

Oppressed Nannies: State Department Orders Embassies to Clean Up Their Act

On a freezing, blustery afternoon last December, a handful of mostly poor, Spanish-speaking women gathered in Dupont Circle to publicly shame Washington's powerful diplomatic community.

Bundled up in the cold — and armed with nothing more than a bullhorn and a few handmade picket signs — the women joined hands and sang “We Shall Overcome,” “This Little Light of Mine” and some new, original ditties to dramatize their particular struggle.

“Fighting for justice and dignity / and domestic worker rights / listen up diplomats cuz you must be / ready for our fight,” their voices rang out, oddly enough to the tune of “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.” “We’ve seen too much injustice to stay silent anymore / we won’t stand for more abuses / STOP mistreatment and excuses!”

Peruvian immigrant Herminia Servat then stepped up to the microphone and addressed the few shivering bystanders who had wandered over to see what was going on.

“Here we are in the capital of the free world, and it’s incredible that human rights are not respected,” she declared in Spanish, as local activist Ashwini Jaisingh enthusiastically translated into English. “That’s why we’re here today — to ask that they respect our rights.”

Domestic workers like Servat, she said, “come here from their home countries with big dreams, but when they arrive, they’re deceived by the diplomats and those dreams are shattered. I could spend hours talking about the injustices these women face working in the homes of diplomats.”

When the little protest was over, Servat and her friends marched up Massachusetts Avenue, singing Christmas carols, shouting “Sí Se Puede!” (yes we can) and handing out “Feliz Navidad” cards to bewildered staffers at the embassies of Chile, Peru, India, Indonesia, Philippines and Trinidad and Tobago.

“Diplomats are not immune to shame,” said Jaisingh, a caseworker with CASA de Maryland Inc. who is originally from India. “It’s unfortunate we have to do this, but it’s the only way we have to bring these cases to the table.”

Those “cases” almost always involve minority women who charge that they’ve been slaving away for high-level diplomats who threaten them with retribution if they make waves. Experts say they know of dozens of such women, both in the Washington and New York metropolitan areas — whose accusations range from deprivation of wages to verbal, physical and even sexual abuse.

A July 2008 Government Accountability Office report identified 42 cases of abuse by diplomats over an eight-year period, though the report also stressed that the actual number was probably higher. Many incidents of abuse by foreign diplomats here likely remain unreported because their victims are too frightened or intimidated to complain, especially because diplomatic immunity is involved.

Although the relatively small number of cases hardly indicates a wide-scale scourge within the vast diplomatic corps, which employs thousands of workers without incident, at the same time these charges clearly represent more than just a few bad apples. The allegations of abuse have recently prompted the State Department to pay greater attention to the issue, and many advocates say the exploitation of domestic workers by foreign diplomats in the United States makes up a disproportionate share of their abuse caseloads.

Jessica Salsbury spent four years as a staff attorney at CASA de Maryland in Silver Spring, Md. She's now with another nonprofit agency, the Tahirih Justice Center in Falls Church, Va.

"The facts of these cases are strikingly similar, regardless of geography," Salsbury told *The Diplomat*. "Time after time, clients have said to me, 'If I had only known that what was happening to me was illegal, I would have left much sooner.' If you truly are a victim of trafficking, you don't have much access to the outside world."

Typically, she said, "these diplomats are immune from lawsuits [under the 1961 Vienna Convention], so most cases don't go forward. There are only a few limited exceptions to diplomatic immunity."

Eva Raudes, a 36-year-old woman from the Nicaraguan town of Matagalpa, worked for an African diplomatic family in Sterling, Va., from December 2008 to March 2009.

"They fought constantly. I was stuck all day with the kids," she recalled. "When the wife got angry, she'd lock me in the bathroom with her kids. She was a very angry woman."

Raudes, who speaks only Spanish, doesn't remember which country in Africa her boss was from. She does know that she worked 14 hours a day and was paid only 0 a week — a fraction of what her contract stipulated.

"After three months I couldn't take it anymore," she said. "They were mentally sick."

Now, Raudes is stuck in Maryland without a visa — and not enough cash to buy a plane ticket home, let alone support her four children back in Nicaragua.

