Like numerous industrialized economies, the United States employs a large number of domestic workers to perform care work and housecleaning. Most domestic workers are female (90 percent) and about one third are immigrants. Remittances sent home can account for a substantial portion of total remittances as international migration flows have become increasingly feminized.

Domestic workers around the globe face multiple challenges that are typically more severe than other occupations due to the low value attached to care work and the difficulty of regulating work in private homes. Low pay, few legal protections, and precarious terms of employment are common. Other issues are wage theft and tax evasion among household employers. Sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and other forms of physical abuse also plague domestic workers. In response, in the U.S. eight states to date have passed some version of a domestic worker bill of rights in which domestic workers are guaranteed the minimum wage, overtime, rest periods, paid vacation time, disability benefits, and/or protection from sexual harassment and discrimination.

The goal of this study is twofold. First, the study examines trends in the number and composition of domestic workers in the U.S. and the inequities they face. Second, the study explores the political economy of legislative reforms to protect domestic workers in the U.S. and why some states have enacted a domestic worker bill of rights while other states have resisted. We use a case study approach comparing New York and New Jersey and qualitative evidence based on interview data and a representative telephone survey poll. New York was the first state to protect domestic workers with a bill of rights in 2010, while various groups in New Jersey have advocated for similar legislation but have encountered political resistance. New Jersey constitutes an interesting test case because it has one of the largest immigrant populations in the U.S. and the share of domestic workers who hail from developing countries is higher than average.

The analysis contributes new knowledge of domestic worker characteristics and will help us to better understand the political economy around regulating their work conditions.