

**The London School of Economics and Political Science**

*Exporting Subservience: Sri Lankan Women's Migration for Domestic Work  
in Jordan*

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## *Abstract*

This thesis is an anthropological study of Sri Lankan 'guest' workers in the Middle East, focusing on the experiences of women who migrate to Jordan for employment in domestic service. More than 100,000 women depart Sri Lanka for such work each year, giving Sri Lanka one of the highest per capita rates of female migration in the world. A large body of literature exists concerning the growth of Asian migration to Arab countries, yet relatively little has been written about migrants' experiences in host countries. Based on dual-sited research conducted over the course of 24 months, the thesis provides an ethnographic contribution both at the point of origin and re-entry (i.e. Sri Lanka) and at the destination point (i.e. Jordan). It draws on research in a village in western Sri Lanka to examine the factors compelling women to migrate for these jobs and how they evaluate the consequences of doing so for themselves and their families.

The second part of the thesis addresses migrants' experiences and working conditions during their sojourns. The analysis aims to move beyond typically one-sided accounts of domestic work by considering the perspectives of both workers and employers and probing the complex relations between them. In doing so, it considers the *kafala* (sponsorship) system by which guest workers are effectively bound to their employers for the terms of their service. According to its terms, migrants are dependent on local sponsors for their residence and work permits. Workers cannot change employers without the sponsor's written consent, and sponsors have the power to send workers back to their own countries at any time. The research focuses on the example of Sri Lankan domestic workers to illuminate workers' experiences of the *kafala* system and analyse the links between migration policies, guest worker programmes and unfree labour in the global economy.

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**Map 1: Sri Lanka**

Source: University of Texas Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection  
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**Map 2: Jordan**

Source: University of Texas Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection  
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## *Introduction*

The wheels touch down on a shimmering strip of black asphalt and within minutes the airplane pulls up to the gate. Clutching a small bag of clothing, a young woman joins a queue of passengers filing out of the aircraft and entering the terminal. Hours before, she bid goodbye to her husband and children and boarded this, her first flight, with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. This is her first journey alone, and she is now thousands of miles from family and home. Once inside the terminal she is met by a man who collects her passport and escorts her through immigration. After retrieving her luggage, she is taken to a sun-baked parking lot where she boards a bus along with several other women who have just arrived. As the bus pulls away from the airport on the next leg of her journey, the young woman sees a vast expanse of desert stretching out on both sides of the road, parched and barren compared to the tropical island she left behind. As the bus approaches the city, she sees large villas, hemmed in by high walls, and billboards with advertisements written in a language she cannot understand. The streets are wider than at home, the buildings taller. Row upon row of cement apartment blocks with shops on the ground floor line the road. When the bus reaches its destination, she and the other women get off and are led inside a small office. It is the recruitment agency that arranged her trip to this foreign place. She is told to wait there for the arrival of her new employers, the family with whom she will be expected to live for the next two years.

This scenario is repeated every day as hundreds of thousands of women from South and Southeast Asia arrive in the Arab region to join a vast workforce that cleans houses, cooks meals and tends children. Many of them will work long hours with little time off and limited access to the outside world. Despite the conditions, these jobs are sought in the hopes that the earnings they will provide will change the lives of families back home. More than 100,000 such women come each year to the Middle East from Sri Lanka alone, giving the small island nation one of the highest rates of female migration per capita in the world.

This thesis is an ethnographic account of the experiences and the intricate nature of the relationships between Sri Lankan domestic workers and their employers. It draws on field research conducted over the course of 24 months in Jordan and Sri Lanka to explore the causes, consequences and contradictions of women's migration from the perspectives of both migrants and the families who employ them. It investigates the constellation of social, political and economic factors at the national and household levels that have fuelled the demand for domestic workers in Jordan. It also examines the factors compelling so many women to migrate to take up jobs in domestic service and explores the intimate yet highly unequal nature of their relations with

employers. In addressing these issues, the thesis considers the role played by the state in brokering labour for export and analyses the links between migration policies, guest worker programmes and contemporary forms of unfree labour.

Much of the literature on labour migration has focussed on movement from less industrialised countries to Europe and North America. This attention does not reflect the fact that considerably more people move within so-called 'less developed' areas in what has been termed 'South-South' migration (Bakewell 2009: 1). Within the so-called 'South', the Middle East ranks as one of the top destinations for labour migrants.<sup>1</sup> As of 2005, the UN estimated that one in every ten international migrants in the world was in the Arab region (Dito 2006: 2). In the 1950s and 1960s, labour migrants to the Gulf states were predominantly Arab. The 1973 oil boom marked the beginning of an unprecedented influx of workers to the region, and from then on the migrant workforce became increasingly Asian. The proportion of Arab workers in the Gulf workforce declined from 72 percent in 1975 to 32 percent in the early 2000s (Kapiszewski 2006: 7, 9). The turn to Asian labour was driven by the fact that they were considered less of a political threat to ruling families, were less expensive to employ, easier to dismiss and thought to be easier to manage (*ibid*: 6-7). By the end of 2004, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) hosted 12.5 million foreign workers, making up 37 percent of the total population (*ibid*: 2). The proportion of women among these migrants has increased in the last two decades, in large part as a result of the demand for domestic workers.<sup>2</sup> Among women migrants, domestic work is the most important category of employment (Chammarin 2005). Accurate statistics for the number of migrant domestic workers in the region do not exist, but according to one source they make up as much as 20 per cent of the labour force, or 6 million people (ICFTU 2002: 2).

The Gulf states remain the most frequent destinations, but demand for migrant domestic workers has escalated dramatically in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. From the palatial abodes of the ultra-rich to modest apartment blocks in middle-class neighbourhoods, domestic workers have become ubiquitous in the homes of Jordanian families. The government reports that 70,000 are employed in the kingdom (Hazaimeh 2010), though given that many enter through unofficial channels and stay beyond the legal residence period, the actual population is much greater. Jordan is less wealthy than its oil-endowed neighbours and has traditionally been regarded as a labour-sending country and home for Palestinian refugees rather than a destination for migrant workers. Given high rates of unemployment and poverty among its own citizens, the recruitment of large

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1 According to the World Bank Development Index 2005, the regions with the highest rates of net immigration are North America, Western Europe and the Middle East. Collectively, these three regions account for 79.5 percent of net migration globally (Worldmapper 2006). These figures include all those living outside of the countries in which they were born, including refugees.

2 The feminisation of labour migration to the region has been well documented (Calandruccio 2005: 273, Eelens and Speckmann 1990: 300, Esim and Smith 2004: 4, Sabban 2002: 9).

numbers of foreign workers for 'low-skilled' work is somewhat puzzling. But for reasons that will be explored in the thesis, the government has facilitated the recruitment of increasing numbers of Arab and Asian expatriates to work in agriculture, the garment industry, construction, and the service sector. Those employed in domestic service come from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines and are geographically clustered in the capital city of Amman, with smaller numbers working in Irbid, Aqaba and other towns.

Migrant domestic workers are hired as temporary 'guest' workers under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, whereby they are dependent on local sponsors for their residence and work permits. The sponsor serves as the worker's guarantor and sole employer. The worker cannot change employers without the sponsor's consent, and the sponsor has the power to send the worker back to his or her country at any time. Within the administrative framework of the sponsorship system, workers are effectively bound to their employers for the terms of their service. Employers pay significant sums to recruit domestic workers from Sri Lanka. During the period of research, Jordanian employers paid a minimum of \$2,000 in recruitment agency and government fees.<sup>3</sup> This makes the situation akin to debt peonage in that the worker is expected to repay the debt with her labour. However, the money paid by employers goes to recruitment agencies rather than the worker, and workers themselves may also pay recruitment agencies or the 'sub-agents' who work with them in order to migrate. Moreover, the worker is obliged to work for far longer than would be required simply to recoup the costs of her recruitment. Wages vary, but most Sri Lankan domestic workers earn the equivalent of between \$125 and 200 per month. Due to the expense of recruiting them, there is a great deal of insecurity on the part of employers that domestic workers will run away. To minimize this risk, workers' passports are confiscated on arrival. They are forbidden by the terms of their employment contracts from leaving their employers' homes without permission, and most are discouraged from communicating with anyone outside the employers' household.

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At the risk of over-generalisation, the study of the Arab world over the last three decades has been characterised by a great deal of interest in political and religious formations to the neglect of labour and employment. Although a substantial body of academic work has emerged concerning Asian labour migration to the region, much of it has focussed on the economic and social impact of remittances on migrants' own countries and has been based on migrants' accounts once they

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<sup>3</sup> This is a significant sum in local terms. During the same period, the director of a public school in Amman earned 280 JD per month, or \$400. Per capita GDP per month was 163 JD, or \$230.

return home. Studies of Sri Lankan migration reflect this pattern.<sup>4</sup> Of anthropological accounts of Sri Lankan migrants, Gamburd's work (2000, 2004, 2005, 2008a) is perhaps the best known and focuses on the impact of women's migration on gender relations, class and caste hierarchies in a village on Sri Lanka's western coast. In comparison, little long-term empirical research on the subject has been carried out in Arab host states.<sup>5</sup> This has meant that important dimensions of migrants' experiences have been neglected, and that less attention has been paid to the ways labour migration has shaped the social, economic and political contours of the Middle East. In short, the study of migration has been impoverished by a lack of research carried out in the region itself, and the implications of migratory patterns have been insufficiently examined.

Of that which *has* been written about migrant domestic workers specifically, the dominant focus has been on exploitation and abuse (e.g. Esim and Smith 2004, Haddad 1999, Human Rights Watch 2007, Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004, McMurray 1999, Sabban 2002). The lens has begun to widen over the last five years, as an expanding number of scholars have documented other aspects of life, ranging from workers' religious ideas and practices to issues surrounding sexuality and intimate relationships. This includes research in Bahrain (Nagy 2008), Kuwait (Ahmad 2010), Lebanon (Jureidini 2009, Moukarbel 2007, 2009, Smith 2010), Israel (Liebelt 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010), Saudi Arabia (Johnson 2010, Pingol 2010) and Yemen (De Regt 2008, 2009). These contributions provide a more comprehensive understanding of workers' lives, allowing them to be seen as more than simply victims. However, studies of domestic service have continued to focus *either* on the workers' viewpoints or the employers' but seldom both within the same frame. In comparison to the many intricate studies of mistress-maid relations in other regions, notably Latin America and southern Africa, the literature on these relationships in Arab countries is scanty at best.

This thesis is motivated by a desire to move beyond typically one-sided accounts by inquiring about the perspectives of both employers and domestic workers. The aim is to unsettle the good employer/bad employer dichotomy which is set up in the rights-based approach by examining the broader social and cultural processes underlying labour relations. This study was also driven by an aspiration to situate the realities of contemporary migration within wider political, economic and social dynamics in Arab host states. Jordan was a logical place in which to undertake research for several reasons, one of which was the paucity of existing scholarship. When I began the project, aside from several policy-oriented reports (e.g. Solidarity Centre 2005, UNIFEM 2000), only a

<sup>4</sup> Contributions in this vein include work by Brochmann (1993), Gunatilleke (1992, 1998), Korale (1986) and Thangarajah (2004). Spencer (2003: 15) has also made the point that studies of Gulf migration have focused on the effects on 'home' communities in Sri Lanka, with little evidence of life in the Middle East.

<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, exceptions, notably studies by Chalcraft on Syrians in Lebanon (2009), Gardner on Indians in Bahrain (2010), Longva on expatriates in Kuwait (1997), and Moukarbel on Sri Lankans in Lebanon (2007). On the whole, however, relatively few in-depth, community-based studies have been done on migrant workers in Arab countries.

few studies were available. These included a survey in Amman in 1982-3 by Humphrey (1991) and two unpublished studies in Arabic (Ayoub 1996, Al-Raqeb undated). Ethnographic accounts of consumption among Amman's upper classes (Beal 1998, 2000, 2001) are curiously silent about domestic workers, mentioning them only in passing despite the fact that they are employed in most affluent households. Jordan also makes for an interesting case study because with few natural resources and no oil, it has been more economically homogenous than many of its neighbours (Wilson 1987: 55). The rapid increase in demand for servants is a relatively new phenomenon, marking the beginning of economic and social transformations resulting from the kingdom's growing integration with global capitalism. The institution of domestic service provides a window onto broader issues relating to class formation and the production of elite status. The decision to focus on Sri Lankans as opposed to other groups of workers was influenced by practical considerations. Filipinos and Sri Lankans have been migrating to Jordan in larger numbers for longer than Indonesians and, for reasons which remain unclear, tend to live separately from their employers and to work as 'freelancers' in greater numbers. This made them easier for me to meet. The choice also was influenced by the fact that less had been written about Sri Lankan migrants in comparison to the Filipino diaspora.

The demand for domestic workers in Arab countries correlates with dramatic shifts in the Sri Lankan labour force. While working abroad was once primarily a male preserve, women migrants have outnumbered men since 1988.<sup>6</sup> Domestic work is the largest category of employment for Sri Lankans employed overseas. Sri Lankan domestic workers had a comparative advantage in the Arab world because many other migrant sending states, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, have restricted female migration (Brochmann 1993: 64).<sup>7</sup> Today approximately one third of all women in formal employment in Sri Lanka are domestic workers employed abroad, the vast majority of whom work in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> Smaller numbers of men are also employed as

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<sup>6</sup> Women represented 24 percent of total migrants from Sri Lanka in 1986-87 and increased from 55 percent in 1988 to 75 percent in 1997 (SLBFE 2009: ii). The proportion of women departing for work from Sri Lanka now appears to be declining. As of 2007, 61 percent of the total 1.6 million Sri Lankan expatriate workers were women (SLBFE 2007). In 2009, the figure dropped to 52 percent (SLBFE 2009: ii).

<sup>7</sup> Pakistan banned the migration of women domestic workers under the age of 45 in 1979; Bangladesh followed suit in 1983 (Shah et al 1991: 483). India imposed a similar ban, allowing only women above the age of 30 to emigrate as maids (*ibid*). All three countries imposed minimum wage restrictions for domestic workers. Nepal banned women from going to many Arab countries in 1998, when a Nepalese domestic worker who had been abused in Kuwait committed suicide, triggering a national scandal. The ban was lifted in December 2010.

<sup>8</sup> As of 2007, the total number of employed women was estimated at 2,388,807 (Department of Census and Statistics 2008a: Summary Statistics on Labour Force Statistics). In the same year, the total number of women employed as domestic workers overseas was 810,500 (SLBFE 2007: Estimated Stock of Sri Lankan Overseas Contract Workers by Manpower Levels and Sex 2007).

domestic workers overseas, although they are not represented by Sri Lankan government statistics because they usually travel on visas for other occupations.<sup>9</sup>

Migrant remittances are the backbone of Sri Lanka's economy, exceeding tea and garments in their contribution to foreign exchange. Though the influx of foreign currency has been regarded as a boon to the Sri Lankan economy, at the individual level experiences vary greatly. As this thesis will describe, it should not be assumed that migrants are 'better off' as a result of going abroad. Though seen as an economic necessity, the social effects attributed to women's migration have become a national preoccupation, sparking heated debates. Some herald it as a vital income generator and potential source of female empowerment, but more common are criticisms that the lengthy absence of migrants traumatises the families left behind and threatens the fabric of Sri Lankan society. The departure of so many married women to work overseas and the reversal of gender roles implied when women become the primary breadwinners is said to precipitate infidelity, divorce, alcoholism and even suicide. Concerns about these issues are addressed in chapters 2 and 3.

### **Research in Jordan and Sri Lanka**

I first became interested in this topic while living in Amman in 2000, when I rented a flat in a building owned by a landlord who employed a Sri Lankan domestic worker. She slept in a ramshackle structure on the roof amidst water tanks and clothing lines. Our exchanges piqued my curiosity about the growing number of migrants from Asian countries who were working in Jordan. Research was carried out in three phases over the course of two years from July 2006 until August 2008. The first phase was for one year in the Jordanian capital of Amman. This was followed by nine months in a village in western Sri Lanka, followed by a final three months in Amman. I also made two shorter trips between the two countries during this time. Although seemingly worlds apart, my two 'field' sites are in fact connected by migrants' trajectories. In the wake of George Marcus's (1995) influential treatise on multi-sitedness, scholars of migration have increasingly adopted transnational research methods; examples include Lindquist (2010) on Indonesian migrants, Stoller (2002) on West African immigrant street vendors in New York City, and Smith (2006) on migration from Mexico to the United States. Critics have warned of the danger that such research can produce shallow, less nuanced or less intimate accounts because the ethnographer's time and efforts are spread over a wider space. I shared these concerns but decided that given that the experiences of the women I hoped to understand had been shaped by life in two places, my research should also be informed by first-hand knowledge of those places. Spending time with both employers and workers in the places they call home generated insights that could not have been produced otherwise. Being neither from Jordan nor Sri Lanka but having lived in

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<sup>9</sup> For an account of Sri Lankan men employed as domestic workers in Italy, see Näre (2010).

both places meant that I was keenly aware of multiple levels of interpretation – and the potential for misunderstanding – in employer-domestic worker interactions. First-hand knowledge of the realities of life in Amman also offered a perspective on experiences that are often left out of migrants' accounts when they return to Sri Lanka. When visiting the homes of women who had returned, we could communicate in a language unknown to those around us. If anything, multi-sited research enabled greater intimacy because it allowed me to share more points of reference with my interlocutors.

The greatest challenge in carrying out research in Jordan was getting to know and spend sustained periods of time with domestic workers who are cloistered in their employers' homes. During my first month in Amman, a Jordanian friend arranged for me to reside temporarily with a family who employed a Sri Lankan domestic worker. This gave me an initial glimpse of the inner workings of a household and interactions between a domestic worker and various members of her employer's family. But when I moved into my own flat, I was at a loss for ways to meet more migrants. I struggled to make inroads until a friend mentioned having seen South Asian women outside one of the churches and suggested that I attend a service. I did so and learned that churches are central nodes of social life for Sri Lankans of various faiths. As I discovered, some employers allow domestic workers out of the house only to go to church. This is in part because it is assumed they will not get into 'trouble' there, 'trouble' being meeting boyfriends or nefarious characters who may tempt them to run away or organise robberies. Attending church allowed me to meet routinely with women who had busy schedules and limited freedom to move about the city. Most services are held on Friday, the Muslim holy day, and so I spent Friday mornings at Pentecostal church services and afternoons at Roman Catholic Masses conducted by a Sri Lankan priest. I also accompanied migrants on pilgrimages and attended social gatherings outside of church. In addition, I volunteered to teach English to a small group of migrants at an NGO and in this way gradually built up a network of contacts outside of church.

Early in the course of research in Amman I was fortunate to meet and befriend an older domestic worker named Lucy. She became my Sinhala instructor and conduit into a loose-knit community of women who lived separately from their employers. Having spent more than a decade in Amman, Lucy had many friends, and with her assistance I was able to get to know most of them. Although the practice is prohibited by the terms of their employment contracts, increasing numbers of women opt to live separately from their employers and work on a freelance basis, though doing so runs the risk of detention and deportation. For several months, Lucy and I met once or twice a week in the evenings after she had finished work. Together, we visited women who lived on their own and collected life histories from those who were willing to be interviewed. Given that many of these women did not have valid residence permits, it was my policy not to ask for their full names. My interest in domestic workers' perspectives seemed to be taken in and of

itself as a demonstration of solidarity. The fact that I had been to Sri Lanka and was studying Sinhala also helped establish rapport.

My interlocutors were predominantly Sinhalese Buddhists and Catholics. The dozen or so women with whom I forged the closest relationships included both those who lived with their employers and those who lived independently. Those who were 'live-in' domestic workers tended to have better relationships with their employers and more freedom to socialise than is perhaps the norm. In general, my interactions with workers who were not allowed outside were limited, so I tried to learn about their situations through other workers who had managed to speak with them. In a few cases I was able to obtain permission from employers to speak with such workers, but unless we had a chance to talk in private and I thought they would not feel compromised, I refrained from asking questions about their working conditions. Research in Sri Lanka was critical in enabling me to get to know women who had not been allowed out of their employers' homes during their sojourns abroad. It also gave me the opportunity to meet women who had worked in other Arab countries.

Establishing contact with Jordanian employers was more straightforward. The friendships I had maintained from my previous time in Amman facilitated introductions. I also expanded my contacts by joining a Jordanian women's social club which met on a weekly basis. At first I feared that employers would consider the topic of my research invasive and be reluctant to speak with me. To my surprise, this rarely turned out to be the case. The trials and tribulations of dealing with the 'hired help' is a perennial subject of discussion amongst Jordanian elites, and many employers were happy to share their experiences. Regrettably, there were only a handful of homes in which I knew and interacted regularly with both employer *and* domestic worker. More often than not I knew one better than the other. The social hierarchy is such that in most households, it would be awkward for me to communicate in an intimate and casual way with both the '*madame*' and the '*maid*'. Socialising with domestic workers and their employers meant negotiating two separate yet inter-connected worlds, and moving between them could be awkward. My interactions with Subashini, a live-in domestic worker, provide an example. Subashini was extremely busy cooking and cleaning whenever her employers were at home, so she tended to invite me to visit when they were out. One day we sat chatting at the kitchen table at the back of the house when Subashini's employer returned home. She had not known I would be coming and seemed surprised by my presence. I suddenly felt like an intruder, and though she knew the topic of my research I sensed she thought it odd that I had befriended a woman who in her eyes was a servant. She encouraged me to move out of the kitchen into the more formal living room, where she said I would be more comfortable. In fact I found this room far *less* comfortable, as it is carefully preserved to receive guests, and given the politics of space, was not a place in which Subashini felt free to sit and chat with me. However well-intentioned it may have been, the employer's intervention ruptured the

sense of intimacy that had emerged in our exchanges in the less formal atmosphere of the kitchen. On another occasion, I was invited to a dinner party by the employer of Rani, a Sri Lankan woman I knew from church. Sitting idly at the dining table while Rani served the guests felt like a betrayal, but leaving the party to join her in the kitchen would have raised eyebrows. In cases in which employers and the women who worked for them had congenial relations, I could socialise with both parties with ease. But more often than not, the social gulf that divided them meant that it was more feasible for me to cultivate separate spheres of contacts – one with Jordanians, and another with Sri Lankans. This created a limitation in that it meant I had privileged access to *either* the employer’s perspective or the worker’s but rarely both within the same house. But it had the advantage of reducing the likelihood that I would be drawn into disputes between the two parties. Disputes were not infrequent. On one occasion, for example, a domestic worker had become pregnant out of wedlock and her employer, knowing I spoke with her regularly, questioned me about who the father was and how she had met him. I responded with feigned ignorance. While perhaps less than ideal from a research perspective, the fact that my research contacts tended to be bifurcated meant that I could avoid situations that might compromise my own position and, more importantly, that of the worker.

Research involved un-structured and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with employers and domestic workers. Individual migration histories were elicited from migrants in order to gain a deeper sense of their lives prior to departure, motivations for migrating, experiences in Jordan, and aspirations for the future. Interviews were also conducted with recruitment agencies, embassy staff, labour ministry officials, lawyers, and staff at non-governmental organisations. Most of my time, however, was spent doing participant observation, which in this case consisted of house visits, sharing meals, attending social gatherings, and generally passing time with people in their homes as regularly as possible. Employers and domestic workers confided to me about their private lives and difficulties, and in order to protect their privacy and honour their trust I have changed their names. In the case of migrants, I have avoided specific reference to their home towns to prevent identification. Place names have not been changed.

During the Sri Lankan phase of the research, I resided in the village of Watinapaha with the family of Soma, a woman I had met in Jordan. When I was preparing to leave Jordan to conduct research in Sri Lanka, Soma arranged for me to meet her daughter Malini, who had also previously worked in Jordan. I eventually chose Watinapaha as a base for my research because of its location in Gampaha District, which had the second-highest recorded departures of women migrants in the country, and because of its location an hour and a half outside of the capital, Colombo, which meant I could easily reach the homes of other women I’d come to know in Jordan, most of whom were from the greater Colombo area. Equally if not more important was the fact that I quickly established friendly rapport with Malini and her siblings. Two of Soma’s

children had migrated abroad and two had not; living with them introduced me to both perspectives. Although I slept in Soma's house, I ate meals and spent most evenings next door where Malini's sister Jeevani, a nurse and mother of three, lived together with her family. Mid-way through my stay in Watinapaha, Soma's son Tissa returned after a stint working on an American military base in Iraq and joined me and Malini in Soma's house. Soma herself then returned after nearly two decades abroad. My relationship with her family has influenced my analysis, and my understanding of village life is largely informed by the time I spent in Watinapaha.

I carried out interviews, observed and took part in daily activities, rituals, festivals and family gatherings in Watinapaha as well as the neighbouring village of Nilpanagoda. Nilpanagoda was selected because it had a relatively high concentration of women migrants according to the 2001 Housing and Population Census, whereas Watinapaha had an unusually low number. Out of a population of 1,003 people, there were reportedly only 8 migrants (5 men, 3 women). The Watinapaha Grama Sevaka (local level village administrator) told me he carried out his own census of the village and counted 11 former and current migrants. Given that within a few weeks I had been introduced to five women from Watinapaha who had migrated, I was sceptical of the validity of the statistics. Nevertheless, I chose to collect data in Nilpanagoda in addition to Watinapaha because of its higher reported percentage of migrants, and because Malini's family had kin links there that would facilitate the research. In addition to fieldwork in the two villages, I also travelled to other parts of the island to visit returnees and migrants' families. I gained introductions to women who had worked abroad from other migrants and collected their life histories and accounts of migration. Less easy to learn about were the perspectives of husbands who stay behind. While I have tried to present the views of those who migrated as well as those who did not, the women I knew best had themselves been migrants, and my account is in this way biased. For an account of men's perspectives on the social effects of women's migration, see Widger (2009: Chapter 7).

One of the aims of the research was to better understand the role of the Sri Lankan state in relation to women's migration. Since the 1980s, the Sri Lankan government has promoted women's migration for domestic work in the Middle East by training potential recruits in pre-departure courses. The training is intended to equip women from rural areas with the skills necessary to work in 'modern', affluent households abroad. The training has been compulsory for all women migrating overseas as domestic workers since 1996, and more than 30,000 women complete the course each year. I attended a 13-day housemaid training course at the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment's main training facility in Colombo. I interviewed training centre staff and, with the help of a research assistant, carried out interviews with 245 women attending housemaid training programmes at several other facilities throughout the island. The findings of these

interviews are discussed in chapter 2. I also collected statistical and other material from government institutions, including the Bureau of Foreign Employment and the Department of Census and Statistics.

During formal interviews, I took notes and tried to record quotes verbatim as often as possible. In casual conversations and during social visits or outings, I waited until I was alone to type up recollections of what had been said or done. In instances in which interviewees agreed and did not seem put off by the presence of a tape recorder, I recorded formal interviews so that I could replay them later and check exact phrases. Conversations with Jordanians were held in Arabic or English. I had studied Arabic for more than four years prior to beginning the research and continued with private lessons throughout my time in Amman. I had only a minimal knowledge of Sinhala when I began the research and took lessons from a domestic worker throughout the first year of fieldwork. Although my comprehension was far from optimal my fledgling Sinhala produced amused smiles and helped break the ice when I met migrants for the first time. Most of the domestic workers I encountered spoke either Arabic or English, and so we spoke in those languages or in some cases a mixture of Arabic, English and Sinhala. I initially relied on the assistance of a Sri Lankan interpreter in Amman in instances in which migrants spoke neither Arabic nor English. This was not ideal, as a fear of judgement and gossip amongst fellow migrants sometimes created a hindrance, and so I tried to avoid involving a third person whenever possible. I later gained a firmer grasp of Sinhala grammar and structure in Sri Lanka, where I enrolled in formal classes with a language instructor. My own struggle to communicate and understand the cultural nuances of two different languages over the course of the research was productive because it mirrored, and hence helped me to better appreciate, the daily difficulties experienced by Sri Lankan workers and their Jordanian employers as they endeavour to make themselves understood.

The role of emotion is often left out of accounts of research methods, but if the production of ethnographic knowledge is an embodied process, it is worth mentioning the way I inhabited my role as a researcher. Many domestic workers have positive relationships with their employers, but I also encountered cases of cruel physical abuse, and even more instances of women being held captive or not being paid for their work. I struggled to square the generosity, warmth and hospitality I so often encountered among Jordanian hosts with the inhospitable treatment experienced by some of my Sri Lankan interlocutors. When faced with instances of mistreatment, I could not help but share the anger and sadness expressed by the workers. At times, I was even more outraged than they were. This posed a predicament: how could I be both angry and objective? The emotions could be overwhelming, yet I also felt compelled to distance myself in order to maintain an analytical perspective and adequately explain the perspectives of workers and employers. The need to make both characters part of the story may seem obvious but is something

few accounts of contemporary domestic service have managed to do. The ambivalence I felt is part and parcel of participant observation, something Hage calls 'ethnographic vacillation', the dialectic between emotional and analytical domains, between 'being part of and not being part of' the worlds we study (Hage 2009: 76). One of the challenges of fieldwork was managing this dialectic and trying not to allow my own feelings to impede my ability to understand complex social interactions. This did not mean that I tried to be dispassionate. But while at times I shared the emotional states of my interlocutors, at others repressing my own response was key. When encountering attitudes and practices I disagreed with - particularly those involving treatment that, to me, seemed inhumane - I was not always entirely forthcoming with employers about my own opinions. I did not, however, remain passive if asked for help by someone who needed it urgently. At times I stopped being an 'observer' and participated directly, for example accompanying migrants to the Sri Lankan embassy in the hopes that their cases would be dealt with in a more timely manner, or putting them in touch with lawyers and NGOs who were better positioned to help them. These engagements, too, played a role in the research by giving me insights into the limited means of redress available to migrant workers.

### **Map of the Thesis**

Chapter 2 poses the question of what has compelled so many Sri Lankan women to seek jobs as domestic workers in Arab countries? To address this, I interpret migration in light of the wider political economy, considering resources and their use, economic opportunities and the lack thereof, and power relations at various levels, from the household up to the nation state. The chapter discusses the structure in which Sri Lankan state policies, particularly post-1977 economic reforms and military expenditures, have fuelled migration. It also present a finer-grained analysis of the various factors influencing individuals' decisions about migration given the available options. Labour migration from 'poor' countries is often perceived to be the result of poverty, but a mixture of social and cultural factors coupled with economic need influence decisions about going abroad. Drawing on individual accounts, this chapter describes the goals, intentions and expectations of those who migrate and those who stay put.

Chapter 3 looks at the role played by the Sri Lankan state in encouraging out-migration through pre-departure training programmes for domestic workers. The focus of the thesis then shifts to Jordan. Following on from the analysis of political economy in the migrant-sending context, chapter 4 analyses the nature and structure of demand for migrant workers in Jordan. Why does this small, oil-poor kingdom with high rates of unemployment and poverty among its own workforce recruit such large numbers of workers from other countries? The chapter explores the interplay of social, political and economic factors fuelling demand for foreign workers. The discussion then turns specifically to domestic workers and why they have become ubiquitous in

the homes of the wealthy. In addressing this, the household and the labour needed to sustain it are considered in relation to class differentiation, state policies and Jordan's wider economy. The aim in this chapter on the demand for labour, as with chapter 2 on the supply, is to use ethnography to bring culture and political economy together.

The latter sections of the thesis address migrants' working conditions and experiences in Jordan. Chapter 5 deals with the legal and administrative framework of the *kafala* system through which guest workers are recruited and bound to their employers. It is motivated by three guiding questions: First, how did the *kafala* system in its contemporary form come about? Second, what are the contractual terms governing relations between employers and migrant domestic workers? And third, as a corollary to this, what do these terms mean in practice? How are they enforced, and what happens when the bond between worker and employer is broken?

The law, itself the result of social, political and economic processes, is only one of several normative frameworks governing relations between domestic workers and their employers. Chapter 6 moves on to consider the social and cultural norms and practices governing employer-domestic worker relations in everyday life. While in some cases they are able to forge harmonious, mutually-beneficial relationships, the road is bumpy and conflict-ridden, and in many cases the household becomes a battlefield. This chapter investigates why this is so often the case by exploring the contradictions inherent to domestic worker-employer relations.

Chapters 7 and 8 take as their starting point migrants' experiences beyond their working lives. While there has been ample research on religion in general and Islam in particular in the Middle East, the role of religion and spirituality in the study of migrant domestic workers in this region has attracted less scholarly attention. As a minority in a predominantly Muslim country, Buddhist migrants lack many of the supernatural and social resources they would otherwise tap into in times of need. But as chapter 7 illustrates, this does not mean they forgo ritual activities. Indeed for many migrants, the need to access the sacred may be heightened as they encounter trials away from home. This chapter shows how ritual practice and participation in faith-based groups play important roles, both moral and material, for Sri Lankans in the diaspora.

Chapter 8, the final ethnographic chapter, looks at the long-term consequences of migration. Much of the academic and policy-oriented literature assumes that individuals benefit from working abroad without considering migrants' own perspectives on the matter. This chapter brings their views into focus by posing questions about how they judge the material, social and emotional implications of their sojourns. The reflections of four women who have spent substantial amounts of time abroad are used to illustrate the contradictions and ambiguities that arise in relation to this question. By way of concluding, I return to the central issue of labour

relations and the position of migrant workers in Jordan and discuss how their status may be understood analytically.

### **Transliteration, Terminology and Currency**

I have adopted the system of Arabic transliteration found in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES)*. Diacritics have been left out. Place names and proper nouns in Arabic and Sinhala are written as they usually appear in English.

Permanent residents of Jordan may identify themselves as Jordanian and/or Palestinian depending on the context and whether they trace their roots to the western or eastern banks of the Jordan River. I appreciate the historical and political implications of the distinction, but for the sake of simplicity I have used the term 'Jordanian' to refer to both groups of residents.

Financial costs are given in the original currency, either Jordanian dinars (JD) or Sri Lankan rupees (Rs), along with the US dollar (\$) equivalent according to exchange rates at the time. US dollars are used because the Jordanian dinar and Sri Lankan rupee are pegged to the dollar, and migrants often refer to amounts in dollars.

## 2

### *The Political Economy of Migration from Sri Lanka*

Growing up on Beach Road in the seaside town of Halawata, Nira enjoyed a comfortable childhood. Her father and aunt (FZ) owned a thriving prawn farm. As a teenager, she fell in love with her *massina* (male cross-cousin, FZS), Kapila. It was assumed they would marry, at which time Nira's father would transfer his share of the prawn business to Kapila's family as a dowry. Nira's future seemed secure.

I first met Nira at a pre-departure training facility for migrants, and she told me why she had decided to go abroad. She began her account with the first of her regrets: neglecting her education. She had been a clever student and excelled in school. But as her Advanced Level exams approached, Kapila urged her not to study, fearing that if she did well, she would go to university and leave him behind. Nira conceded and did not sit for the exams. Not long afterwards, a disease struck the prawn farm, wiping out the crop and, with it, their livelihood. A family feud erupted; given the changed financial circumstances, her aunt opposed the marriage. Unable to bear being apart, Nira and Kapila eloped and started a family of their own. But their relationship soon soured.

Nira's father had built a house for her before her marriage to Kapila. But when the prawn business faltered, he mortgaged it without her knowing. Years later, when Nira received a notice from the bank that the house was due to be auctioned, she borrowed 20 Lakh (\$20,725) from three sources to buy it back.<sup>10</sup> Although by that time she was married to Kapila, she said he did not lift a finger to help her collect the money. Nevertheless after purchasing the house she agreed to transfer ownership to Kapila to spare him embarrassment should people discover he was living in his wife's family's home. This, she said, was her second mistake.

In an attempt to pay off the debt, Nira worked selling dried fish, but without Kapila's help she could not earn enough. According to Nira, Kapila lacked the drive to work. At the age of 16, he had gone to Korea for three years, where he earned good money but also acquired a drinking habit. After they married, Kapila spent a second stint working abroad, this time with his brother in Japan. But he sent no money home to Nira and their children and returned empty-handed after six months. Since that time, he had not found a job because he refused to work under someone else's

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<sup>10</sup> One lakh equals 100,000 rupees. The sale took place sometime in 2003, when the average annual exchange rate was 1 USD = 96.5 LKR.

supervision.<sup>11</sup> He had a wild temper when under the influence of alcohol, and his reputation as a tippler made it even harder for him to find work. Kapila racked up his own debts on top of the money Nira owed for the house, and she feared he would sell their home to pay his creditors. Desperate to avoid homelessness and fed up with Kapila's inaction, Nira decided to go abroad herself. Kapila objected and, in fighting with her over the matter, beat her so badly that she was hospitalised on two occasions. Nira stood firm, resolved that it would be her only chance to save their home. While her chief goal in going abroad was financial, an added benefit would be escaping Kapila. She had grown to loathe him but feared she would be unable to raise their children alone and so would not divorce him. Nira explained, 'I can find a man [spouse]. But I cannot find another father for my children.'

Nira's story may appear unique, but many of the themes it conveys, including her sense of desperation, lack of options and hope that migration would provide a solution, are far from unusual. Nira was one of more than 100,000 Sri Lankan women to go abroad to work as domestic workers in 2007. Sri Lanka's migrant domestic workers number over 800,000 and comprise half of the total 1.7 million Sri Lankans working overseas.<sup>12</sup> These figures have earned the country a reputation for being a 'nation of housemaids'.<sup>13</sup> Why is it such a significant supplier of domestic labour for Arab countries? What has compelled so many women to seek menial jobs abroad? These issues are the subject of this chapter.

### Theorising Migration: Towards a Return to Political Economy

The question of what propels people to migrate has been well-trodden theoretical terrain. Neoclassical theories and push-pull models emphasise the rational, self-interested strategies of individuals migrating in response to inequalities in wages and living standards (e.g. Harris and Todaro 1970, Todaro 1969). Critics of such approaches note that while most migrants leave their homes voluntarily, to view migration as a result of individual choice obscures the wider national and international socio-economic forces by which their choices are constrained. These concerns are addressed in Marxist approaches, including dependency theory, which highlight the structural determinants of migrants' choices as a result of global inequalities in the distribution of resources (Truong 2000: 69). Dependency theory locates migration within a more generalised extraction of surplus from the less developed periphery to the more industrialised core, enabling an ever-increasing exploitation of less developed regions. Although jettisoned by some for its failure to

<sup>11</sup> Her words were: '*Eyata rassawak karanna uwamanawak neha. Kawruwath yatahe weda karanna kemathi ne.*' [He has no desire to work. He doesn't want to work under someone.]

<sup>12</sup> According to the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (2007), the estimated stock of housemaids employed overseas in 2007 was 810,500, all of whom were women.

<sup>13</sup> Sri Lanka was referred to in this way in an article by Ameen Izzadeen in the *Khaleej Times* entitled 'Why Sri Lankans are shaken by the war on Lebanon' (July 18, 2006) and as a 'country of housemaids' in an article by Amy Waldman in the *New York Times* entitled 'Sri Lankan maids pay dearly for perilous jobs overseas' (May 8, 2005).

account for nuanced political, economic and social differences at the local level (Kearney 1986: 339), and for viewing ‘migrants not as active agents but as passive reactors manipulated by the world capitalist system’ (Brettell 2000: 104), the attention such analyses devote to the ways economic disparities are perpetuated by flows of resources and people has remained influential.

Another approach - the modes of production theory - refutes dependency theory’s insistence on a single global capitalist system. Instead, it proposes that rather than replacing non-capitalist modes of production, capitalism has fed off them (Kearney 1986: 342). It suggests that in order to understand the accumulation of surplus value, one must study not only the exchange of goods and services but also the systems that produce and reproduce labour (Kearney 1986: 342). One of the most provocative contributors in this vein is the French anthropologist Claude Meillassoux. Meillassoux criticised dependency theorists such as Samir Amin for seeking to understand under-development strictly in terms of unequal economic exchange, thereby ignoring the political and social conditions perpetuating the domestic reproduction of labour (1981: 93). In Meillassoux’s conception, capitalism derives profit from circular labour migration by paying migrant workers from non-industrialised areas hourly wages that do not cover the cost of maintaining and reproducing labour (1981: 101). These costs are absorbed by the workers’ domestic community, particularly through the institution of the family, to which workers inevitably return in old age or in the event of infirmity or job loss. Thus, non-capitalist modes of production in the domestic community not only survive but are perpetuated by, and also degraded by, capitalism.

An engagement with questions of economic production and capitalist exploitation in migrant-sending and receiving countries continues to guide anthropological thinking about labour migration. One example is Ballard’s work (1987), which situates migration from northern Pakistan to the UK and Middle East within a broader context of political and economic developments and considers the crucial yet often overlooked role of the state. In spite of migrants’ best efforts, Ballard writes, their overseas work has had mostly negative long-term consequences at home: rises in wages and expectations, a depression in agricultural activity, over-dependence on remittances and little ‘productive’ investment in infrastructure and industry (1987: 34-35). Ballard presents a convincing account of the role of the state in facilitating migration and, in so doing, transferring resources from rural to urban areas. The Pakistani state promotes out-migration because it provides a chief source of foreign exchange (1987: 37). But because the proceeds are not reinvested in basic public goods and services in the rural and politically marginal areas from which migrants originate, migrant-sending communities have reaped few long-term benefits. The availability of foreign exchange serves the interests of urban elites by enabling the easy import of luxury goods, of which they are the biggest consumers. As Ballard writes, ‘It is only when placed in this very broad context that the full extent of the exploitation to which overseas migrants may be subjected, often by means of the hidden transfer of resources, begins to emerge’ (1987: 37).

Despite such contributions, an analytical tendency privileging individual choice persists in both policy-oriented reports and academic studies of migration. One example is research on the role of networks in migrants' decision-making processes. In one study, Winters et al. (2001) analyse the role played by family and community-based networks in encouraging Mexico-US migration. They conclude that migrant networks play a prime causal role in increasing the propensity to emigrate (2001: 181-182). Absent are considerations of inequalities between the United States and Mexico. While the authors explicitly endeavour to move beyond neoclassical approaches (Winters et al 2001: 159-160), the model they put forth suffers from some of the same problems – emphasising rational choice while obscuring the macro-level context. Another example is a survey-based study by De Jong (2000) suggesting that individual expectations and family norms are 'major predictors' of migration. De Jong presents 'empirical evidence that intentions, expectations, norms and gender roles are key elements inside the "black box" of migration decision making' (2000: 318). I do not dispute the proposal that these elements play a role; indeed many of them are described in my account of Sri Lankan migration below. What I contest is analyses of migration that take as their starting point a 'black box' devoid of wider political and economic constraints.<sup>14</sup> Data at the level of the individual, household and community are clearly needed to explain who decides to move and where. But sociological explanations prioritising individual or household-level agency risk de-politicising and de-historicising our understanding of migration. Such approaches result in a view of migration as spontaneous and self-prompted, a perspective that fits neatly alongside restrictive immigration regimes that portray people on the move as 'problems' and skirt questions of global inequality and exploitation.<sup>15</sup>

There are important analytical reasons, then, for maintaining a broader perspective on the field in which migration occurs. With this in mind, this chapter seeks first to interpret migration in light of the wider political economy. It considers resources and their use, economic opportunities and the lack thereof, and power relations at various levels, from the household up to the nation state. In particular, it discusses the structure in which state policies, particularly post-1977 economic reforms and spending on the conflict, have fuelled migration. Recognising that political economy alone does not explain who migrates and who does not and how flesh and blood individuals fare when they venture abroad, this chapter also presents a finer-grained analysis of the social and cultural factors influencing decisions about migration. Drawing on individual accounts, it describes the goals, intentions and expectations of those who migrate and those who choose not to. It considers how women frame the decision to leave home in terms of social relations and

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<sup>14</sup> More recent literature on migration has suggested that, rather than individuals, it is 'households themselves that are the decision-making agents behind this economic calculus' (Stecklov et al 2008). Again, such approaches result in too narrow a view.

<sup>15</sup> This point is made by Chalcraft, who has written that migrant-centred accounts of migration have over-emphasised agency while effacing structures of power, inequality and coercion (2009: 2, 221).

conceptions of the person. Moreover, it shows how for most women, migration is viewed as a means to fulfil, or more rarely to evade, obligations to family.

