

Global *Woman*

Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers
in the New Economy¹

Barbara Ehrenreich and
Arlie Russell Hochschild

EDITORS

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human rights lawyer for the Organization of American States, confiscated her passport and forced her to work days more than twelve hours long, for less than one dollar per hour. She was not allowed to leave the house without her employer. When a friend of her employer's raped her, the human rights lawyer refused to take her to the hospital, claiming that medical care would be too expensive.

Ruth Gnizako, a fifty-two-year-old West African woman, says she was approached by a wealthy relative who worked for the World Bank. The relative promised her a house and a car if she would come serve as a housekeeper and nanny to his five children in suburban Maryland. When she arrived, she was required to sleep with a pair of one-year-old twins in her arms every night, essentially providing twenty-four-hour care with no days off. When the family went out, Ruth was forced to wait outside, in the hallway of the apartment building, until they returned. Both husband and wife repeatedly beat Ruth, and they ignored her request to return to West Africa.

When neighbors heard Ruth screaming during the beatings, they called the Prince George's County Police Department. But the police were unable to understand her broken French, so they relied on her abusive employers for translation. Ruth attempted to reenact the beatings by gesturing physical blows to herself. Her employers, seeing an opportunity, told the police, "See, she's showing you how she beats herself. She's crazy." Ruth was taken to a local mental institution where she was forcibly sedated, her arms and legs tied to the bedposts. By the time the doctors contacted a French interpreter by phone, Ruth was feeling the effects of the psychoactive drugs, and, in her limited French, she could not manage to recount the traumatic events. Frustrated, the hospital staff called Ruth's employers and asked them to retrieve her.

When Ruth returned to the couple's home, they told her that if she upset them, they would call the police again and send her to the hospital permanently. They went on to claim that the security guard who patrolled the area was specifically sent to monitor her behavior and to make sure she did not harm their children. Intimidated by the barriers of language and culture, and still shaken from her terrifying experience at the mental institution, Ruth believed these threats. She suffered many more solitary months of beatings and servitude before the couple's neighbors finally managed to help her escape and contact the local authorities. In the end, Ruth found her-

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America's Dirty Work: Migrant Maids and Modern-Day Slavery

JOY M. ZAREMBKA

Imagine you are locked away in a strange home. You do not speak your captor's language. On the rare occasions when you are escorted off the premises, you are forbidden to speak to anyone. You are often fed the leftover food of the children you are required to watch while completing your around-the-clock household duties. You have never been paid for your labors, and the woman of the house physically abuses you.

While this scenario seems to hark back to an earlier time in U.S. history, it describes Noreena Nesa's* recent working conditions in the Washington, D.C., area. Tucked behind the manicured lawns and closed doors of our wealthiest residents live some of the most vulnerable people in the United States: abused migrant domestic workers, who are sometimes the victims of slavery and human trafficking.

Marie Jose Perez, for example, left Bolivia in 1997, excited because she had always dreamed of flying on an airplane and hopeful that she would soon be able to support her family in Bolivia with her wages as a live-in maid. But once her plane landed in Washington, D.C., her employer, a

* Some names have been changed.

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self emotionally unable to participate in the U.S. Justice Department's criminal investigation of her former employers and returned home without collecting a dime.

Global Mothers

Noreena, Marie Jose, and Ruth are among a growing number of migrant women known to suffer under conditions that look very much like slavery after they legally enter the United States as domestic workers. The global economic changes that push women from developing nations to migrate for domestic work have also contributed to the recent rise of domestic worker abuse. Developed countries and international lending organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank often prescribe preconditions for loans to developing countries that include cutting basic social services, devaluing local currencies, and imposing wage freezes. These structural adjustment programs create hardships that are borne most severely by those at the bottom of the economic ladder, a significant proportion of whom are women. The world's poor are often faced with few better options than to leave their home countries in search of work overseas, even if they do so with no assurances and at grave personal risk. Once they arrive in the United States, migrant women are sometimes forced into employment situations to which they did not agree and from which they have no escape.

