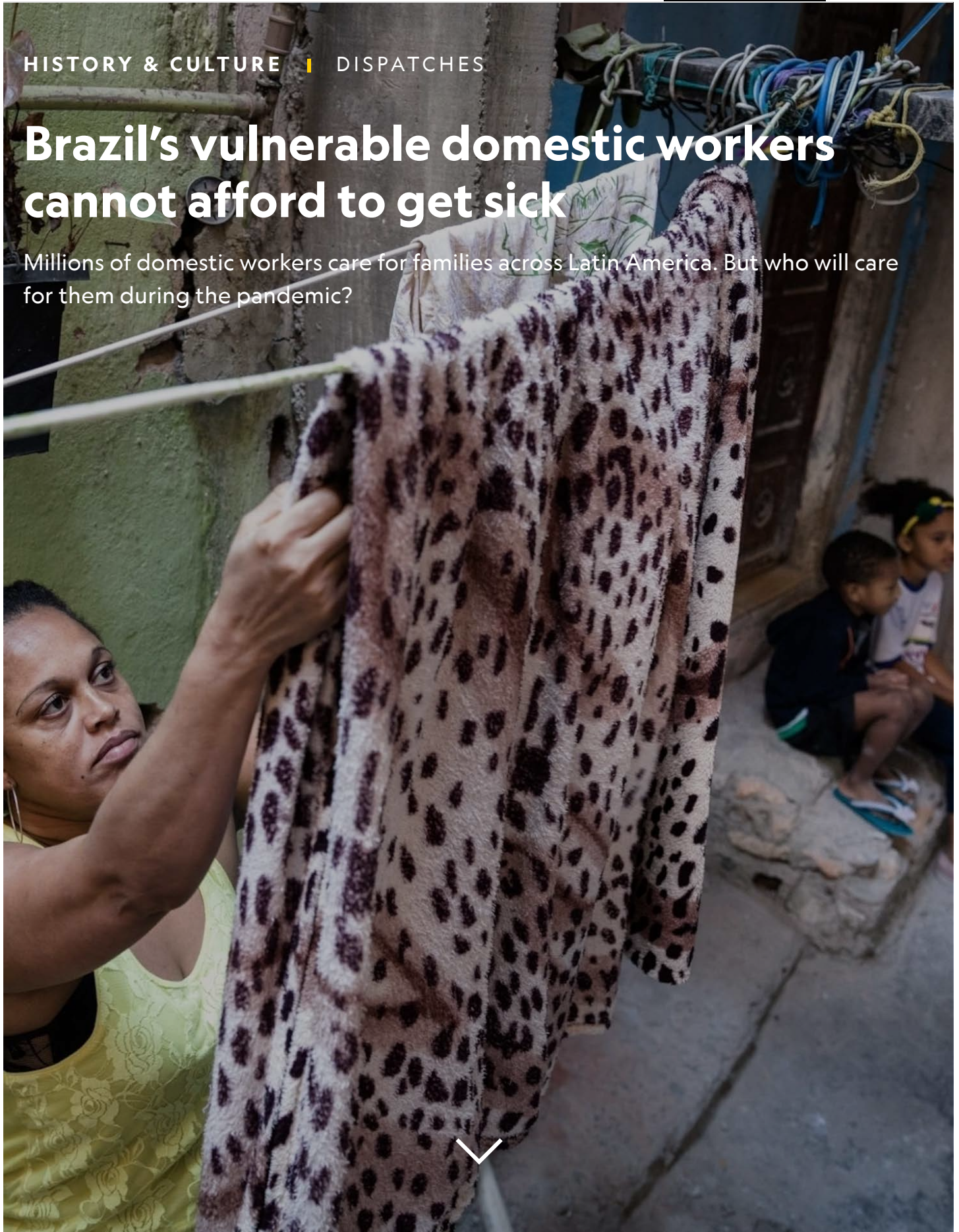


HISTORY & CULTURE | DISPATCHES

Brazil's vulnerable domestic workers cannot afford to get sick

Millions of domestic workers care for families across Latin America. But who will care for them during the pandemic?



Unemployed domestic worker Ailde de Oliveira Dourado hangs her family's clothes out in the alley. She lost her job as a cleaner because of the coronavirus pandemic.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUI CHRIST, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

BY JILL LANGLOIS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUI CHRIST, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



PUBLISHED APRIL 27, 2020 • 9 MIN READ

SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL – Every Monday morning for the past month, Maria Raimunda Ribeiro de Almeida waits for her ride outside the McDonald's on the main street next to Paraisópolis, the favela where she lives.

Before quarantine went into effect on March 24, Almeida took the bus each day to the luxury apartment building where she works as a maid. But now the family calls her an Uber to reduce her chances of contracting the novel coronavirus, which has infected nearly 62,000 people across Brazil and killed nearly 4,200. When she arrives at work, she immediately changes out of her clothes, just in case they are contaminated.



