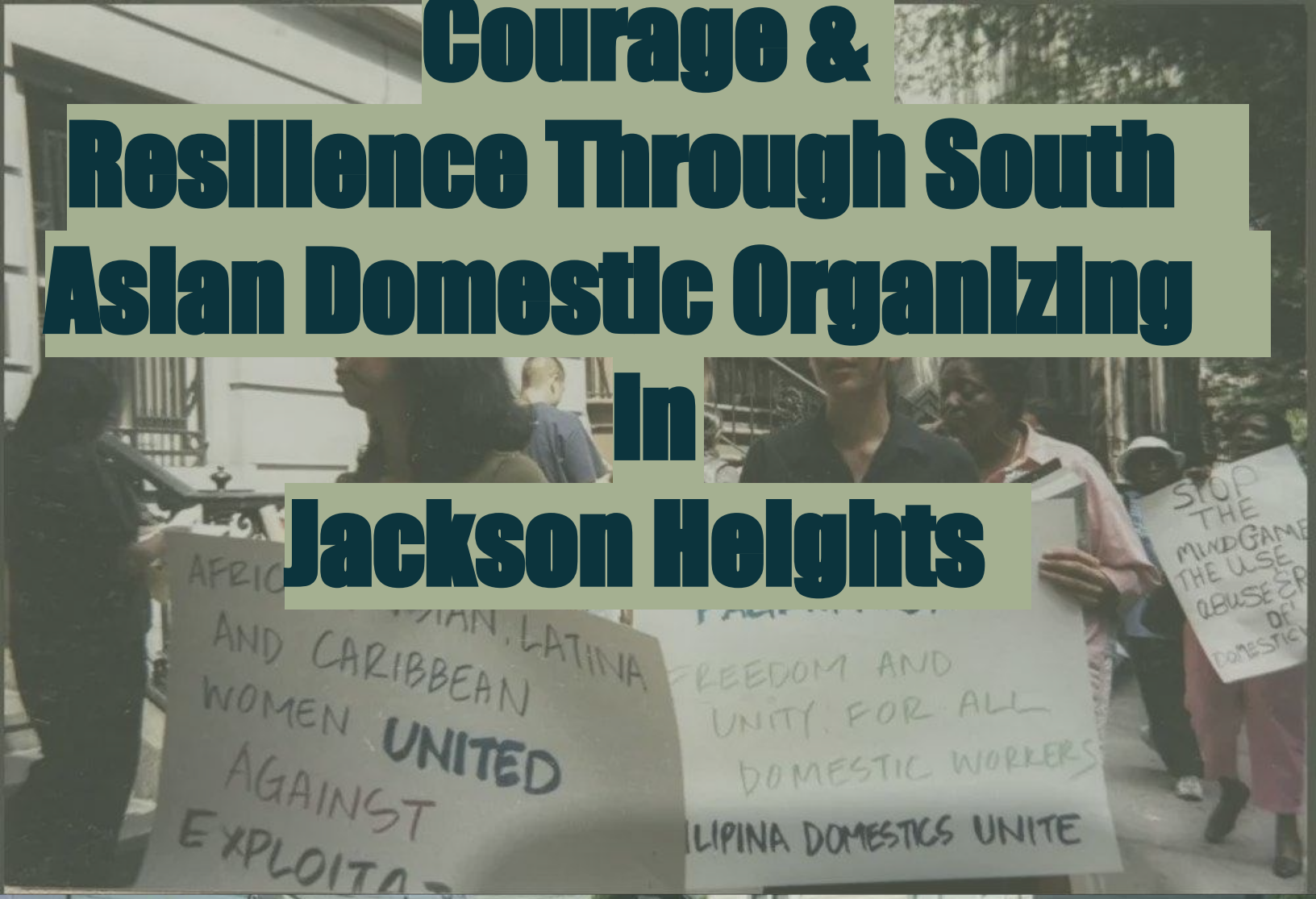
Courage & Resilience Through South Asian Domestic Organizing In Jackson Heights



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Courage & Resilience Through South Asian Domestic Organizing

Fueled with a desire to change this **systemic abuse** , South Asian women who were domestic **workers became organizers** . They created numerous organizations, with slightly different purposes, structures and campaigns, but they all had one goal: **to address the mistreatment against South Asian domestic workers** .

Andolan was one of these organizations. It was founded in 1998 by Gulnahar Alam, a former Bangladeshi domestic worker, in order to fight against the exploitation and abuse of South Asian domestic workers. They addressed **language barriers, discrimination, immigration status, and advocated for labor and human rights.**

This exhibit centers stories of resilience and community organizing, and is a testament to the courage of South Asian women.

Introduction

Beliefs, like strong gusts of wind, travel across vast horizons—especially seen with the influx of South Asian immigrants in the mid-to-late 20th century. For them, immigration was the golden ticket into the American dream.

Although with **lingering racist American policies** and the continuation of caste and gender discrimination within the South Asian community, finding a voice was particularly difficult for South Asian **women.** They resorted to domestic work, a **familiar field that offered comfort in a foreign country** . However, discriminatory practices and legislation persisted, which made **domestic workers prone to exploitation and abuse.**

How did South Asian women speak out against their treatment?
How did they navigate their intersectionality of being multiple minorities?
What fueled their courage?