Modern-day slavery, trafficking, and migrant domestic worker abuse result from the illegal manipulation and deception of hopeful migrants, most of whom believe they are going to the United States in order to better their situations. The new global economy permits transnational corporations and other actors in developed countries to transport capital, labor, goods, and services across state lines with relative ease. In the case of slavery and human trafficking, these goods, services, and labor become one: an unpaid or poorly paid person becomes a commodity that can be used again and again for accumulating profit. Traffickers tell migrants that they will earn many times more money abroad than they could at home. If they were employed by law-abiding people, these workers could indeed increase their earnings. Dora Mortey, an articulate Ghanaian schoolteacher, was one of those who believed the odds were on her side. Little did she know she would

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be worked around the clock as a nanny and housekeeper, and paid only around forty cents an hour.

Dora had signed an employment agreement with a World Bank official in Ghana. Nonetheless, when she got to the Washington area, she was handed a daily schedule that began at 5:45 A.M. and ended at 9:30 P.M., far exceeding the agreed-upon forty-hour workweek. After four months of working for only \$100 a month, Dora asked that her contract be honored. The family decided to terminate her services and put her on the next plane to Ghana. She managed to escape from the moving car as her employer drove her to the airport; but the employer scratched an 'X' across her visa and promptly delivered her passport to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), requesting her immediate arrest and deportation. Uncertain what to do, Dora took a cab from Washington to New Jersey to seek refuge with the one person she knew in the United States. Back at the airport, an astute INS official suspected foul play. Eventually, Dora was granted a stay of deportation while she pursued legal action against her former employers.

Each year, thousands of domestic workers like Dora enter the United States on special visas issued by the U.S. State Department. Foreign nationals, diplomats, officials of international agencies, and, in some cases, U.S. citizens with permanent residency abroad, are permitted to "import" domestic help on A-3, G-5, and B-1 visas. Nearly four thousand A-3 and G-5 visas are issued annually—A-3 visas for household employees of diplomats and G-5 visas for employees of international agencies such as the World Bank, IMF, and United Nations. The B-1 visa is a catch-all business category that, in part, allows other foreign nationals and American citizens with permanent residency abroad the option of bringing household employees with them when they visit the United States. Every year, 200,000 B-1 visas are issued, but the State Department does not keep records of B-1 domestic workers. As a result, their locations and working conditions remain particularly obscure. And the B-1 domestic workers may be at special risk for exploitation. All three visa types list the name of the worker's legal employer, but unlike the A-3 and G-5 visa holders, B-1 domestic workers have no option of legally transferring to another employer. They are left with few alternatives if they are enslaved or abused.

Even for A-3 and G-5 domestic workers, who are allowed to transfer to other diplomats or international officials, it is often difficult to find a suitable

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employer while suffering in an exploitative arrangement. Although the State Department, embassies, and international institutions involved (including the IMF, World Bank, and UN) keep records of the whereabouts of A-3 and G-5 domestic workers, this information is classified as confidential, for the privacy of the employer. Domestic violence and anti-incest advocates have challenged the privacy justification on the grounds that a lot of abuse occurs behind closed doors; other advocates have argued that in addition to being domiciles, these homes are also workplaces, subject to employment standards. Nonetheless, social service agencies remain uninformed of the whereabouts of domestic workers, which leaves them unable to prevent abuse or act on it before it is too late.

Patterns

Abuse and exploitation follow such uncannily predictable patterns that many in the social service world almost wonder if there is an "Abusers Manual" being circulated like samizdat. Typically, when the woman arrives in the United States, her employer illegally confiscates her passport and other travel documents. If the worker signed an official contract in a U.S. embassy abroad, that contract is often replaced with a new contract that stipulates longer hours and lower pay. Even the false contract is often subsequently ignored. Although U.S. labor law dictates that all workers be paid at least minimum wage, it is not uncommon to hear reports of women being paid fifty cents or a dollar an hour—in some cases, nothing at all. With yearly salaries at the World Bank and IMF averaging over \$120,000 tax-free, the income disparity is striking, especially in situations where domestic workers are told that all or part of their meager wage is being withheld to offset their room and board.