Maria Raimunda Ribeiro de Almeida walks up the steep hills of her favela, Paraisópolis, to meet the Uber her employer orders for her to lower her chances of contracting the coronavirus.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUI CHRIST, NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

She won't be back in Paraisópolis, a favela of over 100,000 people, until Friday, because her employers told her she would have to stay at their home during the week if she wanted to keep her job. Almeida, whose 2,000 reais (US\$387) is her family's only source of income, had little choice.

"We're doing OK now with my salary," says the 43-year-old. "But I don't know how we would survive without it."

Across Latin America, one out of seven employed women works as domestic help, often with very little pay, long hours, and no governmental protection. Here, a maid walks to work in historic Milaflores in Lima, Peru in 2017.
PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSANA RAAB, INSTITUTE

Across Latin America, the coronavirus pandemic has upended the lives of millions of domestic workers who exist on the margins of some of the most unequal societies in the world. Eighteen million people worked as domestic help in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2016, according to the International Labor Organization. Of those, 93 percent were women, and nearly 80 percent worked under informal conditions with no government regulation or protection.

Under lockdown, domestic workers' already precarious situations are made all the more dangerous. Many are forced to continue working despite the risk of contracting COVID-19, while others are let go without pay, left to wonder how they'll pay rent and feed their families. ([See inside Brazil's largest apartment complex during the pandemic.](#))

Maids, cooks, and nannies continue to work in homes across Latin America, often with little protection and meager pay. Here, maids prepare lunch in individual apartments in Lima, Peru in 2010.
PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSANA RAAB, INSTITUTE

Struggling to survive

Before the quarantine, Almeida worked nine-hour days cleaning the three-bedroom, four-bathroom apartment in an upper-class neighborhood. Now that she lives there, there's no end to the workday. With the whole family home, she cleans up messes, cooks multiple meals a day, helps the nanny with the children, and caters to whatever need might arise, whatever the hour. She's so busy she hardly has time to keep up with the outside world. "I don't even know what's going on most of the time," says Almeida. "I usually watch the news, but now I work so late and there's no TV in my room."

Maids, cooks, and nannies continue to work in homes across Brazil, which has the highest number of coronavirus-related deaths in Latin America. To keep families safe, the Domestic Employers' Union of the State of São Paulo listed six recommendations on its website, from advising workers to change their clothes upon arrival to suggesting they be sent home if they present any symptoms. Nowhere do they suggest that domestic workers stay home. ([Pictures reveal essential workers serving on the front lines around the world.](#))



Almeida has breakfast with her husband Adriano Silva before she leaves for her job. One of her three adult children lives with them, and Almeida is the family's sole breadwinner.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUI CHRIST, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Without paid leave or governmental protection, these women are left to the discretion of their employers. The first person to die from coronavirus in Rio de Janeiro, and the fifth in the country overall, was a 63-year-old woman who was a domestic worker for decades in Leblon, the most expensive neighborhood in Brazil. One square meter of real estate there costs an average 21,000 reais (US\$4,000). Her boss had reportedly traveled to Italy for Carnival but allowed the woman to return to work without informing her she was feeling ill and awaiting COVID-19 test results. The employer recovered.

When Juliana França, a teacher and actress in Rio, saw that her 57-year-old mother and 75-year-old godmother were still working despite the pandemic, she started an online campaign called "For the Lives of Our Mothers." She rallied other children of domestic workers to demand their mothers be given paid leave and connected those out of work to donors. Since mid-March, 11 workers have been matched to donors and 42 more have signed up.

"The workers are scared," França says. "They're afraid of doing something wrong and losing their jobs. We created this campaign so that they couldn't be blamed for speaking up."

Rejane Santos (right) started the Adopt a Day-Maid program to help unemployed domestic workers in Paraisópolis.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUI CHRIST, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

In Paraisópolis, community leader Rejane Santos has started a similar program to help the favela's unemployed domestic workers. Called "Adopt a Day-Maid," the donor-driven initiative provides food, personal hygiene items, and 300 reais (US\$58) a month for three months to women who

have lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Her goal was to reach 500 women. One thousand signed up in three weeks.

“Most of these women are the heads of their households, single mothers,” Santos says. “They needed their payments to survive.”



Dourado cooks lunch for her kids, Arthur and Camila, in their home in Paraisópolis. Five-year-old Arthur developed breathing problems after a new staircase blocked the only window in their home.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUI CHRIST, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

For many, these programs could mean the difference between going hungry and putting food on the table. Ailde de Oliveira Dourado, a single mother of seven, used to work three days a week cleaning a three-bedroom, five-bathroom luxury apartment before the pandemic. But her employer let her go, and without the 1,000 reais a month, she can't pay the 500 reais (US\$97) rent for her two-room home. (In Brazil, indigenous people are fighting to keep their children.)

