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## DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T (WORK). DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC DOUBLE BIND.

A report based on an online survey in the United States.

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*Tribute to Essential Workers Mural, Chicago, 2020*

Artwork by Sam Kirk.

The mural honors essential and domestic workers by depicting four Chicagoans who have worked throughout the coronavirus pandemic. From left to right: Veronica Rodriguez, a nanny and leader with the Latino Union of Chicago; Carilla Hayden, a United States Postal Worker; Maggie Zylinska, a domestic worker who has done house cleaning and caregiving for more than 20 years; and Juan Burrell, a school lunchroom manager.

## Introduction: The Pandemic and Domestic Workers

This report invites you to consider how the lives of domestic workers have been affected by the pandemic. Already before the pandemic, domestic workers – like nannies, housecleaners, and home care workers – were excluded from labor regulations and suffered multiple, intersecting forms of marginalization while being neglected by most of the regular unions and excluded from everyday safety nets. What can we expect to have changed with the pandemic? Their situation has become even more precarious and, oftentimes, dramatic. However, it is important to know exactly what the impact has been. This report offers insights into lives of domestic workers under the pandemic, revealing **the double bind of that impact: domestic workers were affected negatively irrespective of whether they were laid off or if they kept their jobs**. The impacts included health hazards, economic loss, stress and anxiety, and lack of stability.

A domestic worker is a person who enters a private household to perform daily tasks, like caring for a child, an adult with disability, or simply cleaning. Nannies, personal care attendants, and housecleaners are some of the most popular jobs within the domestic work sector. Domestic workers sometimes have one job, while in other cases they have multiple clients, or juggle multiple jobs within and outside of their clients' households. Domestic workers' situation is often underpinned by informality and a lack of access to public rights and services. When the pandemic hit, this sector had already been vulnerable, which was clear on the global level (ILO 2020b). There are several specific dimensions of the impact that continue to affect domestic workers unevenly.

First of all, COVID-19 clearly affects workers **as an illness**. It is not possible to carry out domestic work at a distance, and during a pandemic, every contact, as well as the need to commute, increases the risks. Because we are not dealing just with a pandemic, but rather a “syndemic” (Horton 2020) – in other words, we are faced with concomitant pandemics of the virus, racism, and the economic crisis – workers who disproportionately come from communities of racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and who work for the lowest wages, are hit the hardest by the virus (OHCHR 2020; Clark et al. 2020). Such workers are overrepresented in household work (Duffy 2020). The disproportionate number of Hispanic and Black people getting sick and dying from COVID-19, and the evidence for large numbers of care workers contracting the virus and missing work, hint at the potential impact on the whole group (see also Gelatt 2020).

Secondly, **the measures implemented to curb the spread**, like the lockdown or stay-at-home orders, as well as **society's responses to the pandemic, have directly or indirectly caused many workers to lose their jobs**. For example, state or local emergency orders that differentiate between essential and non-essential businesses make the work of personal care assistants mandatory, regardless of the hazards for the workers, while the work

of self-employed cleaners was labeled as “illegal” for periods of time in some states (Wilson, Stimpson 2020; Gelatt 2020; see also ILO 2020a).

In turn, **domestic employers** who lose their jobs in many affected industries are no longer able to hire anybody either. Domestic employers who “shelter in place” may no longer wish to outsource domestic services or may prefer to keep their “bubble” tight and not let anybody from outside into their households. In addition, some workers are in contact with one family exclusively, sometimes in a live-in arrangement, like many nannies. These can be included in the “bubble.” On the other hand, other workers have dispersed contacts for whom they work, as is the case, for example, for personal care assistants (PCAs), babysitters, cleaners, and those who also hold multiple jobs outside of domestic work. Among these lines of work, some services are indispensable for the daily survival of vulnerable care recipients, like those who need PCAs, so these workers are, again, likely to retain jobs but still face the risks. Some other services may be perceived as “not critical” during the pandemic, such as cleaning or occasional babysitting. This category of workers is more prone to losing their jobs for the sake of family self-isolation.

Finally, there are measures designed to mitigate the economic impact of the disease and lockdowns, in the form of **COVID-19-related relief policies**. Domestic workers are excluded from some of these regulations as an occupational group, and sub-categories of workers are often left out because of their status as undocumented immigrants (Wilson, Stimpson 2020, see box 3; and Rosińska, Pellerito *forthcoming*). Because before the pandemic many domestic workers had already been excluded from safety measures, including unemployment benefits and/or health and safety regulations, the situation of every worker who was laid off became very challenging.