### Post-Independence Economic Policies

While rice had historically been the lifeblood of pre-colonial Sri Lankan society, under British rule (1796-1948) commercial agriculture was encouraged through the profitable export of tea, rubber, coconut, cinnamon and coffee, and rice was imported from India and Burma (Wickramasinghe 2006: 303).<sup>16</sup> The economy fared well when market prices were high but was battered when they dropped, as has often been the case since the 1950s. Towards the end of British rule and after independence, policies aimed at supporting the Sinhalese ‘sons of the soil’ boosted paddy cultivation (Wickramasinghe 2006: 304). This continued in the 1950s and 60s, and the new Sri Lankan state pursued a welfare-oriented agenda through import substitution and the provision of free education, health services, and subsidies on food and other consumer goods. But the slow-growing economy was unable to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding population.<sup>17</sup> Unemployment was rife, particularly among the youth.<sup>18</sup> The era of welfare statism officially came to an end with the 1977 elections, a watershed moment in Sri Lankan history. The left-leaning Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led government was ousted by the United National Party (UNP), ushering in a period of economic liberalisation, foreign investment and loans. Imports were liberalised, industries privatised, and free trade zones were set up.<sup>19</sup> As Spencer describes, under the new UNP government, “‘Development’ and the ‘open economy’ replaced the ‘socialism’ and ‘self-sufficiency’ of the previous government’s rhetoric” (1990: 10).

While agricultural production has remained a major source of employment, the post-1977 period witnessed an increased reliance on waged labour.<sup>20</sup> In addition to tea production, two main sources

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<sup>16</sup> At independence in 1948, Sri Lanka was more prosperous than many of its neighbours and had relatively high standards of living (Abeyratne 2004: 1297).

<sup>17</sup> The extensive welfare system boosted the country’s population, which nearly doubled from 7.5 million in 1950 to 14.7 million in 1980 (Abeyratne 2004: 1301). As of 2008, the total population was estimated at 19.4 million.

<sup>18</sup> This gave rise to the failed Marxist youth rebellion led by the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) in 1971. On the economic roots of political and ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and their relation to militant Sinhala youth struggles and the growth of the Tamil separatist movement, see Abeyratne (2004). Tambiah (1992) also describes how welfare state policies and the promise of social mobility produced disappointment and resentment that helped fuel both the JVP riots and the Tamil insurgency. According to Tambiah, these problems were exacerbated by the country’s limited industrial base and have helped fuel the ethnic conflict, which has in turn further compromised economic growth.

<sup>19</sup> These policies were not uncontested and kicked off Marxist insurrections in the late 1970s and 1980s (Wickramasinghe 2006: 302). While the welfare state was effectively dismantled under the new UNP government, cracks in the system had begun to appear earlier, and due to an overstretched budget, cuts in welfare spending and food subsidies started as early as 1972 (Wickramasinghe 2006: 305-6).

<sup>20</sup> An ethnographic illustration of this trend is provided in Spencer’s account (1990) of a village in Ratnapura District based on fieldwork from 1982 to 1984. He shows how in place of paddy and *chena* (slash-and-burn) cultivation, greater numbers of villagers had begun earning livelihoods from cash-

of employment were promoted to tackle poverty in rural areas - the garment industry, and foreign employment. In 1978, a predominantly female labour force was recruited for Sri Lanka's first Free Trade Zone, in Katunayake (Lynch 2007: 23, 61). In the subsequent two decades, incentives were offered to private entrepreneurs to set up export-oriented garment factories in villages throughout the island. These initiatives, namely Premadasa's "200 Factories Programme", which set up factories in rural areas, were geared towards encouraging investment and job creation in the areas hit hardest by poverty and, in so doing, heading off political unrest (Lynch 2007). Women comprised 90 percent of the workforce in the factories (*ibid*: 31).

Large-scale migration from Sri Lanka to Arab countries also began in the late 1970s and increased throughout the 1980s and 90s. This was part of a deliberate strategy promoted by the government to alleviate poverty and reduce unemployment. The rupee was steeply devalued, controls on travel were loosened, and workers earning money abroad were entitled to tax-free interest on foreign currency accounts (Gunatilleke 1998: 72). Overseas employment has also been promoted as a strategy to generate access to hard currency. In 2009, migrant remittances totalled \$3.33 billion, which was enough to offset the country's \$3.12 billion trade deficit. Remittances now exceed export earnings from tea, rubber and all agricultural exports combined and surpass earnings from the main industrial export, garments (Sanderatne 2011).

The potential for migration has been heightened by worsening economic conditions. While it is clear that unemployment and deprivation were problems before the introduction of market liberalism in 1977, there is ample evidence to suggest that liberal economic policies have hit the poorer segments of the population particularly hard, reducing caloric intake and increasing levels of malnutrition. These effects have yet to be offset by increases in manufacturing (Jayaweera 2002, as cited by Wickramasinghe 2006: 315).<sup>21</sup> In 2008, Sri Lanka's rate of inflation hit an 18-year peak, at 28 percent, the highest in Asia at the time. This was at least in part the result of the global surge in food and fuel prices at the time. As of June of that year, consumer prices in Colombo had risen by 28.2 percent from the previous year, bus fares were up 27 percent, and train fares had almost doubled (Ondaatje 2008). Many families struggled to cope with soaring food costs. According to a report released in 2008 by the Department of Census and Statistics, only half of the country's 20 million people were receiving the minimum daily calorie intake of 2,030 kcal (Fernando 2008). These factors have encouraged many to look for work overseas.

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cropping, casual labour (e.g. in the gem fields and road gangs), carpentry, masonry and small businesses (Spencer 1990: 115).

<sup>21</sup> The *Economist* estimated that 52 percent of the population, including 88 percent of all people in rural areas, earned less than \$2 per day as of 1995 (*Economist* 2007). The key factors contributing to poverty in rural areas were reportedly the declining value of agricultural exports and a lack of investment in infrastructure, chiefly roads, electricity, communications and irrigation (*Economist* 2007).

Another crucial element is the fact that Sri Lanka was at war for nearly three decades. In 2000, spending on the armed services accounted for 5.3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and 40 percent of all government expenditure (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001: 311).<sup>22</sup> Spending on the military has eaten up funds that could otherwise have been used for investments in infrastructure. The loss of life and effects of violence and fear have further contributed to the sagging economy. Sri Lanka's civil war not only fuelled migration but was also fuelled by it. The remittances migrants have sent home over the past two decades helped sustain the government's massive military expenditures. While there has long been concern about the role of the Tamil diaspora in channelling resources to the LTTE, the indirect support overseas migrants have provided to the Sri Lankan government's fight against the Tamil Tigers is less obvious although no less real. Sri Lanka's conflict has at least in part been fought on the backs of migrant domestic workers.

To pay off its war bill, the government has taken on increasing debt from foreign sources, and in 2009 it limped back to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout worth \$1.9 billion. The main sources of foreign exchange – migrant remittances, garment and tea exports – play an important role in helping the country pay off this debt. Women make up 75-85 percent of the tea picking workforce (McLennan 2011), 90 percent of garment factory workers (Lynch 2007: 31), and 52 percent of overseas migrants (SLBFE 2009: ii). While women have always been economically active in Sri Lanka, reforms initiated in the 1970s have mobilised them for waged work to an unprecedented degree. The ways in which these national trends have reverberated through Sri Lankan society to the village and household levels will be outlined in the following pages.

### **Local Livelihood Prospects**

With reference to the villages of Watinapaha and Nilpanagoda, this section provides an example of local employment prospects.<sup>23</sup> Watinapaha and Nilpanagoda lie several kilometers outside of Minuwangoda town in Gampaha District. Their residential areas are interlaced with bits of jungle, paddy fields, vegetable plots and pineapple groves. They are located within Sri Lanka's 'coconut triangle', a lush, wet lowland portion of Western Sri Lanka named for its high yield of coconuts. Different varieties of coconut are processed for their meat, oil, and fibrous exteriors, which are used to make coir ropes, mats, brooms and other items.

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<sup>22</sup> Sri Lanka's military expenditures were higher than those of other South Asian countries. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, military expenditures as a percent of GDP in 2000 were 3.1 in India, 4 in Pakistan and 1.4 in Bangladesh. For a discussion of the defense budget and expansion of the armed forces in Sri Lanka in the 1980s and 1990s, see Wickramasinghe (2006: 316-317).

<sup>23</sup> With the exception of a small number of Christians, residents of Watinapaha and Nilpanagoda are predominantly Sinhala Buddhists.

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Figure 1: Coir processing in Nilpanagoda (All photographs by the author)

Local men work in agriculture (specifically paddy and *bulaat*, or betel leaves), daily manual labour (*kuli wada*), the coconut fibre industry, glass fibre-board companies, military service or government jobs. Many also migrate abroad for work. Women also work in agriculture and the coconut fibre industry.<sup>24</sup> Watinapaha and Nilpanagoda are located within easy commuting distance of Katunayake Free Trade Zone, and many women were employed there or in garment factories in surrounding areas. Others worked as local school teachers or government employees.

Homes vary greatly; some, particularly those of more prosperous families, are one or two-story brick or cement structures with tile roofs and broad verandas, while others are made of mud and thatched roofing or corrugated metal sheets. The house in which I stayed (left) is typical of most in the village — a single-story cement and tile roof structure,

Figure 2: House in Watinapaha

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<sup>24</sup> Coconut fibre processing is arduous; men do much of mechanised work in mills and dig and maintain the pits in which coconuts are soaked to loosen the fibre, while most of the work drying and weaving the fibres is performed by women. The division of labour and working conditions in this industry have been described in Risseeuw's monograph (1988) of women coir workers on the south-west coast.

with a neatly-swept garden in the front, and pepper vines, mango and cashew-nut trees growing in back.

Most households cobble together income from a variety of sources. During the period of research, a male day labourer could expect to earn 300 – 400 Rs (\$2.72) for a day's work. A nursery school teacher earned 3,500 Rs (\$32) per month, while women in garment factories earned roughly 6,000 Rs (\$55) per month.<sup>25</sup> Those working in garment factories often spend significant amounts of time and money commuting to and from work. In contrast, women who migrate to work as domestic workers in Jordan could expect to earn \$125 to 200 per month. If they live with their employers, they can save money that would otherwise be spent on their own daily subsistence. They are lured overseas not just by the pay-packet promised but the ability to save more of their earnings.

### **The Division of Labour**

The dominant division of labour in Sri Lanka places men in the position of earning money and women in the role of budgeting and spending on food and other family necessities and doing the physical work to maintain the household. Women exercise significant control over household finances.<sup>26</sup> While the normative structure implies that men are responsible for income-earning and women for the management and care of household members, in practice this division is rarely so neat, and both men and women may pitch in in ways that challenge this separation of duties. The gendered division of labour comes under threat particularly in times of financial scarcity. Current economic conditions have left many men jobless and unable to fulfil their roles as breadwinners, while new sources of employment have cropped up for women.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, while the normative structure implies that men should be the breadwinners, there is an equally strong normative ideal that women should make sacrifices for the family. Hence, while women may hold the purse strings, they are also the ones who typically eat last and, in times of scarcity, least.

In Watinapaha and Nilpanagoda it is common for women to leave employment at the time of marriage. Women attribute their decisions to the difficulties of juggling household duties and childcare with paid employment. Their employment may also be a source of shame for men because it can be interpreted as evidence of their failure as income-earners. Many women say that they, not their husbands, were the first to broach the idea of migrating. Many husbands are initially reluctant to let them go but are eventually persuaded in light of financial circumstances.<sup>28</sup> It is a matter of status for a man to have a wife who does not have to work. Having a wife who has to

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<sup>25</sup> For the year 2007, the average exchange rate was 110 LKR to 1 USD. Currency conversions have been calculated according to this rate.

<sup>26</sup> This is illustrated in Stirrat's account (1989: 98) of a fishing village on the northwest coast near Chilaw, in which men bring in the fish, and the marketing and financial decisions are largely left to women.

<sup>27</sup> On challenges to the gendered division of labour, see Gamburd (2000: Chapter 7).

<sup>28</sup> On men's perspectives and counter-arguments to migration, see Widger (2009: Chapter 7).

perform servile labour in someone else's home can be humiliating, although this humiliation may be tempered if she does the work abroad, out of sight, and earns good money. Accounts of negative attitudes towards women's paid work point to contradictions in nationalist discourses which, on the one hand, posit women as the 'mothers of the nation and the locus of tradition and culture' (Lynch 2002: 88), and on the other emphasise the need for economic growth through women's labour-power.<sup>29</sup> In this context, women's formal employment has been construed as an affront to Ceylonese culture and traditions (De Alwis 2002).

In this regard, there are parallels between women migrants and garment factory workers. Both groups constitute a breach in gender norms because of women's conspicuous presence outside of traditional roles. Women's migration, much like garment factory work, has been portrayed as a source of disruption to the moral fabric. Like 'garment girls' (Hewamanne 2003, Lynch 2007), women migrants are assumed to be sexually promiscuous. Stereotypes are reflected in popular nick-names such as, '*Arabi badu*' (Arabic goods) or '*rata badu käle*', '*rata*' meaning 'abroad' or 'foreign', '*badu*' referring to goods, and '*käle*' meaning 'piece', with piece often used to refer to girls. The same stereotypes do not apply to male migrants.

Migrant women are also blamed for social ills. Academics, politicians and local residents alike have perpetuated the idea that women's migration results in the increased incidence of child abuse and incest, divorce, alcoholism among men, and low educational achievements among children.<sup>30</sup> Many residents of Watinapaha and Nilpanagoda, including migrants themselves, talked about the risks to which mothers who migrated exposed their families. This is part of a broader social discourse in which mothers, far more than fathers, are held to account for their family's success or failure. Stories about the ill effects of mothers' migration were also often tinged with jealousy and deployed by villagers who did not go abroad as a way of slighting those who had become more prosperous. Such stories formed part of competitive village gossip, involving both envy and ridicule of mothers shirking their familial duties. But the link between these problems and women's employment is far from straight-forward, as we will see in the remaining sections of this chapter.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Marecek points out that much of the political discourse resisting British rule prior to and after independence portrayed women as the bearers of Sinhalese cultural heritage (2000: 157). These ideas are not unique to Sri Lanka. Chatterjee (1990) has written about the construction of women as guardians of indigenous culture and heritage in Indian nationalist rhetoric.

<sup>30</sup> Parreñas (2005a: Chapter 2) describes a similar discourse in the Philippines, where the children of women who have migrated abroad are *thought* to be badly behaved and prone to criminal activity or juvenile delinquency.

<sup>31</sup> This point has also been made by Gamburd (2000, 2008: 110).

## Profile of Women Migrants

To better understand who migrates and why, I carried out structured interviews with 245 women attending pre-departure housemaid training courses at five government facilities. This is out of a total of 31,462 women who completed the courses in 2008 according to the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (hereafter referred to as 'the Bureau'). The findings are presented below. Before proceeding, some remarks about the methodology are in order.

I was given permission to carry out the interviews by the person who oversees the training programme at the Bureau's head office in Battaramulla. As of 2008, the Bureau operated 23 training centres throughout the island. Interviews were carried out at centres in Mount Lavinia, Kadawatha, Kurunegala, Dambulla and Chilaw, all of which are located in the southern or western parts of the country (see map below). The Mount Lavinia facility, located in the capital of Colombo, is the largest and serves women from all over the country, so a significant proportion of the interviews (39 percent) were conducted there. Travel to the northern and eastern parts of the country would have made the sample more representative of national trends but was not possible due to the war. Some of the interview questions, for example those about educational attainment and employment, were modelled on the 2001 Census to enable comparisons with national-level data. The national statistics are based on an analysis of household data from all districts in Sri Lanka, whereas my survey did not have an even distribution from all districts. This constitutes a limitation. The ethnic and religious make-up of the sample I interviewed is broadly reflective of the reported population at the national level.<sup>32</sup> Reliable data concerning the social composition of Sri Lankan migrants in Arab countries do not exist, but they are generally thought to be predominantly Sinhalese (Buddhist and Catholic) and Muslim (Moor and Malay), with fewer numbers of Tamils (Hindu and Catholic) (Brochmann 1993: 71; Sriskandarajah 2002: 293). Muslims constitute 8 per cent of the Sri Lankan population but reportedly comprise 22-23 per cent of all Middle East-bound migrants (Gamburd 2000: 40).<sup>33</sup> This may in part be a result of the high demand for Muslim domestic workers in the region. Tamils, particularly the internally displaced and those from the Eastern Province, also have reportedly migrated in especially high numbers (Dias and Jayasundere 2002). Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims are strongly represented in the North and East of the country, areas I was not able to visit. The representation of these groups in the survey is roughly proportional to their share of the population at the national level but not necessarily their composition in the migrant workforce.

<sup>32</sup> Seventy-five percent of the interviewees were Sinhalese, eleven percent Sri Lankan Tamils, four percent Indian Tamils, and ten percent Muslim. This compares with national estimates of 74.5 percent Sinhalese, 11.9 percent Sri Lankan Tamil, 4.6 percent Indian Tamil and 8.3 percent Muslim (Moor) according to the 2001 census.

<sup>33</sup> According to the 2001 census (Department of Census and Statistics 2003), Sinhalese constituted 82.0 per cent, Sri Lankan Tamils 4.3 per cent, Indian Tamils 5.1 per cent, Sri Lankan and Indian Muslims 7.9 per cent, and others 0.7 per cent.



Map 3: Provinces of Sri Lanka

Source: [http://www.sercononline.com/promos/sep/fnst/FNST\\_aug.htm](http://www.sercononline.com/promos/sep/fnst/FNST_aug.htm)

Red dots and text added to indicate training facilities where migrants were interviewed.

Pre-departure training is mandatory for all first-time migrants and repeat migrants who do not pass a language test, either Arabic or English depending on the country of employment. Separate courses are held for those going to Middle Eastern versus non-Middle Eastern destinations, including Cyprus, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. The sample I interviewed is broadly reflective of women's migration trends, including 209 (84 percent) heading to the Middle East and 39 to other destinations. Interviews were carried out orally in Sinhala and Tamil between November 2007 and April 2008 with the help of a research assistant. I approached classes during

practical lessons, for example when trainees were practicing cleaning or cooking, and asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed. We had no trouble finding volunteers. I was concerned that they would assume I was affiliated with the Bureau and feel compelled to participate. In an effort to avoid this, I explained that the interviews had nothing to do with the training programme or the Bureau and described my affiliation as a visiting student at the University of Colombo. I also assured the trainees that the data would be kept anonymous and confidential, and that if anyone preferred not to speak with me, I would not inform the class instructor or anyone else at the training facility. Once the interviews began, word spread about what I was doing and the kinds of questions I was asking, and I feel confident that anyone who did not want to speak with me could have kept clear.

As with any survey, the findings should be treated with caution. Even seemingly straight-forward questions about marital status proved to be complicated. For example, when asked whether they were married, women tended to respond affirmatively if they had been married at any point in their lives; if they were now separated, divorced or widowed, they would not usually mention it. It was only later in the interview when discussing household composition that it became clear that some women were no longer living with their husbands or had become widows, in which case their earlier responses had to be corrected. Given this background, no firm conclusions should be drawn from these findings. They are, however, broadly indicative of the main trends with respect to women's migration and complement several patterns I identified using ethnographic methods.

#### *Age, Marital Status and Household Characteristics*

The ages of the women I interviewed ranged from 18 to 50. More than half (58 percent) were between the ages of 20 and 30; 9 percent were aged 19 and under; 22 percent were between the ages of 31 and 40; and 11 percent were 41 or older. In 2011, the Sri Lankan government raised the age limit for departing domestic workers from 18 to 21 in an attempt to reduce the risk of abuse. Such bans are largely ineffective, as ample anecdotal evidence shows that younger women find ways to migrate with travel documents that are not their own. The majority of women migrants are thought to be married (Dias and Jayasundere 2004: 166, Gamburd 2000: 39). Among survey respondents, 54 percent were married at the time of departure, 27 percent had never been married, 13 percent were separated or divorced and 6 percent were widowed. In comparison to the national average, unmarried women are under-represented in the migration stream.<sup>34</sup> More striking is the fact that whereas nationally only 1.2 percent of women are reportedly divorced or separated, among those I interviewed 13 percent fit this category. This could be for two reasons. One is that ethnographic evidence suggests that marital breakdown often prompts women to migrate, a trend

<sup>34</sup> According to the 2006/7 Household Income and Expenditure Survey, out of the entire population, 35.3 percent were never married, 55.5 percent were married, 8 percent were widowed, and 1.2 percent were divorced or separated (Department of Census and Statistics 2008b: Table 2.7).

discussed below. The other relates to a potential source of error in the national statistics – stigma may make women reluctant to identify themselves as divorced or widowed. Female-headed households were over-represented among those I interviewed, representing 30 percent of the sample in comparison to the nation-wide estimate of 24 percent.<sup>35</sup> Migrants' households also appear to be larger than average, with a median household size of 5 and mean of 5.1 compared with the national mean of 4.1.

### *Education and Income*

In the eyes of Jordanian employers, Sri Lankan domestic workers all come from a 'poorer' class, yet their socio-economic backgrounds vary quite substantially, and not all come from the lowest-income or least-educated groups. In fact, in comparison to the national average, those with no formal schooling are under-represented among migrants, and those who have successfully completed their Ordinary Level (O-Level) exams are over-represented.<sup>36</sup> Responses to questions about household income should be treated with caution for many reasons, one of which is that even if people are inclined to give an accurate estimate, not all individuals necessarily *know* how much income their household receives each month. Out of those I interviewed, 46 either did not want to answer the question or said their household income fluctuated too greatly to estimate with any degree of certitude. Of the 199 who responded, the mean monthly household income was 12,742 Rs (\$116), with a median of 10,000 Rs (\$91). This compares with a national average of 26,286 Rs (\$239) and a median of 16,735 Rs (\$151). In terms of per capita monthly income, the mean among respondents was 2,763 Rs (\$25), with a median of 2,776 Rs. This compares with a national mean of 6,463 Rs (\$59). These findings suggest that while migrants are not less educated than the general Sri Lankan population, they appear to come from households with significantly less income. Many of the women I spoke with said that their household income provided just enough for daily subsistence but was insufficient for large expenditures, for example making structural improvements to housing.

### *Work History*

Of those interviewed, 22 percent had worked abroad previously as domestic workers or in garment factories, whereas the rest were first-time migrants. An equal number had never worked in Sri Lanka in formal employment, and 34 percent had worked at some point in a garment

<sup>35</sup> For the purposes of these interviews, household (*gedara*) membership includes those who regularly sleep and eat in the house and are considered part of the domestic unit.

<sup>36</sup> Among survey respondents, only 1 percent had no formal schooling, 7 percent had completed some primary schooling (grades 1-5), 36 percent had completed some secondary schooling (grades 6-10) but did not take O-Level exams, 45 percent had passed their O-Level exams, and 11 percent had passed their A-Level exams. This compares with national rates of 4.8 percent with no schooling, 26.5 percent with some primary schooling, 41.7 percent with some secondary schooling but not O-Level exams, 16.4 percent passed O-Levels, and 10.7 percent passed A-Levels (Department of Census and Statistics 2008b).

factory in Sri Lanka. Only 5 percent had worked as domestic workers in Sri Lanka. This suggests that migration to Arab countries brings women who have not previously been employed into the formal workforce. It also reflects the fact that women are willing to perform certain jobs abroad, i.e. domestic work, that they do not do at home.

In relation to work status, only 29 percent (72 women) had been engaged in paid employment at some point in the 12 months prior to migration. This included women who were working in garment factories or other industrial facilities, engaging in agricultural and manual labour, plucking tea, or working as clerks in small businesses. A larger number of women - 116 (47 percent) – did unpaid work in their own homes or family business; 33 (13 percent) described themselves as unemployed,<sup>37</sup> and 21 (9 percent) were self-employed, a category which included those operating small cafes or food stands, or preparing items of food such as dried fish or *beedis* (a kind of cigarette) in their homes.

#### *Expectations About Migration*

When asked how long they expected to stay abroad if working conditions were satisfactory, the majority (72 percent) said they planned to work overseas for only 2 years. Only 4 percent said they planned to stay for at least 6 years. Findings from Jordan indicate that while many women initially plan to stay abroad for a few years, it usually takes six or even eight years to accumulate savings to enable significant expenditures, such as the purchase of land and construction of a home. When asked how much they expected to earn while working abroad, 54 women (22 percent) said they had no idea. For those going to Middle Eastern destinations who *did* have a figure in mind, the average expected monthly salary was 17,537 Rs (\$159), with a median of 17,000 Rs (\$155). For non-Middle Eastern destinations, the mean was 44,328 Rs (\$403), with a median of 40,000 Rs (\$364).

#### **Recruitment Processes and Costs**

Labour migration to the Middle East is a predominantly rural phenomenon; only 34 percent of women migrating for work abroad reportedly come from urban areas (Dias and Jayasundere 2002: 4). This is unsurprising given that Sri Lanka's population as a whole remains predominantly rural.<sup>38</sup> Among those I interviewed, 64 percent came from areas they described as rural, 32 percent

<sup>37</sup> Unemployment is defined as those above the legal working age (14) who are not in paid employment or self-employment, and are available for and seeking work, i.e. taking steps to seek paid employment or self-employment. Given that the rate of absorption into the Sri Lankan labour force is limited and much of the labour force is engaged in informal employment, a very loose definition of seeking work was used. I asked whether women had been looking for or ready and willing to take up work (*rækiyawe*).

<sup>38</sup> More than two-thirds of the population resides in rural areas (Economist 2007).

from urban districts and 4 percent from tea estates.<sup>39</sup> A total of 106 women (43 percent) said they had moved to a different district at some point in their lives for work, marriage, because of the war or for other reasons. High rates of internal migration (Spencer 2003: 5) appear to coincide with overseas migration.

An entire bureaucracy has been set up to facilitate migration to the Middle East. At the national level, it is promoted by the Bureau of Foreign Employment, as is described in chapter 3. At the village level, it is facilitated by a vast network of 'brokers' and 'sub-agents', who act as mediators-for-hire between potential migrants and recruitment agencies, helping migrants with paperwork and administrative procedures. As of 2008, there were 626 licensed recruitment agencies in Sri Lanka, more than half of which were based in Colombo. They transmit job orders to brokers operating at the village level. Brokers' activities are not regulated, and some charge excessive fees for their services. They are well-known figures in most villages, and though they are sometimes viewed as exploitative, they provide valuable services for those seeking employment abroad. Of the women I interviewed at the Bureau's training facilities, 104 (42 percent) said they were migrating with the help of a broker or sub-agent; 68 (28 percent) said they were migrating through an agency but not with the help of a broker or personal contact; and 67 (27 percent) said they were migrating with the help of a personal contact other than a broker. Brokers were distinguished from other contacts in that they were remunerated for their assistance. These findings suggest that intermediaries – whether brokers, relatives or other personal contacts - play a role in the migration process in the majority of cases.

Some migrants are able to select their countries of employment, while others have the decision made for them by recruitment agency staff depending on the availability of jobs. The majority (59 percent) of the women I interviewed at the training centres said they had not made the choice themselves. Of those who did, 58 percent said their decision was influenced by the fact that a relative (*nædæya*), fellow villager or other contact in the host country was helping them to migrate. Only 43 women (30 percent) chose the destination on the basis of the country's reputation. Countries are typically ranked according to differences in salaries and benefits, with non-Middle Eastern destinations preferred because they are thought to offer higher salaries. These interviews suggest that many women do not have a say in where they migrate. Among those who do, social networks play a strong role in their decisions.

Women migrating for domestic work are required to pay the Bureau 7,700 Rs (\$70) in registration fees (which include health insurance) plus 3,000 Rs (\$27) for medical exams. In interviews at the Bureau's training facilities, responses to questions about the costs of migration varied greatly. I

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<sup>39</sup> Women were asked whether they came from a village (*gama*) or a town (*nagaraya*), the former being considered rural and the latter urban.

cannot draw conclusions because not everyone would have been aware of costs recruitment agencies charge after the training. Moreover, many women said they did not know whether money would be deducted from their salaries once they arrived in the host country. Though doing so violates the terms of the sponsorship system, some women said they intended to pay local citizens to act as their sponsors when they arrived. This system entails paying for the visa in addition to an inducement for the sponsor. This is sometimes called the 'free visa' system, 'free' referring not to the lack of cost but to the fact that once a sponsor has been paid, the migrant can choose her own employer. Many women said they did not know how much they would have to pay their future sponsors. The lack of awareness about the costs of migrating in itself is significant. Other women reported that all of the costs of migration, including the Bureau's registration fees, were being paid by agencies. A preference for Muslim domestic workers meant that some employers were prepared to pay a premium and cover these costs for the migrant. Accordingly, some Muslim women reported that agencies paid them cash advances in exchange for having agreed to migrate or had enticed them with the promise of radios or television sets.

Fees associated with migration correspond with the desirability of destinations; Cyprus and East and Southeast Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore can be several times more expensive to reach in comparison to Arab countries. In an interview in January 2008, L. K. Ruhunage, Deputy General Manager of Foreign Relations at the Bureau, said that while there was a legally stipulated fee structure based on workers' salaries that in principle governed the amounts required to migrate, it was widely acknowledged that brokers and agencies charged exorbitant amounts. Though there is a preference to send men abroad for work instead of women, the fees charged by agencies to place men in employment abroad are often prohibitively high.

Of those women I interviewed who reported having already made payments to go to the Middle East, the figures ranged from 1,500 Rs (\$14) paid by one woman migrating to Kuwait, to 200,000 Rs (\$1,818) paid by another migrating through the 'free visa' system to Dubai. The mean was 22,075 Rs (\$201), and the median was 10,000 (\$91). The costs reported for non-Middle Eastern destinations were considerably higher, with a mean of 186,462 Rs (\$1,695) a median of 175,000 Rs (\$1,591). Though no firm conclusions should be drawn from these figures given that they do not include costs migrants might have to pay after they arrive in the host country, in broad terms they indicate a lower cost of migration to Arab countries in comparison to other destinations. The fact that there were so many different responses to these questions even among women migrating to the same country suggests a great deal of variation with respect to how much women know about the financial costs of migration.

## Motivations for Migration

### *Securing Vital Needs and Planning for the Future*

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Figure 3: Home built with remittances from Jordan

Decisions about migration are often motivated not strictly by the inability to meet basic subsistence expenses but the desire to make investments in family projects. Women interviewed at the Bureau's training centres were asked an open-ended question about why they decided to work overseas. Economic need was assumed to play some role, but I asked them to identify one or two of the most important factors that had influenced their decisions. The single most commonly cited reason – mentioned by 103 (43 percent) of the 242 women who responded to this question – was to earn money for housing. This included money to purchase land, build or complete construction of a home. Many were living in their parental homes or with affines and wanted a place of their own. Owning one's own home, ideally on a plot of land large enough for a small garden (*gewatte*), is strongly valued and linked with the passage into adulthood. Renting a home is seen as wasting money. Population growth has outstripped the housing stock and the cost of land has increased, meaning that substantial resources are needed to buy land and purchase or build a new home. Some of the women I interviewed were living in houses made of mud and *cajun* (coconut fronds) and wanted to build more solid cement or brick structures with tile roofs. Others had leaky roofs or homes too small to accommodate growing families and wanted to make improvements.

The second most common response, mentioned by 57 women (24 percent), was to earn money for their families' daily living expenses. A total of 37 (15 percent) of women said they were migrating in order to earn money for their own dowries or that of sisters or daughters. The word 'dowry' (*daewaedda*) was seldom used; such payments were more often referred to as expenses associated

with getting married and starting a new life with a spouse. Dowries are thought not to be required for 'love marriages' but are typically expected for arranged marriages. In practice, even in the case of 'love marriages', women are expected to provide money or assets that act as a marital start-up kit for the new couple. The ability to provide these things makes the union appear more formal and socially acceptable. One of the other most commonly-cited reasons for migration was to earn money for children's or siblings' educational expenses. In order to ensure a child's educational success, parents and teachers believe in the necessity of private tuition (Little 1999: 193), the costs of which can be a significant burden for low-income parents. Many other women said they were migrating to settle debts or to invest in future livelihoods, for example purchasing a small shop, farming or sewing equipment.

Twenty-one women (9 percent) said they were motivated by economic need in the wake of the illness or death of a spouse or parent. Such was the case for Lata, a 41-year-old woman from a village in Matale District, central Sri Lanka whom I met in Jordan. As a young woman, she had worked alongside her parents on a rubber plantation. After marrying, she and her husband cultivated rice paddy. She earned a pittance in both types of labour. When her daughter turned three years old, Lata decided to go abroad. With the goal of improving their home and saving money for her daughter's educational expenses, Lata went to work as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. She described her time there as nightmarish. Her employers had seven children, whom she cared for in addition to cleaning the house from six a.m. until well into the night. She barely left the house. Although she sent letters to her family, she did not know other Sri Lankans in Saudi Arabia and had no opportunities to speak her own language. Craving her family's company, Lata longed to return to Sri Lanka. But towards the end of her stay in Saudi Arabia, she received word that her husband had been bitten by a poisonous viper while working in the paddy fields. He had survived, but barely. The viper's poison had crippled him, preventing him from working in the fields. Lata was suddenly the sole breadwinner. As a result, after completing her two-year stint in Saudi Arabia, she took a job in Jordan, where I met her.

Lata's work for an elderly Jordanian man was an improvement. With no *madame* (as female employers are called) to scrutinise her and only one person to look after, the work was not backbreaking, as it had been in Saudi Arabia. But she couldn't shake the wrench of loneliness she felt. Not allowed to leave the home where she worked, Lata was on call 24 hours a day looking after her employer. She earned \$140 a month, which she saved and sent to her husband. This money was barely enough to cover daily household expenses. While working in Jordan she was diagnosed with high blood pressure, a condition for which she would require medication for the rest of her life. Nearly a decade of household confinement with little exercise may have been partly to blame, but Lata attributed the condition to sadness: her constant thoughts of home had

made her unwell.<sup>40</sup> Although she wanted to return, Lata expected to remain abroad for at least three more years. Her case demonstrates why many women become serial migrants, working for several contract periods until they save enough.

While Lata's decision to remain abroad was prompted by her husband's illness, other women are compelled to migrate as a result of their husbands' inability or unwillingness to find work. Swarna, a 29-year-old woman from Puttalam with a two-year-old son, decided to go abroad despite strong objections from her own parents, who said her husband should go instead. Swarna's husband was a building contractor with a heavy drinking habit and, according to Swarna, had a lazy streak. Swarna was doubtful that even if he did go abroad he would have the initiative to do the work. She complained that she had to instruct him to do everything. 'He doesn't even know how to match his clothes. I have to tell him [to do] everything.' Swarna had specific objectives in mind: she planned to work overseas in order to settle several outstanding loans and then begin saving for the costs of putting her child in an international school where he could learn English. She hoped to be home by the time he was ready for school.

In other cases, women's migration is prompted by the need to pay off debts associated with previous attempts at migration, as Doreen, a 30-year-old mother of two, illustrated. In 2000, two of Doreen's younger brothers paid smugglers to help them travel, one to Italy and the other to New Zealand. Doreen mortgaged her land in exchange for 5 Lakh Rs (\$6,579) to pay the smugglers.<sup>41</sup> The brother heading for New Zealand took a boat with 88 other people that broke down during the two-month journey. He was imprisoned in a detention facility for one and a half years. The other brother was caught by the Italian authorities and also detained. Doreen lost her land when she failed to keep up the mortgage payments.<sup>42</sup> She decided to migrate to Cyprus in order to buy a new plot of land and build a home.

Studies of migration in other contexts have emphasised the role of utopic imaginings in migrants' decision-making. But among most of the women I encountered, migration was not talked about in terms of becoming modern, as it has been described for other contexts (e.g. Ferguson 1999). Women tend to approach it in a more pragmatic way as a strategy to deal with financial crises or to invest in the future. As in the cases of Lata and Doreen, going abroad is a way to cope with family crises. At the time of departure, their return to Sri Lanka was unquestioned. Employment overseas as a domestic worker is rarely talked about as having transformative potential for the migrant herself, although it may have this effect. Rather, the focus is on the acquisition of savings.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the ways physical ailments may be thought to be caused by mental distress in a village in western Sri Lanka, see Widger (2009: 95).

<sup>41</sup> Based on an average annual exchange rate for 2000 of 76 LKR = 1 USD.

<sup>42</sup> She had mortgaged her land through a personal loan at a monthly interest rate of 10 percent. She said that a mortgage through a bank would have had a lower interest rate but would be more difficult and time-consuming to obtain.

Moreover, most women do not imagine the Middle East as El Dorado. Hopes and aspirations tend to be smaller-scale than this. Many view migration as a speculative wager made in the hope that by leaving their families for a time they will give them a better life in the long-run.

#### *Mothers and Daughters: Migration as a Rite of Passage*

Many women express a strongly felt duty to provide for their families, particularly their children, and cast their decisions to go abroad in terms of maternal duty. While this type of migration is often individualised in that women travel alone, the decision to go is quite the opposite. Motivations to migrate often arise out of the fact that in Sri Lanka, as in many other places, notions of the person are highly relational. Marriage and childbirth define womanhood. Though women's participation in waged labour at current rates may be new, the ways in which they feel responsible for and bound to their families is not. These ties make them feel compelled to provide economically in the ways they attempt to do by migrating.

Migration also tends to be inter-generational. It would be unusual for a migrant to be the only member of her family to have gone abroad, an unsurprising fact given that 20 percent of the country's workforce is overseas. In many cases, their mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts and even grandmothers had migrated. Matilda, for example, was one of five sisters all employed as domestic workers in Jordan. She brought her daughter there, who subsequently married and had a child of her own, and all three generations lived together in Amman. Of those women interviewed at pre-departure training facilities, only 21 women (9 percent) out of the sample of 245 had no relatives who had ever gone abroad. A significant number (31 percent) had five or more relatives who were either currently or previously working abroad. A total of 27 percent reported that their mothers had migrated before them, and 24 percent had one or more sisters who had migrated. Only 9 percent had brothers who had migrated previously.

In many cases, a precedent is set by the older generation whereby it is expected for a wife or daughter to provide in this way. Several of the women I met at training facilities were going abroad within months of having married, suggesting that migration may have been an implicit or explicit part of their dowries. This appeared to have been the case for one young woman, who worked as a domestic worker at a guesthouse in Colombo. Her mother had been working in the Middle East until she returned abruptly and made arrangements for her daughter's marriage. Within two months of the wedding, a job had been arranged for her in Dubai. The plan, which her mother had helped concoct, was for her to depart for Dubai and be followed two months later by her new husband. Six months passed, and the husband had yet to leave for Dubai but continued to ask for her earnings. Within the literature on Sri Lanka, dowries usually consist of moveable assets and land, and this appears to be an unusual example of women's productive capacity being bartered as part of a marriage transaction.

A number of women attributed the need to migrate to the fact that they had not been able to complete their own educations – and hence fared less well on the job market - because their own mothers had been in the Middle East when they were growing up and had not been there to encourage them to study or support them in other ways. Education is believed to lead to jobs, particularly professional or government employment. A discourse of blaming migrant mothers for poor educational attainment or juvenile delinquency among children is common. It is not clear, however, that educational success necessarily translates to employment, as unemployment is particularly high among the educated. Ironically, some women who blame their mothers for having migrated decide to migrate and leave their own children behind, repeating the pattern. Such was the case with Kumari, a 21-year-old woman from Colombo whom I met in Amman. Kumari's mother migrated to Jordan when Kumari was 10, returning every two years for only a week or two. Eventually, she stopped returning altogether and stopped sending money home. Kumari and her father assumed she had become involved with another man, and Kumari spoke at length about how her mother's absence had affected her. Kumari married at the age of 17 and had a daughter of her own. When her daughter turned three, she decided to go to the Middle East to earn money for her family. As luck would have it, the recruitment agency with which she had registered sent her to Jordan, the same country where her mother had worked. Kumari suspected that her mother might still be there but had no interest in tracking her down. She rationalised her own departure by saying she would maintain more regular contact with her child and send all of her money home. For her and many other women, financial support was an important form of long-distance mothering.

Nevertheless, deciding to leave children behind is not easy. Among women I met at training facilities, questions about plans for departure often provoked a flood of tears as they talked about leaving their children. Of those interviewed, 62 percent had at least one child, and of those, 47 percent had two or three children, and 10 percent had four or more. In cases in which women had children under the age of 18, 34 percent reported that they intended to leave them in the care of their own mothers, 22 percent in the care of their husbands, and 19 percent in the care of their husbands' parents. Fewer women said they planned to leave their children with siblings or other relatives. Some women in Nilpanagoda and Watinapaha decide *not* to migrate because they do not want to leave their children behind or because they have no one on whom to rely for childcare. Choices about migration often hinge on what other resources a woman has, particularly whether she can depend on female kin for childcare. In public discourse, fathers are not considered good options and tend to be viewed in a predatory light, apt to neglect or even abuse children left in their care, especially if they are prone to drinking. In common parlance, fathers' roles in raising children is often discounted. Although many fathers have tender, loving relationships with their children, they are generally thought to be responsible only for providing material support. The

intimate, day-to-day care, emotional support, oversight of school studies and preparation of food are left to mothers. Fathers are regarded as being emotionally distant from their children once they have reached a certain age, whereas women are seen to be more directly engaged (Obeyesekere 1984).

In response to complaints that young children were suffering from abuse and neglect in the absence of their mothers, in March 2007 the government banned women with children under the age of five from working overseas. The decision provoked outcry from women's organisations, who demanded that it be revoked. During the period of research, the ban was not enforced, and women with young children continued to leave the country for employment. Those who did so pointed to a lack of viable alternatives and said the additional money they would send home for education, house improvements and dowries outweighed the negative impacts of their absence. They viewed providing material support as an extension of their roles as mothers rather than a departure from it.

#### ***Responding to Marital Conflict: Migration as an Alternative to Divorce***

Domestic violence, alcohol use and disputes with husbands over finances often influence women's decisions to go abroad. Throughout Sri Lanka, social norms dictate that married couples should not divorce even if they are fighting repeatedly and their disputes turn violent. Legal divorce proceedings are rare. Some spouses may live apart, but few make their changed status official. While some women live alone, doing so is financially difficult and socially unacceptable. For women such as Nira, described at the beginning of this chapter, migration can provide a temporary break if not a permanent escape from an unhappy union. Migration contributes to family breakdown, but not in the straightforward, linear way commonly assumed. Interviews indicate that marital breakdown often *prompts* rather than *follows* migration. I learned about this when speaking with migrants in Jordan, but marital conflict was also mentioned as a factor influencing decisions to migrate among 16 (6 percent) of the women interviewed at training centres.

As in Nira's case, alcohol use often fuels marital conflicts. The consumption of alcohol is highly gendered in Sri Lanka. While Buddhist prohibitions against intoxicating substances apply equally to men and women, many men drink whereas the vast majority of women do not, it being considered a socially unacceptable practice for 'respectable' women (Gamburd 2008b). Unemployment and a lack of financial resources can be a source of humiliation for men, driving them to the bottle (*ibid*). Drinking plays a crucial role in male camaraderie and cementing social networks (Widger 2009: 326-7). But the diversion of scarce household resources for an activity women see as unproductive and detrimental can spark fights and prompt women to go abroad to supplement household income (Gamburd 2008b: 110).

### ***Young and Restless: Social Motivations for Going Abroad***

While the majority of the women I met emphasised a *need* to go abroad, for some the decision appeared more impulsive, as Manoja's story suggests. I met Manoja at a pre-departure training facility in Colombo. She was preparing to go to Jordan on what sounded like a whim; she had a cousin who lived there and was doing well. Manoja wanted to follow in his footsteps and saw going to Jordan as her only opportunity to travel. After I told her I had lived in Jordan, she asked for my phone number. Two months after we first met, she called me frantically from Jordan, asking for help to get her passport back from her employer so that she could come home. She said the work had been too much for her, and she had run away. Her employer refused to hand over the passport until she came up with the money he had spent bringing her to Jordan. Manoja eventually found a place to stay with other Sri Lankans and worked on a part-time basis. Jordan had not been what she had expected.

