

## Female Migrant Domestic Workers, a Forgotten Segment of Forced Labor: Evidence from Jordan

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### Abstract

This study aims at investigating the life and work conditions of Female migrant domestic workers in the Gulf States and United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in general and Jordan in particular. Interviews were conducted with officials in the Sri Lankan, Indonesian and Philippines embassies accompanied by extensive relevant literature review including UN organization reports. Results revealed that female migrant domestic workers live and work in environment that is similar to the life of slaves. The study recommends that the current work contract system be abolished and be replaced with better work system that gives female Migrant domestic workers more freedom and independence to enter labor markets with complete rights protection

**Keywords:** Migrant Domestic Workers, forced labor, human right slavery, exploitation

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to critically examine female expatriate household workers' life, work conditions and human rights from every aspect. Analyze reports by relevant local, regional and international organizations, and to discuss other issue.

According to the United Nations' definition of expatriate worker is that, "Any person who will start working or works already in return for wages in a country which he/she is not of its citizens"(UN, 1990). In Jordan for example, there are 1,342,815 expatriate workers or 22.6% of total Jordanian work force (DOS, 2009). Among those, 51,000 females who work as maids, and who are from Asian countries: Indonesia, Srilanka, Philippines and most recently from Kenya. Although these workers rights are protected by the Jordanian. Laws (2008 and 2009 legislation amendments); human trafficking outlaw Act no. 9 of 2009; Jordan's constitution, article 23, civil law 43/1976, labor Act not. 8 of 1996 article 12/A,B and Jordan's membership in several international treaties and agreement belong to the international labor organization that address human rights of laborers including expatriates such as: Treaty (98) of 1968, Treaty 29 and 105 of the years 1958 and 1966 that deal with forced labor, Treaty 100 (1966) that deals with pay equality, antidiscrimination Treaty 111 (1963) and minimum wage treaty 138; minimum age a child labor treaty (138), 1998 and child labor treaty 182 of 2000 (UN labor treaties archives). And host of relevant other treaties that Jordan is a member (28 treaties). However, migrant workers do not enjoy the full protection of the law: expatriate worker cannot obtain a car driving Licence; households female expatriate domestic workers are subjected to forced labor, sexual harassment and abuse (Human Rights watch report in UAE entitled, "I Already Bought you", 2014).

Most of female migrant domestic aides are unskilled workers who seek low-skilled Jobs and have little or no education (Dhaka Tribune, Bangladesh, 12.3.2015).

In addition, most Arab countries labor laws generally do not cover women domestic workers because they are not considered as employees and households where they work are not considered as workplaces. (UN 2015). For that reason and others, working as domestic aides risky for female.

In most recent years, the Gulf Arab states, Saudi Arabia in general and Jordan as well have been subjected to criticism by Human Rights Watch and other relevant local and international organization over the abuse and exploitation of female migrant female household aide. This has been accompanied by increased violence: suicide and murders among these aides and families they work for. As a result, several NGOs have been established to defend migrant female aides such as "Tamkeen" or "Empowerment" which provides legal assistance to expatriate workers in Jordan, Female aides included.

The aforementioned reflects two points of views: first, the official is in which host governments try to defend; justify or denies accusations by the international community. The second perspective of the International organizations who have been trying to defend and protect migrant workers in host countries. Thus, current author summarizes the problem of this study as; female migrant household workers are exploited and abused or enjoying full laws protection with sustainable human rights.

### Literature Review

There is ample of literature that discusses human trafficking, human rights violations, migrant workers exploitation and several other relevant issues. However, this study look into literature including UN reports mainly human rights. In regard to migrant household female aides; this author looked into literature involves aides when they leave their homeland on their way to work in Middle Eastern countries mainly the Arab Gulf

states, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon. Their stay in these host countries and the roles of their embassies, local governments and employment agencies. All these bodies, which a migrant aide comes in touch with, are "For profit organizations". An aide must pay a hefty fee to local employment agencies prior to the signing of work contract abroad. Then she has to pay an entry visa's fee to the host countries embassies; and flight ticket. Some of these are paid by the employing families who employ the migrant aides. (Tamkeen Org.2009).

Dhaka Tribune newspaper published an article on 3/12/2015 entitled "Working as domestic aides risky for female migrants". This article is about a study conducted by Bangladesh Ovivashi Mohila association (BOMSA). The study revealed the following findings:

- As of April 2013, a total of 2,36,194 women have gone abroad for jobs, since migration of female works started in 1991. This substantial numbers of migrant aides from one country only, Bangladesh, to Arab countries indicates the presence of huge masses of aides in Arab countries in which other aides from Srilanka, Indonesia Philippines and Kenya, are working.
- Migrant aides are not considered as "employees" in host countries Thus, labor laws and protection do not cover such aides.
- Their mobility and freedom are restricted.
- Female migrant workers are not getting consular services and
- Bangladesh missions abroad provide aides with minimal services.