All of these factors have a disparate but differentiated impact on domestic workers. We can observe a polarization into **two variants of negative impact during the pandemic**: some workers become vulnerable because they are left without a job, and other domestic workers experience vulnerability because they are still on the job. Hence, it is of the utmost importance to study what the impact of the COVID-19 has been on the ground, to have a detailed account of the lived struggles of these workers, and to highlight the challenges they face so that we can design better and more inclusive policies and relief measures. This report hopes to offer a glimpse into the domestic workers’ experiences of the COVID-19 crisis.

## Who Took Part?

**The online survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work and lives of domestic workers in the US was live in the period from August to December 2020, and it yielded 100 complete responses. The survey is not representative of the whole domestic sector in the US: the most information is available on workers living in the Northeast, especially in Massachusetts. Nannies were the most numerous group of participants, so their experiences are reflected in the most nuanced way. The participants were also younger than the national average of domestic workers (see Box 1).**

The survey asked about the situation before and during the pandemic, contained 77 questions altogether, and gave participants several options to share their stories through open questions. Out of 240 people who initiated the survey, 100 participants completed it. 79 used the English language version, 13 opted for Spanish, and 4 for either Polish or Portuguese each. The survey was distributed on social media, through organizations and individual contacts (see Acknowledgements).

Ninety-five people identified as women, 4 as men, and 1 as non-binary. The youngest participant was 19 y.o., oldest 71 and the mean age was 38 years. Half of the workers were younger than 34 y.o. and half were older, with 25% below 27 and 25% above 48 years old. 51 participants were in a relationship, among them 30 were married, and 49 participants were single. 39 participants had dependent family members who in 23 cases live with them, and 61 did not have dependent children or other family members.

Forty-four participants had below college education, however, among them 30 had some college, including active students; 46 people hold either associate (7) or bachelors (39) degrees, and 10 hold master degrees (8), Ph.D. or professional degree (one person each).

Seventy-two participants were from the Northeast, among them 54 from Massachusetts and 7 from New York state, 11 from the Midwest, among them 7 from Illinois, 9 from the South and 6 from the West (out of total 98 people who revealed their state of living).

Fifty-seven participants were born in the US, 43 in a different country. Among the countries of origin, the most recurring were Brazil, Dominican Republic and Poland, each of which was represented by 7 participants. Nineteen people were from Latin America altogether, 9 from Europe, 4 from the Caribbean, and 2 from Asia.

Forty-nine participants were white US-born people, 18 were Hispanic or Latina/o/x immigrants, 11 were white immigrants, 6 were Black immigrants, 6 were Hispanic or Latina/o/x US-born workers, 5 were immigrants of mixed black and Hispanic or Latina/o/x descent, 3 declared being mixed white and Black or other of color background born in the US, 2 were Asian immigrants.

Throughout the report, I use a simplified division into white non-Hispanic US-born workers (49 in total) and immigrant and/or workers of color (who number at 51), among whom there are US-born people of color (9), white immigrants (11), and immigrants of color (31) (Table 1). White US-born workers presumably experience the least marginalization, and I decided to contrast them with all of the other participants, because the low numbers do not allow for a more subtle analysis<sup>1</sup>.

**Box 1. Domestic Workers in the United States**

In the United States there are more than 2.2 million domestic workers: personal care assistants, housecleaners, and nannies and babysitters; 91.5% are women (the ratio of women is highest among nannies); the median age is 45 years; 35% of domestic workers declared in the census was born outside of the U.S. (among all workers, it is 17%); among cleaners the immigrants' participation amounts to 69.3%; Among domestic workers, 42% are white non-Hispanic workers; Black non-Hispanic workers are 22%; Hispanic workers are 29%; and Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders are 6.9% of the domestic workers (EPI 2020); Most probably there are more immigrants in the sector than officially recognized (Burnham, Theodore 2012).

Participants	US-born	Non US-born	
White	49	11	60
People of color	9	31	40
	58	42	100

Table 1.

Before the pandemic, being a nanny was the sole or primary job of 61 participants, while 14 people did house-cleaning, and there were 10 PCAs. Six people were unemployed. Among the nannies, there were 38 white

<sup>1</sup> The term “white US-born” designates in the report people who are non-Hispanic and not Latina/o/x, because having Hispanic or Latina/o/x backgrounds usually makes them vulnerable to racialization in the US so their experience is very different than a white person’s who does not have such backgrounds.

