

# Trapped maids face life of abuse in Lebanon

Thu Dec 18 00:51:09 UTC 2008

By Yara Bayoumy

BEIRUT (Reuters) - An Ethiopian housemaid lies bandaged in a government hospital after falling from a 12th floor balcony. She says her Lebanese employer pushed her off.

"Madam asked me to hang the clothes. Then she came and pushed me from behind," the 25-year-old woman told Reuters. Too frightened to let her name be published, she said her employer had frequently threatened and abused her.

"Madam would tell me, 'I will spill hot oil on you', so I hid the oil. She would take a knife and threaten to kill me. She would beat me with shoes, pull my hair to the floor," the injured woman said, her face still bruised a month later.

According to the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW), nearly every week one of an estimated 200,000 migrant domestic workers in Lebanon dies. Suicide, falling while trying to escape their employer and untreated illness are the main causes of death. The employers are rarely prosecuted.

HRW says maids in Lebanon, as elsewhere in the Middle East and Asia, are vulnerable to beatings, rape and even murder for lack of national laws to protect them from abusive employers. Live-in housemaids have been a fixture among well-off Lebanese families for years. They often do everything from heavy housework to nannying and helping with children's homework. Many get no days off, work for up to 18 hours and are locked indoors. Others leave the house only to shop or walk a dog.

Employers, who routinely confiscate their passports to deter them from running away, promise to pay maids \$150 to \$250 a month depending on their nationalities. But many employers don't pay as agreed. Some verbally and physically abuse their workers.

They often deduct the first three month's wages to pay a fee to the agencies that import the maids.

"We've definitely seen a lot of cases where the employer would beat, slap (a worker) when she makes a "mistake" - that could be breaking a plate, badly ironing a shirt or burning some food on the stove," added HRW senior researcher Nadim Houry.

## EMBASSIES OVERWHELMED

When domestic workers get into distress, they may ask their embassies to help, but staff are often overwhelmed. The Sri Lankan embassy, for example, has two people to handle some 80,000 Sri Lankan workers in Lebanon.

The issues are laid bare in a recent documentary, "Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home," directed by Carol Mansour in coordination with the International Labor Organization (ILO). The 40-minute film, narrated by a Lebanese woman awaiting the arrival of a maid from the Philippines, provides information about the rights and obligations of employers and workers, the full costs of hiring maids and how they should be treated.

"It's so obvious that there is a problem here," Mansour told Reuters at her office in Beirut's Hamra district.

"The concept of having somebody at home whose language you don't speak, whom you don't trust, you don't know, who comes from a different culture ... It's a bit weird."

The ILO and other groups have helped set up a committee at the Labor Ministry to try to improve conditions for domestic workers.

One proposal is to approve a standard contract stipulating the rights and obligations of employers and workers, and to add specific legal provisions to guarantee workers' rights. Abdallah Razzouk, the head of the committee, told Reuters that he expected the contract to be approved and the draft law sent to parliament "in the immediate future," provisionally in early 2009.

Now workers have little recourse if they are not paid. They come to Lebanon under a sponsorship system that ties them to employers. They forfeit any legal status if they run away from abusive employers.

Maids often go unpaid because their employers miscalculate the true expense of employing them. They often think a maid will cost only her \$150 monthly wage, but fail to factor in agency

fees, food, clothes, medicine and return tickets.

"That's the biggest problem, people who cannot afford these workers are bringing them in," says Simel Esim, an ILO official specializing in gender equality and women workers.

#### NEW SLAVERY

Indrani, a 27-year-old Sri Lankan, lived for 18 months in a shelter run by the Christian charity group Caritas after running away from an abusive employer.

"I was paid the first year and a half. But then I wasn't paid for the next eight years. When I asked for money, Madam would swear at me, break glasses against the wall. She spoke to me like a donkey," she told Reuters recently at the shelter in Beirut.

"I was only given some bread and rice to eat. Fruit was forbidden. I woke up at 9 a.m. and slept at 4:30 or 5 a.m. I was not allowed to speak to my parents. They thought I had died," she said, tears welling up.

Indrani has since returned home. But every day countless other maids are physically and emotionally abused by employers across the Middle East and in Asia, where laws protecting their rights are flimsy and abusive employers are rarely punished for their crimes.

Even if rights groups persuade the Lebanese government to improve the legal framework for domestic workers, they face a tougher task in changing attitudes among many Lebanese who refer to their maids openly in conversation as "slaves" or "liars and thieves."

"The way a large number of Lebanese deal with them is like a new slavery," said HRW's Houry.

(Editing by Alistair Lyon and Megan Goldin)