study of domestic workers in the UK reveals migrants may be at risk of high levels of labour exploitation, including questionable practices that leave them at vulnerable to severe forms of abuse such as forced labour. Our survey respondents, the majority of whom were from the Philippines, reported high levels of verbal abuse, and payment rates below that of nationally-agreed minimum wage levels. A very high number also indicated that they did not know where to go to find help. Intimidating behaviour and threats on the part of employers were also reported, with nearly a quarter of respondents indicating that they had received a lasting injury as a result of physical violence.

Why is this research important?

Past research into domestic work in the UK highlights the potential for unacceptable standards of behaviour to arise among employers, particularly where migrant workers are tied to their employers by the requirements of the UK's Overseas Domestic Workers' visa.¹ In this study, we aimed to provide quantified empirical data to help unpack the nature and extent of labour exploitation among domestic workers in the UK and to contribute to a more detailed understanding of the type and intensity of the exploitation experienced to help policymakers make more targeted decisions to improve working conditions in the sector.

While the largest single source country for migrant domestic workers remains the Philippines, since Brexit there has been a shift to an increasing diverse set of migrant workers including those from the European Economic Area with the right to work in the UK. Though migration dropped off during the pandemic, rates have since risen and 18,553 Overseas Domestic Worker Visas issued in the year to December 2022.² Working visas are restricted to six months and, in the case of those arriving on Overseas Domestic Workers, tie the worker to their employer.

Recommendations

To address these labour abuses, we call upon the UK Government to:

- **Recommendation 1:** Introduce a registration scheme for employers of domestic workers.
- **Recommendation 2:** Prepare the way for UK ratification of ILO C189: Domestic workers convention (2011).
- **Recommendation 3:** Require UK visa and immigration (UKVI) to provide rights-based training and information to domestic workers newly arriving in the UK.
- **Recommendation 4:** Enforce a firewall between the investigation of labour exploitation and immigration control.

¹ Kalayaan and Oxfam (2008) [The New Bonded Labour? The impact of proposed changes to the UK immigration system of migrant domestic workers](#)

² Strauss, D. and Cocco, F. (2023) [Britain after Brexit: The surprising surge in skilled migrants](#) March 12, 2023.

Research overview

Two-thirds of the 97 domestic workers who responded to our survey were Filipina nationals, representative of the large proportion of workers from this country that arrive on Overseas Domestic Workers' Visas (10,186 of 18,553, or 55% of all visas issued to December 2022).

We used a snowballing method called 'Respondent Driven Sampling' to recruit survey participants. Between March and June 2023, the Rights Lab surveyed non-British nationals who had worked as domestic workers in the UK in the past 12 months. Ninety-seven per cent of the sample were female, with nearly half (48 respondents) over 45 years old.

45% of those surveyed reported that they were self-employed; 39% said that they were employees, with 16% describing their employment status as that of a worker.

Our survey was circulated in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Tagalog and data collection was supported by representatives from the charities Voice of Domestic Workers, Kanlungan Filipino Consortium and the Latin American Women's Rights Service.

Key findings

Our findings paint a concerning picture about the existence of widespread levels of verbal abuse and a lack of privacy; reported payments at below national living wage levels; a lack of freedom over the choice of working hours and reports of more severe forms of exploitation including physical or sexual violence; withholding wages or identity documents and the potential for debt bondage.

- **82% reported that they had suffered verbal abuse** from their employers.
- **Over 44%** of domestic workers 'often' **suffered from privacy issues** during their work.
- All the respondents in our sample had reached the age of 23 at which those who were employees and workers were entitled to receive wages at the level of, or higher than, the National Living Wage. However, **43% of domestic workers surveyed** reported that they **had received payments lower than this minimum standard**. The exploitative nature of such payments risks is complicated by the fact that the earnings level of self-employed domestic workers is not covered by legal minimum wage protections. Due to the variations in reported employment status **this was an illegal rate of pay for 6%** of domestic workers in the overall sample.

