

OTTAWA CONSIDERING GIVING NANNIES A RAISE

# The real payoff for foreign nannies is immigration

**P**arents who hire foreign, live-in nannies are caught between a squirm and an honest compromise.

How do you justify paying a nanny from a poor country a meagre wage to take care of your children, especially if you make a good salary and believe in the value of good child care?

The federal government is considering changes to its policy on live-in nannies from foreign countries, changes that would make it more difficult and more expensive to hire a nanny.

A new policy would also make it tougher for women from impoverished countries to build new lives in Canada.

Right now, live-in domestic workers get special visas allowing them to apply for landed-immigrant status after working in Canada for two years.

Critics say the Live-In Caregiver Program gives nannies special treatment over other workers and deflates child-care wages because foreign nannies work for minimum wage.

Plus, the argument goes, the current



Liane Faulder

law leaves nannies vulnerable because they have to live-in or risk losing their visas, making them less able to leave abusive employers.

All that is true. Working as a nanny is a tough gig. People who employ live-in, foreign nannies are kidding themselves if they don't acknowledge their choice, even under the best of conditions, smacks of exploitation.

Though people who hire nannies are often far from rich, they're making a lot more than the \$5 an hour (less room and board) they pay people to care for their children.

Such a measly wage says a lot about how much our culture values children

and the people who look after them.

The problem is — who is in a position to lead the charge to pay a wage for child care which reflects the skill and responsibility it entails? Certainly the federal government and the province have washed their hands of any leadership role in this area.

And you know what happens to the lonely voices who call for higher wages for child-care workers, or decent tax breaks for stay-at-home parents. They are sidelined as left-wing dreamers or right-wing fanatics, when all they're saying is: let's get our priorities straight.

Parents who work, either by choice or necessity, find themselves embroiled in some variation of this emotional debate every time they leave the house, briefcase in hand.

"I was in a dilemma when I started hiring a nanny, asking myself 'Is this the right thing?'" said Edmonton immigration lawyer Shirish Chotalia, who has a live-in nanny from the Philippines to care for her two young-

sters, five and seven.

Like many working mothers, however, Chotalia knows her child-care choices are few.

A live-in nanny is often the only option for women whose work requires shifts or long hours. But finding a qualified, competent Canadian worker willing to work for a foreign domestic's wage — about \$1,080 a month, less room and board — is difficult.

Foreign workers, on the other hand, may be nurses or teachers willing to exchange two years on minimum wage for a crack at a future in a country with opportunities, however hard-won.

Chotalia points out that, though the wage she pays her nanny is small by Canadian terms, it still affords the woman the opportunity to send money home to help support her own children, who are cared for by a nanny back in the Philippines.

Chotalia's family does extra things for the nanny, such as paying her car

insurance. "But in the end, you're going to pay what the market is, what everyone else pays their nanny."

"I do justify it with discomfort, because I do support the whole notion that child care shouldn't be underpaid."

What makes the situation work for Chotalia is that at the end of the day, foreign nannies get landed-immigrant status. "I think it's a reasonable way for immigrant women to get entry into this country."

The current immigration policy could use a tweak or two. But until that happy day when the entire social structure does a backflip, and child care workers and women are paid what they're worth, the policy works.

Any righteous fiddling by the federal government merely denies the reality in which working families live and limits opportunities for people in less prosperous countries.

Yup, we exploit others in order to survive ourselves. But so far, I don't see a line-up for a revolution.

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