

WORKER VOICE IN PRIVATE HOMES:

MEASURING DOMESTIC WORKERS' SAY IN WORKPLACE ISSUES.



**NATIONAL
DOMESTIC
WORKERS
ALLIANCE**

MIT
MANAGEMENT
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& EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Domestic workers are the nannies who nurture and raise our children, the house cleaners who bring order to our homes, and the direct care workers who ensure that our loved ones who are aging or living with disabilities receive the assistance they need to live with dignity and independence in their homes. There are around 2.2 million domestic workers in the U.S.¹ Despite their essential contributions, domestic workers are among the most undervalued workers and vulnerable members of our society.

Building on prior worker voice research,² we aimed to better understand domestic worker voice, defined as the ways in which workers attempt to have a say to influence issues that affect their work.³ We also analyzed how worker voice may differ across certain characteristics (e.g., English language proficiency, years of experience in domestic work, and occupation), and we looked at the association between worker voice and workers' self-reported psychological well-being.

In particular, we adapted an existing survey instrument to measure domestic workers' voice gap: the difference between how much voice domestic workers believe they ought to have and how much voice they actually have. Our measure inquired about the voice gap in a single question, asking workers to compare how much say or influence they have in different workplace issues, compared to the say they think they ought to have.

The isolated nature of domestic work, as well as the exclusion of domestic workers from key labor protections, makes worker voice, either through individually speaking up or collectively organizing, critical for job quality and satisfaction.

We collected data through an already existing survey tool utilized by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), a Facebook Messenger chatbot called La Alianza. La Alianza allowed us to survey Spanish-speaking domestic workers across the U.S., collecting a total of 1,632 survey responses from unique respondents between April and June of 2024. In addition to survey responses, domestic workers were active participants in different stages of the research process. Their input informed our survey tool, the interpretation of our findings, and the individual experiences shared throughout this report.

¹ Banerjee et al. (2022). *Domestic Workers Chartbook 2022*. <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-2022/>

² Kochan et al. (2019). Worker Voice in America: Is There a Gap between What Workers Expect and What They Experience? <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793918806250>; Diaz-Linhart et al. (2023). Bridging the Gap: Measuring the Impact of Worker Voice on Job-related Outcomes. https://mitsloan.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2024-01/Diaz-Linhart%20et%20al.%20Families%20and%20Workers_Work%20Voice_Report%2011%2009%202023%20final.pdf

³ Wilkinson, A., Donaghey, J., Dundon, T., & Freeman, R. B. (2020). *Handbook of Research on Employee Voice* (2nd Edition). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/usd/handbook-of-research-on-employee-voice-9781788971171.html>; Budd, J. W. (2004). *Employment with a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice*. Cornell University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv2n7jfg>

KEY FINDINGS

- Survey results show domestic workers have less say than they believe they ought to have in almost all workplace issues we asked about.
 - Working conditions and wages were the two areas where workers reported the largest voice gaps.
- The set of characteristics associated with having a larger voice gap were: lower wages, lower English proficiency, working for an agency, and being a homecare worker or a nanny – compared to a house cleaner.
 - Across all domestic work occupations, we found that higher wages were associated with lower voice gaps, as expected.
 - Surveyed domestic workers who were hired by agencies (e.g., nanny or homecare agencies and housecleaning service companies) were more likely to perceive larger voice gaps compared to those who were hired directly by the client.
- Homecare workers reported a larger voice gap in all workplace issues, but most notably in determining their compensation, compared to nannies and house cleaners.
- About 43% of respondents in our sample who answered the well-being questions met the criteria, according to the World Health Organization,⁴ to warrant further depression screening.
 - Larger voice gaps were associated with lower overall well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our research findings, as well as NDWA's experience organizing and advocating domestic workers rights, we recommend:

1. **Policymakers and advocates** should pass and enforce state and local legislation to increase labor rights and protections for domestic workers, including protecting workers who exercise their voice from retaliation.
2. **Domestic worker employers** should provide transparent written work agreements with good working conditions and a fair wage, and establish accessible mechanisms for workers to voice their needs and concerns on the job.
3. **Policymakers and government officials** should increase public investment in Home and Community-Based Services, and ensure the increased funds are allocated to higher wages for care workers.
4. **Labor organizations and other worker groups** should strengthen voice-building mechanisms and spaces that promote collective power.
5. **Community-based organizations and service providers** should create accessible mental health resources that account for the connection between worker voice gaps and well-being.

⁴ World Health Organization (2004). The World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5). License CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/mental-health/who-5_english-original4da539d6ed4b49389e3afe47cda2326a.pdf?sfvrsn=ed43f352_11

RESEARCH TEAM

The **National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)**, founded in 2007, works to win respect, recognition, and labor rights and protections for the millions of nannies, house cleaners, and homecare workers who do the essential work of caring for our loved ones and our homes. Every day, domestic workers do the work that makes all other work possible. They are the nannies who care for our children, the house cleaners who bring order to our home, and the care workers who ensure our loved ones can live with dignity and independence.

The **Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'s Institute for Work and Employment Research (IWER)** is a multidisciplinary and highly collaborative hub for the study of work and employment, housed at MIT Sloan School of Management but including researchers from other departments across MIT. IWER-affiliated scholars conduct and disseminate cutting-edge research that improves the lives of workers and their loved ones and that guides managers and policymakers in crafting a successful and inclusive future of work.

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Acknowledgments: Thank you to the National Domestic Workers Alliance staff members who participated in various stages of this research, including Liliana Bernal, Toni Castro Cosio, Kelly Gannon, Juan Felipe Leguizamon, Lisa Moore, and Kairin Peñaloza. We are grateful to members of NDWA's Nanny, House cleaner, and Homecare councils, and to all domestic workers who participated in survey pilots, as survey respondents, and in one-on-one interviews. We are also grateful to Agnès Kabambi, Mariana Viturro, and Emily Wright for sharing feedback on versions of this report. Thank you to the WorkRise Network for their critical support of this research.

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic workers are the nannies who nurture and raise our children, the house cleaners who bring order to our homes, and the direct care workers who ensure that our loved ones who are aging or living with disabilities receive the assistance they need to live with dignity and independence in their homes. There are around 2.2 million domestic workers in the U.S.⁵ Despite their essential contributions, domestic workers are among the most undervalued workers and vulnerable members of our society.

For over 15 years, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) has been working to improve domestic work jobs and to fundamentally transform how they are viewed, valued, and compensated. NDWA and allied organizations have put forth innovative interventions that aim to build structures for worker voice and power. Through organizing, NDWA raises awareness among domestic workers of their rights, provides training to empower workers to negotiate higher standards, and builds leadership to ensure workers have a seat at the table for policies and other influential decisions. Notably, 15 states and cities passed Domestic Worker Bills of Rights, gaining domestic workers inclusion in existing workplace laws and providing greater protections to ensure they are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. The city of Seattle also created the first Domestic Worker Standards Board, which provides a space for domestic workers, employers, private households, worker organizations, and the public to discuss how to improve working conditions for domestic workers. The Board's suggestions go to the Office of Labor Standards, the Mayor, and the City Council. Additionally, our allied organization, NDWA Gig Worker Advocates, achieved a first-of-its-kind legally binding contract with Angi Services (formerly known as Handy). Among other provisions, this contract ensures a mechanism for house cleaners on the platform to provide input and regularly meet with company leadership in order to improve their experience on the platform.