This exhibit entails covering all these questions and nuances through worker organizing. South Asian women created communities with one another to offer support and legally condemn their employers. They filed cases, protested, hosted workshops, and crucially uplifted their voice in a space where their voice wasn't heard. Organizations such as Andolan, DRUM, and Domestic Workers United were safe spaces for organizing for women. Together, these women addressed numerous systemic social barriers and, most importantly, advocated for labor and human rights for women, no matter their identity.

South Asian Immigration in the Early to Late 20th Century

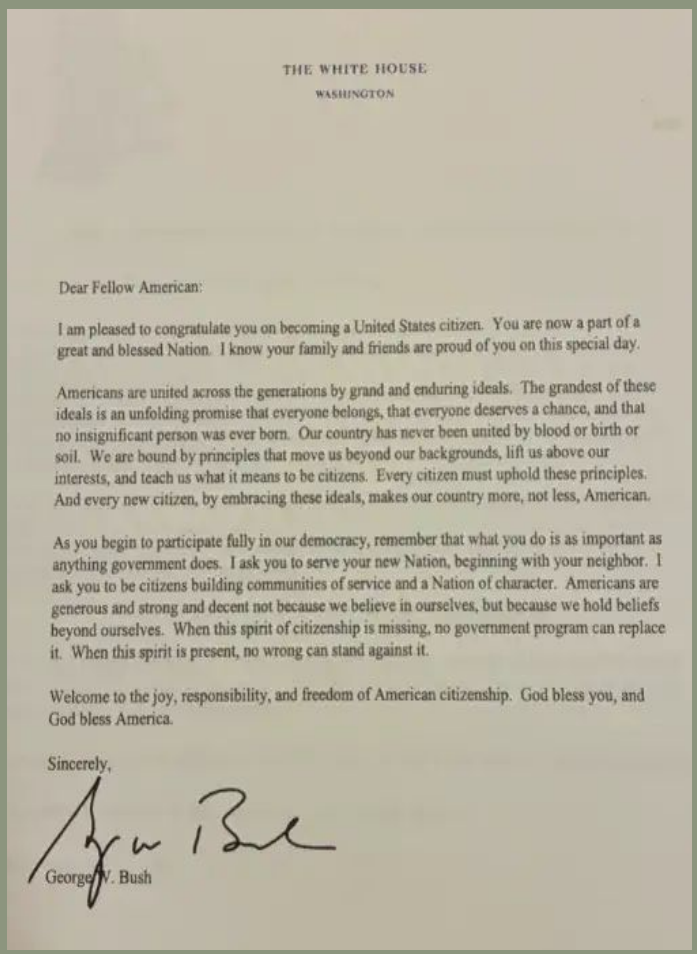
President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Immigration and Nationality Act as Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Lady Bird Johnson, Muriel Humphrey, Sen. Edward (Ted) Kennedy, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, and others look on.

Photo by Yoichi Okamoto

In 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the **Immigration and Nationality Act** which provided a new opportunity for South Asians, and South Asian women in particular, **to migrate to the United States.**

However, the act prioritized immigrants with direct family ties to current Americans or those with high levels of education in scientific fields, most South Asian immigrants who came to the U.S. in this first wave of migration were **upper caste professionals** , or **of the diplomat class.** This first wave of immigration was one of the contributing factors to **illustrating Asian Americans as "model minorities."** South Asians became **stereotyped as naturally gifted** in STEM fields, and as wealthy, successful immigrants. The success of the first wave of South Asian immigrants is still used to **claim that systemic barriers don't apply to our community, and the expectation is that hard work is all it takes to overcome racism and inequality.**

In the 1980s and 90s, the second wave of South Asian migrants arrived to the United States. ***The Immigration Act of 1990*** and the **Diversity Visa Lottery** , a subset of the act that started in 1995, provided a **free application process to immigrate to the States from countries with low US immigration rates** , including Bangladesh.



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Dear Fellow American:

I am pleased to congratulate you on becoming a United States citizen. You are now a part of a great and blessed Nation. I know your family and friends are proud of you on this special day.

Americans are united across the generations by grand and enduring ideals. The grandest of these ideals is an unfolding promise that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, and that no insignificant person was ever born. Our country has never been united by blood or birth or soil. We are bound by principles that move us beyond our backgrounds, lift us above our interests, and teach us what it means to be citizens. Every citizen must uphold these principles. And every new citizen, by embracing these ideals, makes our country more, not less, American.

As you begin to participate fully in our democracy, remember that what you do is as important as anything government does. I ask you to serve your new Nation, beginning with your neighbor. I ask you to be citizens building communities of service and a Nation of character. Americans are generous and strong and decent not because we believe in ourselves, but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves. When this spirit of citizenship is missing, no government program can replace it. When this spirit is present, no wrong can stand against it.

Welcome to the joy, responsibility, and freedom of American citizenship. God bless you, and God bless America.

Sincerely,

George W. Bush

A letter from President George W. Bush given to immigrants once they became a citizen.