Many women find themselves working nearly around the clock, seven days a week. The exploitative employer usually tells the worker that she may not leave the house unaccompanied, use the telephone, make friends, or even converse with others. The worker is often denied health insurance and social security, even if these benefits have been deducted from her pay. Some domestic workers are subjected to physical battery and sexual assault; others who have serious health conditions are denied medical treatment, which can result in long-term illness. Some domestic workers are given as gifts to the

mistresses of diplomats, or traded and loaned out to American families who further exploit them. One Ghanaian woman reported that her employer's American wife referred to her not by name but rather as "the Creature." Yet another woman reported being called "the Slave." Others have been required to sleep on the floor, sometimes in the kitchen, laundry room, or unfinished basement. An Ivy League professor, who paid her domestic worker \$40 a month, slapped her for smoking outside. One domestic worker reported that she was made to kiss her employer's feet. A Malawian man recalls being forced to bathe in a bucket in the backyard rather than in the home of his American employer. A Filipina was forced to wear a dog collar and, at times, sleep outside with the family's dogs.

Typically, if an abused domestic worker complains, the employer threatens to send her home or turn her over to the police. The employer may also threaten to retaliate against her family if she speaks out; on several occasions, family members have been contacted and harassed after a domestic worker has escaped from an abusive situation. Legal issues in the United States also militate against leaving exploitative jobs: women who flee abusive employers are immediately considered "out of status," ineligible for other employment, and liable to be deported by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. As one neighbor who helped a Haitian domestic worker escape says, "When she ran away, she was out of a job, out of money, out of a home, out of status, and, quite frankly, out of her mind."

While some abusive employers use violence and the threat of violence to keep their domestic workers captive, others rely on psychological coercion. In one recent case, Hilda Rosa Dos Santos, a dark-skinned housekeeper from Brazil, was trapped for twenty years, with no pay and insufficient food, in the home of a Brazilian couple who convinced her that Americans disliked black people so intensely that she would likely be raped or killed if she went outside. Similarly, an Indonesian maid was informed by her Saudi Arabian bosses that Americans disliked Muslims so much that it was unsafe for her to leave the house. Abusive employers often point to violence on television to bolster claims about the dangers of American life. Unfamiliar with the English language or with American culture and laws, these women live as prisoners in the homes they clean.

Many women suffer in silence because they do not know their rights, nor do they have any idea where to go to seek help. Some may leave an abusive

situation only to find themselves in even worse circumstances. Consider Tigris Bekele, who quickly found herself in jail on two felony counts of child abuse and grand larceny, all because she fled her job as a live-in maid after being exploited, sexually harassed, and threatened. Unfortunately, the day she decided to escape from her abusive employer, there was a bomb scare at the employer's children's school. The children were sent home at 10:00 A.M., a time when Tigris was not required to work as a nanny. But finding themselves alone, the children called the Virginia police. Tigris was arrested for leaving the children unattended.

The police record does not mention that Tigris was paid only \$100 a week for around-the-clock chores because her Middle Eastern employer claimed that "that was enough money for a black person." Nowhere does it mention that the man of the house attempted to fondle and kiss her on various occasions. Nor does it mention that the woman of the house forced her to cut her hair and stop wearing makeup, threatening to kill Tigris if she had sex with her husband. Instead, the police record indicates that she is being held on \$20,000 bail. It states that she allegedly stole a piece of jewelry, a claim that is often wielded against runaway domestic workers. Her employers had confiscated her passport and visa; when Tigris scoured the house to "steal" her belongings back, her employers accused her of stealing their personal effects.

Even though she came legally to the United States on a domestic worker visa program, if Tigris is convicted, she will be deported to her home country in East Africa, where she is fleeing political persecution. Tigris had been sending remittances to her father, and she has recently learned from relatives that she will be arrested if she returns because the government claims that the money is being used to launch political opposition. A felony conviction in the United States will automatically render it impossible for her to seek asylum here. While some domestic workers end up in court seeking judgments against their abusers, Tigris finds herself on the wrong side of the courtroom.

A Comparison

Some migrant workers who come to the United States to perform child care and light housework do so as participants in another, markedly different visa program. The congressionally sponsored au pair program—au pair means

"an equal" in French—largely recruits young, middle-class women from Europe for "educational and cultural exchange" on J-1 visas. Ava Sudek, from the Czech Republic, experienced life in the United States both as a J-1 and as an A-3 visa holder. She thoroughly enjoyed her time as a J-1 au pair and thoroughly despised her time as an A-3 domestic worker. Ava's experience with the two visa programs highlights their striking dissimilarity.