Worker voice is recognized as an important component of a good job;⁶ it encompasses the different ways through which workers attempt to influence issues that affect their work.⁷ Despite its importance, most workers are not satisfied with the amount of voice they have at work. Research has found substantial gaps between workers' expected level of voice at work, and their actual voice.⁸ Building on prior research in other industries,⁹ we aimed to better understand domestic workers' voice gap: the difference between how much voice domestic workers believe they ought to have and how much voice they actually have.

To conduct our research, we adapted an established survey instrument measuring worker voice gaps in other industries and adapted these questions for the domestic worker context. We distributed this survey through La Alianza, a Facebook Messenger chatbot used by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) to reach and regularly survey Spanish-speaking domestic workers. Our measure inquired about domestic workers' voice gap in a single question, asking workers how much say or influence they have in different workplace issues, compared to the say they think they ought to have. We also analyzed how worker voice may differ across certain characteristics (e.g., English language proficiency, years of experience in domestic work, and occupation), and we looked at the association between worker voice and workers' self-reported psychological well-being.

⁵ Banerjee et al. (2022)

⁶ Aspen Institute, Statement on Good Jobs <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/good-jobs-champions-group/>

⁷ Wilkinson et al. (2020) ; Budd, J. W. (2004)

⁸ Kochan et al. (2019)

⁹ Ibid; Diaz-Linhart et al. (2023)

The isolated nature of domestic work, as well as the exclusion of domestic workers from key labor protections, makes worker voice, either through individually speaking up or collectively organizing, critical for job quality and satisfaction.

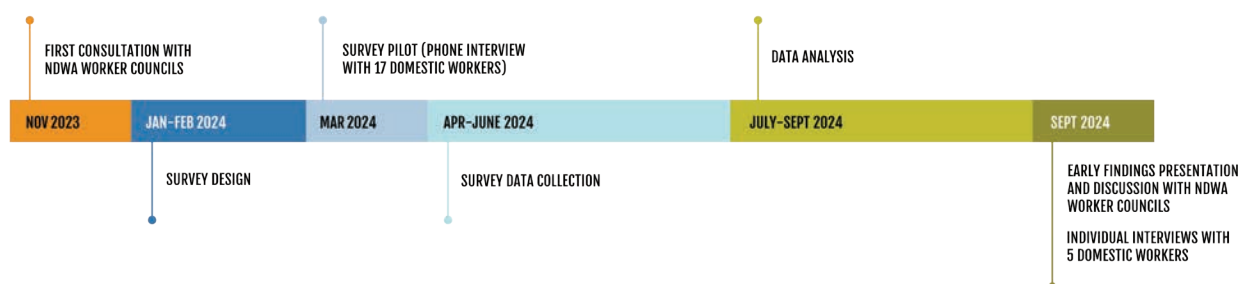
For example, domestic workers in household employment are not protected by the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and if they are a household's sole employee, which is often the case, federal anti-discrimination laws generally do not apply. Even when legal protections exist, they can be incredibly difficult to enforce due to workplace disaggregation. As a result, worker voice among domestic workers is often exercised at the individual level.



When I'm working, I tell them
[my employers]: "I have my way of
working. I try to do what you want
but if I'm doing something you don't
like, let me know, and if there's
something I don't like, I'm
going to tell you."

MARGARITA, 20+ YEARS AS
A HOMECARE WORKER (CA)

METHODOLOGY



COLLECTING DATA THROUGH LA ALIANZA CHATBOT

Quantitative data for this analysis was collected through an already existing survey tool utilized by NDWA, a Facebook Messenger chatbot called La Alianza. This chatbot allows NDWA to communicate at scale with thousands of Spanish-speaking domestic workers. Starting in 2020, NDWA adapted the chatbot into a powerful survey tool that has since allowed the organization to keep a pulse on employment and economic [trends](#) among domestic workers. The chatbot is a programmed conversation with a series of multiple-choice questions and prompts that Spanish-speaking domestic worker subscribers navigate through on the Facebook Messenger app. It does not utilize artificial intelligence.

In addition to the chatbot, La Alianza is a news source that informs, inspires, and connects Spanish-speaking domestic workers. La Alianza's original news articles are written by an NDWA staff journalist, and published on La Alianza news website. The articles are also published on a Facebook page associated with the chatbot and are shared as broadcast messages through Facebook Messenger.

Sharing news and resources relevant to house cleaners, homecare workers, and nannies – in their own language – is part of NDWA's regular surveying process. Each survey broadcast starts with a timely news headline, before moving on to questions. This has been key to building trust with domestic workers subscribed to La Alianza's contact list, as many of them have continued to respond to survey questions for four years.

The vast majority of subscribers to La Alianza chatbot joined NDWA's list in 2018 before it was adapted into a survey tool. Recruitment happened via Spanish-language Facebook ads. The ads are no longer active and we did not recruit additional subscribers for the purposes of this research.

There are trade-offs to using this surveying approach. We are able to meet workers where they are, on a platform they are already familiar with. We believe this is a key reason for workers' ongoing engagement with La Alianza chatbot. On the other hand, the software that powers the chatbot, Chatfuel, is not designed primarily for research purposes, creating limitations in survey design. The main drawbacks include: 1) we are only able to send multiple choice questions with single selection options, 2) response options are limited to 20 characters, and 3) respondents cannot revise their answers once submitted.

DEVELOPING THE SURVEY

Our questionnaire draws from prior worker voice and voice gap research,¹⁰ for which voice gap measurements have been thoroughly validated. The voice gap measure was adapted to include outcomes that address the unique characteristics of domestic work, and to adjust to the surveying software's 20-character limit for response options.

The voice gap measure had a list of workplace issues, which in our survey included items from previous voice gap research from other sectors (i.e., compensation, respect, and working conditions), as well as items specific to all types of domestic work (i.e., resolving disagreements and deciding how to perform the work). Finally, we included an item specific to workplace issues for house cleaners (cleaning products), and another item specific to workplace issues for nannies and homecare workers (care and activities the client needs).

The domestic work-specific issues were decided in consultation with NDWA's three worker councils (nanny, house cleaner, and homecare council). NDWA's worker councils are committees of elected domestic worker leaders around the country who meet monthly to discuss relevant workforce issues and inform NDWA strategy. Before finalizing the questionnaire, which was sent exclusively in Spanish, we sent pilot surveys to 17 chatbot subscribers, who were interviewed by phone as they clicked through the survey on the Messenger app on their own devices. NDWA's worker council members were also sent the pilot survey and asked to provide feedback.