"Our clients make on average only 0 a month, so it's rare they even have bank accounts," said Kim Propeack, director of community organizing and political action at CASA de Maryland. "Most of our clients are Hispanic women, but we also have several active participants from Togo, Mozambique, Nigeria and Congo. At any time, we have two or three women actively pursuing litigation or negotiation."

Ana Maria Bata Huamani is one of those young women. A native of Arequipa, Peru, the shy 26-year-old arrived in Maryland last June after five years as a domestic worker in Santiago, Chile. She was looking forward to her job as a nanny for a Chilean diplomat posted to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

"I was supposed to work Monday to Friday, eight hours a day for .41 per hour, taking care of her kids and cleaning the house.

"But things weren't as they seemed," she tearfully recalled one evening at the Long Branch Community Center in Silver Spring, where CASA de Maryland was sponsoring a Christmas party. "They cursed me from the day I arrived here."

Bata said the Chilean diplomat's mother was a living nightmare, criticizing everything she did. She ended up working Monday to Saturday, 12, 13 or sometimes 14 hours a day, from 7 a.m. to 8 or 9 p.m.

"They only counted the hours the kids were in the house. But I'm timid, so I didn't say anything," the young woman explained. "They told me I had no rights. She said that thanks to her, I was in this country, so I should shut up."

Barely five months into the job, her employer accused Bata of infecting her 11-year-old daughter with swine flu and promptly fired her. Now she's unemployed and in this country illegally. Even worse, Bata says she is owed some ,000 by her former employer, whom she claims is holding her money at the IDB credit union.

"She opened an account the day I arrived. I wanted to have it only in my name, but she said no," said Bata, who hasn't sent a penny back home. "I can't touch that money."

Christian Hodges-Nugent, consul-general at the Chilean Embassy, told *The Diplomat* that he isn't familiar with Bata's case, but he seemed sympathetic to her plight. He also explained that the practice of using foreign domestic workers is becoming much more rare given the complexities involved.

"In general, it's becoming more and more difficult every day to bring domestic workers from home," Hodges-Nugent said. "The paperwork is excessive, you have to pay health insurance and it's very expensive. It could easily cost more than ,000 a month if you include food and living expenses."

Manuel Talavera Espinar, deputy chief of mission at the Peruvian Embassy, said his staff avoids this problem altogether by hiring locally.

"Most of our diplomats these days aren't bringing domestic workers from Peru," said Talavera, unable to recall a single staffer who's done so in the three years he has served in the United States. "In places like Washington, it's cheaper to contract a local company to clean the house than sponsor someone from your own country."

But not if you're paying your nanny next to nothing.

Tia, a 32-year-old woman from Indonesia who asked that she be identified only by her nickname, lives in a Wheaton, Md., high-rise with her American boyfriend.

In 1997, Tia was brought here on an A-3 visa to work as a live-in housekeeper for the country's military attaché in suburban Virginia. She said she was paid the equivalent of a month in Indonesian rupiahs. In fact, the money was supposed to be given to Tia's family through a complicated scheme arranged by her uncle, who was supposedly building a house in Jakarta for his hard-working niece.

"I worked seven days a week, without any days off," said Tia, who didn't speak a word of English when she arrived. "Sometimes, I didn't get enough sleep. In the beginning, they were really nice, but after six months, the wife started being mean to me. I don't know why. Nothing I did was right. She yelled at me, and used bad words in Indonesian. She made me cry every day. Sometimes I hid under the table, in the laundry room, in the bathroom or in the basement. I prayed to God every night to get away from this problem."

After a year and three months, Tia's employer returned to Jakarta, and she found a job with another diplomat, under the same A-3 visa. Conditions with the second family were even worse, though the salary was better — 500 rupiahs per month (worth to).

But Tia claims she never saw any of that money anyway, nor did her mother back in Indonesia.

"I wasn't allowed to go out of the house. They put an alarm on, and a few times the alarm went off and the police came," Tia said. "She had a very big house and she kept adding more work. I couldn't use the phone. I had no friends. I suffered until someone came from Indonesia to replace me. I was so happy to get out of that house prison."

To this day, Tia is unwilling to confront her uncle about the missing money, and she's never complained to the Indonesian Embassy about what happened.

“I don’t want to look back. Now I’m working with American people, making enough money to support myself. My life is so much better,” said Tia, who exudes a cheery optimism despite her illegal status here. “I’m only telling my story so someone else doesn’t have to feel what I had to go through.”