US-born people and 23 individuals who were either of color, born elsewhere, or both. Among the housecleaners, 13 out of 14 people were not white and US-born, and there was only 1 person who was white and US-born. Among the PCAs, 6 out of 10 workers were non-white and non-US-born, and 4 were white and US-born.

## Impact on the Job Situation – A Snapshot from the Time of the Survey

The survey documented the dynamic shifts in the professional lives of people whose main or side occupation is or came to be in the domestic sector. The numbers changed dramatically during the pandemic (Boxes 2 and 3).

### Box 2.

Among 100 participants before the pandemic:

- 61 indicated “nanny” as their main job. Among them 57 worked only as nannies or as babysitters. Additionally, 5 people had a side job in childcare, so there were 66 people connected to childcare all total.
- 14 people’s main job was in housecleaning, and for 9 among them it was the only job. Another 5 cleaned on the side, so altogether 19 people had work in cleaning.
- 10 people were personal care workers as their main job, and among them 9 had personal care as their only job. Two more had additional gigs as PCAs, so altogether 12 participants had a personal care work experience.
- 6 people reported being unemployed.

At the time of the survey, only 49 people worked as nannies, 8 people made a living as housecleaners, and nine 9 worked in personal care. Of the total, **31 people were unemployed while filling out the survey, an increase of over 5 times from the pre-pandemic level (6)**. Among 31 people who were unemployed, there were 14 US-born white workers (out of 49), 1 Black US-born person (out of 9), 4 white immigrants (out of 11), and 12 immigrants of color (out of 31). Overall, 17 out of 51 immigrants and/or people of color were unemployed at the time of the survey.

Among the 31 unemployed at the time of the survey, the most numerous were 14 nannies (out of 61) who lost their jobs. The number of housecleaners was very low to start with, but as many as 6 people out of 14 whose primary job was cleaning lost their jobs.

While the number of people still working at the time of the survey dropped significantly, interestingly neither the character (formal versus informal) nor the access to paid time off changed significantly. The number of hours worked among those employed has remained almost the same: on average, 36.4 and 35.7 hours per week, from 90 and 65 responses, the median being 40 hours in both periods.

#### Box 3.

When the survey was filled out mid-pandemic there were:

- 49 people whose main job was in nannying, among them 44 who only worked as nannies. Additionally, 5 people had nannying as a side job. So, altogether, during the pandemic there were 54 people in the nannying business, a drop from 66 pre-pandemic.
- 8 workers whose main and only job was in housecleaning, with only 3 people cleaning on the side, so 11 people altogether, a drop from 19.
- Among the PCAs the numbers almost did not change: 9 had their primary and only jobs in personal care and 3 more worked in care on top of a different main job, so the same number of 12 people were providing personal assistance.
- **31 people were unemployed while filling the survey, an over 5 times rise from the pre-pandemic level (6).**

What did change was the access to health insurance and, seemingly, for the better. People who remained employed had better access to healthcare than before than pandemic – a relatively smaller part was uninsured in any way during the pandemic (only 10%) than before the pandemic (14%). Why is that so? The answer is quite simple: only people who had higher quality and more secure jobs kept them, and others probably lost not only their jobs but also any access to healthcare that they might have had before the pandemic.

## Changes and Impacts of the Pandemic throughout 2020

What have the experiences of workers on the ground been during the pandemic? The impact was drastic, but it was far from uniform. We already know that 31 out of 100 participants were unemployed at the time of the survey. However, the workers that retained their jobs also experienced a number of severe changes. The participants described the shifts they were observing and challenges they were facing in several open questions in the survey. I grouped the responses into six major categories of impact. We observe a polarization into two variants of vulnerability: some workers are **vulnerable because they have been left without a job** and other domestic workers are **vulnerable because they are still on the job**. The two largest categories corresponded

either to having less or no work (44 people), or having more work and/or experiencing a negative impact at work (35 people). The third major impact has been increasing anxiety (29 people). The remaining types of impact mentioned spontaneously include: isolation and mental health issues (20 people), medical and health aspects of the pandemic (14 people), and economic aspects (10 people) (Table 2).

