

Migrant Rights Centre Ireland

NEWS RELEASE

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Exploitation of Domestic Workers by Foreign Diplomats in Ireland

The *Dispatches* programme, 'Britain's Secret Slaves', on Channel 4 earlier this week highlighted how embassy staff are hiding behind diplomatic immunity to abuse their domestic workers and effectively 'legalise slavery' in the UK. According to the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI), such exploitation by foreign diplomats is happening in Ireland as well.

MRCI has been dealing with cases in recent months, where domestic workers employed by foreign diplomats are exploited and denied their basic rights. "MRCI is currently working on six cases involving domestic workers employed by diplomats," says MRCI Director Siobhán O'Donoghue. "Accessing redress in these cases is proving difficult. We have referred three cases to An Garda Síochána for investigation, however they have identified diplomatic immunity as a barrier."

Last year a former employee of the South African embassy, Valentyna Khristonsen, took a case against the former South African Ambassador, Priscilla Jana, who she claimed violated her employment rights. However the ambassador chose to invoke diplomatic immunity, and the Rights Commissioner decided that he had no jurisdiction to hear the complaints brought by Ms Khristonsen. According to Ms O'Donoghue, "this effectively denied Valentyna the basic right to due process and to have her complaints heard." MRCI has appealed the decision and it is due to be heard in the Labour Court on October 14th.

"Diplomatic immunity should not be a *carte blanche* for denying domestic workers their basic rights," says Ms O'Donoghue. "Under the current system of embassy visas, domestic workers are bonded to their diplomat employers. If they try to leave an abusive employer they lose their immigration status, are not permitted to take up new employment, and risk becoming homeless and destitute. They have no access to their rights or to due process when diplomats invoke immunity."

"We have written several times to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheál Martin, T.D., seeking a meeting to outline these cases of exploitation. When the issue was raised in the Dáil recently, the Minister claimed he was not aware of problems with abuse of diplomatic immunity(1). Clearly there *is* a problem, and we believe the Minister should take immediate action to ensure that foreign diplomats understand their obligations as employers here in Ireland, and that the rights of the domestic workers they employ are respected and enforced."

Ends

Notes:

- (1) Parliamentary Question by Deputy Ruairí Quinn regarding diplomatic immunity, & Minister Micheál Martin's reply: <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/Xml/30/DAL20091118A.PDF> (see p. 164 of pdf)
- Channel 4, Dispatches - Britain's Secret Slaves: <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/4od>

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