

Christine Yvette Lewis

Trinidad: activist, actor, pan player

Object: Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights

I love the kids I take care of – money can't begin to pay for that.

When I came to America from San Fernando in Trinidad in 1990, I needed a job. I saw an ad in *The Irish Echo*, and I went to work in wealthy people's homes as a nanny. What I brought was my language and my lingo, the food, the air, the sand, the island ambiance. I brought beauty and my early childhood beginnings into those homes. I love the children I cared for—you have to get on the floor with kids because they want to see you at eye level. You have to be goofy, tell them Anansi stories. So we are responsible for these little seedlings. We are the first caretakers they see.

When you're a nanny, you're part of a chain of work—someone needs to make sure someone's children are picked up and cared for because those parents have to go to work. We do difficult, endless, valuable work—when we stay late, we are often forced to neglect our own children at home. They say integrity is who you are when nobody's looking. We do the job with integrity. We should not be paid poverty wages.

The Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights was passed and signed into law in New York State in 2010. It was passed to counteract the multitude of abuse and exploitation in an industry that isn't protected by most labor laws. For years, women had no recourse when they were abused or exploited. Too many women were living and working in the shadows. I stand for the women who asked, "Who do I go to when I worked for 24 hours and got paid for 12?" Keeping in mind that she is her household sole provider—even if they went back to the islands and are no longer around. I feel I am the voice of those women because their story is my story too. We have to get off our "do nothing" stools and get active.



Bio:

Christine Yvette Lewis is a worker, a leader, organizer, activist, secretary, and Cultural Outreach Coordinator with Domestic Workers United. She is an articulate spokesperson for the movement. Christine appeared on *The Colbert Report* in 2011. She reminisced on her early years when at a performance of an Easter Cantata, the children needed to recite stories and poems: "It dawned on us that we were reciting poems written by British poets in hot island sun about snow falling. That's colonialism for you." In addition to her activism, Christine Lewis acts with The Public Theater, plays the steel drum, and writes poetry. She says, "Providence and serendipity are my watchwords—because living brings us into things we can't control like fate and destiny."