<b>CHANGES AND PROBLEMS MENTIONED IN OPEN QUESTIONS</b>		<b>N=85</b>
<b>(multiple answers)</b>		
<b>LESS TO NO WORK:</b>		
job losses, reduced hours, unemployment, no money to cover basic needs		44
<b>MORE WORK AND NEGATIVE CHANGES AT WORK:</b>		
more hours, more tasks, negative changes on the job, burnout		35
<b>ANXIETY:</b>		
fear, fear of contagion, less stability		29
<b>ISOLATION and MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES:</b>		
isolation, loneliness, depression, conflicts, mental health issues		20
<b>MEDICAL AND HEALTH ASPECTS:</b>		
sanitizing, testing, personal protective equipment (PPE), sickness and death		14
<b>ECONOMIC ASPECTS:</b>		
shortages, prices going up		10

Table 2.

## LOSING JOBS OR WORKING FEWER HOURS

Despite filling the survey out in four different languages, the workers were all telling the same story in response to the question about the impact of COVID-19 on their lives: that of a sudden job loss.

In Polish: „*Odwołane zlecenia. Brak pracy. Straciłam 5 domków, bo ludzie się boją.*” A cleaner from Poland, white woman 60-65 y.o., in Illinois.

In Spanish: „*Me bajaron las horas y ahora me enfermé de COVID 19 y ahora estoy en casa mi empleador está en un centro de rehabilitación. Estoy desempleada.*” A personal care assistant from Honduras, Hispanic woman aged 45-50, working in Massachusetts.

In English: „*Loosing jobs. No income.*” White US-born babysitter, a woman aged 20-25, District of Columbia.



In Portuguese: „*Os empregos desapareceram. No entrava dinheiro.*” A black Brazilian cleaner, woman aged 40-45, in Massachusetts.

**Forty-four out of 85 participants who answered the open questions have experienced a job loss or reduced hours at some point or over extended periods of time during the pandemic.** Out of the 44, 23 were people of color and/or immigrants and 21 were white and US-born. This kind of experience has been the most highlighted in media coverage of the pandemic and the available research data are the most alarming about its risks (see Box 4).

Box 4, based on Rosińska and Pellerito, *forthcoming, Essential or Expendable?*

- The “Six Months in Crisis Report” on Spanish-speaking domestic workers, most of them housecleaners, states: “by late March, more than 90 per cent of workers lost jobs due to COVID-19” and 70 per cent were out of work in early May (López González and Anderson 2020).
- The “Notes from the Storm” report on Black immigrant workers identified that “In all locations, 70 per cent of the Black immigrant domestic workers surveyed have either lost their jobs (45 per cent) or received reduced hours and pay (25 per cent)” (IPS 2020). People who lost their jobs have struggled financially to cover basic expenses.
- They have struggled with rent payments and faced housing and food insecurity (López González and Anderson 2020). Losing jobs or having hours cut is common among domestic workers, alongside housing insecurity and the lack of a safety net, also according to the IPS report (IPS 2020).

Repeatedly, domestic workers are at the forefront of society’s reckoning with how we are all interconnected; repeatedly, domestic workers are unevenly impacted by what underpins all of human life – our mutual dependencies. The stories shared by several workers pointed directly to that asymmetry. One nanny said:

*I stopped working due to the father of my [nanny] kids going to his parents every day. His parents were elderly & one was ill. He needed to take care of them. I did not want to risk going into the household since my boyfriend was a frontline worker.* White US-born nanny, a woman aged 55-60, Massachusetts.

Here the risks are assessed and the most vulnerable family members are protected, but at the cost of another vulnerable person – a domestic worker.

## WORKING MORE AND NEGATIVE CHANGES AT WORK

**Thirty-five out of 85 workers who responded reported the negative impact of the pandemic on the jobs they kept.** Twenty-three out of 45 white US-born people and 12 out of 40 immigrants and/or people of color who responded reported negative changes at work. Workers found themselves in situations where they were required to work, sometimes more than before the pandemic, but now in dangerous conditions and under a lot of stress. This was especially common in the situation of PCAs, who, because of the nature of their job, are usually

in contact with multiple clients. Frontline workers including PCAs have reported not having access to personal protective equipment (PPE). The lack of PPE, lack of medical insurance, and exposure to COVID-19 were thus mentioned as the major threats to those still on the job (IPS 2020).

