

# How home care workers take collective action to disrupt domestic servitude

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How much power do home care workers have to resist being exploited by their employers? For Asian women working in this occupation in California, the answer is shaped by several factors, including filial

obligations, cultural traditions, language barriers, economic status, state employment regulations, labor unions, immigrant organizations and disability rights groups.

University of Toronto Mississauga sociology professor Cynthia Cranford examines this complex subject in "Confronting Servitude: Asian Immigrant Women Workers in State-Funded Homecare," a [study](#) published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*.

Cranford joined with scholars from the University of California, Florida Atlantic University and Brown University to analyze how the inequalities of gender, race, class and immigration shape these workers' ability to refuse coercive labor conditions. Their investigation also examined the role of California's in-home support service (IHSS) state-funded care program in enabling and inhibiting self-advocacy by care providers.

"The state, in the design of its program, opens the door for home care workers to slip into servitude. 'How can they collectivize and access supports within their community to navigate these situations?'" says Cranford, author of the 2020 book "Home Care Fault Lines: Understanding Tensions and Creating Alliances."

The situations to which Cranford is referring, illuminated through interviews with 60 home care providers, include:

- Being expected to work unpaid overtime and serve members of their family.
- Being subjected to verbal abuse.
- Being accused of stealing.
- Having food thrown at them.

The interviews were arranged with the help of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and three partnering [community](#)

[organizations](#): Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, the Filipino American Services Group and the Pilipino Workers Center of Southern California.

As Cranford notes, the IHSS program in California, which employs more than 500,000 home care providers, stands out as a model in the U.S. for empowering home care workers who are members of the SEIU with the right to engage in [collective bargaining](#) for fair wages and benefits.

Yet the union limits its interventions in cases of home care worker mistreatment, the authors note: due to concessions it has made to disability rights groups, it does not engage in workplace strikes that could jeopardize the health and well-being of people who need continuous care.

As well, they write, the IHSS program grants care receiver-employers full autonomy over the hiring, firing and supervising of their home care worker, and takes a "hands-off approach to regulating employment conditions in home care," which leaves workers vulnerable to inhumane treatment.

The IHSS program allows for spouses, parents, children and other relatives to be paid care providers. While it is beneficial for a care receiver-employer's relative to be paid for work that they might anyway perform for free out of a sense of family duty, Cranford and her colleagues found that family dynamics often contribute to the "unfreedom" for the care provider by way of expectations to perform extra tasks beyond their paid hours, and threats of firing for non-compliance.

This issue is exacerbated by California's insufficient resourcing of the program, they say, as care receivers often need funding for more care

hours than allotted by the program. Other mitigating factors include the ethno-cultural expectation of female servitude among older care receivers, and the financial precariousness and limited English proficiency of some [care providers](#).

Yet, as the authors note, many of the [home care](#) workers they interviewed did find ways to respond to their dilemmas of servitude. Taking advantage of what few supports their union offers, they have engaged in grassroots community organizing to cultivate group solidarity among [home care workers](#), sought help when facing unreasonable demands at work in order to improve working conditions, and sometimes resorted to blacklisting abusive employers. Some also connected with local immigrant organizations to help advocate for their rights.

Says Cranford, "These women are confronting servitude in multiple ways, and when they have collective support from their unions and other community groups, they are capable of confronting it."

**More information:** Jennifer Jihye Chun et al, Confronting Servitude: Asian Immigrant Women Workers in State-Funded Homecare, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/725842](https://doi.org/10.1086/725842)

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