

DECLARATION OF RAZIAH BEGUM

Petition Alleging Violations by the United States of America of the Human Rights of Domestic Workers Employed by Diplomats

I, RAZIAH BEGUM, declare as follows:

1. I am a petitioner in the case of *Petition Alleging Violations by the United States of America of the Human Rights of Domestic Workers Employed by Diplomats* before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.
2. My birth name is Raziah, but I am known as "Shaku."
3. I am a national of Bangladesh. I am a native speaker of Bengali; I do not speak very much English.
4. I currently reside in New York and have legal permanent residency in the United States.
5. For two and a half years, I worked as a household worker for Mr. F. A. Shamim Ahmed, the Deputy Permanent Representative to the Bangladesh Mission to the United Nations, and his wife, Shabnam Ahmed. They had a son and a daughter. I lived and worked in their Manhattan apartment at 211 E 70th St, Apt. 11G.
6. For those two and a half years, Mr. and Mrs. Ahmed kept me as a prisoner in their house, and made me a slave to their demands. They treated me no better than they would treat a stray dog. They tried to take from me my humanity.

Coming to the United States

7. In June of 1997, I traveled to the United States on a special visa that allowed me to work for my employers. I do not know exactly what visa I had because my employers confiscated my passport as soon as I arrived in the United States and they never returned it.
8. I remember that my employers made me sign something in order to obtain my visa to come to the United States. I believe it was an employment contract. However, because I do not know how to read or write, I do not know what the contract said.
9. My employers promised me that if I agreed to work for them in the United States, they would arrange to bring my son over. I took the job and traveled to the United States in reliance on this promise. After I arrived in the U.S., I frequently asked my employers when my son would be coming, but they always refused to talk about it and would get angry with me when I brought it up.

Hours

10. My work was very strenuous. On a normal day, I would rise around 6 a.m. to begin work. Sometimes I was required to start work earlier. On occasion, my employers would wake me in the middle of the night. I was always “on call” during the night to wake and attend to their needs.
11. On a day when my employers did not have guests to the apartment, I could expect to finish my work by 9 or 10 p.m. However, my employers very often had guests to the apartment. Once a week they had a party and every couple weeks they had big parties. On the days when there were guests to the apartment, I would finish my work around 11 or 12 p.m. or sometimes later.

Wages

12. I was paid 2,000 taka per month (approximately \$29). This money was not paid to me directly; rather, it was paid to my son in Bangladesh when he went to collect it from my employers’ family in Dhaka. My son lived in a village very far from Dhaka, so he was only able to travel to Dhaka to collect my salary every four or five months.
13. I was not paid for the last seven months of my work because, after I escaped my employers, I told my son not to collect my salary from the family in Dhaka. I told him this because I feared they would hurt him.
14. My employers never paid me a cent directly during the time I worked for them. In fact, guests to the apartment would often leave me tips for my work, but the wife always kept these tips for herself and never gave them to me.

Working Conditions

15. My work conditions were very, very bad. I was required to do all the cooking, cleaning, and washing. There was a lot of work. As soon as I finished one task, there would be another waiting. I was never given an opportunity to rest or take a break. I was never given a day off.
16. I was required to wash all bedding, clothing and dishes by hand, even though they had a washing machine and a dishwasher. There were five beds in the house and washing all of that bedding by hand was extremely difficult.
17. There were three bathrooms to clean. There were lots of antiques in the house, which I regularly had to clean and polish. My skin was always broken and cracked from the washing and cleaning.
18. I cooked all the meals for the husband and wife and their two children. Often I would have to cook special meals for the two children. I also was regularly required to cook for guests, since guests came so frequently to the apartment. When they had parties, these

parties would include 10-30 people. I had to cook for all of the guests and do all the cleaning afterwards.

