Modern Slavery: Abuse of Domestic Workers

One of the women’s issues given attention during the World Bank protests was the issue of immigrant domestic workers in the US and ways they can be abused because they have no legal rights. The following article was written by a woman who is working at the DC-based Campaign for Domestic Workers Rights. Notably, most of the domestic workers her organization helps to free from abuse are employed by World Bank employees.

Imagine you are locked in your own private prison. You do not speak the same language as your subjugator. On the rare occasion you are escorted off of the premise, you are forbidden to talk to anyone. You are often fed the leftover food of the children you are required to watch while completing your around-the-clock household chores. You have never been paid for your labors and are sometimes physically abused by the woman of the house.

While this scenario seems to hark back to an earlier time in US history, it describes the working conditions of one Asian woman less than a month ago in the Washington DC area. Unfortunately, she is just one of an increasing number of women known to be suffering a similar fate of abuse and exploitation. Slavery is currently being practiced against women here in this country, right in the shadow of the nation’s Capitol.

For the past two years, the Campaign for Migrant Domestic workers Rights, a coalition of over 25 DC-based organizations, has been working to assist abused domestic workers and to change policies to better protect their rights. The Campaign has primarily focused on domestic workers who have entered the United States through a special visa program that grants international bureaucrats and diplomats the privilege of bringing hired help in from overseas. Most of these domestic workers are poor women from developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America who enter the United States on temporary A-3 and G-5 visas. Each year, nearly 4,000 of these special visas are issued to A-3 visas for household employees of diplomats and G-5 visas for employees of international agencies such as World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations. The visas are valid for occupations such as housekeepers, nannies, cooks, drivers, gardeners and other personal servants. Nowhere on the list is “slave.”

Unfortunately, once the paper work is filed for these visas, the State Department, international institutions and embassies take a “hands-off” approach to the situation of these domestic workers. "For some women, the time spent in the US as a housekeeper ends up being a pleasant experience and a dream come true. Others, who think they are coming to fulfill this American dream, sometimes find themselves living out a nightmarish reality."

The patterns of abuse and exploitation are so uncannily similar that many in the social service world wonder if there is a clandestine “Abusers Manual” being circulated. Frequently, once the woman has arrived in the US, the employer illegally demands she hand over her passport and other travel documents. If an employment contract exists, the official contract signed in the US Embassy abroad is often replaced with a new contract, stipulating longer hours and less pay. To make matters worse, even the false contract is subsequently ignored on payday.

Despite US labor laws, it is not uncommon to hear reports of women being paid 50 cents or a dollar an hour and, in other cases, forced to work for years with no pay at all. Many women find themselves working nearly around the clock, seven days a week. The exploitative employer also typically tells the worker that she may not make contact with her “companions” in the area, use the telephone, or leave the house unaccompanied. Often times, she is not provided with health insurance and social security, even if these benefits are deducted from her wages. Typically, if she complains, her employer threatens to send her home or turn her over to the police. To further complicate the matter, women who run away from their employer are immediately considered “out of status,” ineligible for other employment, and liable to deportation by the INS. For these women—many do not speak English and may be illiterate—life is lived as a virtual prisoner within the confines of the homes they clean.

Violations at times take on even more horrific forms. Increased reports of physical barter, have been filed, often disturbingly perpetrated by other women. Some domestic workers are given as gifts to the mistresses of diplomats or traded and loaned out by uncompanied. Many women suffer in silence due to a lack of knowledge of their rights and because they are uncertain of where to seek help. A loose network of churches, lawyers, social service agencies, and good Samaritans has served as a modem-day “underground railroad” for women attempting to escape their situation. Most women are only allowed out of the house on Sundays, making churches frequently the first stop on the path to freedom. One Catholic sister has filed on several hundred G-5 and A-3 workers she has assisted over the years beginning in the 1970s. Other good Samaritans—some foreigners, some Americans—just happen to encounter domestic workers who have been abused and take the

A Ghanaian woman reported that the American wife of her employer did not refer to her by her name but rather as "the Creature." Yet another woman reported being called "the Slave."
analysis

The Campaign for Migrant Domestic Workers Rights’ coalition is made up of women’s groups, human rights and community-based organizations, and legal and social service agencies, each attempting to provide different facets of assistance to enslaved and/or exploited women. For example, one Campaign member, Casa de Maryland, currently runs a Promoters’ Rights Project where former domestic workers—armed with determination and an arsenal of legal literature in Spanish—comb the streets, markets and parks looking for potential abused domestic workers in order to educate them about their rights. Various law firms conduct research on the legislation while others volunteer their time to file criminal and civil cases on behalf of these women. As publicity around me issue increases so does the need for more service organizations.

Rather than ending the visa program, the Campaign firmly believes it should be reformed to ensure that each woman’s rights are protected. In theory, the program represents one of the few ways women from developing nations can enter the United Stales and earn a decent wage. The worldwide stratification of poverty spawned by economic globalization has caused many women to search for job opportunities abroad and, ideally, this visa program could provide much needed relief for women from poverty-stricken areas. However, in its current manifestation, the program fails to provide adequate protections to its visa holders.

One procedural reform the Campaign has been pushing for in its negotiations is an independent monitoring system. The whereabouts of G-5 and A-3 workers continues to remain a well-kept secret, making them some of the most vulnerable and easily exploited sectors of the American workforce. The Campaign has proposed establishing a counseling and monitoring program that mirrors some of the requirements and benefits of the au pair visa program. The au pair program—a Congress-sponsored program which brings in nannies from overseas to live in households of U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents—requires that both the nannies and their employers have periodic contact with registered social service agencies. The difference between the domestic worker program and the au pair program—which largely recruits middle-class white girls from Europe carries significant racial and class implications that more than likely play into the way in which these two groups of women are treated. Access to independent social workers, lawyers and monitors would provide the live-in domestic workers with a system of safeguards to protect their legal rights and ensure that their employers comply with contract conditions and/or U.S. labor laws. So far, both the World Bank and IMF have rejected these recommendations. For women working for ambassadors and embassy staff, their abuse situation becomes even more problematic when working for individuates who are protected by diplomatic immunity and are, therefore, unable to be sued by the housekeeper.

The Campaign for Migrant Domestic Workers Rights is currently staging a two-pronged approach to challenge and change this form of domestic slavery. By organizing Congressional briefings on the Hill, conducting Lawyers Workshops and negotiating with international institutions, the Campaign is employing top-down policy tactics to facility improvements. At the same time, grassroots organizing efforts and the creation of a “Legal Rights” pamphlet to be distributed in several languages works towards empowerment from the ground up.

If you want more information about domestic workers rights, contact the Campaign for Migrant Domestic Workers Rights on 202-234-9382, ext. 232.

by joy zarempka

Thanks goes to the "foremothers" of the Campaign for Migrant Domestic Workers Rights. Martha Honey and Sarah Anderson, two women at the Institute for Policy Studies who were instrumental in the founding the organization.