

Lifestyle Trends

In Brazil, revenge of the nannies

By Alexei Barrionuevo (New York Times)

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Andreia Soares's training has enabled her to earn a bigger salary. She played with her client's child in Sao Paulo. Lalo De Almeida for The New York Times

SaO PAULO, Brazil - In a decade working as a nanny, Andreia Soares finally joined Brazil's middle class.

With the money she saved, she bought a two-bedroom apartment with granite kitchen countertops and a small veranda, a house for her mother, land for her brother and a Louis Vuitton purse.

Later this year, with her monthly salary of \$3,100, which she earns caring for a toddler in an upscale neighborhood, she plans to buy a \$39,000 car - in cash.

While she has done better than many of her counterparts, Ms. Soares, 39, is part of a nanny revolution that is shattering the colonial stereotype of inexpensive but dedicated domestic help in Latin America. As their expectations for a better quality of life rise, nannies are increasingly seeking to work for the very wealthy and becoming less affordable for many middle-class families.

Fading fast are the days when whitefrocked nannies worked for a menial salary, with only two days off every 15 days. Betterqualified nannies are refusing to sleep over or work weekends, and they are demanding salaries that are two to four times what they were paid just five years ago.

The income of domestic employees in Brazil, including nannies and maids, rose 34 percent from 2003 to 2009 - more than twice the average increase for all of Brazil's active workers - said Marcelo Neri, an economist at the Getulio Vargas Foundation. At the same time, he said, the hours of domestic employees fell by 5 percent to 36.2 hours a week.

"Today, what I need from a nanny job is different than before," said Ieda Barreto, 32. Seven years ago, she was making about \$400 a month and had only 24 hours off every Thursday. Today she expects to make almost \$1,900 working Monday to Friday, and she charges \$250 on weekends.

Once isolated, nannies now trade information about the market and working conditions through e-mail, blogs and social networks.

"It's a mafia," said Jacqueline Szwarc, 44, a psychologist, adding that she has been lucky to hold onto the same nanny for 10 years.

Michelle Tchernobilsky, 29, has changed nannies about 10 times in the past year, searching for someone affordable yet qualified.

Cutting the nanny from her budget is not an option for Ms. Tchernobilsky, a public relations manager, but neither is paying a salary that she considers exorbitant. "We are hostages," she said.

Rodrigo Constantino, an economist at Graphus Capital, said a lack of investment in education in Brazil would prevent many domestic workers from finding better-paying work, and salary demands could stoke inflation.

Still, nannies like Ms. Soares are investing in themselves. It began nine years ago when she took a nursing course. She followed up two years later with specialized nanny courses. Next year she plans to take English lessons.

In São Paulo,
low-cost domestic help
grows rarer.

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After two years working in New York, she found her way to the home of Fernanda Parodi, a lawyer married to an executive in Sao Paulo. Ms. Parodi says she has no complaints about Ms. Soares's salary, though she is counseling her to buy a cheaper car.

"I don't ever want her to leave," said Ms. Parodi, 38.

Where some mothers see a debilitating revolution, she sees social progress. "If Brazil wants to move beyond a third-world country, then it needs to allow everyone to participate in the growth," Ms. Parodi said. "It's the price you pay for progress."

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