19. In the mornings, I tended to the children by making them breakfast, making their beds, and ironing their clothes before school.
20. My employers forbid me to sit anywhere in the house except on a small stool in the kitchen. The stool was the only place I was ever allowed to sit and eat. I was never allowed to eat at the table, and I was never allowed to eat or sit in front of guests.
21. I was only allowed to eat my meals after everyone else had been fed and all of my work was complete. My employers forbid me from eating dinner, for example, until all the family and guests had eaten and all the cleaning after the dinner was finished. Often this meant that I did not eat lunch until mid-day and dinner until late at night.
22. My employers only allowed me to use the daughter's bathroom. Sometimes the wife would nag and berate me after I used the bathroom, saying that I should clean it after using it.
23. My employers denied me adequate sleeping conditions. I slept on the hard floor in the daughter's bedroom. My employers never gave me a mattress or blankets of any kind. As a result, I used the only thing I had, a thin handmade sheet that I brought from Bangladesh, to sleep on and to cover myself. I had one small pillow. In the winter, I was terribly cold and had to sleep in many layers of clothing.
24. On those occasions when there were overnight guests in the apartment, my employers made me sleep under the dining room table, huddled up against the wall, so that the guests would not see me.

Isolation and Physical Confinement

25. For two years, I never stepped outside my employers' apartment. My employers prevented me from ever going outside. When I asked to go outside, they said I would have problems if I went out because there were bad people outside that would do bad things to me. Sometimes the wife would lose her temper at me when I asked and tell me that if I wanted to go outside so badly that I should "just go and leave forever!" I wanted to leave, but my employers had my passport and their threats about what might happen if I left scared me.
26. My employers never allowed me to phone my son. During the two and half years of my employment, I spoke to my son only on two or three occasions because he called me. I only could speak to him for a couple minutes.
27. Sometimes my employers allowed me to send letters to my son. But since I could not really read and write, I could not communicate very much through letters.

28. My employers always kept me isolated from any guests to the apartment. They did not allow me to be seen or to interact with their guests, even with other Bangladeshi guests. When there were guests to the house, they would keep me in the kitchen so that I could not interact with the guests or be seen by them.
29. My employers were the only people I was allowed to communicate with for two and a half years. But they didn't treat me like another human being.
30. After two years of being a prisoner in their apartment, I was desperate to go outside. I tried to convince my employers that I did not feel well and that I needed to get some air outside. The wife was very angry that I kept insisting on going outside.
31. Finally, she allowed me to go outside for a half an hour or an hour at a time. I only went outside like this a few times.

My Escape

32. I never felt like a human being in my employers' home. They treated me as they would treat a dog. Not the way people in America treat their dogs, but the way people in Bangladesh treat stray dogs on the street. They treated me as a piece of property. They tried to deny me my dignity.
33. I became very desperate to escape my employers. I worked so hard for two and a half years believing that my employers would carry out their promise to bring my son to the United States. But eventually I realized that they were never going to bring him over. When I realized this, I felt like I had come to work in the United States for nothing. I felt that I had wasted my time and suffered for nothing.
34. Nevertheless, I was very scared about leaving. I did not know what would happen if I left. I feared that my employers would find me and find a way to deport me back to Bangladesh, since they were very powerful people. I was also scared of the police because I thought they were like police in my country. I thought about returning to Bangladesh on my own, but I didn't have any money or anyone to go back to in Bangladesh except my son. I did not have a husband or a family there.
35. On one of the few occasions when I left my employers' apartment, I met a woman named Anu, who was a member of Andolan, an organization that helps South Asian domestic workers. Anu understood my desperation and encouraged me to escape.
36. Finally, I found the courage to escape. I put some clothes and my Koran into a bag. The wife saw me doing this and yelled: "what are you doing?!" I told the wife that I was leaving for good that day. But the wife didn't believe me, and yelled at me that I should "just go, just leave!" I was so scared that I was shaking. I got up the courage to walk out the door, but I was so nervous and scared that I didn't have the courage to grab the bag with my clothes and Koran. I left empty-handed. I had no money.

37. After I left, my employers owed me seven months of salary, but I was scared for my son's safety so I instructed him not to go retrieve the salary from my employer's family in Dhaka. They are very powerful people and I feared that if he went to them, they would probably hurt him in retaliation for my escape.
38. After I escaped, Andolan helped me. I didn't file a complaint against my employers or take any legal action because I was scared about what repercussions taking such action might have. I worried that my employers would take it out on my son back home.
39. Andolan told me about diplomatic immunity. I learned that, because of immunity, my employers had even more power than I thought. I understood that there was no way I could ever get from them the money they owed me in wages.

I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the United States that the foregoing is true and correct to the best of my knowledge.

Dated: 10/19/07

Executed in Woodside NY

Raziah Begum
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