The second wave of South Asian immigrants were **vastly different from the first wave.** This wave included more working class migrants, particularly from nations like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. When these immigrants arrived in the US, they were **immediately compared to the first wave of migrants** . This **established a false hierarchy** across and within marginalized groups and, made it so that **structural inequality that was experienced by working class South Asians was harder to make visible.**

This invisibility was perpetuated by the community as well, who believed they needed to **live up to the standards** set by the **model minority myth** to stay safe in a new country. As one South Asian immigrant shared:

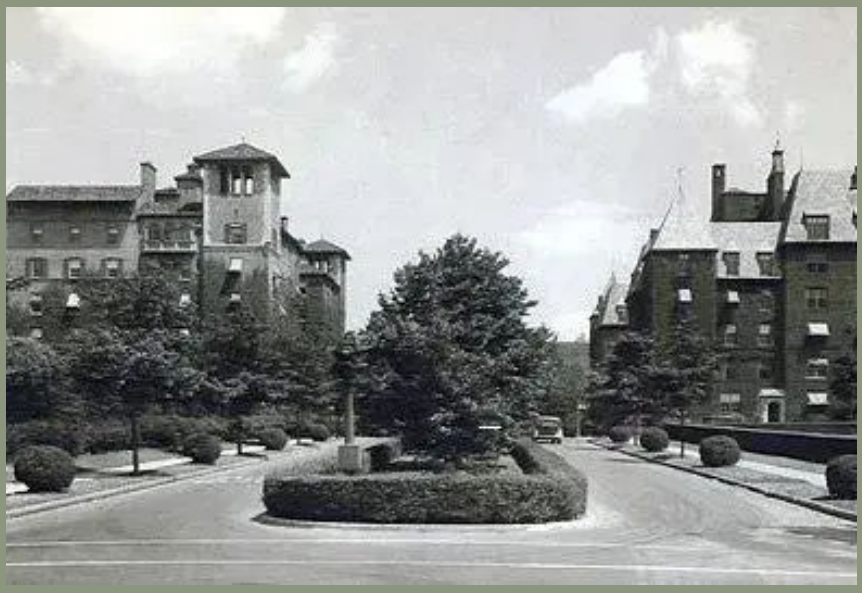
"You have to be polished. There's no room for failure. There's no room for imperfections. You have to be well-spoken, well-educated, have the right opinions, be good-looking, be tall. [You] have to have a family structure. There's no room for any sort of freedom in identity except for the mold that you've been painted as – as a model citizen." —
U.S. born man of Pakistani origin;
Source:
Pew Research Center

While many of the first wave of migrants settled in California, New Jersey, and North Carolina, **purchasing homes in the suburbs** , many of these working class South Asians **found community** and work in cities, including **New York City** , settling in the city's **South Asian enclaves like Jackson Heights** . Amongst these working class communities were undocumented South Asians, including women seeking work.

What laid the road for domestic work?

Jackson Heights: More Than Just Diverse Cuisines

Jackson Heights, Queens, did not start out as a haven for South Asians. Prior to 1965, it was promoted by developers as a community garden getaway from the business of Manhattan for wealthy white families. However as housing became more affordable and the recent influx of immigrants, **small enclaves formed across the city and Jackson Heights was one of them** .



Jackson Heights in the 1990s; Source: Jackson Heights Beautification Group

Today, Jackson Heights is a South Asian enclave, and **Roosevelt Ave is lined with a South Asian commercial district** of restaurants, shops, and boutiques. However, this has allowed for a dominant narrative to grow about the area. Many outsiders set foot here as culinary tourists, calling it a perfect, charismatic place to live in. They are always excited to try out the different kinds of "**authentic** " dishes every culture has to offer. **However, this can obscure the realities of Jackson Heights for working class New Yorkers.**

Various storefronts in "Little Bangladesh," Jackson Heights, Queens.

There is harm in presenting Jackson Heights completely through an overall positive and celebratory perspective, such as consumer-friendly, business growth, culinary strength, and entrepreneurial success. The issue is that this is the only clear lens in which it is seen through, blurring out the narratives that are just as important: **economic inequality, labor exploitation, the very complex, challenging process of naturalization for immigrants.**

It is no coincidence that there are numerous immigrant lawyers based in Jackson Heights to support its communities moving through the complex and harmful system.

DRUM (Desis Rising Up & Moving) is a community organization that **mobilizes South Asian immigrant workers in Jackson Heights** . DRUM, along with the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center, conducted a research study and report in July 2012 that documented the experiences and statistics of undocumented South Asian workers in New York City, with a specific focus in Jackson Heights. This report focuses on five major industries in which a significant amount of undocumented South Asian workers are employed in: **construction, domestic, restaurant, retail, and taxi.** Among these, retail and domestic sectors are majorly composed of South Asian employees who are **women** . The report states that the retail industry is the top employer of low wage workers and "Citywide, the retail industry employs approximately 250,000 workers, 89% of them immigrants. Jackson Heights has one of the largest concentrations of retail stores in Queens, many catering to South Asians. **Most retail workers are women, while a large majority of employers are men** ."