The caregivers from Dominican Development Center in Boston have reported working more hours during the pandemic due specifically to covering for sick colleagues as PCAs (on a Zoom call in October 2020 with AR). Workers found themselves burdened with additional tasks (and no extra pay); this included sanitizing and remote education supervision in the case of nannies:

*E-learning was in full swing and I was in charge of the process. The children felt a lot of frustration with the process and isolation. A 30-35 y.o. American woman with Guatemalan and Mexican background, Illinois.*

Additionally, cleaners were told to use household chemicals in a hazardous way, mixing detergents that should not be mixed in an effort on the part of their employers to have an extra clean home, regardless of the toxicity. In this way, contagion was not the only health hazard for these workers during the pandemic.

Several workers reported changing labor conditions, including moving in with their employer's family to switch to a live-in mode. Some workers who kept their jobs are actually employed by other essential workers, like medical personnel. As such, these employers are at a higher risk of contracting and passing the virus on to their domestic workers. Employers are perceived as a threat when they are not careful enough, as reported by some of the nannies and cleaners. There are concerns about employers not keeping their end of the bargain while expecting their workers to conform to strict measures. There were also instances of differential treatment – the domestic worker was expected to protect the employing family, not vice versa:

*I could not leave the house (not even to go to the grocery store). I was not allowed to see anybody else (even if we were wearing masks and keeping social distancing). Spending special dates by myself (while my employers were hanging out with friends) and my best friend's death. A woman from Brazil, live-in nanny, 25-30 years, Virginia.*

This lack of access to cleaning products and personal protective equipment has not always been the case. Job stability has also decreased:

*At first, changes from shutting down: demand for live-in childcare. Then in August, changes from opening up: I lost my job because the parents decided it was safe to put their children back in daycare. But demand*

*was still high so I found another job within a week. In December: chaos/confusion/mental health changes in parents resulting from the high stress of the surge. I lost my job again when the family decided to bring in a family member as caregiver.* White US-born nanny, a woman of 55-60 years, Maryland.

So even those workers who managed to find a new job in a short time, unlike some of the cleaners who remained jobless for weeks and months, experienced the negative impacts of instability and chaos.

## ANXIETY

While 29 out of 85 workers – among them 19 out of 45 white US-born and 14 out of 40 immigrant and/or people of color – spontaneously mentioned feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and a lack of stability, as unease began to permeate everybody's experience of the pandemic. In the closed multiple-choice question "Following the COVID-19 outbreak, was any of the below your concern?" the respondents could pick from the list: "my safety," "my family's safety," "my employers' or my charges' (children, adult care receivers...) safety," or "none of the above." **Nobody picked "none of the above." Fear was pervasive:** 47% of participants were concerned about the safety of everybody on the list. Seventy-nine percent feared for their family, 73% for their own safety, and 59% for the employers' or care-receivers' safety. Unfortunately, there were reasons to be scared: in the course of the pandemic, **9 participants got sick with COVID-19 themselves; 23 had a member of the household, a family member, or a close friend get sick; 7 people had employers or charges get sick; and 19 people lost a family member or friend to COVID-19.**

For domestic workers, a very real fear of contagion is the central part of what has been called "COVID stress syndrome" (Taylor et al. 2020). It entails fear of the dangers of the disease and contagion, fear of the socioeconomic consequences, xenophobic fears, traumatic stress symptoms, and compulsive checking. While this model has not been rigorously pursued in the survey design, the fact is that multiple domestic workers have reported all the facets of the stress syndrome, which can maybe be summarized by these responses to the question about the changes noticed during the pandemic:

*Lack of product availability and overall concern for any type of sickness. More people on edge and concerned about getting sick, but also people on the complete opposite side where they do not seem to care at all. Politics started playing a bigger part in the actions taken towards the situation.* A Hispanic US-born nanny with Mexican background, a woman of 25-29 years in California.

*Food and supply shortages in our local grocery stores and drug stores (CVS, Walgreens, etc.); our church was closed; lots of unrest and fear conveyed through social media and the news; early bird shopping hours for citizens at risk; many businesses in my town and those around me were completely closed;*

*people talking about the difficulties of isolation from friends and community.* A white US-born PCA, a woman of 20-24 years in Massachusetts.

*En cierto caso al principio del brote fue difícil para todos. Había mucho más miedo que ahora. Fallecieron muchas personas era algo de terror. Pero en el momento que nuestra familia y yo pasamos por ese proceso fue difícil, pero con menos miedo. Fue un proceso el cual teníamos la preocupación de que el virus no saliera de nuestro cuerpo o que nos afectara fuertemente.* A 30-35 y.o. PCA, a woman from Dominican Republic, in Massachusetts.

