



WORLD NEWS

CHANGE TEXT SIZE

AUTHOR



Mac Margolis

Follow @macmargolis

From Newsweek

Brazilian Maids Get a Leg-Up

Apr 22, 2013 4:45 AM EDT

No one has more domestic servants than the Brazilians. But a new law is designed to move those downstairs upward.

1 Like 1 Tweet 10 0

Complaining about the hired help in Brazil is as old as the New World. And yet like the nightly *telenovela*, where the storyline often turns on maids and masters, the comfortable classes can't seem to do without their household staff. No country has more domestic servants than Brazil: some 7.2 million, according to a recent report by the World Labor Organization (or 6.6 million, according to Brazilian government figures). By contrast, India, with five times the population, has 4.2 million paid servants, while the mighty United States employs just 667,000. So it was no surprise that when the legislature recently passed a constitutional amendment granting new rights for millions of domestics, the national chatter in Brazil grew shrill—upstairs and down.



New laws in Brazil have placed maids, nannies, governesses, gardeners, and drivers on equal footing with wage earners in the general workforce; controversial legislation that has caused tumult both upstairs and down. (John Stanmeyer/VII)

The new law and the tumult it has created say a great deal about the impressive transformations, and growing pains, sweeping Latin America's emerging giant. The law, modestly enough, puts maids, nannies, governesses, gardeners, and drivers on equal footing with wage earners in the general workforce. And yet Brazilian health and home may never be the same. While domestics once worked unlimited hours, drew paltry benefits, and could be fired for a trifling, now they are entitled to a maximum eight-hour workday, a month's paid vacation, and a 50 percent bonus for overtime. In addition, employers are hit with a fat fine when they dismiss their workers without cause. Labor leaders, scholars, and politicians hailed the law, which passed without a single dissenting vote, as a second emancipation. "Today we are closing down the last slave quarters and throwing away the key," intoned President of the Senate Renan Calheiros.



THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

A New Brand of Terror

Newsweek Is All Digital! Print subscribers: Please click here for important information about digital access.

RELATED VIDEO



New Zealand's Gay Triumph Like something straight out of a movie, The New Zealand Parliament...

STORIES WE LIKE

WONDERWALL Celebs Hit the Beach -- Who Has the Best Beach Bod?

ROLLING STONE 'Game of Thrones' Recap: 'King of the Ashes'

YOUR TANGO Sex & Sci-Fi: Summer's Hottest Movies & Men

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TIMES Need Work? Australia's Got Some Of 'The Best Jobs In The World'

YOUR TANGO Celebrity Sex Talk: 7 Craziest Things We've Heard This Week

ASK MEN



Far away, so close: Lourdes Barreto, right, and her maid, Marcela Concalo Pessoa, at Barreto's home in Recife, Brazil. (John Stanmeyer/VII)

That was a barbed reference to Brazil's inglorious past. No country in the Western hemisphere imported more slaves (4 million) or held them longer (till 1888) than did Brazil. In some ways, the housemaid is the living symbol of a land just 125 years out of bondage. And yet the modern Brazilian domestic is not just a slave with a mobile phone. In fact, as Brazil has prospered, the number of domestics has grown from 3.7 million in 1996 to about 7 million today. Behind the boom is a demographic upheaval that is dramatically reshaping the country.



Keeping up appearances: Maria Do Socorro Lucas Da Silva Santos, a maid, puts on makeup. (John Stanmeyer/VII)

More than 23 million Brazilians have climbed out of poverty during the last decade. Once frail and few, the middle class now makes up the majority of the population. The new Brazil is not just wealthier but also more equitable. While the top 10 percent of society grew 16 percent richer in the past decade, the poorest tenth saw their earnings jump 94 percent. "Brazil is one of the few countries in the world where inequality is shrinking," says Marcelo Neri, a social-policy expert who heads Brazil's leading economic-policy think tank, IPEA.

As aspiring middle-class women have taken jobs in shops, offices, and factories, the demand for nannies and house cleaners has soared. At the same time, yesterday's maids want maids of their own. That means a seller's market for those still in the homemaking business.

GET NEWSWEEK ON YOUR TABLET

Like [The Daily Beast on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#) for updates all day long.