Domestic workers arrive in the United States via one of three types of visas. The most common is the A-3, given to employees of embassies, foreign missions to the Organization of American States, and anyone else entitled to diplomatic immunity. G-5 visas are granted to the domestic employees of foreigners working for nongovernmental organizations. Less common are B-2 visitor visas, given to domestic workers whose bosses are American citizens here.

“Between 95 and 99 percent of these women work for employees from their own country,” said CASA de Maryland’s Propeack. “Almost always it’s taking care of kids, so they typically work 12 to 14 hours a day, at least six days a week.

“They enter this relationship feeling very positive about each other,” she added. “Oftentimes, these women have worked for this particular family before, so the details are not clear. And when things go sour, there’s no commitment that can be relied on.”

By law, these domestic workers must be paid at least .25 an hour, which is the federal minimum wage. And in Maryland — where many diplomats reside — employers are required to pay overtime to live-in domestic workers. They may also deduct up to 7 a week for housing and other expenses, said Propeack.

In July 2008, Montgomery County officials enacted the nation’s first law that protects and regulates the employment of domestic workers. The measure — which followed a four-year campaign supported by CASA and 30 other organizations — grants nannies and housekeepers the right to a written contract that specifies hours of work, pay, vacation time and many other fundamental workplace issues.

“We see this as the first step to improvement in the working conditions of mostly women suffering extreme levels of labor abuses in the workplace,” said Gustavo Torres, executive director of CASA, which has long argued that diplomats and international financial institutions commit most of the abuses in the D.C. metro area.

Added Propeack: “For these workers, it’s a big sacrifice to leave behind their own children in order to take care of a diplomat’s kids. This is not a typical migration story where people cross borders without permission. Domestic workers see this as a temporary departure from their family so they can help out financially.”

Araceli Martínez-Olguín is a staff attorney at the New York-based American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which is also heavily involved in the issue. “For the last several years, we’ve been lobbying Congress to get additional protections for these workers,” she told *The Diplomat*. “They’re only being allowed in the U.S. because the State Department lets them and initially interviewed all these folks [before granting them visas to come here].”

Martínez-Olguín said 93 percent of all domestic workers in New York are “women of color” — which includes blacks, Hispanics and South Asians, among others. In the Washington area, according to CASA, some 50 percent of domestic workers are Spanish-speaking women principally from South America.

The ACLU is currently involved in a lawsuit against the government of Kuwait, in which an Indian nanny was allegedly sexually abused and tortured by a Kuwaiti diplomat assigned to the United Nations. The U.S. District Court of New York entered a judgment against the diplomat; the case is still pending.

In another high-profile case, Lauro L. Baja Jr., a former Philippine ambassador to the United Nations — and twice president of the U.N. Security Council — was sued by Marichu Suarez Baoanan, his one-time maid. The 40-year-old Baoanan accused Baja and his wife of bringing her to the United States under false pretenses, promising to help her find a job as a registered nurse. Instead, Baoanan claimed she ended up toiling 126-hour workweeks as a virtual slave, without pay.

In denying the charge, Baja invoked diplomatic immunity. But last June, a federal judge in Manhattan stripped him of that protection because Baoanan's duties "benefited the Baja family's personal household needs, and are unrelated to Baja's diplomatic functions."

That case put a spotlight on a trafficking problem that, until recently, has gotten little attention even in Washington — which is home to thousands of diplomats accredited to at least 170 foreign embassies and a multitude of international organizations ranging from the World Bank to the Organization of American States.

"You have a population of workers in a racial category different from those who are hiring them," said Martínez-Olguín. "The [diplomats] fail to see these women as equals. They're laboring in your home, nobody's watching, and they're in a position to be severely exploited."

Luis CdeBaca is trying to change that. An ambassador-at-large in the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, he told *The Diplomat* that it is "critically important" — as the 10th anniversary of the U.N. protocol against human trafficking approaches — "that we take steps to make sure that someone who comes here to work for a diplomat is as protected as possible."

In years past, he said, most allegations of trafficking by diplomats centered on the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and other Washington-area financial institutions.

"But in the last few years, we've heard allegations coming out of the missions themselves," CdeBaca said in a telephone interview. "There have been 45 or 50 such allegations, which is frankly way too much. It hasn't been in the hundreds or thousands, but it's still of great concern."

