

“SHE TOLD THEM I WAS A LAZY, NO-GOOD IMMIGRANT, LIVING OFF THE WAGES SHE WAS PAYING ME AND REFUSING TO LEAVE

SUBURBAN slavery

REAL investigates this horror hidden behind closed doors across the country

Year in, year out legions of women are brought to this country to work as live-in servants. While some are treated well, many others may work 12-15 hour days for as little as £50 per week, or in the worst cases, for nothing more than a roof over their heads.

‘There’s no question there is a problem with domestic slavery in the UK,’ says Beth Herzfeld of Anti-Slavery International. ‘It’s very much hidden though because of the nature of domestic work. We only know of the ones enslaved if they escape.’

Maids can be brought to the UK by employers but they’re also trafficked here as slaves, coaxed by ruthless slave-rings who prey on vulnerable people, or lured with promises of good wages or education which never materialise.

Kalayaan (‘Freedom’ in the Philippine language

Tagalog), is a London-based charity that helps migrant domestic workers who find themselves in trouble in the UK. In shocking figures from 2004-5, Kalayaan found that more than one third of its clients reported experiencing physical abuse (slapping, spitting, punching, pulling of hair or kicking) from their employers, and the same amount said they had been kept either from leaving or entering their house at will.

Kate Roberts of Kalayaan says, ‘These domestic workers will be poor, and employers often think that work can be done cash in hand, informally, and they maintain control by withholding information about the worker’s immigration status. Passport retention can also happen.’

Kalayaan fears that proposed government changes to immigration policy, to take away migrant domestic workers’ right to change their employer and to renew their visa, will leave those who suffer abuse and

exploitation to endure their treatment in silence.

Currently, migrant domestic workers are covered by UK employment laws and Kalayaan workers spend a lot of time advising clients about their rights. But although many maids would challenge their employer because of ill treatment, Kate says they are often too terrified to do so in case they lose their job and visa and become homeless. Kate explains that returning ‘home’ is not always an option. ‘Families back home are depending on them for money – there is an image of, ‘You’re so lucky, going to Europe,’ she says. It’s hard for workers to go home and lose face by saying, ‘It’s not wonderful, it’s awful.’

USEFUL CONTACTS

- **Kalayaan.** Call 020 7243 2942.
- **Anti-Slavery International.** Call 020 7501 8920.

MADAM WORKED ME LIKE A SLAVE THEN KICKED ME OUT ONTO THE STREETS

Manori*, 56, from Sri Lanka, was brought as a maid to England and hoped to send money home to her family

Madam towered above me as I scrubbed her expensive floor; her perfectly made-up face, cold and hard. I was desperate to lie down – my fever was high and my body ached from head to toe. But as always, there was work to be done, or there’d be trouble: sneers, threats to send me back to Sri Lanka, and even less money than I was getting now.

‘Please take pity on me, I am so sick, let me rest,’ I begged. Madam, as all female employers are referred to in Greece, simply smirked and shoved a box of aspirins in my face. ‘Take as many as you like but you’re to carry on with your work,’ she barked. ‘If you don’t, I’ll send you home in disgrace without a penny for your precious children.’ At the mention of my four teenage children, guilt raged.

Since my husband had fallen ill four years earlier, and lost his job, I’d had to provide for the family and money was scarce back home. My sister had left Sri Lanka and worked as a maid in Greece. She told me how much money she made so I decided to go, too.

Heartbroken, I left my sick husband and children promising to send home money every month and return with enough savings to give us a bright prosperous future.

I found employment in the house of her employer’s friend, Mrs El-Solh*. She was an educated, beautiful 39-year-old woman, with a professional job, divorced with one son and a handsome boyfriend. But as Mrs El-Solh showed me around her palatial four-storey house, the class and cultural differences between us became obvious and she soon took advantage of my vulnerable position. Before long I was doing 14½-hour days, six days a week for approximately £179 per month.

There was never a day’s rest. Even when I learned my husband’s condition had deteriorated and he was dying, Madam wouldn’t give me time off to see him.

‘You’re such a bad liar, Manori,’ she laughed, refusing to believe me. I pleaded with her to trust me, but she wouldn’t and he died without me by his side. I sobbed thinking about my children back home alone and fatherless.

Only then unapologetic and grudgingly did she allow me to fly back to attend the funeral. But I barely had time to hug my children and grieve for my husband before I was flown back to resume my chores. As much as I hated leaving them I knew I had to make some money now more than ever.

Shortly after I returned to Greece, Madam decided to move to England and she asked me to go too. She promised a better life, better money, Sundays off and eight hour days. I agreed and went – only to be treated worse than ever.

I was alone and in a foreign country, barely spoke the language, wasn’t allowed out and on my first pay day I received even less than before. ‘You don’t need so much money to live on,’ was Madam’s reasoning.

“I LONGED TO SEE MY CHILDREN

Despite my pleas and the fact that she’d broken our employment contract she refused to pay me what she’d promised. I had no choice but to stay and earn money for my kids. I was totally and utterly alone and isolated. I wasn’t even allowed to phone or visit them. Sundays were the only days I had to myself and one day I stumbled across a nearby church – I’m not religious but went in anyway. I met the reverend, who seemed like a kind man and I ended up telling him everything.

He told me about an organisation called Kalayaan and explained how I could visit it. I secretly went to see them one Sunday and told them everything. They were so caring, told me about the Citizens Advice Bureau and said I could find another employer. They also said that Mrs El-Solh couldn’t send me home. I was entitled to stay in the UK and if she wanted me to leave she should write me a reference explaining that she couldn’t pay my salary.

Relieved but petrified, I went back and confronted Mrs El-Solh and told her my rights. She dismissed me instantly, ‘I brought you here from Sri Lanka, I will send you back to Sri Lanka,’ she said.

But I said that I wanted to stay in England until my visa expired, work for another employer and make good money. Still, she ignored my decision to leave and defeated, I retreated to my room in tears.

The atmosphere in the house was awful during the next few weeks and Mrs El-Solh became suspicious of my Sunday afternoon trips. She took my passport and tried to stop me leaving the house. She even took my door key away and said: ‘You cannot go out. Pack your things, I am sending you to Sri Lanka on Wednesday.’

Panic shot through me. I longed to see my children, but I couldn’t go home without a penny to my name. I had nowhere to go. Distressed, I pushed past her and fled to the church. Later when I returned, I knocked on the door and Madam let me in. She’d packed my things. I tried to stand up for myself, explained I had no money and that I’d be homeless but she called the Police. She told them I was a lazy, no-good immigrant, living off the wages she was paying me and refusing to leave.

When the Police arrived they told her to let me stay the night but at 5am, she stormed in and ordered me to leave in a furious voice. Terrified, I grabbed what little possessions I owned and went.

I was jobless and homeless. At 6am I took my suitcase and went to the church. I waited outside for the reverend. He looked after my belongings while I went to Kalayaan who quickly found me free emergency accommodation with four other lovely, friendly Sri Lankan women. It was so good to hear my own language again and be with people who understood me and treated me as an equal.

Kalayaan helped me find a better housekeeping and cleaning job in a house in London. Now I get paid £1000 a month, on time, into my bank account and I send money home to my children. I’m saving to make a better life for us when I return. I miss them so and haven’t seen them since my husband’s funeral more than two years ago, but I am planning to return to Sri Lanka to visit this December.

*Names have been changed