The final voice gap question format, asked in a similar format for all workplace issues, was the following: “En tu trabajo principal, ¿cuánta voz o influencia tienes en [workplace issue], en comparación con la voz que deberías tener?” This translates to: “In your primary job, how much say or influence do you have in [workplace issue], compared to the say you ought to have?” For each voice gap question, the following response options were provided:

- “Tengo la que debería” (“I have what I ought to have”)
- “Poco menos” (“A little less”)
- “Menos” (“Less”)
- “Mucho menos” (“A lot less”)
- “Ninguna voz” (“No say”)

¹⁰ We use an instrument developed by Díaz-Linhart et al., 2023, which builds on Kochan et al., 2019.

LEARNING ABOUT WELL-BEING

We sent a follow-up well-being survey 22 hours after workers completed the worker voice questionnaire to avoid sending both types of questions in the same survey. The questions were adapted from the World Health Organization's (WHO) Five Well-Being Index,¹¹ which asks how often in the prior two weeks respondents felt cheerful and in good spirits, calm and relaxed, active and vigorous, fresh and rested, and whether their daily life had been filled with things that interest them. We adapted the format and response options to adjust to character limits in the software we utilized. For each well-being question, the following response options were provided:

- "Todo el tiempo" ("All of the time")
- "La mayoría de tiempo" ("Most of the time")
- "Más de siete días" ("More than seven days")
- "Menos de siete días" ("Less than seven days")
- "De vez en cuando" ("Some of the time")
- "Nunca" ("Never")

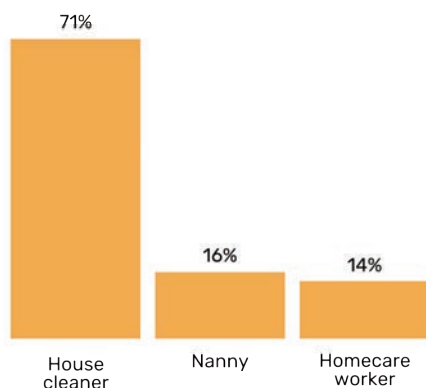
SELECTING THE SURVEY SAMPLE

We sent the survey to approximately 181,000 domestic workers subscribed to La Alianza Chatbot. These workers live across the U.S. and Puerto Rico. By the survey close date, we collected a total of 1,632 completed surveys from unique respondents, for a completion rate of around 1%. This completion rate is lower compared to that for NDWA's ongoing surveys, where the most recent rates ranged from approximately 1.3-2.5%.

Figure 1

Most surveyed domestic workers reported their main occupation as house cleaner

What type of paid work did you spend the most time doing during the past three months?



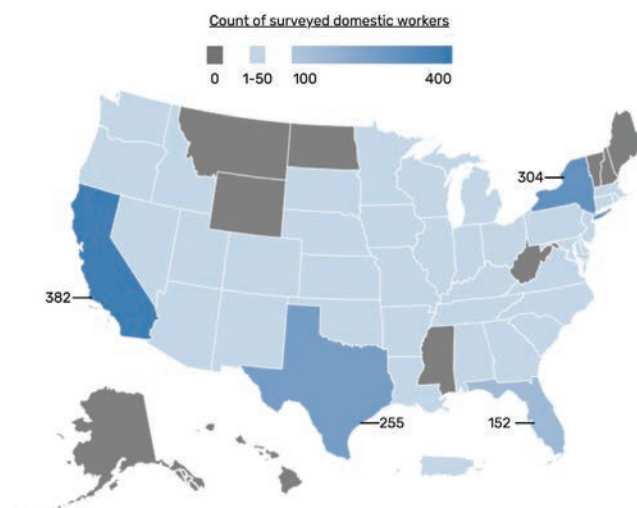
Note: n = 1,632. Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number and do not sum to 100%.

Source: NDWA's La Alianza Survey

Figure 2

Majority of surveyed domestic workers live in California, New York, Texas, and Florida

What is your zip code?



Note: n = 1,606.

Source: NDWA's La Alianza Survey

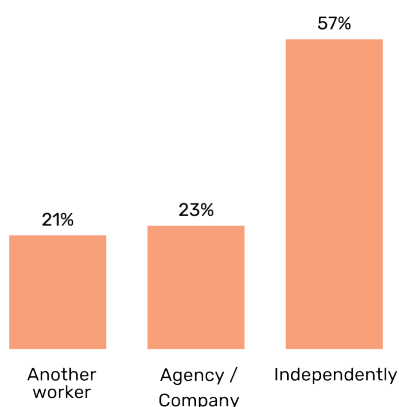
¹¹ World Health Organization (2004)

We believe this is the result of two changes we made for this research, compared to NDWA’s usual process. First, to increase the survey cohort size, we sent the worker voice survey to La Alianza subscribers regardless of their prior engagement, while NDWA sends ongoing surveys to people who have engaged with La Alianza at least once before. Second, to mitigate potential bias, our chosen news headlines avoided some topics that are usually the most engaging, such as information on free resources, or articles about domestic workers’ conditions on the job.

Figure 3

Most surveyed domestic workers worked independently

In your main job, do you work for another worker, for an agency or company, or independently?

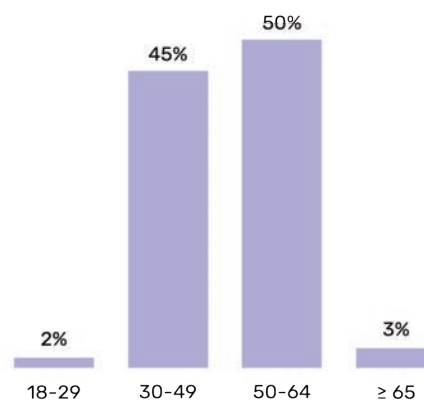


Note: n = 1,632. Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number and do not sum to 100%. While some domestic workers find work through agencies or companies, or independently and negotiate formal or informal employment with the employer themselves, they may also ask for support from other workers for particular jobs, for example, cleaning a large home.

Figure 4

The vast majority of surveyed domestic workers were ages 30-64

How old are you?



Note: n = 1,632. Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: NDWA’s La Alianza Survey

We adjusted the timing and frequency of the worker voice survey send dates to align with NDWA’s ongoing survey schedule to avoid disrupting La Alianza subscribers’ user experience. The worker voice survey, sent exclusively in Spanish, was fielded to distinct subsets of the 181,000 La Alianza subscribers on a biweekly basis between April 10 and June 14, until each subscriber had the opportunity to respond. Each survey was left open to responses until the day before the following survey was sent. The final survey was closed and collected on June 28, to be consistent with the two-week period the other surveys were open to responses.