For other women, migration offers a means of revenge in family disputes, as was the case for Shanika. Shanika lived on a steep mountain slope on the outskirts of Sinharaja Rainforest, in the lush south-west corner of the island. Although only 160 km from Colombo, reaching her home from the capital took an entire day, involving three buses, a bumpy trishaw ride up a winding, potholed dirt road and, finally, a ride in the back of a lorry. With no public transportation connecting her village with the nearest town, the only options were to hitch a ride in the village's only vehicle – a lorry that doubles as a school bus – or to walk. Shanika's mother and father had separated when Shanika was 8, and Shanika grew up living with her mother, sisters and brother in her mother's natal village in a simple, two-room house made of *matti* (mud mixed with dung) with a *cadjan* (coconut leaves) roof. Her mother supported the family by working in the tea fields and cultivating manioc, cinnamon, potatoes and other vegetables on land donated by the government. Shanika went to school long enough to finish her O-Level exams and then took a job as a weaver in a powerloom factory in Panadura, on the western coast, where she earned 3,000 Rs (\$27) per month. While there, she met a young man working in a nearby noodle factory who became her beau. The two wanted to marry. He approached Shanika's brother, who asked if he wanted a dowry. The young man said he did not but that his mother did, and so Shanika's brother refused and insisted the two break off ties. Shanika was incensed both with the boyfriend for having asked for the dowry and with her brother for refusing to pay it. In anger, she decided to go abroad. Shanika said that at the time she felt '*jindera*', as if on fire. A woman at the powerloom factory who had previously worked in Jordan helped her to secure a job, and in 1992, at the age of 26, Shanika left for Jordan. She had defied her family by going to Jordan and once there felt terribly alone. Although her initial decision had been made in haste, she stayed in Jordan for 13 years. She worked for a family in Zarqa, initially earning \$50, twice what she had been earning as a weaver. Her salary was eventually raised to \$150. She sent most of her earnings to her mother, who used

them to build a house that was ready by the time she returned to Sri Lanka in 2005. Hers is one of the best-equipped and most spacious homes in the village and is one of only a handful with electricity.

Thus, for some women, economic and emotional incentives coalesce to make migration an attractive option. Other important factors driving women to migrate include curiosity, the desire to join kin already abroad, or attempts to circumvent parental obstacles in the pursuit of romantic love. For example, a young woman from Puttalam explained that she wanted to go to Dubai both to support her family and in order to be with her boyfriend, whom her parents had forbidden her to marry. She planned to bring her boyfriend to Dubai after she obtained her own job. In her view, this was the only way they could be together.

### *'Migration Fever' in Watinapaha*

Another important dimension is the emergence of what in other contexts has been called a 'culture of migration' (Thomas-Hope 1978, 1998), in which people increasingly view going abroad as an expected or even the only means of obtaining upward mobility.<sup>43</sup> Watinapaha provides an illustration: One afternoon while walking home, Malini and I were met on the road by a young man who, after chatting with us briefly, asked if Malini could help him go abroad. 'Ne, pisude?' ('No, are you crazy?'), she replied, asking why he would want to leave his wife and child. The man lived in one of the nicest homes in the area, situated along the main road, and had a job and motorcycle. Malini thought it foolish for someone in his position to leave. 'It's like people have migration fever', she said when he had left, explaining that ever since she had returned from Jordan people had been asking for her help to migrate even when in her eyes they lacked sufficient cause. The visible fruits of migration, particularly the new garb and gold that migrants bring back with them and the homes they build, add to its allure. There is also a marked difference in architecture between the homes of migrants and non-migrants.<sup>44</sup> The contrast is particularly striking with the homes of migrants working in Italy, some of whom build two-story structures that dwarf the neighbouring homes and have ostentatious flourishes, spiral staircases or fake columns.

While migrants often frame their decisions to go abroad in terms of poverty and limited livelihood options in Sri Lanka, an increase in consumerism also acts as a powerful propellant. The opening

<sup>43</sup> Describing a more extreme version, Horst (2006) writes of a desire for resettlement among Somalis in Kenyan refugee camps that is so intense it is disease-like, occasionally sparking madness if not fulfilled. According to Horst, the affliction, which Somalis call *buufis*, acts as a form of collective imagining that provides hope among people who are otherwise hopeless (2006: 152).

<sup>44</sup> Thangarajah (2004: 156-159) describes the ways migration to the Middle East has influenced housing styles among Muslims in a village in Batticaloa district, eastern Sri Lanka. Middle East returnees build homes with more pronounced divisions for male and female areas and equip them with imported artefacts replicating Gulf house-styles.

up of the economy introduced new imported items and advertising, creating new demands and desires (Kemper 2001). Many of my evenings in Watinapaha were spent with Malini's family sprawled out on the floor eating rice and curry dinners while watching the latest Indian or Sri Lankan TV serials. The glamorous lives and well-appointed homes of teledrama protagonists far exceed village norms. As Appadurai (1991: 198) has written, the mass media offers 'prisms of possible lives', fantasies in which people imagine lives different from their own. Such fantasies inspire yearnings that might only be fulfilled with money earned abroad.

For some, including Malini's brother Tissa, money earned abroad enabled consumption habits that were hard to break. Shortly after Tissa returned from working in Iraq, he treated the family to an evening out. Twelve of us piled into a van borrowed from a relative and drove to Negombo beach for a splash in the sea. After nightfall, we went to McDonald's for dinner. This would not have been my choice, but the children among us were overjoyed and for a moment I relished the prospect of a non-rice-based meal. This feeling was short-lived as Tissa and I watched the clerk tally up the bill for our twelve dinners, which totalled the Rupee equivalent of more than \$40, a staggering sum by local standards. Tissa's flashy display of generosity was an assertion of success abroad. But such acts proved difficult to maintain. Tissa had returned from Iraq with a plan to marry an American woman he had met on the military base and migrate to the United States as her spouse. The plan evaporated by the time he got to Sri Lanka, at which point the woman had broken off their relationship. Tissa began investigating other possibilities. He became singularly focussed on the goal of going abroad, and how he could do so became a main topic of conversation in the household, particularly when I was around because he was convinced I could help. Having worked in Jordan and Iraq, he had now set his sights on more lucrative destinations in Europe or North America. His brother-in-law, Lakmal, who was in the military, was also eager to migrate. Together, they used Tissa's savings from Iraq to pay for tourist visas for Canada. Each night for several weeks, Tissa quizzed me about what life might be like in Canada and how much things would cost. When the man they had paid failed to produce the visas, Tissa became depressed. He was the youngest of four siblings and the only one without a house of his own. Local employment options paid so little it would take years for him to be able to save enough to build a home. His experience working in Iraq had established expectations that could not be matched in Sri Lanka.

### **Silences Surrounding Women's Migration**

The fact that paid domestic work is seen as beneath women from 'respectable' families is not entirely overcome by those who have gone abroad to perform it. Women who would never work as domestic workers in Sri Lanka are willing to do so abroad because it takes place far from the gaze of other village residents and generates enough money to outweigh the stigma. Similarly,

writing of a community in southern Kerala, Osella and Osella (2001: 79) describe how migration lessens the shame of employment in manual labour by allowing for a separation between village life and work that is undignified. Sri Lankan women who have returned from working in Arab countries rarely cultivate a positive image of themselves as migrants or as domestic workers. This became clear to me while carrying out research in Nilpanagoda. Malini occasionally assisted me in carrying out formal interviews with migrants and non-migrants. When we encountered women who had worked in the Middle East, she did not identify herself as having worked abroad. I had hoped she would share this information to break the ice when broaching a delicate subject, but I gradually came to understand her reasons for not doing so. While the economic goods resulting from time abroad may be a source of prestige, the experience itself is not.<sup>45</sup> Migrant domestic workers are both admired for the money they earn and looked down upon for the degrading status of their work. For this reason, stories of life abroad rarely feature accounts of suffering or mistreatment, which can be a source of shame rather than evidence of tenacity in the face of adversity. Whereas in Jordan Sri Lankan women speak voluminously about problems with employers and recruitment agents, at home in Sri Lanka few mention these subjects unless directly asked, and even then, seldom at length. Having struggled abroad does not translate to a sense of dignity or self-worth upon a migrant's return. It should also be said, however, that the women I met at training centres in various parts of the country who had gone abroad previously were less guarded in their accounts of migration and talked about their hardships more freely. I assume they were more forthcoming because they felt anonymous when speaking to me, as we were not near their home communities and hence there was less fear of gossip. The conspicuous silences in returnees' accounts may mean that some women contemplating migration are not given the whole story about what to expect. However, discussions with women at the Bureau's training centres indicated that even women who had themselves been physically abused on previous trips often remained determined to migrate again in the absence of alternatives. Moreover, many of the women who were migrating for the first time had heard stories about abusive employers and were fearful of going abroad, an issue that will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3. This suggests that while some women may be more aware of potential difficulties than others, many are not naïve about the dangers of working overseas.

## Conclusion

Labour migrants have been called the 'unsung heroes of globalisation' (Ramamurthy 2003) and heralded as reducing poverty through remittances. Pro-migration development theorists have predicted that migration through regular, legal channels for temporary work abroad by 'unskilled'

<sup>45</sup> Doing other people's work ('wena keneku yata the weda kirima') or 'low-status work' (*pahath weda*) is generally viewed as demeaning, which helps explain why women rarely offer detailed descriptions of domestic work performed abroad.

or ‘semi-skilled’ workers from poor backgrounds tends to result in higher flows of remittances than other types of migration (Ronnas 2003: 16). By this logic, one might think Sri Lanka, with its high proportion of ‘unskilled’ circular migrants, would be the perfect candidate for the development-through-migration model. But evidence from three decades of migration to the Middle East raises questions about migration as a path to prosperity. It is possible that migrant remittances have stymied economic development by reducing incentives for the government to invest in projects that would have provided employment at home and by helping to fund the country’s war bill. While there has been increasing interest in how governments can better invest migrants’ remittances, what also needs to be considered are ways remittances can enable spending that may be antithetical to long-term development needs. Many women migrate from Sri Lanka in order to educate their children to give them a better future. But without well-paid jobs in Sri Lanka, many of those children themselves grow up to become migrant domestic workers.

While trying to avoid the trap of portraying contemporary Sri Lanka as being in a state of decay and fragmentation in contrast to a cosier, egalitarian and stable past, I have presented some of the transformations in the past four decades that have influenced decisions about migration. The stories presented in this chapter speak to the diversity of women’s reasons for going abroad. Some have gone out of wanderlust. But the narratives of most migrants at all stages of migration – before leaving, while in Jordan, and after returning – emphasise going abroad as something they are *compelled* rather than *choosing* to do. And for many, the decision to go is heart-breaking. Their sense of compulsion arises not just from dire economic need but social obligation, and many migrants cast their motivations in a language of sacrifice for the family. This context highlights the ways individuals’ understandings of themselves are highly relational, bound up with their rights and duties vis-à-vis kin. While the journey abroad itself may be solitary, the enterprise of deciding and preparing to go is not. This calls into question the nature of the ‘individual’ as a unit of analysis in understanding migration. The evidence presented in this chapter also raises questions about the limitations of the household as a unit of analysis. While migrants are often prompted by household-level problems or goals, their options have been shaped by Sri Lanka’s war-weary economy, widening inequalities under economic liberalism, and changing patterns of consumption. Migration is often portrayed by scholars as an individual or household strategy, but it is conditioned by factors at the local and national levels. Equally important in this equation is the international context in which the Sri Lankan economy is enmeshed and the socio-economic, political and cultural forces in Arab countries that have created a demand for Sri Lankan women’s work. This will be addressed in the next two chapters.

### 3

#### *Pre-Departure Training and the Making of Servants in Sri Lanka*

It is late afternoon at the Bureau of Foreign Employment's training facility in Mount Lavinia, Colombo, where a class of prospective workers huddles around an instructor as she gives a cooking lesson. They are preparing a salad of sliced carrots, cabbage and onions, along with rice and baked chicken. Despite the heat and humidity, the women watch intently as the instructor demonstrates how to clean and slice the vegetables. Many of the women have travelled here from remote villages around the island. There are Muslims from the east coast, Tamils from tea estates in the central hill country, and Sinhalese from lowland villages in the south. Once here, they receive training over the course of two weeks in preparation for employment as domestic workers abroad.

Going abroad offers many individuals a rare opportunity to accumulate savings. But it is a gamble with many risks. Stories about domestic workers mistreated by employers in the Middle East appear regularly in the Sri Lankan press. For example, on December 30, 2009, the *Daily Mirror* featured a story about a Sri Lankan woman in Jordan who endured daily beatings from which she was eventually hospitalised.<sup>46</sup> Other media outlets have described women working for long periods without pay.<sup>47</sup> In October, the *Sunday Times* reported the findings of an NGO study suggesting that 10 percent of Sri Lanka's expatriate workers faced physical, psychological or sexual abuse while abroad.<sup>48</sup> Low-paid workers such as domestic workers are described as most at risk. As a result, the political discourse about Sri Lanka's migrant domestic workers is contradictory. On the one hand, there is a patriarchal desire to protect women employed abroad, with an underlying assumption that women migrants are more vulnerable than men. On the other hand, there is a countervailing tendency to view migration as a source of 'net profit' to be expanded because of the much-needed remittances migrants send home. Politicians have issued statements insisting that Sri Lanka stop sending 'unskilled' housemaids abroad because of the ill treatment they endure and the emotional strain on their families. But there has been a simultaneous push to increase the capital Sri Lanka receives in remittances. In March 2008, President Mahinda Rajapaksa reportedly recommended that steps be taken to reduce the number of women migrating as housemaids (Senaratne 2008). Several months earlier, in September 2007, Foreign Employment

<sup>46</sup> Daily Mirror, 'Lankan domestic worker in Jordan abused', 30 December 2009.

<sup>47</sup> The *Sunday Times* told the story of Mallika, a domestic worker who returned to her home in Wadduwa after 16 years of 'slavery' in Saudi Arabia. She described enduring severe beatings and verbal abuse, and being held against her will to work without pay. 'Amma is back', *Sunday Times*, November 11, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> *Sunday Times*, '10 percent of Sri Lankan foreign labour faced abuses in 2001', 25 October 2009.

Development and Welfare Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said he planned to increase expatriate remittances. 'Our targeted direct foreign remittance is US\$3 billion by the end of this year from foreign employment and through a thorough campaign to boost Sri Lankan labour force especially in European and other countries we are positive of earning 4 billion dollars as net profit of the next year,' he said (Weerakoon 2007). Contradictory state discourses about the need to protect women migrants while maintaining remittance-driven capital flows have also been noted with reference to Indonesia (Lan 2006: 50) and the Philippines (Tyner 2004: 2).

One of the chief strategies the Sri Lankan government has adopted to tackle the problem of abuse while maintaining the 'maid trade' has been to create pre-departure training programmes. The rationale is that increased awareness of how to adapt to host country norms and expectations will decrease the likelihood of maltreatment. The training programmes are also a response to demands by host countries that domestic workers arrive better prepared for their jobs.

The pre-departure programmes are run by the main government agency charged with promoting and regulating the overseas deployment of workers, the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment. Established in 1985, the Bureau is a self-financed public corporation that derives its revenue from recruitment fees, administration fees and commissions from employment agencies (IOM 2005: 22). The Bureau's main duties are to promote the employment of Sri Lankans abroad, regulate employment agencies, and ensure the protection and welfare of Sri Lankan migrants and their families. Four representatives of recruitment agencies serve on its eleven-member board, as stipulated in the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment Act (1985). This gives it a vested interest in the business of overseas employment. Migrant workers are required to register with the Bureau and pay registration fees. Bureau employees keep watch at the airport to make sure all departing workers are registered. In 2009, the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment Act was amended to grant 'police powers' to the Bureau's civilian employees (Samath 2009). Those workers who try to leave the country with false travel documents can be arrested at the point of departure. Those who fail to pay the Bureau's compulsory registration fees can be denied the right to travel. Worker advocates and human rights lawyers have said that these police powers violate citizens' freedom of movement by preventing them from travelling even if they have the proper travel documents.

The Bureau promotes overseas migration in a number of ways. It has established low-interest loan schemes through state banks to help migrant workers cover the cost of going abroad or for investments in housing and self-employment projects when they return to Sri Lanka. Additionally, it operates a scheme by which scholarships are granted to migrant workers' children who pass grade five, General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (O-Level) and Advanced Level (A-Level) examinations. The Bureau has also played an increasing role in preparing workers for

employment abroad. In a memorandum dated 28 April 1994 to the Bureau's Board of Directors and Chairman, Sunimal Senaratne, then the General Manager, made the following recommendation:

The Bureau has experienced since its inception the problems that the Sri Lankan migrant workers, especially housemaids, have to undergo in their host countries as well as within their family circles, through the vast number of complaints that pour in daily. The Bureau has also realised that this pathetic state is a direct consequence of sending untrained personnel for employment. Considering this situation, Honorable Minister of Labour and Vocational Training has decided to make training compulsory for migrant workers after June 1994.

Senaratne went on to suggest that the existing training facilities should be enhanced and new centres opened to ensure that all new recruits receive adequate training. Documents such as this reflect the assumption that abuse of workers occurs as a 'direct consequence' of their lack of training.

Part of the reason for the focus on training workers in the hopes of pre-empting abuse is that the Sri Lankan government is largely unable to protect citizens in host countries where it has no legal jurisdiction. The difficulties faced by Sri Lankan embassy staff in responding to cases of abuse in Jordan are described in chapter 5. Thus, emphasis is instead placed on the 'personality development' of the domestic worker *before* she goes abroad. This is in lieu of the more politically unpopular and practically difficult alternative: demanding that host states enforce workers' contractual and labour rights through regulation and by holding errant employers and recruitment agencies to account.

In the sections that follow, I describe the pre-departure training programmes currently in place. The analysis is based on participant observation of a 13-day housemaid training course at the Bureau's main training facility in Mount Lavinia, where the greatest numbers of new recruits are trained. I also observed classes at the facilities in Kurunegala, Dambulla and Chilaw. In breaks before and after lessons, I conversed with trainees and instructors. Interviews were conducted with departing migrants, training centre staff and officials at the Bureau's head office. In addition, migrants currently working in Jordan were interviewed about their experiences and evaluation of the training. I also draw on discussions with Jordanian employers and officials at the Sri Lankan embassy in Jordan. Important secondary source material, including the English-language versions of training manuals used in the pre-departure training programmes, was collected at the Bureau's library in Battaramulla.

### **Overview of the Training Programme**

The Bureau of Foreign Employment began offering training to prospective migrants soon after its creation in the mid-1980s, but participation was low until 1996, when the training was made

compulsory for migrants without prior work experience in the Middle East. In 2007, an estimated 32,568 women participated in the Middle East and non-Middle East-bound housemaid training programmes (SLBFE 2007: Table 65).<sup>49</sup> This represents nearly a third of the 102,176 women departing for employment as domestic workers that year (SLBFE 2007). Part of the reason for the low participation is that training is only mandatory for those going abroad for the first time or for those who do not pass a language test (Arabic or English, depending on the destination). Those migrating on repeat contracts are exempt. It is impossible to estimate the percentage of new recruits who complete the training on the basis of available data, but given that some migrants manage to depart for overseas employment without registering with the Bureau, it would appear that some also do not receive the formal training.<sup>50</sup>

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Figure 4: Learning to make a bed, Mount Lavinia, Colombo

The Bureau's training programmes are funded out of its Welfare Fund. Although touted as free, migrants and employers indirectly pay for the training, since the Welfare Fund is based largely on registration and recruitment agency fees, which are paid by employers and migrants. Training is provided at 23 centres run by the Bureau as well as a number of centres run by private recruiting agencies, most of which reportedly base their courses on the Bureau's curriculum and employ the

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<sup>49</sup> According to the same source, a total of 22,798 women completed the Middle East-bound training; 3,356 completed the non-Middle East-bound training, and 6,414 participated in the one-day housemaid refresher course for repeat migrants. Bureau-administered training is also given in the form of literacy classes, vocational courses for garment factory workers and training specifically for Korean-bound migrants.

<sup>50</sup> According to one source, only 70 percent of migrant women actually register with the Bureau of Foreign Employment prior to leaving (Dias and Jayasundere 2002: 14). Migrants interviewed in Amman and Sri Lanka confirmed the presence of a black market whereby one could buy false training certificates. One source estimated that as of 2007, the going rate for these certificates was 20,000 Rs (\$182). The training itself was provided free of charge, but by buying a certificate one could leave without having to take the course.

Bureau's instructors.<sup>51</sup> Separate courses are held for Middle East and non-Middle East-bound migrants. Women bound for the Middle East learn Arabic, while those heading for non-Middle Eastern countries learn English. Apart from this, the curricula are much the same. Separate courses are held in Sinhala and Tamil, and for women who cannot read and write, additional literacy courses are offered. My focus is on the training for migrants bound for the Middle East, where the vast majority of Sri Lankan expatriate workers are employed.

The training for Middle East-bound migrants takes place in 120 hours over the course of 12 days. Each day begins at 8 am, when trainees line up to sing the national anthem and perform aerobic exercises. Trainees are then taught through a mixture of lectures and 'hands-on' practical lessons. The instructors are former domestic workers who are required to have worked abroad for at least 5 years in addition to having passed O-Level examinations (IOM 2005: 128). The instructors receive training from the Bureau, and Bureau officials regularly visit the training facilities to oversee the programmes. External consultants are hired to give additional lectures on banking, electricity and health.

Figure 5: Cooking lesson, Mount Lavinia, Colombo

The stated objective of the training is to teach women how to be '*honda gruhasevikava*', or good household servants. Most of the women come from rural villages and have no experience with

<sup>51</sup> In addition to the governmental training programmes, a number of NGOs, namely the Migrant Service Center, the Legal Aid Commission and ACTFORM provide supplemental awareness-raising programmes for prospective migrants in rural areas throughout the island. These are discussed by Dias and Jayasundere (2002: 21-3, 26).

modern appliances or imported cleaning products. Trainees are given practical lessons in how to use and care for electrical equipment, make beds, lay dining tables, polish floors, shampoo carpets, cook Middle Eastern cuisine and care for children and the elderly. They also listen to lectures on how to speak basic Arabic, open a bank account, mail letters home, cope with stress and prepare their husbands and children for their absence. At the end of the training, they take an exam in order to receive a certificate of completion. Performance on the exam is largely irrelevant, as all of those who take the course are given certificates.

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Figure 6: Lesson on childcare, Mount Lavinia, Colombo

In addition to the pragmatic advice that is meted out, the training serves three primary, un-stated goals viewed as crucial to the making of good housemaids. These will be described in the following sections.

### **Lesson One: Developing Bourgeois Attitudes to Dirt**

The first goal involves the instruction of middle-class values with respect to cleanliness and personal hygiene. Many of the practical lessons are aimed at sensitising women to the fact that they will have to clean more often and with more paraphernalia than they are used to.<sup>52</sup> The majority of the women attending the courses, indeed all of those in the course I observed, did not have commode-type toilets, showers or bathtubs in their own homes and had never used them before attending the training.<sup>53</sup> In order to prepare them for what they would encounter abroad,

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<sup>52</sup> Heightened standards of cleanliness were cast by one instructor as being a result of the fact that Arab employers are culturally different. A trainer at one facility told her class: 'Muslims do not trust in re-birth. For that reason, they are very clean. They don't like being sick.' The word she used for 'clean' - 'pirisiduwa' - can refer either to physical cleanliness or being free from pollution in a ritual sense.

<sup>53</sup> As is common in rural Sri Lanka, they bathed in rivers or from a well with a jug.

trainees are taught to use and clean Western-style bathrooms. An elaborate colour-coded system helps them distinguish between cleaning towels that can be used for the floor, toilet, washbasin and fixtures. A lengthy session is devoted to cleaning products and disinfectants, including everything from air freshener to toilet bowl cleaner, and the many different types of mops, brushes, dusters, sponges, pads and wipes they will need to use in the Middle East. In the class I observed, this lesson produced giggles from many of the women, who were surprised to learn that so many products existed and that they would be required to identify and use all of them.



Figure 7: Cleaning lesson, Mount Lavinia, Colombo

The attempts to inculcate middle class values extend to personal appearance and bodily comportment. Throughout the training sessions at the Mount Lavinia facility, women who had taken off their shoes and were barefoot were admonished by instructors. Those caught eating lunch while seated on the floor were told that doing so could make them sick. When one woman took off her shoes upon entering the facility's model living room, as is customary upon entering homes in Sri Lanka, the instructor scolded her, saying she should forget such 'uneducated village ways'. The instructor later told me that she considered it a problem that so many Sri Lankan women went abroad wearing the cheapest sandals they owned, assuming their employers would buy them new ones. She said that if employers saw them wearing such things from the start, they would think they are 'poor village women' and treat them as such. Migrants are encouraged to adjust their

bodily comportment and personal habits through a process of genteel refinement by which they will, it is hoped, succeed as workers.<sup>54</sup>

Ten of the total instruction hours are dedicated to 'personal grooming and hygiene'. In the module I observed, women were encouraged to shower each morning, apply makeup, and wear fresh clothes every day. While none of the women wore makeup at the beginning of the training, I noticed that many had applied some for the ceremony on the final day. Ironically, while wearing makeup and stylish clothes is presented in the training as one of the ways domestic workers can impress their employers and adapt to life abroad, it is also one of the bases upon which migrant women are criticised when they return home to Sri Lanka. Returnees are sometimes scornfully referred to as '*Dubai kelli*', or '*Dubai babes*', who show off by wearing excessive makeup, jewellery and tight clothes, habits that go against the grain of modest respectability for women in rural areas.

### **Lesson Two: Learning Docility**

The second main theme of the training involves teaching migrants to be obedient and deferential. One of the cornerstones of the pedagogy is that trainees should learn by doing. Trainees are therefore responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the facility. They sweep and prepare the classrooms and outdoor areas at the start and end of each day. In overseeing the work, trainers assume roles mirroring those of Arab employers. In the sessions I observed, their manner with trainees was brusque and authoritarian. They referred to trainees as '*lamay*', or 'children'. They are served tea and cakes prepared by the cookery class and eat their lunches separately from the trainees. They also set themselves apart through dress, donning saris and high heels in contrast to the skirts and blouses worn by trainees. These differences allow the instructors to maintain social boundaries and reinforce their positions in charge.

A point of contention between instructors and trainees was the rule that trainees should not bring or use mobile phones with them to the training courses. While some could not afford to own a mobile phone, many did and objected to this rule. Those who had travelled great distances, leaving family or boyfriends behind, wanted to be able to call home. One day at the Chilaw training facility, a trainee was found to have smuggled in her phone. She was lambasted by the instructor, which brought her to tears and disrupted the day's lesson for more than an hour. Disputes between trainers and instructors also erupted when trainees failed to trim their fingernails to the length specified by the instructors, leading to harsh reprimands. It is unclear whether the instructors were so stringent as a means of maintaining their own order over the class or because they viewed strict adherence to rules part of learning to be a good housemaid. In either case, such incidents provide

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<sup>54</sup> This resembles accounts of housemaid training programmes in Indonesia, where according to Lan (2006: 85-7), migrants' own homemaking and caretaking habits are cast as crude and primitive.

trainees with their first taste of what it will be like to have to forgo personal privileges while employed abroad.<sup>55</sup>

On the first day of the training, women are told about the expenses their 'masters' [*hamputha*] incur to recruit them. They are warned that, in light of this, it is reasonable that employers will become angry if migrants do not do their jobs properly or do not complete their two-year contracts. Trainees are told that if they make mistakes or do not finish their work, it is reasonable for employers to hit them. One instructor cautioned her class: '*Oyala wedamaga hariyoth eyala deparak hithanne neha. Eyala gahawi.*' [If you neglect your work, they won't think twice. They will beat you.] Even minor mistakes can result in physical abuse.<sup>56</sup> Beatings from dissatisfied employers, it is suggested, are inevitable. The threat of corporal punishment is not altogether unusual when one considers how physical and behavioural discipline is commonly inculcated in schools throughout South Asia. Transgressions by pupils are often met with a beating or whack with a stick.<sup>57</sup>

The strategy presented for how to avoid beatings is to work as hard as possible. As one instructor explained, 'We have to make our masters happy. We have to win their trust. Even if you do not get your salary for the first month, don't give up work. Do your work well next month. They may not pay you because you do not work well enough for the salary you get.' Working harder is presented as a tactic for how to deal with an employer who does not pay the salary owed. The women are instructed not to use words such as 'don't' or 'can't', and to carry out instructions without asking questions. One pre-departure guidebook states: 'As much as possible, arguments with the employer should be avoided. The employer can make life difficult for the overseas worker. Most Arabs are personal in their feelings' (SLBFE Undated: 16). The manual goes on to warn: 'In order to keep overseas workers in line, it is normal for some Arabs to frighten you by threatening to call the police, or threatening to kill you and bury you in the desert. In such cases, remain calm and act normally. Running away would not help. Once the employer sees that the worker is not alarmed the frightening usually stops' (*ibid*).

The underlying theme is that housemaids who do not work hard enough may be physically punished, and that good housemaids who work harder eventually will be rewarded. The trainees are told, 'Your success depends on you.' As one instructor advised, 'If you work well, they will

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<sup>55</sup> Many domestic workers in Jordan and elsewhere in the region are not permitted to have mobile phones or to make or receive calls using employers' phones (HRW 2007: 72; Chammartin 2004: 20). Communication with the outside world is curtailed as a way of reducing the likelihood that the domestic worker will run away or engage in activities without the consent of the employer.

<sup>56</sup> A *New York Times* article (Waldman 2005) described a similar scene at one of the Bureau's training centres in which prospective migrants were warned that they could be beaten or burned for making a mistake.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Froerer (2007: 1049-1052) on Indian primary schools.

treat you well.' Another instructor explained the underlying philosophy of the training to me this way: 'We teach them how to win the confidence of their boss. Do whatever job you are doing well and do it professionally. No man will come close to you if you are doing a good job. They won't want to lose a good worker.'

In addition to being obedient, the 'good worker' is portrayed as flexible and adaptable, always ready to please her employer. An informational brochure published by the Bureau of Foreign Employment suggests these qualities as typical of Sri Lankans:

Reliability and Loyalty. These are natural characteristics of the Sri Lankan employee, by nature warm, hospitable and generous, through ways of life inbred in them from youth. These characteristics also help Sri Lankan employees to become quickly 'acclimatised' and oriented in foreign locations and help them to discover job satisfaction and contentment, so essential for good and successful employer-employee relationships. Sri Lankans cherish and maintain their links with families back home and would like to return home at the end of their period of contract.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, it is suggested that the ideal worker is one who will be loyal, flexible, and will remain in the country only temporarily.

### **Lesson Three: Service with a Smile**

Linked to lessons in obedience and flexibility is the third goal of the training: 'personality development'.<sup>59</sup> Theme 7 of one of the training manuals is dedicated specifically to this theme. It states:

It is very important that the migrant female worker maintain a favourably high standard of personality. Especially during the first 2 – 3 months after arriving in a foreign country it is likely that due to stress, personality weaknesses tend to appear. Then the employer may make faulty judgements about the employee and may consider her to be inefficient, unpleasant and unhealthy (SLBFE 1999: 32).

Personality development includes 'developing a physically pleasant appearance.' In addition to personal cleanliness and dress, migrants are advised that 'all mannerisms should suit the respective culture – European/Middle East.' Migrants should look relaxed and have 'good manners' (*ibid*). 'It is possible to win the employer by following favourable manners'. 'Having a pleasant smile is also important' (*ibid*). Trainees are advised that while making direct eye contact with employers is accepted in 'European culture', 'according to Arabian culture, one is expected to look down at an angle of 45 and [only] occasionally have direct eye contact' (SLBFE 1999: 32-33). The following illustration, included as Annex 6 of a training manual (SLBFE 1999), demonstrates the appropriate angle of eye contact.

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<sup>58</sup> Undated brochure published by the Bureau of Foreign Employment, available at the Bureau's library in Battaramulla.

<sup>59</sup> The preface of one manual (SLBFE 1999: 1) states: 'Helping the process of personality development of Sri Lankan female migrants is considered a national task.'

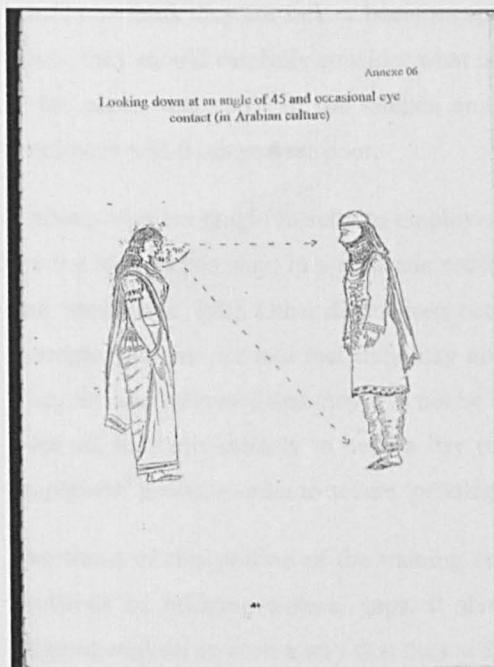


Figure 8: Illustration from an SLBFE training manual

Trainees are instructed to use key Arabic phrases with their employers, such as '*Inshallah*' [God willing] and '*Alhemdolillah*' [Praise be to God]. They are advised that if everyone else in the household is fasting during Ramadan, they too should fast. One instructor warned her class not to bring Hindu or Buddhist religious photos or cards with them abroad lest such things alarm employers. If asked their religion, trainees should identify themselves as Christian because it will be considered more appealing to Muslim employers, according to instructors.

In a session I observed about how to prepare for the journey abroad, an instructor cautioned her class against wearing sandals or plastic slippers upon first meeting employers. Shoes with 'at least one-inch heels' are preferred, she said, pointing to her own high heels. Emanating an air of confidence, she said: '*Lassanata innone*' [You need to be beautiful]. '*Airport ekedi hondata hasirennna. Game hitapu widiyata newei*' [Behave well at the airport. Don't behave like a village woman]. Similarly, an instructor at another training center told her class to pack nice clothes. '*Oyalage asaranabawaya penwanna epa*' [Don't show them that you are helpless.] She told them not to reveal their poverty [*dupath*] and to always wear long sleeves and skirts. With these warnings, migrants are encouraged not to appear too 'poor', 'rural' and 'uneducated'.

Trainees are also encouraged to wear shorts or trousers under long skirts and dresses, and to sleep in pyjamas with trousers rather than nightgowns, in order to avoid unwanted advances by male employers. As one instructor opined, trainees should use conditioner rather than hair oil and not

bring too many ‘smelly’ Ayurvedic products or medicines with them to the Middle East, lest employers think they are sick or become repulsed by the strange scents. If they bring photos from home, they should carefully consider what is in the background. For example, said one instructor, if the photo was taken in the kitchen and reveals a hearth where firewood is used to cook, employers will think you are poor.

Trainees also are taught to refer to employers as ‘*mama*’ and ‘*baba*’. In Sri Lanka, kinship terms are not used in this way; in a domestic setting, employers are usually referred to as ‘*nona*’ [lady] and ‘*mahattaya*’ [sir]. Other distinctions between home and abroad can be more challenging. For example, trainees are told that they may not be trusted at first and their honesty may be tested. They are also informed that they will not be allowed out of the house at first and that, even as time goes on, they are unlikely to have a day off. They are warned that they will have to win their employers’ hearts in order to secure ‘privileges’.

The thrust of this portion of the training centres on teaching trainees how to head off potential problems by bridging cultural gaps. It also attempts to mould the personalities and bodies of migrant workers in such a way that they will be more appealing to employers. As part of learning their place in the hierarchy, trainees are encouraged to appeal to employers on moral and ethical grounds rather than on the basis of any knowledge of their contractual rights. The training ideology endorses the view that the blame for abuse rests with the worker’s own personality. Within this model, there is no room for the possibility that ‘good’ women can be mistreated. The implicit corollary is that certain types of migrant women deserve to be the victims of violence.

### **The Absence of Labour Rights**

While the pre-departure training provides useful advice on a variety of topics, it gives almost no information about basic labour rights. Although ample information is supplied about workers’ duties and responsibilities towards employers, little is said about *employers’* responsibilities towards workers.<sup>60</sup> The fact that Sri Lanka has established a minimum wage for overseas domestic workers was mentioned in only some of the training courses I observed. Interviews suggested that even on the final day of the training, many trainees remained unaware that they were entitled to a

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<sup>60</sup> The lack of information about workers rights and redress mechanisms has also been noted in reports by IOM (2005: 113, 123) and Human Rights Watch (2007: 96-7), which said ‘...the only information about their rights that trainers provided was the advice that they should run away to the Sri Lankan embassy. Trainers provided the phone number of the embassy, but little else. Many domestic workers were misinformed about their rights, and some interviewees were unaware that they could leave abusive employers before their contract period ended.’

minimum wage, much less what it was. Trainees were also not made aware that they had a right to maintain possession of their own identity documents.<sup>61</sup>

In the event of abuse, trainees are advised to contact the embassy or write a letter to Sri Lanka asking relatives to inform the Bureau of Foreign Employment. This advice is questionable. It is doubtful that a migrant in urgent need of assistance would get a prompt response this way. Some migrants are not fully literate and need help sending letters home; others are restricted from writing by their employers. Furthermore, many migrants are reluctant to tell their family members if they are being subjected to sexual or physical violence and would be disinclined to write home about it. No country-specific information was provided about other ways migrants in distress could seek help. During interviews, trainees frequently asked me where they could go if they had problems with employers. Although a limited number of NGOs provide support to migrants abroad, no information about such sources of assistance was provided in the training.

Part of the reason for the lack of information about legal redress is that such mechanisms are rarely available to migrants. This is an issue that will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. In addition to the practical difficulties of regulating work in private households, domestic workers are excluded from the labour law in most Arab host states. Non-citizens are forbidden from striking or joining unions in much of the region, and those who dare to protest can face deportation.<sup>62</sup> The fact that they live cloistered inside their employers' homes means that many domestic workers lack the social networks that might otherwise come to their aid. In most cases, their only recourse involves breaking the law by absconding from their employers' households.

Embassies offer the main source of protection, providing shelter for workers in distress, mediating disputes with employers, and assisting with repatriation when necessary. But the general attitude among the migrants I knew was that embassy officials lacked sympathy for their grievances. Many were reluctant to go to the embassy for fear they would be returned to the recruitment agency or their employer. These fears are not unfounded. The unwritten policy at the Sri Lankan embassy in Amman during the period of research was that those workers seeking shelter at the embassy who had not completed their two-year contracts and who were not believed to have suffered abuse would be returned to the agency or place of employment to fulfil the contract. In some cases, this meant forcing a migrant to go back against her will, a situation I witnessed on more than one occasion. This is described in more detail in chapter 5. Despite their reputations among migrants,

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<sup>61</sup> A 2002 study carried out by the University of Colombo and the Migrant Services Centre found that only 12 percent of migrant domestic workers interviewed were aware of their rights when they first left for employment abroad (cited in Human Rights Watch 2007: 99).

<sup>62</sup> For example, in August 2008, Kuwait deported 850 Bangladeshi workers for alleged involvement in a strike for higher pay. Many of those deported said they had nothing to do with the strike and reported being physically abused while detained (BBC News 5 August 2008 'Deported Bangladeshi workers allege torture in Kuwait').

some embassy officials expressed genuine sympathy towards the situation of workers in Jordan. Many also believed that workers ran away from their employers' homes not because of maltreatment but because they were homesick, lazy or incapable of doing the work required. In some instances, embassies facilitate legal action against errant employers, but court cases are costly and time-consuming, and private negotiations outside of the formal justice system are preferred. As will be described in chapter 5, in Jordan convictions against employers for abusing or failing to pay workers are rare. Given the lack of legal protections and the extremely limited opportunities for collective action, the suggestion put forth in the training courses that workers are more or less on their own and must fend for themselves by appealing to employers is not surprising.

In addition to these factors, exporting subservient domestic workers may be considered advantageous given that the market for domestic service is competitive, and when one sending state aggressively presses for safeguards to protect workers, host country demand may shift to more acquiescent suppliers. The governments of the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka have all at some point implemented temporary bans on the recruitment of domestic workers to Jordan in response to concerns about the treatment of their workers.<sup>63</sup> When this happens, recruitment agencies have mounted pressure on the Jordanian government to allow recruitment from new countries. In January 2008, when the Philippines banned the recruitment of Filipina domestic workers to Jordan, recruiting agencies rallied the Ministry of Labour to allow recruitment from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Nepal (*Jordan Times*, 1 August 2008). The Philippines has previously banned recruitment to Lebanon, where recruitment from these three source countries has already begun.<sup>64</sup> It is worth mentioning that deployment bans do not stop workers from migrating to Jordan. Recruitment agencies bribe or deceive immigration officials in the country of origin and/or send workers through indirect routes via transit countries in order to circumvent the bans. Jordanian authorities do not recognise other countries' deployment bans and allow workers to enter when they arrive at the airport.<sup>65</sup>

Sri Lanka is not unique in encouraging the virtue of obedience among migrant domestic workers. Rudnyckyj (2004) and Lan (2006: 84-5) describe training for domestic workers departing from Indonesia that also involve lessons in moral and bodily discipline and submission. The tone of the

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<sup>63</sup> In August 2010, the Sri Lankan government imposed a ban on sending domestic helpers to Jordan because of the high number of complaints of unpaid salaries and ill-treatment by employers. The ban was lifted one month later after recruitment agencies promised to address the problems.

<sup>64</sup> As Lan (2006: 75-80) has shown with reference to Taiwan, contrasts between 'smart' and 'assertive' Filipinas and 'docile Indonesians' have been cultivated by recruitment agencies to persuade employers to phase out Filipina domestic workers in favour of Indonesians, who offer agencies higher profits and more control over the recruitment process.

<sup>65</sup> A similar situation has been described in Lebanon, to which the governments of Nepal, the Philippines, Madagascar and Ethiopia have banned the deployment of domestic workers (Hamill 2011: 34-39).

training programme helps to explain the lowly position of Sri Lankan women within the global market for domestic workers. Demand for domestic workers is often stratified along national lines.<sup>66</sup> Sri Lankans and Indonesians are designated as being more servile, hardworking and unquestioning, whereas Filipinas are assumed to be better educated, more assertive and more apt to push for certain rights. Within this framework, Filipinas are often said to deserve higher salaries and more privileges, in part because they are said to 'know their rights'. I have no evidence to suggest that Filipina domestic workers are actually given more privileges or paid more in Jordan, but according to one source, they earn an average of \$200 to \$250 per month in Lebanon in contrast to Sri Lankans, who earn \$180 (Hamill 2011: 40). Even without comparative data for Jordan, an argument can be made that by encouraging docility, the Sri Lankan government's training programme perpetuates the low status of Sri Lankan workers within the pecking order, and that this may influence the way employers treat them as a category.<sup>67</sup> With some exceptions, the general rule is that more affluent employers opt for Filipina domestic workers, whereas less wealthy families employ Sri Lankans and Indonesians. This has implications for their working conditions. More well-to-do employers can afford to hire a mini-legion of domestic helpers, so the burdens of cleaning, cooking and childcare can be divided among several women. In larger, more opulent homes, employees may have their own rooms and bathrooms. Women working for less privileged families, on the other hand, often lack these amenities and have no one with whom to share the work. Sri Lankan and Indonesian women are described by recruitment agency staff as being less 'pushy', for example about the right to have a mobile phone or to leave the employer's house during time off. With this in mind, employers may be even more likely to deny privileges to workers who are thought to be more compliant.

### **Participants' Responses**

What are migrants' views of the training courses? Those I observed carried out the practical lessons with varying levels of enthusiasm; while some dragged their feet, most completed the tasks assigned. Some trainees resisted the strict rules against phone use, and in one facility, Tamil trainees complained that Sinhalese instructors discriminated against them. Many were dissatisfied with conditions in the facility's hostel where they slept at night. But when asked directly, none openly rejected the content of the training course. Although some complaints about individual instructors or misdeeds of fellow trainees were mentioned, few objected to the training itself. The single most common issue raised was the language portion of the training; many wished it could

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<sup>66</sup> Nationality-based hierarchies of domestic workers have been noted, for example, in Qatar (Nagy 1998) and Lebanon (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 586), as well as Taiwan (Lan 2006) and Hong Kong (Constable 2007).