*Didn't know how I would pay any of my bills,* a Black immigrant woman aged 50-55, housecleaner in New York.

Anxiety connects to all other mentioned impacts: isolation and mental health issues, which were mentioned by 20 people; the impacts directly connected to the medical aspects of the pandemic, mentioned by 14 workers; and shortages as well as prices going up, mentioned by another 10 people.

#### Box 5. How was it in different jobs during the pandemic?

**House cleaners:** Many cleaners lost their jobs; they seem to be the one sub-category of domestic workers that has suffered the immediate economic impact for extended periods. This kind of experience has been the most highlighted in media coverage of the pandemic, and the available research data has raised the most alarm about it (López González, Anderson 2020; IPS 2020).

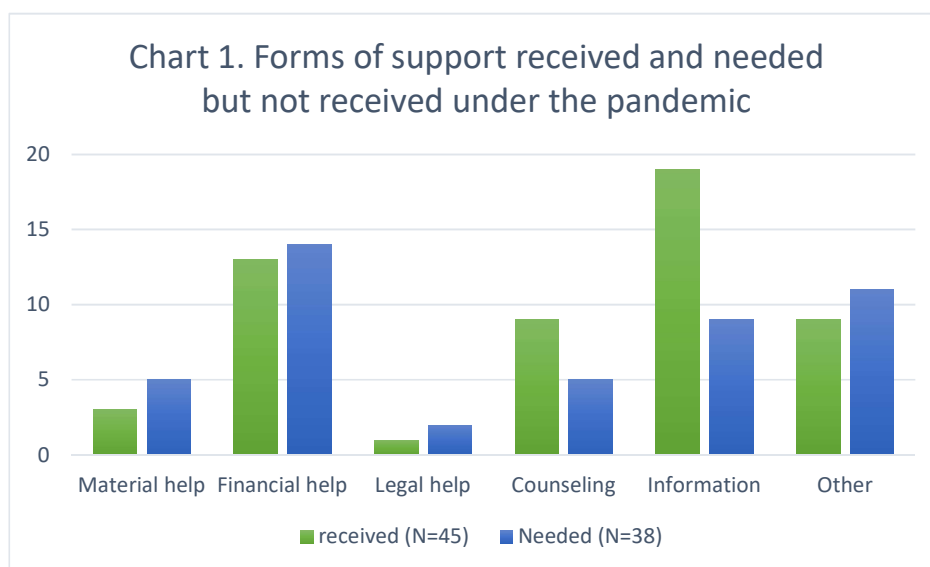
**Personal Care Attendants:** The majority of PCAs kept their jobs but underwent huge changes, including working more hours, taking on additional tasks, and facing overwhelming hazards unmitigated by PPE provision. As elderly people were among the most vulnerable in the pandemic, the PCAs became more worried about them and had to be extremely careful, while the access to cleaning supplies and PPE was scarce, especially early on in the pandemic.

**Nannies:** Among the nannies the situation was very mixed. Several nannies lost their jobs but were usually able to find a new one; their experience of the pandemic is marked by less stability overall. Those that stayed on the jobs experienced many negative changes: more working hours; more restrictions, for example in regard to their mobility and social life, that were sometimes unfairly distributed and not followed by the parents; and new tasks, like overseeing children's online education. Some nannies ended up moving in with the nanny families. What was challenging was suddenly being stuck at home with kids who had no after-school activities, while the parents oftentimes worked from home the whole time.

## Needs and Support during the Pandemic

The access to public relief was unequally distributed: more than half of the white US-born workers and less than one-fifth of all other workers reported receiving a stimulus check. Domestic workers reported needing information, financial support, and material help during the pandemic. The most common providers of support were online groups, organizations of domestic workers and immigrants, and mutual aid initiatives. More people were actively involved and identified as members of organizations and local, including mutual aid initiatives, than online groups. Online groups were more popular among white US-born workers, while other organizations were more common among immigrants and/or workers of color.

In general, before the pandemic the vast majority of participants (82 out of 96 who replied) did not use any form of support. Accessing support like food stamps, unemployment benefits, food pantry, or other was selected 14 times before the pandemic. During the pandemic this changed dramatically: the “old” types of support were indicated 32 times, and new ones, available to those who were eligible, like stimulus checks (indicated by 38 out of 100 workers) and “new” unemployment benefits (2 people), appeared. Significantly, access to the most popular form of relief, the stimulus check, was unevenly distributed: more than half of white US-born workers reported receiving it (28 of total 49) and less than one-fifth of all other workers (10 out of 51 in total).

