

# Jasmine's Story

Interview and story written with Chuck Yachun Li



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou\_

*Jasmine is a frontline worker in domestic and care work.*

Jasmine, a Chinese Canadian frontline worker, shared some of her experiences of living and working during and prior to the pandemic. Jasmine has been working as a domestic care worker for over 5 years now. Because she doesn't own a vehicle, she takes public transit to get to work. Not knowing whether other transit passengers have been following public health guidelines, where they have been or if they have been exposed to risky and dangerous situations, makes her anxious and wary every time she rides the bus, fearing the possibility of direct and indirect COVID-19 transmission. To add to that, Jasmine's employer does not provide her and her co-workers with personal protection equipment (PPE), leaving them to supply their own N95 masks, face shields and gloves to care for clients. Because of the one-time-use nature of PPE, and the high volume used, acquiring what she needs to protect herself at work has amounted to a costly out-of-pocket expense. Workplace safety is a cause for concern that

has generated additional psychological stress. However, because of her belief in Buddhism, Jasmine has managed to feel grounded and is optimistic that she can make it through this difficult time.

Speaking about the impact of the pandemic on her family and daily life, Jasmine tells us her father is a senior living in a long-term care home. Because of COVID-19, she has not been able to visit her father as regularly, and her father too, has not been able to go out, enjoy leisurely activities or chat with other residents like he used to. Her father's loneliness during this time has had an effect on his mood and made him slightly irritable. She doesn't know how long things will continue this way and only hopes that the pandemic can quickly come to a close so she can return to her normal life.

With regards to the Canadian government's COVID-19 response, generally, Jasmine is relatively satisfied, noting as an example how some basic supports are still available to those who have not filed taxes due to the fault of employers. She just hopes that the government and the community can manage to provide sufficient personal protection equipment for everyone to lessen the financial pressure workers have had to bear. Further, the ups and downs of the repeated ordering and lifting of lockdowns have left people with a sense of uncertainty and confusion. She hopes that the Canadian government can make improvements to their pandemic response mechanisms and to their plan for fighting COVID-19. As for her employers, Jasmine says they have provided her

with reasonable compensation during the pandemic already, and she doesn't feel the need to ask for anything else.

On her experiences with work before becoming a domestic care worker, Jasmine shares that she had worked in the restaurant industry for around 20 years. When she first started, she was young, didn't have any specialized skills and her level of English was relatively low. She felt as though restaurant work was her only option. At the time, the minimum wage was about \$ 10.00. Because she didn't file taxes for work, she didn't have the support of Employment Insurance (EI) or Canada Pension Plan (CPP). She was injured many times at work. During the restaurant's busy peak hours, she often had to run around. Sometimes, things were so hectic that she wouldn't even have time to change her menstrual hygiene products and resorted to using larger menstrual pads to reduce the number of times she would have to change it.

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Each and every time she needed to use the washroom, she was required to notify her supervisor and the time spent in the washroom was not to exceed 10 minutes. If it did, employees would be reprimanded.

20 years ago, Jasmine was working at what was at the time, the largest Chinese restaurant in Toronto. Workers were treated extremely poorly. Originally, employees had a table where they could eat their meals.

But the manager thought allowing customers to see workers eating would reflect badly on the restaurant, and so required all workers to take their meal breaks in the kitchen. Then, each time the boss saw workers in the kitchen on break, he would assume they were being lazy and would reprimand and even threaten to fire them. In response, the manager asked that workers go hide in the women's washroom for their meal breaks.

The women's washroom was piled up with miscellaneous things, and while they ate their meals workers had to endure the stench of the restaurant toilets. The environment was toxic. The employees felt enraged but were too afraid to speak out then, largely because they had no knowledge of their rights, nor did they have devices like cell phones to record evidence of their mistreatment in order to seek help from legal organizations. On top of this, the restaurant would frequently change or cancel the employee's shifts last minute according to the management's own needs and convenience. Because everyone was so afraid to lose their jobs, they kept their mouths shut and just swallowed their complaints.

In her time at the restaurant, Jasmine also heard numerous accounts of women co-workers sexually harassed by management and staff in positions of power and of workers having to seduce their superiors in order to be scheduled for more hours. There were also kitchen supervisors who abused their authority to make women employees do tasks that far exceeded their job responsibilities, including asking workers to clean their personal dirty laundry. The degree of gender and sexual discrimination and exploitation in the restaurant industry was severe.

Years of labouring in such awful working environments caused Jasmine to develop an inflammatory condition in both hands and to suffer injuries in both her feet. Eventually, she decided to leave the restaurant industry behind and began her career in domestic care work following a recommendation

with meals. If care was needed overnight, she would be paid an additional \$100-200. These days, she no longer has the mental or physical energy to do this work. If woken up at night, it's likely she won't fall back asleep again.

Reflecting on her immigration experience as a whole, Jasmine recalls the days of earning very little as a factory worker in Guangzhou. In the 80s, during the feverish rush to go aboard, she too wanted to leave China and experience living in another country. At that time, the availability of news and information about what life was like in other places was limited. Under the impression that there would be more

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from a friend.

In comparison to the low wages domestic care workers used to make years ago, the hourly rate for care workers today has almost doubled. The conditions of the work itself has also, generally speaking, gotten better, though it is still a fairly demanding kind of work. On occasion, when she has encountered clients who didn't speak Chinese, communication has been a challenge. Other times, clients have asked for both household cleaning and childcare to be done at the same time—near impossible tasks to simultaneously fulfil. On another occasion, a senior she was caring for suffered from dementia and needed assistance with using the washroom and other things such as cleaning, dressing and diaper changing. This, along with the ever-changing day and night scheduling made her work especially difficult and exhausting.

When she was working as a live-in nanny, Jasmine would earn approximately \$130-150 a day, and if she was lucky enough to come across a decent employer, she might even be provided

opportunities abroad, she decided to immigrate to Canada with her family. When she first arrived in Toronto, she remembered finding the streets very dim. The atmosphere and environment in general were indeed quite pleasant, however things were not as vibrant and bustling as she had imagined. Still, she doesn't look back on her decision to immigrate to Canada with regret because she likes the government and the people here. Her hope now is that the next generation would not have to live through as many difficulties as she had, and that they can live a better and more enjoyable life.