So much so that last September, CdeBaca — following a directive from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton — personally met with the entire Washington diplomatic corps to brief ambassadors on new domestic worker regulations that took effect the following month.

"We're going to try to work on the front end to make sure there are structures in place that would prevent abuse in the first place," he said. "There's no longer a presumption that every member of a diplomatic mission will be able to have a domestic worker."

The diplomatic circular that became law Oct. 15 outlines the strict new regulations that the State Department has put in place to implement the 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA), which has specific sections dealing with A-3/G-5 visa holders.

Among the key provisions of these new guidelines:

- * The chief of mission must submit pre-notification to State before a domestic worker can obtain a visa to work for a mission member.
- * If State has credible evidence that a mission member who seeks to replace a domestic worker or add to his/her staff has "failed to fulfill his/her obligations to a former or current employee," the department may deny the visa request.
- * Mission members employing domestic workers must provide a written contract; that contract must include specific provisions outlined in the circular.
- * TVPRA requires the secretary of state to "suspend for such period as the secretary determines necessary, the issuance of A-3 or G-5 visas to applicants seeking to work for officials of a diplomatic mission or international organization, if the secretary determines that there is credible evidence that one or more employees of such mission have abused or exploited one or more non-immigrants holding an A-3 or G-5 visa, and that the diplomatic mission or international organization has tolerated such

actions.”

* And consistent with the general expectation that mission members pay their just debts, they are expected to pay any award of damages in cases brought against them by their former domestic workers.

“With these new regulations, we don’t just look at the individual diplomat, but the entire mission,” said Ambassador CdeBaca. “On one hand, there’s a perception that diplomatic immunity forecloses everything. But the reality is that an investigation occurs, and if there’s evidence that — were it not for diplomatic immunity — an indictment would be returned, then at that point we would ask for a waiver. And if they don’t grant that waiver, we would declare that diplomat persona non grata. These are tools in our arsenal.”

So far though, State has yet to deny or revoke a diplomatic visa or implement sanctions as a result of an abuse allegation.

“We take them as they come,” CdeBaca said. “We don’t have a particular target list, nor would we. We have to look at all the allegations.”

Salsbury, the attorney at Virginia’s Tahirih Justice Center, said she applauds the Obama White House for eliminating the legal loopholes that previously allowed officials of foreign embassies to abuse their servants with impunity.

“They’ve made a lot of steps in the right direction in terms of preventing future abuse by diplomats. This law requires State to take active notice of serious offenders, and its approach is to hold diplomatic missions responsible,” she said. “The next phase is real and serious repercussions for countries that downplay the severity of the crimes occurring within their midst.”

Thirty-year-old Zipora Mazengo is hoping to bring serious repercussions down on her former employers for the exploitation she says she endured at their hands.

In April 2007, the Tanzanian woman took the bold step of suing her former bosses, Alan and Stella Mzengi, in U.S. District Court. She won a judgment of $\$201,059,348.79$ in unpaid wages, damages and attorneys’ fees — but cannot collect because the Mzengis have long since returned to their East African nation.

At the time of Mazengo’s employment, Alan Mzengi was minister for consular affairs at the Embassy of Tanzania in Washington. According to the lawsuit, Mazengo’s contract called for her to work eight hours a day, five days a week, performing “child care and normal household work” at the couple’s Bethesda, Md., home. She was to be paid a month plus overtime at 1.5 times the rate for regular days. The contract also provided that Mazengo would “get two full days off per week” and two weeks of paid vacation, and that she would be “free to leave the [Mzengis’] house at all times other than regular or overtime working hours.”

When her contract was executed on June 12, 2000, Mazengo was a 20-year-old domestic worker in the Tanzanian capital of Dar es Salaam. The contract had to be read to her in Swahili because it was written in English, a language she did not understand. Fifteen days later — with an A-3 visa stamped in her passport — she arrived in the United States.

“Before she even left the airport, Mr. Mzengi seized her passport and her copy of the employment contract,” the lawsuit alleged. “Instead of working eight hours per day, five days per week, Ms. Mazengo routinely labored from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m., seven days per week. Ms. Mazengo slept in the same room as the Mzengis’ infant child and took care of the baby during the night.”