<sup>67</sup> Ong (2006) makes a similar point about Filipina workers attaining 'trophy' maid status and thus generally being better treated by employers in Southeast Asia in contrast to Indonesian workers, who have worse reputations.

be enhanced, saying their knowledge of Arabic was insufficient. While trainees may have been reluctant to voice criticisms for fear that I would pass this information on to their instructors, the majority seemed genuinely satisfied.

However, several women said they felt more anxious about going abroad *after* the training than before. A number of trainees had already worked abroad and shared their experiences with the neophytes. The hostel at the training facility provided a platform for such chronicles, as new and old migrants inter-mingled at night and swapped horror stories about employers who failed to pay or abused their domestic workers. Instructors' warnings about employers who beat their domestic workers confirmed their fears. During interviews, many trainees asked whether I thought it was indeed dangerous for a young girl [i.e. virgin] to go to a particular country, or whether it was true that employers would hit them. Others asked for telephone numbers they could call for help. Two women said that as a result of the stories they heard, they had nearly made up their minds not to go abroad but had already given their passports to agencies and now felt compelled to go despite their fears. The Officer in Charge (OIC) at the Dambulla training centre said that according to her records, only 75 percent of those women who complete the training end up going abroad. The main reasons for declining to go were family problems, problems with recruitment agencies, or visa irregularities. Similarly, the OIC at the Chilaw facility estimated that 15-20 percent of the trainees decided not to go abroad for the same reasons or because they had misgivings about leaving their children. Although neither OIC mentioned it as a factor, my discussions with migrants suggested that some decide not to go based on anxieties fuelled by the stories they hear at the training facilities. In this sense, the training gives women realistic warnings about the problems they may encounter. However, as I described in the previous chapter, the majority of my interviews with potential migrants suggested that most women were not naïve about the dangers to begin with, having heard stories from previous migrants in their home communities or having been exposed to them on TV and in the newspapers. During the period of research, Sinhala and Tamil-language media were closely following the story of Rizana Nafeek, a Sri Lankan who migrated to Saudi Arabia at the age of seventeen and was sentenced to death by beheading after her employer's infant died in her care. Such stories inspired a degree of wariness among departing migrants.

Veteran migrants offered critical reactions to the training after having worked abroad. Maria, a returnee interviewed in Sri Lanka who had worked for four years in Lebanon and 18 years in Singapore, said:

You know, the trainers say if you work hard, and you show that you are clean, the employer will like you. But it depends on the personal problems of the employer, too. If the lady has a problem with her husband and her husband talks with you, even if you are very good, she will get angry with you. It's not always the maid's fault. But also, sometimes we do things wrong. It can be either side.

Another long-term migrant, Chandra, who was employed in Jordan as a domestic worker, told me about her experience completing a 12-day training programme in 1999 in Colombo. Her first recollection of the training was that it had been difficult for her to attend. She is from a village near Kalutara, 40 km south of Colombo, and had to wake at 3 a.m. each day to cook for her family before travelling to Colombo by bus for the training. When I asked her opinion on the training based on her subsequent experience working in Jordan, she replied: 'It was useless. I got nothing from it. I didn't learn a thing. I had to learn everything when I got here.' She said that the Arabic dialect they had taught was considerably different from the one she had to master in Jordan. She also cited differences in the style of food they learned to cook and said the appliances used in training were out-dated. Her comments resemble those of employers in Jordan, who have said that despite the training, domestic workers arrive from Sri Lanka with no knowledge of Arabic and great difficulty learning to use equipment and cleaning products.

Similar criticisms were expressed by an official at the Sri Lankan embassy in Amman in an interview in July 2008. When asked his opinion about the training programme, he said:

My understanding is that it is not enough. I don't know whether it is even satisfying the requirement by 20 percent. Jordan is different than Saudi Arabia. Kuwait is different than Saudi Arabia. It should be a country-specific training program. Those doing the training should know what Jordan is like. I don't think the trainers are aware of what the situation is here. The training should prepare workers psychologically. You have gone to various places in Sri Lanka. If you go deep in Kurunegala, Moneragala or Matara or Batticaloa – there are very poor people. They live in huts. Not houses like this. They don't use appliances. So, when they come here, it's a problem. You should give a quality service to get a return. When we look at the Filipinos, they speak English, and they are professionals. So, I think we should also bring our people up to that category. You should give a quality service, and for that we should be prepared.

These comments point to the need for more country-specific information to be provided in the training, a deficiency also noted by migrants. They also suggest an attitude that, because Sri Lankan migrants are less well-educated and hail from poor, rural backgrounds, they are less 'professional' and hence deserve lower salaries. This notion has purchase among migrants and employers alike in Jordan.

### **Moral Migration and the Patriarchal Family**

In addition to the three goals identified above, a significant component of the training emphasises women's moral obligations to their families as the root cause of migration. A significant amount of class time is devoted to how women should prepare their families for their absence. Unlike women, men are not required to enrol in training programmes prior to working abroad (Dias and Jayasundere 2002: 11). The absence of women from the household for overseas work is assumed

to be more disruptive to families than that of men. There is also an assumption that women need to be 'protected' in ways that male workers do not.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to preparing their families, women migrants are instructed on how they themselves should deal with the emotional strain of separation. For example, if they receive a letter from home while working, they are advised not to read it immediately because it could distract them from their work. In one session I observed on this topic, the instructor told an anecdote about a young woman whose grandmother died three days after her departure for the Middle East. The girl's husband called the training centre to inquire how to contact the girl. The instructor refused to give the husband the phone number, not wanting the migrant to be informed of her grandmother's sudden death lest it cause her to break her contract and return immediately. In the event that trainees miss their families, they are advised to listen to music or sing to themselves quietly (SLBFE 1999: 35). It is suggested that treating their employers' children like their own will help them feel less lonely (*ibid*). Migrants are also given suggestions on how to counter thoughts that could interfere with work. 'For example as against an unfavourable thought like, "there is work throughout the day. I am now sick of this work" argue with a counter thought like "I came here to work not to enjoy comforts, I get a good salary for the work I do. Why should I be concerned about being loaded with lots of work, after all I do not have any other problem"' (SLBFE 1999: 35-6). Trainees are advised to write down 'positive' statements so that they can be read again and again.

A training unit on 'Family Marriage and Sexual Life' discusses the institution of the family in order to highlight the problems women's absence can trigger. 'The mother occupies the central position in a family. Family discipline, nutrition and protection are her responsibilities. She has to perform functions in relation to these responsibilities.... It is not possible to avert the damage the family experiences when the females migrate abroad for employment' (SLBFE 1999: 19). In a session I observed in Mount Lavinia, a class was asked to do a group exercise in which they discussed what they should have already done and should still do as wives, mothers and daughters. They were then asked to consider what problems their families might face in their absence, and how to solve them. Rather than portraying migration as potentially emancipatory for women, the training emphasises the figure of the sacrificial mother who migrates for her family's benefit. Migrants are encouraged to remain focused on their family goals while abroad, to send money home regularly and to visit Sri Lanka every two years. They are told to remain disciplined, both fiscally and sexually. Those who have love affairs or stay away too long are cast in negative terms, illustrative of the hazards of working away from home.

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<sup>68</sup> As Dias and Jayasundere point out, most NGO initiatives aimed at raising awareness among migrants also have focused exclusively on women, with a lack of attention to male workers (2002: 27).

Cautionary tales about other migrants are used throughout the programme to impart moral lessons. For example, in a class I observed in Chilaw, an instructor told trainees the story of a mother who went abroad when her son was 15. Sometime after she left, a neighbour gave the boy a cigarette laced with drugs. Now, the instructor explained, the boy is in a mental hospital and is very angry with his mother for having left. 'As a woman and as a mother, your first priority is to look after your family, your husband, your children,' she told her class. This story reinforces a broader popular discourse that blames migrant mothers for the problems that occur when they are absent. Families with 'missing' migrant mothers are commonly alleged to be at greater risk of experiencing infidelity, divorce, alcoholism, or to have children who are sexually or physically abused.<sup>69</sup>

The overall message is conflicting and potentially demoralising as women face what, for many, is the most frightening step in their lives. Far from being a source of potential independence, migration is portrayed as part and parcel of their commitment to their families. In advising women how to prepare their families for their absence, the training presents an image of women's rightful place within family structures. Disciplined, chaste and acquiescent workers are portrayed as a success for their families. Thus, the training both perpetuates the moral economy of the patriarchal family while at the same time encouraging women to enter the global labour market.

The training curriculum proposes that provided that the migrant remains focussed on her goals, sends money home regularly and does not stay away too long, migration can be a boon for her and her family. The risks of family disintegration are greater, it is suggested, if migrants stay abroad for lengthy periods and do not maintain close contact with their kin. Frequent return trips and regular remittances are portrayed as good for the family unit. But they also serve national interests. *Temporary* migration of 'unskilled' workers offers particular benefits to sending states. Such workers have fewer opportunities to settle abroad than those who are considered highly-skilled, and those who migrate for shorter periods are more likely to send money home often, ensuring a steady influx of foreign exchange. In the training curriculum, the interests of the state, migrant and family seemingly become one. But as many women are keenly aware, the consequences of migrating are not so straightforward. Because mothers play such crucial roles in maintaining Sri Lankan families, the promise of winning one's fortune abroad comes with risking the family's well-being. Women receive a mixed message both in the training and in society at large: that they should go abroad as a familial duty, but that doing so may lead to their family's undoing. The

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<sup>69</sup> Horror stories about the dangers of migration abound in popular parlance and in much of the academic literature on migration (Gamburd 2008a: 12-13). Spencer describes a village love affair between the daughter of a migrant in the Middle East and the daughter's boyfriend, who both poison themselves after a dispute. The girl dies, and the boy is left seriously ill. According to Spencer, the moral message of the story is clear to villagers: 'Things go wrong, the mother is not there, and tragedy ensues. In the end, the mother is to blame, and migration is the source of moral disorder' (2003: 4).

incoherence of the training programme in this regard reflects contradictions within state and popular discourse more broadly, in which women's migration is portrayed as both a social evil and an economic necessity.

## Conclusion

Domestic workers are typically categorised as 'unskilled' workers. But as these training programmes suggest, considerable cultural and linguistic knowledge is required for them to perform their jobs to the satisfaction of employers. The extent to which the training succeeds in preparing migrants for this task is not obvious. As employers and bureaucrats alike note, the programme is insufficient in preparing migrants for their new work environments. By the end of the course, trainees may memorise a few Arabic words but remain unable to comprehend instructions or converse with their employers. Most do not possess detailed knowledge about the countries in which they will be employed. Nor are they invariably eager to migrate. If anything, some become *more* fearful and decide *not* to leave. In this way, the training courses may be successful in weeding out women whose nerves may not be strong enough to stand the strain. But I am not making the argument that all workers are being successfully inculcated in how to be subservient. This is a short course. And as any teacher knows, some advice that students are given ends up like water down the proverbial duck's back.

That a government would establish a training programme aiming to impart certain skills and fail utterly in the process is not unusual. What *is* unusual is that a programme purportedly designed to reduce the likelihood of abuse makes no pretence that workers have protection against abuse in the first place. Rather than encouraging 'rights-based empowerment' - as international donors and anti-trafficking *gurus* now dictate that governments should do - the Sri Lankan government's training programme suggests that abuse is not only possible but likely.

What is striking about this case, then, is that it is a frank admission that the Sri Lankan government cannot - or will not - protect its citizens abroad. Workers are made to understand in no uncertain terms that their fate is in their own hands. Their best hope is to try to please their employers. This is where the three goals identified earlier come into play. The instruction of bourgeois values with regards to cleanliness, the emphasis on obedience, and the goal of 'personality development' can be analysed as an endeavour on the part of government bureaucrats to impart the dispositions necessary for maintaining a flow of workers that cause minimal problems in host states and, hence, maximise the flow of remittances.

One caveat should be added, however. When government bureaucrats designed the training programme, they presumed that well-mannered, well-groomed migrants would be better suited to work abroad. But this may not have been because such workers were presumed to cause fewer

problems. Middle-class prejudices *unrelated* to overseas migration *also* underpin the lessons. The curriculum embodies a civilising mission on the part of comparatively more prosperous civil servants who look down on lower-class workers as uncouth and attempt to make them more refined. Similarly, while much of the programme adheres to the training manuals, additional advice and explanations are given by instructors. This is based on their *own* experiences, opinions and stereotypes about the Middle Eastern ‘other’. The content of the lessons are a composite of influences, and so the programme should not be seen exclusively in terms of state instrumentality.

Nevertheless, with its underdog status in the market for domestic workers, the Sri Lankan state encourages migrants to adopt strategies of accommodation rather than reform. While ostensibly initiated as a protectionary measure to curb the threat of abuse, the training programmes endorse a view that abuse and non-payment of wages are natural and acceptable results of insufficient work and poor personality development. In this way, the problem of abuse is located in the body and behaviour of the worker rather than in the employer or host government.

## *Gifts from Abroad: Domestic Servants and the Political Economy of Jordan*

One cold January morning in Amman, I had one of many conversations with a taxi driver about Jordan's ailing economy. He thought the presence of foreign workers was part of the problem. We pulled up at a traffic light next to a man in a grimy, tangerine-coloured uniform sweeping a pile of debris. Tilting his head in the direction of the street-cleaner, the taxi driver said, 'He's probably Egyptian. Jordanians don't want these jobs. They all want to be sheikhs, smoking the *argilah* and sleeping, not doing anything.' The notion that even when Jordanians need the money, their pride prevents them from undertaking certain types of work is commonly espoused. What many refer to as the *thaqafat al-'aib* (culture of shame) is said to explain the large-scale employment of migrants for low-paid work. A case in point: In a speech to the Cabinet in 1998, former Prime Minister Abdul Salam Majali referred to the *thaqafat al-'aib* as the main cause of joblessness and basis for the kingdom's reliance on foreign labour.<sup>70</sup>

The Arab region has some of the highest rates of unemployment in the world, and with a rapidly growing population, those rates are set to rise. Why, then, have governments facilitated the recruitment of large numbers of workers from outside the region? This contradiction is even more puzzling in Jordan, where rates of poverty and unemployment among citizens are particularly high. As many as 14.2 percent of Jordan's population, or 700,000, live in what the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) considers 'extreme poverty' (UNDP 2009: 113).<sup>71</sup> No reliable statistics on unemployment exist, but according to government estimates it was 12.7 percent as of 2008. Independent sources have said it is as high as 30 percent. Joblessness is reportedly 39 percent among the young, and 59 percent among young women (UNDP 2009: 109). These figures compare with a global average of 6.4 percent (*ibid*: 10). And yet, Egyptians collect the garbage, pump the gas, tend to the agricultural fields and work on construction sites; Chinese and South Asian migrants work in the garment factories; and Sri Lankan, Filipina and Indonesian women do the paid domestic work. Despite some 44,500 new jobs created annually from 2000 to 2005, there has been no substantial decline in unemployment, in part because many of those jobs have been filled by expatriates (Razzaz and Iqbal 2008: 3). Foreign workers comprise at least 24 percent of

<sup>70</sup> As reported by the *Jordan Times*, 'Majali calls for comprehensive efforts to fight poverty, unemployment' Sunday, June 28, 1998.

<sup>71</sup> This is based on survey data from 2002 using estimates of the national poverty line - which is lower than the two-dollar-a-day international line - and taking into account the cost of food and basic non-food needs (UNDP 2009: 112).

the labour force (Ministry of Labour 2010: 14) and remit an estimated 3 billion JDs (\$4.23 billion) from the kingdom each year.

On the surface, this may appear paradoxical, but here I argue that Jordan's recruitment of foreign workers is no accident, and that the reasons have less to do with the '*thaqafat al-'aib*' than with political economic structures relating to rentierism. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the country's rentier economy as crucial to the employment of foreign workers and expansion of domestic service over the past four decades. The 'rentier economy' refers to Jordan's dependence on a regular supply of external economic rent, or 'unearned' income not derived from productive activity in the domestic economy.<sup>72</sup> Rentier theory holds that if the majority of revenue comes from outside the domestic economy, domestic politics tend to revolve around gaining access to that rent, or from the perspective of rulers, allocating rent in ways that ensure political stability (Nsour 2002: fn 15). In this case the two main sources of rent are foreign subsidies and expatriate remittances. The second section of the chapter draws on ethnographic and other data to explore the nature of demand for foreign domestic workers at the household level. The third and final section builds on these insights and extends the analysis, suggesting that paid domestic workers provide a service that has implications for the kingdom's economy as a whole.

### **Part One: An Oil Economy Without Oil**

External subsidies have been a pillar of the political economy since the territory of Transjordan was first carved out as part of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France. It extends back to the early days of Hashemite rule, when Amir 'Abdullah, an outsider to whom local groups did not naturally feel allegiance, used British subsidies to purchase loyalty. Backed by British largesse, Abdullah I was installed as the ruler of the British Mandate of Transjordan in 1921 and continued as king when it was granted independence in 1946. Prior to WWI, Jordan was largely rural and more homogenous and egalitarian than many other parts of the region (Wilson 1987: 55). The chief differentiating factor among Transjordanians in 1920 was livelihood – pastoral or peasant (*ibid*). Economic differentiation increased during WWII, when high inflation, shortages and war profiteering led to the formation of a group of wealthy merchant landowners and moneylenders (Amawi 1994: 174-175, Wilson 1987: 165). By the end of the 1940s, in addition to a mercantile bourgeoisie, a middle class made up of small-scale traders, shopkeepers, craftsmen and civil servants, as well as a working class of wage labourers, had also begun to emerge (Shteiwi 1996: 410).

The 1948 Arab-Israeli war sent the first major influx of Palestinians into Jordan. Tens of thousands of Palestinians, including large numbers of farmers and merchants, settled in Amman

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<sup>72</sup> For an account of rentier theory and the changing degree and nature of rent in the Jordanian economy, see Knowles (2005) and Brynen (1992).

and Irbid to the north (Shteiwi 1996: 411). Following Jordan's annexation of the West Bank in 1950, Palestinians were granted full citizenship and quickly became the majority. Following 'unification' and throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Jordan's economic policies favoured business and commercial interests in the East rather than West Bank (Carroll 2003: 110, Wilson 1987: 193). Many West Bank elites moved or set up second homes in Amman, where work opportunities were more plentiful (Carroll 2003: 109, Massad 2001: 236). According to a survey conducted in Amman by the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1960, the upper class, estimated at 8.2 percent of the population, was predominantly comprised of top public and private sector employees and commercial and industrial business owners (Shteiwi 1996: 411). A small middle class (20.9 percent) included professionals, technicians and sales workers, while a large working class (67 percent) engaged in service, transport, communication and production work, as well as mining, quarrying and the armed forces (Shteiwi 1996: 411).

Israel's occupation of the West Bank in 1967 sent another 310,000 Palestinian refugees fleeing across the Jordan River, and the Palestinian resistance movement began to consolidate in Jordan. In 1970, deteriorating relations between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Hashemite regime eventually led to violent clashes later known as Black September, prompting a campaign of 'Jordanisation' in which scores of Palestinians were expelled from military and government posts (Massad 2001: 13, 246). Palestinians remain grossly under-represented in senior government, military and security jobs. Shut out of much of the public sector, they have traditionally dominated the private sector, particularly banking and commerce (Carroll 2003: 114-5).

By the mid-1980s, with an economic crisis in the Gulf and prospects for continued foreign aid and remittances receding, Jordan's economy was on the verge of collapse. Budget deficit and external debt levels soared, as did unemployment. Facing financial crisis, in 1989 Amman took loans from the IMF and World Bank that hinged on far-reaching structural adjustment programmes. During this period the government slashed food and utilities subsidies, revamped the tax system, and privatised public sector enterprises, including oil refineries, cement, transport, water and telecommunications companies. This sent the cost of living soaring, and a freeze on public sector employment exacerbated unemployment. By 1999 more than one-third of the population was living under the poverty line (Nazzal 2005: 7-8).

The neoliberal policies advocated by the IMF and World Bank have yet to produce the economic 'progress' promised.<sup>73</sup> Income disparities have risen since 1989, leading to an increasingly

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<sup>73</sup> I refer to neoliberalism in the sense defined by Harvey (2005: 2): 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.'

polarised society (Saif and Tabbaa 2008: 11). Today the economy relies heavily on the service sector, which comprises over 70 percent of GDP and 75 percent of jobs (World Bank 2010a: 1). According to the UNDP, the type of services that predominate contribute little to the local knowledge base and lock the country into an inferior position in world markets (UNDP 2009: 103). Manufacturing and agriculture make smaller contributions, representing 10.6 and 2.6 percent of total employment respectively (Department of Statistics 2009). Jordan's relatively unproductive economy is part of a wider regional pattern of de-industrialisation as a consequence of oil-led economic growth. On average, Arab countries were less industrialised in 2007 than 1970 (UNDP 2009: 103).

With little in the way of industry, Jordan relies heavily on income from expatriate remittances and overseas development assistance (ODA), primarily from the United States and European Union. Foreign sources of revenue comprised more than 54 percent of the budget in 1980 and throughout much of the 1970s (Baylouny 2008: 284). In per capita terms, Jordan was the highest recipient of aid flows from the 1970s until the early 1990s (ESCWA 2007: 20). It was the seventh-largest recipient of US foreign assistance in 2010, a position it is expected to maintain in 2011 (Lawson et al 2010: 15). From donors' perspectives, the flow of aid has acted as a political and economic stabiliser, helping to prop up the Hashemite regime and to ensure the provision of a logistical base for US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, cooperation in intelligence sharing, and the maintenance of good ties with Israel.

External rents have played a pivotal role in shaping state-economy relations. They allowed the government sector to expand and dole out large benefits to loyal constituencies, namely tribal elites, East Bank landowners and business classes (Brynen 1992: 79-80). They have also helped ensure quietism in the absence of meaningful political participation. Although nominally a constitutional monarchy, the real reins of power are held by the king and his court. Parliamentary and municipal elections are held, but electoral districting and the distribution of seats is skewed towards thinly populated, tribal areas in the south and north, where support for the monarchy is strongest. This leaves the majority Palestinian population under-represented and undercuts support for the opposition Islamic Action Front, which is favoured in urban constituencies. Although parliamentary and municipal elections are held regularly, most policymaking is done behind closed doors by authoritarian rule. King Abdullah II appoints the prime minister, cabinet and the upper house and controls the security services. He can dissolve parliament, veto legislation and introduce 'provisional laws' with the full force of law when parliament is out of session. He has done so twice since assuming power in 1999. When parliament was out of session between 2001 and 2003, more than 220 provisional laws were passed by royal decree, including controversial investment and economic reforms and amendments to the penal code introducing harsh penalties for publications that could damage national unity or tarnish the kingdom's

reputation. Parliament was disbanded again in 2009, during which time Prime Minister Samir Rifai's government introduced more than thirty provisional laws on thorny issues such as pensions, taxes and utilities pricing. Shortly before this thesis was submitted, in the spring of 2011, popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt had triggered renewed calls for political reform and support for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, which would limit the king's powers to appoint or disband parliament.

Returning to the issue of rentierism, worker remittances presently form the other major source of rent and comprise at least a fifth of the GDP. Although Jordan lacks the oil wealth of its eastern neighbours, it has been said to have an oil economy because a large proportion of its workforce is employed in the Gulf states. Beginning in the early 1950s and throughout the following two decades, hundreds of thousands of Jordanians – most of Palestinian origin - sought employment in the Gulf. This relieved pressure on the local labour market and furnished the kingdom with an increasingly significant source of income. Rather than viewing the loss of skilled labour as a 'brain drain', the government fostered emigration through a range of policies, including tailoring education curricula and vocational training to meet the needs of oil-exporting countries (Brand 2007: 4, De Bel Air 2003). Today an estimated 600,000 to 670,000 Jordanians, most of whom are highly skilled, work abroad, with half a million in the Gulf countries alone (De Bel Air 2010: 1). The high rate of emigration of skilled labour has political ramifications, allowing for the departure of potential rivals and lessening the threat of destabilisation from frustrated middle and upper classes (*ibid*: 10). Emigration serves as a safety valve for contradictions in the distribution of economic and political power. As Brand (2007: 4) has suggested, the Jordanian government has promoted a strategy of encouraging out-migration rather than making the structural reforms required to create jobs at home. Both foreign aid and remittances appear to have reduced incentives for the government to mobilise domestic resources and to make the long-term investments needed to strengthen the kingdom's economic base.

Jordanian emigration to the Gulf peaked during the oil boom from 1973 to 1985, and it was during these years that demand for foreign labour within Jordan increased - particularly in sectors benefitting from the investment of expatriate remittances. In the 1970s and 80s, the government allowed for the entry of 'unskilled' and 'semi-skilled' workers from Egypt, Syria and several Asian countries. This came at a time in which unemployment among Jordanians and Palestinians had dropped to almost nothing due to high rates of public sector employment and out-migration (Baylouny 2008: 286). Much like the Gulf states, Jordan's labour market was segmented into two parts - one for citizens with higher wages and more benefits, and the other, concentrated in agriculture, manufacturing, building and services, for temporary workers, with low wages and few legal protections. As opposed to 'immigrants', migrant workers are officially referred to as '*al-'ammal al-wafidin*' (incoming labour), suggesting that they are visiting rather than settling

permanently. Article 12 of the 1996 Jordanian Labour Code states that foreigners should be hired only if there are no qualified Jordanians to perform the job. In such cases, priority should be given to Arab workers. In practice, however, expatriate workers from Arab and non-Arab countries are routinely hired for jobs involving manual labour. In 2010, the Ministry of Labour passed a temporary regulation allowing foreign workers to join existing unions, but they are not allowed to form their own unions or hold key positions.<sup>74</sup> Government permission must be obtained in order to organise strikes; migrants who have engaged in illegal strikes have been beaten and deported (ICFTU 2010).

According to the Ministry of Labour (2008: 29), 303,325 non-Jordanians held work permits in 2008, of whom 67 percent were Egyptian. This figure rose to 335,707 in 2009 (Ministry of Labour 2010). According to unofficial estimates, there may be as many as 100,000 to 150,000 unregistered migrants working in the kingdom (ICFTU 2010). Many of the new jobs created in recent years have been in construction and manufacturing in the Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs), where foreigners make up the majority of the workforce. The QIZs were meant to be an incentive for Jordan to agree to a US-brokered peace treaty with Israel in 1994 and allow for duty-free exports to the United States provided that 8 percent of the content is Israeli. Although touted as a reward for Jordan, Jordanians have seen few of the benefits. The majority of the companies are owned by non-Jordanians (Baylouny 2005: 42, Halaby 2010). No company with purely Arab capital appears to operate in any of the QIZs (Nazzal 2005: 14). At least 66 percent of the workforce is non-Jordanian (ILO 2006: 4). Deepak, a personnel manager at a garment factory in one of the QIZs in Dulayl, told me that while there was initially an understanding that foreigners should not exceed one third of the total workforce, in practice at least 80 percent of the workers he hired were young women from other countries because they had a better work ethic and were better at taking orders. 'Jordanians don't want these jobs. This is a poor country. They need the money, but they don't want to do the work,' he said. The need to recruit foreigners is frequently explained with reference to what employers describe as a 'shortage' of domestic labour. This so-called shortage is used to justify the continued recruitment of foreign workers under terms favourable to employers.

Factory managers typically expect garment factory workers to work long hours, especially when there is a rush to fill an order. A study of working conditions in the QIZs in 2005 and 2006 by a labour watchdog found that 'mandatory 38 to 48 and even 72-hour shifts are routine' (Kernaghan 2006). Workers have reported having to work until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning on Thursdays in

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<sup>74</sup> Trade union activities are heavily restricted. All unions must belong to the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU), and Ministry of Labour approval is required for new unions to be formed (ICFTU 2010). The rate of union membership among Jordanians is estimated at 10 to 15 percent of the labour force (Solidarity Centre 2005: 9).

order to reach production targets before the weekend (ICFTU 2007: 7). Given that Jordanian families commonly expect women to be home before dark and that the labour law prohibits night shifts for women, employers tend to favour migrants who live in labour accommodation facilities near the worksite and who are willing or can be coerced to work longer hours. Similarly, in the agricultural sector in the Jordan Valley, farm owners prefer to hire migrants who will live on the farm and accept lower wages and dependent work relations (Van Aken 2005: 120). Migrant women have complained of being prevented by factory managers from leaving the workplace on Fridays, the stipulated day off (ICFTU 2007: 7). Workplace accidents and labour rights violations are reportedly rampant (ICFTU 2007: 6-10, Kernaghan 2006). As of 2011, the minimum wage in Jordan was 150 JD (\$212) per month. Minimum wage restrictions do not apply to migrant workers, and many of those employed in the garment factories earn significantly less than their Jordanian counterparts. In April 2011, several thousand Asian garment factory workers went on strike demanding an increase in their wages from 110 JD to 150 JD per month (Palma 2011). The workers said that in response to the strike, factory owners stopped supplying food, water and electricity to their hostels (*ibid*). When the workers brought their case before a labour court, they were ordered to return to work. The fact that employers do not have to contribute towards social security or severance pay for foreign workers also makes them less expensive to employ. Government policies that allow firms to hire expatriates under these conditions represent a concession to capital, a way of deregulating the lowest rank in the labour market and maintaining a more or less unfree, menial workforce. These policies have played a role in determining low wage levels and working conditions that Jordanians find unsavourable.<sup>75</sup> The 'shortage' of domestic labour to fill these jobs is at least partially a result of this.

Given the high rates of poverty and unemployment, why haven't more Jordanians lowered their standards to take up jobs now filled by expatriates? Few in-depth empirical studies have been done on the issue of work (or the lack thereof) among this segment of Jordanian society. According to a World Bank report (Razzaz and Iqbal 2008: 3-4), more than half of the unemployed are not willing to accept available jobs at current wage levels. The authors suggest this is because they expect to obtain better remunerated employment in the public sector or abroad or to receive some form of income support. Public sector jobs are still preferred because of the

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<sup>75</sup> Drawing on research conducted at Al-Hassan Industrial Estate, Hasselknippe and El-Abed (Forthcoming) describe the practical and social obstacles Palestinian and Jordanian women workers face in garment factories. This includes disapproval from male relatives, a lack of childcare facilities, a fear of arbitrary dismissal as a result of personal disputes with managers, and what were perceived to be unfair salary deductions for absenteeism. Many expressed dissatisfaction with working conditions and pay. Complaints were made about poor ventilation, filthy toilets and restrictions on visits to the toilet, and an exhausting work regime. Only one third of the workforce at Al-Hassan is Jordanian. Jordanians and non-Jordanians work in segregated teams because, according to Hasselknippe and El-Abed, many Jordanians would not want their daughters or wives to work alongside foreign women, who are viewed as morally deficient and sexually promiscuous.

social security and retirement benefits they offer, the guarantee of steady income, and the short working hours. Even if such jobs are not as plentiful as they were in the past, expectations remain.

Foreign workers tend to dominate in sectors of employment that are not considered prestigious, and there is evidence to suggest that certain jobs are further stigmatised by their association with foreigners. For example, the fact that agricultural work is done by migrant workers reportedly has made local men less inclined to perform it (Van Aken 2005: 116). Similarly, a study on unemployment found that Jordanians were discouraged from seeking employment in jobs dominated by non-Jordanians (Guégnard et al. 2005: 24-25). (Attitudes towards foreign workers will be discussed in chapter 5, on domestic worker-employer relations.) It would be an exaggeration to say that working in certain sectors is so taboo that no one will do it. A significant portion of Palestinians residing in the refugee camps, for example, work in mining and manufacturing, a sector in which many non-Jordanians are also employed (Tiltnes 1999: 25). An empirical question remains as to whether certain jobs are viewed negatively due to their association with foreigners, because of the nature of the work itself, or because they are poorly remunerated. A survey of 200 unemployed men and women carried out by Jordan University's Center for Strategic Studies (CSS 2006: 8) found that the majority would *not* work in agriculture and or in factories for 150 JD (\$212) per month but *would* do so if the wages were increased to 200 JD (\$282). These wages would still not be sufficient to prompt them to accept employment as cleaners or in construction, however. A study on the tourism industry found that of 2,778 respondents surveyed, the overwhelming majority (60.2 percent) expressed a preference for working in the public sector as opposed to 24 percent in a tourism-related establishment (USAID 2007: 2). Only 12 percent said they were averse to working in tourism because such work was against their norms and traditions (USAID 2007: 49). A more significant factor, cited by 27 percent, was the belief that such jobs were less secure. Greater numbers reported that public sector jobs offered more fringe benefits (31 percent) or better salaries (13 percent) than jobs in tourism (*ibid*). This suggests that cultural attitudes *do* play a role, but that other factors such as wages and benefits are equally if not more important.

Several sources of welfare support enable economically-deprived families to withstand hard times without having to accept less prestigious work. This includes charitable assistance from groups such as the Islamic Center Charity and Society (ICCS), one of the largest NGOs in the kingdom, and, for Palestinians, welfare and basic services from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Many low-income households receive income from relatives working abroad. One in three Palestinians residing in refugee camps received gifts, transfers or remittances from abroad in the 1990s (Tiltnes 1999: 25). The military and security services are also important. Conscription ended in 1992, but the military continues to employ a large sector of the workforce. Ten percent of the total labour force

reportedly worked in the army in 1997 (Abrahart et al 2002 as cited by Baylouny 2008: 301). According to Baylouny, the military and security service is the only sector to have expanded during structural adjustment. In contrast to other forms of welfare support that have declined, social welfare for military personnel and their families has been enhanced (Baylouny 2008: 302). Employees and their dependents receive free health care and scholarships for higher education and can purchase goods at subsidised rates at military cooperative stores (*ibid*). This form of state welfare has been bolstered by aid from the United States, which earmarks a substantial portion of its assistance to Jordan for military expenditures (Baylouny 2008: 301).

To summarise briefly, this chapter has suggested that while the ‘culture of shame’ is not insignificant, it has been somewhat overplayed as an explanation for why Jordan employs so many foreign workers. The country’s rentier economy, employers’ preferences for more pliable, less expensive foreign labour, and concessionary government policies allowing foreign workers to be employed regardless of the impact on the local labour market should also be considered. This is not to say that cultural attitudes to work are irrelevant, but rather that such attitudes themselves may be influenced by how well remunerated certain jobs are and the kinds of benefits and security they offer. Given other sources of support and expectations of alternate employment options, many Jordanians have not been motivated to take up menial jobs under the prevailing circumstances.

## **Part Two: Understanding Demand for Domestic Servants**

### **Historical Shifts in Domestic Service**

Let us now turn to the issue of demand for domestic workers. The genealogy of domestic service in the area that now comprises Jordan is difficult to trace due to a lack of source material. As Zilfi (2004: 4) notes with reference to the Middle East from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, historical sources on women’s work in general, let alone domestic employment, are few and far between, and most of what is known of servants derives from *shari'a* court registers.<sup>76</sup> Based on the limited sources available, it appears that in the 1950s and 1960s paid domestic workers in Amman were predominantly low-income women from rural households and Palestinian refugees from the camps (Humphrey 1991: 54). Interviews with older residents of Amman suggest that the employment of women from the refugee camps and the Jordan Valley (*Ghor*) to assist with domestic work and child care is now rare. Two reasons are generally given for this. One is that it has become difficult to find women willing to do this type of work; the other is that once foreigners became available, employers preferred them. Unlike locals, they are

<sup>76</sup> One exceptional study of the history of servants in the region is Judith Tucker’s social history of nineteenth-century Egypt, which documents women’s expanding employment as domestic servants (Tucker 1985: 92–93).

willing to work on a live-in basis for less pay. They are also easier to control. A woman in her late sixties recalled her experiences employing domestic workers from the Jordan Valley.

The women from *Ghor* were inconvenient. They'd want two or three days off. When they went, they'd take sugar and milk and olive oil and all sorts of things from the home back to their families. You have to spend like 20 JD on all of this stuff and pay for their transport. Her people would come with her when she came back to the house. So, people would rather have a Sri Lankeeyah. It's also very difficult to find girls from the *Ghor* nowadays who are willing to do this work.

A similar trend has been described for the agricultural sector in the Jordan Valley, where farm owners prefer to hire Egyptians over Jordanians because they will work longer hours for lower wages without breaks or holidays (Van Aken 2005: 120-2).

Curious about the experiences of local women who had worked or continue to work in domestic service, I tried in vain to identify people in Amman with whom to speak. One woman who employed a Palestinian woman to clean her home twice a week said she would pass along my questions but did not approve of the idea of my meeting the worker in person. It was not clear whether this made *her* uncomfortable or if she thought the worker herself would object. A fellow researcher who had grown up in Wihdat refugee camp in the 1950s and 60s said that if any women had been working in private homes during those years, they would have kept it secret. He recalled people referring to other camp residents as '*awlad al-khaddamat*' ('children of servants') as a derogatory term but knew of no one who admitted their relatives actually did this work. The shameful aspect related not to the idea of women working outside their own homes but to the sexual connotations implied by working inside the homes of strangers. I eventually came to meet a young woman, Hala, who had worked as a research assistant on a project on garment factory workers in Irbid and who knew Palestinian women currently employed as domestic workers. Hala is from Al-Husn refugee camp, located in northern Jordan on the outskirts of Irbid. She offered to show me around the camp and introduce me to some of these women. The husbands of two of the seven women emphatically rejected the idea of their wives speaking with me about the subject, but I was able to meet with four of the others.

Al-Husn camp, also known as Martyr Azmi Al-Musli Camp, was set up in 1968 to shelter refugees displaced from the West Bank and Gaza by the 1967 war. Today there are an estimated 26,000 inhabitants, including 22,000 registered refugees (UNRWA undated). Hala and I planned our visit to the camp on a Monday, when water flows freely through the pipes and women are most likely to be at home.<sup>77</sup> As we meandered through the narrow streets and back alleys, women worked busily washing windows and doorways and hanging laundry in the warm sunlight. Of the four women we visited, two were widows and one was divorced. All four worked during the day and returned to the camp in the late afternoon. Samia is a 42-year-old mother of five from Syria

<sup>77</sup> Throughout much of the kingdom, water flows freely through the taps only once a week. For the next six days, households rely on a finite supply of water stored in tanks.

who moved to the camp when she married her husband, a Palestinian. She comes from a family of 10 children and had no formal schooling. Shortly after her husband passed away, Samia began working outside the home because she had no other way to support her children. She initially cleaned schools and hospitals but was asked to show educational certificates in order to keep these jobs, so she began working in private homes. She worked for a single employer from 8 am to 3 pm seven days a week for a monthly salary of 70 JD (\$100). After five years, the employer, who was disabled, ended the arrangement because she wanted to hire full-time help. Samia was unable to leave her own children unattended at night and so was replaced by a Sri Lankan domestic worker. She has since remarried and has begun working in several different homes. Most of her employers are elderly. 'They have money but not health,' says Samia. Other Arab domestic workers she knows have complained about Sri Lankan and Filipina women taking their jobs, but Samia says it has not been difficult for her to find new employers.

Samia and the other domestic workers emphasise the fact that they do not work in homes while men are present. Unlike Asian domestic workers, they do not refer to employers using fictive kin names, instead referring to them in the common way as Umm Samer (the mother of Samer), for example. In their conversations with me, they described their work as arduous but generally unproblematic, and though they mentioned occasional disputes over matters relating to pay or work, they said their employers usually treated them with respect. They were aware that my research focussed on Asian domestic workers, and it is possible they glossed their own situations in a positive light as a way of distinguishing themselves. Three of the women had previously worked in garment factories on the nearby Al-Hassan Industrial Estate, the largest QIZ. They said domestic work was preferable because the workday was shorter – 8 am to 2 pm as opposed to 4 or 5 pm at the factory – and they did not have to stand in one place all day and could take breaks. The main drawback, however, was that being paid on a daily basis made it more difficult to save for large purchases, and they received no compensation if they had to stay home in the event that their children were ill. They reported earning an average of 8-10 JD per day (\$10-13). They would have preferred working in the public sector, they said, but felt that as Palestinians, they were discriminated against and did not have the *wasta*, or kin and tribal ties, to obtain better employment.

These women are now a small minority. Significant changes in the paid domestic workforce occurred as the Jordanian economy grew increasingly intertwined with the oil-based economic boom in the Gulf. The total number of migrant domestic workers in Amman in 1984 was estimated at 8,000 (Humphrey 1991: 55). The number has grown considerably. As of 2009, the Ministry of Labour estimated there were a total of 70,000 domestics in the kingdom from three main source countries: 35,000 Sri Lankans, 20,000 Indonesians and the rest from the Philippines. Interviews with recruiting agents and employers suggest that Sri Lankans and Filipinos were the

first groups to begin arriving in the late 1970s and early 1980s but that greater numbers of Indonesians have been recruited in recent years in response to employer demand for Muslim domestic workers and because they are willing to work for lower salaries than Filipino workers.<sup>78</sup> Recruitment agents say they are unable to satisfy even half of the demand for domestic workers in Jordan because there are not enough applications from the three main source countries. According to one agency, lower salaries and lower living standards in Jordan mean that many women prefer to work in the Gulf states.

Recruiting agencies play an important role in shaping employers' perceptions of domestic workers. Agents often advise employers about which nationality of domestic worker would best suit their family based on stereotypes. Filipinas are said to be the best educated, most efficient and speak the most English, making them suitable for parents who would like their children to learn English. Sri Lankans and Indonesians, on the other hand, are reputed to be harder workers, suitable for large homes with lots of work, and are less apt to demand independence and push for certain rights, for example to have a mobile phone or to go out on weekends. One agency owner shared his observations:

Families without much money, who have little resources, always want someone with no experience. They think, 'She'll take what she gets'. The most common problems with Filipinas are about a day off and a mobile. They want these things. Indonesians, because they are Muslim, don't believe in a day off. They have the same culture as the employers. With very conservative clients, I don't recommend that they get Filipina girls because in the Philippines, they have a Western life and have a hard time adjusting to life here. Here, people's idea of a domestic worker is that I own you. You can sleep when I sleep. You eat when I tell you to eat. You cannot even open the window or go out unless I say so. So, I don't tell them to get a maid from the Philippines. One from Sri Lanka or Indonesia would be better. Although the contracts say that the worker should have a day's rest, that she is entitled to full payment, there is a very big gap in families' mentalities about these things. How a worker will be treated depends on where her dice fall. Some get lucky and are given gifts, clothes are bought for them, and they are taken out on their birthdays. Others are not even allowed to look out the window. So, we like to make good matches.

Agencies also offer advice about how domestic workers should be treated, encouraging employers not to allow them to venture out of the house alone or to talk with other migrant workers.

### **Hospitality, Cleanliness and the Domestic Aesthetic**

Among elites, social life in Jordan involves a circuit of *munasabat*, or occasions, including holidays, engagement ceremonies, weddings, birthdays, baby showers, funerals, graduation parties and receptions of various kinds, all of which involve large gatherings. Families also regularly assemble for feasts on Fridays. Homes should always be prepared for the possibility of visits from relatives, friends and neighbours. Women derive much of their status from the

<sup>78</sup> Recruitment agents report that Sri Lankan and Indonesian women are paid roughly the same monthly salary – approximately \$125 – 150 during the period of research. Filipino domestic workers are commonly said to earn more. Without systematic data on their earnings, I cannot evaluate this claim, but it is worth noting that the minimum wage stipulated by the Philippines government was \$400 per month compared with \$150 set by the Sri Lankan and Indonesian governments.

cleanliness of their homes and the intricacy of the meals they serve, both of which relate to all-important traditions of hospitality. All of this requires significant amounts of labour. Even the mundane running of a household can be arduous. Traditional dishes are not easy or quick to make and often require several stages of preparation. Homes are cleaned in a particular manner, involving much soaping up and rinsing down. Carpets and mattresses must be beaten and exposed to the cleansing power of the sun. Windows, shutters and floors must be washed regularly to remove the dust that accumulates in the arid climate.

