

Maid in Lebanon

By Elise Barthet

We stopped the car at an anonymous-looking building just outside Beirut that nearly disappeared behind an enormous yellow billboard. A blue drawing covers half the space of the advert. It pictures an Asian woman in an apron shyly proffering a tray of tea. Her look is submissive, the message eloquent. Even to customers who cannot read Arabic.

Inside, the manager of the company, the Manco Group, is all business, seated in front of an empty desk. A brisk offer of coffee to the visitors, then, she plunges into a sales pitch. *“From my experience, Ethiopian is the best”*, she says. *“Sri-Lankans run away after two days and Filipinas are too expensive.”*

We try not to look like too surprised. After all, in Lebanon, buying a maid is as common as buying a car. And just like cars, maids are imported.

Business is booming here for companies that recruit foreign women to work as maids, housekeepers and nannies. In five years, the number of such employment agencies has nearly doubled from 250 to 418. This tiny Middle Eastern nation of only four million has an estimated 120,000 maids, most of them from Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Africa. According to *The Daily Star*, a Lebanese newspaper, one out of every 16 individuals in Lebanon is a foreign maid.

Women are exported and imported by means of a sophisticated network of job agencies across the world. Each Lebanese agency has its counterpart in the country of origin of the migrants. One furnishes the maid, the other the employer. But the business is largely unregulated, despite the fact that the products being marketed are human beings.

And the worldwide demand for cheap labour appears to be increasing, meaning that more and more developing countries are eager to encourage people to leave their homes and families for uncertain jobs abroad.

At Manco Group, we presented ourselves as a couple looking for a maid. The saleswoman handed out a blue plastic binder. It was a catalogue with some 40 descriptions of the merchandise. Each page has two photographs of a young woman and her personal details, including name, city of origin, age, date of birth, height, religion, languages spoken, family situation and professional experience. Most of the girls came from Ethiopia. Some of them with children.

The agency offered us a plenty of advice.

“If you allow her to go out, she will meet run-aways or marry a Syrian man”, the manager said. In other words, confine and lock the maid in the apartment when leaving.

“This form of imprisonment has become part of the normative expectations of the employment relationship”, comments Nayla Moukarbel, a sociologist who wrote a thesis about Sri Lankan maids in Lebanon.

The sales pitch continues:

“You’d rather choose someone who has no former professional experience” the woman comments.

Don’t they work better if they already know what to do ? we asked.

“Maybe, but if the girls has been a maid here, she’ll be harder to break. If she is new, you will teach her exactly what you want, you’ll train her exactly the way you want.”

The woman knows what she is talking about. Before the civil war in Lebanon, families used to employ local and foreign Arab women. At that time, girls entered the household at the age of 10 and left as women when it was time for them to get married. Their parents would visit sometimes to collect their wages.

But because of the political tensions during the civil war, Lebanese families stopped employing Arabs in their homes. When the first recruitment agency in Beirut opened its door to Asian migrants in 1978, a significant number of Sri Lankans as well as Filipinas had already entered the Gulf States following the oil boom.

At the same time, the business of importing maids matured. Because it was largely unregulated during the 1980’s and the 1990’s, agencies used to import group of girls and then place each of them with an employer. *“Such a practice was very close to trafficking and the Lebanese government finally took measures”*, explains Nayla Moukarbel.

Since 1998, each maid has to be “sponsored” to enter the country. She must register when she arrives at the airport. Her name and address are now computerised as well those of her sponsor. The maid comes with a three months working visa, pre-arranged by the Lebanese agency and which includes the name of the employer written in her passport. This passport is immediately taken from her at the airport and given to the employer.

The agency usually receives around \$1,500 from the employer to arrange the maid’s trip. This sum includes the price of the plane ticket plus diverse charges, like notary costs and medical fees. Agencies only pay \$700 for communication and insurance. In other terms, they make an immediate profit of \$700 for each maid they place. In a country where the medium wage is around 300 dollars, that means a lot of money.

During the first three-month, the agency remains responsible for the woman. If there is anything wrong, the employer is allowed to bring her back and ask for a new maid. When this “guarantee” period is over, the employer becomes responsible. Legally, the agency is not concerned anymore until the end of the contract.