In addition to looking after the couple’s three children, Mazengo was responsible for cleaning the diplomats’ six-bedroom, four-bathroom house, cooking family meals, washing the dishes, and performing other chores like raking leaves and shoveling snow.

“The Mzengis mistreated Ms. Mazengo throughout the four years that she worked in their home,” according to her lawsuit. “Ms. Mzengi would yell at her and on one occasion struck Ms. Mazengo on the face for not preparing Mr. Mzengi’s breakfast on time. Immediately following this incident, Ms. Mzengi sent Ms. Mazengo outside in the cold January temperatures even though Ms. Mazengo was only wearing a short-sleeved shirt and shorts.”

The lawsuit further alleges that the Mzengis refused to allow their housekeeper to return to Tanzania when her sister was dying, and that they forced her to do outdoor chores — such as shoveling snow — even though she couldn't wear shoes because of ingrown toenails.

“It was three years before the Mzengis took her to a doctor, at which time the doctor informed Ms. Mazengo that if she had waited any longer to seek medical treatment, she might have lost her toes,” according to the complaint. “Ms. Mazengo needed surgery to fix her condition and her doctor told her to stay off her feet. Despite this advice, the Mzengis put her to work on the same day she had surgery.”

Mazengo finally escaped the Mzengi household in August 2004, when she confided in a customer of the catering business that the Mzengis operated on the side. That customer sent a taxi for the young lady. Since her escape, the suit alleges, she's suffered from insomnia, inability to eat, depression and headaches.

“A lot of the abuse you see is all about controlling people,” said Mazengo's pro bono attorney, Martina Vandenberg. “I've heard stories of domestic workers sent into the front yard to cut the grass with scissors. Some of the things the traffickers make people do are all about humiliating the worker and trying to control her.”

Vandenberg said “a very fierce advocacy campaign” is now under way to make Tanzania the first country to be suspended from the A-3/G-5 visa program under the State Department's stricter new regulations. But CdeBaca of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons declined to speculate on whether that will actually happen.

Nevertheless, Vandenberg noted that the newest provisions in the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act “now give victims of exploitation the right to stay in the country while they are suing their perpetrators. Once you leave your employer, you're automatically severed from your [A-3 or G-5] visa, but this provides a method for people to stay in the United States in order to pursue remedies against the traffickers.”

Ombeni Y. Sefue, Tanzania's ambassador to the United States, insists Mazengo v. Mzengi has “nothing to do” with his mission.

“This young lady was not employed by the embassy. It was a private contract between Ms. Mazengo and her employers,” said Sefue, who became ambassador in July 2007, three months after Mazengo filed her case.

“My government asked me to bring Mr. Mzengi and Ms. Mazengo together to establish exactly what her claims were, so that if her claims were genuine, they could be settled. We didn't want this cloud hanging out there under the name of Tanzania,” he told us. “But apparently I didn't succeed, because her lawyers did not want her to come to the embassy. It was like they were implying that they didn't have confidence in me.”

Vandenberg, of the Washington law firm Jenner & Block, says that's absurd. “I met with a representative of the ambassador and we discussed the case at the Tanzanian Embassy,” the lawyer told us. “The ambassador then demanded that Ms. Mazengo meet with him at the embassy. Any person knows that the moment you walk onto embassy grounds, you are essentially within the control of that embassy.”

Vandenberg added: “Mr. Mzengi was an embassy employee, and we were not going to go to his place of employment to be questioned by the Tanzanian ambassador in a building considered inviolable under international law. We found another law firm on Dupont Circle, about two blocks from the embassy, that offered the use of a conference room. We offered to meet the ambassador at this neutral location, but he declined. The locations of those discussions became an excuse for the Tanzanians not to cooperate.”

She added that the African nation could have waived Mzengi's immunity for criminal purposes because there was an ongoing criminal investigation. And it could have waived his immunity for civil purposes.

“It did not,” she said. “If diplomats engage in commercial activities, they lose that immunity. We were prepared to litigate that Mzengi had surrendered his immunity under the Vienna Convention because of the commercial catering business run out of the Mzengi home.”

Regardless of the lawsuit, Tanzania’s man in Washington says he’s inclined to believe his former employee, who has called Mazengo’s allegations all lies.

