

Modern slavery? The UK visa system and the exploitation of migrant domestic workers

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2/4/2016

It might be hard to believe that a domestic worker – or anyone – is currently forced to sleep on a bathroom floor or is locked up in a house. Yet such experiences are very real for those who come to the UK on an overseas domestic worker visa, writes [Virginia Mantouvalou](#). She explains how the current system – which provides a six-month, non-renewable right to stay – does not allow such workers to change employers. Those who run away due to appalling experiences are thus unable to find a new job and become undocumented. She writes that changing the visa system is the only way forward, if the UK is to treat everyone as human.



Since 2012 migrant domestic workers arrive in the UK under very restrictive visa conditions. The Overseas Domestic Worker [visa](#) does not permit them to change employer and ties them to the employer with whom they arrived for a non-renewable period of six months. Domestic workers, particularly when they live in the employers' household, are a vulnerable group of workers. They are also often excluded from labour protective [laws](#). The UK visa has been heavily criticised by many for creating further vulnerability, and has even been linked to [slavery](#). Between 15,000 and 16,000 such visas are issued each year, according to the Home Office, which does not provide any further information on arrivals but produces data on the nationality of the employers. About 80 per cent come from a very small number of countries in the Middle East.

Last year I conducted an [empirical study](#), a series of interviews with 24 migrant domestic workers who arrived in the UK on this visa. My aim was to find out how this vulnerable and difficult (for researchers) to reach group of workers experience the visa in practice. The workers interviewed recounted shocking stories of abuse and exploitation, fear and isolation.

I approached the interviewees through [Kalayaan](#), the main non-governmental organisation specializing in the labour rights of domestic workers. I was introduced to them as a trustee of Kalayaan, and conducted the interviews in the offices of the organisation with the help of interpreters. The purpose of my study was not to find a representative sample or to produce quantitative analysis of the numbers of workers under the visa, which would be impossible in the case of this group.

'[The employers] did not give me to eat. Only once a day, limited food. I was hungry. That is why I said I made a sacrifice: you need to work, you sacrifice everything.'

Migrant domestic worker

Before arriving in the UK

All participants were women, and almost all of them were already migrant workers before coming to the UK. Originally, they came from countries in Southeast Asia (such as the Philippines or Indonesia), South Asia (India) or North Africa. They migrated to work for employers in the Middle East or North Africa, and arrived in the UK from there. The interviewees, live-in domestic workers, said that their tasks covered every aspect of housework: caring for children or elderly, cleaning, shopping, cooking and serving.

Before arrival, workers' salaries were reported to range between £100-250 per month, but could be as low as £50 per month. Interviewees reported working between 12 and 20 hours a day with no day off. Almost all interviewees said that they were not allowed out of the house unaccompanied. Many said that they did not eat at the same time as the employers and that nutrition was not always sufficient. One interviewee said: 'I had dinner/meals in the kitchen. I was not allowed to join them. After they finished eating, they allowed me to eat. I cried every day'. Another interviewee said: 'I was very skinny because I didn't have food... [I was] very hungry. When they ate, they treated me like an animal. They sat at the table but I stayed on the other side. They gave me food just like you give food to animals'.

Interviewees reported psychological and physical abuse. One interviewee said: 'If I did something wrong with my work or if the baby kept crying and I could not handle it, they hit me'. Some reported being sexually harassed or assaulted by their employers. One of them said that she had attempted to commit suicide because of this harassment. Despite the ill-treatment, the interviewees said that they felt that they could not escape while they were there. When asked why she did not escape from her employers, one interviewee said '[t]hat's why I did not run away there; because there are no human rights in Qatar'.

UK experience

The interviewees said that they did not know about the details of their visa or UK labour rights before or after arrival. Some safeguards that are supposed to exist in theory, such as provision of advice at the airport, appeared non-existent or ineffective in practice.

After arrival, some reported that their working conditions deteriorated. Some stayed in less spacious accommodation (hotel rooms shared with the employers). One interviewee recounted that she slept on the bathroom floor because of lack of space. Others said that they were not paid at all in the UK. Their hours of work

remained extremely high and they were still not allowed out unaccompanied. One interviewee explained that in the UK the employers locked her up in the flat, which did not happen before.

The employers still kept the workers' passports and sometimes threatened them that, if they escaped, the police would imprison and deport them. One of the workers interviewed also said that she received death threats from her employer because he was hungry one evening, and the market was closed. He said: 'I can kill you and throw you into the sea. It is an ocean there'. And she continued: 'I was scared. It was the two of us in his flat. I was scared about what would happen to me. What would I really do? I didn't know'.

Being undocumented

Almost all interviewees escaped their employers and became undocumented. One of the workers said that she asked her former employer to return her passport to her, but the employer asked her £2,000 for it. The majority of the interviewees said that they only learned after they escaped that they had no right to remain in the UK or work for another employer.

The workers interviewed said that they know that they are undocumented and seemed embarrassed by this. They said that they are driven underground: they do not want to return to their employers because of the treatment suffered. They also said that they do not want to return to their country of origin, because they have children, spouses or parents to support who are in desperate economic need.

After becoming undocumented, many of these workers said that they find part-time jobs for a few hours a week. Some found full-time work initially but were subsequently dismissed because of their undocumented status. Some workers said that they know that they are being exploited by being paid below the minimum wage or working very long hours. One interviewee said: 'Sometimes if you have an interview and you tell [the prospective employers] that you don't have papers, they take advantage of you and they give you a small salary'. Despite this, interviewees said that they would not consider going to the authorities because they are afraid of deportation. They are thus trapped in ongoing cycles of exploitation.

A right to change employer

In 2015 the UK adopted the Modern Slavery Act. The domestic worker visa attracted significant attention against this background, with many arguing that it is linked to conduct prohibited by the Act. Even though it became a crucial political issue and severe criticisms were expressed in parliamentary debates, the government decided to leave its main points unreformed, but initiated an independent review by barrister James Ewins. The eagerly awaited [report](#) was published in December 2015. Ewins [recommended](#) a universal right to change employers for overseas domestic workers, as well as two and a half years maximum stay, adding his voice to calls for the treatment of domestic workers as workers with labour and human rights. It is now urgent that the government implements his recommendations, in line with the [commitments](#) made in the Modern Slavery Act.

About the Author

[Virginia Mantouvalou](#) is Reader in Human Rights and Labour Law and Co-Director of the UCL Institute for Human Rights. She is the editor of *The Right to Work: Legal and Philosophical Perspectives* (Hart Publishing, 2015) and the author of *Debating Social Rights* (with Conor Gearty, Hart Publishing, 2011).

