



# NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE

## Spotlighting Domestic Workers: A Guide for Storytellers

“As artists, our job is to look where others don’t.” – Alfonso Cuarón

### Introduction

Spotlighting Domestic Workers: A Guide for Storytellers is a resource for writers, directors, producers, and creators who want to tell accurate and authentic stories of domestic workers – nannies, house cleaners, and home care workers – many of whom are immigrant women and women of color.

There are over 2.2 million domestic workers across the country who care for what is most important to us: our families and our homes. And yet, domestic workers are often the least valued in our society; their stories are relegated to the shadows.

For far too long, domestic workers have been portrayed as one dimensional characters, often without agency and deeply rooted in harmful stereotypes tied to race, ethnicity, gender, and class. But the truth is, domestic workers are strong, compassionate women and skilled leaders who are defining the future of work.

We see this in the way the domestic worker movement sits at the crossroads of change in our nation – from immigrant rights, to gender equity, to labor and racial justice. Domestic workers do the work that keeps our society functioning and makes all other work possible.

Telling authentic and complex stories of historically underrepresented communities has never been more important, and domestic workers are on the cutting edge of the most pressing social issues of our time. We believe in the power of storytelling to bring domestic workers out of the shadows and into the spotlight, and we hope this guide will not only help ensure accuracy in your storytelling, but inspire you to make domestic workers the protagonists.

### Glossary of Terms

**Domestic Work(ers):** Domestic work refers to work conducted within the home. Domestic workers are the nannies that take care of our children, the house cleaners that bring order to our home, and the home care workers, for seniors and individuals with

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disabilities, that ensure that our loved ones can live with dignity. Domestic workers are 91.5% women, majority Black, Hispanic and AAPI women and 1/3 immigrant. For additional demographics, see [Economic Policy Institute](#).

**Women’s Work:** Work that is traditionally and historically performed by women due to gender roles prescribed by white patriarchal values. “Women’s work” most commonly refers to work that takes place in the home, such as cooking, cleaning, and child care.

**Labor Trafficking:** An exploitative practice of forced labor. Due to the nature of working behind closed doors in private homes, a lack of labor protections in place, and varying immigration statuses, domestic workers are particularly at risk. In fact, domestic workers make up the greatest percentage of all labor trafficking in the United States. For more, see [Human Trafficking & Domestic Workers fact sheet](#).

**Care Infrastructure:** From child care to paid leave, to home and community-based services, care is a need shared by all at some point in our lives, and is fundamental to enabling economic activity.

## Did You Know?

→ Domestic work in the U.S. is rooted in the history of slavery and was built on the centuries-long economic exploitation and social subjugation of Black women.

→ Only domestic workers and farmworkers – majority of whom were Black workers – were excluded from labor laws in the 1930’s because white southern lawmakers feared their political power if allowed to unionize.

→ The home care sector is one of the [fastest growing in the country](#).

→ The entire sector – home care workers, nannies, and house cleaners – faces rampant exploitation, including but not limited to:

- Poverty wages (there is a [wide and persistent gap](#) between domestic workers’ wages and wages of all other workers. The [average wage](#) of a home care worker is \$16,000 per year)
- Sexual harassment
- Wage theft
- Lack of health or retirement benefits
- [High rates](#) of human trafficking (higher than other sectors)

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→ Throughout history, domestic workers have been at the forefront of the largest social movements of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries:

- 1881 Washerwomen's Strike: In the summer of 1881, Black washerwomen, calling themselves the Washing Society, mobilized a strike in Atlanta, Georgia, resulting in higher wages won.
- In 1917, a group of domestic workers from Juarez, Mexico attempting to cross the border for work, refused U.S. immigration officials demands that all migrant workers be stripped naked and bathed in gasoline to disinfect them before entering into the United States. Led by 17-year old Carmelita Torres, more than 200 women resisted and several thousand protesters joined them. Their actions were not able to stop such dangerous and humiliating policies, which continued into the late 1950s, but their story remains with us today as evidence of their solidarity in the face of injustice.
- Dorothy Bolden, a legendary civil rights leader and often referred to as the mother of the domestic workers movement, founded the National Domestic Workers Union of America (NDWUA) in Atlanta in 1968 organizing to win fair wages and professionalize household work for over 13,000 workers. Dorothy Bolden led NDWUA for 28 years, despite constant harassment from white employers, including threats from Ku Klux Klan members.
- Domestic workers have been at the forefront of many social change movements in the 2010's: [#MeToo movement](#), [#FamiliesBelongTogether](#), and the [National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights](#).
- For more history, visit [A History of Domestic Work and Worker Organizing](#)

## Debunking Stereotypes

### Underrepresentation, Racism, & Sexism

To put it simply: we don't often see depictions of domestic workers on screen. When we do, they are either invisible – nameless characters in the background with no speaking roles – or fall into a number of stereotypes rooted in racism and sexism. Here are some common stereotypes and how to mitigate them:

- Sexualized Latina maid
  - **Don't:** Portray Latina domestic workers as sexually deviant, exotic, and sexually available to their (often white) male employers.
  - **Do:** Portray domestic workers as working professionals. While they should not be sexless or void of desire, when they are in their employer's home, they are in their place of work.