“Mr. Mzengi never had any chance to dispute these charges, so it’s whatever this lady says. And to me, that is not justice,” the envoy complained. “I have reason to doubt her story. If I were convinced it was a strong case, maybe I’d have a different opinion. But frankly, I don’t know what’s true and what’s not.”

Sefue suggested that human rights lawyers, not abusive diplomats, are the real problem.

“Even if Mzengi didn’t pay this lady a single penny, the total amount she could claim wouldn’t be more than ,000 [for lost wages] — and now the award is more than [2010February.Nannies.txt](#) million. Who takes most of that money? A lot of people are getting involved, and things may not be as they seem. We’re not sure whose interests are being served in this case. I think the best way was the way I wanted to deal with it.”

In any event, the ambassador predicted Mazengo will have a hard time collecting her seven-figure award, considering the U.S. judicial system has no jurisdiction in Tanzania.

“You know, we have lots of serious cases of human trafficking and modern-day slavery,” he mused. “To think you can make a case out of this is to trivialize the serious problems we all have to deal with. This does not deserve to be used as an example.”

Perhaps the most serious example of abuse charges ever lodged against Washington’s diplomatic community involve three women from India who worked for Maj. Waleed Al Saleh, former military attaché to the Embassy of Kuwait (also see “Diplomatic Immunity Poses Big Hurdle for Domestic Workers” in the March 2007 issue of *The Washington Diplomat*).

The trio — Mani Kumari Sabbithi, Joaquina Quadros and Gila Sixtina Fernandes — were all employed by al-Saleh and his wife, Maysaa Al Omar, at their sprawling mansion in suburban McLean, Va.

“In the summer of 2005, the three women were brought to the United States under false pretenses, where they were subjected to physical and psychological abuse by the Al Saleh family and forced to work against their will,” said the ACLU, which sued the Kuwaiti government as well as the diplomat and his wife for human trafficking.

According to the ACLU, the couple confined the women in their home, confiscated their passports, and forced them to work 16 to 19 hours a day, seven days a week. They wired 2 per month to India, to the families of Sabbithi and Quadros, but paid the women themselves nothing. Fernandes’s family received 6 a month, but like the other two, never saw any of it.

“Ms. Al Omar verbally and physically abused Ms. Sabbithi on a regular basis, slapping her, pushing her into a wall, pulling her hair and hitting her with heavy objects. On numerous occasions, Ms. Al Omar threatened to kill Ms. Sabbithi and send her defiled body back to India,” according to an ACLU fact sheet on the case.

“On Oct. 31, 2005, Ms. Al Omar became enraged with Ms. Sabbithi for incorrectly preparing a meal for the children, pulled her hair and threatened to cut off her tongue. Mr. Al Saleh then came into the kitchen, yelled at Ms. Sabbithi and pushed her so violently that she struck her head on a table and lost consciousness. That same day, Ms. Sabbithi fled and sought refuge at a neighbor’s house.”

Likewise, Quadros was prohibited from leaving the McLean house alone, opening the front door, approaching the windows or even looking outside. On Jan. 18, 2006, Quadros and Fernandes fled the diplomats’ mansion together and in January 2007, along

with Sabbithi, filed suit against Al Saleh and his wife.

Nine months later, the diplomats also escaped — back to their Persian Gulf emirate, where stories of wealthy Kuwaiti families mistreating servants are as ubiquitous as oil wells — rather than face prosecution without the benefit of diplomatic immunity.

Kuwait's ambassador in Washington, Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, declined to return the numerous messages this reporter left with his secretary.

“Some of the diplomats who do this are repeat offenders,” said Vandenberg, who has represented trafficked domestic workers in several cases. “It's by and large the victims themselves who tell us they're not the first ones, that others who have been there before them.”

But, she added, “unless they're lucky enough to find an NGO to support them and an attorney who will launch a civil suit on their behalf, they're absolutely stuck.”

CASA's Propeack said she's seen cases of female servants being raped or sexually abused, but she added that those incidents generally don't involve embassy staff.

“What's much more common is controls on the workers' movements, inability to use the telephone, inability to leave the house, verbal assaults like ‘you're worthless, you're stupid,’” she said. “Historically, the State Department has been uninterested in dealing with these cases.”