Our sample consists predominantly of women house cleaners (Figure 1), who are largely located in California, New York, Texas, and Florida (Figure 2). The majority of workers in our sample have been domestic workers for 1-10 years, and are hired directly by their clients, as opposed to a company or agency (Figure 3).

Comparing our sample to Hispanic domestic workers from the 2022 American Community Survey identified some important differences. These differences reflect the distinct sampling processes of our survey versus nationwide government-led surveys.¹²

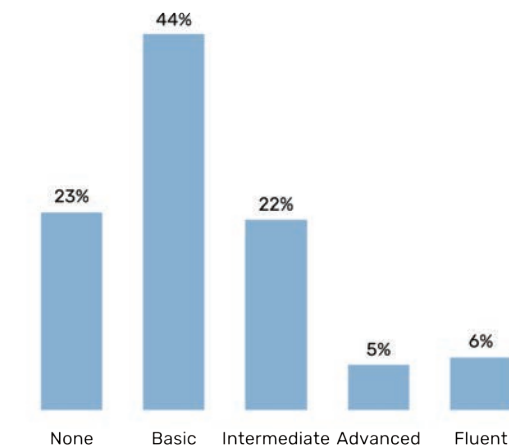
¹² These sample differences may be due to our recruitment through Facebook. Recent Pew Research data on social media usage reported differences in usage by age category, with younger adult users preferring Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok (Gottfried (2024). Americans’ Social Media Use <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use>). Facebook and WhatsApp are also the most widely used social media platforms in middle-income countries (Poushter (2024). WhatsApp and Facebook dominate the social media landscape in middle income nations <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/22/whatsapp-and-facebook-dominate-the-social-media-landscape-in-middle-income-nations>).

As shown in Appendix Table 2, our sample is relatively older, with only 1.6% of respondents in the 18-29 age range (Figure 4), compared to 15% nationwide. Our sample also has a higher percentage of individuals with no English proficiency (Figure 5), and higher average reported hourly earnings (Figure 6). Finally, our sample has a higher relative share of house cleaners (71%) and a lower share of homecare workers (13%) compared to national data (30% and 61%, respectively).

Figure 5

The majority of surveyed domestic workers had limited English proficiency

How would you describe your level of English?

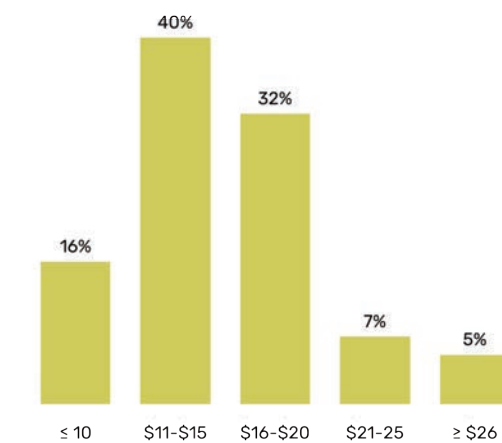


Note: n = 1,632. Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.
Source: NDWA's La Alianza Survey

Figure 6

The vast majority of surveyed domestic workers earned \$20 or less an hour

At your primary job, how much do you make on average per hour?



Note: n = 1,632. Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.
Source: NDWA's La Alianza Survey

DATA ANALYSIS

The goal of the data analyses was to understand domestic workers' voice gap, and how it relates to socio-demographic characteristics and psychological well-being.

The voice gap measure is a mean of the six workplace issues included in the questionnaire, ranked on a scale of 1 (I have what I ought to have) to 5 (No say). This scale reflects workers' perceptions of how much say or influence they actually have, compared to how much say they think they ought to have. A higher number indicates a higher voice gap (i.e., a worse outcome), indicating that workers feel they should have more say at work than they currently have.

All domestic workers were asked about compensation, respect, working conditions, resolving disagreements, and deciding how to perform the work. House cleaners were asked an additional question about deciding which cleaning products to use, while nannies and homecare workers were asked about deciding the care and activities their clients need. The WHO-5 well-being index¹³ is a sum from 0-25 of the five well-being characteristics – each of which was scored from 0 (Never) to 5 (All of the time). A higher number represents better psychological well-being. Additionally, if participants reported a 0 in any of the five questions (e.g., at no time did they feel cheerful or calm) and/or had a psychological raw

¹³ Topp, C. W., Østergaard, S. D., Søndergaard, S., & Bech, P. (2015). The WHO-5 Well-Being Index: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 84(3), 167–176. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000376585>

score below 13, they are considered at risk for depression.¹⁴

To understand the associations between voice gap, psychological well-being, and various demographic and employment characteristics we conducted several analyses. First, we measured¹⁵ the strength and direction of the correlation across all of the characteristics. We then conducted analyses of variance to corroborate these findings. Finally, we ran Ordinary Least Squares regression analyses using the average voice gap measure across all workplace issues. The regression results, presented in Tables 3-5 of the Appendix, form the basis for the Key Findings section.

CENTERING DOMESTIC WORKERS THROUGHOUT THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Domestic workers were active participants in different stages of the research process. First, we consulted with NDWA's domestic worker councils in the survey design. They provided relevant insights that shaped the final survey language we used, including identifying the specific workplace issues most relevant to domestic workers. Second, we piloted the survey with 17 Spanish-speaking domestic workers. We made minor changes to the questionnaire, such as altering the question order, based on worker feedback during the piloting process.

Once data collection was complete, we presented early findings to NDWA's three worker councils. We facilitated a guided discussion with 5-8 workers in each council about our early results to inform the interpretation of our findings. In particular, what were council workers' reactions to our findings? How did their professional experiences reflect, or not reflect, the findings from the survey? Their insights and experiences were key to interpreting our survey results.

Finally, to better illustrate how domestic workers exercise their voice at work, we conducted individual interviews with five workers who had also participated in the survey pilot. These interviews lasted about 25 minutes to an hour. The interviewees' experiences are included throughout this report, with their permission. Their names have been changed to respect their privacy.



¹⁴ World Health Organization (2004)