When Ava arrived as an au pair, she was flown to a New York hotel for a week-long orientation session. There she was introduced to other nannies who would be living in the same region, so that they could form a network of friendships. Once she joined the employer's family, she attended another orientation program, where she received information on community resources and educational opportunities, as well as the contact numbers of other nannies in her local support network. Every month, she and her employers were required to check in with a counselor, who would help them resolve any disputes that arose or report any problems.

After completing a successful year with her au pair family, Ava decided to stay on an A-3 visa and work as a domestic worker for a French diplomat's family. There were no orientations, no information booklets, no contact numbers, no counselors, and no educational programs. In practice, for A-3 domestic workers, there is often no freedom. Ava felt like she was being held captive. She was not allowed to leave the house even during her off hours without a day's advance notice. Work hours and nonwork hours blurred together. When she asked for days off, her employers often refused to grant her request, telling her, "Perhaps another time." They did not pay her overtime. Within a month of obtaining her A-3 visa, Ava fled for the Czech Republic, where she dreamed of opening an au pair agency in her hometown. She did not bother to try to collect the overtime wages she was owed: her employer, as a high-level diplomat, was protected by diplomatic immunity.

Ava had the opportunity to hold both a J-1 and an A-3 visa, but few women of color from developing countries are so lucky. Most of them migrate on A-3, B-1, or G-5 visas, which do not come remotely close to offering the protections or the comforts J-1 visas provide European women. The different policies governing the temporary workers on these two visa programs are thick with racist and classist implications. Simply put, women of color in the domestic worker program deserve the same safety net and rigorous oversight granted to white women in the nanny program.

Solutions

Theoretically, the domestic worker visa program provides a window of opportunity for people from developing countries to enter the United States and earn a decent wage. What the program fails to do, however, is to ensure adequate protection for its visa holders. One simple improvement would be to establish independent monitoring and counseling like that which is provided to au pairs. Access to independent social workers, lawyers, and monitors would furnish live-in domestic workers with a system of safeguards to protect their legal rights and ensure employer compliance with contract conditions and labor laws.

By and large, migrant domestic workers belong to a hidden work force tucked away in private homes. Severe cases of domestic worker abuse differ from other cases of slavery and trafficking, such as those uncovered in brothels, farms, and sweatshops, because workers under the latter conditions have contact with one another. Each domestic worker, by contrast, is employed by an individual boss. Not only are the workers without peer support, but their cases involve no smuggling or trafficking rings for law enforcement to target for investigation. The result is that less attention is paid to these seemingly isolated incidents.

Far from their home countries, abused domestic workers are cut off from their families and their cultures, not to mention the protection that social networks and familiar institutions would provide. Many abusive employers incur the expense of hiring overseas precisely for this reason: they believe that they can increasingly control non-English speaking help. Such workers are less likely to run away in the United States. Lack of familiarity with the American legal system also works to the disadvantage of abused domestic workers.

So where do these workers turn for help? A loose network of churches, lawyers, social service agencies, and good Samaritans have formed a modern-day underground railroad for women attempting to escape abusive employers. Because some domestic workers are only allowed out of the house on Sundays, churches are frequently a first stop on the path to freedom. One Catholic sister has files on several hundred G-5 and A-3 workers

she has assisted over the years, beginning in the 1970s. Other good Samaritans have just happened to take initiatives when they've encountered domestic workers in need. Street vendors, taxicab drivers, neighbors, and complete strangers have been known to assist domestic workers in distress. Social service organizations and pro bono lawyers then help domestic workers with housing, medical care, mental health needs, and legal assistance.

Policy on matters affecting domestic workers has improved, but there are still troubling gaps in the protections these workers receive. Congress passed trafficking legislation in 2000 that allows federal law enforcement to convict not only traffickers who control their victims by force but also those who coerce workers by means of threats, psychological abuse, fraud, or deception. Domestic workers who bring criminal claims (such as sexual and physical abuse, or psychological coercion) against their former employers are granted work authorization, while domestic workers with civil claims (back pay, overtime, and the like) remain out of status and are considered illegal. Although the INS often turns a blind eye to out-of-status G-5, A-3, and B-1 domestic workers with civil claims, the threat of deportation and the lack of work authorization makes it unappealing for these workers to seek legal redress. It is time-consuming and difficult to find a pro bono lawyer, and migrants who come to the United States as temporary workers often have families to feed in their home countries; they are not really at liberty to sit around waiting for lengthy and uncertain court proceedings. Moreover, domestic workers with civil cases are so vulnerable and have so little bargaining power that they are sometimes re-enslaved as they wait out the long court process without job or housing options. It is certainly disheartening to think that a migrant domestic worker in a potentially violent situation is legally better off staying and getting beaten because she will later be able to receive a work permit, social services, and legal status. If she leaves before violence erupts, she receives nothing.

