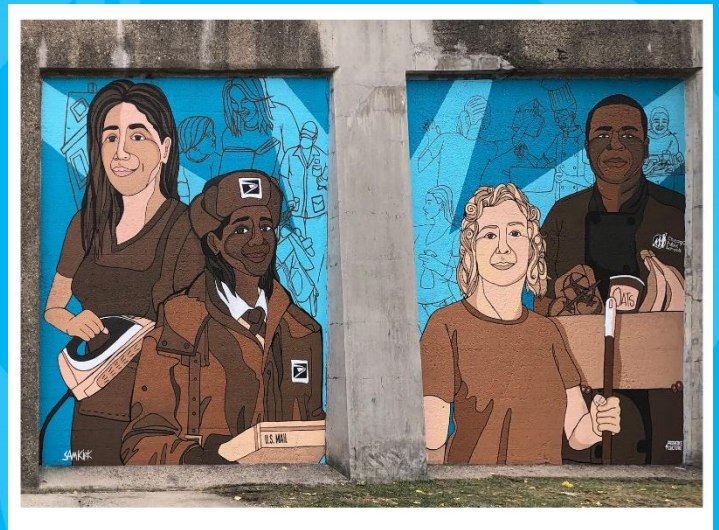


No. 5 (28), May 2021

Damned if you do, damned if you don't (work)

In this issue of Spotlight, we cross the Atlantic to look at research on the impact of the #Covid-19 pandemic on domestic workers, conducted by dr Anna Rosińska [@akordakord](#) in the US. It reveals the double bind of that impact: domestic workers were affected negatively irrespective of whether they were laid off or if they kept their jobs. At the same time, their involvement in and help from workers and immigrant organizations increased in the pandemic.

FULL REPORT AVAILABLE [HERE](#)



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.



CENTRE OF
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Damned if you do, damned if you don't (work)

Domestic workers in the Covid-19 pandemic double bind. A brief based on the results of an online survey in the United States

Anna Rosińska

Introduction: Pandemic and domestic workers

This Spotlight is based on the results of the **online survey on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on work and lives of domestic workers in the US** and offers a glimpse into the domestic workers' experiences of the Covid-19 crisis. It reveals **the double bind of that impact: domestic workers were affected negatively irrespective of whether they were laid off or if they kept their jobs**. Nannies, home care workers, and housecleaners are some of the most popular jobs within the domestic work sector. Domestic workers' situation is often underpinned by informality and a lack of access to rights and public services. When the pandemic hit, this sector had already been vulnerable.

There are several specific dimensions of the impact that continue to affect domestic workers unevenly. First, Covid-19 is an **illness** that affects especially those who cannot work from home as well as minorities, who are overrepresented in domestic work (Gellat 2020, OHCHR 2020, Clark et al. 2020).

Second, **measures** like the stay-at-home orders **have directly or indirectly caused many workers to lose their jobs**. Differentiating between essential and non-essential businesses make the work of personal care attendants (PCAs) mandatory, regardless of the hazards for the

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).

workers, while the work of self-employed cleaners was labeled as "illegal" for periods of time during the pandemic in some states (Wilson, Stimpson 2020; Gellat 2020; see also ILO 2020a).

Third, **domestic employers** who lose their jobs can no longer afford to outsource household services. Employers who could afford to pay are afraid to have somebody come into their houses while in self-isolation. Rarely do they continue to pay the workers. This way many workers are laid off with short or no notice.

Finally, domestic workers are excluded from some of **Covid-19-related relief policies** as an

occupational group, and sub-categories of workers are often left out because of their status as undocumented immigrants (Wilson, Stimpson 2020).

All of these factors have a huge but differentiated impact on domestic workers. Hence, it is essential 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. I identified **two variants of negative impact: some workers are vulnerable because they are left without a job, and other domestic workers are vulnerable because they are still on the job.**

Who Took Part?

The survey was live in the period from August to December 2020, and it yielded 100 complete responses. 61 responses came from people whose primary job was nannying and their experiences are reflected in the most nuanced way. 14 more people's main job was housecleaning and 10 others were personal care workers. The most represented region is the Northeast (72 participants), especially Massachusetts (54 people). 79 respondents 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.

Participants overwhelmingly identified as women (95 of them). The average age was 38 years and 39 out of 100 participants had dependent members of family.