¹⁵ Kendall's rank correlations

KEY FINDINGS

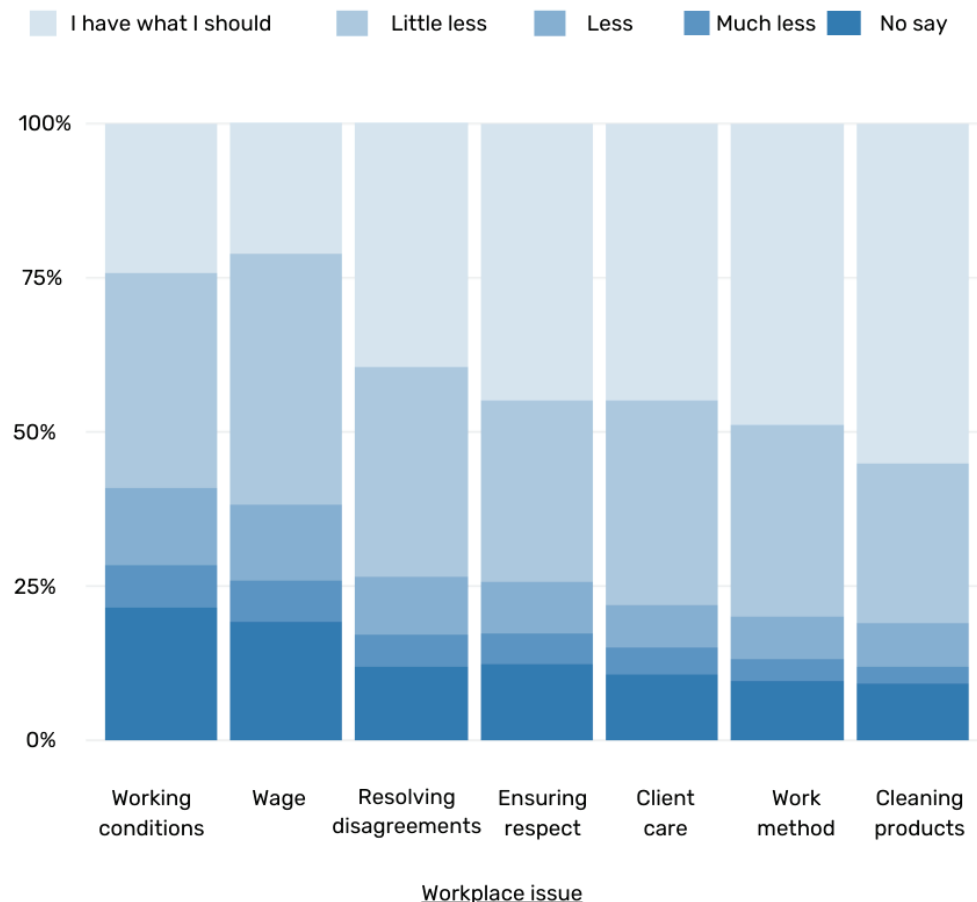
NOT ALL VOICE GAPS ARE THE SAME

Survey results show domestic workers have less say than they believe they ought to have in all workplace issues we asked about. Workers reported the largest voice gaps in relation to working conditions and wages, followed by resolving disagreements, and being respected at work (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Domestic workers reported the largest voice gaps in relation to working conditions and wages

In your main job, how much say or influence do you have in [workplace issue] compared with how much say you should have?



Note: n = 1,632. Client care was asked only to homecare workers and nannies, while cleaning product choice was asked only to house cleaners.

Source: NDWA's La Alianza Survey

She [the employer] was the one who told me: "I can pay you this much", and she asked me about the schedule. I could do it so I said "I can do it anytime", but for the rate, she's the one who determined it. [...] It was lower than I expected."

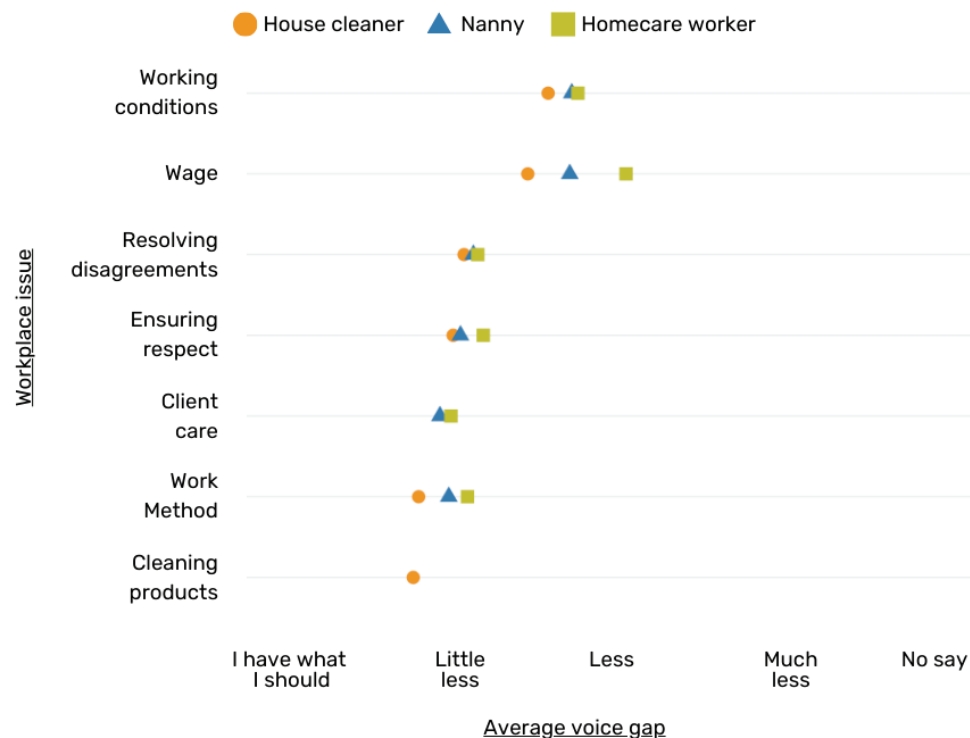
**GUADALUPE, 5+ YEARS A
HOUSE CLEANER (FL)**

There were some differences in voice gaps by domestic work occupation (Figure 8). Homecare workers reported a larger voice gap in all outcomes, but most notably in determining their compensation, compared to nannies and house cleaners. Voice gaps were more similar across occupations regarding having a say in how to resolve a disagreement.

Figure 8

On average, homecare workers experienced a larger voice gap across workplace issues than other surveyed domestic workers

In your main job, how much say or influence do you have in [workplace issue] compared with how much say you should have?



Note: n = 1,632.

Source: NDWA's La Alianza Survey

Domestic workers in our sample reported a mean voice gap of 2.23 across all workplace issues. Using our 1-5 scale, this places them in between having a “Little less” and “Less” say than they ought to have. Although there are no nationally representative samples that look at the voice gap for domestic workers, there are some studies that may shed light on differences from and similarities to domestic workers in our sample. Similar workers in the healthcare and service industries reported a mean voice gap of about 3.35, situating them between having “Less” and “Much less” say than they ought to have.¹⁶ Overall, this suggests workers in our sample have smaller voice gaps compared to the referenced healthcare and service industry workers.

¹⁶ Diaz-Linhart et al. (2023)

It is important to note that the voice gap measure uses a single question, asking workers to compare how much say or influence they have in different workplace issues, compared to how much say they feel they ought to have. As a result, our voice gap measure is informed both by the expectation of how much say a worker thinks they ought to have, as well as by their actual say. One potential explanation for the relatively lower voice gaps reported by this sample compared to similar workers in the healthcare and service industries may be due to higher actual say at work, or lower expectations for how much say they ought to have. For example, workers who already feel disempowered may not report large voice gaps if they don't believe they should have a greater say in their work. Although our work is the first to highlight voice gaps in domestic work, additional research will help us understand if domestic workers expect to have less say at work than other similar workers in related service industries.