So far, the 46-year-old has been able to feed her kids through donations from community organizations, but meat and milk are hard to come by. She worries about her youngest son, five-year-old Arthur, who developed breathing problems from mold after the only window in their home was blocked by construction. For a family already struggling to stay afloat, the pandemic threatens their survival.

“Sometimes it’s so hard that I pray to God and say, ‘God, just take me. If I’m going to keep suffering like this, I’d rather you took me,’” Dourado says. “But I know this will pass someday. I have faith that things will get better.” 📌

[f SHARE](#)[TWEET](#)[EMAIL](#)

READ THIS NEXT



HISTORY & CULTURE

The 225-year-old working warship sustained by a Navy forest

A forest owned by the U.S. Navy in Indiana ensures that the U.S.S. Constitution, named by George Washington and built with bolts forged

Constitution—named by George Washington and built with bolts forged by Paul Revere—stays afloat and at the ready.



ENVIRONMENT PLANET POSSIBLE

Can today's youth overcome widespread climate anxiety?



TRAVEL

To discover wild America, follow Bigfoot's mythical steps



ANIMALS WILDLIFE WATCH

Inside the race to save West Africa's endangered lions

GO FURTHER

ANIMALS





ANIMALS WILDLIFE WATCH

Inside the race to save West Africa's endangered lions



ANIMALS

Why plague still afflicts U.S. wildlife



ANIMA

How oi
smarte

ENVIRONMENT



PAID CONTENT

A day in the Okavango Delta



ENVIRONMENT PLANET POSSIBLE

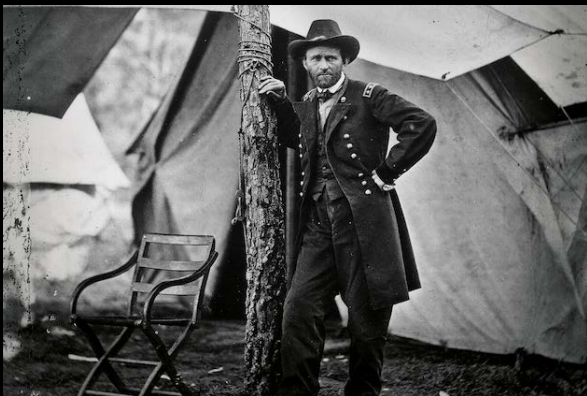
Can today's youth overcome widespread climate anxiety?



ENVIR

Histori
renewa

HISTORY & CULTURE



HISTORY MAGAZINE

General Grant's surprising rise from cadet to commander



HISTORY MAGAZINE

How the Declaration of Independence wooed Americans from Britain



HISTO

The gro
LGBTQ

SCIENCE



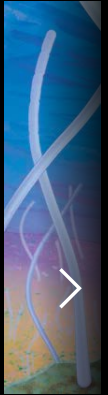
SCIENCE CORONAVIRUS COVERAGE

Young adults are volunteering to get COVID-19—for science



SCIENCE

Why a placebo can work—even when you know it's fake



SCIENCE

Biggest view of

TRAVEL



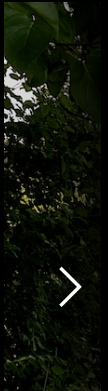
TRAVEL

Escape the heat at these 10 cool U.S. destinations



TRAVEL

The many definitions of sustainable travel



TRAVEL

Want t

SUBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE CONTENT



MAGAZINE

How viruses shape our world

See how Mars rovers are exploring the planet

Why are dang ok





READ

SEE MORE

THE BEST OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC DELIVERED TO YOUR INBOX

Sign up for more inspiring photos, stories, and special offers from National Geographic.

SIGN UP

LEGAL	OUR SITES	JOIN US	FOLLOW US
Terms of Use Privacy Policy Your California Privacy Rights	Nat Geo Home Attend a Live Event Book a Trip	Subscribe Customer Service Renew Subscription	    United States (Change)

[Children's Online Privacy Policy](#)

[Interest-Based Ads](#)

[About Nielsen Measurement](#)

[Do Not Sell My Info](#)

[Buy Maps](#)

[Inspire Your Kids](#)

[Shop Nat Geo](#)

[Visit the D.C. Museum](#)

[Watch TV](#)

[Learn About Our Impact](#)

[Support our Mission](#)

[Nat Geo Partners](#)

[Masthead](#)

[Press Room](#)

[Advertise With Us](#)

[Manage Your Subscription](#)

[Work at Nat Geo](#)

[Sign up for Our Newsletters](#)

[Contribute to Protect the Planet](#)

[Pitch a Story](#)



**NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC**

Copyright © 1996-2015 National Geographic Society | Copyright © 2015-2022 National Geographic Partners, LLC. All rights reserved