Housework might not always have been so taxing. Homes have grown larger and grander, and standards for cleanliness have escalated in the rentier economy. As Forte's (2001) work on the expansion of consumption among Palestinians shows, expectations for hospitality and cleanliness have risen, and while women's labour in the home cleaning and baking bread used to play a central role in defining household status, that prestige is now connoted by women's ability to buy and use 'modern' goods as well as by their enjoyment of leisure activities. On the most basic level, demand for domestic servants relates to ideas of leisure and the escalation in the volume and forms of consumerism. As Beal's (1998, 2000, 2001) work on Amman's upper classes illustrates, conspicuous consumption of items for the home plays a particularly important role in the construction of elite status. Domestic service is undoubtedly part of this broader pattern, though Beal's account is object-focused and mentions servants only briefly.<sup>79</sup> Domestic workers help employers maintain an appearance of leisured gentility while also facilitating a convenient, 'modern' lifestyle (Gill 1994: 51). Though most families employing domestic workers are financially well-off, it has become increasingly common for middle-class families to hire domestic workers. I met school teachers, secretaries, hairdressers and taxi drivers who employed domestic workers.

### **Household Composition, Life Course and Care Work**

Demand for domestic workers is fuelled not only by the need for help with housework but also with care work. This is particularly evident at stages in the family developmental cycle when children or the elderly need to be looked after. Changes in household composition and cross-generational dynamics have meant that domestic workers are increasingly sought to perform work family members might have done in the past. There is evidence of households decreasing in size: according to national statistics, the average household size shrank by more than 15 percent over the past three decades, from 6.7 persons in 1979 (Department of Statistics 2004) to 5.4 in 2008 (Department of Statistics 2009). This decline is most likely partly a result of falling fertility levels,

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<sup>79</sup> Beal has noted that while middle-class households in Amman might employ one Egyptian, Sri Lankan or Filipino worker in their homes, elites tend to employ a 'mini-army of domestic employees, the oversight of which constitutes a full-time responsibility...' (1998: 129). Aside from this brief mention, migrant domestic workers are not included in the analysis of household consumption patterns.

which appear to have decreased by 57 percent from 7.4 children in 1976 to 3.2 in 2004 (Department of Statistics 2007). It may also be the result of a greater incidence of nuclear household types, which reportedly make up 70 percent of all Jordanian households (Tiltnes 1999: 7).

The majority of employers interviewed for this research resided in nuclear households. This does not mean people interact less with the extended family. As Othman (1974) has noted, Jordanian families continue to have strong social and economic ties with wider kin, and a strong preference for living near or next to extended family members remains. The ideal living arrangement is for a couple to build their home on the ground floor and gradually add stories vertically for their children as they marry and establish their own families. While the importance of the extended family should not be underestimated, there is a preference for the independence that nuclear residential structures afford. Several young Jordanian women said in interviews that one of their preconditions for a marriage proposal is a promise that the couple will have their own home, free from nagging and opinionated mothers-in-law. Arwa, a woman in her late 20s who had recently married, said:

We're not building big houses for the whole family the way we used to. It's too expensive. Due to the cost of land and building supplies, people are living in smaller apartments. But it's also for privacy. Young women don't want someone older living with them, telling them how things should be done. They want to be on their own.

Preferences for privacy and independence from meddlesome in-laws may not be new but can now be fulfilled in ways that might not have been possible before, and domestic workers play a role in this. Many employers remarked that the ability to have a domestic worker care for children allows them to avoid having to live with their mothers-in-law, who in the past would have contributed to this task.<sup>80</sup> Young women also noted that one of the advantages of employing a domestic worker was that it allowed them to go out to dinner or attend social events with their husbands in the evenings. This is part of what appears to be a new premium placed on 'quality time' as an important ingredient in conjugal relations among the younger generations. Hiring a full-time domestic worker can also be a more convenient and cheaper option than a private nursery. The lack of adequate, good-quality childcare facilities in Jordan was noted by many employers.

Demand for domestic workers also reflects changing attitudes toward childhood and the importance of education. Children who a generation ago might have been expected to help with household chores are now encouraged to devote more time to studying and participating in after-school activities. Muna, a 38-year-old mother of six who is the director of a kindergarten and in

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<sup>80</sup> Noting increasing preferences for nuclear households in Taiwan, Lan (2000: 11) described a similar motivation amongst Taiwanese women who hire domestic workers in lieu of residing with in-laws.

the evenings studies for a master's degree, illustrated these points when she explained her decision to hire a Sri Lankan domestic worker.

I have thirteen brothers and sisters. Growing up, everyone helped with all the responsibilities in the house. We took turns. We had shifts for the kitchen, the bedroom, doing the laundry, helping mom with everything so she didn't do all the work herself. And also the boys were helping. When I started my family, I was doing it the same way as my mom. But when the children got older, I thought these chores would distract them from their studies and even from having fun. I don't want to have arguments with them, to have misunderstandings, or to harm them by pushing them to help me. That's why we decided to have the maid. Because I thought it would be more relaxing for everybody....

Employing domestic workers also gives middle-class mothers more time with their children, something now believed to be necessary for child development. This has been cited as a factor driving demand for domestic workers elsewhere (Anderson 2001: 27).

Dania's family provides an example. Dania's mother and father live on the bottom floor of a large villa and employ two Filipina workers. Their son lives on the floor directly above them, and Dania, her husband, four children and one Filipina domestic worker live on the top floor. Dania has a Master's degree in education and works as a private teacher for the royal family, a subject about which I was warned not to inquire, royal affairs being top secret. Dania grew up with servants, the first one having been hired when her mother developed heart problems. When Dania married and started her own home, she and her husband waited until after their first son was born to hire their first domestic worker because they wanted privacy during their first year as a married couple. Twelve years have passed since then, and in that time they have employed a string of Filipina domestic workers. In addition to housework, Dania's current domestic worker looks after Dania's four children until she comes home from work. Her family used to employ Sri Lankan domestic workers but now only hires Filipinas.

The Sri Lankans who come to Jordan now aren't like the ones who used to come. They don't want to work. Before, they would come and give you everything they had. Now, they're, I don't know... they're stubborn. Filipinas are more professional, are better with children, speak better English. Language is very important to me. For me, it's very important for her [the domestic worker] to have finished secondary school. You can't always count on this with Sri Lankans.... People say if you're of a certain status, you have to have a Filipina. It wasn't so much that, for me, as language and education.

The following example is illustrative of many of the wider patterns with respect to families' decisions to hire domestic workers. Ibrahim and Mariam are a retired couple in their sixties. They have five children, three of whom are unmarried and live with them in a three-story villa. Yazan is a university student, and Riad and Samir work for a foreign car company. The two elder children are married and reside separately, but Ibrahim says it would be unusual for two days to pass without them seeing all of their children and grandchildren. Mariam and Ibrahim employ Lina, a live-in domestic worker from Sri Lanka. Also staying with the family is Mariam's nephew, Amer, a teenager who weighs more than 400 pounds and has been sent from the United States to try to

lose weight. Since Ibrahim retired, the couple has begun renting out their basement and the top floor of their home to paying tenants in order to supplement their income.

When they first married, Ibrahim trained to be a paediatrician at the University of Sophia in Bulgaria. Mariam joined him and attended university there. They lived in Sophia for six years before returning to Jordan to live with his family in Madaba. Ibrahim took a job working with an international aid organisation providing medical care, and Mariam worked as an administrator in a UN agency. She had a long commute into Amman for work, and with several young children, said she struggled to cope. The couple hired a domestic worker, a Sri Lankan, for the first time in 1986. Mariam recalls that they paid her 20 JD a month.

According to Mariam, two things are responsible for the rise in employing domestic workers. The first is that life has become more expensive, meaning that more households rely on both parents working. The second relates to the lack of good-quality childcare.

You know, we have this saying, *Al-Urdun Awwalan* [Jordan First].<sup>81</sup> But in reality, the government doesn't care. I lived in Bulgaria for six years. My children were young when we were there, and I sent them to pre-school. The pre-schools in Bulgaria are first-class. They served the freshest vegetables. They were so clean. We lived right across from the pre-school and I used to look out the window and watch Dalia playing in the yard. The government spent so much money on the kindergarten... But here, we don't have these options. It costs so much to send your children to a private nursery - at least 100 JDs per month. It's less expensive and easier just to get a maid at home. This was the main motivation for me. Childcare. I don't know if the government nurseries are up to standard, if they treat the children well. They're just, you know, *ziballa* [trash]. So, I have two choices, either to send my children to one of those very expensive nurseries in a private school, or get a maid. It's easier to get a maid.

Mariam noted that many women feel overloaded by the burden of work and taking care of their families. On the issue of whether husbands helped, she had this to say:

When we were first married, Ibrahim used to help me. In Bulgaria, we didn't have a washing machine and he used to help me by making the coffee and things. When we moved back to Jordan, his sister once came to the house and saw him helping me and screamed, "You are a doctor. You should not serve people. Stop this!" And so he stopped. This is what men like to hear, anyway. I failed to train him to help me.

Mariam's comments were echoed by a number of other employers, who noted that husbands who helped out with domestic chores risked being teased for what was seen as a loss of masculinity. When asked whether her children pitched in with housework, Mariam replied: 'They had too much schoolwork. Too much studying.' Ibrahim and Mariam sent their children to private schools

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<sup>81</sup> This is a reference to the slogan of a nationalist campaign King Abdullah II launched in 2002 emphasising Jordan's interests at a time when public attention was focussed on crises in Palestine to the west and Iraq to the east.

and paid for additional lessons after school. This was a significant expense for the family, something Ibrahim and Mariam made sacrifices to afford.<sup>82</sup>

You know about the scare of the *Tawjihi*. There are very few spots in the government schools and children must get very high scores if they want to go to them. Otherwise, they have to go to one of the private colleges. During the *Tawjihi* year, we paid so much for tuition for our children.... I have thought about this a lot and I did a calculation once. I calculated that we spent 70 percent or more of our income on our children's education. Of the five children, only Dalia got a scholarship. The others we had to pay for. Each credit hour in the university cost 65 JD. This is incredible. It's an incredible cost. I compare it to India. I had a colleague at the UN who was from India. He had a PhD. He told me that from his first year of school up to his PhD, he only paid \$100. This is nothing. Here, we pay so much. It's a disgrace.

The *Tawjihi* to which Mariam refers are national exams for the General Secondary Education Certificate, upon which entry to universities and community colleges is based. High scores are required to study in private universities and to enrol in certain disciplines – such as pharmacy, engineering and the hard sciences. The exams are the source of a great deal of stress for students and their parents. The release of exam scores in the summer results in an all-out frenzy, as those who achieved high marks parade through the streets blasting car horns in celebration.

Education is an asset both because of the prestige that qualifications in higher education confer as well as the role it plays in the economy. Given that it is generally only the highly-skilled (i.e. those with a tertiary education) who emigrate, it can be considered a prerequisite for migration (De Bel Air 2010:1) and plays a crucial role in the way Jordan positions itself in the global economy. As the statements by Mariam and Dania illustrate, much of the impetus for hiring domestic workers relates to the desire to provide a certain kind of home environment for children, one in which they can study and, for those who can afford to hire Filipina domestic workers, practice their English.

### Care of the Elderly

Domestic workers play an important role at both ends of the life cycle, caring for the young as well as the aging. This appears to be encouraged by the government, which provides special subsidies for elderly and disabled persons to hire non-Jordanian domestic workers. The Ministry of Social Development exempts all elderly and/or disabled persons who are unable to care for themselves from paying work permit fees for domestic workers. The scheme began in 1993 under the Law of the Care of Persons with Disabilities [*Ri'ayat al-ashkhas al-mu'awwakin*] Number 12. According to ministry staff, it was initiated because of cultural attitudes toward group homes,

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<sup>82</sup> Education is a significant expense for most families. All households in Jordan reportedly increased their expenditures on education from 2002 to 2006 (Saif and Tabbaa 2008: 16). The wealthiest ten percent reportedly devote 8.6 percent of their total household expenditures to education; this is fifteen times more than the amount spent by the poorest ten percent of households (*ibid*).

which are perceived as sites of abandonment.<sup>83</sup> ‘Our culture is not like Britain’s. We are closer to each other’, said one ministry staff member when explaining the reasons for the government’s initiative. The comparison with Britain was made because this was where I was studying, as I explained to him. The numbers receiving these subsidies are surprisingly high. In 2006, 12,340 domestic workers were brought to the kingdom through the programme.<sup>84</sup> In 2007, the number rose to 14,945. This is more than one third of the roughly 30,000 domestic workers issued residence permits annually. One cannot know for certain that all of those recruited through the programme do end up working for the elderly and disabled. But my observations from interviews and discussions with employers and domestic workers confirmed that many are indeed recruited to work for these groups – particularly the elderly.

The fact that the government facilitates the recruitment of foreign domestic workers through labour legislation and targeted subsidies effectively keeps child care and care of the elderly firmly within the realm of the individual family. On the one hand, this policy encourages privatisation by keeping care of the elderly and children within the family, yet at the same time the subsidies contradict the international financial community’s mandate that Jordan reduce public spending.

Many elderly employers reported that they first decided to hire domestic help after a debilitating illness or accident. Even if their children lived nearby, they needed the sort of round-the-clock care that might prompt their European or North American counterparts to move into a retirement home. Although retirement homes exist in Jordan, as the civil servant quoted above noted, they are generally unpopular. Hiring foreign caretakers is the preferred alternative. Some elderly employers also stated a preference for hiring domestic workers over living with their children so that they could maintain independence or avoid being a burden. With growing life expectancy and high population growth rates, the need for the care work domestic workers provide is likely to expand in the years to come.

### **The Division of Labour**

Another factor contributing to the market for paid domestic work relates to women’s employment. Women have long played an active, although often unreported, role in the economy. Official statistics on women’s workforce participation rates – estimated at 17.8 percent for 2008 (Department of Statistics 2009) – remain very low compared to the global average of 40.5 percent

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<sup>83</sup> Interview, Ministry of Social Development, Department of Welfare for the Disabled, Amman, 13 July 2008.

<sup>84</sup> Information about the subsidy scheme and the statistics for 2006 and 2007 were provided by staff at the Ministry of Social Development on 7 June 2007 and 13 July 2008. As part of the same scheme, disabled persons are also exempt from paying customs on automobiles. Several elderly employers confirmed that they had received the subsidies.

(ILO 2009: 9) and even the regional average of 26 percent (World Bank 2010b).<sup>85</sup> Yet compared to a rate of 7.7 percent in 1979, increasing numbers of women are taking up formal employment outside of the home. Some women opt for this as a matter of choice, while others are compelled to do so for economic reasons. Many of those who work all day and then come home to do the bulk of the housework feel overloaded and consequently solicit the help of Sri Lankan, Filipino or Indonesian women. Egyptian men and women are also hired to help with the cleaning on a part-time basis.

Studies carried out elsewhere have suggested that domestic workers fulfil a role that allows middle-class men and women to avoid conflicts surrounding the gendered division of labour (e.g. Anderson 2000: 1, Enloe 2000: 179, Gregson and Lowe 1994: Chapter 4). The extent to which this may be true in Jordan is questionable, as few would deny that housework remains first and foremost a woman's job. This is not to say that husbands never help with housework, but the bulk of the responsibility rests with women. Muna, the employer quoted above who works full-time and employs a Sri Lankan domestic worker, explains:

If a woman works outside of the house, when she comes home, she must do the same work in the house whether she has a job or not. So, women think that if they work outside, they might as well pay for a maid from their salary so that when they come home they can be more relaxed. The mentality of the Arab or Eastern man is not to help in the house. So, she helps herself.

Muna was one of several women who said they paid domestic workers out of their own salaries. While the ability to employ a domestic worker may not necessarily enable women to work who would not have otherwise, domestic workers *do* allow working women more time for leisure activities and to spend with their children.

Nadia, a news editor at a local television station, and her husband Nasser, a medical doctor, have four sons, the eldest of whom is fourteen. Nadia returns from work at 9 pm on most evenings and so has employed a string of Sri Lankan and Indonesian domestic workers to look after her children when they return from school. The last worker she employed ran away, and in the few weeks the family went without domestic help Nadia said she barely slept. By the time she arrived at the house, everything was in disarray and she had to stay up late into the night cleaning, with no time left for her children. When asked whether her husband could come home early, she said they had not even contemplated the idea. Nadia discusses her responsibilities towards the household as if they are hers alone and seems genuinely unperturbed by the fact that her husband doesn't pitch in. With the help of a domestic worker, she can devote the limited time she has left at the end of

<sup>85</sup> Sonbol (2003) provides an account of why workforce participation rates among women remain low despite the fact that Jordan has one of the highest female literacy rates in the region (nearly 80 percent in 1998). She cites patriarchal attitudes that emphasise women's fragility and need for protection, educational curricula and practices discouraging women from pursuing certain careers, and discriminatory laws leading to lower pensions and fewer benefits as some of the factors.

the day to checking the children's homework and relaxing in front of the television. Contrasting herself with others who hire domestic workers for prestige, she emphasised the fact that she *needs* the help.

If there is a disagreement about whether to hire a domestic worker, it is usually the husband who objects. Several mothers said that their husbands and sons, some as young as eleven, refused to eat food cooked by domestic workers or to drink coffee or tea which they prepare. For example, Umm Leith, a 43-year-old mother of four, said that although her family has employed domestic help for more than seven years, her husband has never liked the idea. He insists that the woman leave the room when he enters and forbids her to clean in front of him. When asked why she thought he felt this way, she said he had never become accustomed to the idea of having a stranger in the house. A male interviewee commented that although his wife wanted to hire a domestic worker, he refused. 'I go out and work all day. Her job is to clean and put food on the table. What will she do if we get a maid?' Such attitudes may be an attempt to keep wives in traditional gender roles, but they also speak to a real sense felt by employers that inviting a foreign worker into the home entails an unwanted invasion of privacy. Since housework in Jordan is still considered women's work, women may be more willing to sacrifice family privacy than men. It may also be the case that women do not feel that their privacy is invaded by the presence of foreign women in the same way that men do.

### **Part Three: Domestic Servants and the Reproduction of Highly-Skilled Labour**

The preceding passages have illustrated the role domestic workers play in elite homes. In this section, I wish to draw on the points raised in the previous sections to put forth a hypothesis about the way domestic workers are situated within the value chain of the Jordanian economy and the function they play with respect to the reproduction of labour.

In Marx's terms, domestic workers may be subject to the discipline of the wage but are not 'productive' workers.

Every productive worker is a wage-labourer, but not every wage-labourer is a productive worker. Whenever labour is purchased to be consumed as a *use-value*, as a *service*... labour is not productive and the wage-labourer is no productive worker. His work is consumed for its *use-value*, not as *creating exchange-value*; it is consumed unproductively, not productively (Marx 1976: 1040-41).

Marx viewed the household primarily as a site of consumption, but as subsequent critics have pointed out, despite his insights into the centrality of labour-power to capitalism he failed to push the analysis far enough to acknowledge the extent to which the household is also a site of production (Hensman 2006: 2). Whether performed by unremunerated family members, slaves or paid workers, domestic labour produces labour power. It creates 'value' by virtue of the fact that its product – labour power - is a commodity (Cock 1981: 65).

In the Jordanian case, domestic workers are central to the reproduction of labour in several ways. First, at the level of daily maintenance through tasks that sustain the workforce – for example preparing meals, cleaning, washing and mending clothes. Second, on a generational basis through the care of the young, elderly and infirm. With respect to the young in particular, domestic workers contribute directly to the production of Jordan's potential labour force whenever they play a substantial role in raising children. In this vein, as reflected in employers' accounts presented in the preceding passages, certain migrants – chiefly those who speak fluent English – are preferred on the basis that they may transmit skills to their employers' children. Thus, domestic workers assist in the production of certain kinds of labour.

The less obvious, indirect contributions domestic workers make to social reproduction are equally significant. By freeing mothers from the burdens of housework, domestic workers allow them to devote more time and attention to their children, help with homework and ferry them to and from private tuitions, leisure and various social activities associated with the upper classes. Children in homes with domestic workers are themselves less likely to have to chip in with chores or care of siblings and are left free for other activities. In these ways, migrant domestic labour is an important factor in the social production of highly-educated elites who are trained and made 'ready-for-export'; first, to top-notch universities and then, in many cases given Jordan's high rate of out-migration, for employment in the Gulf states, Europe and North America. Like the labour of housewives under capitalism, domestic workers' labour 'becomes part of the congealed mass of past labour embodied in labour power' (Secombe 1974: 9). The services they provide help produce workers with the social capital and skills necessary for Jordan to compete on the global labour market. The value of their labour is realised as one part of the total value Jordanian labour power achieves when it is sold on the market as a commodity.

The round-the-clock service domestic workers provide could not be purchased at comparable rates on the Jordanian market. Because the supply of domestic labour is virtually limitless and new labour markets can be opened up at any time, wages have remained relatively low, at between \$100 and \$150, for the past decade.<sup>86</sup> And because the migrant workforce is un-regulated, un-organised and easily exploitable, in practical if not legal terms the working day can and often is extended indefinitely without pay for overtime. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, benefits that would be owed to citizen-workers such as maternity and sick leave are seldom paid to migrant workers.

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<sup>86</sup> Reliable statistics on actual earnings do not exist, but a UNIFEM report (2000) stated that the majority of migrant domestic workers in Jordan earned \$100 or less in 2000. Many of the Sri Lankan domestic workers with whom I met earned little more than this nearly ten years later. The purchasing power of wages has fallen during this time; according to IMF indicators, the average annual rate of inflation as measured by the consumer price index from 2000 – 2009 was 3.87 for Jordan and 10.73 for Sri Lanka.

Migrant labour is also relatively inexpensive for Jordan's economy because the costs of producing the workforce are born by the migrants' own countries. As soon as migrant workers become too old or sick to continue working, they can be disposed of and absorbed again by the domestic community in their own countries. Taking the analysis one step further, it now becomes possible to see how the communities from which Jordan's domestic servants come indirectly contribute to the surplus value which later accrues to those who employ highly-skilled Jordanian labour. This idea is not new - Meillassoux (1981) made a similar point with respect to the way domestic agricultural communities articulate with capitalism through labour migration in Africa. In the Jordanian context, it is worth bearing in mind that the costs borne by the domestic community include considerable emotional strain and the temporary loss of reproductive labour during the worker's absence from her own home.

Taking into account Marx's conception of the two-fold character of labour (its use value and its exchange value), we can see that while domestic workers' exchange value is low – around \$100 to \$150 per month – their output in social terms is much more valuable, contributing to the production of more highly-paid labour. Given that so many Jordanians and Palestinians eventually migrate abroad as doctors, engineers and technicians, these workers provide one of Jordan's most important links to global capital, a link which, as outlined in the first section, contributes at least a fifth of the country's GDP. Household statistical data linking the employment of foreign domestic workers to the emigration of Jordanians for work abroad would help to support this point. In the absence of such data, my argument remains tentative at best. But the wider point stands – that the domestic unit is a site not just of consumption but reproduction of the productive forces of the economy. Furthermore, through the trans-national circulation of domestic labour, migrant-sending communities under-write at least a portion of the total costs of producing future generations of highly-skilled Jordanian labour. In many households, domestic workers are part of the many intricate layers involved in the social reproduction of the workforce. They act like a mini-welfare state, playing an important role at both ends of the life cycle by caring for the aging and the young.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented an overview of some of the main political and economic developments in Jordan's recent history to contextualise contemporary migration policies. It has highlighted the reasons the recruitment of foreign workers has persisted despite high rates of unemployment among the local workforce. Foreign workers lack legal parity with citizens and will accept – or can be more easily coerced into taking part in – work for lower wages with fewer protections. Labour migration is often explained through push/pull models that portray movement as the result of a labour shortage creating a 'pull' in one area, and poverty creating a 'push' in another, but this

analysis suggests that the employment of foreign workers in Jordan is far more complexly determined. Although the state is often assumed to act as a neutral control on the labour market, in this context it has helped to create a stratified labour market which enables discrimination on the basis of citizenship. This is an integral part of the structure of capital accumulation in specific zones, namely the garment industry, agriculture, construction and the service sector. Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that labour market segmentation has contributed to a cheapening of labour and degradation of working conditions in these sectors. The extent to which policymakers have realised or chosen to ignore this is not clear.

The employment of so many foreign workers can be understood at least in part as a symptom of the lack of organisation among Jordanian labour. Trade unions are weak, and their activities are heavily restricted (see ICFTU 2010). If they were able to more effectively represent the interests of *all* workers, including migrants and Jordanians in the lowest pay ranks, and if they were allowed to play a stronger role in influencing government action, policies concerning the recruitment of foreign labour might well be different. This context raises questions about the relationship between repressive and unrepresentative political structures in which decision-makers are not accountable to the local population and the pursuit of policies that benefit business owners at the expense of the local workforce. This is relevant to the Arab region as a whole, where in six of the eight existing monarchies, the labour force is between one-half and nine-tenths foreign (Chalcraft 2010: 1).

Drawing on the limited evidence available, this chapter has also sought to outline the shift from employing Arab to Asian domestic workers. A constellation of social, political and economic factors at the national *and* household levels has fuelled the demand for domestic workers. This includes changes in class formation in the wake of the oil boom, increasing forms of consumerism, changing residential patterns, as well as the social value of education and changing attitudes towards childhood. Migrant women are often preferred for domestic work because – like migrants employed in agriculture and in garment factories – they tend to live at the worksite, are willing to accept lower wages and dependent work relations, and are far from their own homes and so work longer hours without regular holidays. Another important factor influencing the demand for foreign domestic workers in Jordan is the fact that migrants are expected to work under conditions that are generally favourable to employers. The legal and practical dimensions of their relationships with employers will be the subject of the next two chapters.

## *The Kafala System: Legal and Administrative Framework*

This chapter examines the status of foreign workers employed under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. Variants of this system are in use throughout the Arabian Peninsula and Levant and apply to the vast majority of foreign workers, including those employed in agriculture, construction, industrial production, healthcare, personal care, domestic work and other service-sector jobs.<sup>87</sup> The region hosts some of the highest concentrations of labour migrants in the world. As of 2010, six Gulf states employed more than 15 million foreign workers, who comprised 38 percent of the population (IOM 2010). Migrant workers make up more than two-thirds of all residents in Qatar (86.5 percent), the UAE (70 percent) and Kuwait (68.5 percent) (*ibid*).

The *kafala* system is the administrative apparatus by which migrant workers are recruited, managed and controlled. It is not homogenous throughout the region, but the basic elements are similar. Foreign nationals must have local sponsors in order to obtain residence and work permits. These sponsors serve as the worker's guarantor and sole employer. The worker cannot change employers without the sponsor's consent, and the employer has the power to send the worker back to his or her country at any time. Within this framework, foreign workers are bound to their employers for the terms of their service, which typically last two years.

How did such asymmetrical relations come about? Despite the prevalence of the *kafala* system and its consequences for millions of workers, few scholarly attempts have been made to understand its origins. The first part of this chapter puts forth a hypothesis about its legal and customary antecedents, suggesting that while *kafala* contracts have a long history in Islamic jurisprudence, their contemporary use for the administration of foreign workers has radically diverged from prior uses. While *kafala* contracts were once understood as a means of granting protection and patronage to vulnerable parties, they have become a mechanism of institutionalised discrimination. The second part examines the contemporary use of the *kafala* system for migrant domestic workers in Jordan. We have already examined the reasons for the exodus of women from Sri Lanka to the Middle East for jobs in domestic service (chapter 2), the role of the Sri Lankan state in promoting their migration and training them to be obsequious and docile (chapter 3), and the factors contributing to the demand for their services in Jordan (chapter 4). This chapter focuses on the administrative framework of the *kafala* system and what this means for workers. It

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<sup>87</sup> Certain highly-skilled workers such as teachers are not required to have sponsors in all countries in the region. Although this chapter refers primarily to the situation in Arab countries, Israel also uses a sponsorship system which 'binds' foreign workers to their employers (Kemp 2004: 272-273). The situation of migrant domestic workers there is in many ways similar (Liebelt 2008a).

argues that while workers may willingly enter into the sponsorship system, once in they cannot opt out until the term of their employment has been completed. Rather than free wage workers, they may be thought of as bonded labourers. Chapter 6 then examines the variety of ways domestic workers and employers negotiate their roles within this framework.

The Arab East is often stereotyped by those who live outside it as a region locked in conservatism where women are oppressed. We would do well to recall that forms of bonded and enslaved labour have existed almost everywhere throughout history, and while the stories presented here are from Jordan, the elements of exploitation they contain are by no means uniquely Middle Eastern.<sup>88</sup> It should also be mentioned that while the practice of employing domestic servants has become widespread among the wealthy and has begun to be common among middle class families, it remains beyond the means of the majority of Jordanian households, where the responsibility for domestic work rests with female kin.

### **Part One: Legal and Conceptual Provenance**

The term '*kafāla*' has a wide semantic scope in Arabic. Its root, kāf – fā' – lām (كفل), means to feed, support, vouch for or warrant; hence '*kafala*' refers to bail, guaranty, security or sponsorship (Wehr 1994: 976). According to Lane's nineteenth century Arabic dictionary, *kafala* meant 'responsibility; answerableness; amenability; or suretiship; the conjoining of responsibility to another' (1872: 3001). Likewise, the *kafil* is 'one who is responsible, answerable, amendable, or a sponsor or surety' (*ibid*). In line with this sense, in Islamic family law '*kafala*' refers to a formal agreement to provide temporary support for an orphaned child until adulthood. Such support does not confer inheritance rights and is best understood as a form of legal guardianship rather than adoption.

How has a word connoting guardianship and protection come to be associated with the employment of migrant workers? Does the *kafala* system have an historical antecedent? In the following passages, I advance a hypothesis about the origins of this form of legal sponsorship. Without the benefit of archival evidence, I am unable to trace its genealogy into present-day Jordan. Nevertheless, I wish to draw attention to the problem because it has so far been neglected in the literature.<sup>89</sup> Given the scale of the use of the *kafala* system, its origins deserve further study.

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<sup>88</sup> This point is also made by Toledano (2007: 1, 17).

<sup>89</sup> Longva has also noted that the *kafala* system has been largely ignored by scholars of labour migration to the region (1997: 78).

### ***Kafala Contracts Under Ottoman Rule***

While Ottoman rule of Transjordan officially ended in 1918, the Ottoman civil code, the *Majalla*, has had a lasting influence, particularly with respect to contract law.<sup>90</sup> It is possible that the present-day *kafala* system grew out of earlier Ottoman forms.

According to Foster, the concept of the *kafala* derives from pre-Islamic practices and was spoken of approvingly and confirmed in verses of the Quran and *hadith*, in this way becoming part of Islamic jurisprudence (2001: 139).<sup>91</sup> *Kafala* is synonymous with *damān* (ضمان), which is the term used more commonly in all Islamic law schools except for Hanafi (Rispler-Chaim 1991: 144-5; Linant De Bellefonds 1978: 404-405).<sup>92</sup> In Islamic jurisprudence, the *kafala* operated as a form of suretyship that could be used to secure: 1) property (*kafala bil-mal*), 2) attendance before a tribunal (*kafala bil-nafs*), 3) delivery of goods (*kafala bil-taslim*), or purchase of goods sold (*kafala bil-darak*) (Foster 2001: 141). In Ottoman Hanafi jurisprudence uses of *kafala* contracts were largely the same. According to the *Majalla*, a *kafala* agreement consisted of 'someone adding himself to another person, and himself undertaking a demand which is binding on that person' (Article 612). The *Majalla* mentions several types of *kafala* agreements relating to guarantorship, none of which refers to the performance of labour.<sup>93</sup>

In Ottoman contexts the *kafala* system was also used as a means of collectivising responsibility. For example in sixteenth century Jerusalem, *kafala* was instituted as a form of collective representation for particular religious groups (Cohen 1984). The Jewish community was represented by a '*shaykh al-yahud*', who acted as a guarantor representing them in dealings with the Muslim government. In other instances, *kafala* served as a form of communal control. Petrov (2004) describes a Bulgarian village in 1865 in which police investigating a murder of two Circassian immigrants required all male villagers to associate themselves with a guarantor ('*kefil*'). There, the *kafala* system functioned 'like a communal check on "deviant" behaviour', with trusted village men vouching for the suspects' character and ensuring that they would not flee (Petrov 2004: 751, fn 81). Similarly, indigenous Muslims in Libya between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries were subject to a *kafala* system whereby 'the head of each Muslim household

<sup>90</sup> The Ottoman *Mejelle-i Ahkam-i 'Adliyye* (*Majalla*) was the civil code of Hanafi-derived law of the Ottoman Empire. It was promulgated in 1877 in the wake of Tanzimat reforms and remained the basis of civil law, particularly contract law, in Trans-Jordan and elsewhere in the region long after the end of the empire (Arabi 1998:45, fn 2). The version to which I refer is a translation by Tyser et al (1901).

<sup>91</sup> The relevant *hadith* are found in the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari in Chapter 42: Book of Sureties (*Kafala*). The *Sahih* is one of the six major collections of sayings pertaining to the Prophet Mohammed. The *hadith* pertaining to *kafala* involve people or things being taken as surety for loans or debts. In one (I: 2169) Allah himself is invoked as and acts as a guarantor.

<sup>92</sup> The ways various schools of Islamic law dealt with *kafala* agreements are described in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Linant De Bellefonds 1978: 404-405).

<sup>93</sup> *Kafala bil-mal* (Article 614) was a guaranty of property ensuring that a debtor would repay a debt to a lender, as in the English 'surety'. *Kafala bil-nafs* (Article 613) was a personal guaranty whereby one became a guarantor for another person to ensure due attendance in court, as in the English word 'bail'.

was bonded by professional bondsmen and *sheykh*s (patriarchs) of their quarters (*hara*) against the detection in their respective households of a thief, a prostitute, or a person neglectful of the performance of the daily Muslim rites. Should a “misdemeanour” be discovered, the bondsmen were liable to forfeit their bond’ (Abou-El-Haj 1983: 310).<sup>94</sup> Outside of the Ottoman context there are also examples in which guarantors have traditionally been used to represent opposing parties in the mediation of disputes.<sup>95</sup>

Based on these examples, *kafala* contracts appear to have been used most commonly in instances in which an individual who lacked the means or political clout to represent him or herself gained patronage or custodianship from a notable member of the community. This was for one of three main purposes: 1) For financial protection, in which financial risk was extended to a third party; 2) in order to communalise responsibility from one to more than one person; or 3) as a form of legal or political representation. Interestingly, *kafala* agreements were presumed to be gratuitous undertakings, i.e. not for the guarantor’s profit (Foster 2001: 137). They implied the personal obligation of the guarantor towards the debtor and were characterised by liberality towards the debtor (*ibid*: 142). The guarantor was *responsible for* the debtor. Nothing in the Ottoman or *fiqh* contexts referred to the use of such contracts for the purpose of rewarding the guarantor. Such a situation would in fact have constituted a legal breach since any payments made to the guarantor for providing *kafala* would have constituted *ribā* (usury), forbidden in Islam (Foster 2001: 143).

Although there is some danger of comparing what might be an idealised picture of previous uses of *kafala* contracts with the harsh realities of the present system, there appears to be a genuine contrast between the contemporary *kafala* system as it applies to expatriates and the historical uses described here. Slavery was a feature of the Ottoman landscape, but none of the accounts of Ottoman slavery I have read refer to the use of *kafala* contracts.<sup>96</sup> If the current use of the *kafala*

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<sup>94</sup> In the Ottoman sources cited by Abou-El-Haj, these bondsmen are referred to as ‘*kefiller*’ (Abou-El-Haj 1983: fn 16).

<sup>95</sup> For example, see Dresch (1989: 93-94) on the role of guarantors in settling disputes among tribes in Yemen.

<sup>96</sup> In relation to the Ottoman context, it is worth mentioning that the situation of migrant domestic workers today bears some resemblance to that of Ottoman slaves. Enslaved Africans, Circassians, Georgians, Greeks, Slavs and others were brought into areas under Ottoman rule to work in the households of the elite and in harems, for agricultural work, menial jobs such as pearl diving, mining and construction, and to join the Ottoman military-administrative elite (*mamluk*) (Toledano 2007: 12-14). Domestic slaves were an integral part of Ottoman society, and because they had been cut off from their own kin and social networks, they were dependent on links with slave holders for food, shelter and, to some extent, protection. While the majority of slaves were largely resigned to their situation, a minority – often those who had been abused as well as some who had not – took risks to gain their freedom. According to Toledano, few fled expressly with the aim of freedom from bondage; rather, most absconded to end abuse, prevent a forced abortion, or for some other reason relating to the circumstances of their employment (2007: 79). Toledano describes runaway slaves who, if caught, were generally returned to their masters unless they were believed to have been subject to ill-treatment, in which case they could be granted manumission. As a result, many alleged ill-treatment to increase the odds that they would be freed. To pre-empt such charges, slavers often made false accusations of theft (2007: 61). This resembles aspects of contemporary domestic worker – employer

system for migrant labour did descend from these earlier forms, it diverged dramatically in the context of nation states and neoliberal market forces and transformed into a system whereby non-nationals are bound to nationals for the purposes of work or business.

### *The Kafala System as Practiced in the Arabian Gulf*

Jordan's contemporary use of the *kafala* system as an administrative framework for the recruitment of foreign labour is in many ways similar to that of the Gulf states. Could it have been influenced by models from the Gulf, where large-scale labour importation arose earlier? While I do not yet have evidence to assess the degree to which this may have been the case, given the similarities and the fact that there has been some, albeit limited, scholarship charting the evolution of the *kafala* system in the Gulf, that context is worth considering if only for the purposes of comparison. There, the contemporary *kafala* system for migrant workers emerged in the context of a particular kind of state -- one that distributes oil-rent to a small pool of citizens in exchange for political acquiescence and the pursuit of free-trade policies and a laissez-faire economy; and most importantly, one in which huge migrant worker populations vastly exceed the number of nationals. Under these conditions, the *kafala* system was instituted as part of a broader dynamic generated by oil revenue alongside administrative policies aimed at separating and controlling expatriates. In order to illustrate how and why the *kafala* system emerged as it did in the Gulf, I will briefly sketch the history of migration and rise of the oil economy.

The Gulf port towns of Manamah, Kuwait and Dubai were characterised by migratory flows long before the discovery of oil. During the nineteenth century, migrants from India, Iran and farther east, along with groups from the desert and inland agricultural areas of eastern Saudi Arabia, flocked to coastal Gulf towns to work in the pearling industry and commercial trade (Fuccaro 2005, 2009, 2010). Immigrants, settlers, sailors and administrators from British India dominated the social landscape in early twentieth-century Manama (Fuccaro 2010: 28). Government apparatus were minimal, and patronage played a key role in facilitating migration, with settled migrants sending for kin and providing them with employment and protection upon arrival.

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relationships; employers commonly level false-counteraccusations of theft against those who run away or accuse them of abuse, as will be described in chapter 5. While cases of slaves absconding occurred frequently throughout Ottoman rule, the incidence increased dramatically in the final quarter of the nineteenth century (*ibid*). This was in part because the British government was known to harbour mistreated slaves in its consulates and aboard its naval vessels. Another was that the Ottoman state, under pressure from the British and due to a need to resolve problems posed by Circassian agricultural slaves, increasingly sponsored manumission. The slave trade waned toward the end of the nineteenth century and the institution more or less died out in the first decade of the twentieth century (Toledano 1998:3). By comparing domestic slaves in the Ottoman era with domestic workers in Jordan today, I do not mean to suggest a historical link. Rather, what I wish to emphasise is that both sets of relationships were rationalised in terms of mutual dependency. In the Ottoman case and now, absolute dependency was thought to engender loyalty and, hence, trustworthiness. Both sets of relations also featured the use of or threat of the use of violence, the element of racial and ethnic difference, the stigmatised status of the worker, temporary alienation from the worker's own kin, and above all, legal dependence.

Economic migrants continued to represent a large proportion of the urban population in the Gulf port towns after the discovery of oil in the 1930s, when foreign labour was sought for oil production, manufacturing and construction (Fuccaro 2009: 208). While the inflow of workers was relatively unlimited in the beginning of the oil era, this gradually changed as immigration and nationality laws began to create new legal and political divisions between nationals and non-nationals, Arabs and non-Arabs (*ibid*: 223). The notion that GCC nationals should be entitled to privileges above and beyond those of non-nationals began to take hold (Crystal 1990: 79). In Kuwait in 1948, two decrees established the first legal basis for nationality (*ibid*). By the late 1950s, with the number of expatriate workers still increasing steadily, more explicit policies were passed favouring nationals. Labour laws specified the hiring of nationals, expatriates engaged in labour disputes were swiftly deported, and the formation and activities of unions were tightly regulated (*ibid*: 80). In 1964, a private sector labour law was passed limiting employment contracts to five years, compelling workers to register with the state, and establishing priority for the hiring of Kuwaitis, followed by other Arabs (*ibid*). According to Crystal, 'These policies encouraged Kuwaitis, including potential dissidents, to set themselves apart from expatriates. In the 1950s and 1960s, as Nasserism grew around the world, this policy was a very important containment mechanism' (*ibid*).<sup>97</sup> Fuccaro writes of Bahrain, 'Immigrants, who had been the building blocks of pre-oil Manama, turned into possessors of visas and travel documents, a disciplined labour force subservient to the new economy' (2009: 211).

Opinion is divided over whether *kafala* requirements were in place when post-oil labour importation began in the 1940s. Longva writes with reference to Kuwait:

According to some testimonies there may have been a practice whereby migrants were vouched for by a respected citizen of Kuwait. If this was the case, then the practice was not formalized in the first decades of labour importation, since the text of the Aliens' Residence Law issued in 1959 and amended in 1963, 1965, and 1968 made no mention of it. The 1960 Law of Commercial Companies did stipulate that foreigners might not establish businesses in Kuwait except with Kuwaiti partners who, in turn, were required to have 51 percent ownership. This requirement of partnership, however, was not strictly the same as the requirement of sponsorship... (1997: 78).

By the 1950s and 60s, while natives from other parts of the Gulf could enter and settle freely in Kuwait, Indian migrant workers were required to have guarantees from employers in order to enter (Longva 1997: 78, citing Joukhadar 1980). By 1969, all migrant workers including Palestinians had to be guaranteed by Kuwaiti employers (Joukhadar 1980 and Russel 1989a as cited in Longva 1997: 78). While the *kafala* system was commonly practiced by the end of the 1960s, it was not until 1975 that it was finally codified in an amendment to the Aliens' Residence Law (Longva 1997: 79). By the 1980s, all foreigners originating from non-GCC states had to be

<sup>97</sup> Crystal's political history of Kuwait and Qatar (1990) develops the argument that distributive mechanisms, including assured public sector employment and other labour policies favouring nationals above foreigners, served to stifle political dissent and ensure stability for ruling families. In short, oil wealth was distributed in exchange for political control.

under the sponsorship of a private citizen or private or state institution (Longva 1997: 79; see also Kapiszewski 2001: 202).

For the first time, the *kafala* was mentioned and the role of the *kafil* (sponsor) was explicitly identified with that of the employer. In the years since 1975, the *kafala* institution had become the very key to in-migration. Yet nowhere and at no time had the notion of *kafala* and the relationship between the *kafil* and the migrant worker been clearly explained, not even in the various detailed explanatory memoranda that accompanied the law and its amendments. (Longva 1997: 79)

What is striking is how late this practice became officially regulated. The *kafala* system emerged recently as an administrative tool institutionalising a broader system of patronage and control over labour which had long been in place. It functioned to ensure that no more workers entered than jobs existed, that they were personally tied to a national, and that they stayed only as long as they were employed.

### ***Discontinuities in Nature and Form***

In the preceding sections, I have traced the vernacular genealogy of the word through its use in legal contracts in the Ottoman Hanafi context. I have also discussed the Gulf context, in which a practice of patronage and control has been codified only recently. Given the similarities between the *kafala* system as practiced in the Gulf and Jordan, this is important to consider. But precisely how the *kafala* system as it applies to foreign workers in Jordan came to be I cannot determine. It is clear, however, that the *kafala* system has become something substantially different than earlier uses of *kafala* contracts in Islamic jurisprudence. The system is lent a veneer of legitimacy by being named after a previous type of contract enshrined in Islamic law but with which it has little in common. In all earlier forms, the *kafil* took responsibility for his *protégé* and was held to account, whereas in this case – at least in practice - he is not held accountable. Part Two of this chapter illustrates this in detail. Historical uses of *kafala* contracts may also have had exploitative elements, but their current implementation with respect to migrant labour violates both the letter and spirit of the legal institution. No firm conclusions can be drawn on the basis of my analysis of historical uses of *kafala* contracts -- this chapter was written with the intention of raising questions rather than answering them. But a shift appears to have taken place at least at the vernacular level in which something once associated with social protection has become more restrictive and punitive.