You can read more about DRUM and their incredible work in "A Social Justice Walking Tour of Jackson Heights."

Street vendors are another key community of workers in Jackson heights that are run by immigrants. These vendors come in many different forms: jewelry and souvenir shops, hot dog stands, and food trucks. Jackson Heights' streets have been a space for entrepreneurs who range from people who are doing a **small side hustle to those who are established small business owners** .

Jackson Heights: More Than Just Diverse Cuisines

For many immigrants, however, it is not so simple—sometimes, this is the only or most important way for them to make a living to support their families. At the same time, **there are certain policies that make it extremely difficult for them to keep doing this work** legally because there's a cap on licenses for vendors in which the demand far surpasses the supply. There are also several regulations depending on the type of license they have, such as what can be sold and the distance their vendor has to maintain between similar businesses— these regulations are arduous to keep up with and navigate.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group

Participants	Percent
Male	49%
Female	51%
Average Age	42
Country of Origin	
Bangladesh	77%
India	11%
Nepal	4%
Pakistan	9%
Current Industry	
Construction	17%
Domestic	15%
Restaurant	15%
Retail	32%
Taxi	21%

Demographic summary table of participant demographics in a research study surveying the experiences of undocumented South Asian workers in New York City, conducted by DRUM (Desis Rising Up & Moving); c. July 2012

"A lot of people are just trying to make a living – undocumented folks, women who come here – [it's] the only job they can get to support their families – and they are criminalized."

- Josselyn Atahualpa, organizer for Queens Neighborhood United (QNU)

We place this story geographically in Jackson Heights because it is a working class South Asian neighborhood, and also because it is a key home for South Asian organizing. In our next section, we go into more detail about **Domestic Work,** another key industry of labor, and one that is **often not documented or made as visible as some of the labor** discussed in the section above.

"Jackson Heights: Unearthing the People's Struggle." 2016. Asian American Writers' Workshop. December 20, 2016. https://aaww.org/jackson-heights-unearthing-the-peoples-struggle/.

Why Domestic Work & Who Did It?

Domestic work, along with service, retail, food service, became a **key mode of employment for the second wave of South Asian immigrants** who were often working class and/or undocumented immigrants. **Domestic work by definition refers to the services performed in a private residence.** It can refer to roles such as nannies, housecleaners, and careworkers. South Asian women typically became domestic workers as they fulfilled similar roles in South Asia and employment opportunities otherwise were scarce for women.

One domestic worker wrote, "When I was in Bangladesh, I did housework — took care of my house, did all the cooking, brought the food to my husband's table so I got this feeling in my head that that's the work I can do."
– SAMAR Magazine Issue #4 (Winter 1994)

afraid to try it.

C talked about people's attitudes towards domestic labor.

Most people, in India, if I tell them I worked as a nanny and a cook and a housekeeper, they say "What?!" It's a shocking thing. Some people don't like it. It's like, "What?! You used to work in an office, and now you're doing a nanny's job?"

First thing they say is about cleaning the bathroom. Cleaning someone else's bathroom. But I feel it's not degrading. It's each one's way.

N was of the opinion that the setting up of a clear contractual relationship between employer and worker is very necessary. She felt that domestic work could become a viable professional category, if treated properly.

It is possible here, because in this country, everything is a job. All jobs, outside and inside, are seen as jobs by the hour and are paid on a weekly basis. If people who work at outside jobs get respect, why shouldn't we? There is scope for getting respect for our work if we see it this way.

For more information call:
Sakhi for South Asian Women, (212)695-5447

- It is likely to take between 10-15 years to get a green card through employment as a domestic worker.

Domestic workers, documented or undocumented, must:
- get at least $4.25 an hour, and proper breaks.
- get one full day off each week.
- not be deprived of more than $1.45 per meal, $1.00 per day of lodging, $3.40 a day for an apartment (on the basis of $4.25 an hour) if the employer provides meals and/or a place to stay.
- not be required to pay for any items that they need to perform their work.
- not be required to pay for items that they damage in the course of their work.
- not be deprived of their wages on grounds of the high costs of airfare to bring them to the U.S.
- be free from sexual harassment and/or other kinds of abuse and cruelty.

Domestic workers who work 40 hours or more with one employer, whether documented or undocumented, are entitled to:
- 1.5 times their hourly wage for every extra hour of work beyond 40 hours per week.
- workers compensation insurance.
- short term disability benefits.

Documented domestic workers are eligible for:
- unemployment insurance if s/he works with an employer who pays cash wages of $500 for every three months.

ONE BIG, HAPPY COMMUNITY?

C has worked in South Asian homes ever since she first arrived in the United States.

My last job is with an Indian family. The one before this was an American/Indian mixed. The lady was from Sri Lanka and the husband American. The one before that, again Indian/American. And then Indians.

N compared South Asian American employers with other American employers.

I don't have enough experience but I hear that American employers specify babysitting or housekeeping and pay accordingly. They pay hourly. Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi families give less money but make you work much harder. We go to South Asian families because American employers want work permits and legal papers. But I don't have any legal papers.

