“Look Deep in Your Hearts”
Making a Global Domestic Workers Movement

“In the backroom of my employer, I started questioning myself, why do we have to suffer like this?” —Myrtle Witbooi, President, International Domestic Workers Federation

“We must ask, are our dreams are simply individual?” —Ebrahim Rasool, Former South African Ambassador to the United States

Hester Stephens spent 53 years of her life as a domestic worker—cleaning, cooking, and caring for white families in South Africa’s elite communities. Over the past 25 years with one employer, she has raised the family’s only child, kept a six-bedroom Victorian household spotless and secure, cooked meals to order and managed the bedside care of her male employer throughout his struggle with terminal cancer. After seeing to the needs of this family each day, she returns to her outside room “on the premises” of her daily work, a 15-hour bus ride from her own family in the rural Eastern Cape. For this labor investment, she earns approximately $8 per day. Her vacation time depends on the holiday schedule of her employer. If she needs health care, she must ask her employer for support. Any romance must exist off duty and outside of her residence, where visitors are overseen by her “madam.” Should Hester seek other work, she may face an HIV/AIDS exam, if potential employers fear that she could transmit the virus that has infected nearly a fifth of South Africa’s population. At 67, Hester would like to retire, after working in domestic service since the age of 15, when she left school to find work that would
buy bread for her family. Even after investing five decades of her life energy, she is not eligible for retirement benefits or social security—leaving her future livelihood to the benevolence of her employer.

Hester moved to Cape Town in 1966, under South Africa’s most intense years of racial apartheid governance. As she worked behind the walls of white residences, she soon recognized that her own situation mirrored the daily lives of black women throughout the divided country. At the time, government policies named domestic work as one of the few sanctioned professions for black women, creating race, class and gender-based migrant labor pools to serve the white minority population. Under these circumstances, Hester left her own son to care for the newborn son of a family she did not know. In recalling this moment, she identified the most tragic part of her life story—when she returned to her own child in the rural areas after a year’s work, he did not recognize her, calling her “auntie.” In the city that snatched her teenage years to the promise of an income for her parents and son, Hester met other domestic workers who lived under these same defining conditions of servitude and systemic injustice. As she took her employer’s son for neighborhood walks, shopped for the family’s groceries and passed her weekly Thursday afternoon “Maid’s Day” off in public parks, she witnessed the scale of exploitation domestic workers faced, and the magnitude of the losses they endured. Rather than accepting these circumstances, Hester strived to change them. In 1985, she began to organize the workers on her street, and eventually those employed throughout Cape Town’s elite neighborhoods—an act worthy of imprisonment under the apartheid regime. These clandestine gatherings grew to form South Africa’s national union of domestic workers. Under apartheid, this organization linked women’s labor to a larger struggle for liberation, as part of the labor and women’s resistance movements. After 31 years of organizing, Hester currently holds the presidency of the national
domestic workers union. In the aftermath of apartheid, she stood on the frontlines to push for the first national policies that assured domestic workers regular working hours, minimum wages, vacation time, maternity leave, unemployment insurance, access to dispute resolution systems, and the right to organize. Her union’s fight for basic labor and social protections carved a place for domestic workers into the national dialogue, as South Africa built a new democracy based on human rights.

The Global Domestic Work Picture

Hester’s struggle stands alongside millions of domestic workers worldwide. Her life investment in the care of another family reflects the global economy’s escalating dependence on migration and service labor. Like Hester, millions rely upon paid household work for their daily existence. Over the past five years, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated between 52-100 million workers provide domestic service in homes throughout the world, a wide range that reflects the inherent impossibility of an accurate accounting of this informal, often migrant sector. Behind closed doors, they care for children and elders, cook, clean, wash laundry, garden and even chauffeur—daily tasks that allow their employers to live free of the time, management and labor responsibilities of reproducing daily life. While men serve as “house boys” and cooks in some parts of the world, women and girls comprise 83% of this quintessentially feminized work. They leave their own homes for jobs with other families, in many cases before completing secondary school. This labor path not only places domestic workers in positions with the high probability of exploitation, it also sets most on a course with fewer life options, given the extreme isolation and limited opportunities of this profession.
Of this household labor supply, 17 percent migrate across national borders to seek employment outside of their own countries. They leave their families behind, creating even greater demands for grandmothers and aunts to pick up this global care tax. In many cases, national economies rely upon the salary remittance exchanges for domestic workers’ bodies abroad. The trade of domestic workers builds formalized bilateral relations that undergird larger geopolitical power systems—as evident, for example in state-supported working visa systems, training programs and employment agency networks. The Philippines, for example, encourages women to leave their own families to contribute to the state and promote the noble values of Filipina motherhood worldwide. The salary remittances of these *bagong bayanis*, modern day heroes as they are known, accounts for 24 billion dollars annually, the largest source of export revenue for the Philippines.