CASA, which operates differently than a traditional law firm, said 80 percent of the members of its Mujeres Buscando Justicia (Women Seeking Justice) project are former live-in diplomatic domestic workers. The agency's budget for this program is only ,000 to ,000 a year — less than half the salary of a typical mid-level foreign diplomat posted to Washington.

“The diplomatic community has been very generous with us, and this is the irony,” said Propeack. “Bolivia is a perfect example. We had a wretched case involving a Bolivian Embassy employee, and then there was a change in government. When the new ambassador [Gustavo Guzmán, who has himself since been declared persona non grata for political reasons] came in, they immediately started scrambling to resolve the dispute. Now the embassy opens its doors to us on International Domestic Worker Day.”

Propeack said she's never met a live-in domestic worker who's labored less than 60 or 70 hours a week — and that, she said, is being generous. “We once represented an Ethiopian woman who was brought in to work for an NGO employee. She worked seven years without pay, providing elder care,” charged Propeack. She added that her most frequent complaints involve the Organization of American States, though CASA has also pursued cases against employees of the IDB and Intelsat.

On rare occasions — about 10 or 12 times a year — CASA rescues women in potentially dangerous situations.

“Typically, the employers back down immediately,” she said. “I had one case eight years ago in Howard County involving a girl from Togo, where the homeowners slammed the door in my face and would not allow the worker to come out. We were very scared. We had no idea what he was doing with her. But half an hour later, the door opened and she just walked out.”

Usually, though, the minimal threat is that if the unhappy nanny leaves, her employer will report her to immigration authorities. “They almost always say that to the worker when she complains about pay or working conditions,” noted Propeack. “I've never seen a case where the employer has not confiscated the worker's passport.”

That would make Maria Lloisa Gil one of the lucky ones.

Known to her friends as Mitzi, the spunky, confident 38-year-old Filipina shares a comfortable Rockville, Md., house with two other

women from her country. A painting of the Virgin Mary adorns one wall, while a fireplace graces the living room and colorful souvenir plates from Florida, Georgia and New York decorate the communal kitchen.

It's a far cry from Gil's life three years ago, when she arrived on a flight from Manila, carrying a newly issued A-3 visa and a notarized contract to work for Oren Sagir, a security attaché at the Israeli Embassy.

"When I was still in the Philippines, I was sent a contract that I signed, of course," she said in fluent English. "It said my salary would be 4 per week excluding housing and travel expenses. But when I got here, they sat me down and told me I'd be receiving the same as other domestic workers in my circumstance: 0 per month plus 0 a month for housing."

Sagir and his wife Adi immediately put their new nanny to work, caring for their five-month-old baby, cleaning their Rockville, Md., apartment, washing the dishes and cooking for the family. Gil charged that she ended up working 11 hours a day but was not paid overtime as stipulated in the contract.

"I worked for them because I was here already and didn't have any choice," she told *The Diplomat*. "They never paid me by check, only in cash. Once I overheard them saying they would pay me in cash because they were afraid of having problems in the future."

Unlike most other nannies here, Gil didn't live at her employer's home — which meant that she walked 45 minutes each way to and from her Twinbrook residence to save bus fare.

"I came here to send money back home, but I didn't because my living expenses were not enough to let me do that," Gil said, noting that while the Sagirs never physically abused her, they certainly didn't treat her like a member of the family. "I couldn't live with them because they told me they did not want me staying with them."

Mostly, she said, "this is an issue of them violating my contract and threatening to send me home if I caused problems. They tried to take my passport, but luckily I talked them out of it. I did not give it to them."

Gil was also lucky in that her new boyfriend, Richard Majuk — introduced to her by a mutual acquaintance — took a keen interest in her predicament. "She was a little coy with me when we first met. She said she was working for the Israeli Embassy," said Majuk, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Kazakhstan stationed in Iraq on contract for the U.S. government as an English instructor. "Ironically, I'm a very strong supporter of Israel and have been to the Holy Land. So when she started keeping these crazy hours, I asked her what she was doing. Finally, she relented and told me what her job really was. I was outraged."

Gil said she wasn't allowed to make phone calls or have friends over. "They forbade me from using the computer or any communications. It was just work from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. — 11 hours of straight work — and sometimes later than that," she said.

