Falling through the Cracks

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For decades, immigration has been a hot topic of debate in the UK where it has divided opinions not just among politicians but also amongst the general public. There are those who feel that the influx of migrants over the years has been detrimental to Britain both economically and socially, and that immigration laws need to be made more stringent. On the other side of the fence are those who claim that there is almost no evidence to show that people are immigrating to the UK just for its social benefits and see it as a 'welfare magnet'. They suggest that if this was the main reason then there are other EU countries such as Denmark, Belgium and Finland where the social benefits are far more generous and thus would be the recipients of a greater number of migrants. However, this is not the case.

If we go back forty five years we have former Shadow Cabinet member for the Conservative Party Enoch Powell and his controversial 'River of Blood' speech in April 1968, where he voiced his concerns (in a somewhat melodramatic manner using the line 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood' --- by Virgil) on what he believed would be the consequences of allowing immigration from the Commonwealth to go unchecked. Or more recently, we have the views of David Goodhart where he asserts that increased levels of immigration has and is undermining the social solidarity of the British people. He also wrote a rather controversial article a few years ago where he stated that "To put it bluntly – most of us prefer our own kind." He feels that most people prefer to be around people of their own kind and immigration puts a strain on the welfare state as well as the native population.

However, on the other side of the spectrum a recent report compiled by the Migration Matters Trust suggests that migration brings in a net economic benefit to the UK. They feel that the cost of stopping migration today would raise the public sector net debt by £1.8bn in the next five years.

Atul Hatwal, director of the Migration Matters Trust, said: "The British economy cannot sustain itself without migrant labour. By all means let's discuss the issue of immigration openly. But once you set aside the rhetoric and the hyperbole, you're left with a simple truth – Britain cannot afford to shut its doors to migrant workers." (Independent)

One section of the migrant community that does not necessarily put a burden on the welfare system consists of migrant domestic workers. Migrant domestic workers are people who enter the UK legally with an employer on a domestic worker visa to work in a private household. They comprise mostly of women and recent changes in the immigration law (April 2012) have fundamentally put them in a far more vulnerable position than previously.

According to the old immigration laws, if a domestic worker left the employer who brought them into the UK, they could seek domestic work in another household and the new employer would have to apply for their visa for them to continue working in the UK. In the new system, the domestic worker is allowed to enter and stay for no longer than 6 months and only work for the employer who brings him or her into the UK. On paper the new legislation sounds reasonable and tries to establish a safeguard against workers who come into the country with an employer and then do not return with them to their home country but remain in the UK. However, in reality what it means, is that domestic workers who are being exploited or abused by their employers have no form of recourse and have to remain with their employer regardless.

Kalayaan, a registered charity in the UK provides advice, advocacy and support services for migrant domestic workers and they register over three hundred and fifty workers a year. Often what happens with these migrant domestic workers is that they are not only unfamiliar with the UK legal system and are unsure of their rights in this country but also do not speak English at all or speak very little English. This makes them extremely vulnerable and dependent on their employer to provide them with information about their job, their housing and their immigration status in the UK. In many cases their employers take advantage of these workers who face horrific working condi-