In contrast to these coordinated state systems of care labor exchange, for many transnational migrants, the private home provides a means of employment when citizenship rights are inaccessible. Without legal documentation, many domestic workers describe their lives in constant shakiness. As one migrant domestic worker in the UK expressed, “I hold my life in my hands like an egg.” Transnational careworkers must negotiate their daily life as anonymous non-citizens, outside of the purview of state officials. In these instances, while domestic workers pick up the pervasive and growing global care demands, their own wellbeing is seriously compromised.

This transnational industry of carework makes intimacy a commodity. Motherhood is globalized; love is borrowed across borders; and states are freed from the social contract to care for the basic needs of their populations. Here is what transnational care work looks like, in snapshots of real-life incidents across the world:
• In Holland, one prominent domestic worker leader tried to flee the scene of a serious car accident, in fear that a visit to the emergency room would result in deportation.\(^{11}\)

• In Nepal, a Member of Parliament’s younger relative did not touch the ground in four years, working in a high-rise apartment complex in Kuwait.\(^{12}\)

• In Singapore, hundreds of women from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines have jumped to their death, rather than facing a life of abuse and isolation as domestic workers in high rise apartment buildings.\(^{13}\)

• In the United States, domestic workers mother their own children in Mexico and Central America via Facetime and daily text messaging, while their hands tend to the care of privileged children in their immediate contexts.\(^{14}\)

• In Senegal, young women from rural villages leave school to become “house girls” in their extended families in Dakar, living at the crossroads of family responsibility and indentured life labor, beyond the scope of legal protections.

• In Lebanon, the *kefala* system of immigration law governs not only labor, but love, allowing employers to investigate domestic workers’ private lives in order to report local romances—a violation worthy of deportation.\(^{15}\)

As these instances suggest, through paid domestic labor, many of the world’s most egregious conditions of suffering thrive. Within this largest sector of human trafficking for women, the worst conditions of this global industry comprise “modern slavery.”\(^{16}\) For example, in many parts of the world, employment “agencies” promise rural families hotel salaries in exchange for their daughters’ labor, which is ultimately put up for sale in underground venues where employers can (literally) choose their household helper.\(^{17}\) Domestic workers’ pay is among the
lowest in the world, while their protections hinge upon the continuum of employers’ practice of fair labor, compliance with national standards, and, ultimately, compassion.

The cumulative impact of these circumstances of exploitation present one of the largest human costs of globalization. Legal scholar Darcy du Toit contends that the transnational conditions of domestic work “represent a human rights failure of significant proportions whereby tens of millions of people are prevented from achieving their full potential as persons, workers and citizens.” The structures of inequality at the foundation of this international industry build fear, insecurity and psychological hardship into the daily lives of workers in this precarious sector. These everyday traumas, set in the context of a synchronized global system of economic trade, pose serious questions about the state of human development. Where are we as a global community when the most foundational tenets of human existence—health care, education, family security, safety and wellbeing—are violated pervasively at an individual level in the interests of an international industry built upon the value of care? This question travels from the most intimate household exchanges to the widest reach of international relations.

On this macro-scale, domestic work is the persistent contrarian of human rights. Yet, not every household labor environment evokes exploitation. Under the best circumstances, some domestic workers claim their profession as dignified, fair and rewarding. Across the world, “good employers” provide clear working conditions, worthy compensation and flexibility in home work contexts and relationships. In the ideal scenarios, domestic workers find autonomy, flexibility and a harmonious environment as an equitable exchange for their care contribution. As one South African union organizer put it, “I’d rather work in my employer’s home than a factory.” Some employers have even become among the strongest advocates for domestic worker rights, as part of a larger commitment to ethical care standards around the world.
Ultimately, the range of employment conditions varies widely across the globe, with overarching national systems, economic conditions and cultural practices playing central roles in the extent to which domestic workers can realize “justice in the home.” Those countries with embedded race hierarchies and deep class/caste systems are less likely to establish legal protections and more prone to violations of domestic workers’ basic rights. In Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Malaysia, Madagascar and Lebanon, for example, domestic workers are not allowed to organize. In India, the dominance of a caste system renders legal rights incongruent with prevailing associations about those destined to deal with the dirt. Similarly, in many societies, systems of stratification play out through daily practices of servitude. As Peruvian domestic worker activist Ernestina Ocha contended “We are in the twenty-first century and even then, we domestic workers still live in a state of semi-slavery and of racial degradation. Our silverware is separated; our washrooms are separated. We can’t sit with our employers to eat, we can’t! Why?” In many parts of the world, domestic workers receive substantive portions of their salaries in used clothing and food. These conditions mark domestic work as a neo-colonial industry, where care, intimacy and service labor are integrally connect to historical conditions of inequality. As pioneer domestic work scholar Mary Romero contends, “colonialism marks every aspect of the global care chain.” Yet these daily injustices are often shadowed by their normalization in so many societies. In Austria, domestic workers travel from Eastern Europe each month on transit systems designed to assure the supply of necessary care providers for the aging population. In the fanciest U.S. neighborhoods, as Tamara Mose Brown portrays in Raising Brooklyn, undocumented nannies push more privileged babies through parks, while the wider public sanctions this reliance upon the global import of care labor. Across a wide range of national contexts, this proliferation of domestic work demands that women with the fewest
resources pick up the pieces of the global care deficit, most often at the cost of their own wellbeing, livelihoods, and families.