The agreement signed by the employer and the maid at the agency remains a very vague frame. Officially, the salary depends on the nationality of the maid. You must count \$150 for an Ethiopian, \$200 for a Sri Lankan and \$450 for a Filipina, who is considered by Lebanese

as more prestigious in term of status, more intelligent, better educated and able to speak English. The family commits itself to pay and feed her. Details like working hours and days off are not mentioned in the agreement.

For Habib Zakhoul, *“contract is only ink on paper”*. At Manco Group, the woman in charge confirms: *“It is just a signature, it is not obligatory.”*

Yet, sending countries tried to impose certain regulations. In 2000, a standard “contract of employment for domestic helpers from Sri Lanka in the Middle East” was also introduced in Lebanon. It says *“the employer must treat his employee with equity and humanity. No violence can be exerted on the employee.”* Dispositions which are very instructive by telling a lot about mistreatments maids face in Lebanon.

In the hierarchy of abuses, the confiscation of passport comes first. Confinement, withholding of payment and food, interdiction of communication, absence of day off also remain very common. It may even be worth it.

Ann is a young Filipina who has been living in Lebanon since 3 years. We met at the Starbucks of Achrafieh with her friends, all of them Filipinos. Drinking an orange juice, she told how her first employer tried to rape her. *“During the seminar I attended in the Philippines, they taught me how to clean the house, wash clothes but I was not prepared to reality.”* After the “mister” tried to abuse her, he brought her back to the agency. The agent sold her to another employer. *“It was worth (it), she said. The madame always beat me with a wood spatula. She was crazy.”*

Ann said she ran away by jumping from the balcony. Wearing just pyjama in the cold night of November, she hung out in the streets, crying.

That is where Joy, a former maid who is also from the Philippines found her. *“I knew what to do because I faced a similar situation”*, Joy said.

When she arrived in Lebanon in 1999, Joy worked seven months as a maid but said her employer gave her *“no salary, no food, nothing at all.”* Her mother, who settled here 28 years ago, helped her. Now it is Joy who is trying to return the favor by helping other frightened and desperate foreign women.

And even if Lebanese don't like to hear about that, these abuses are well known. *“Lebanese women are a little nervous”*, confesses the manager of Richka, an employment agency from Beirut. The “madame” is the one who manages the maid on a daily basis. *“With you, the manager says, there will be no problem, you're a Westerner, you'll treat her as a human being”*.

No doubt, agencies are aware of these mistreatments. *“Problems of sexual harassment are frequent, confesses the manager of Richka. Sometimes, those who're doing that are important persons like generals or politicians. If I denounce them, they can use their influence to close the agency. Plus, it's delicate to tell the madame that her husband is cheating on her with the maid.”*

Violence may even take place inside the agency. According to Nayla Moukarbel, some companies keep an informal “after sales service”. It happens that the employer threatens the woman to bring her back to the agency where she will be taught “a lesson”. If they do, “*the agent threatens or beats the girl and ask her to say “sorry” to the madame.*” “*There are even certain agencies which employ an Ethiopian or a Sri Lankan to play the dirty job*” the sociologist adds.

Around 50 women who ran away from their employer are now living in the Sri Lankan embassy, in Hazmieh. After we talked with the ambassador, we ask to meet them. A few came down, looking sad and miserable. Aged from 17 to 36 years, they were from poor areas of Sri Lanka, and, most of them, married with children. Their English, as well as Arabic, was very poor. “*Madame beat me... not paid... I run away*”, they said and repeated. Their names: Sanda, Sangilimuttu, Galagedanage, Renuka, Kumari...

Kumari is 24. She is beautiful and speaks passable English. When we met, she said her madame was a “*nice school teacher*”. “*Once you go back to Sri Lanka, I’ll pay you*” she told Kumari. But when the woman brought her back to the airport, she gave her maid \$500 dollars in cash and forgot to give her the passport. That is how Kumari arrived at the embassy. “*She is very innocent ... she asked me what is dollar*”, commented the translator with an air of resignation.

They are only three employees of the embassy in charge of calling agencies and families. Most of the time, they are facing Kafka-esque situations. One employer said he lost the passport. One does not want to pay. This other, just does not pick up he phone. And the agent says he won’t cooperate because he is not responsible.

Then, here finishes products that nobody wants anymore. Most of them have been beaten and escaped because they were not paid. Now, those women are nobody’s business. They have no passport, no money and only think about one thing: going back home. They will stay here for months before being allowed find back their families and children. In this limbo, they wait. And every day, more women just like them arrive.