At the same time, she felt that there were some cultural advantages associated with working for South Asian employers.

I am from Bangladesh and my favorite food is Bangladeshi food. If I stay with an American family they won't know that I need to eat rice three times a day. They won't know what my desire is. Where I am now, I eat the same food they do and when they go out, they bring food for me to eat. My employer's sister, however, treats her babysitter differently. I can't expect my employers to understand everything if they are from a different country.

C has always been employed in the homes of well-to-do South Asian professionals.

In the first house, the husband was working in a good concern, as a vice-president. She was at home.

Then there were two doctors. The first one's wife was at the house. The second—both were doctors, Indians. They were out of the house all the time. The third one was a doctor and engineer — both out of the house all the time. The fourth one — the lady was studying and I don't know what her husband was working as. The fifth one and the current one — they're both professionals too.

N felt strongly that

I don't think that these people could have succeeded without the cheap labor they hire at home. Those who are established here — get a new house, established themselves maybe as

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In a new world with vastly different cultural norms, a different language, and **forceful assimilation**, South Asian women work under the few other spaces of familiarity: other South Asian residences (often those coming from that first wave of immigration and already middle-class, educated, upper-caste and typically highranking officials or diplomats). A domestic worker who goes by N said, **"I am from Bangladesh and my favorite food is Bangladeshi food. If I stay with an American family they won't know that I need to eat rice three times a day. They won't know what my desire is."** Word of new employment was informal and **spread by mouth** in existing South Asian communities as many people didn't know English

A page of an article with a domestic workers reason for working in this industry under a South Asian employer.

Why Domestic Work & Who Did It?

Moreover domestic work became so appealing because **in South Asia, domestic work was already an extensive and popular industry.** For a long time, middle and upper class families relied on **cheap domestic labour** for household chores with often **live-in workers.** As domestic work expanded in America, many of the behavior and strong gender, class, and economic inequalities presented in South Asia persisted here. As one worker states, **"The Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani families treat us like they treat domestic workers in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan—the expectation is that we will work all the time."**

A Bangladeshi domestic worker cooking for her residence, c. 2019

Exploitative and Abusive Working Conditions & Diminishment of Women's Voices

Domestic work was an extremely exploitative and abusive field. Women had to work **long, arduous hours with little to no pay** and acts of **physical or sexual violence were common**. Many times workers were forced to live at the residence because of its demanding nature, forbidden from leaving, or talk to their family and pay was often done in the form of food or accommodations rather than money.

The story of Shanti highlights the cruel nature of the job. She came from India to NYC in 1996 and worked under the former first secretary in the Kuwait mission in the UN. For 4 years she was forced to work **18 hours everyday and endure emotional and physical abuse.** She **barely received pay** and if she did, was **unable to spend it due to the time constraints and inability to leave the house**. Moreover Shanti was unable to escape because her passports, visas, and other necessary important documents were stolen from her and deprived. This was a common strategy of preventing domestic workers from speaking up and leaving. **Even after filing a case against her abuser after fleeing and being scared for her safety, legal repercussions were hard to enforce as high ranking officials are immune from legal action due to the Vienna Convention of Diplomatic Relations.**

United Nations. 1961. "Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations." The American Journal of International Law 55 (4): 1064

Another domestic worker recalls her experience by saying, "She treated me worse than a slave. No proper food, and always saying insulting things like, 'You are my servant." – Review of SAMAR Magazine Issue #4 (Winter 1994). n.d. SAADA

The familiarity that South Asian workers confided in actually turned out to be a reason for distress as **it created a cycle that they were unable to escape.** The culture of domestic work in South Asia—including power and economic inequality that was the reason for such mistreatment—spilled over into the states and was the reason for such indifference to the treatment they were facing and unwillingness to change. **To them, nothing was wrong.** The long hours, abuse, little pay, was **normal** for these employers and women were expected to fill in these roles without rebelling.

Exploitative and Abusive Working Conditions & Diminishment of Women's Voices

A domestic worker also uplifted the challenges of being both a domestic worker, and being undocumented. **"I don't have enough experience but I hear that American employers specify babysitting or housekeeping and pay accordingly. They pay hourly. Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi families give less money but make you work much harder. We go to South Asian families because American employers want work permits and legal papers. But I don't have any legal papers." – Ibid, 14.**

Domestic workers particularly lacked workers' rights as prior to the 1980s, they were predominantly black women. As a result, **these women were excluded from major federal labor laws by racist Southern Democrats** policymakers who feared they would gain too much political power. Labour laws such as the **National Labor Relations Act in 1935** , which allowed employees to form unions, and the **Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938,** which established worker protections and minimum pay, were unavailable to domestic workers and it ultimately **exacerbated conditions for South Asians** workers once they took over the role in the future.

Lastly, many South Asian women **didn't know that they were being oppressed.** The combination of South Asian experience with domestic work and lack of ability to understand English resulted in many of the domestic workers **believing that their exploitation was normal and nothing to fix.** For example, Nilofer Ahmed writes, **"I had no ideas about holidays and I did not know that I could take the weekend off,"** adding onto the growing dilemma of abuse.