Fifty-seven participants were born in the US, 43 in a different country. 19 people were from Latin

America, 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 (see the proportions nationally in box 1).

I use a simplified division into white US-born workers (49 in total) and immigrant and/or workers of color (who number 51), among whom there are US-born people of color (9), white immigrants (11), and immigrants of color (31) (Table 1).

Table 1

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

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. (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 who does not have such backgrounds.)

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

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 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/or non-US-born, and 4 were white and US-born.

At the time of the survey, only 49 people worked as nannies, 8 people made a living as housecleaners, and 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.

Changes and Impacts of the Pandemic throughout 2020

I grouped the responses to open questions into six major categories. 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).

Table 2

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

LOSING JOBS OR WORKING FEWER HOURS

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.

Cleaners are 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). 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.

WORKING MORE AND NEGATIVE CHANGES AT WORK

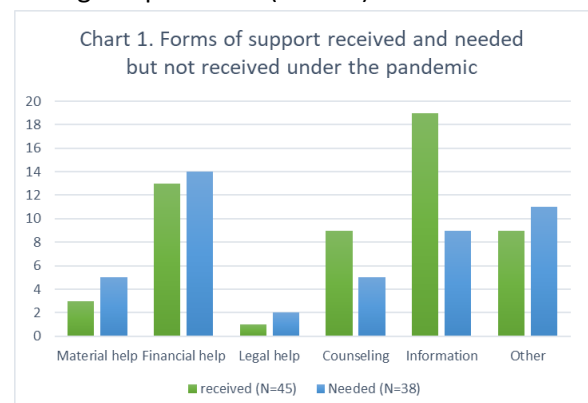
Thirty-five out of 85 workers who responded reported the negative impact of the pandemic on the jobs they kept. Twenty-three out of 45 white US-born people and 12 out of 40 immigrants and/or people of color who responded reported negative changes at work. Workers found themselves burdened with additional tasks (and no extra pay); this included sanitizing and remote education supervision in the case of **nannies**. Several workers reported moving in with their employer's family to switch to a live-in mode. Nannies experienced more restrictions, that were sometimes unfairly distributed. Most of the **personal care assistants** experienced working more hours, taking on additional tasks, and facing overwhelming hazards unmitigated by PPE provision.

ANXIETY

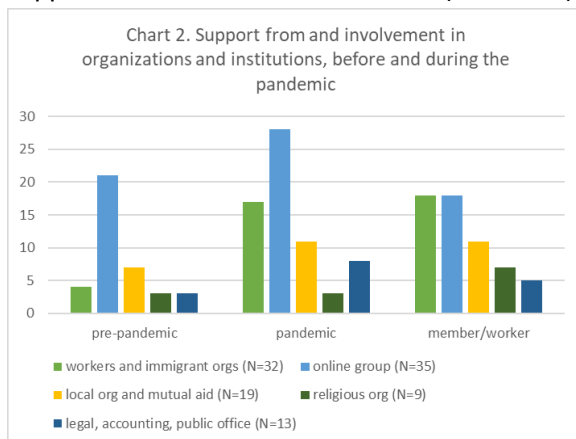
While 29 out of 85 workers – among them 19 out of 45 white US-born and 14 out of 40 immigrant and/or people of color – spontaneously mentioned feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and a lack of stability, unease began to permeate everybody's experience of the pandemic. Fear was pervasive: 79 feared for their family, 73 for their own safety and 59 for the employers' or care-receivers' safety in the closed multiple-choice question 'Following the Covid-19 outbreak, was any of below your concern?'. Nobody picked "none of the above." 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.

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 (chart 1).



The most common sources of support were online groups, organizations of domestic workers and immigrants, and mutual aid initiatives (chart 2). Organizations and mutual aid initiatives were more popular among immigrants and/or workers of color, while online groups were more common among white US-born workers. Despite these efforts, the direct financial and material help needs exceeded the support that was received (chart 1).



As the survey was also distributed through the domestic workers' organizations, organizations (the Brazilian Women's Group, Dominican Development Centre, Matahari Women's Worker Center, the Massachusetts Coalition of Domestic Workers, SEIU1199), 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), and this is because more people needed help and support services during the pandemic, and the organizations were there to meet their needs (Rosinska, Pellerito, *forthcoming*).

Conclusions

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.

Acknowledgements

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