EVIDENCE SUGGESTS DOMESTIC WORKERS HAVE LOWER THAN EXPECTED PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Using the WHO-5 well-being measure of psychological well-being we find that, on average, domestic workers in our sample had a well-being score of 14.2 on a scale from 0-25, where 25 indicates the best possible well-being. Homecare workers reported the lowest average well-being compared to nannies and house cleaners. There is no benchmark for well-being with this particular measure in the U.S. However, a recent study at the community level in the Midwest found higher average well-being (~17.5) compared to domestic workers,¹⁷ suggesting that domestic workers have lower than expected psychological well-being.

About 43% of respondents in our sample who answered the well-being questions met the criteria to warrant further depression screening. This is similar for workers in the healthcare and service industries, where about 43% of workers met the threshold to warrant further mental health screening.¹⁸

Finally, when we assessed the relationship between worker voice gaps and overall well-being, we found that larger voice gaps were associated with lower overall well-being.

VOICE GAPS ARE INFLUENCED BY EMPLOYMENT ARRANGEMENTS, ENGLISH PROFICIENCY, AND WAGES

Feeling like you have enough say at work can be influenced by multiple factors. Working from someone else's home is something all domestic workers have in common. However, nannies, house cleaners, and homecare workers have very different job responsibilities and dynamics. For example, members of NDWA's nanny council shared how they constantly need to redraw boundaries and agreements with their employers, as the nature of their job changes as the children they are caring for age and their needs evolve. On the other hand, house cleaners may face different challenges, such as delimiting their scope of work and making sure employers respect it. A worker in NDWA's house cleaners council told us they often need to negotiate which tasks will be considered part of the job, and which tasks will be charged as extra, such as cleaning the oven or the inside of the fridge and car washing.

¹⁷ Murad et al. (2021) Evaluating Well-being at Community Level. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings: Innovations, Quality & Outcomes*, Volume 5, Issue 6, 961 - 968

¹⁸ Data was analyzed for this report from Diaz-Linhart et al. (2023)

Some clients you have to leave because you have an agreement and then they start with extra things they want you to do for them. I said to one lady: "I can wash the dishes if there are only one or two", and one day I found a lot, and there were pots and lots of things. So I told her "I'm going to charge extra for that because I said from the beginning that I wouldn't do the dishes". She asked: "How much will you charge?", so I told her "At least give me \$20 dollars more". She was mad but she paid me extra, but because of that [experience] I didn't come back [to clean there].

ANA, 10 YEARS AS A HOUSE CLEANER (NY)

In addition to occupational differences, individual characteristics like age, English-language proficiency, years of experience, and employment arrangements may also impact how workers feel about their say or influence on the job. We looked at the relationship between these characteristics and the average voice gap – across all workplace issues – to better understand how they influence worker voice.

Across all domestic work occupations, we found that higher wages were associated with a lower voice gap, as expected. Employment arrangements also had significant associations with voice gap. Surveyed domestic workers who were hired by agencies (e.g., nanny or homecare agencies and housecleaning service companies) were more likely to perceive a larger voice gap compared to those who were hired directly by the client.

When we shared these findings with NDWA's three worker councils, workers were not surprised by the results. They pointed to trade-offs in each employment arrangement. However, with agencies, workers across all three councils generally agreed there is less flexibility to decide key terms of employment, such as wages or scope of work. In addition, some members of the nanny council shared that when there are issues at work, the agency tends to side with the client who receives care, and not with the workers. In the homecare council, some workers mentioned it was harder to speak up when working for an agency because they represent the company and not themselves.

Finally, English-language proficiency was significantly associated with voice gap. Domestic workers with basic or no English proficiency were more likely to have larger voice gaps compared to their advanced/fluent English-speaking peers. This finding was echoed in the house cleaner council discussion, where a member shared she found her English proficiency beneficial when negotiating with employers and letting them know about the quality and worth of her work.



[The company] tells you the terms. Sometimes I tell them: "I want to earn this much", and they tell me: "Look, we can't pay you that, this is our rate". So I say: "Okay".

ROSA, 20 YEARS AS A HOMECARE WORKER (TX)

It's harder [to speak to employers] when you have more years because, at first, when you start, for example, you can start laying out everything you want. But now, when I've had my client for eight years... [Eight years ago] I still didn't know how to charge, I didn't know how to negotiate or anything like that. And now when, for example, I want to ask them to pay me more because I do their laundry, then they ask "But why?". Because I have a lot of appreciation for them, I leave it be. But when [the clients] are new, then it's easier.

ANA, 10 YEARS AS HOUSE CLEANER (NY)

SOME CHARACTERISTICS AFFECTED VOICE GAPS FOR PARTICULAR DOMESTIC WORK OCCUPATIONS

For nannies and homecare workers only, we found a significant association between voice gap and years of experience in the profession. Respondents who have worked as a nanny or homecare worker for 5 years or fewer are likely to perceive smaller voice gaps than their peers who have been working in the profession for longer. Overall, our conversations with workers suggested that more years of experience may make them feel better equipped to have more say with a new employer, but they don't necessarily make it easier to have more say with existing, long-term employers.

Although this finding can seem counterintuitive, workers in NDWA's nanny council did not find it surprising. They named changes in their job scope as children age as key sticking points in the employment relationship. For example, when the children they care for are younger, some nannies may find time to do dishes or other housekeeping chores while babies or toddlers nap. As children grow and are more active, they require more full-time attention, or the responsibilities may extend to after-school activities. However, employers often still expect them to do household chores as part of their day-to-day work, and it can be hard to redraw boundaries and scope of work as the children grow.

The homecare worker council named more conflicting views, with some workers sharing that this finding made sense, while others shared they've had the opposite experience. A worker mentioned more time on the job meant more time to learn and notice the things that she would like to be different about the job. With more years on the job, she also felt like voicing her disagreements didn't necessarily mean she would be listened to. On the other hand, some workers said with more years as homecare workers, they felt more confident to speak up and negotiate fair terms. They could also develop more trust with employers the more time they work with them and can show the value and quality of their work.

When I started [housecleaning] I did things than we had specified and with time, one gets experience and the confidence to set boundaries. What I feel like helps is the experience that one gets from interacting with people, doing the cleaning, being in touch with one person and another. At first one doesn't know how to work with boundaries but with time one becomes experienced.

**CLAUDIA, 14 YEARS AS A
HOUSE CLEANER (TX)**

DISCUSSION

The isolated and intimate nature of domestic work, as well as the exclusion of domestic workers from standard labor protections, means domestic workers have a unique set of needs in how they can influence various aspects of their jobs. In general, this report found that domestic workers would like to have more say in their jobs than they actually do, especially as it relates to their working conditions and their wages. Key findings also revealed a set of characteristics associated with having a larger voice gap: lower wages, lower English proficiency, working with an agency, and being a homecare worker or a nanny – compared to a house cleaner.