ILGWU members, all Black women, hold picket signs with various texts about unionization, contracts, and fair wages.

Overall the **societal expectations** of how a woman should act, **cultural norms** of the dynamic between a domestic worker and employer, **previous history** with labour laws, the **overwhelmingness and confusion** of moving to a new country, **class**, and **gender** were all **factors that made it difficult for domestic workers to speak up about their oppression.**

Andolan: Resistance & Resilience Through Organizing

Andolan: meaning protest or movement in Hindi, is a South Asian domestic organization created by Gulnahar Alam in 1998.

Gulnahar came to NYC in 1990s and recalls her experience as a domestic worker saying:

"When I came to this country 15 years ago, I had no idea about labor laws or minimum wage...I didn't have anybody who could understand my concerns, but now workers can come to Andolan to at least share an experience with a friend and have a safe space in a low-wage worker community."

At first, Andolan was a very small voluntary organization without any funding. Their first campaigns **addressed legal cases** that troubled domestic workers and referred them to services such as learning English. Then they began to offer mammograms at **health clinics** and hosted workshops on self-defense and immigration issues.

Andolan was **extremely different to other organizations** like it during its time. For example, organizing communities tended to mainly focus on **physical domestic violence**; Andolan's scope was broader and **attempted to address more of what people faced including employer-employee inequalities, sexism, working condition violation.** Andolan emphasized being worker-led so they maintained ratios of worker to non-workers so that the number of staff **didn't outweigh domestic workers** and so they wouldn't feel belittled by it. As the Andolan member and former domestic worker Afroza says, **"I fight with them and when they win, I feel good...Seeing all the members after so much time makes me feel like I'm back with my family."**

As Andolan became established, **their goal was to empower working class communities that face exploitative working conditions** through two campaigns. The first one was the ***Retail Workers Campaign*** that focused on worker's rights in the many retail shops in Jackson Heights. They **conducted surveys to record conditions employees faced** and offered community bonding events in **languages such as Hindi and Bangla to educate them on their rights, and steps to take if they are abused.**

The second major campaign they had was the ***Campaign against Diplomatic Immunity*** , which specially addressed the lack of accountability diplomats could legally take if they abused domestic workers. Gulnahar Alam attended the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland and spoke about this **corrupt diplomatic protection** . She was able to gain more traction towards the issue and gained connections to other organizations through it.

Moreover they placed emphasis on **domestic worker education** as many workers didn't know the rights they were entitled to and that they were being abused in the first place. Andolan would distribute flyers informing domestic workers about their rights, that exploitation should not be seen as normal, and overall would **promote Andolan as a space for protection, resistance.**

Andolan protest for a domestic worker Aniq Khan, abused by a Diplomat. The Andolan members are protesting on the Diplomat's lawn in Jackson Heights, holding multilingual signs

The picture above depicts a case Andolan undertook for a domestic worker named Aniq Khan, who was abused by his Bangladeshi diplomat employer. The Andolan members are protesting on the residence's lawn in Jackson Heights, **holding multilingual signs** . This photo in itself **uplifts stories of the working class by defying systemic power and economic inequalities and advocating for workers rights.** Moreover Andolan strongly believed in multilingual aid as many of domestic workers recently immigrated and couldn't speak English; **these signs served as a weapon to defy mistreatment** but also as a **hand to educate other workers** on their rights and the power they had to speak up for their rights.

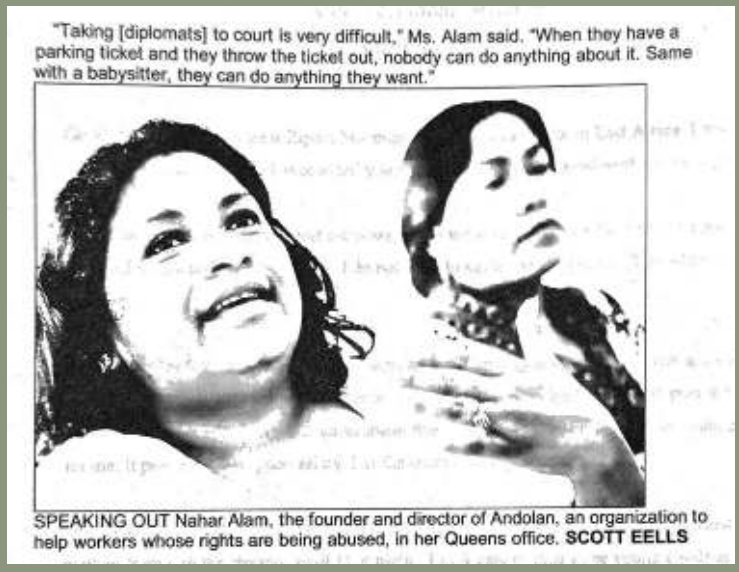
Another major victory was for a 60 year old domestic worker, Zarina, who was extremely neglected and exploited by her employers. She broke her hand while working and her employer didn't let her go to the hospital. Instead she was forced to **continue working 70-80 hours a week for less than 2 dollars an hour.** Andolan filed a case against her employer and organized a demonstration in front of the Royal Arcadia Palace with slogans, signs, and flyers to distribute to walker-bys. They garnered serious traction from pedestrians and also the Channel Four News. Andolan helped her file a case against her employer for $94,000 dollars **and won.**

