

# Domestic Workers In Montgomery Plead for Protection

By TIM CRAIG  
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When Gloria Ramos took a job as a live-in nanny for a Rockville family last year, she was told she would earn \$200 a week to care for three children. But Ramos, who emigrated from Ecuador five years ago, suddenly realized that caring for children was the easy part of her job.

She said she was forced to cook daily for seven members of the family. She found herself working as late as 3 a.m. to finish all her tasks. To make matters worse, her promised weekly paycheck often didn't materialize.

Three months later, Ramos quit.

"I was tired of so much abuse," Ramos, 25, told a Montgomery County Council committee yesterday.

Immigrant advocates say there are hundreds of other women in Montgomery County who are too scared, poor or naive to follow Ramos's path, making them in effect modern-day slaves. Often fearful of being deported or unemployed, these women endure exhausting work hours and, in some cases, physical and mental abuse to keep their jobs.

"We need to send a forceful message to employers that they need to start acting like employers," said Elizabeth Keyes, a staff attorney for Casa de Maryland, a Latino advocacy group.

See WORKERS, B4, Col. 1



BY PRESTON KERES — THE WASHINGTON POST

**Herminia Servat, a domestic worker originally from Peru, testifies before the Montgomery County Council about poor treatment she endured on the job and the need for benefits.**



BY PRESTON KERES — THE WASHINGTON POST

Domestic workers tell council members about being exploited while working in the homes of Montgomery residents.

# Domestic Workers Seek Help From Montgomery Council

WORKERS, From B1

"The employers range from middle-class families to high-ranking diplomats," she said. "Racism and sexism combined are the powerful forces domestic workers are struggling against to attain simple human dignity."

The advocacy group is asking the council to protect such domestic workers with far-reaching legislation that would establish a living wage for such employees of at least \$10.50 an hour, unless they also receive medical insurance. The proposal also would mandate paid holidays, vacation time, sick leave and family and medical leave time.

Yesterday, the council's Health and Human Services Committee heard testimony from workers, including a nanny who spoke of having to sleep in the laundry room, to determine what, if anything, the county government can do to ensure such workers are treated humanely.

The discussion will continue Thursday, when the committee questions Police Chief J. Thomas Manger on ways to crack down on employers who sexually or physically abuse their hired help.

To date, no council member has introduced the legislation that Casa de Maryland is suggesting. Members said they are trying to deter-

mine whether a local government has the jurisdiction to enact such expansive labor laws.

While Montgomery is known for its activist approach, county leaders said they are weary of passing legislation that could be struck down by state or federal courts. Traditionally, labor laws have been addressed by federal and state governments.

"We need a lot more legal research," said council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), chairman of the health committee.

Domestic workers are covered by some labor laws, such as federal and state minimum wage standards.

But other areas of labor law do not apply to domestic workers. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which protects employees' right to unionize and collectively bargain, excludes domestic workers, as do the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which oversees safety issues, and the Fair Labor Standards Act, which mandates overtime.

The issue resonates in Montgomery, which is home to large numbers of families who hire domestic help, including foreign diplomats and other foreign government officials who often bring domestic workers into the country on special visas.

In recent years, Casa has helped dozens of women in Montgomery County escape their working conditions and, in some cases, seek legal recourse against employers.

In September, the University of California at Berkeley's Human Rights Center and the Washington-based group Free the Slaves estimated that 10,000 people are working as forced laborers at any given time across the country.

In 2001, Casa surveyed 31 domestic workers in Maryland and found that 27 had no personal days, 23 received no health insurance and 18 did not receive overtime pay.

Workers earned an average of \$312 a week, about \$5.79 an hour, and nearly a fourth of all those workers were not permitted to leave the house. A survey of 600 domestic workers in New York had similar findings.

One immigrant from Ecuador who worked as a nanny for a Falls Church family told the committee yesterday she earned as little as \$300 a month for 13-hour workdays.

Germania Velasco said she was also promised her own bedroom. But after she began working, her employer made her sleep in the laundry room. "I didn't have my own privacy," she told the committee. "That is why I ask you to help us."