In both Jordan and the Gulf, the *kafala* system applies not only to the entry of foreign workers but also to commercial activities. Thus any expatriate (including Palestinian refugees and Arabs from other states) wishing to start a business must form a partnership with a local guarantor.<sup>98</sup> The use of the *kafala* system combined with regulations barring foreigners from being naturalized, bringing family members with them or permanently settling is particularly advantageous for

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<sup>98</sup> On regulations concerning naturalisation, business investments and property ownership of non-Jordanians in Jordan, see Olwan (2006: 8-20).

ruling regimes. Because most foreign workers lack the right to associate, organise, or vote and are subject to deportation, the system has effectively out-sourced the least wanted, most difficult, dangerous and low-paid work to a vast, politically impotent workforce. Further illustration of the way in which the contemporary *kafala* system differs from earlier understandings of *kafala* contracts is the fact that serving as a guarantor has become a lucrative business. As I mentioned in chapter 2, though forbidden by law, visas are commonly sold to migrants by local citizens who agree to act as guarantors in exchange for a fee.<sup>99</sup> Workers with expired visas and those wishing to bring relatives to the country often 'buy' visas in this way. For those who successfully secure visas through a *kafil* whom they trust but do not work for, the arrangement affords a degree of freedom to choose their own employer. But it is costly and risky. Many migrants pay large sums for visas that never materialise. In order to more fully understand how the *kafala* system operates in practice today, we shall return to the Jordanian context.

## **Part Two: The *Kafala* System for Migrant Employment**

Although this study focuses on the situation of domestic workers, it is important to remember that the *kafala* system also applies to migrants employed in agriculture, construction, industrial production and many other service-sector jobs. It has been instituted not as the result of a single piece of legislation but rather through a series of administrative practices associated with various laws and regulations. Any employer seeking to hire a non-Jordanian worker must submit an application to the Ministry of Labour specifying the nature of work to be performed, place of employment, and other details and including a photograph of the worker, copies of the worker's passport, and medical certificates showing that he or she is in good health. The application must be approved by the Ministry of Labour, after which time the employer must pay for the employment permit. In 2008, work permit fees for the 303,325 foreign workers employed resulted in revenue of 54 million dinars (Ministry of Labour 2008: 40), suggesting that the state has a pecuniary interest in the recruitment of foreign workers. Once the employment permit is issued by the Ministry of Labour, a request can be made to the Department of Residence and Borders to issue a residence permit. Article 27 of Law Number 24 of 1973 on Residence and Foreigners Affairs states that foreigners may be required to provide security to cover any financial obligations that they may incur and to guarantee their departure from the kingdom upon the expiry of the residence permit granted. After entering the country to work for a particular employer, the worker may not change employers or occupations without prior permission from the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and the employer regardless of the reasons for the termination of the initial employment contract (Ta'amneh 2003: 39). A signed, notarised 'release' from the first sponsor is required in order for the worker to be transferred to another sponsor.

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<sup>99</sup> Longva (1997: 107-108) has described the illegal sale of visas in Kuwait.

Employment procedures vary by sector and according to the workers' country of origin. Jordan divides countries into three categories for the purposes of entry of foreign nationals. Citizens from 'Exempt' countries, including Arab League member states, do not need permits to enter the country.<sup>100</sup> Those from 'Unrestricted' countries do not need prior permission to enter Jordan but do require visas, which they may purchase at a port of entry; this category includes countries in Western Europe, North America and Latin America. All other countries, including Sri Lanka, fall into the category of 'Restricted', meaning their citizens must obtain permission to enter from a Jordanian consulate prior to arrival (see Annex A, 'Restricted Nationalities List'). The Jordanian and Egyptian governments have signed bilateral agreements allowing Egyptian migrants to obtain 'open' work permits, which allow them to change their employment; such permits are not available to any other nationalities (Ta'amneh 2003: 39). In addition to these laws and regulations governing the entry and work of foreigners, Memorandums of Understanding are periodically signed between Jordan and the governments of other sending countries. Such agreements are seldom made public and lack enforcement mechanisms.

During the period of research employers paid a minimum of the equivalent of \$2,000 in recruitment agency and government fees in order to bring a domestic worker to the country. This situation resembles debt bondage in that in exchange for the employer having paid this sum, the migrant is expected to work for two years. But there are important differences between the context at hand and forms of bonded labour linked to the clearing of debt. Here, the money paid by employers goes to recruitment agencies rather than workers, and most workers themselves *also* pay brokers and recruitment agencies in their own countries. Moreover, the worker is obliged to work for longer than would be required simply to repay the costs of her recruitment. Many employers do not pay domestic workers for the first two or three months in order to offset recruitment agency charges, and even once these charges have been fully recouped, the worker continues to be tied to her employer. She is not 'free' until she has completed the two-year contract, at which point she can return to her country or, if she is able to obtain a 'release' from her sponsor, be employed by someone else. Some recruitment agents and employers may allow domestic workers to break their contracts and return to their countries early if they pay all of the costs that were incurred in bringing them to Jordan. There is no formal procedure or stipulation in the contract allowing for this, however, and I am not aware of a single case in which a domestic worker was able to 'buy' her freedom in this way. The costs usually exceed \$2,000, or more than a year's salary, and are more than the vast majority of migrants are able to pay. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which workers employed in other sectors or who come from

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<sup>100</sup> Special restrictions apply to Iraqis; in 2008, the government began requiring them to obtain visas prior to entry.

countries closer to Jordan, for example Egypt, are able to break their employment contracts and return home early.

Due to the cost of recruitment, there is a great deal of insecurity on the part of employers that domestic workers will desert them. To minimise the risks, workers' passports are confiscated as soon as they arrive. To reduce the likelihood that they may gain knowledge of how to escape, their movement outside the household is restricted and they are usually discouraged from communicating with anyone outside the home.<sup>101</sup> Thus, working conditions involve an extreme form of social alienation. This is meant to deter workers from fleeing and also to prevent gossip about employers' private affairs from reaching the neighbours. While not all employers limit mobility and communication in these ways, these restrictions appear to be the norm.<sup>102</sup> Unlike accounts of debt bondage in which workers are attracted and then controlled by the payment of advances (De Neve 1999: 384-9; Kapadia 1995: 447), here such payments are extremely rare, given only to trusted, long-serving workers. Wages are more often *withheld* as a way of immobilising labour. Some employers also resort to physical violence, and domestic workers and employers alike have reported incidents of physical abuse by recruitment agency staff.

Once in custody of the employer, the domestic worker's position is legally governed by the unified working contract that all employers and migrant domestic workers are required to sign (included as Annex B). When the contract was first introduced in 2003, it was touted as a breakthrough for domestic workers' rights.<sup>103</sup> However, the majority of workers I spoke with in 2007 and 2008 who had migrated after the contract had been introduced did not recall having read it prior to migrating. None had copies of the contracts they had signed. Contracts are printed in Arabic and English, which only a small minority of workers are able to read. The contract stipulates that employers must provide workers with return airfare, accommodation, meals,

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<sup>101</sup> These patterns are also evident in Lebanon. An NGO carried out a study of employer attitudes in 2010 (Abdulrahim 2010). Out of a sample of roughly one hundred employers, 88 percent said they believed they should have the right to keep domestic workers' passports in order to prevent them from escaping. The majority opposed the practice of locking domestic workers in the house, but 31 percent reported that they did so. Fifty-four percent said they gave their domestic workers time off from work, but of those only 20 percent allowed them to leave the house independently during time off.

<sup>102</sup> These practices were described as widespread in several countries in the region by Human Rights Watch (2007) and the ILO (Esim and Smith 2004). Women reported working 16-18 hours a day and almost none had regular rest days (Human Rights Watch 2007: 62). Ninety to one hundred percent of those domestic workers interviewed by the ILO reported having their freedom of movement controlled, and few were allowed to visit friends or go for a walk on their own (Esim and Smith 2004: 19-20). Of complaints the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment recorded from migrant workers, 80 percent were from women, most of whom were working as domestic workers in the Middle East. Approximately 18 percent related to non-payment, 15 percent concerned breach of employment contract, 13 percent involved restrictions on communication, and 12 percent pertained to physical or sexual harassment (SLBFE 2008: 54).

<sup>103</sup> Before Jordan introduced the unified contract, workers signed contracts in their home countries that were not legally binding in Jordan and then were often asked to sign contracts with different terms upon arrival in the country of employment. This has been reported in many other parts of the region as well (Manseau 2005: 30). Similarly, the ILO has reported irregularities in contracts for domestic workers in other countries in the region (Simel and Esim 2004: 20-21).

clothing and medical care and states that workers are entitled to an additional 15 days of pay at the end of the two-year contract period. But it also states that domestic workers must 'faithfully and loyally perform his/her duties without violating the general social norms, morals and laws' and stipulates that they must not leave the employer's residence without permission (Article 6). Workers are entitled to one rest day per week on the condition that they do not leave the employer's residence without approval (Article 8). The only two grounds under which the worker can terminate the contract is if the employer fails to pay the worker or fails to obtain the required residence and work permits (Article 9). The contract does not specify punishments for employers if the conditions of the contract are breached and places a heavy burden of proof on workers in cases of abuse or non-payment.

Until 2008, persons employed in agriculture and domestic work were not considered *workers* under Jordanian law.<sup>104</sup> Article 3 of the 1996 Jordanian Labour Law stipulates that the labour law applies to all employees *except* a) public servants and employees of the municipality, b) unpaid family members, c) domestic workers and cooks, and d) agricultural workers. The rationale behind these exclusions is not clear. But in the case of domestic work, it was commonly explained with reference to the fact that it differs from other types of 'work' because it is performed in private homes. In practice this legal exclusion gives employers greater power and means that regulations regarding entitlements to holidays, social security, health insurance, severance pay and other rights do not apply to workers in these sectors. Disputes between employers and workers in the excluded sectors fall under the jurisdiction of civil or criminal courts but not the labour court, which has expedited procedures and in which workers do not have to pay legal fees. In 2008, Jordan became the first Arab country to extend labour law coverage to domestic workers and some categories of agricultural workers. Following on from this, in 2009 new regulations on the employment of domestic workers were issued stipulating that employers must pay workers on a monthly basis, restricting working hours to 10 per day, and guaranteeing 14 days of paid leave at the end of each year of employment, along with 14 days of paid sick leave per year. Under the new regulations, employers must also allow domestic workers to write letters home and are entitled to one phone call home per month at the expense of the employer. It is unclear what impact these regulations will have given that there is still widespread opposition to the prospect of government oversight of household labour. When asked about carrying out labour inspections in private homes, Ahmed Hababbeh, president of the Domestic Helpers' Agencies Association and an owner of a recruitment agency, remarked that this would be unfair to employers. 'No one can enter your house to check if your maid is OK or not. We are Bedouins in this country!' (Seeley

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<sup>104</sup> Similarly, in Sri Lanka the government does not regulate the work of those persons employed in domestic service. Domestic work is excluded from labour laws in Saudi Arabia (Silvey 2004: 146), Kuwait (Longva 1997: 94) and Lebanon (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 596). The legality of excluding particular groups of workers has been challenged by Jordanian legal scholars (see Malkawi Undated: 2-4).

2009). Employers and Ministry of Labour officials alike subscribe to the idea that the home is an inviolable space. Without enforcement mechanisms, the effectiveness of the legal regulations is extremely limited. In fact, there appears to be an almost total lack of enforcement of workers' rights. Guidelines about the minimum salary are often flouted. As of 2006, the contract stipulated that migrant domestic workers should earn a minimum of \$125 per month. While some earned more, others earned less or were not paid at all.<sup>105</sup> Some employers withhold pay until the end of the contract period in order to discourage workers from running away, and some fail to pay the full amount even then. Though forbidden by the terms of the contract, employers also frequently dock workers' wages to cover the cost of visas, recruitment agency fees, phone calls, medical care, food and other items, meaning that some workers receive only a fraction of the promised pay.

Domestic workers may be disciplined with physical force as well as the threat of dismissal. Employers who are dissatisfied with domestic workers' performance can either send them back to their countries or take them to the agency responsible for recruiting them. Workers who are 'returned' to recruitment agencies are usually deployed to work on a full-time basis in another employer's home or can be made to work on a daily basis in multiple homes until a permanent position is found. The story of Elsie - a Filipina domestic worker whom I met in the spring of 2007 – provides an example. Elsie's first employer sent her back to the agency that recruited her, which then sent her to clean several office buildings during the day while a new employer was sought. Elsie slept in the recruitment agency at night during this period. By her account, the offices where she worked paid the agency 7 JD (\$10) per day, of which Elsie received only 3 JD (\$4.25). After several months, she was employed on a live-in basis by an elderly woman and paid \$100 per month. Other migrants described similar experiences, and some said they were not paid at all while being held by recruitment agents.

Residence and work permits are issued for one year, but migrant domestic workers are employed on two-year contracts. Employers are responsible for renewing their permits after the first year, but there is no procedure in place to compel them to do so. A fine of 1.5 JD (\$2.12) is levied for each day a foreigner remains in the country without a valid visa. Although according to the standardised working contract employers are liable for paying the fines if they have not renewed the worker's visa, those who fail to do so are seldom held to account. In most cases, it is the worker who is punished. Workers who cannot afford to pay the fines themselves are prevented from returning to their countries. Amnesty International reported that 14,000 migrant domestic workers were trapped in Jordan due to overstay fines (2008: 4). In one unusual case in which legal

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<sup>105</sup> Human Rights Watch (2007: 40) found that 20 percent of domestic workers interviewed in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon and the UAE had not received their full salaries. Similar figures were reported by the ILO (Esim and Smith 2004: 18).

proceedings were initiated against an employer who had not paid a domestic worker's salary for one year and the worker accrued overstay penalties due to the fact that the employer had failed to renew her work permit, a judge found the employer guilty and issued a decision requiring him to pay her salary, overstay fines, indemnity damages and a return ticket to her country (Ta'amneh 2003: 41). However, the sentence was never enforced, the plaintiff was deported due to lack of legal status in the country, and the employer faced no consequences (*ibid*).

### ***Enslavement or Bondage?***

The main UN agency responsible for international labour standards has identified six basic indicators of forced labour: 1) the threat or use of physical or sexual violence, 2) restrictions on the worker's movement and/or confinement to the workplace, 3) debt bondage or bonded labour, 4) withholding or non-payment of wages, 5) retention of passports, and 6) threat of denunciation to the authorities (ILO 2005: 20-21). According to the ILO, one or more of these elements can constitute a criminal offence in many countries. In the case of migrant domestic workers employed in Jordan, all six of these elements are frequently combined at once. Some elements, such as confinement to the workplace and retention of passports, are standard practice. By the ILO's criteria, then, migrant domestic workers are held in conditions which qualify as forced labour.

Does this form of unfree labour fall under the category of slavery? Jureidini and Moukarbel (2004: 582) and Gardner (2010: 58) suggest that it does, referring to the *kafala* system as 'contract slavery'. They adopt Bales' (1999) conception of 'new slavery' in which total control over another person – rather than ownership – is the defining feature. Bales' understanding is at variance with most studies of slavery, which view ownership as the essential characteristic of master-slave relations (Meillassoux 1991: 73). The original definition of slavery as laid out in the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 1926 (Article 1(1)) was 'the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised'. According to most historical accounts, slaves were captured and made to work without pay. They could be bought and sold. They were usually property-less, and their situations were usually permanent. In contrast, unlike slaves, migrants enter into employment at will with the expectation that they will be remunerated for their work. The extent to which any worker 'freely' offers his or her labour varies, but a distinction can be drawn between people who presumably migrate of their own volition – and in fact pay recruitment agency fees to do so – and slaves who have been abducted or born into situations of forced labour from which there is no foreseeable exit. Migrants in the context at hand are separated from their social milieus, and limits are imposed on their ability to reproduce socially, much like slaves (Meillassoux 1991: 11, 35). But for migrants, unlike slaves, the condition is temporary. Given these distinctions, I have concluded that migrant labour in the *kafala* system should be understood as bound rather than enslaved. Migrants submit

to captivity for a finite period. As in cases of bonded labour described in India, the unfree element lies not in the bondage being imposed from the start but in the inability to break the bond once it has been contracted (Breman 1993: 12). Comparisons can also be made with indentured labour. Like indentured servants, migrants are expected to work for a fixed period, usually but not always in exchange for transportation and lodging, and are not permitted to sell their labour freely on the market during that time.<sup>106</sup> But unlike most indentured labourers, they are *not* then free to settle in the country after the period of indenture.<sup>107</sup> In light of the temporary nature of their situation and the fact that they do not have the option of permanent settlement, bonded labour appears to be a more fitting descriptor than either indentured labour or slavery, although as I have described, these workers are not bound by debt alone. They are tied to their sponsors for a two-year period through their employment contracts regardless of the amount the sponsor may have paid in recruiting them and whether this money has been recouped.

#### ***Coercion and Enforcement: Scenes From the Sri Lankan Embassy***

The meaning and structure of the contractual bond between employers and domestic workers is best revealed when it is violated. One November morning in 2006, in a cramped office at the back of the Sri Lankan embassy in Amman, a red-faced Jordanian taxi driver in a plaid shirt shouted at the top of his lungs that he wanted to be paid. Abier, a woman employed in the bustling labour relations section of the embassy, pleaded with him to be patient. She calmly explained that she could not pay him straight away, that he should fill out a form and return later. After completing the form, the driver stormed out. Earlier that morning, he had driven a Sri Lankan domestic worker who was running away from her employers' house to the embassy. Having fled without any belongings, the woman had no money to pay the fare. This was not the first time the taxi driver had encountered a customer wanting to go to the embassy without money. He expected the embassy to reimburse him. As I later learned through discussions with embassy staff, the problem of women running away from their employers without money for taxi fare occurred so often that the embassy had created a fund specifically for such occasions. Although migrant domestic

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<sup>106</sup> Migrant domestic workers' food and lodging is usually provided by their employers, but this is not always the case for migrants working in other sectors. For those in the garment industry and construction, for example, the costs of food and accommodation are usually deducted from their wages. Many migrants heading to the Middle East pay a portion or in some cases all of the costs of transportation.

<sup>107</sup> In the North American context, indentured servitude appeared in the seventeenth century as a way of facilitating migration, and thereby enabling the supply of labour, to the British colonies by allowing migrants to borrow against future earnings to cover the high cost of passage across the Atlantic (Galenson 1984: 24). Between one-half and two-thirds of all European immigrants to North America between the 1630s and the American Revolution in the second-half of the eighteenth century came as indentured servants (*ibid*: 1). Most of these predominantly British, Scottish, Irish and German migrants settled permanently in the colonies after finishing their contracts. Indentured emigration of Indians in the nineteenth century also usually led to permanent settlement abroad. Carter estimates that at least two-thirds of all Indian indentured migrants in the British Empire did not return to India at the end of indenture (1996: 56). Indian indentured migrants brought to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malaya (Malaysia) in the nineteenth century were not only permitted but *encouraged* to settle permanently by being allowed to bring their wives and children (Grieco 1998: 713).

workers in Jordan are forbidden from leaving their employers' homes without permission, many do so anyway. Consequently, the Sri Lankan embassy had become a temporary haven for 'runaways'.

In the autumn of 2006 I spent several weeks in the Sri Lankan embassy with the permission of the labour attaché in order to learn about the process of migration from Sri Lanka to Jordan. During that time I sat on the leather couch in the labour attaché's office drinking cup after cup of the sweet tea the embassy staff served me and observed the goings on of the labour relations section. The labour attaché and his staff handled a daily barrage of crises involving recruitment agencies, employers, migrant domestic workers and the police. Women arrived in droves seeking shelter. Employers came to complain that workers had run away, and recruitment agency staff came to fetch 'runaways'. The following passages describe how these issues were dealt with by embassy staff.

One morning, a tall man in a green military uniform entered the labour attaché's office and described a problem involving a Sri Lankan woman who until recently had worked in his home. She had been very demanding, he said, and eventually ran away. Several days after leaving his household she sent him a text message stating that she had found a new job working for an elderly man and that she would give him the money he had spent bringing her to Jordan if he returned her passport. He refused because she had run away. The employer and labour attaché had the following conversation:

Employer: If I can catch her, can I bring her back to the embassy?

Labour attaché: No, because we already have a high number [of women] in the embassy. We will have to send her back to Sri Lanka. We can do this through the help of a charity who can help get her a ticket. The charity is called Caritas.

Employer: Do you have any housemaids here in the embassy right now? Any good ones?

Labour attaché: No, we cannot act as agents at this embassy. We are representatives of the Sri Lankan government. I'm very sorry. But we'll try to help you in any other way. If I find her, I will call you and I will translate for her.

Employer: Well, thank you. I will try to find her. I have a friend helping me from the police and we are trying to trace the text message she sent to us. We may be able to find out who the owner is based on the number. It depends on how the number is registered.

The labour attaché and the employer discussed whether it would be possible to find her, and then the man left. This episode illustrates the fact that responsibility for policing the foreign workforce rests with individual employers. Confiscating workers' passports is an important mechanism of control. This exchange also reveals the way in which embassy staff act as brokers between workers and employers.

During another visit to the embassy, I sat in the labour attaché's office and watched as a dozen workers presented their cases to him. Almost all wanted to return to Sri Lanka before their two-year employment contracts had expired. With tears streaming down her checks, one woman pleaded with him to help her go home. When she had left the office, the labour attaché turned to me and said:

I have to keep up public relations. Many of these women are very, very poor. They come from remote areas. I cannot say unkind things to them. Many of them really suffer. I'd say 80 percent come to the embassy from homesickness. You have women with babies of just seven months who come here. They leave their children behind. They don't tell the [recruitment] agents in Sri Lanka that they have such young babies. They don't disclose everything, because otherwise they might be prevented from coming.<sup>108</sup> So, you see, you cannot blame the [recruitment] agents in Sri Lanka, either. They are just desperate to earn some money for their families because they have nothing else.

He added that he did not blame employers either. 'You have to put it in the context of slavery. There are previous practices and the idea of democratic rights is very new. It will take time for things to get better.' Sri Lankan embassy staff were not insensitive to the plight of their compatriots, but the fact that workers were made to perform labour against their will or for employers they did not want to work for was accepted. Embassy staff said they had no legal jurisdiction to intervene in matters occurring in private households. The situation of many Sri Lankan domestic workers was recognised as miserable but was rationalised by the fact that they were poor and had come to Jordan in the hopes of earning more money. The prevailing discourse framed the plight of migrant women as problematic but justified by economic necessity.

I did not visit the embassies of the Philippines or Indonesia and cannot comment on their practices, but based on what I observed at the Sri Lankan embassy, the policy was that any worker seeking shelter at the embassy without having completed her two-year work contract would be sent back to the agency that recruited her unless she was believed to have been abused. Those workers who were allowed to stay in the shelter in the basement of the embassy were not permitted to leave the premises, and visits from non-embassy personnel were strictly limited. During the period of research, the embassy housed between 80 and 100 women. I made several requests to speak with them and on each occasion was told that special permission would be required, and that I would have to wait. Nearly one year after I had first asked, I was granted permission to speak with several women on the condition that I did not record their names and that the labour attaché remained present. In this way, I came to meet four women, each of whom was brought upstairs into the labour attaché's office.

One of the women was Nceta. When she arrived in the office, her blouse was dirty and her face was puffy and swollen from crying. The labour attaché questioned her, and she explained what

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<sup>108</sup> The labour attaché refers here to the regulation prohibiting women with children under the age of five from going abroad for work. But as I have mentioned previously, this regulation was largely ignored by recruitment agencies, and women with young children continued to migrate.

had happened. Neeta was a married mother of two who had arrived in Jordan the previous year. She was placed in the home of a family who had a fifteen-year-old son. Neeta said that the *madame* of the house sometimes hit Neeta as well as her own son. On one occasion when the *madame* had been unsatisfied with Neeta's work, she slammed her into a wall, causing a painful bump to form on her forearm. Neeta held out her arm to display the bump. The family owned a second home on the outskirts of the city. One day, the husband drove Neeta to the second home so that she could clean it. Neeta and the man entered the house alone. When she began cleaning the main room, the employer locked the door and forced himself on her. Neeta wept as she recounted the story. She said that later that day the man drove her back to Amman. As soon as she had the chance, she jumped from a window on the second story of the house in an attempt to escape. She injured her back in the fall, and the husband and wife heard her cry and found her lying on the ground outside the house. They took her to hospital, where she was treated. Several days later, she jumped from the window again, this time landing unscathed. She came directly to the embassy. Despite what had happened, Neeta wanted to stay in Jordan because her family badly needed the money she earned. At this point I interjected, saying to the labour attaché that Neeta's case should be documented, and that she should be taken to the police station immediately so that they could collect evidence. He said this would serve no purpose, since the police assume Sri Lankans lie, and that on the following day he would arrange for the recruitment agency that had brought Neeta to Jordan to come to the embassy and that they would try to persuade the employer to pay to send Neeta back to Sri Lanka and give her \$500 in compensation. I was unable to find out what occurred subsequently in relation to her case, but the labour attaché's response was typical; in further discussions with him and attorneys employed by the embassy, I learned that in the vast majority of cases in which domestic workers alleged abuse or sexual assault, reconciliation was sought through private channels. If the employer admitted wrongdoing, they would agree on a financial settlement and the worker would be sent home. Few cases were brought to the attention of police. Embassy staff explained this in relation to the fact that court cases can last several years, and arriving at a settlement through private negotiations is faster and thus in the worker's best interests. This means, however, that there is little meaningful deterrent to mistreating or exploiting migrant domestic workers.

These episodes reveal the ways in which embassy staff help to enforce the bond between migrant women and their employers. When faced with allegations of abuse, the labour attaché's response was usually to attempt to resolve the matter through informal bargaining. The embassy did blacklist employers and recruitment agencies who mistreated domestic workers, but it is unlikely such blacklists were effective given that they were not shared among the various embassies, and an employer or agency banned by one could recruit workers from another country. The Sri Lankan embassy's lack of support for domestic workers is underpinned by the government's

financial interest in promoting labour migration. Sri Lankan diplomats are expected to maintain good relations with labour-receiving countries, a goal that conflicts with protecting workers' rights (Gamburd 2009: 76). As a result, they adopt policies of accommodation. As was examined in chapter 2, Sri Lanka markets subservience as its comparative advantage in the global 'maid trade'. Aggressively pursuing labour disputes on behalf of its citizens could threaten Sri Lanka's standing as a labour supplier. The lack of support means that seasoned migrants tend to be cynical about the embassy. Many criticise the fact that women in the shelter are not allowed to leave. Others warn women who have run away from their employers not to seek assistance at the embassy because they may be forcibly returned to the recruitment agency if they have not completed their two-year contracts.

### ***The Jordanian State and Legal System***

Having considered the Sri Lankan embassy's role, what role has the Jordanian government taken with respect to migrants employed in domestic work? In 2006, the Ministry of Labour established the Division for Domestic Workers to oversee the employment of domestic workers. Foreign domestic workers can be recruited legally only through one of 95 registered recruitment agencies, all of which are monitored by the Division. The Division addresses complaints from employers and works to prevent Jordanians from recruiting domestic workers privately without agency involvement. Here is an excerpt of an interview with the Ministry of Labour (MOL) staff member who was then serving as Head of the Division for Domestic Workers.<sup>109</sup>

EF: I understand that your work involves monitoring recruitment agencies. Have you had to close any agencies for not following the regulations?

MOL staff member: Yes, we have. Since our office opened, we have closed three agencies.

EF: Why were they closed?

MOL staff member: Because they didn't follow the rules. In each case, they had not followed up on promises made to the employers.

EF: What about promises made to workers? Are these a problem concerning recruitment agencies?

MOL staff member: The recruitment agency's responsibility to the worker ends as soon as she begins her employment in a home.

EF: Do you receive complaints of abuse or other problems from domestic workers themselves?

MOL staff member: No, we have never received complaints of abuse or violence from domestic workers. These cases are sent to the Family Protection Unit.<sup>110</sup>

EF: Is this not a problem, if part of your mission concerns the employment of domestic workers? Would you not want to hear about the problems they encounter?

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<sup>109</sup> Interview at the Ministry of Labour office in Abdali on March 8, 2007. Our conversation was in Arabic. This is my own translation.

<sup>110</sup> This is a unit of the Public Security Directorate that deals with cases of domestic violence.

MOL staff member: Yes, we want to protect domestic workers. We are working on trying to amend the law. The labour law currently does not include domestic workers.<sup>111</sup> There is an initiative now to extend it to cover them. I hope in the future this will happen. So, yes, of course we care about protecting domestic workers. This is very important for Jordan's reputation. But since the division was established, we have only had one or two domestic workers come to the office to complain. These are always money-related complaints, not involving abuse.

EF: In your view, is abuse of domestic workers a problem?

MOL staff member: It's not common. With relation to our recruitment agencies, they maintain very strict controls. We undertake awareness-raising programmes and training seminars for them. We teach them not to abuse the workers, either verbally or physically. We also warn the offices that if employers complain that workers are being abused there, they will have to be shut down. We have set up a special unit concerned with random visits to the agencies.

At this point the staff member asked me to wait and then left the office. When he returned he was accompanied by the woman in charge of the Ministry of Labour's Inspection Unit, which carries out random inspections of recruitment agencies in Amman. She remained present for the rest of the interview. The staff member introduced her before continuing:

MOL staff member: We try to be as civil as possible when we visit the offices. We try to be objective. Most domestic workers prefer to work in Jordan because it's a stable country and they enjoy it more. As Jordanians, we treat the domestic worker as part of the family. Some run away, and that is because they were forced to come here, they were made to come against their will. Many agencies in their countries promise women jobs doing other things, so they come not knowing they will be housemaids. We try to cooperate with the embassies as much as possible to solve these problems.

EF: If a worker were not being paid or were being mistreated in some way by her *kafil*, what procedure should she follow to make a complaint?

MOL staff member: She should come here in person. We will then contact the recruitment office and pull her file. And we'll bring in the *kafil*. We try to be as objective as possible. We tend to side with the domestic worker, because that is the weaker party.

EF: You mentioned that only one or two women have come to your office to make complaints. Do you ever hear about other complaints about employers? Is this a problem?

MOL staff member: We do not receive a big number of complaints. Abuse is rare.

[The woman in charge of the Inspection Unit interjected to say: 'Mistreatment of domestic workers is not common because our religion and our traditions guide employers in their conduct.']}

EF: In the course of my research, I have had the opportunity to meet many migrant women in Jordan. I recently met a woman who has been working for a family for 8 years and has never been paid. Her residence permit has been expired for the past 6 years. Her employers admit they have not paid her, so there's no dispute about that. What should a woman in her position do? What advice can I give to her?

MOL staff member: Is this woman in Irbid?

EF: Yes.

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<sup>111</sup> This interview was carried out before the labour law was amended to include domestic workers.

MOL staff member: We have been in touch with the Irbid Municipality. I have been told that the mayor of Irbid will meet with this woman and her employers. A woman from the women's section of the Ministry of Labour is also involved. This matter is being resolved.<sup>112</sup>

EF: That's great news. But what about other women in her position? What steps should they take?

MOL staff member: Since 2003, a policy has been enacted to ensure that workers are paid and their visas are renewed on time. Since then, there have been no unresolved complaints of non-payment. All of the cases we have received have been solved. When you entered the room this morning, I was speaking with the Sri Lankan embassy, if you recall. We were discussing an ongoing case involving a woman. She was working in a home for a man and made an agreement with him to set aside her pay each month so that she could collect all of it at the end of her contract. After one year, she ran away to the embassy saying she wasn't paid. The embassy contacted us. We have spoken to the employer, and he sent the embassy a check for the woman's pay. But the embassy refused to accept this. They haven't given her the money. We think that some of the workers in the embassy are taking some of the money. They're ripping her off.

EF: But, again, what should women in the position of the girl we spoke of in Irbid do?

MOL staff member: We will address any complaint that comes to us.

EF: There are large numbers of migrant women in Jordan who have run away from their employers and who continue to live and work as part-time domestic workers. Are these runaways a concern?

MOL staff member: No, this is a police matter. We do not deal with runaways.

EF: But they still work as domestic workers?

MOL staff member: I met a woman who has been in Jordan for more than twenty years and she earns more than 1,000 JDs a month. Her daughter goes to an English-language school. She's doing fine. The problem is that in some cases, these women who run away lure other women to run away from their employers' homes. Most of the women who run away don't run away from abuse. They run away to engage in prostitution.

EF: What about the problem of women who have overstayed their visas and owe fees? Whose responsibility is this?

MOL staff member: The *kafil* is responsible to pay the visa fees. If he doesn't, he'll be jailed.

EF: How often does this actually happen?

MOL staff member: We don't deal with these cases. This is a police matter. But there are cases, yes, in which employers have been taken into custody. The law is very strictly enforced when it comes to domestic workers. Sponsors are held to account. We're now dealing with a case of a member of parliament who had a domestic worker who ran away a year ago. The police just called and said that after a year, they've found her. Now, her employer must pay the overstay fees, even though the woman hasn't been there.

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<sup>112</sup> This case involved a domestic worker I will call Shanthi. When we met in January 2007, Shanthi had been working for a family in Irbid, a town in the north of the country, since 1999. She had been promised 80 Jordanian dinars as a monthly salary but had never received her pay. I learned of her case through another Sri Lankan worker, who had been contacted by her family, who wanted help to bring her back to Sri Lanka. When I visited the home where she worked and spoke with her employers, they confirmed that her wages had not been paid; they had at one time given her a gold chain as a gift but admitted owing more than 6,000 JD (\$8,466) in unpaid wages. Her employers explained that the family business had failed, and one of their sons had fallen gravely ill, placing a great financial strain on the family. They planned to pay her, they said, but could not yet do so. For the same reason, six years earlier when Shanthi's residence permit expired, they had not paid to renew it. So, in addition to working without pay, Shanthi had no legal status in Jordan and had accumulated overstay fees in excess of 3,300 JD (\$4,655). It was only when a number of Sri Lankans took up the case with the Sri Lankan embassy that action was finally taken and in June 2007, she was sent back to Sri Lanka with a portion of her earnings.

EF: Has there been discussion of doing home inspections, similar to those you do with recruitment agencies, to ensure that workers are being treated properly, are being paid, are being fed and have adequate accommodation?

MOL staff member: No, the law does not allow this. It is prohibited to go into private homes. But with this new initiative to extend the labour law to include domestic workers, this might be possible.

EF: What is the biggest challenge your division faces?

MOL staff member: The recruitment offices don't live up to the promises they make to the *kafil*. They say they'll bring workers at a certain time, and then they don't. We receive complaints from employers and work to try to resolve these disputes.

This exchange reveals the fact that although the government has taken steps to regulate the work of domestic servants by monitoring the activities of recruitment agencies, the objective in doing so is to protect the interests of employers. Private households are considered inviolable spaces, and there is reluctance on the part of the authorities to interfere in household affairs. The phenomenon of women absconding from their employers' homes is attributed to false promises having been made to workers before arrival in Jordan. The problem of abuse is denied, and there is no clear procedure by which workers can seek redress without violating the terms of their employment contracts by leaving their employers' homes. Thus, seeking legal assistance entails criminalisation.

On a practical level, migrant workers and employers are not treated as juridical equals. When the law is enforced, it is usually in the employer's favour. Many migrants assume that approaching the police to lodge a complaint against an employer is futile or could even make the situation worse, as employers are known to level false counter-accusations of theft that result in the migrant being detained.<sup>113</sup> According to Firas Ta'amneh, an attorney who worked for the Sri Lankan and Philippines embassies in Amman representing migrant women, those who approach the police because they cannot afford to pay their overstay fines and want to go home can be detained or turned away if the authorities do not want to deal with their cases (Interview, 22 May 2007, Amman).

Most legal proceedings against employers are handled as civil rather than criminal matters, even if a worker has been physically abused. This is true throughout the region. According to Roland Tawk, an attorney who represents migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, while the penal code would act as a stronger deterrent to abuse because it entails stiffer penalties, judges tend to be unsympathetic to migrants and it is difficult to persuade them that employers' actions constitute criminal offences (Interview, Beirut, March 19, 2009). Similarly, according to one source, there has only been one case in Bahrain's history in which a sponsor was convicted of abusing a domestic worker in a criminal court; the employer was sentenced to three months' imprisonment

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<sup>113</sup> The problem of false counter-accusations has been reported by migrants, lawyers and NGO workers in Jordan as well as Lebanon. It has also been described as common in Bahrain (Stroble 2009: 173).

for beating her housemaid on a daily basis (Stroble 2009: 168). These examples are part of a wider trend with respect to the legal treatment of violence against women. Jordan's criminal code is gendered such that crimes such as rape tend to carry lighter sentences when the victim is female and the act is committed within the domestic sphere, which is deemed private (Warrick 2009: 63). Domestic violence between relatives can be tried as a criminal matter, but in practice few victims report incidents and cases are rarely prosecuted (Warrick 2009: fn 7).

Domestic workers who file legal cases against employers are stymied by expensive and lengthy court proceedings during which time they are not allowed to work because they are only authorized to work for a single employer. There are seldom witnesses willing to testify on their behalf, and it is often difficult to obtain physical evidence of abuse. As a result, there have been few convictions against employers. The United States Department of State's annual Trafficking in Persons Report for Jordan for 2008 (p. 152-3) stated that while the government received 2,479 labour complaints, including some for conditions of forced labour, and the authorities reported resolving 77 percent of the cases, the government provided no evidence of any prosecutions, convictions or jail sentences for forced labour involving domestic workers. The same report stated that well-documented cases of forced labour in garment factories were primarily resolved with administrative penalties. Although Jordan banned slavery with the passage of the Anti-Slavery Law of 1929 and ratified ILO conventions 29 and 105 abolishing forced labour, legal protections which could protect workers against forced labour are rarely invoked. While it is a violation of international law as well as Article 18 of the Jordanian Passport Law to hold someone else's passport, the practice remains routine. Human rights lawyer Atef Majali from Jordan's National Council for Human Rights told me that he was aware that the practice of confiscating workers' passports was widespread but had never heard of a case in which an employer or agency had been prosecuted for it (Interview, Amman, 4 August 2008).

The story of Jennifer Perez illustrates how the justice system fails domestic workers. Perez was a Filipina domestic worker who was paralysed and eventually died after falling two stories from a kitchen balcony in 2005.<sup>114</sup> She had been employed in her Jordanian employer's home for only a few hours when the incident took place. According to her statement, soon after she arrived in Jordan and was brought to the house, a quarrel broke out between her and the *madame* over the fact that she had a mobile phone which she was unwilling to give up. The disagreement turned into a physical struggle, and Perez bit the employer's hand when the employer took her phone. She said the *madame* then grabbed her and pushed her over the balcony. According to the employer, Perez jumped from the balcony in a suicide attempt after their argument over the phone. With the help of the Philippines Embassy, Perez pursued legal action against the employer.

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<sup>114</sup> Full details of the case were reported by Seeley (2007).

Her neck had been broken in the fall and she would need life support for the rest of her life. She wanted compensation. Court proceedings were ongoing when Jennifer was sent back to the Philippines to be with her family nearly a year after the incident. She died two weeks after arriving in the Philippines due to complications arising from her injuries. Upon her death the power of attorney allowing her embassy-appointed lawyer, Firas Ta'amneh, to represent her in Jordan was cancelled, and legal proceedings ground to a halt. The public prosecutor's office never pursued criminal charges against the employer.

Another example is the story of Aminah, a 28-year-old Indonesian domestic worker. She arrived in Amman in January 2008 infected with tuberculosis. Aminah was employed in the home of a Jordanian doctor, where she worked for 19 months without pay and where she said she was beaten on the face and body by the doctor's mother when she failed to clean well. Her tuberculosis went untreated. Jordanian newspapers reported that in September 2009, the doctor abandoned Aminah near the Directorate of Chest Diseases and Foreigners' Health.<sup>115</sup> She weighed 20 kilograms, was bleeding from the mouth and was unable to speak. Her clothes were rotting and stuck to her skin. The employer subsequently denied that Aminah had ever worked for him, though investigations later proved that she had. In response, the Indonesian embassy announced that it would file a lawsuit against the doctor. Such action by an embassy is rare. But despite the severity of the mistreatment Aminah endured, the case was handled as a civil rather than a criminal matter. Public prosecutors rarely file criminal charges against employers in response to allegations of abuse by domestic workers. Similarly, a study by Human Rights Watch (2010: 3) in Lebanon found that police and prosecutors fail to treat domestic workers' allegations as potential crimes or ignore them entirely. More than 100 judicial decisions were reviewed in which migrant domestic workers were either plaintiffs or defendants. The cases involved allegations of employers locking workers inside homes, confiscating passports or withholding food, but in no case were criminal charges filed against an employer.

### **Amendments to the Sponsorship System in Bahrain**

Before concluding, it is worth mentioning that changes have been implemented in Bahrain that appear to have introduced an element of flexibility in the *kafala* system. In 2009, Bahrain became the first Arab state to take measures to change the sponsorship system by passing an amendment allowing migrants to transfer from one employer to another without the first employer's consent and without losing their residence permits. If the migrant stops working for his or her first sponsor and is not transferred to a new sponsor within 30 days, however, his or her residence permit can be - and in most cases is - cancelled by the first sponsor. The amendment excludes domestic

<sup>115</sup> See coverage in *Al-Ghad* by Hanan Al-Keswani on 12 September 2009 (<http://www.alghad.jo/?news=448074>) and in the *Jordan Times* by Khetam Malkawi on 14 September 2009 (<http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=19977>).

workers, whose work visas continue to be tied to their employers and who are legally required to reside with their employers. Further empirical investigation is needed to analyse the impact of this amendment, but at this stage a number of loopholes and problems in implementation suggest it has resulted in little change for most workers. Under the new law, a company or individual seeking to hire a foreign worker must apply to the Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), which then issues a visa for the worker. If the worker wishes to change jobs after arriving in Bahrain, he or she must file an end-of-contract notice three months in advance, and a new employer can then apply to re-register them. These changes were touted as amounting to a cancellation of the sponsorship system, but in fact they appear to simply transfer the right to release workers from their jobs from individual sponsors to the state (Gardner 2010: 23). They have the potential to allow greater flexibility in employment but have not altered the fact that workers still require an individual or company to oversee their stay. There is a great deal of scope for abuse. For example, because workers must apply three months in advance, vengeful employers can cancel the visa beforehand. False accusations made against workers who try to leave also continue to be a problem and can result in detention and deportation for the worker. Many migrants remain unaware of the new policies or face difficulties extricating themselves from employment contracts. Moreover, many do not possess copies of their employment contracts, which the authorities demand to see if they wish to change jobs.

It is no coincidence that Bahrain was the first state in the region to amend the sponsorship system. It has fewer oil and gas reserves than other Gulf states, and in comparison to the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, higher rates of unemployment and underemployment among its own citizens. The *kafala* system was amended not due to concerns about foreign workers' welfare but rather in order to make them less attractive to employers by limiting their control over expatriates.<sup>116</sup> It was hoped that this would give nationals a leg up in the labour market. It is not surprising, therefore, that the amendment excludes migrants employed in domestic work, a sector in which there is little competition from Bahraini citizens. It is possible that concerns about joblessness elsewhere in the region could prompt other governments to implement similar amendments; discussions about reforming the *kafala* system have been initiated in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and several other states.

