

# “What they pay me doesn’t even cover a little food”

By [German H. Reyes R.](#) Friday, December 02, 2016 6:18



Photo: Kirstin Garrison

**Hers is the life of a cleaning woman, a single mother of two daughters working from 6pm to 6am cleaning up after the illness and disease of a public hospital. If she were to get sick, she too would have to seek treatment there at the public hospital, because her employer has not made the payments for her health benefits.**

It is five o'clock in the afternoon on Tuesday November 1, 2016. Clouds gather in the sky, covering Tegucigalpa in shadow. Suyapa Martínez hurries to leave her humble house in the neighborhood of Los Pinos. With a kiss, she says goodbye to her eleven-year-old daughter Kenia. “See you tomorrow”, she tells her as she rushes down to the road to catch the bus. (For their protection, the names of the cleaning worker and her children have been changed).

In an olive green dress, white socks and black shoes, she steps onto the bus that goes by her workplace. Suyapa is the employee of a private cleaning company. She works as a cleaning woman in a public hospital in the capital city of Honduras. From 6 at night to 6 in the morning, Suyapa scrubs the hospital’s constant discharge of bacteria and waste. Her shift is twice as long as the maximum night shift established in Honduran law.

For many years, her company has maintained contracts with various state institutions despite the fact – as is the case with many cleaning companies – that several official complaints have been filed against it in the Ministry of Labor for rights violations.

Suyapa is a single mother of two daughters: 11-year-old Kenia and 18-year-old Maritza. Both girls are in school. Suyapa knows that she must work as hard as she can to help them get ahead in life. Suyapa knows her rights and is very aware that they are being exploited, but she does not demand what is rightfully hers for fear of losing her job.

Suyapa's work schedule is categorized in the Labor Law as a night shift and "The ordinary workday for a night shift cannot exceed six hours daily or thirty-six hours weekly," as established in article 322 of the Labor Code. In other words, if there was justice for workers in Honduras, Suyapa would not have to work until six in the morning. Her shift would end at 12 at night. Unfortunately, neglect on behalf of the government now forces Suyapa and thousands of other workers to endure the abuses that benefit businesses as well as State institutions, who receive more services than what they should be receiving based on how much they pay, and possibly the corrupt government officials who award contracts to private companies.

From 12 at night to 6 in the morning, Suyapa endures a shift that should be performed by another employee for a separate salary.

Suyapa is sick, and not by chance. Apart from not eating enough, she is exposed daily to an environment plagued with bacteria, viruses, and illness.

Suyapa works for a large company that maintains contracts with various state institutions. Despite the fact that the law states that she should earn a minimum of 8,626.31 lempiras (\$369) a month; her work only pays her 6,800 lempiras (\$291) – \$78 less than the legal minimum wage established in 2016.

It is obvious that Suyapa is not well, but she forces a smile in an attempt to cover the exhaustion reflected in her face from weeks of strenuous work. She rubs her stained and calloused hands and softly says, "What they pay me does not even cover a little bit of food." She moves her fingers, starting to count. From the 6,800 "they only give me 6,400 because of the deductions."

From her salary, 400 lempiras are deduced monthly as a fee for Social Security, which legally gives her the right to state medical care, but so far, her fees have been pocketed by the cleaning company.

Eight months ago, Suyapa became sick and the doctors told her that she needed surgery. She went to Social Security but was denied medical attention because her company had not paid its contribution to medical insurance. Suyapa then had to go to a public hospital and her employer only covered her sick days. Six months later, Suyapa needed another operation. This time company refused to pay sick leave. She demanded that they give her leave to have the surgery, and in response, her boss changed her shift.

Up to this point, Suyapa had worked the day shift from 6am to 6pm. Suddenly they assigned her to the night shift without changing her salary.

***The supervisor was mad at me because I fought for my rights and after I came back from sick leave, they made the change, and I feel like it was a punishment," confirms Suyapa. She says that they gave her the contract to read and she signed it, but because of her education level, she could not understand the document. "Since you don't understand much, you just sign it", she stated.***

The change in shifts has been very difficult for Suyapa. She still cannot sleep during the day, and her health is beginning to deteriorate. "At night sleep takes over. Sometimes I feel it momentarily and I close my eyes and the supervisor scolds me in front of my coworkers", she says as two tears roll down her cheeks.

The 6,400 lempiras that Suyapa receives as salary should cover the costs of food, rent, transportation to work, electricity and water as well as **“phone charges to call my little girls that stay home by themselves at night”**, she explains.

She adds clothes, shoes, school supplies for her daughters and toiletry items to the list of necessities. Official figures from the Central Bank of Honduras and the Ministry of Labor indicate that as of last June the basic cost of living is 7,890.96 lempiras monthly (\$337), \$81 more than Suyapa makes.

To make matters worse, Suyapa has had to survive on borrowed money over the last four months because her company is behind on paying employee’s salaries.

She has been with the same company for two and a half years but her contract is still considered temporary. Many companies keep their employees on temporary contracts to ensure that their workers do not have rights to vacations, end of the year bonuses, school stipends, and other benefits that permanent employees are entitled to according to the law.

At the beginning of 2016, the teaching hospital signed a contract with Suyapa’s employer that is valid until December with the option of renewal. Clause 19 of the contract clearly states that the provider will be responsible for paying employee’s salaries **“including overtime, end of the year bonuses, benefits, vacations, social contributions to various State organizations, pay for sick leave, uniforms and other payments referred to in the current law.”** The reality facing Suyapa and her coworkers, however, is very different than the conditions expressed in the contract.

Her life is not easy. She is surrounded by misery, and she feels alone. Sometimes her neighbors refuse to loan her money and the local store does not take credit, but, **“what other option do I have?”** she exclaims.

If she complains in front of her bosses, she is certain to lose her job. No one envies job insecurity, but for her, it is a matter of survival. The constant renewal of contracts allows companies to fire employees without being responsible for giving them severance pay. The authorities know that this happens, but whether it’s from complications or negligence, they do not do anything to stop it.

The adversities Suyapa has suffered are not strong enough to crush her. She fights for her daughters and resists her afflictions, a sacrifice that has already shown positive results. Maritza, her eldest daughter, successfully finished her high school studies and has signed up to take the admissions exam for the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), and Kenia, the youngest, just finished seventh grade.

Suyapa shares her daughters’ triumph with everyone she meets. She shares and trusts that God will continue to light her way and give her strength to move forward.

That is why every evening Suyapa puts on her faded olive green uniform and her worn black shoes, and she walks down the dimly lit path to catch the bus that she takes to work. She does not know how each night will go, even the journey on public transportation is a risk given the city’s rampant violence, but she trusts in God and asks him for protection to return safely the next day.