This author notices when visiting friends in their homes that most working woman especially the wealthy and middle class families have an aide. These migrant aides do almost everything in their employer houses. An aide starts her day early in the morning, preparing children to school, dress and feed them. Then tidy and clean their beds and rooms, makes coffee and breakfast to the parents. Then she does house cleaning; wash dishes until afternoon when she repeats work cycle until at least 8 o'clock at night.

Al Dustur Newspaper published an article in which describes household migrant workers as "Slaves". (16.11.2008). this article entitled "elegant house wives, turn their house maids into slaves in Jordan."

The article criticizes a report by National center for Human rights about migrant household female workers (report 12.11.2008) "cheerful and elegant Jordanian women need an aide because they entered labor market; however, aide becomes "a slave"". The following statistics prove this fact, the report says:

- One family has not paid their aide's wages for seven years.
- In 2007, there were 12 rapes. UNIFEM report that one of every nine aides face sexual harm.
- 5-10% of suicides in Jordan are migrant household female workers.
- An aide works an average of 15 hours a day.

Finally, the report says that Jordan is no need for foreign aides to be treated as slaves.

In this context editor, Habashneh (2009) conducted a study about migrant household workers in Jordan, under the title of "Female Expatriate household workers are deprived from their Rights". Tens of thousands of migrant aides in Jordan face isolation, exploitation and maltreatment by their employers. Many of them do not get paid as usual, despite these aides work 16-19 hours a day without having day off, or weekends.

In other study conducted by women development Foundation which belongs to the United Nations (UNIFEM) in 2005 revealed that 3 out of 4 migrant aides exert maximum body energy in their work which lasts minimum of 14-15 hours a day.

Authors and newspapers in Jordan constantly conduct survey's and write about migrant aide workers human rights severe violations, even they described these aides by "modern days slaves" (Salameh, J. 2008; Shama, M, 2011).

Life and work conditions of female migrant domestic workers in Jordan are not better than these in the Saudi Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates.

A report by Human Rights Watch (2014) entitled "I Already Bought you", Abuse and Exploitation of female migrant domestic worker in the UAE. Findings are based on interviews with domestic workers in Dubai, A summary of an interview tells the entire story of domestic workers:

"The work wasn't what I expected to be. It was totally different, washing clothes, and then cooking again. No rest, there was just no rest.... Because she kept yelling, I cried and asked to go back to agency, but madam said I already bought you...."

- Farah, S. a 23 years old Indonesian domestic worker, December 7, 2013.

Halabi Romina (2009) points out in her study "Contact Enslavement of female migrant Domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates" that, "slavery was abolished in Saudi Arabia and the United Arabia in 1962, and UAE in 1963. It is unsurprising then, that contract slavery of domestic servants continues to thrive in the Gulf states... with restrictive contract system, bind the female domestic worker to her employer and create an environment conducive to exploitation and involuntary servitude". The report adds that, migrant aide enters Saudi Arabia or the UAE a visa through a method of sponsorship known as Kafala, which legally binds the worker to her employer means the system of exploitations are already in place even before worker steps foot in

her host country.

In addition, relevant literature is rich with close or similar findings, that, "Enslavement of female domestic worker in Arab countries Jordan included".

### Methodology

In order to achieve the study's purpose; this author developed a plan to collect factual data from proper sources, through meetings with embassy officials who are aware of their citizens life and work conditions in Jordan: Indonesian embassy, Philippines and Srilanka's. These embassies have shelters for abused aides in which they stay until resolving their problems: A structured questionnaire has been developed to be used in the interviews with embassy officials

**Table 1**  
 Questionnaire for data collection

1	What type of counseling do domestic workers receive prior to their coming to work in Jordan
2	What is education/ training level they have?
3	What type of service do you (as embassy) provide to these women?
4	What are the major problems domestic worker face in Jordan?
5	What do you do to help them solve their problems?
6	Do you follow up or monitor incidents that happened to your citizens in Jordan?
7	Do your officers communicate with the Jordanian officials in terms of your citizens situation and problems
8	What do you like to be done by all parties involved in order to secure domestic workers right?

Source: Developed by author

### Findings and Discussions

The visited embassies have shelters for aides to have a brief stay until resolving their problems. The shelters were crowded with battered, and miserable women. Each has a story to tell, but they have one in common namely; all of them are "runaways" from their employer houses.