No shelters currently exist in the United States for trafficked women, and this remains one of the biggest obstacles facing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that attempt to assist domestic workers. NGOs sometimes have to ask women who are not in grave physical danger to stay in their exploitative situations while advocates scramble to find culturally appropriate housing. The Justice Department faces a small housing crisis every time a

new criminal case involving trafficking is filed. On one occasion, police dropped a domestic worker on the private doorstep of an NGO worker in the middle of the night, for lack of housing alternatives.

Because few housing options are available to abused domestic workers, NGOs often turn to ethnic communities for assistance with housing, clothing, medical care, and mental health needs. Most of these communities are small and tight-knit. This presents a safety risk for some domestic workers, who find temporary housing in their ethnic communities only to be easily located by their abusers, who sometimes hail from the same background and know those communities well. Most domestic violence shelters will not accommodate domestic workers because they were not beaten by romantic partners; most homeless shelters refuse to assist due to language barriers and lack of beds. Domestic workers often end up relying on compassionate strangers—everyday people who open their homes and hearts to individuals in need.

Fortunately, advocates and domestic workers have been organizing to find solutions to these problems at both the policy and the grassroots levels. Groups such as CASA de Maryland's *Mujeres Unidas de Maryland* (United Women of Maryland) are forming workplace cooperatives to advocate for improved conditions for all workers. Former and current domestic workers take to the streets, parks, buses, and churches looking for potentially abused domestic workers and educating them about their rights, using Spanish-language legal literature. When a volunteer encounters an exploited employee, she directs her to bilingual legal assistance. The increase in outreach has resulted in an increase in the number of reported cases of domestic worker abuse. *Mujeres Unidas* has developed self-esteem classes, in which formerly abused or exploited domestic workers extend their support to others suffering under similar circumstances. The group has now formed a twenty-four-member, democratically controlled cleaning cooperative whose goal is to provide dignified day jobs and equitable working conditions. Most impressive, 10 percent of all the cleaning service's proceeds are funneled to social justice organizations.

While most members of *Mujeres Unidas* are Latina, other ethnically based organizations in the Washington, D.C., area are also engaged in efforts to curb domestic worker abuse; among them are a Filipina organization, Shared Communities, and the Ethiopian Community Development Council. More than twenty-five Washington-based organizations have joined

forces to create the Campaign for Migrant Domestic Workers Rights (now Break the Chain Campaign), a coalition whose aim is to change public policy and to strengthen the safety net available to G-5, A-3, and B-1 domestic workers. These efforts involve lawyers, feminists, labor activists, human rights activists, community-based organizations, and social service agencies.

Related campaigns have sprung up elsewhere in the country. In New York, groups such as Andolan, Worker's Awaaz, and the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence's Women Workers Project are working together; and in California, the Coalition Against Slavery and Trafficking, and the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, address similar issues. Workers rights' clinics in Washington, Los Angeles, and New York often provide relief to individuals escaping slavellike conditions. A nationwide Freedom Network (USA) to Empower Enslaved and Trafficked Persons recently formed in response to incidents of trafficking and slavery uncovered among laborers and sex workers.

Noreena, Marie Jose, Ruth, Dora, Hilda, Tigris, and Ava were all able to seek assistance from concerned neighbors, lawyers, and advocates. But it remains unclear how many other women currently toil in isolation, unpaid and abused. In the 1970s, the battered women's movement established a network of advocacy groups and shelters for women who were abused by their spouses; the movement even managed, through arduous grassroots efforts, to change public policy and public consciousness about domestic violence. Its work is not done. But the groups that have committed their time and resources to assisting trafficked and enslaved domestic workers have only now embarked on a similar movement: they are building a new underground railroad, one stretch of track at a time.