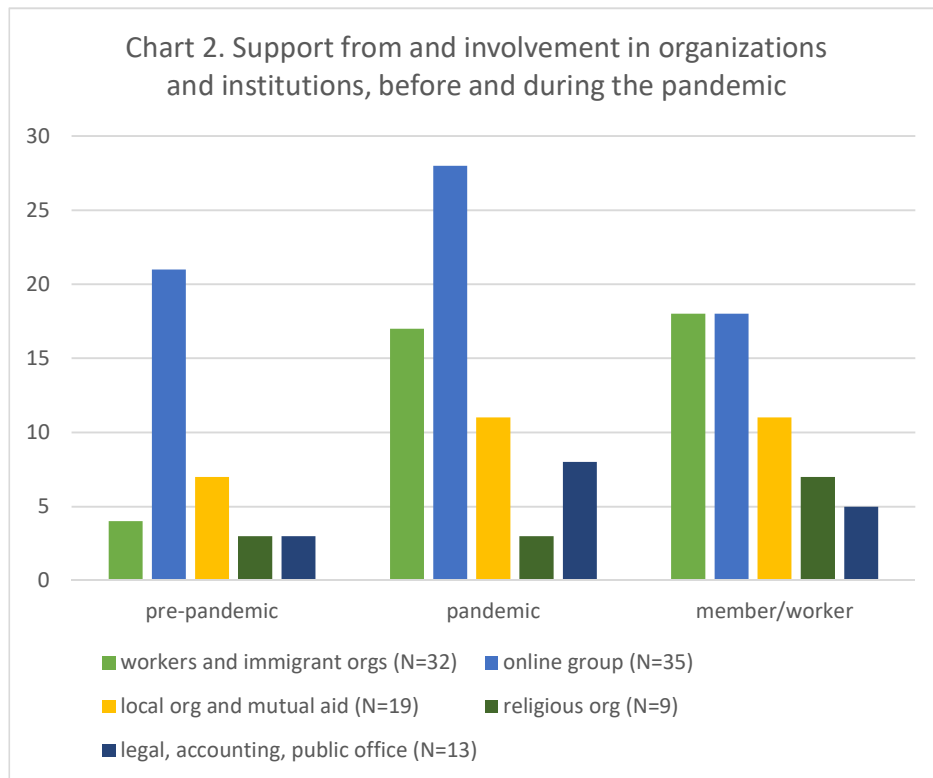


Domestic workers are excluded from the regular support systems because they are often employed informally and/or are undocumented immigrants; during the pandemic even those who were in formal employment were excluded from some of the relief measures (see Box 6). It is important to understand what

kind of support the workers needed beyond what was (not) provided through public programs and who was able to provide them with these kinds of support.

Throughout the pandemic, workers received information, financial help, counseling services, and material help from a number of organizations and institutions. Despite these efforts, the direct financial and material help needs exceeded the support that was received (chart 1.).

Who could they count on beyond the public relief measures? As information was one of the most common services obtained, it is understandable that workers intensified their participation in online groups, with an increase from 21 to 28 mentions (chart 2.). This was probably also a means to address their overwhelming anxiety, and it was the most readily available source of support. The majority of the 28 mentions of support from online groups during the pandemic came from white US-born workers (19).



The second most popular provider of any service has been various organizations, like worker centers, immigrant, and especially domestic workers’ organizations, mentioned 19 times among the 32 organizations mentioned altogether. This was clearly the domain of immigrants and/or workers of color; across 21 mid-pandemic indications, 16 came from them and only 5 from white US-born workers. While information was the

type of support more sought after among immigrants and/or workers of color, these organizations also provided popular education, to address the needs for information (see also Rosińska, Pellerito *forthcoming*).

Mutual aid initiatives and local community organizations have also grown more popular during the pandemic. In contrast to online groups, mutual aid and similar organizations asked for more commitment and identification in the form of membership declarations, whereas online groups did not create such identifications to the same extent. Again, in mutual aid initiatives immigrants and/or workers of color were more involved than white US-born workers.

As the survey was also distributed through the domestic workers' organizations, it is not surprising that participants indicated them as a source of support. However, it certainly points to the fact that the participants were people newly benefitting from these organizations (from 4 to 17 times selected pre- and mid-pandemic), in part newly attracted to these organizations, and this is because more people needed help and support services during the pandemic, and the organizations were there to meet them (box 6.).