The instrument we used to measure voice gap asks the following question: “In your primary job, how much say or influence do you have in [workplace issue] compared to the say you ought to have?” This means our voice gap measure is informed both by the expectation of how much say a worker thinks they ought to have, as well as by their actual say. It’s hard to tell whether the relatively lower voice gaps for this sample compared to similar workers in the healthcare and service industries are due to higher actual say at work, or lower expectations for how much say they ought to have. Workers who already feel disempowered may not report large voice gaps if they don’t believe they should have a greater say in their work.

Interventions to reduce voice gaps must include those that provide workers with mechanisms and skills to exercise their say on the job, as well as increase their expectations of their say at work. In our discussions with NDWA’s worker council members and with individual workers, we heard domestic workers name different factors that have influenced their say. For example, one worker mentioned the Department of Labor’s Sample Employment Agreements for Domestic Workers, sharing how they gave her a frame of reference for the different work issues she should make sure are discussed before starting a job with a new client. Other workers mentioned being a part of organizations that give them information about their rights, and negotiation training that has helped them realize the value of their work.

The research presented in this report is only a starting point to better understand the different factors that influence worker voice and voice gaps in domestic work in a systematic way. In the past year, NDWA has expanded its focus on making rights effective through awareness, compliance, and enforcement of worker protections. This strategy includes experimentation with interventions to reach workers and employers at scale. It also encompasses a community of practice model among affiliates and chapters to learn from each other about what is working and what is falling short to ensure domestic workers’ rights are respected and enforced. We intend to incorporate this survey instrument into current and future interventions to learn about what works best to reduce domestic worker voice gaps, inform future policy development, and influence key stakeholders. Adapting a validated survey instrument to measure domestic worker voice gaps lays the foundation for NDWA and others to expand our understanding of voice in domestic work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our research findings, as well as NDWA's experience organizing and advocating domestic workers rights, we provide the following recommendations for different groups of stakeholders.

Policymakers and advocates should pass state and local legislation to increase labor rights and protections for domestic workers, including protecting workers who exercise their voice from retaliation. Beyond establishing a floor, legislation should implement spaces that institutionalize worker voice, such as standards boards and task forces. Current and new legislation should be paired with designing and investing in enforcement mechanisms that account for the isolated nature of domestic work.

Recognizing the particularly high voice gap among homecare workers and the important role of Medicaid funding for Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS), it is imperative for **policymakers and government officials** to increase public investment in HCBS. Increased investment should be paired with ensuring the increased funds are allocated to higher wages for care workers. This is particularly crucial as these are some of the fastest growing occupations.¹⁹

Domestic worker employers are key stakeholders in ensuring workers' rights and protections are upheld, and domestic workers have a say on the job. They should provide transparent written work agreements with good working conditions and a fair wage, incorporating regular increases to reflect the cost of living. Employers should also establish accessible mechanisms for workers to voice their needs and concerns on the job. This is especially true for agencies, as our research found agency employment was associated with larger voice gaps.

At the same time, **labor organizations and other worker groups** should strengthen voice-building mechanisms and spaces that promote collective power. These can include know-your-rights and negotiation training, leadership development programs, and other models that strengthen workers' collective power. In designing these programs and spaces, organizations should consider the factors that are associated with larger voice gaps (e.g., limited English proficiency, lower wages).

Finally, to improve domestic workers' psychological well-being, **community-based organizations and service providers** should create accessible mental health resources – such as mental health screenings, accessible care, and peer-to-peer support– that account for the connection between worker voice gaps and well-being.

¹⁹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Home Health Aides and Personal Care Aides., <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/home-health-aides-and-personal-care-aides.htm>

TECHNICAL APPENDIX

Data were cleaned and analyzed in R statistical software (R Core Team, 2024). We first analyzed descriptive statistics of all variables: demographic characteristics, workplace characteristics, voice gap, and psychological well-being. See Table 1 for a summary of demographic and work characteristics by occupation.

Bivariate statistics were computed to understand differences in voice gap and well-being by demographic and work characteristics. To corroborate these findings, we additionally ran analyses of variances (ANOVA; Type 1) to understand differences in voice gap means across different groups. We used a stepped approach to build our regression models, adding variables that demonstrated associations with voice gap in our correlational analyses. We then collapsed some of the categories for work characteristics for clarity. For example, age was collapsed from four categories to two (18–49 years old and 50–65+ years).

For our final corroborating models, we ran Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regressions (Tables 3 and 4). We ran a separate OLS regression with well-being as a dependent variable (Table 5). In the main text, we report the results of these regression analyses. Regression diagnostics revealed some potential issues with non-normality of data. This is likely because we have about 50–70% missing data for variables that we only asked to certain groups of workers. For example, the voice gap question regarding the care and activities the client needs was only asked to nannies and homecare workers, while only house cleaners were asked about cleaning products. In addition, the well-being questions were only answered by approximately 45% of the sample because these questions were added as a 22-hour follow-up to the worker voice questionnaire, and some workers opted out of responding. To address issues with non-normality of residuals, we tried several robustness checks, including running negative binomial regressions, which consistently showed similar results.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

	Homecare worker (N=221)	House cleaner (N=1156)	Nanny (N=255)	Overall (N=1632)
Gender				
Female	205 (92.8%)	1119 (96.8%)	246 (96.5%)	1570 (96.2%)
Male	12 (5.4%)	23 (2.0%)	4 (1.6%)	39 (2.4%)
Non binary	2 (0.9%)	7 (0.6%)	2 (0.8%)	11 (0.7%)
Other	2 (0.9%)	7 (0.6%)	3 (1.2%)	12 (0.7%)
Hispanic				
No	1 (0.5%)	8 (0.7%)	1 (0.4%)	10 (0.6%)
Yes	220 (99.5%)	1148 (99.3%)	254 (99.6%)	1622 (99.4%)
Age				
18-29	3 (1.4%)	19 (1.6%)	4 (1.6%)	26 (1.6%)
30-49	48 (21.7%)	597 (51.6%)	94 (36.9%)	739 (45.3%)
50-64	158 (71.5%)	514 (44.5%)	146 (57.3%)	818 (50.1%)
65 or more	12 (5.4%)	26 (2.2%)	11 (4.3%)	49 (3.0%)
ESL				
Fluent/Bilingual	15 (6.8%)	68 (5.9%)	17 (6.7%)	100 (6.1%)
Advanced	16 (7.2%)	57 (4.9%)	14 (5.5%)	87 (5.3%)
Intermediate	59 (26.7%)	253 (21.9%)	49 (19.2%)	361 (22.1%)
Basic	76 (34.4%)	529 (45.8%)	106 (41.6%)	711 (43.6%)
No English	55 (24.9%)	249 (21.5%)	69 (27.1%)	373 (22.9%)
Schooling				
None	6 (2.7%)	28 (2.4%)	8 (3.1%)	42 (2.6%)
Primary	36 (16.3%)	243 (21.0%)	48 (18.8%)	327 (20.0%)
Secondary	72 (32.6%)	452 (39.1%)	93 (36.5%)	617 (37.8%)
High school	61 (27.6%)	296 (25.6%)	54 (21.2%)	411 (25.2%)
Undergraduate	42 (19.0%)	130 (11.2%)	42 (16.5%)	214 (13.1%)
Graduate	4 (1.8%)	7 (0.6%)	10 (3.9%)	21 (1.3%)
Years in current occupation				
Less than a year	43 (19.5%)	139 (12.0%)	67 (26.3%)	249 (15.3%)
1-5 years	58 (26.2%)	387 (33.5%)	76 (29.8%)	521 (31.9%)
6-10 years	68 (30.8%)	331 (28.6%)	51 (20.0%)	450 (27.6%)
11-20 years	35 (15.8%)	202 (17.5%)	43 (16.9%)	280 (17.2%)
More than 20 years	17 (7.7%)	97 (8.4%)	18 (7.1%)	132 (8.1%)
Participant in labor-related organization				
No	175 (79.2%)	1005 (86.9%)	202 (79.2%)	1382 (84.7%)
Yes	46 (20.8%)	151 (13.1%)	53 (20.8%)	250 (15.3%)