Andolan: Resistance & Resilience Through Organizing

Gulnahar Alam, the founder of Andolan, was a former domestic worker herself and domestic violence survivor. At 13, she was married to an abusive and violent police officer through an arranged marriage in Bangladesh. She eventually fled to the United States where she lived in Brooklyn and worked as a domestic worker. There she was exploited, abused, and denied privileges such as pay, using her phone, or time off. **Gulnahar used her time instead to learn English and became inspired to advocate for immigrant domestic worker justice.**

Her journey of domestic organizing first began at **Sakhi**, an organization to **address violence within the South Asian Committee under the Domestic Worker's Committee** and she eventually became the lead coordinator in 1996. However a year later, a dispute where an employer filed a counter-lawsuit against the DWC for abusive worker complaints led her to creating her own organization: **The Worker's Awaaz**. The goal of the group was to first to advocate for **female domestic worker rights** and membership consisted of people who **also left Sakhi for dissolving the DWC.** However, funding disagreements and the fact that it stopped seeming like a comfortable, safe space for domestic workers led Gulnahar to leave Worker's Awaaz and create **Andolan** a few months later. She believed that Worker's Awaaz strayed from its original purpose and **didn't empower domestic workers without the input from the domestic organizer staff.** **Andolan was special in the way that it was worker-led and stayed authentic to the "for domestic workers, by domestic workers" mindset.**

Gulnahar worked directly on Andolan's cases, facilitated **presentations and training to workers**, and **connected with other people and organizations in her community.** She represented Andolan at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001 and developed the Cultural Diversity Curriculum for the New York Police Department in 2001. She received numerous awards for her work such as the Susan B. Anthony Award in 1996, the Union Square Award from the Fun for the City of New York in 2001, and the Sneha Award for work in fighting for the rights of Domestic Workers in 2002.

