

6-30-2021

**Book Review of: Blackett, A. (2019). Everyday Transgressions:  
Domestic Workers' Transnational Challenge to International Labor  
Law**

Hina B. Shah

*Golden Gate University School of Law*, [hshah@ggu.edu](mailto:hshah@ggu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Labor and Employment Law Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Work and Occupations, June 30, 2021.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at GGU Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of GGU Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jfischer@ggu.edu](mailto:jfischer@ggu.edu).

---

# Book Review

Work and Occupations

0(0) 1–4

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/07308884211029338

[journals.sagepub.com/home/wox](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/wox)



Blackett, A. (2019). *Everyday Transgressions: Domestic Workers' Transnational Challenge to International Labor Law*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, an Imprint of Cornell University Press. 287 pp. \$23.95 (paper).

**Reviewed by:** Hina B. Shah , Women's Employment Rights Clinic, Golden Gate University, San Francisco, CA, USA

One in every twenty-five women workers worldwide is a domestic worker. They are largely invisible, undervalued, and lack the most basic labor protections. Professor Blackett's book, *Everyday Transgressions*, tackles this invisibility head on and provides a much-needed conceptual framing that lays bare the inequities faced by domestic workers and the transnational movement for change. The book expertly peels back the layers of history of subjugation that shaped the historic efforts by the International Labour Organization to adopt the first international treaty for domestic workers – the ILO Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (Domestic Workers Convention, No. 189). In this book, Professor Blackett provides an insider's view of this historic moment. She served as the ILO's lead expert and wrote the ILO's Report IV:1 on Decent Work For Domestic Workers ("Law and Practice Report"). Her vivid descriptions of the negotiations, the conflicts, and the behind-the-scenes agitations bring to life the Convention.

The book benefits not only from Professor Blackett's professional expertise in this area but also her intimate connection to her family's legacy as migrant domestic servants. The legacy of subordination and servitude does not strip domestic workers of their agency. *Everyday*

*Transgressions* makes a persuasive argument for the need for the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention.

Professor Blackett also creates a unique framing around the law of the household workplace – a largely invisible counterforce that is asymmetrical and unequal – that pushes against formal state regulation of the domestic workplace. The book makes visible the roots of the law of the household workplace, burrowed in the fertile ground of subordination, servitude, colonialism and the global transnational slave trade. This law has kept domestic workers in position of “exploitation and actual exclusions” (p. 19) from most labor standards in most countries.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first and last two chapters are bookends to the ILO process. Chapter 1 traces the arc of the negotiations of the Domestic Worker Convention and the shift in understanding that domestic worker rights are part of the human rights framework. Professor Blackett credits this breakthrough to the success of the Convention and credits domestic workers' militancy towards a robust transnational movement to the success of building a transgressive legal order. The chapter, however, puts too much faith in the readers' basic understanding of the intricacies of the ILO standard setting process. At key junctures, Professor Beckett assumes the readers' familiarity with these mechanisms. At times, the narrative is bogged down in the minutia of the ILO standard setting process and without the background foundation, a reader may simply miss the importance of the detail.

Chapter 2 is an excellent and engaging discourse on challenging the dominant narrative of informality and formality dualism that often sidelines domestic work from formal labor regulations. Professor Blackett challenges the Global North's flattening of the informal economy to fit a traditional market sector economy analysis. “What if informality is normatively controlling?”, (pp 44) she asks.

Chapter 3 traces the historical development of the domestic work relationship. Drawing on a diverse body of ethnographic studies, Professor Blackett paints a complex narrative of the history of domestic work, juxtaposing studies on master/servant relationship, slavery, and colonial/postcolonial histories of domestic work servitude. However, it falls short of providing a cohesive understanding of how these different strands have shaped the modern domestic work relationship. Professor Blackett's panoramic view, at times, flattens or obscures some of these details.

One of the most satisfying and illuminating chapters is Chapter 4. Professor Blackett unearths cookbooks written in the eighteenth to the

early twentieth centuries, written by domestic work employers and employees. She digs into this genre for understanding and illuminating the law of the household workplace. What was remarkable was that she found that the domestic work relationship was similar across time and geography. Another consistency was how these cookbooks enshrined the law of the household subordination. Even those written by domestic work employees highlighted that the very job of a domestic worker is a duty of submission/subordination.

Chapter 5 returns to the ILO standard setting process, the negotiations and the crafting of the convention and recommendations. At the outset, Professor Blackett acknowledges that much of traditional labor was created for the male citizen. We cannot simply apply industrial workplace models to the domestic work relationship but at the same time, domestic workers must be treated as any other worker. Too many countries have just normalized or regulated the unequal law of the household workplace. Professor Blackett does not gloss over the challenges in treating domestic work like any other work while addressing the specificity of the domestic work in the private home. She gives specific examples of the drafting and negotiations of the articles, especially around work hours, that illustrate this tension. She provides a frank assessment of the limitation of the international regulatory framework but does highlight the achievement of international cooperation and assistance as a result of the Convention.

Chapter 6 focuses on four studies of countries both before and after the Convention, where innovations took place that influenced some of the ILO standards and the impact of the Convention on creating a new transnational legal order. Focusing on South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, France, and Switzerland, and on bilateral agreements from the Philippines, Professor Blackett emphasizes that much work remains to be done and celebrates the "transnational cooperation" (pp 16) as a result of the Convention. The Convention relied on regulatory experimentation in the Global South and that in itself is transgressive.

**ORCID iD**

Hina B. Shah  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2756-3316>