

## **Domestic Service in Lebanon:**

### **A Brief History**

#### **An Arab Families Working Group Brief**

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Over the past century, the subtleties surrounding domestic service in Lebanon have evolved substantially. As the demographics of individuals who have been willing to perform domestic work have shifted, a commensurate change in attitudes toward domestic workers by their employers has also become palpable. This movement in attitudes by both domestic workers and their employers has been a result of the advancement toward the globalization of sources for domestic labor in Lebanon, during and following the Lebanese civil war. Increasingly, Lebanese women have shown a reluctance to perform domestic labor in any home other than their own. Concurrently, many employers of domestic labor have chosen to hire non-Arab foreigners who were not connected to the tense and complex sectarian enmities that evolved in Lebanon during and after the civil war. A brief background of the history of domestic labor in Lebanon

yields a broader understanding of these evolving attitudes and provides greater insight into an important subtext of Lebanese home life.

The German sociologist Georg Simmel wrote of “the stranger” who enters a community, noting that the formal position of the stranger is at the same time the “unity of nearness and remoteness”. Similarly, when a domestic worker, particularly a live-in worker, steps over the family threshold, a stranger is introduced into the household. As a stranger in the family, the domestic worker is simultaneously close but distant, familiar but unknown. Much like the stranger Simmel describes, the domestic servant is in the position of a permanent and irreconcilable dissonance. She may come from – and represent in the family’s collective imagination – a different class, ethnicity, or nationality, one that is subservient, comfortable, or threatening, as political and economic conditions change.

Based on interviews conducted with Lebanese employers of domestic labor, the aforementioned conditions of politics and economy were pivotal in the altered expectations surrounding the employment of domestic workers in Lebanon. Historically, Lebanese families have been highly dependent upon domestic labor for the work to maintain their households and, during the first half of the twentieth century, the labor pool of domestic workers was variously Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian and Palestinian. With the advent of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, however, the labor pool of domestic workers began to diversify significantly. Previous demand for and supply of local and regional Arab women began to wane.

The onset of the war created a series of pivotal disruptions to the status quo: an abrupt exodus of Egyptians; a reluctance on the part of Palestinians to work; an unwillingness by Lebanese to employ locals and an increasing unwillingness of Lebanese women to undertake domestic work as Asians from Sri Lanka and the Philippines entered the scene. Eventually, it became shameful (*'aib*) for a Lebanese woman to work as a maid and such employment is now

associated with the assumption that the woman will never marry.

A few years after the war started, enterprising recruitment agencies started bringing in Sri Lankans who were increasingly becoming part of the foreign labor source for the Gulf States. From 1990 to 2006, Sri Lanka was the main source country for domestic labor in Lebanon, followed by the Philippines and Ethiopia. This gradual influx of migrants into the domestic labor supply precipitated new social norms surrounding domestic labor in Lebanon. When local and other Arab women were providing the labor, there were often emotional ties created between worker and employer. Such intimate connections generated reciprocal obligations on the part of employers toward Arab workers, often including the workers' family members in a virtual patron-client relationship.

The closeness of these relationships changed dramatically once migrant labor became the rule rather than the exception. Lebanese women also began to express a preference for hiring non-Arab migrant domestic workers. Their specific reasons were manifold, but most seemed to follow a general theme of maintaining control more easily over the employees. As one Lebanese interviewee stated:

We don't have that much poverty in Lebanon anymore, for you to get a maid from here. And even if you brought one... she has become demanding. She wants to sit and chat with you. She wants to sit and drink coffee or have a cigarette. She wants to rest. (The foreign maid) will work all day. Even though she earns less than the Lebanese dry-cleaning lady, you can still make her work, whereas you can't with a Lebanese.

Another interviewee expressed her satisfaction with employing Sri Lankan labor because, even though the relationship is not as personal as it might be with a Lebanese worker, she knows that the Sri Lankan woman has fewer options: "Now there is the guarantee that your maid won't run

away. You have her passport, and if she runs away, it happens only once, while with the Lebanese, every time she goes to visit her family, you're afraid she won't come back."

One notable effect of the transition to migrant domestic labor has been the eradication of child domestic labor in Lebanon. Prior to the civil war, an Arab domestic worker would often enter the Lebanese household as a child (from as young as 8 years of age). The inherent intimacy of adopted child maids would often evolve into lifelong relationships along with the myriad experiences and reproductions of class, status and gender. The hiatus of the fifteen-year civil war ended such relationships. Before the war, child domestic workers often entered Lebanese households and became an integral part of the family, not only working, but being educated and being companions of the children they served, but the introduction of migrant domestic workers also resulted in the eradication of child maids. Excluding the incidence of the trafficking of child labor in other parts of the region, the Lebanese experience has meant that only adult migrants are able to enter the country to take up these positions. The shift to foreign domestic workers has also meant fewer obligations toward impoverished Arab women that previously could have lasted two or three generations.

The demand for domestic help remains high and is perhaps increasing in Lebanon and the dependency on domestic labor has continued as a normative tradition from one generation to the next. The interviews conducted by this study provide a window into middle-class Arab families and their reliance on domestic help. The interviews also offer a sketch of the class structure of Lebanon and the importance of employing domestic help as a delineation of status and class. While no study is all-inclusive, a cursory understanding of the norms

surrounding domestic help offers further illumination on the structure of many Arab families.