



Domestic Workers in San Francisco Find Their Power

Domestic workers often endure a host of difficulties, including low pay, demanding employers, and exposure to toxic cleaning products.

Through the Domestic Worker Safety & Dignity project, a group of women in San Francisco found voice and power. In the process, the women also found new employers concerned with worker safety who were happy to provide nontoxic cleaners.

The project was one of eight in *New Routes to Community Health*, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation national program that sought to improve immigrant health through immigrant-created media. For more information on the program, see the [Program Results Report](#).

Under the Domestic Worker Safety & Dignity project, members of [La Colectiva](#), a Latina organization run by domestic workers, collaborated with [Underground Advertising](#) and the [Labor Occupational Health Program](#) at the University of California, Berkeley, to create a social marketing campaign advocating fair pay, respect for the profession, and healthier working conditions. “The labor of domestic workers is often undervalued,” said Susan Teran, director of the Berkeley program.

The campaign included images of strong and dignified domestic workers on a 50-foot-long billboard in the Mission District in San Francisco, on posters on the city’s public transit system, and on postcards the women distributed. The campaign also highlighted the benefits of “green” cleaning products for both domestic workers and the families they work for. La Colectiva trains its members in the use of such products.

The public outreach was so successful that La Colectiva staff struggled to handle an influx of inquiries from families who wanted to hire its members. La Colectiva responded by creating a new [website](#) that provides bilingual hiring information and links to green cleaning resources.

“Working with the collective, we have been able to gain a lot of pride and dignity for the work we do,” said Guillermina Castellanos Mendoza, a domestic worker and leader of La Colectiva. “And through this we have been able to gain leadership abilities in civic participation. We have developed economically, socially, and politically.

“We have also changed our lives. The campaign has helped us improve our health and others’ health. Before we used cleaning products that were toxic, and now we’re using nontoxic products.”

Through the campaign, the women learned how to present their own stories in the media. “It’s an empowering and healing process to tell your story and reframe your work as dignified work,” attested Jill Shenker, who coordinated La Colectiva during much of the project.

She said the work not only helped build the organization but also helped spur the formation of the National Domestic Workers Alliance in 2005, where Shenker is now field director.

After the grant ended, the women used their leadership skills to advocate for a California bill of rights for domestic workers. Castellanos Mendoza of La Colectiva represented the National Domestic Workers Alliance at a United Nations meeting in Geneva in 2011 on a global agreement to protect domestic workers. The women say they would never have imagined such possibilities for themselves and their work before the initiative.

“What has been exciting about the campaign is that the social marketing and media work have been grounded in a long-term strategy,” Shenker said. “The domestic worker movement is at a key point. I think we’re taken more seriously. The campaign helped give it momentum.”

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