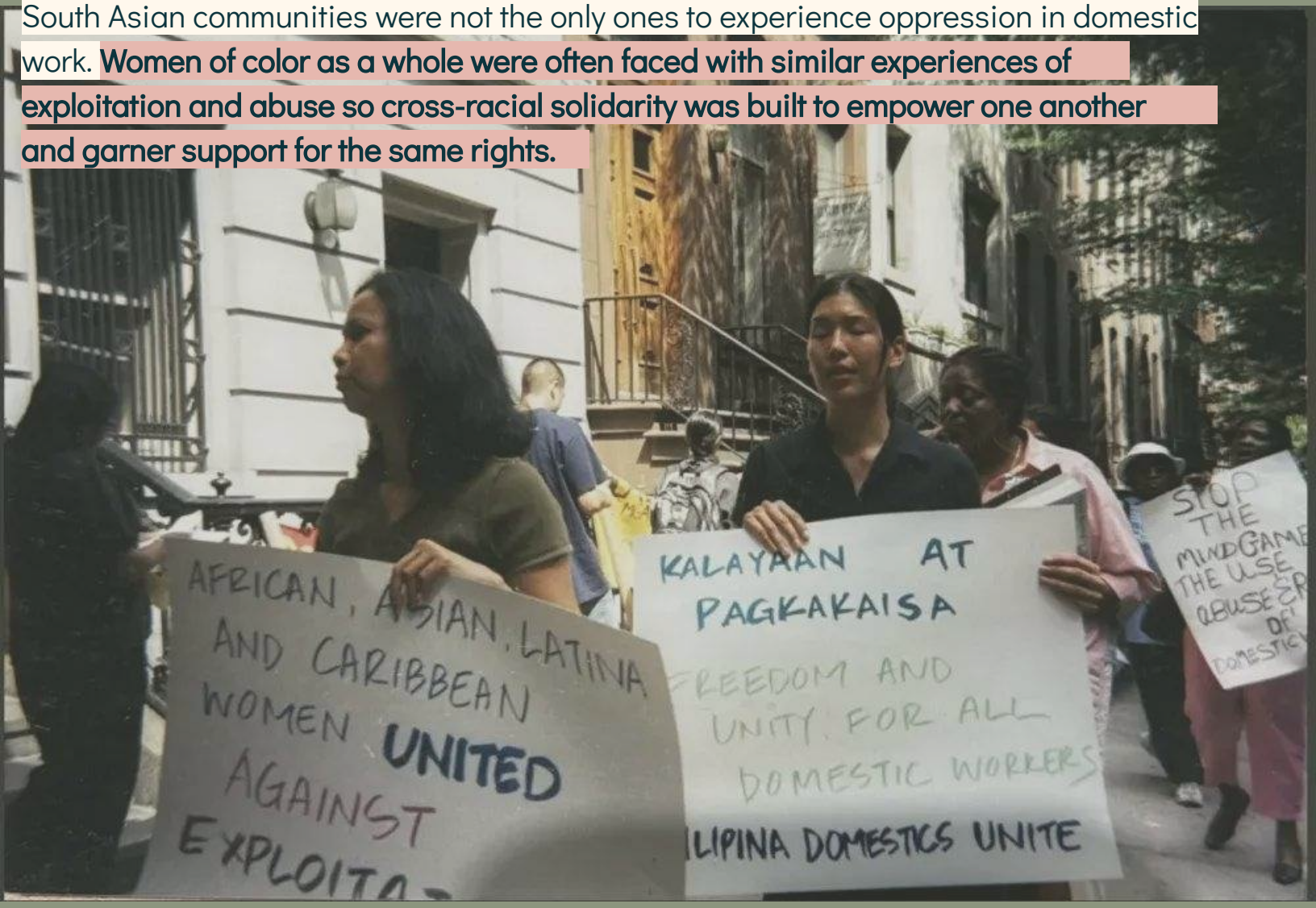


"Taking [diplomats] to court is very difficult," Ms. Alam said. "When they have a parking ticket and they throw the ticket out, nobody can do anything about it. Same with a babysitter, they can do anything they want."

SPEAKING OUT Nahar Alam, the founder and director of Andolan, an organization to help workers whose rights are being abused, in her Queens office. SCOTT EELLS

Shared Struggles, Links of Solidarity, & The Power of Community

South Asian communities were not the only ones to experience oppression in domestic work. **Women of color as a whole were often faced with similar experiences of exploitation and abuse so cross-racial solidarity was built to empower one another and garner support for the same rights.**



The Domestic Workers United was founded in 2000 as a **coalition of CAAAV and Andolan** in order to establish **fairer labor standards** . Monthly meetings were held in Brooklyn where Filipina, South Asian, Caribbean, African, and Latina domestic workers came together to educate, share stories, campaign, and organize. In 2003, they launched the **Domestic Workers Bill of Rights** campaign that included **sick days, overtime pay, written agreements, and introduced domestic workers back into labour laws after years of exclusion**

After **six and a half years** of organizing with over 4,000 workers supporting over a broad scope of community organizations, the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights was signed into law on August 31, 2010. This was a substantial turning point in not only **domestic workers,** but also the **power of women of color.** It marked the **first step in securing a voice where the "double minority" obtained many significant wins and the power of community triumphed above all else**

South Asian Women's Organizing

A poster created by Desis Rising Up & Moving (DRUM) for an action on ending all forms of gender-based oppression.

Several South Asian women have gone through such **gruesome working experiences** that it is considered **modern-day slavery**. Unfortunately, their voices have been shunned by mainstream narratives and teachings of dominant history. When they are portrayed, it is through a harmful lens which further dehumanizes them by **reducing them to just victims** instead of **highlighting them for their resilience**. It also ignores how South Asian women, even those who were once victims themselves, have been **foundational to the establishment of worker organizing, community groups, political organizations and religious institution.**

The main takeaway we hope you leave from this archival exhibit with is **the power of South Asian women's voices**. Seen as a "double minority," their voices were **diminished by systemic branches of power** that lent no legal hand to their abuse, the actual employer that created a dangerous and demoralizing environment, and the stress that comes from moving from their country that they once knew as home into **foreign lands**. By speaking up for themselves and demanding rights, they had to **navigate these nuances and challenge gender and caste ideologies** that stemmed back from strong beliefs in South Asia at the same time. They had to **stop conforming to the submissive and passive picture that society paints them as** and **take a chance on themselves to demand better when there was no guarantee that anyone would support, and that takes a lot of guts.**

These women are so courageous and so strong in their experiences and advocacy that they deserve to be recognized and applauded in our community. Stories such as these ones that **highlight the perseverance of our community** are truly what makes NYC as resilient as it is. It's important to learn this history and acknowledge the backbone of our community because it **defies even current-day visions of what society believes women can accomplish**. And as for the words of the former domestic worker Violet Anthony, **"I want to tell my story because I don't want anyone to go through what I went."**

About the Researchers!

Anusha Rahman

My name is Anusha Rahman and I'm a 16 year old junior at Bronx Science. I enjoy uplifting stories that are often hidden and part of the reason why I joined LHP was to highlight a new narrative into education written by people of NYC who are often overshadowed by the heavily eurocentric themes. Outside of LHP, I enjoy dancing, rollerblading, and hiking with my friends in my free time!

Afsara Purnata

Afsara Purnata is currently a senior at Queens Gateway to Health Sciences Secondary School. She has always been passionate about history and social justice, leading her to pursue a major in economics and career in law. She enjoys learning about how policies affect communities and how they unite against discrimination through community action. Outside of academics, Afsara spends her time reading, staying updated on current events, watching TV shows and documentaries, and listening to R&B music.

Shakira Salimova

Based in Brooklyn, Shakira Salimova is a senior at James Madison High School, focusing on classes related to historic policy change seen in healthcare. Shakira's passions include political science, specifically the effects of legislation on access to essential services for treatment and opportunities regarding communities made up of minorities. Shakira also shares interest in the impact of historic reforms, such as Medicare and the Civil rights act, all movements to improve the quality of life for all. Inspired by the drive for social justice and equity, Shakira hopes to pursue a degree in public health policy.

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