Box 6. COVID-19 Relief and domestic workers (based on Rosińska, Pellerito *forthcoming*)

While domestic workers face increased vulnerability from the “syndemic” and the lockdown measures that jeopardized their employment, the federal relief measures passed early on in the pandemic included some domestic workers under the umbrella of “workers in need of relief.” The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) provided for increased food assistance and, at least in theory, provided for emergency paid medical leave for care of oneself or a family member through December 2020 (FFCRA 2020).

However, undocumented immigrants are largely excluded from programs like SNAP and WIC and may be less likely to seek assistance in the first place due to their vulnerable legal status, their concern about the risk of deportation when applying, and the potential impact of applying for public support on current or future visa applications (see Lopez Gonzalez, Anderson 2020; IPS 2020), and the emergency paid sick leave provision is only available to full-time employees (§5102).

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), also passed in March 2020, widened the umbrella of eligibility for unemployment insurance (UI) and extended the amount of time an individual can collect UI (§2102); established moratoria on foreclosure and evictions from properties that receive federal funding (§4022-4); and one-time stimulus payments and additional boosts to UI payments for a short period of time. It took a whole year to finally pass the second COVID response bill (March 10 2021) that covers part of domestic workers with the same caveats as the first one.

The Essential Workers Bill of Rights, introduced in April 2020, would rectify many of these exclusions by explicitly naming domestic and care workers under the umbrella of eligible workers. The policy would explicitly provide health and safety protections, premium pay, universal paid sick leave, child care, and more.

## Conclusions

In all, **100 domestic workers shared their experiences** in a survey that was live for 5 months in 2020 (August-December). There are 3 main things you need to know about the impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers:

First, **it polarized domestic workers' situations**, in that some of them lost their jobs, entirely or in part, and struggled to pay rent and put bread on the table, while others that kept their jobs were overburdened, strained, and forced to take risks to make a living or to make difficult adjustments to keep their jobs. Even if there were individual workers who may have not experienced big impacts, collectively, domestic workers were affected negatively either way, in an impossible situation of a pandemic double bind.

- Thirty-one out of 100 participants were unemployed at the time of the interview but **as many as 44 experienced a job loss or reduced hours** and difficulties to make ends meet at some point in the course of 2020 (out of 85 that answered this question)!
- **Thirty-five workers reported a negative impact of the pandemic on the jobs that they kept** (out of 85 who responded). Workers found themselves in a situation where they were required to work, sometimes more, in dangerous conditions, and under heavy stress.

Second, **the impact of the pandemic was not equal but varied for people with different primary occupations**: housecleaners faced mass and abrupt layoffs; PCAs kept their jobs and faced a number of hazards, stress, and reported being overworked; and nannies had a mixed experience – of either losing their jobs or keeping them with difficult adjustments.

- Some of the adjustments included: moving in with the family for nannies, or facing unequal restrictions; covering for sick co-workers, in the case of PCAs, and putting up with lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) that was not provided to anybody early on in the pandemic. Employers expected the workers to be more cautious than they were. Fear, anxiety, and uncertainty were universal.

Third, **the workers started relying on non-governmental initiatives to a much greater extent than before the pandemic**. Among the most popular services sought were financial help and information. Workers who were immigrants and/or people of color reported using fewer governmental programs yet having greater financial and other needs than other workers. Many of the avenues for getting help increased in importance over the pandemic, but especially organizations for workers and immigrants, which mobilized and serviced mostly immigrant communities of color.

The structurally permanent presence of a workforce that remains on the fringes of society and public systems – one that was already challenging in the pre-pandemic times – became deadly during the pandemic.



Moreover, the domestic workers have been expected to show up when called upon as essential workers, yet if they lose their jobs they have a much smaller chance at getting any support than other categories of employees. These workers have waited too long for any change and for the second relief bill to be passed. Both the Essential Workers Bill of Rights that could have mitigated the immediate hazards, and the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Act, presented to Congress in 2019 that could rectify the situation of domestic workers at the federal level, have yet to be passed. The organizations have multiplied their efforts to cover the unprotected, but it is not fair to expect them to make up for decades and centuries of neglect and exclusion under a rampant crisis or to make up for the failing public support. Any future measures have to address the dire financial and material needs of these workers and the wild instability of their jobs. This report supports the necessary protections and guarantees for this time of crisis and beyond that have to accompany all work, especially the work that is as essential for our society as is care and domestic work.

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