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- Mammy/Aunt Jemima
  - **Don't:** Portray Black domestic workers as content servants who prioritize the interests and capital of white employers. While they may have deep affection for the children they care for, their relationship is one of employer and employee and that power dynamic is always present.
  - **Do:** Portray Black domestic workers as powerful workers and activists who understand and advocate for their own rights and well being, who also have their own families to care and provide for.
- Subservient Filipina
  - **Don't:** Portray domestic workers as submissive and docile in need of guidance from their employers – a trope commonly inflicted on Filipina and other AAPI workers.
  - **Do:** Portray women who do domestic work with agency.

## Domestic Work Is Not Real Work

Domestic work is often devalued as “women’s work” and can be seen as a “labor of love” or unskilled work. However, domestic work is hard work that requires special skills, can take a toll on your body, and is often performed with little to no breaks.

- **Don't:** Depict domestic workers as a person who performs any unspecified chores around the house that are needed by the family at any given time. Avoid referring to domestic workers as “one of the family” – a claim often used to justify additional work without pay.
- **Do:** Portray domestic workers as belonging to defined sectors – nannies, house cleaners, and home care workers – with specific job duties and skills required. Furthermore, portray domestic work as a profession that deserves dignity and respect and recognize the long history of domestic worker leaders and organizers who have fought for labor rights within the sector.

## Domestic Workers Are Criminals

We often see domestic worker characters stealing from their upper class employers, or being accused as perpetrators of serious crimes that happen within the home. This misconception has real life consequences on workers' ability to find and maintain work.

- **Don't:** Show domestic workers stealing items from employers homes, utilizing amenities when employers aren't around, or inviting others into the home without consent. Additionally, avoid depicting domestic workers as taking advantage of or being abusive towards their older care recipients.
- **Do:** Portray domestic workers as professionals and depict their client's home as their place of work. Also be mindful of relying too heavily on domestic workers to be passive witnesses to serious crimes that happen in the home.

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## Domestic Workers as Comedic Relief

Domestic workers are often relegated to comedic relief at their expense, creating caricatures that lean into racist stereotypes.

- **Don't:** Utilize cultural traits – such as accents or an inability to speak English – as the butt of a joke, encouraging other characters, and the audience, to laugh at their expense.
- **Do:** Create domestic worker characters who are multidimensional and use humor that doesn't come at the expense of themselves or the communities they belong to.

## Domestic Workers Having Romantic Entanglements With Their Employers

Our [Spotlight research](#) found romantic entanglements with employers to be one of the most common themes associated with domestic worker characters – a trope that has had a harmful impact on domestic workers and their safety in real life.

- **Don't:** Reduce a domestic worker character's primary purpose to providing eye candy or sexual temptation to a male employer.
- **Do:** Give domestic worker characters the opportunity to experience the full breadth of humanity, including romance, outside of their workplace. Make them romantic leads!

## Best Practices When Depicting Domestic Workers

### Consult directly with domestic workers when developing the storyline/character.

NDWA can facilitate these conversations and provide additional expertise. Check out our [entertainment consulting services](#) and get in touch!

**Bring domestic workers out of the shadows and into the light.** Feature domestic workers in more prominent and developed roles in your story. When developing a domestic worker character, consider the following:

- Ensure the character is seen on screen rather than only referenced by other characters.
- Make sure the character has a speaking role that moves the story forward.
- Create a name for the character instead of referring to them exclusively as “the nanny” or “the house cleaner,” etc.
- Consider the full lives of domestic workers outside of their jobs – do they have a partner? A family of their own? Hobbies and interests outside of their work?
- Make the character complex, nuanced, and multidimensional.



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**Consider how race and ethnicity are impacting characterization.** White domestic worker characters are overrepresented on screen and often given more prominent roles and dialogue (see our [Spotlight research report](#) for more). When creating domestic worker characters in leading roles, consider representing the majority women of color and immigrant women in this workforce, and avoid falling back on the tropes and stereotypes we've discussed in this guide.

**Use the correct professional titles.** Avoid terms like "housekeeper," "maid," and "the help." Domestic workers are nannies, house cleaners, and home care workers – they are separate professions that require their own unique set of skills.

**Depict more working people as having care jobs.** With home care being one of the fastest growing sectors in the country, care jobs are the jobs of the future. Consider care jobs when determining the occupation of a working class character.

**Reimagine the future by portraying a society where domestic work is respected.** Instead of limiting domestic worker stories to those that spotlight injustice, trauma, and inherent disrespect, consider telling stories that illustrate the value domestic workers provide to our day to day lives, the skills they bring to their work, and the dignity and respect these jobs deserve.

## Contact us

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*Founded in 2007, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) is the nation's leading voice for the approximate 2.2 million domestic workers in the United States. Domestic workers are essential to our economy and society. They are the nannies that take care of our children, the housecleaners that maintain our homes, and the care workers that allow our loved ones to live independently and with dignity.*