- **Nearly a quarter (24%)** of those domestic workers in the UK we surveyed reported that they **worked over forty hours per week**. **Nearly half** of these respondents (11 respondents) reporting that they **did not receive pay at a level at or above that of the national minimum level** for this work.
- **Only 23%** of domestic workers '**always**' had the freedom to manage the time they spent at work and their daily working hours. Their **visa status** and the **fear of losing the job served to limit domestic workers' freedom** with **over 58%** of the domestic workers we surveyed reporting that they **needed to remain in their job to stay in the UK**.
- **10%** reported that they **worked between 12 and 24 hours per day**.
- **7% of domestic workers reported restrictions on the level of freedom they experienced in relation to their work**.

The individual nature of domestic worker supervision and the lack of work standardisation could lead to overwork, with the relatively high number of self-employed domestic workers in our survey lacking legal labour rights protections for work breaks and rest periods, annual leave, sick pay, protection against offence and harm, and flexible working.

- **Only 42% of domestic workers enjoyed a break that lasted longer than 24 hours each week**.
- **14% of workers felt that they were 'always' working excessively**.

Concerning evidence of more severe forms of labour exploitation included:

- **42% of the sample reported threatened or intimidating behaviour from their employer, with over a third of domestic workers reported experiencing physical violence from their employer and 24% reporting that they had received a lasting injury as result**.
- **Over 41% reported that they had experienced the withholding of payments to which they were entitled**.
- **41% of domestic workers reported that their employers always or**

sometimes withheld their travel and identity documents.

- **29% of domestic workers reported needing to use their salary to pay off debts to people who helped them to find jobs.**

Implications and recommendations

We identify four areas in which we make recommendations to improve job satisfaction and reduce the risk and extent of labour exploitation for all domestic workers, not just migrants. **First, greater transparency is required of employers to ensure domestic workers' labour rights and well-being is protected. We recommend therefore that the UK government introduces a registration scheme for employers of domestic workers.**

Second, the laws and regulations concerning domestic work, domestic workers and other home-based, domestic service, employment need to be standardised and enforcement powers applied in such a way as to be commensurate with those enjoyed by workers in other UK sectors. We recommend that the UK government prepares the way for UK ratification of ILO C189: Domestic workers convention (2011) by ensuring that the employment conditions of domestic workers are no less favourable than those enjoyed by other UK workers. Indeed, we believe that there is a case to be made for domestic workers and those notionally self-employed in this sector to have the right to a national minimum and living wage for domestic work. Furthermore, the range of exploitative labour practices that were reported to us suggests the need for a clearer reporting pathway which could be achieved by, for instance, the proposed move to a Single Enforcement Body.

Third, we recommend building upon existing work to increase the self-awareness and self-defence of the domestic workers themselves through education, training workshops and peer support to improve the health of the sector. To increase domestic workers agency, in particular we recommend that UK visa and immigration (UKVI), in addition to the provision of rights-based training and information to domestic workers newly arriving in the UK and, through the embassies of the source countries from which migrant domestic workers are recruited, specifically explain the limited circumstances in which UK employers can make legal deductions from an employee or workers' wages; how to make a claim related to wage deductions and/or other illegal employment practices through an employment tribunal; and to signpost domestic workers to governmental and non-governmental organisations operating to

protect their UK labour rights including current labour market enforcement bodies, such as the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage team (HMRC NMW); Citizens Advice and the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

Trust in these authorities is vital if vulnerable migrant domestic workers are to have the confidence to report abuse. **This leads to our fourth recommendation, which is that the UK Government introduces a firewall between immigration and labour market enforcement bodies.**

The full report, entitled 'Exploring the nature of labour exploitation among domestic workers in the UK' can be found at:

<https://nottingham.ac.uk/Research/Beacons-of-Excellence/Rights-Lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2023/October/Exploring-the-nature-of-labour-exploitation-among-domestic-workers-in-the-UK.pdf>.

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ⁱ Yilmaz, S. and Emberson, C. (2023) 'Exploring the nature of labour exploitation among domestic workers in the UK' Rights Lab, University of Nottingham. Available at: <https://nottingham.ac.uk/Research/Beacons-of->

[Excellence/Rights-Lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2023/October/Exploring-the-nature-of-labour-exploitation-among-domestic-workers-in-the-UK.pdf](https://nottingham.ac.uk/Research/Beacons-of-Excellence/Rights-Lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2023/October/Exploring-the-nature-of-labour-exploitation-among-domestic-workers-in-the-UK.pdf).