## Conclusion

The recent changes in Bahrain aside, all workers subject to the *kafala* system face the same basic predicament: while they willingly enter into employment, having done so, they cannot exit and are at the mercy of their employers until they complete their contracts. The *kafala* system is not

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<sup>116</sup> Bahraini Minister of Labour Majid bin Muhsin Al-Alawi reportedly said that the move was prompted by a desire to make local workers more attractive to employers in comparison to foreigners. See coverage in KUNA Online, 'Free Movement Adds to Dynamism of Labour Market', 25 Oct 2009.

the root cause of their exploitation, but it is the key mechanism for it. Those employed in domestic service are at an even greater disadvantage. Their cloistered lives and the fact that domestic work is socially stigmatised mean they lack the networks and respectability that might otherwise afford them protection. There is virtually no government oversight of their working conditions. Although domestic work is now included under the labour law in Jordan, domestic workers continue to face hurdles in seeking redress against errant employers through the formal justice system. In many cases, no sovereign power defends their interests. Sri Lankan migrants' rights have been trumped by their own government's economic interests in continued remittance income and the Jordanian government's political interest in appeasing its own citizenry over and above foreigners. Without the ability to access trade unions or engage in collective action, migrant domestic workers lack an effective base from which to make claims. By tying migrant workers to individual employers, the *kafala* system creates an impetus for this form of labour to be unfree. Comparisons can be drawn with guest worker programmes in other parts of the world that also tie migrant domestic workers to their employers, for example those in Hong Kong (Constable 2002; Kennelly 2008: 115), Malaysia (Chin 1997), Singapore (Yeoh et al 1999) and the UK (Anderson 1993).

We may be inclined to think that forms of enslaved and coerced labour died out with the emergence of 'modern' capitalism. Yet the context at hand suggests that far from becoming obsolete, unfree labour can emerge in new forms at any time. As we have seen in this chapter, the bonding of labour through the *kafala* system is a recent phenomenon, having been formally instituted with the emergence of the oil economy in the last four decades. Workers in various parts of the world have experienced similar working conditions, albeit with local specificities. What distinguishes those in Jordan and other countries in the region is the highly asymmetrical way in which migrant labour is employed through the administrative framework of the *kafala* system. Unlike many other instances of unfree labour, in this context the coercion is state-sponsored and endorsed through official administrative procedures. The fact that this system is maintained by a wide-ranging web of actors including recruitment agency staff, diplomatic officials and the Jordanian authorities makes it that much harder to escape. In the final chapter of the thesis, more will be said about how this instance of unfree labour compares with others. But first, it is worth considering the ways the *kafala* system is negotiated in practice by workers and their employers. This is the subject of the next chapter.

*Inherent Tension: Employer-Domestic Worker Relations*

— عادى —

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Figure 10: Abu Mahjoob cartoon entitled 'Denial'

Speaker 1: 'My God! Does this country need an awareness campaign for servants' rights!!? What exaggeration!! True we hit them sometimes... True they don't have days off... True they work day and night... True we treat them like slaves at times... But [what goes on in] houses is secret. I'm satisfied and her father is satisfied, so why the scandal... Or am I mistaken?!"

Speaker 2: 'Right on!!'

These caricatures are part of the well-known Abu Mahjoob ('Father of the Hidden') series produced by political cartoonist Emad Hajjaj. His satirical comics in Jordanian newspapers are renowned for poking fun at social and political life. Hajjaj was commissioned by UNIFEM to produce these illustrations for a 2007 advocacy campaign calling attention to abuses against domestic workers.<sup>117</sup>

Like the cartoons, much of what has been written about migrant domestic workers in Arab countries focuses on their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse (e.g. Esim and Smith 2004, Haddad 1999, Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004, Jureidini 2003, McMurray 1999, Moukarbel 2007, Sabban 2002, UNIFEM 2000). Much of the English-language press coverage falls into this category, with stories focusing on cases of extreme physical violence. This focus is understandable given the highly unequal and coercive conditions under which they are employed, but from a scholarly perspective it runs the risk of casting migrants as hyper-exploited. Few studies have approached the issue from employers' perspectives (Ayoub 1996, Al-Raqeb undated, Roumani 2005). Roumani (2005) examines the widespread use of domestic workers for childcare throughout the Gulf and concludes that it has 'harmful effects on children's social and emotional development'. Al-Raqeb (undated study) also describes the adverse effects of employing foreign domestic help. These include disruptions in children's acquisition of Arabic (p5), the weakening of mother-child bonds (p5), and a risk of depression among children when domestic workers return to their home countries (p4). Similarly, Ayoub (1996) examines whether migrant domestic workers are a negative influence on the families who employ them. Based on a survey of 112 Jordanian families with children between the ages of three and five, Ayoub concludes that in most cases domestic workers play a supportive but not integral role in childcare and so, do not adversely affect children's growth (p78-79, p91). This view of domestic workers as inherently problematic is also reflected in some of the Arabic-language media coverage; the little Arabic-language reporting that has been done has tended to vilify migrants by focusing on their involvement in crime or the threats they pose to the families who employ them.<sup>118</sup> There are, of course, exceptions, but on the whole employer-centred accounts tend to see domestic workers as a 'problem', whereas migrant-centred studies portray them as victims. Few scholars have carried out intensive research with both groups.<sup>119</sup>

When the perspectives of both employers and workers are taken into account, it becomes clear that there is often a great deal of despair on both sides. While some manage to build harmonious,

<sup>117</sup> I am grateful to Emad Hajjaj for kindly giving me permission to reproduce his cartoons. (Personal correspondence 28 October 2008.)

<sup>118</sup> For example, on January 19, 2007, the Jordanian television channel *Al-Urduniyya* broadcast a programme on the show '60 Minutes' about the trend of hiring foreign domestic helpers. It identified employers' children as the main 'victims', warned of the dangers of allowing servants to become substitute mothers, and pointed to the risk of child abuse.

<sup>119</sup> Noteworthy exceptions include De Regt (2008, 2009) and Nagy (1998).

mutually-beneficial relationships, the dynamic in many cases is fraught with conflict. The acrimony felt on both sides was impressed upon me throughout the course of my research, as I met workers who complained of abuse or ran away from their employers, and employers who told horror stories about domestic workers' misdeeds. Following on from chapter 5 on the legal and administrative framework of employment, this chapter considers the norms and practices governing worker-employer relations in everyday life and explores why their relationships are so often problematic.

### **Ambivalence and Ambiguity**

Soon after I arrived in Jordan in 2006, I joined a women's social club in an effort to meet more employers. Roughly 30 members – most middle-aged from prominent Palestinian and Jordanian families - assembled each week to socialise and practice public speaking skills by giving prepared and impromptu speeches. Domestic workers are a perennial topic of conversation among Amman's ladies of leisure, so I was not surprised when one of the speeches focused on the trials and tribulations of employing household help. The speaker described her frustration trying to communicate with a newly-arrived maid who spoke no Arabic, knew nothing about housework and broke countless appliances and dishes. On one occasion, she found her feeding fish bones to the dog, she presumed because she was tired of taking care of it. 'You cannot survive without them, and at the same time you cannot live with them', the speaker said. The sentiment that domestic workers are a necessary burden is often expressed.

After I had been a member of the club for nearly two years, I asked if the women would be willing to participate in a tape-recorded discussion as part of my research. Seven of them agreed to join me one afternoon. As part of our chat, each described her arrangements for housework. Hania and Hala had employed domestic workers when their children were young but no longer want live-in help and think more Jordanian women should do without it. Instead, Hala employs an Egyptian man to do the heavy cleaning once a week. She is trying to convince her friends, most of whom have live-in help, to give up their maids. The underlying problem, she says, is that the young generation do not want to clean up after themselves, and relatives and neighbours no longer help one another with childcare. Amira agrees; although she employs a Sri Lankan domestic worker, she wishes there were an alternative. Arwa's family hires a part-time cleaner because her father does not want a stranger living in the house. Similarly, Nesreen employs a freelance domestic worker who cleans several times a week. Deema has two live-in domestic workers from Indonesia. The following is an excerpt of our discussion:

Hala: Look, here in Jordan the first thing is we have very big houses. And we have big families. And when our children grow up, we want them to come to our homes to feed them. All of this requires a lot of work. We can't do it alone, so we need to recruit someone to help. That's why there is a need for them. Not everyone can afford to bring them. Now they are becoming very expensive. They are

putting more taxes and the offices that are bringing them are taking too much money from the girls and from the employers.

Deema: *Tijarat al-raqiq*. [slave trade]

Hala: Yes, it is. It's like a slave trade.

Amira: *Excuse me*. They have more rights than anyone here. Sorry... *Excuse me*. In the new laws - the Ministry of Labour has put strict laws. When you want to hire one, it is not easy.

Hania: Nevertheless, they are abused money-wise. When they come, they have to work for two successive months without pay. *[This is a reference to the fact that recruitment agencies and employers often deduct the first two or three months of domestic workers' earnings to recoup charges associated with travel and recruitment. Although officially forbidden, such deductions are common.]*

Hala: No, no, but they come under this condition.

Amira: I'm bringing one now from Indonesia. And I will pay her all of her salary from the first month.

Hania: Yes, but not everyone does this.

Hala: She paid in advance [to come]. Her family paid in advance. *[Hala is suggesting that the worker paid agency fees in advance, so further deductions would be unnecessary.]*

Amira: *Tayyib*, this is not our problem.

Hala: Listen, we're talking about what people do to them. But what you have to understand is that maids are also making problems for the families.

Nesreen: Yes.

Hala: Before, the women used to be older, aged 35, 40, 45. Now they are very young, 18 years, 20. They are young and beautiful. Their minds are more open to life. They see what the woman [employer] is wearing, and they want to wear it.

Deema: *[laughing in reference to the fact that she has a full figure]* I'm lucky I don't have *that* problem.

Hala: They might use your bedroom... It's not taboo for them to sleep with anybody, like the chauffeur or anyone who knocks on the door. Even my friend, the girl who works for her asked her, 'If the master asks me to sleep with him, should I?' And many do, because they think they will be able to do whatever they like... They don't feel shame. Even though they are Muslim and they pray, when they do these things they don't consider it *haram*. They accept it. And a lot of problems are happening because of this.

The women go on to discuss their experiences employing domestic help. Hania says, 'They come here without knowing how to take a bath, how to take a shower, how to eat, how to deal with anything.' Hala adds, 'Maybe the trained ones go to other countries, like to Europe. But not to Arab countries.' Of the woman she employs, Layal says: 'I don't trust her. Just cleaning the floor, she doesn't do it right. I have to look at the glasses and the plates after she's washed them. I think I work more than she does.' Nesreen mentions a Sri Lankan woman hired by her cousin who did not know how to use the shower when she arrived and washed her body with dish detergent.

This exchange highlights one of the first sources of stress in domestic worker-employer relations - a knowledge gap. Women who migrate for the first time from rural or impoverished areas may

be unaccustomed to household cleaning regimens in Amman. The fact that many arrive speaking little or no Arabic exacerbates the problem and contributes to the idea that they are ignorant. In the hopes that they will be better understood, some employers simplify their Arabic by not fully conjugating verbs, for example using only the present tense masculine.<sup>120</sup> Even when this is done, overcoming the language barrier is a lengthy process.

Many employers are ambivalent about employing domestic help. Domestic workers are reputed to be cunning, morally deficient and sexually promiscuous. Suspicion sets the tone for employment relations. Employers who have had problems with domestic workers in the past are even more likely to be wary. One employer explains:

One of the first Filipinas we had, I treated like a daughter. She had plenty of freedom, and I didn't ask questions. I was too easy with her. One day, we went to the pool, and she came along and wore this little bikini, and everyone told me, 'What are you doing? What are you letting her do to your family?' I didn't understand what they meant. When she left, it was not on good terms. She had been lying to me.... Before, I didn't ask any questions if she was gone from the house. But starting in the last three years, I've been more strict with them.... I used to think this was extreme—a friend of mine has so many rules for her maid. When the bus comes to pick up her children, if the maid isn't outside with them, ready for the bus when it comes, she takes five dollars away from her. I used to think this was crazy. No way. You can't just have a contract on the one hand and then make up your own new rules when the girl comes to the house. But now I see. This makes some sense.

Strict rules are thought necessary to keep domestic workers in line. Lamis, a woman in her early thirties, provides another example of how employers' previous experiences with workers shape their approaches with neophytes. One afternoon I met Lamis and her mother Rula. I was interested in the manner in which employers talk about domestic workers, so I asked and was given permission to record our conversation, excerpts of which I include below. Lamis suffers from chronic back pain and has employed a string of domestic workers since the birth of her first child, though she has never liked having them in her home.

All my privacy is taken from me because I can't talk to my husband, I can't sit near him. He can't wear his shorts. When I talk to my children, I feel there's someone interfering. You know, she's looking at me, I'm looking at her. I don't know how to tell you. I hate maids in the house. It's not that I worry about my image in front of her because I don't think she thinks right. I feel that there's an invasion in my home. But it's like, I have to get her because of all my back aches, and she's doing let's say half of the work. And I'm happy with half of the work being done. But for me, I hate them. I have some sort of discrimination against them.

When I asked whether hiring an Arab woman to do the work would solve some of the problems, Lamis responded: 'But I *want* to have someone who doesn't understand my language. Who doesn't understand what I say. I want that separation. I don't want us to be equals.' For Lamis and many other employers, emphasising linguistic and social distinctions facilitated the control of labour.

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<sup>120</sup> On how dialogue between Sinhala-speaking maids and Arabic-speaking employers has produced a new Arabic pidgin in Lebanon, see Bizri (2005).

Not long after Lamis' first child was born, her maternal grandfather fell ill. Lamis wanted to spend time with him and so brought the baby and the domestic worker to stay in her parents' villa while her grandfather recuperated. Four Indonesian domestics were already working in the home at the time, so this made a total of five, all of whom slept in the basement. Late one evening, Lamis went downstairs to find four of the domestic workers missing. She later discovered that the women had made an arrangement whereby one woman would stay at home and keep watch while the other four crept into an empty house next door to have sex with several Egyptian men who worked nearby. In the end, all of the women were dismissed from their jobs and sent back to the recruitment agency.

The second domestic worker Lamis employed, a woman from the Philippines, also proved untrustworthy; she ran away, taking some of Lamis' jewellery with her. Embittered, Lamis now takes measures to ensure that she is not cheated again. She locks the door when she leaves her house, ensuring that the current domestic worker cannot escape. She does not allow her to use the phone or to know the phone number. She tries to reduce all personal contact, instructing the woman to clean parts of the house only when she is not present.

Lamis: I have my privacy now and I don't interact with the maid. I never ask her anything. If she does something bad or wrong - because they cheat all the time and lie - I just tell her to do that job again. I don't want any relationship with her. I don't want her to know anything about me.

Elizabeth: Because you're afraid she'll take advantage of you?

Lamis: Yes, I don't trust her, and I show her I don't trust her. I tell her to her face, 'You are a liar. I don't trust you. I will never trust you.' This is my system. And when I went to the office that brings the maids, I asked them specifically for a maid that does not want to leave the house at all. She's only here for staying at home. So she's always inside, locked. And I'm always suspicious. I'm going to buy a camera... and I'm going to watch her.

Rula: You will live your life watching the maid.

Elizabeth: That must be a horrible feeling.

Lamis: I know. I hate them. I don't trust them. I don't like them. I don't like their energy. But I really have problems with my back, so I can't do all the work....

Elizabeth: I don't doubt that there are some who come here with the intention of cheating families and stealing. But... do you not feel badly on behalf of the one you have now... because you were burned by the maid before and now this one, how does she feel?

Lamis: No, I mean, I'm responsible for what I say. I had another Sri Lankan lady. She was older. I thought maybe if I had a really mature lady it would be better. She was, *hik*, complaining all the time. She would follow me to my room. I would be, you know, lying down. I wanted to take a break. She used to open the door and tell me her stories. I was like, oh my god, leave me alone! I had to lock my door. She was really a big problem for me. She didn't work well, and she said her salary was too low. She wanted 150 JDs but her contract said only 100 JDs because Sri Lankan girls are only paid this amount. I told her, it's not me. This is your government. This is how they rate you. It's not my problem. It's not something personal.

Lamis' statement, 'It's not something personal', echoes Keith Hart's hit man (2005), who tells his victim – 'Don't take this personal, it's just business'. Hart uses the idea to demonstrate how

people manage to see highly personal matters in terms of impersonal business. The hit man's dilemma is also Lamis's – how to depersonalise relationships that are necessarily personal. She deals with domestic workers in the intimate context of her home on a regular basis, but constantly pulling against this is Lamis' desire to detach and maintain boundaries.

Later in the conversation, Lamis and her mother describe domestic workers who practice magic against employers. Rula mentions an Indonesian domestic worker who put menstrual blood in a relative's Turkish coffee in an effort to make him fall in love with her. 'Sick. Sick. They are crazy,' Lamis said. Rula then described an incident involving an employer who discovered that her domestic worker was pregnant. When confronted about the pregnancy and asked who the father was, the domestic worker replied: 'It's either your husband or your son.' Enraged, the employer picked up a heavy glass ashtray lying on a nearby table and hurled it at the woman's head, killing her. Lamis and Rula did not condone the employer's actions but referred to the story as another example of the problems domestic workers cause.

Lamis's views are more hostile than those of most employers, but her account is telling of the distrust felt by many. The horror stories she and her mother refer to are part of a wider pattern. Tales of domestic workers having sexual liaisons with Egyptian men, teaming up with other migrants to organise robberies and committing bizarre or unscrupulous acts are common. An editorial in the Lebanese *Daily Star* provides an illustration (Atiya 2005). The author accuses Sri Lankan domestic workers, with their 'shy exotic smiles', of entering 'our homes already briefed on clandestine ways', of smuggling whisky, gin and fine liqueurs out of the house in trash bags, of gossiping and revealing their employers' 'habits, ticks and quirks' and even of fabricating rape allegations. Such depictions reinforce fears about what can happen if domestic workers are not closely monitored. Control over women's sexuality is linked to control over their labour. Without discipline, there is a fear they may usurp their female employers. Rula expressed it this way:

If they are caring for the children and doing everything the mother is supposed to be doing, then they become like ladies of the house. What is to stop the husband from marrying them? These women come, and if you give them the role of mothering, they look very closely at you, at what you are wearing, at your jewellery, at your house, and they want the same thing.

According to her, when confronted with wealth and privileges in Jordan, women from poorer countries develop '*al-hiqd al-tahagi*' (الحقد الطبقي), or class-based envy. In light of this, she and Lamis believe it is better to maintain emotional distance and avoid getting personally involved with the women who work for them. Not all employers adopt this approach, however. Some become closely involved in workers' personal lives; examples of employers who criticise the way their employees use their earnings or give them loans to help them resolve problems at home are discussed below in the section 'Dependency and Patronage'.

As in Lamis' case, some employers hire several domestic workers. Where this is the case, the employer may give one worker responsibility for training and disciplining the neophytes. This was the case with one woman I came to know well, Darshini, who played the role of inducting a newly-arrived worker from Sri Lanka into her employer's household. This was both helpful and annoying for the new woman. Darshini acted as a translator, which was certainly helpful. But Darshini is also bossy and kept the young woman under her thumb. Later, when the young woman had an affair with a boy who worked in a nearby garment factory and became pregnant, Darshini was instrumental in helping smooth things over with the employer so that the woman could go back to Sri Lanka before her contract ended. Ultimately, much depends on how well the two (or three or four) workers get along – in some cases they help one another, and in others they jockey for power.

### **The Household as Battlefield**

In August of 2010 a woman named Lahanda Purage Ariyawathie returned home to Sri Lanka after having worked for five months as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. Her hands, legs and feet were covered with small, oozing wounds. According to Ms. Ariyawathie, more than 20 nails had been hammered into her skin by her Saudi employers because they were dissatisfied with her work. Her inability to understand instructions in Arabic was part of the problem. Almost as striking as the punishment was the fact that Ms. Ariyawathie remained in her employer's house and endured the abuse for several months because she said she feared her employers might kill her if she tried to leave. It was only after they sent her back to Sri Lanka and she sought medical care that her family discovered what had happened and reported the case to the authorities.<sup>121</sup> Ms. Ariyawathie's story is not the only high-profile case of its kind involving a Sri Lankan domestic worker. In November 2010, a Sri Lankan woman working in Jordan alleged that her employer forced her to swallow six nails when she asked for her salary. Recruitment agency staff in Jordan claimed she had purposely swallowed the nails so that her employer would be blamed and she would be sent back to Sri Lanka.<sup>122</sup> The mere fact that this scenario would be contemplated is telling of how difficult it is for domestic workers to break the bond with their employers. The same week, a Sri Lankan worker who had been employed in Kuwait had nine metal pins surgically removed from her hands and leg. She accused her Kuwaiti employer of driving the nails into her skin when she asked for her pay.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> This story was widely reported in the Sri Lankan press and by other news outlets. See 'Slave Punishment for a Sri Lankan Maid', *The Sunday Leader*, August 29, 2010; 'I Have No Reason to Lie: Ariyawathie', *The Sunday Times*, September 5, 2010; 'Sri Lankan Maids Become Victims in Saudi Arabia', *Time*, November 16, 2010.

<sup>122</sup> 'Sri Lankan maid "swallowed nails to blame boss"', AFP, November 23, 2010

<sup>123</sup> 'Sri Lankan maid alleges nail torture in Kuwait', AFP, November 14, 2010

These accounts of abuse are extraordinary. The vast majority of employers do not use such extreme forms of violence to intimidate or discipline workers. But baffling stories of cruelty against domestic workers crop up regularly in the press. When I heard about such incidents during the course of research, my initial response was to dismiss them as exceptional. I also struggled to make sense of domestic workers' accounts of employers who did not give them enough to eat or locked them at home when they went out. These aspects of employers' behaviour puzzled me because they seemed incommensurable with other aspects of Jordanian culture. But as I discovered, while the examples presented above are extreme, they are telling of a wider context in which migrant workers' relationships with their employers are highly asymmetrical. This section describes the contours of those relationships and shows how the circumstances under which women from Asian countries are recruited create the conditions for a perfect storm.

Relationships between domestic workers and employers are like many other employment relations in that employers typically try to extract as much work as possible and implement various methods of discipline and control to do so. But work in a domestic setting is intrinsically different in several ways. First and foremost is the issue of physical proximity. Most domestics live where they work. This means their work hours are potentially limitless and all of their activities, sleep and leisure time can be regulated. Equally, this affords workers *intimate* knowledge about employers. Due to their permanent presence in the household, they are in a unique position as witnesses to household dramas. This intimacy and the possibility of what family secrets may be revealed compel employers' demands for full control of the worker's personhood (Coser 1973: 35). Allegiance and loyalty are sought in order to preclude betrayal; this is what makes domestic workers with few external social ties so appealing and explains employers' attempts to isolate them (*ibid*: 35-36). In the context of this intimacy, a number of techniques are commonly used to accentuate social distance between worker and employer. A hierarchy of social space is often created such that servants eat, wash and sleep separately from other household members (Nagy 1998: 97, Rollins 1990: 79-80, Tellis-Nayak 1983: 69, Qayum and Ray 2003: 526). For example, while there is no standard formula for living arrangements in Jordanian homes, as illustrated by the floor plan below, maids' quarters are often located some distance from other bedrooms. The fact that the domestic worker's room is an offshoot of the kitchen, far from the other bedrooms, is telling of the social boundary separating her from the family. In other homes, the domestic worker may sleep outside of the house altogether on a balcony or rooftop.



**TOTAL GROSS AREA : 302.88 sqm**

**3 Bedroom Apartment Type - A**

Figure 11: Floor plan for an apartment in Amman as advertised by Damac Properties

A number of other features are typical of this occupation. It is almost always devalued and stigmatised, entailing long hours of work for low wages (Colen and Sanjek 1990: 5). The fact that it occurs in what is commonly construed as private space has meant that in many countries, domestic workers are excluded from the labour rights and protections afforded other workers. Hidden from public view and without government oversight, domestic workers are subject to the whims of their employers. Their work is often considered an extension of wisely and motherly duties rather than 'work' in the true sense, regardless of how difficult or time-consuming it may be. As I have described in chapter 5, although domestic work is now legally considered 'work' in Jordan, this has not yet led to substantial regulation; households are not inspected or monitored, and basic problems such as the non-payment of wages go unchallenged.

In these respects domestic worker-employer relations in Jordan are not unusual. But the employment of migrant domestic workers in Jordan, Lebanon and the Gulf states is distinctive in several ways that heighten the potential for conflict. Paramount in significance is the *kafala* system. For reasons outlined in chapter 5, guest workers can be disciplined by the threat of deportation and lack the right to quit, strike or organise. Employers have absolute power within the household. Although the lack of government oversight is not in and of itself unusual, the reluctance on the part Jordanian authorities to intervene on behalf of migrant workers and in household affairs more generally is particularly great. Parallels can be drawn with attitudes towards domestic violence; while domestic violence may or may not be more prevalent in Jordan, when cases are reported the authorities are especially reticent to get involved. Crimes committed

against women in the domestic domain are treated less harshly than those against men. For example, the average sentence for honour killings in Jordan is a mere seven and a half months, which reinforces the idea that certain types of punishment against women are acceptable (Zuhur 2005: 403). All of this is to say that there are few legal and social sanctions against treating domestic workers badly. When cases of abuse do come to light, it is rare for employers to face punishment greater than a fine. The fact that most migrant domestic workers come to Jordan alone also means there are even fewer penalties for cruelty than might be the case with a Jordanian with a network of kin to defend her. Aside from withholding their labour, domestic workers have limited bargaining power.

The money paid by employers to recruit domestic workers from abroad often makes them feel they are owed a debt of service and that workers should suspend their personal lives when they arrive. It is also used to justify a heavy workload. The chief complaint expressed by domestic workers is that they are overworked and underpaid. They engage in labour which is often only acknowledged when it is *not* done correctly. For some, the spaces of their employers' households can aptly be described as 'taskscapes' (Ingold 1993: 157-8), with seemingly endless ensembles of jobs to perform.<sup>124</sup> This can require adhering to a taxing schedule of late nights and little rest. Some employers purposely establish busy work regimens to keep domestics constantly occupied, claiming they become lazy with idle time. The fasting period of Ramadan tends to be especially arduous, as domestic workers rise before daybreak to prepare *suhur*, the meal before sunrise, and serve large quantities of food and drinks for *iftar*, the meal after sunset. Those who are fasting often exhibit frayed tempers. Not coincidentally, this is when embassies report the highest numbers of migrant domestic workers absconding. Many domestic workers submit to being overworked and held under house arrest, but not all do, and while designed to keep the peace, these conditions can actually inflame tensions.

Domestic workers must learn to adapt to a range of new customs in Jordan. Separated from loved ones, many suffer from loneliness and homesickness. The stress of culture shock can compound problems with their employers. Food can be a thorny issue. The Sri Lankan diet is based on rice, and a meal isn't complete without it. Each meal is cooked freshly and accompanied by several vegetable dishes or curries, often flavoured with green chillies and spices. In Jordan, on the other hand, bread is the staple, and meals only occasionally include rice. Those who can afford it regularly eat meat, usually lamb or chicken. Some domestic workers are critical of the large quantity of meat consumed in the households in which they work. The Five Precepts of Buddhism enjoin devotees to abstain from killing all living creatures, stealing, being unchaste, lying, or consuming intoxicating substances. Many workers do eat meat, but not on a par with their

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<sup>124</sup> Johnson and Pingol (undated) also use the term 'taskscapes' to describe Filipino migrant workers' experiences of life in Saudi Arabia.

Jordanian employers. Many particularly dislike lamb, which, though popular in Jordan, is not eaten in Sri Lanka. The difficulty of adapting to a new cuisine is a source of frustration for many domestic workers. Some also express resentment about having to eat refrigerated 'leftovers'. The problem of employers not giving domestic workers enough food is a common complaint.<sup>125</sup> Some women who cook their own food surreptitiously prepare extra parcels for Sri Lankans living in their neighbourhoods who do not have enough to eat. In some cases, low-income families trying to cut costs may indeed provide insufficient food. There are also cases of deliberate deprivation. But at least some of the time, it is the *kind* of food rather than the quantity that is problematic. Employers and workers have different expectations, in this case about what constitutes a proper meal. This is just one example of how tension can arise not as the result of a power struggle but from differences in custom and socialisation.

Fear and prejudice play an important role in the way migrant domestic workers are treated. Buddhists and Hindus are thought not to be God-fearing and, hence, morally deficient. Dark skin tones do not help matters given that fair skin is favoured. Cultural and racial difference is often glossed in terms of hygiene; some employers claim domestic workers themselves are not clean or know little about hygiene and, as a result, should not be trusted with food preparation. Domestic workers are viewed as a potential source of pollution. Banning them from swimming pools is one example of the many rituals of discrimination.<sup>126</sup> South and Southeast Asian domestic workers belong to a category of people who, on the basis of race, ethnicity and faith, are judged inferior. As part of a stigmatised group, they have little honour.

One December afternoon I paid a visit to a friend's house in Amman. We sat in her marble-floored living room on a set of sumptuous leather couches as one of three domestic workers brought us Nescafe and chocolates. My friend's mother joined us and told us about her recent package holiday in Sri Lanka. She had been cajoled into going by a group of friends and was surprised by how much she liked it. 'You know, we think of them as animals, and I couldn't believe their country.' She went on to describe Sri Lanka's lush green landscape and showed me photographs of her five-star hotel in Bentota, on the island's southern tip. 'Most of the women who come here from Sri Lanka are no good. They come from jungly [sic] parts. But in the city, there are very wealthy people, very well-educated, beautiful people. *'Anjadd* [Really] I was surprised when I saw it.' Her surprise is telling. Many employers' ideas about racial inferiority have been influenced by labour market segmentation; the fact that the majority of the Sri Lankans

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<sup>125</sup> Food deprivation is commonly reported by domestic workers throughout the region in human rights reports (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2007: 65-68).

<sup>126</sup> Hibr Lubnani, a citizen media network, polled 36 beach resorts in Lebanon about their policies towards domestic workers (Lynch 2010). Three refused to let domestic workers enter; 14 allowed them inside but forbid them from using the pools, and five allowed them to enter but would not let them swim in pools or the sea.

they encounter in Jordan perform menial work informs their impression of the country as a whole. Class and racial distinctions inter-mingle. Hence, the term '*Sri Lankiyya*' (Arabic for 'Sri Lankan') has become synonymous with 'housemaid'.

Arab domestic workers are not immune to these problems. One of the few studies of Arab domestic workers in a contemporary context is that by Ismaili (2002) on the psychological health of Egyptian domestics in Egypt. When asked how they felt they were viewed, 20 out of the 30 women interviewed said '*zay al-zif*', or 'like dirt' (*ibid*: 102). Of the problems they faced at work, they mentioned physical exhaustion, being underpaid and not being respected (*ibid*: 98). These dynamics are not entirely unique to *foreign* domestic workers, but discrimination and prejudice against non-Arab women is more pronounced. Racial, ethnic and religious 'othering' provides added ideological support for what are already unequal relationships.

Given this context, it is little wonder domestic worker-employer relations in Jordan are often turbulent. This helps to explain, although not to justify, certain types of mistreatment. It may also go some way in explaining why migrant domestic workers appear to have a high suicide rate. In 2008, Human Rights Watch (2008a) released a study showing that migrant domestic workers were dying at a rate of more than one per week in Lebanon. Of 95 recorded deaths between January 2007 and August 2008, 40 were classified as suicides, 24 as the result of 'falls' from buildings (as often occurs when workers try to escape), 14 due to health problems, 2 murders, and the rest due to accidents. Police rarely investigate the circumstances, so some fatalities recorded as suicides may have other causes, including homicide. In the absence of evidence about the women involved, it is impossible to conclude with certainty what the Lebanese statistics might mean. But in at least some cases, intolerable and degrading working conditions may play a role. In Kuwait, a survey of newspaper reports found that 17 migrant workers attempted or committed suicide in the month of May 2010 (Migrant Rights 2010). According to the human rights group that conducted the survey, one of the incidents involved a Filipina domestic worker who had requested to leave her sponsor because she was being mistreated and had received a better offer of employment. The sponsor refused, and the domestic worker left a suicide note and attempted to kill herself. Similar patterns have emerged in Jordan. Amnesty International (2008: 3) reports that 'domestic workers are much more likely than any other group in Jordan to take their own life. The National Institute for Forensic Medicine told Amnesty International that of around 45 people who commit suicide each year, between five to 10 are domestic workers.' A Sri Lankan woman reportedly attempted suicide as a result of the fact that her employers did not allow her to return to her country (Qteishat 2010). In such cases, suicide may result from a sense of futility and alienation brought on at least in part by working conditions.

Although there is much working against harmonious relations, the household is not always a battlefield. And while the situation appears profoundly unjust to an outsider, only some workers end up leaving their employers' homes. The remaining sections of the chapter address how domestic workers and their employers deal with this context, and how their relationships can become less prickly over time.

### **Dependency and Patronage**

There is a great deal of diversity in living and working arrangements of Sri Lankan domestic workers in Jordan, but in broad strokes they can be divided into three main categories, differentiated by the length of stay and place of residence (whether on their own or with an employer). The first is comprised of women whose stay in the country is limited to one or two two-year stints and who reside with their employers. Manoja's story reflects the broader experience of this group. Manoja is a 21-year-old woman from a village near Kalutara who worked for an elderly Palestinian woman in the district of Jebel Ashrafieh. Her mother had worked in Lebanon when she was growing up, and both of her parents are now unemployed. At the age of 19, Manoja came to Jordan in the hopes of earning money for her dowry. I first met her in Amman at a Christmas party for Sri Lankan migrants organised by a church group. Her employer had escorted her to the party and remained by her side until it was time to leave. This was Manoja's first interaction with other Sri Lankans in Jordan, and she knew none of the other migrants in attendance. I later visited her and her employer at their home in Jebel Ashrafieh, a lower-income neighbourhood in Amman. Manoja told me she earned \$100 per month. Aside from her first two months' pay, which was deducted from her salary by the recruitment agency in Amman that placed her, she had saved all of her earnings and sent them to her mother. When I interviewed Manoja in early 2007, I asked how she felt about living in Amman. 'I had a good experience,' she said. 'I am happy I came. When I came, I didn't know any English. Now I can understand. I learned many things. How to clean such a big house, take care of money, take care of myself. But I want to go back and be with my family. I don't like being so far away.' In June 2007, after completing her two-year contract, Manoja returned to Sri Lanka. I visited her at her parents' home near Kalutara in September 2007. Only weeks after she returned, her parents arranged a marriage with a man in her village. Manoja was excited for me to meet him and take a ride in the trishaw with which he earned a living. Much of Manoja's remittances had been spent on clothing, jewellery and home furnishings for her husband's family, with whom she has lived since marriage. The fact that she had amassed these assets greatly enhanced her marriage prospects. Her limited mobility outside of her employer's home in Jordan had meant that Manoja was able to save considerably more than she might have otherwise.

The second group is comprised of domestic workers who also reside with their employers but who stay in Jordan for longer periods, sometimes as long as twenty years. Many are fluent in Arabic or English and have managed to win certain privileges from their employers by building trust over time. This may include higher salaries and being permitted to leave their employers' homes unaccompanied to attend church, migrant gatherings or shopping trips. Kamini provides an example. Kamini is a 39-year-old mother of two from Panadura. When I first met her, she had been living in Jordan for eight years and had gone home to Sri Lanka only once in that time. Her husband, a former bus driver, had a hernia five years ago and has not worked since, making Kamini the sole breadwinner. Her husband has a gambling and drinking addiction, so she sends her earnings to her daughter, who is 22 and spends the bulk of the money on the construction of the family's new home. The house that she has never seen is Kamini's life's work. When I interviewed her, she had spent \$6,000 of her remittance money to buy the land and lay the foundation. She had also borrowed an additional \$2,000 from the bank. She expects to work in Jordan for at least five more years to complete the house. Kamini earns \$250 per month working for an elderly Palestinian woman in the upper middle-class neighbourhood of Shmeisani. She also works one day a week for her employer's daughter, earning an additional \$20 each time. Kamini accompanies her employer on all of her outings. She has two Sri Lankan friends who work in the same apartment block, and the three sometimes take short trips downtown to buy small gifts or cards to send back to their families in Sri Lanka. Otherwise, they rarely venture far from their employers' homes. Buying land and building a home is a primary reason many women decide to work abroad, and as Kamini's case illustrates, doing so often takes many years. Like Kamini, many of the women in this group remain focused on their economic goals and their eventual return to Sri Lanka. I should add that while the majority of domestic workers who reside with their employers are sponsored by them, a minority buy their visas from other individuals and reside with employers who are not their sponsors.

Although the practice is legally prohibited, increasing numbers of domestic workers now opt to reside independently of their employers. These so-called 'freelancers' comprise the third group. At the time of research, one source estimated that as many as half of the 40,000 Sri Lankan women working in Jordan fell into this category (Samath 2004). Freelancers live in rented apartments or single rooms and work full-time for a single household or on an hourly or daily basis as housekeepers or office cleaners in multiple locations. Some are brought to Jordan by family members or friends already working in the kingdom and pay Jordanians to act as their sponsors, while others initially come on two-year contracts as live-in domestic workers and either decide to live on their own at the end of the contract period or run away from their employers' homes prematurely. Some women have plans to abscond from their employers' homes before they even set foot in Jordan; for them, signing an employment contract is a ticket out of Sri Lanka.

Others flee in moments of utter frustration or as a last resort when they have no other option. Escaping is not always easy, as some employers literally lock workers in the house when they go out. In most cases, domestic workers who run away are not accepted back. Leaving is viewed as a breach of trust. Those who abscond usually leave their identify documents behind, and employers and recruitment agencies often ask for large sums of money in exchange for returning them. Those who are unable to obtain a 'release' from the first sponsor allowing for the transfer of guardianship to a new sponsor are not able to work legally for a new employer. In light of this, those who run away from their employers usually forfeit their legal status in the country.

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Figure 12: A shop selling saris in downtown Amman

Some freelancers feel trapped in Jordan because they do not have their passports or are unable to pay their overstay fines and so cannot leave. Others have no desire to return to Sri Lanka anytime soon. Women in this category have more opportunities to socialise with other migrants, and many form romantic relationships with fellow migrants. During time off from work, they frequent South Asian restaurants and stores in downtown Amman selling Sri Lankan music, clothing and food. On Fridays, they organise parties and outings to the Dead Sea and Aqaba. Some operate informal revolving credit schemes ('seetu' in Sinhala) whereby members make monthly contributions towards a common fund. Once the fund reaches a certain amount, it is handed over to each member in turn. Such saving schemes are common in Sri Lanka and require a good deal of trust among the members. They are not always successful, and stories of members disappearing with the money are common. Although domestic work is the chief source of income for most women in this group, many supplement their incomes with self-employment projects, such as making 'hoppers', a Sri Lankan delicacy made of rice flour, and selling them out of their homes or at shops downtown. Prostitution also provides income for some.

Sujani's story provides an example. Sujani is a 46-year-old woman from Ja-Ela who has been in Jordan for 16 years. She lives in Muhajirin, a low-income area named for its migrant population, along with her husband, who is a hotel cook from Bangladesh, her 25-year-old daughter, and her husband's son from a previous marriage, who works in a garment factory. Sujani left Sri Lanka in 1991, when her two children, a son and daughter, were 12 and 10. She left, she says, because her husband drank heavily, was abusive, and was unable to support the family. She placed the children in the care of her husband's mother and came to Amman on a two-year contract to work as a live-in domestic worker. She worked for the same family for six years, but when they moved to the US, leaving her jobless, Sujani decided to stay in Amman and live on her own. When her daughter turned 20, she brought her to Jordan and found work for her, also on a live-out basis. Sujani returns to Sri Lanka every two years to visit her mother and son, for whom she has bought a track of land and built a small house. She has no contact with her first husband, whom she never divorced. She suffers from severe back pain and can no longer do the heavy cleaning required of a domestic worker. She makes a living as a seamstress, working several days a week in a shop sewing sequins and other decorations onto blouses, and tailoring clothes on her own sewing machine at home.

Freelancers such as Sujani can earn two or three times the amount live-in domestic workers make, particularly if they secure coveted jobs with expatriate families. But given that at the time of research the going rate for freelance domestic work was 2 JD per hour (\$2.82), many had to work long hours six or seven days a week to cover their own living expenses. They have the freedom to decide where they work, how much and for whom. But the autonomy gained from living independently comes with disadvantages, as they face uncertainty in finding well-paid jobs and, unless they have valid residence and work permits, avoiding deportation. They also tend to be more vulnerable in times of sickness than workers who live with their employers and may have their medical care paid for. Freelance work is both freeing and constraining. Workers in this category have much in common with those in the informal sector, with an important difference being that those without legal status face the risk of arrest and deportation.

While there is a great deal of variety *within* each of these three groups, in broad strokes these categories reflect the divisions migrants identify amongst themselves. Freelancers emphasise the fact that they have more freedom than their live-in counterparts. Live-in domestic workers, on the other hand, say they are willing to trade personal liberties for the financial rewards of living with their employers. They also tend to express a distrust of those living 'outside.' Migrants frequently reproduce Jordanian employers' discourses about 'correct' behaviour and propriety when talking about other migrants. Those who run away from their employers, live independently, and have boyfriends may be seen as disloyal and even dangerous. This is not surprising given gender dynamics in Sri Lanka. From an early age, Sri Lankan boys are given more freedom to roam

outside the home than girls. In contrast, the culture of femininity demarcates the home as a safe zone outside of which girls are at risk of being kidnapped or seized by demons. In principle if not in practice, women should remain sexually pure until marriage, and their respectability hinges on their display of modesty and fear of social ridicule. As Obeyesekere put it, they are inculcated to 'fear shame' (*läjja-baya*) (1984: 504-505). The notion of *thanikama* (loneliness) is also pertinent. Individuals who are physically outside of the web of kin feel bereft. Women who are left alone are vulnerable to spirits and sexual advances by men. Several Sri Lankan women told me they had never slept in a room alone before coming to Jordan, having previously always slept alongside female relatives. Many were terrified upon first travelling abroad. They are also predisposed to the idea that traversing the city on one's own is dangerous. Gender identities and patriarchal ideologies in Sri Lanka and Jordan converge on these points, influencing the position of women in their own households as well as those of the Arab families for whom they work. This helps explain why some live-in domestic workers find it natural to heed employers' advice about not going out.

Unlike those who live with their employers, freelancers are casual workers and are not unfree. But those I came to know tended to be less economically successful in the long-term than those who resided with their employers. This is in part because live-in domestic workers have fewer freedoms and, hence, fewer chances to spend money. But more importantly, domestic workers who reside with their employers are better positioned to establish their employers' trust and develop relations of dependency.<sup>127</sup> These relations are constructed and maintained on the basis of highly affective, personal ties rather than contractual rights and obligations.

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<sup>127</sup> The distinctions between live-in and live-out domestic workers are akin to those described for 'attached' servants versus unattached labourers in Breman's account (1974) of bonded labour in Gujarat and Martin's description (2009) of the same in the Pakistani Punjab. Though exploitative, being bonded to a single employer brings with it the possibility of financial support and security in times of scarcity.



Figure 13: A domestic worker holds one of the twins she looks after

For live-in domestic workers, maintaining a good relationship with an employer often entails suspending one's own social life. Kamini and Umm Samer provide an example. Umm Samer is a 78-year-old mother of eight from Nablus whose family came to Jordan in 1967. She suffers from terrible pain in her knees, has lost the use of her legs and occasionally requires the use of an oxygen machine. She lives independently of her children in her own small apartment but requires constant care. When one of her daughters decided to open a restaurant and no longer had as much time to spend with her mother, the family decided to hire a domestic worker. In this way, Kamini was brought to Umm Samer's home. Kamini's husband had been a fisherman and died at sea. Two years after his death, Kamini left her four-year-old daughter in the care of her parents and went abroad to work for the first time. Her plan was to earn money for her daughter's education and the construction of a home. Following in the footsteps of her mother's sister, she migrated to Jordan. At the time of research, Kamini, then aged 27, had been employed in Umm Samer's home for seven years. Aside from two brief visits home, Kamini spends nearly every waking moment at Umm Samer's side. She knows few other Sri Lankans in Jordan and though she runs errands, she seldom ventures out alone. While she laments not being able to attend church, Kamini otherwise does not complain about not going out. Umm Samer describes her as '*ktir muhafaza*' ('very conservative'), praising the fact that she does not leave the house on her own or socialise with other Sri Lankans. Kamini's willingness to be a full-time companion to Umm Samer has been crucial to their relationship.