**Domestic Worker Activist Alignments**

These common conditions link Hester Stephens’ struggle in South Africa to a global crisis of care labor that takes its greatest toll on domestic workers. Over the past ten years, domestic worker activists reached beyond their national landscapes to advocate for the global recognition, rights, and protections of their sisters worldwide. In 2006, Hester travelled to Amsterdam for the largest international meeting of domestic worker activists. Along with representatives from 41 other domestic labor organizations in Asia, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and North America, and 15 international organizations, she founded the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN), the first transnational organization of domestic workers. Their mission—to put domestic work “on the map” of the world’s human rights struggles and establish the first set of international standards for paid work in private households. Their first stop—the ILO, the world’s largest global governance body on work. Here, for the first time, domestic workers themselves took part in dialogues that would determine how this heavily-exploited, transnational sector of the informal economy could finally gain international rights. Domestic workers sought dignity, while the ILO spoke of its commitment to “decent work.” Over the course of two years, a global network of domestic workers and their allies brought their aligned activism to the ILO in ways that altered this historic institution and allowed those formerly relegated to “the kitchen” and “the backyard” of private households to claim a transnational public voice.
In this global forum, the IDWN set out to expose the daily and systemic injustices of this contemporary form of servitude by aligning stories like Hester’s with domestic workers throughout the world. As its “Platform of Demands” proclaims:

We are called ‘maids’ or ‘servants,’ barely worthy of attention or to be ordered around or even abused. Added to this, many of us are from communities and regions that have been disadvantaged over history. Many are migrants, living isolated from our host community, and far away from our own families and even our own children.28

The international arena that gathered 187 member governments, employers and workers provided the perfect platform for this newly formed network to mobilize around the demand for universal rights. Over the course of two International Labour Conferences in 2010 and 2011,29 domestic workers gathered to tell their stories to those who lead the governments, national unions and employer organizations of the world.

At the largest level ever seen in the history of the ILO, workers themselves participated in making global labor policy.30 As a transnational activist network, the IDWN spoke for the millions of domestic workers at the center of this policy consideration. Gender labor policy expert Sofia Trevino situated this international representation of domestic workers in the wide reaching national movements and social activist histories symbolized within the process, contending, “It took years of organizing to get to this moment.”31 For domestic workers who had suffered a lifetime of injustices and labor exploitation, their ability to take part in this global dialogue symbolized a “dream come true.” For Hester, this moment provided a symbolic compensation for her life investment in domestic work. “This conference, it is such a history, it will be a history worldwide, that we picked the fruit from the tree that we planted over the years.”32 The life stories of the founding women in this first global organization of domestic
workers make their presence and participation in the seat of global international power an astounding account of individual agency and the potential to gain rights through collective activism.

This book tells the story of domestic workers’ transnational organizing—from employers’ garages to Geneva. As pioneer international development scholar Rae Blumberg called it, this is the global women’s activist version of “the little engine that could.”33 The story shows how this policy victory anchors the making of a global women’s activist movement. By drawing from the life narratives of domestic workers throughout the world, I explore how women’s transnational activism used a formal UN system to galvanize its identity and garner wide international attention. In the details of Convention 189’s formation,34 the history of domestic workers’ struggle amplifies the monumental occasion of their global policy victory. Throughout this book, the ILO serves as a microcosm of the larger global arena, where employers defend capitalism, workers demand rights and state governments vacillate between profit and people. From a feminist analysis, the role of domestic workers within this process articulates interconnected civil society, state and international structures behind the proliferation of this global “maid trade.”35 While the policy process centered this movement around the attainment of global rights “on paper,” this book is also concerned with how this policy victory translates to women’s day-to-day lives. Luc Demaret—one of the principal ILO leaders responsible for placing domestic worker rights on the agenda—asserted that this policy victory would directly benefit domestic workers worldwide. “They will move from a world of exploitation to one of dignity. This isn’t theory, it is a tool for real change.”36 Likewise, I explore how the ILO process matters for domestic workers themselves, who continue to search for respect, recognition and justice in their daily work lives.