

My name is Rose and this is my story. It is true.

I am from a country in South America, and I grew up in poverty. When I was 28 years old, I left my family and my children to work abroad. For almost two years, I worked for a family who lived in a wealthy neighbourhood of a European city. I thought I was going to be a live-in domestic worker. I was wrong. I became their 'servant', their slave. They took control of my life.

I expected to work hard, and to be paid. I thought my working conditions would be fair, and I expected to be treated with kindness and respect. Instead, I was forced to work 20 hours a day, seven days a week. My passport and documents were kept from me. My salary was withheld from me. I was threatened, insulted, and starved. When I finally escaped this 'cage', I weighed only 45 kilos. I was so thin, I could fit into the space in a car behind the driver's seat - that place where you put your feet.

My employer, the wife, controlled everything - including communication with my family. I was allowed to call home once a month, for just five minutes, and my employer listened to my private conversation on another line. She also controlled the amount of food I was permitted to eat...and how. There was a specific cup and plate that I had to use, and if I ever used a different plate she would get furious.

I realised that my salary was very low. I should have received 200 euros a month, but she refused to give me all of it. She would send half to my family back home but the rest she kept. The lowest wage in this European country was 600 euros a month, so for working 20 hours a day, 7 days a week I earned one third of the official minimum wage.

Once, I asked for money to go to the hair salon. My hair was very long and I loved my long hair. But my employer refused to give me money. She said, 'I'll cut it myself.' She cut it very short, up to my neck. She cut it roughly and badly. That night I got some scissors and tried to fix it up myself. I was so sad.

This woman would say to me, 'It is thanks to me your children are not dying of hunger.' When I tried to stand up for my rights, she would say, 'You need to remember that you are hired 24 hours a day. And if I feel like doing thirty meals a day, then it's you who has to prepare them. And if I feel like bringing 100 dogs to the house, then it's you who has to take care of them.' That was always her reply. I felt exploited and humiliated.

She was cruel in other ways too. She would tell her children to make a mess intentionally. They would pull everything out of the cupboards, like the cooking pans, and leave them all over the floor. That was more work to clear up. In all this time, her husband was reasonable and treated me well, but unfortunately he was away on business very often. His wife was so nice to me when he was home, but the minute he left she would change into a different person.

In all the time I was there, I went out for a day trip just four times, and still my employer controlled me. She would check the train ticket to see what time I travelled and where. Sometimes she let me go to church on Sundays, but I had to be back within 45 minutes or she would get angry. I was too scared to run away. She had told me that I would be deported if the police found me.

But finally I couldn't take it anymore. With the help of kind neighbours, both I and the other domestic worker managed to escape. Our neighbours had noticed that the lights were on in the house at unusual times of the night and they suspected something bad was going on. Luckily I found new employers who opened their home to me. I call these people my angels. I believe it was my faith that gave me the strength to survive in that house and the courage to escape from it.

I did not take any legal action. My old employer threatened to seriously harm my family back home if I did. 'We will deal with things our way,' she said. Many years have passed and I have come to know cases that are similar to mine.

My message to people who are reading this and to families that have domestic workers is - be kind. Please, treat other people as you would like them to treat you.