The embassies officers are cooperative and willing to tell the world about problems their citizens are facing:

- These women without or no education, they come from poor families in hope to work and help their families.
- They do not see any type of counseling or training prior to their coming to Arab countries. Instead, maid employment agencies in their homeland deceive them by telling them "They will have golden opportunity" the moment they come to the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. However, the moment they start working as domestic aides, they realize that are fallen into a huge trap: Economic exploitation without government protection whereas some do not get paid for months may be years.
- Domestic workers face isolation, maltreatment and long hours of work 16-19 hours every day without having a day off.
- They are subjected to bodily and mentally (psychological) abuses

While talking to one of the SriLankan embassy's employee

One of women in shelter told me with broken Arabic

"Every morning I receive orders and instruction with the madam's fist banging on my chest... that well dressed madam does not know or not able to tell me... would you, could you... please, thank you" I guess not (then she exploded screaming with bitter tears).

Furthermore, one official in SriLankan embassy told this author, "if you want to know the entire picture of these poor maids read the international organizations reports which reflect the true their condition, pure slaves." These women can endure abuse, exploitation and harm for a while or a limit, however when they run out of patience or endurance, they escape to their embassy, lose their minds (2 women currently in mental health hospital in the town of Fuheis- (Sarayreh, 2014)).

- Female migrant domestic workers are subjected to inter-cultural miscommunication, constraints on freedom of religion, constraints on using the telephone and receiving visits and friend and the lack of shelters for the abused domestic workers.

Author observed the abnormal situation among female migrant aides. This situation can be described as a state of abused and exploitation. This finding coincides what author Halabi (2014): Due to the individualized workshop environment of household labor, female domestic servants are the group most vulnerable to exploitation... denied freedom of movement... Violence against maids includes physical attacks ranging from rape to slapping... overworks... lack of food and privacy.... Traumatized, changing jobs is impossible and when they run away from their employers, they are often arrested for running away to continue their suffering from the bondage of contract slavery. (Halabi, 2014).

Moreover, many cases of enslavement in Saudi Arabia and UAE were mentioned in the Anti- Slavery

International report (2006) "Trafficking in women: forced labor and domestic work the context of the Middle East and Gulf Region."

Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003) wrote extensively about slavery.

Lan, Pei Chia (2006) investigated migrant domestics in Taiwan of maids in UAE comparison with Saudi Arabia, she describes their work as slave- like practices.

Silvey, Rachel 2006 wrote about the practice of domestic slavery in Saudi Arabia against the Indonesian migrant domestic workers.

In sum, majority of the studies and UN reports with the results of this study indicate that migrant domestic workers are a living witness for modern day slavery.

### **Final Remarks, recommendations and conclusion:**

This author relied heavily on interviews with officers from three embassies: Indonesian, Philippines and Srilankan; and extensive review of relevant Jordanian legislations and ministry of labor regulations; previous studies and UN reports in this context, in addition to author's experience and close observations to the female migrant domestic workers, in order to reach transparent and factual results as follow:

1- Female Migrant domestic workers are victims to abuse and exploitation by their own government which do not regulate, organize and protect their female workers abroad; and by recruitment agencies in their home lands which lure and deceive these women to have- a golden opportunity- when work in the rich Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, and by local recipient agencies which care about profits only even through the abuse of maids and by local or host governments which don't give foreign maids their legitimate rights.

2- Local human right organizations, media and relevant government agencies do not pay attention to this class of workers except a report once a while about a maid suicide or alleged theft from their employer's house. Author can say loudly, show me even once that one official- from ministry of labor, media or other relevant organizations visited a house or inspected the so called "work place" of these maids.

3- Female migrant domestic workers are living and work in an inhumane environment, exactly like slaves. Author observed this fact during several visits to employer houses who happened to be the author's friends.

These findings are concurrent with studies and publications such as: Human Right watch report (2014) "I Already Bought you", Human Right watch report (2006) Building Towers, cheating workers: Exploitation of Migrant construction workers in UAE, longva, Anh Nga. (1999) keeping Migrant workers in check chammartin, Gloria (2002) the feminization of international migration. Degorge, Barbara (2006) Modern Day Slavery in the UAE.

Jureidini, Ray and Nayla M. (2004) female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon; Kaur. Gill (2007) Today's Slavery; Helen 2005 Domestic slavery versus workers rights.

This author recommends in brief statement that "To abolish the current system of recruiting female domestic workers through" Work contract visa, which by itself is a sign of bondage, and replace it with a system that grants working women to enter labor market freely and choose her employer, without overnight staying in the employer house; and to be free to change employers.

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