A longtime correspondent for *Newsweek*, Mac Margolis has traveled extensively in Brazil and Latin America. He has contributed to *The Economist*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*, and is the author of [The Last New World: The Conquest of the Amazon Frontier](#).

For inquiries, please contact The Daily Beast at

Tom Cruise's 10 Manliest Roles

MENTAL FLOSS

5 Americans Who Defected to North Korea

HUFFINGTON POST POLITICS

What's Driving Conservative Opposition to Immigration Reform?

ROLLING STONE

Mad Men Recap: The Sellouts

MOST POPULAR

The Paranoid Mind

Drowning in Oil

I Knew the Bombers' Mom

The Caucasus Connection

What America Means to Israel

RELATED STORIES

THE DAILY BEAST

Hillary Was Right: Obama's Inexperience Sank Gun Deal

THE DAILY BEAST

Porn Star Death Mystery Deepens

THE DAILY BEAST

Hands Off My Boobs, Chaz!

AROUND THE WEB

REDORBIT

Distant Black Hole Awakens To Devour Massive Planet

WORLD POLITICS REVIEW

Morocco's Cancellation of Military Exercise a Major Disruption for U.S.

FINANCIAL TIMES

De Beers Aura ring

1 Like 1 Tweet 10



TAGS: World News, Brazil

RELATED SECTIONS: World

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



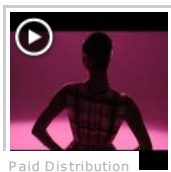
Paid Distribution

Yahoo!'s take on Tom Cruise's latest movie 'Oblivion' (YAHOO!)



Paid Distribution

David Beckham's Sons Kickaround at Paris St Germain (THE DAILY BEAST)



Paid Distribution

Natalia Khutkubia for Westfield - Florals & Prints (YOUTUBE)



Paid Distribution

Rob Black, Porn's Dirty Whistleblower, Spills Trade Secrets (THE DAILY BEAST)

COMMENTS

Powered by Livefyre

OTHER NEWS

ENTERTAINMENT

WONDERWALL

The Shortlist for April 22
Week in Photos for April 26, 2013
All apologies: A 'deeply embarrassed' Reese Witherspoon and more celebrity mea culpas
Get More from Wonderwall

ENTERTAINMENT

EW.com

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

EW's Morning Bite: And the best sound bite from last night is...
North Dakota anchorman channels Ron Burgundy... by dropping an f-bomb — VIDEO
Google doodle celebrates Earth Day
Get More from EW.com

ENTERTAINMENT

BuzzFeed

Republican Law maker — And Former FBI Agent — Defends Bureau's Handling Of Boston Bombing
Flight Crew s Blame Sequester As Delays Kick In
"Boston Bomber's" Former Friends Suspect Him In Triple Murder
Get More from BuzzFeed

POLITICS

TAEGAN GODDARD'S POLITICAL WIRE

Flake Said He Supported Background Checks Then Voted No
Two Paths on Immigration Reform
Christie Pursues Background Checks
Get More from Political Wire

[HELP](#) | [ABOUT](#) | [CONTACT US](#) | [JOBS](#) | [ADVERTISE](#) | [PRIVACY](#) | [COMMUNITY POLICY](#) | [TERMS OF USE](#) | [FINANCIAL DISCLAIMER](#) | [COPYRIGHT & TRADEMARK](#)

Sections: [HOME](#) | [ELECTION](#) | [ENTERTAINMENT](#) | [BOOKS](#) | [VIDEO](#) | [WOMEN IN THE WORLD](#) | [PRESS](#) | [NEWSWEEK](#) | [SUBSCRIBE - 1MTH FREE](#)

Featured: [BOSTON ATTACK](#) | [TRAVEL](#) | [THE ROYALIST](#) | [HOWARD KURTZ](#) | [DAVID FRUM](#) | [NEWSWEEK SUBSCRIBER HELP](#)

Partners: [EXPEDIA](#) | [HOTELS](#) | [HOTWIRE](#) | [MERCHANTCIRCLE](#) | [REFERENCE](#) | [THESAURUS](#) | [URBANSPOON](#)

Weather data provided by Weather Underground, Inc.