Employment Arrangement				
Agency/Company	167 (75.6%)	180 (15.6%)	21 (8.2%)	368 (22.5%)
Independent	40 (18.1%)	689 (59.6%)	195 (76.5%)	924 (56.6%)
Other worker	14 (6.3%)	287 (24.8%)	39 (15.3%)	340 (20.8%)

Table 2. Comparison between La Alianza and American Community Survey

Sample (N=1560)		ACS Sample (N=553,781)
Gender		
Female	1560 (100%)	553,781 (100%)
Hispanicity		
Yes	1560 (100%)	553,781 (100.0%)
Age*		
18-29	25 (1.6%)	83,267 (15.0%)
30-49	711 (45.6%)	224,856 (40.6%)
50-64	779 (49.9%)	202,896 (36.6%)
65 or more	45 (2.9%)	42,762 (7.72%)
English Proficiency*		
Fluent/Bilingual	94 (6.0%)	83,598 (15.1%)
Advanced	83 (5.3%)	168,809 (30.5%)
Intermediate	346 (22.2%)	107,971 (19.5%)
Basic	689 (44.2%)	123,645 (22.3%)
No English	348 (22.3%)	69,758 (12.6%)
Wages (\$USD)*		
Less than \$10	243 (15.6%)	261,132 (47.2%)
\$11-\$15	620 (39.7%)	146,333 (26.4%)
\$16-\$20	495 (31.7%)	75,885 (13.7%)
\$21-\$25	116 (7.4%)	29,416 (5.31%)
\$26 or more	86 (5.5%)	41,015 (7.41%)
Occupation*		
Home Care Worker	204 (13.1%)	335716 (61%)
House Cleaner	1111 (71.2%)	165135 (30%)
Nanny	245 (15.7%)	52930 (9.6%)

*Pearson's Chi-square tests significant at 0.001 level

Note: This comparison restricts our sample to respondents who identified as women and Hispanic/Latina.

Table 3. Results of Ordinary Least Square Regressions for All Domestic Workers

Voice Gap		
<i>Estimates</i>		<i>SE</i>
(Intercept)	-0.50***	0.06
Ages 18-49	-0.04	0.05
Hourly Wage <=\$15	0.44***	0.05
English Proficiency: Basic/No English	0.16**	0.05
Educational Level: None to Secondary	0.04	0.05
Years in Current Occupation: <1 to 5	-0.02	0.05
Participant in Labor Organization: Yes	-0.09	0.07
Employment Arrangement: Agency/Other	0.27***	0.05
Occupation: Nanny or Homecare Worker	0.14**	0.05
Observations	1632	
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.094/ 0.089	

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: Standardized coefficients and standard errors reported; Reference groups were Age: 50-65+; Hourly wage: \$16-\$26+; English proficiency: Advanced/Intermediate English proficiency; Years in current occupation: 6 to 20+ years; Participant in labor organization: Self-reported non-participant in labor organization/group; Employment arrangement: Independent worker; and Occupation: House cleaning worker.

Voice gap is an average of the gap in how much say a worker has compared to how much say they feel they should have in a set of workplace issues, with a higher average voice gap indicating a worse outcome.

Table 4. Results of Ordinary Least Square Regressions for Nannies and Homecare Workers

Voice Gap		
<i>Estimates</i>		<i>SE</i>
(Intercept)	-0.36***	0.12
Ages 18-49	0.12	0.10
Hourly Wage <=\$15	0.44***	0.10
English Proficiency: Basic/No English	0.15	0.10
Educational Level: None to Secondary	0.02	0.09
Years in Current Occupation: <1 to 5	-0.20*	0.10
Participant in Labor Organization: Yes	-0.16	0.11

Employment Arrangement: Agency/Other	0.18*	0.09
Observations	476	
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.065/ 0.051	

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: Standardized coefficients and standard errors reported; Reference groups were Age: 50-65+; Hourly wage: \$16-\$26+; English proficiency: Advanced/Intermediate English proficiency; Years in current occupation: 6 to 20+ years; Participant in labor organization: Self-reported non-participant in labor organization/group; and Employment arrangement: Independent worker.

Voice gap is an average of the gap in how much say a worker has compared to how much say they feel they should have in a set of workplace issues, with a higher average voice gap indicating a worse outcome.

Table 5. Results of Ordinary Least Square Regressions for Voice Gap and Well-Being

Psychological Well-Being		
Estimates		SE
(Intercept)	0.26***	0.10
Voice Gap	-0.23***	0.04
Ages 18-49	-0.18**	0.07
Hourly Wage <=\$15	-0.11	0.08
English Proficiency: Basic/No English	-0.13^	0.08
Educational Level: None to Secondary	0.01	0.08
Years in Current Occupation: <1 to 5	-0.03	0.08
Participant in Labor Organization: Yes	0.20^	0.10
Employment Arrangement: Agency/Other	-0.10*	0.07
Occupation: Nanny or Homecare Worker	0.02	0.08
Observations	721	
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.097/ 0.085	

^ p < 0.10 * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: Standardized coefficients and standard errors reported; Reference groups were Age: 50-65+; Hourly wage: \$16-\$26+; English proficiency: Advanced/Intermediate English proficiency; Years in current occupation: 6 to 20+ years; Participant in labor organization: Self-reported non-participant in labor organization/group; and Employment arrangement: Independent worker.

Voice gap is an average of the gap in how much say a worker has compared to how much say they feel they should have in a set of workplace issues, with a higher average voice gap indicating a worse outcome. Well-being is an average of self-reported well-being during a 2-week time frame, with higher scores indicating better well-being.