"Amazingly, when I finally got the courage to go to the Philippine Embassy and ask for help, the labor attaché there discouraged me from complaining. She said I should be thankful I'm here in the U.S.A.," Gil recalled. "Even my friends didn't want me to cause any trouble. They advised me to stay and finish my contract."

Sofronio Cortel, an attaché at the Philippine Embassy who's been quietly lobbying on Gil's behalf, declined to get into the particulars of her case. "We try to help our Philippine nationals, especially domestic workers, the best we can," he said. "But we are not in a position to disclose any details. As far as I'm concerned, we are assisting her in an appropriate manner."

The Israeli Embassy refused to discuss the ex-nanny's case at all, other than to say that Oren Sagir "is a private person" who left his diplomatic post more than a year ago.

"This is a labor issue — an issue for the State Department — and we adhere to these laws and regulations in very strict fashion, like any other diplomatic mission," said Israeli Embassy spokesman Jonathan Peled. "There's nothing more I can comment on."

But that's not good enough for Gil and her boyfriend, who have determined that Gil's former Israeli employers owe her ,493, based on per hour, times the number of hours she worked each day, plus .50 times the estimated overtime she put in throughout the course of her seven-month stint working for the Sagirs.

After resigning, Gil sent her former boss a letter asking for her back wages. When she didn't receive a reply, Gil asked a Philippine law firm to help her with the case. Several months later, her attorney heard from John Levi — a Chicago lawyer representing the Sagirs — offering to settle out-of-court for ,000.

If she didn't accept that offer, Gil said she was warned that the Sagirs would counter-sue her for neglecting and abusing their baby. Deeply insulted, she sensed that was nothing more than an intimidation tactic and held out for the full amount.

A year later, the Sagirs upped the ante to ,000, but by then Gil's deadline had long passed and she quickly rejected that final offer.

"The Israelis have been so closed-minded in not settling this quietly and quickly," a clearly frustrated Majuk told us. "It's so arrogant of them to offer so much less than what she was asking, and to think they're being philanthropic."

Majuk, who accuses the Israeli Embassy of "turning a blind eye" and "hiding behind a legal fig leaf," launched his own mini-PR campaign, writing letters to local newspapers including *The Diplomat* and *Washington Jewish Week*. He also contacted Secretary of State Clinton, Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and the State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

In addition, the couple wrote directly to two Israeli ambassadors, Sallai Meridor and the current Israeli envoy, Michael Oren, though neither one replied. Ironically, in July 2006 — five months before Gil began working for the Sagirs — Israeli experts met with their counterparts from other Middle Eastern nations in Vienna to draft an action plan to fight human trafficking in the region.

Majuk concedes that, when compared to its Arab neighbors, Israel is hardly the Great Satan in such matters. In Lebanon, according to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, at least 95 domestic workers have died since January 2007, of which 40 have been classified by the embassies of the migrants as suicides; another 24 were caused by workers falling from high buildings, often while trying to escape their abusive employers.

In September 2008, the Philippine labor secretary lifted an eight-month ban on sending workers to Jordan after setting a minimum wage of 0 a month in the hopes of eliminating abuse and exploitation. And Kuwait's track record when it comes to its own diplomats' treatment of nannies and housekeepers appears to speak for itself.

None of that lets the Israelis off the hook, in Majuk's opinion.

"Maria is apolitical and seeks no affiliation with the Palestinian cause in Gaza or elsewhere," the affable English teacher said of his girlfriend. "But the Israeli Embassy risks drawing such analogies of mistreatment by other activists, due to its failure to confront these alleged hiring violations."

Gil acknowledges that many women have experienced far worse than her, yet have accepted their circumstances quietly. "The only thing that fuels me now is that I think I can help other people."

In the meantime, Gil has found a way to remain in the United States legally: She's now the catering director of a Rockville food management company that's acting as her official sponsor while her green card is being processed.

"It's pure luck that I have a job right now. It's been a struggle for me. I don't have any money." Asked what she wants, Gil responded quickly: "Full compensation and either a letter of apology or a public statement that the Israeli Embassy will review their internal hiring policies for foreign nationals and take whatever corrective measures are necessary.

"I'll talk to President Obama if I have to," she vowed. "I know that's farfetched, but I'm not doing this only for me. I want to show

other domestic workers that we can fight back. This will go on for years and years unless somebody like me speaks up.”

About the Author

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