While some tasks performed by domestic workers are mechanical, repetitive and solitary, other aspects of the work are inter-personal, involving 'emotional labour'.<sup>128</sup> Many domestic workers

<sup>128</sup> 'Emotional labour' describes the management and display of feelings thought to be crucial in service jobs (Hochschild 2003; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Some occupations require workers to be nice

speak about the ability to understand and predict the desires of their *madames* as an important asset. Maintaining a pleasant countenance when dealing with employers is itself a type of work. Domestic service entails intimate interactions, such as feeding, grooming and bathing the elderly, young or infirm. These tasks require patience, and success in performing them can depend on how well the worker manages her own feelings. As Manalansan (2010) writes of Filipino care workers in Israel, 'disaffection', or the ability to maintain emotional distance and suppress feelings of disgust, boredom or frustration, can be an important part of the job. Those frustrated by their employers sometimes resort to veiled forms of revenge, or 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985). When rankled by unreasonable demands from her *madame*, for example, Rita took retribution by opening the taps to let the water run and allowing the vacuum to run unmanned in a single spot to drive up her employer's utilities bills. Subtle tactics helped her maintain a sense of dignity while doing otherwise demeaning work. Similarly, some workers who pilfer do so not only out of desire for specific objects but in revenge for oppressive treatment. Some also express a sense of personal superiority, commenting on the fact that their employers are lazy. But for Rita and many other veteran domestic workers, the ability to suppress one's own anger and *perform* deference, even if it not genuine, is crucial. 'As soon as I went into the bathroom to bathe, she [female employer] would bang on the door and say, "Eh, you wasting too much water." So I bathed quickly and came out, and then she'd say, "Eh, what's this, you smell. Don't you use soap? Don't you wash well?"' Rita says she felt as though she could never win. She was criticised constantly. 'Now I'm talking to you about it without getting upset. But when it happened, it was terrible.' Rita worked as a domestic worker for more than 20 years, during which time she learned to ignore rebukes from her employer. She says other Sri Lankans make mistakes by over-reacting. 'If you take the broom because you're going to sweep somewhere, and she sees you, she'll tell you to go sweep, and you think, "What does she think I was going to do with this broom? Dance with it? She's stupid."' Rita says she learned to shrug it off. 'You have to understand your employer. She will try to keep you busy. She will find some work for you to do, for sure.' She and other domestic workers described the ability to cultivate the appearance of deference as an important skill.

Harmonious relations between employers and domestic workers take time to develop. One employer, Rana, referred to the importance of longevity. She currently employs a Filipina domestic worker whom she does not permit out of the house. She contrasted this with her memories of the woman who worked for her family when she was growing up:

One of them stayed for seven years, starting from when I was four. I just loved her. She was so wonderful. She was a very hard worker. She used to have many privileges that we don't now allow

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whether they feel like it or not. For flight attendants, for example, 'the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself...seeming to "love the job" becomes part of the job...' (Hochschild 2003: 5-6).

our maids to have because she worked so well and we trusted her. She had a day off and used to go out of the house. She even had a mobile.

When I asked Rana why the previous employee had these privileges while her current domestic workers do not, she responded: 'Because she stayed with us for longer, and she had become one of the family.' Rana's comments suggest that certain privileges are not a right, but something that must be earned. The notion that migrant workers arrive with a set of inalienable rights is not presupposed. De-personalised rules about how domestic workers *ought* to be treated according to employment contracts carry little weight in everyday life. More often, treatment hinges on *personal* relationships.

Hemawathi, a Sri Lankan woman who has lived with and worked for a family in the Jebel Webdeh district of Amman for twelve years, told me, as many domestic workers did, how she had to 'win' her freedom from her employer.

When I first came, she didn't like my long hair and made me cut it. I cried and cried and was so ashamed. But time passed, and I got my way. I had to fight for things, like for them to pay for my toothpaste and shampoo and things. They didn't want to pay for these in the beginning. And I had to teach them, even though I am a housemaid, you must speak to me in a nice way. I am a human being.

A year ago, Hemawathi's mother fell ill in Sri Lanka and her family pawned the deed to their home to pay for her medical treatment. As the interest compounded on their loan, the moneylender threatened to keep the deed, leaving the family with the possibility of becoming homeless. Despite her long time abroad, Hemawathi had continued to support her parents and felt obliged to help them. Her employer loaned her \$1,500, which she sent to her family to pay off the debt. Hemawathi's case illustrates how long-term, live-in service for a single employer can afford some workers the resources with which to respond to crises at home. There are exceptions, but generally those workers who live with their employers are deemed more credit-worthy. Trusted domestic workers well-versed in running the household are not easily replaced, and employers may dispense gifts, advance payment and other forms of support to keep such servants in their employ. These rewards are not always merely instrumental. They also can be an expression of the debt of gratitude and obligation employers genuinely feel towards women who are providing an important service.

This is reflected in Thanoja's story. Thanoja had long been estranged from her husband and first migrated at the age of 40 after her only child, a son, had married. After working for a year as a domestic worker in Iraq, she came to Jordan and worked for an elderly widower for nearly 20 years until he passed away. She cleaned his house, prepared all of his meals and tended to his needs. She had her own room and managed the household affairs but apart from short errands did not venture out alone. When the elderly man passed away, his family felt indebted to Thanoja for her years of loyal service. His two daughters, who lived in Europe, were especially grateful to her

for caring for their father in their absence. Several relatives offered to hire her but Thanoja refused, wanting to return to Sri Lanka. Throughout her tenure in Jordan she had sent her earnings to her son, who was unemployed and used the money to build a house for his family. Her employer's daughters had thought it a shame that Thanoja had given everything to her son, whom they considered a layabout. As she was preparing to leave Jordan, they called me to inquire about the cost of living in Sri Lanka. They wanted to give Thanoja an end-of-service bonus on which she could live comfortably, but they didn't want to give so much that it would end up in the hands of her undeserving son. Upon her departure, they gave her \$4,000 with which to buy her own plot of land. Some months later, when she requested an additional sum of money to help cover the cost of urgent medical expenses, they complied. Thanoja's employers were more generous than most, but her relationship with them illustrates a wider pattern. A domestic worker's willingness to curtail her own personal freedoms is crucial to her ability to secure her employer's trust. Co-residence, lengthy service and allegiance can lead to affectionate ties and more significant financial support.

There are numerous cases in which this pattern is contradicted, however. For example, the woman in whose house I lived in Sri Lanka, Soma, also resided with an elderly employer in Jordan for whom she worked for nearly two decades. At his death, she hoped to be rewarded for her service but was instead sent back to Sri Lanka with \$200. She and her family were devastated that she had not been better compensated, but there was nothing they could do. There are limits to domestic workers' ability to negotiate with their employers given that they can be dismissed at any time. Arundathie's story illustrates this point. I met Arundathie in her village in Sri Lanka a year after she had returned from working in Jordan. Arundathie recounted her experience working for a military doctor and his wife, an English teacher. A year after Arundathie had begun working for them, the couple planned a trip to Australia to visit relatives. Arundathie wanted them to take her along, but they refused. 'They were rich. It would have been nothing for them to take me. But they were greedy [*lobai*]. They wanted all their money for themselves,' she said. Arundathie asked to be sent to Sri Lanka while they were on holiday. They declined, instead placing her in the home of the husband's sister, who had recently had a baby. 'That house was not familiar to me. The madam was rude. She expected me to look after the baby and clean. She wanted me to wash the stairs in the apartment building every day. Just taking care of the baby, I barely had time to eat. I started losing weight.' In protest, Arundathie refused to do any cleaning, saying that she was unable to both care for the baby and do the housework. Her employers eventually returned from Australia, and Arundathie resumed her usual household duties in their home. At the end of her two-year contract, Arundathie returned to Sri Lanka. At her departure, they gave her the rest of her salary, which had been \$100 per month, plus an extra \$50. Arundathie was furious.

I had to ask them for my salary in dollars. They weren't going to give me dollars at first. They didn't give me any gifts. No jewellery. No clothes. I gave them two years of loyal work. But they were heartless [*hengin netti*, or without feelings]. In vain I sacrificed everything for them.

Arundathie expected personal gifts in exchange for her personal work and sacrifice. She felt betrayed at the end of her employment, but there was little she could do. In oppressive or unfair situations, workers' modes of resistance may include everything from inertia or foot-dragging to leaving without notice, but seldom does this over-ride the overwhelming power of the employer.

Do Sri Lankan domestic workers in Jordan express a sense that their predicaments are collective, that they exceed their own *personal* experiences? Unsatisfactory as it may seem, the answer is both yes and no. Few would dispute the notion that migrant domestic workers are badly treated as a group. However, the ethics of labour tend to be seen in individualised terms; problems with employers are understood as being the result of the employer's personality rather than in terms of wider structural inequalities. This atomised view is at least in part a result of the isolated nature of their work. Among those Sri Lankan workers I knew best, there was little sense of 'togetherness' and no mention of the need for collective action to change the existing order. This may not be the case amongst all nationalities, for example workers from the Philippines, where a long history of NGO mobilisation in support of migrant domestic workers' rights and more engagement on the part of the embassy seems to have led to more assertiveness and cooperation among migrants. For example, with embassy support, Filipinos in Jordan have formed a network of associations that organise social activities such as sports competitions, rent houses where workers can meet during time off, and hold fundraising events to raise money for workers in distress. This level of collective organisation was not evident among Sri Lankan workers during the period of research.

Relationships between domestic workers and their employers have been characterised elsewhere in terms of patron-client bonds (e.g. Tellis-Nayak 1983, Muttarak 2004, Gill 1994). Following Scott (1972: 92), the patron-client structure can be understood as an exchange relationship 'involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.' This concept has some appeal given the interpersonal, affective, and dependent relations formed between domestic workers and their employers. However, the patron-client model has limited explanatory power for the situation of *foreign* domestic workers, particularly 'guest' workers who are bound to their employers by the *kafala* sponsorship system. As I have described in the previous chapter, under this system the worker's legal status is entirely dependent on the employer and she is restricted to the realm of the employer's household. She has no choice of patron. This system diverges from accounts of traditional patron-client relations in Latin America and the Mediterranean in which the patron

must bargain for the relations of the client within a wider political and economic arena, competing with other patrons to retain clients. The *kafala* system prevents such competition by prohibiting the free circulation of labour. Through it, employers are endowed by the state with enough coercive power that they do not need to play the role of patron to gain a worker's services. Moreover, patron-client relations normally imply that both parties belong to the same political system, which in this case they do not. Although the social ties that develop between Asian workers and their Arab employers often resemble patron-client relations, and domestic workers often seek and obtain patronage from their employers, the power imbalance is such that the workers may be better understood as captive labour.

## Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter has highlighted the fault-lines of conflict between migrant domestic workers and their Jordanian employers. I have dwelled on the sources of tension because these relationships are messy in ways that are more complex than existing accounts suggest. The battles are not purely about domination and resistance. They also arise because employers and workers do not share a common cultural infrastructure. Often, they don't even share a language. Contradictions are posed when highly personal work is performed at close quarters, and when employers' desires for privacy run up alongside the convenience of having round-the-clock care. While much of the literature sees domestic worker-employer relations as inherently unequal, among employers, there is both power and fear. Their strategies to cope with that sense of vulnerability often lead to highly inhospitable working conditions. But as this chapter has also revealed, relationships between domestic workers and their employers are neither monolithic nor static. They often change over time as trust, loyalty and familiarity are established. Paradoxically, those workers who remain bound to their employers often fare better in the long term than those who are 'free', as dependency brings with it the possibility of financial security. This is only a possibility, however. There are no guarantees, as domestic work is unregulated, and migrants have little chance of legal redress and few social protections.

## Buddhism By Other Means: Sacred Sites and Ritual Practice

Until this point, this study has focussed primarily on the relations between domestic workers and their employers and how they are maintained. Here I would like to turn to an aspect of life that has received less scholarly attention, the issue of migrants' spiritual and imaginative engagements during their sojourns. In light of their closely controlled working conditions and the fact that many migrate for only a couple of years, it may be assumed that non-Muslim migrants suspend ritual practices while residing in predominantly Muslim countries. This is not the case. This chapter explores religious devotion in the context of Sri Lankan migrants' wider experiences of life and work in Jordan. As a religious minority with limited room to manoeuvre in Jordanian society, Buddhist migrants lack some of the spiritual and social resources they may otherwise tap into in times of need. Despite the limitations, they manage to create their own sacred spaces. Sinhala Buddhists and Catholics both use Christian churches as arenas for making and fulfilling ritual vows, known as *bara* in Sinhala.<sup>129</sup> Many Buddhists also attend Catholic and Pentecostal church services, and some convert to Christianity.

The ethnography is based on regular attendance of Roman Catholic church services conducted in Sinhala by a Sri Lankan priest and two Pentecostal church groups in Amman. Some of the evangelical Christian groups operating in Amman are not officially recognised. In 2007, the Jordanian authorities expelled or refused residence permits for several expatriate church leaders for illegal missionary activities. In light of this, I have not named the denominations or locations of the evangelical churches I attended. Data also come from accompanying migrants on pilgrimages, as well as social interactions and conversations outside of church. Observations of religious practices and festivals in Sri Lanka offered points of comparison with the activities of Sinhala Buddhists in Jordan. My interlocutors were predominantly Sinhala Buddhists and Catholics, and so the focus of this chapter is on their perspectives and practices rather than those of Muslims and Hindus. Discussions indicated that Muslim and Hindu Sri Lankans also attend churches in Amman, but for several reasons I was unable to learn about the significance of these activities for them. The focus of my research was on Sinhala speakers. Most Sri Lankan Muslims and Hindus speak Tamil as their mother tongue, whereas Sinhala Catholics and Buddhists speak Sinhala. The ethnic polarisation that has occurred in the wake of nearly three decades of civil war in Sri Lanka extends to the diaspora in Jordan; Tamil- and Sinhala-speaking migrants generally maintain separate social groups. The religious dimensions of Sri Lankan Muslim migration to the

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<sup>129</sup> The word *bara* is linked to the Tamil *varam* and also conveys a wider meaning in Sinhala of putting one's self in the care of a superior (Goonasekera 2006: 108).

Middle East would be fascinating to consider, but I have not been able to do so as part of this project.<sup>130</sup> Another gap in the present analysis relates to how women who are not allowed to leave the house organise their spiritual lives. It was more difficult for me to spend time with these women, and so this remains a matter for further investigation.

In the following sections, three types of religious engagement are described: attendance at Catholic church services, participation in Pentecostal worship, and the performance of ritual vows to Christian saints and the Virgin Mary.

### **Catholic Church Services as Shared Religious Spaces**

On Friday afternoons, Sri Lankan workers of various faiths converge to attend Mass at the Annunciation Church (also known as the Latin Church), perched on a hilltop in one of Amman's oldest neighbourhoods, Jebel Webdeh. Resplendent in saris of every colour, from gold, orange and crimson to lime green, women gather in the church courtyard to chat before the service begins. Mass is held by Father Gabriel, a Roman Catholic priest recruited in 2006 to serve the Sri Lankan community in Jordan. He holds Bible study classes and services in Sinhala every Friday. He also blesses migrants' homes and provides pastoral services, including dispensing advice and supplying curative holy oil and water to Catholics and Buddhists alike.

Between fifty and one hundred Sri Lankans attend Mass each week. Many are Catholic, but by my estimate approximately half are not. I derived this estimate from an imprecise method of counting how many took the sacrament and how many did not.<sup>131</sup> There are, of course, reasons why Catholics may not take the sacrament on a given day (e.g. if they failed to observe a fast or committed a sin they did not confess). As a general rule, both Catholic and non-Catholic attendees seem primarily preoccupied with the magical elements of the service - the protective blessings they receive at Communion being one - and show comparatively less interest in the rationale or scriptural authority. Few bring bibles. Much like Ventura's (1992) account of Filipino workers in Japan, church services are an important arena for status competition.<sup>132</sup> Migrants compete in aesthetics as well as ritual participation. Those who can afford to come in their best frocks, wearing make-up and gold jewellery. The all-Catholic choir group sits separately in the first two

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<sup>130</sup> Although there is a great deal of diversity among Sri Lankan Muslims, most identify as orthodox Sunni followers of the Shafi'i school (McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 11). Thangarajah (2004) describes Muslim women's migration to the Middle East from a village in Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka.

<sup>131</sup> I was able to keep count because I myself did not take the sacrament. I participated in all of the other activities during Mass, but at the time of Communion I remained in my pew and did not go up to the altar. I was not asked about this, nor was I questioned in detail about my beliefs by the women who attended these services. Assuming I was Christian and knowing the subject of my research, they seemed to accept my attendance as a matter of fact.

<sup>132</sup> As Ventura (1992: 65) writes, for Filipinos in Japan, church provides a respite from work, a chance to remember friends and family back home, a focal point for Filipino social life and a key site for conspicuous consumption.

pews and its members wear lace veils and are particularly well attired. Acting as gatekeepers, they hush those who speak inside the church and keep tabs on non-Christians who try to take the sacrament. Although in practice the boundaries between religious traditions are porous, there are occasionally attempts to assert them, particularly by Catholic women who object to the extent of Buddhist and Hindu participation in church activities. Moreover, although churches provide places where migrants find solidarity, they are also platforms for gossip, which can be vicious and often includes allegations of marital infidelity and other illicit behaviour.

An informal migrant association called the Sri Lankan Christian and Buddhist Community forms an elite corps among those attending Mass. Its membership ranges from twenty-five to fifty members at a time. The association accepted me as a member, and I attended their monthly meetings after Mass. Aside from small-scale revolving credit groups and Pentecostal church groups, it is the only Sri Lankan organisation in Amman. With Father Gabriel's oversight, members organise church services and community events at Christmas, Easter and for *avurudda*, the Sinhala New Year. Serving as a mini welfare support system, the association lends money to members in times of illness or if an urgent trip to Sri Lanka is required. Members also organise alms-giving ceremonies in memory of deceased loved ones.<sup>133</sup> Aside from church services, these are the only regular, large-scale communal activities of their kind among Sri Lankans in Amman. Domestic workers who live independently of their employers often take the lead in organising the association's activities. When I began research in the summer of 2006, the association's officers were predominantly Catholic domestic workers, many of whom worked for wealthy expatriates, were better paid and had more free time than other domestic workers. By the time I completed field research in 2008, Father Gabriel had persuaded the association to replace the elected women officers with men on the grounds that they were easier for him to work with because, not being domestic workers, they were more mobile.

For Christians and non-Christians alike, attending church is an affordable way to socialise with other Sri Lankans and offers rare respite from housework. Another factor contributing to the popularity of churches among Sri Lankans in Jordan is xenophobia and prejudice against followers of non-Abrahamic religions (Jureidini 2003). Many employers express a distrust of Buddhists and Hindus, often assuming that they are not 'God fearing'; as a result, they prefer to hire Muslim or Christian domestic workers. Aware of the stereotypes, some migrants wear crosses and say they are Catholic in order to obtain employment. Another salient factor is that the Catholic charity Caritas and concerned priests and nuns provide the only substantial humanitarian

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<sup>133</sup> Such ceremonies are held by a person's loved ones after a death. In Jordan, they are often organised by migrants as a way of honouring kin who have died in Sri Lanka. Large meals are prepared on the seventh day, after three months and on the one-year anniversary of the death as a merit-making activity and to aid the deceased in movement towards the next level of life.

assistance to migrant domestic workers. They visit and feed those in administrative detention and hospitals, raise money for airline tickets to send stranded migrants home and help women who become pregnant out of wedlock.<sup>134</sup> Many migrants may assume that affiliating with these groups by attending church will increase their chances of receiving aid. Churches are also more popular among migrant women than mosques, which, in Jordan, tend to be predominantly male spaces. Women do not normally attend congregational prayers and so women migrants could not walk in and pray as easily or be as active in a mosque as they may in a church. Most importantly, the popularity of the churches among non-Christians can be explained as an extension of a wider pattern of devotional, personalised and plural practices that have become characteristic of Sri Lankan religiosity. In the absence of Buddhist and Hindu temples, churches and shrines to the Virgin Mary and Saint George act as stand-ins to shrines to the more familiar deities that Sri Lankans petition for help at home. As such, church activity is a form of improvisation.

Buddhist women are not the only ones to participate in activities formally associated with another tradition. Although there are no Buddhist or Hindu gurus resident in Amman, *bhikkus* (monks) are periodically recruited by the Sri Lankan embassy to give *banas* (sermons) on *poya* days (holy days in the Buddhist lunar calendar) and important holidays, such as *Wesak*.<sup>135</sup> On such occasions, Buddhist, Catholic, Muslim and Hindu women alike assemble at the embassy dressed in white. They recite *pirith* (Buddhist verses), have protective white threads (*pirith nuul*) tied around their wrists and eat *kiribath* (a dish made of rice and coconut milk, cut into squares and served on auspicious days). From the viewpoint of most lay participants, non-Buddhists' involvement in these events is neither inappropriate nor unusual.

### **Pentecostal Worship**

In addition to Catholic services, equal if not greater numbers of Sri Lankan migrants are drawn to evangelical Protestant churches. At the time of the fieldwork, approximately eight evangelical denominations operated in Amman. A large proportion of their congregations consists of foreign workers, chiefly Filipinos and Sri Lankans, with smaller numbers from South Korea, China and African countries. It is impossible to estimate how many Sri Lankans attend such churches. There is no central registration system or single umbrella organisation covering all the groups, and many operate out of unmarked buildings or private homes and do not publicise their activities. The two Pentecostal churches I attended had between seventy-five and one hundred Sri Lankan attendees

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<sup>134</sup> Parents who cannot present a marriage certificate may be refused permission to register a child's birth with the Jordanian government. Children whose births were not registered and who do not leave the Kingdom within three months become subject to daily overstay fees of 1.5 JD (\$2.12). These fees accumulate as long as the child remains in the country. The total number of unregistered children born to migrants in Jordan is not known.

<sup>135</sup> *Wesak* is a holiday marking the birth, enlightenment and passing of Lord Buddha. In Sri Lanka, on this day Buddhists traditionally make offerings at temples and listen to sermons by monks. See descriptions by Spencer 1990: 58-63.

each. I was told there were six other church groups with smaller Sri Lankan congregations. The spread of Pentecostalism in Jordan is part of a wider regional phenomenon. Evangelical churches with Sri Lankan congregations operate in Kuwait, Israel, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), among other places. Evangelical groups make a deliberate effort to reach out to migrants, who are easier to approach and, separated from their own social networks, may be more easily persuaded to try new things. The fact that proselytising to Muslims is a criminal offence also encourages these groups to target non-Arabs, about whom the authorities are less concerned and who, in turn, are less likely to inform on the religious recruiters. Services are typically held in English, this being the language spoken by the American and Nigerian pastors, Sinhala and, if Tamils are present, Tamil.

While my attendance at Catholic services was accepted unproblematically, my presence at Pentecostal services was the source of more scrutiny, particularly among the church leaders. On several occasions I was asked if I was a 'believer'. The expatriate church leaders in particular – a Nigerian pastor and his wife, and several American pastors – seemed most concerned about my salvation. Keen that I play an increasingly active role, they urged me to sit at the front of the church, perform readings, say prayers aloud, and offer my own interpretations on points raised during the service. By attending multiple churches, I discovered that I was not the only one doing so. Church membership tended to be fluid and migrants often switched churches as a result of personal disputes with other members.<sup>136</sup> Splinter groups also formed; in one instance, a group of Tamil women left a Sinhala-led congregation to form their own group. Owing to their loose structures, such instability is not uncommon in evangelical churches, as others have remarked concerning churches in the United States and Latin America (Smith-Hefner 1994: 29-30).

While only a handful of migrants converted to Catholicism during my fieldwork in Jordan, many more converted to Pentecostalism. A Sri Lankan Pentecostal pastor interviewed in Amman in the summer of 2008 told me that he had baptised 30 new members during the preceding year. This compares with the half-dozen members who had been baptised by the Sri Lankan Catholic priest in Amman during the same period. At least two of the Sri Lankan women who converted to Catholicism had Catholic employers. To be baptised in the Catholic Church, one should be tutored for at least several months, whereas those ready to receive the Holy Spirit in many Pentecostal churches can take a one-month Bible study course and be baptised more quickly. This

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<sup>136</sup> Janaki provides an example. She was being groomed by American pastors to become a church leader and played an active role recruiting new Sri Lankan members. When she requested money to pay someone on the black market to make a visa for her husband, the pastors lent it to her. But the person she paid ran off with the money without producing a visa, and so Janaki asked for a second loan. Upon doing so, she was accused of cheating the church. In bitterness, she and her husband left the congregation and joined another group.

is linked to the belief, which is one of the tenets of evangelical Christianity, that people can be 'saved' through personal conversion at any time.

Evangelical churches appeal to migrants on several levels. Services are uplifting, ecstatic affairs involving jubilant singing, loud music and bodily movement. Testimonials play an important role. Participants take turns verbally 'testifying' to the good work God has done in their lives and the miracles they have witnessed. These testimonials have strong persuasive power. They centre on several key themes: healing illnesses, fixing broken marriages and bringing financial prosperity. Such stories are alluring to migrants, as they are intended. But they also allow congregants a rare opportunity to air personal problems in public. American church pastors openly express sympathy and compassion for the plight of domestic workers. At the beginning of each service, newcomers are asked to introduce themselves and are then told, 'You are only a new member once. Now you are part of our family'. This familial structure and atmosphere of support and camaraderie provides psychological comfort and a sense of fellowship for those who may feel downtrodden and isolated in Amman. Church leaders organise meals, outings and other activities once a month or more to welcome migrants into the fold. They also hold weekly Bible school classes for children, which often involve lessons in Sinhala or English. Although most Sri Lankan women migrate to Jordan alone, leaving their families behind, a minority find ways of bringing their husbands and children to Jordan. A small number - most of whom are freelancers - marry fellow migrants and start families abroad or have children out of wedlock. Foreigners cannot enrol in public schools in Jordan and, for those children whose parents cannot afford private school tuition, Bible schools may be their only source of formal education.

The global expansion of Pentecostalism has been attributed, in part, to its emphasis on direct, personal contact with the Holy Spirit. These elements are also important to my Sri Lankan interlocutors, for it is through such contact that miraculous healings are believed possible. Pentecostalism provides a symbolic rhetoric consistent with beliefs in healing, possession and exorcism that are common in Sri Lanka (Kapferer 1983). Church services involve prayer sessions in which members lay hands on one another to relieve physical, emotional or demonic illnesses. Such group therapy activities are a regular feature of Friday services, although for those with especially grave afflictions, private sessions can also be arranged. For some migrants, the therapeutic potential of Pentecostal worship is paramount.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> There is a wide literature on the therapeutic appeal of evangelical Christian denominations. One example is Erzen's (2006) work on a Protestant ministry in the US with a 'healing culture' that provides a sense of intimacy and belonging for those seeking to renounce long-term same-sex relationships. Another is Greenfield's (1992) account of Brazilian spirit healing groups, in which African and Amerindian religious practices find consonance with Christianity, and vulnerable and distraught people from middle and lower-middle class backgrounds in urban Brazil are drawn to church groups for healing treatments. As Greenfield

Expressive of this point is Soma, a 42-year-old woman from Colombo who converted to Pentecostalism from Buddhism while working in Jordan. Several years after her arrival in Jordan, Soma became possessed by the spirit of her deceased father. In her account, the spirit had been unsettled and sent to pester her as a result of sorcery performed by a woman with whom her husband had begun an affair in Sri Lanka after Soma had left. The spirit was particularly meddlesome at night, revealing itself in the form of a legless torso and yelling at her. Soma was unable to sleep and, on some days, too exhausted to get out of bed. She visited a doctor who prescribed medication for an ulcer, but this did not resolve the problem. It was only after her friend Lanka brought her to a Pentecostal church that Soma's affliction began to abate. Soon after her introduction to the church, one of the church pastors visited her home to exorcise the spirit. It temporarily possessed Soma's aunt [father's sister], with whom Soma lived at the time. Like Soma, the aunt was also a long-term resident of Amman, worked as a domestic worker and lived outside of her employer's home. The women began attending the church together and, according to Soma, as long as they continued praying there the spirit remained at bay. As Soma's case illustrates, for some women Pentecostal worship can have cathartic effects that ultimately lead to conversion.

For others, the allure of such groups lies in the fact that Pentecostal ideas about sexuality and gender norms correlate with patriarchal attitudes about women and the family in Sri Lanka. Husband and wife missionary teams often emphasise the importance of strong conjugal bonds and enjoin men to be the spiritual leaders of the home, with wives standing by faithfully. This poses an unresolved tension: being a 'good' wife according to Pentecostal teachings clashes with the realities of life for many migrant women, who are separated from their husbands for years at a stretch and may have severed ties altogether. This might repel women who seek greater sexual freedom abroad. But for those attempting to distance themselves from stereotypes of migrant women as sexually promiscuous, conversion to Pentecostalism provides a sense of respectability.

Illustrative of this is Rani, a 27-year-old Tamil woman from a village in the tea-growing highlands near Kandy who converted from Hinduism to Pentecostalism in Jordan. Orphaned at a young age, Rani was raised by her elder brother and sister, both of whom have worked previously in the Middle East. Upon completing secondary school at 17 years of age, Rani took a job in a garment factory. After 6 months in the factory, her sister urged her to go abroad to work so that she could earn a higher salary. Rani visited a recruitment agent in Colombo who, because Rani was under 18 years of age, gave her another woman's passport and sent her to work in the home of a family in Jordan. Rani said she was badly treated by her first employers, who gave her stale food and did not allow her to leave the house or have a rest day. One night, after being struck

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(1992: 42) points out, spiritualist healers and patients do not need to share a common belief system in order for patients to be effectively cured.

across the face by the *madame*, Rani consumed a cocktail of pesticide and Pepsi in an attempt to commit suicide. She was hospitalised and, upon recovering, sent back to Sri Lanka. Rani vowed never to work in Jordan again. She moved in with her sister and took a job working in a pharmacy in Colombo. After several months, her sister again urged her to go abroad. This time, Rani visited a recruitment agency and requested to work in Malaysia, the UAE or Lebanon. A job was arranged for her. The day before her departure, Rani learned she was being sent back to Jordan. Upon her arrival, she was employed by the family of a wealthy doctor. They treated her well and she has been working in Jordan ever since. Rani told me that she began attending Christian churches because there was no Hindu temple in Amman and because it was the only place her employer allowed her to go on her own. Like many, Rani's conversion narrative began with a miracle. On one of her routine visits to church, Rani bought a poster depicting Jesus and placed it alongside an image of Lord Shiva in her bedroom. She regularly prayed before both images. Late one night as she slept, Lord Shiva's image burst into flames. Showing me the charred image as she related the story, Rani said this had been a message from Jesus that she should become Christian. Following the lead of a friend, Rani began attending Bible school and was soon baptised into a Pentecostal church.

In our conversations, Rani frequently expressed concerns about her reputation as someone who had worked as a domestic worker in the Middle East and what this would mean for her marital prospects: 'If I go back to Sri Lanka, I know I am still a girl [virgin], but people will say I am no longer a girl. What can I do? I know I am good, but that's not what they will think.' Rani feared she would have to pay a higher dowry to compensate. She often contrasted herself with other Sri Lankans in Jordan who had boyfriends or went out late at night. She also emphasised ways in which she had changed since converting. She used to love Hindi music, but now listened only to Christian songs. She altered her wardrobe, opting for long skirts and dresses in lieu of trousers. According to Rani, part of the reason people view women who return from the Middle East in a negative light is their manner of dress: 'returnees' wear tight-fitting jeans rather than long skirts and decorate themselves with too much make-up and jewellery. Such practices are not encouraged in rural Sri Lanka because they are said to be immodest. They are also strongly discouraged by the church Rani attended. Women are instructed to follow the example of female pastors by wearing long skirts and refraining from the use of make-up and jewellery. The gold earrings worn by many Sri Lankan women irk American church pastors, who often try unsuccessfully to persuade women to give them up. Buying and wearing gold is both a status marker and an investment strategy, and so it is not surprising that migrants find this advice problematic. Rani dealt with the dilemma by taking off her earrings before church activities, but she said she conformed to the other rules. Her adaptations render a more wholesome self-portrait, providing her with a sense of distinction in comparison with other migrants. By emphasising modesty,

chastity and bodily discipline, Pentecostalism provides a moral counterbalance to notions of women migrants' sexual and behavioural impropriety. It is also worth mentioning that despite the emphasis on men as spiritual leaders, women play key roles in these churches as pastors, teachers and evangelists. In contrast with socially undervalued work as domestic servants, these activities are a source of pride for the Sri Lankan women who take part.

Although the appeal of evangelical groups is clear, less apparent is the extent to which women continue Pentecostal worship after returning to Sri Lanka. This is difficult to assess without longitudinal data, but the wider context of evangelical Christianity in Sri Lanka has important implications.<sup>138</sup> As a general rule, evangelical Christian groups are not highly regarded by non-Christians in Sri Lanka. There is a widespread perception that they prey on poverty and suffering in order to gain converts.<sup>139</sup> There is also suspicion that those who convert do so simply for handouts. In my field site in Gampaha District, villagers sometimes refer to evangelical churches as *paripu palieh* ('lentil churches') because they are thought to lure people with food parcels. Sinhala-speaking Christians typically refer to their own conversions by saying '*Christiani una*' ('we became Christian') or '*Api deng paliehte yannava*' ('we now go to church') or '*Assemblies of God ekata benduna*' ('we got tied up with the Assemblies of God'). The verb tense for '*benduna*' implies that the tying up was voluntary. Conversely, Buddhists tend to deny the voluntary nature of Christian conversion. One may describe a fellow Buddhist who regularly attends a Catholic church thus: '*Catholica palieh egolamwe bandewa gaena*' ('the Catholic church has caused them to be tied up'). Here, the emphasis is on involuntary action caused by another party. These differences in terminology reflect the negative attitudes many have towards Christian conversion. Although it would not be seen as wrong to attend a Christian service or pray at a church, renouncing one's Buddhist identity would be problematic. A fear of social censure at home may deter migrants from announcing that they have converted. A migrant may also be discouraged if she converted to a particular group abroad and was unable find the same denomination at home. Pastor Nevil, a Sri Lankan church leader who oversees a congregation with approximately 500 members in a town south of Colombo on the western coast of Sri Lanka, shared his thoughts with me on those who convert to Christianity while working in the Middle

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<sup>138</sup> Some Evangelical groups, such as the Assemblies of God, have been active in Sri Lanka for more than a century, but most have been in operation only since the 1970s (Perera 1998: 49). The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), an umbrella group for five Christian denominations, says it represents 200,000 evangelical Christians in Sri Lanka (NCEASL 2010). Other groups have reported that there are between 300 and 350 evangelical church and para-church organisations throughout the island (Perera 1998: 52).

<sup>139</sup> Since 2002, violent attacks against Christian churches and pastors have increased. Much of the violence was orchestrated to stir up support for an anti-Conversion bill supported by the Buddhist monks' party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). The bill was eventually shelved, but animosity against such groups continues. Evangelical groups reached out to tsunami survivors to provide relief and assistance and this, combined with proselytising activities in poor communities, has disturbed some Buddhists who view such groups as a divisive force.

East. Pastor Nevil had been instrumental in starting two Pentecostal churches abroad, one in Kuwait and one in Jordan, and we had been introduced by a domestic worker who was a church leader in Jordan. When asked whether migrants who convert while abroad remain in the church after returning to Sri Lanka, Pastor Nevil replied:

Many of the women who return from the Middle East are not permitted by their families to come to church. But this is not always the situation. Some women are returning with certain abilities. They have earned money and built their homes and gained respect. They are able to influence their families with the money they have earned, and in some cases, we've had women who bring their whole family to the church with them.

Such women appeared to be a minority. Most of those I knew who had converted to Pentecostalism in Jordan had not convinced their family members to join them. Likewise, Pastor Nevil noted that many returnees may find it difficult to locate a church at home and acknowledged that, if they could not do so, they would most likely revert to earlier religious practices. 'Faith is something you have to put fire into. It's a flame you have to feed or it will die down. Only a small percentage will fight for their faith without the church,' he said.

Migrants' engagements with Pentecostal groups in Jordan are coloured by the fact of their eventual return to Sri Lanka. Although I am unable to argue conclusively in the absence of long-term data, my tentative hypothesis is that, like their stay as guest workers in Jordan, migrants' participation in Pentecostal churches is temporary and contingent. For most, it appears not to entail a radical, lasting rupture with previous ways of living and believing. Furthermore, much like the participation of non-Catholics in Catholic Masses, their activities are an extension of a pluralist, flexible approach to the supernatural, although not one condoned by Pentecostal doctrine, in which salvation can be achieved only by surrendering to Jesus Christ alone. Although sermons by American and Nigerian missionaries underscore the importance of Pentecostal worship in offering a direct path to an omnipotent God through which salvation can be achieved, this theological element was not emphasised in my discussions with most Sri Lankan church members. Their participation tended to be inspired by other concerns. Financial insecurity is one; affiliating with such groups creates the possibility for future assistance in the form of jobs or money. But, as described, there are also important noneconomic motives relating to healing and exorcism. And for those bereft of kith and kin, membership provides moral benefits, including intimate interaction and a sense of belonging and respectability. Many Sri Lankan migrants engage in Pentecostal services in Jordan principally for their emotional, therapeutic and social appeal and to address problems encountered in everyday life. In doing so, they do not challenge pre-existing Buddhist notions of self or salvation.

The context at hand suggests that there may be a greater resistance to internal religious transformation than some accounts of Pentecostal conversion may imply. In this respect, it

resembles Smith-Hefner's (1994) description of Khmer refugees from Theravada Buddhist backgrounds who moved to the United States through a government resettlement scheme sponsored in part by Christian churches. Many had been exposed to Christian proselytising in refugee camps before they were resettled. Once in the US, frequent movement between Protestant churches and Buddhist temples was common; one quarter of the several hundred people Smith-Hefner interviewed had attended Christian churches at some point (Smith-Hefner 1994: 30). However, the vast majority eventually stopped doing so when government assistance was halted. The few who remained within Protestant churches did so in part because of the appeal of the Christian belief, which runs counter to the Buddhist idea of *karma*, that one's sins can be forgiven and salvation achieved through a personal relationship with Jesus (Smith-Hefner 1994: 31). This was appealing to refugees suffering from guilt about their own survival. But as Smith-Hefner describes, from a Buddhist perspective the concept of born-again salvation and forgiveness is fundamentally unjust, and Khmer Buddhists suspected that those Khmer who had converted to Christianity did so in a futile attempt to escape atonement (1994: 31-2). For a few Khmer, rejecting previous lifeways in exchange for a new Christian identity was appealing. But for most, it was not. Likewise, for some Sri Lankan women, such as Rani, Pentecostal church membership offers a route to respectability. But the likelihood that most migrants will continue to espouse a Protestant Christian identity after returning to Sri Lanka is not great.

In the preceding sections, I have described two types of communal religious activities in which Sri Lankan migrants in Jordan participate - those associated with a Catholic church and those with Pentecostal groups. In each case, I have described how such activities had both moral as well as material appeal. Equally important, although less readily apparent to an outsider, are more individualised, private practices in churches involving contractual prayer, as described in the following section.

### **Vow Making and Pilgrimages to Madaba**

On the first Friday of each month, dozens of Sri Lankans working in Amman pile into minibuses and travel 50 kilometres south-west to the town of Madaba. They come to visit Saint George's Church, a nineteenth century Greek Orthodox site famous with tourists for its beautiful Byzantine-era mosaic map of Palestine and the Nile Delta. It is not the map that most come to see, but a shrine to the Virgin Mary nestled inside the church. Most of the Sri Lankans who make the journey are not Christian but Buddhist. Some come in time to attend the official service, held in Arabic, but most come to visit the shrine. The first Friday of the month is the most popular day, but migrants also come on other days.

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Figure 14: Church of St. George, Madaba

Regardless of their religious backgrounds, many pause after crossing the threshold of the church to make the sign of the cross. They then head past the mosaic map and bypass the altar to enter a small room housing the shrine. The room's focal point is a plaque depicting the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus in her arms. The image is protected by a glass-panelled wooden case. Gold chains and pendants adorn the image, and coins wrapped in white cloth are tied to the columns on the side as a *pandura*, or offering in Sinhala. Jewellery and other donations, as well as promissory notes written in connection with ritual vows, can be deposited into a box nearby. Devotees scrawl messages in wax with candle tips on the glass panels. On one visit to the shrine, I noticed that personal names had been written in Arabic. But the majority of the messages were in Sinhala. They read: 'Heal my daughter', 'Bless our family', 'Help me get my visa and passport'.

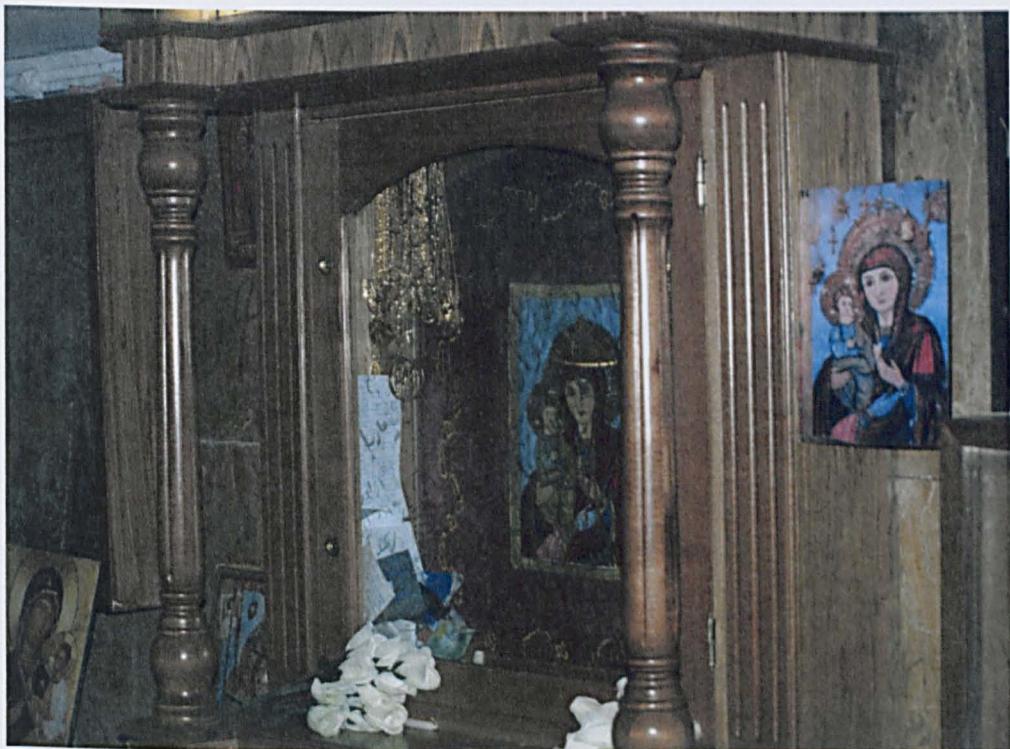


Figure 15: Gold pendants and promissory notes adorn the shrine to the Virgin Mary at the Church of St. George, Madaba

Early one Friday morning in April 2007, I accompanied two Sri Lankan women, Seeta and Kumari, both Buddhists, on one of their regular outings to the shrine. The purpose of Seeta's journey was to make a payment for a vow (*bareak*) to ensure her son's successful performance in his O-Level exams in Sri Lanka. Months before, Seeta had vowed that if her son scored high marks, she would return every Friday for three months to light candles, pray and make offerings in thanks for the Virgin Mary's intercession on her son's behalf. When the exam scores were released, Seeta learned that her son had indeed excelled.

By performing a vow (*bara*), a person puts himself or herself in the care of a supernatural being, promising that if his or her request is granted or problem solved, the petitioner will make a payment honouring the divine entity. The supplicant pledges his or her devotion to a supernatural being in exchange for what he or she expects will be a reward of divine assistance.<sup>140</sup> Although

<sup>140</sup> How these practices fit logically with the nibbanic and kammatic doctrines of Buddhism in the minds of lay believers is discussed by Spiro (1982: Chapter 6). Canonical Buddhism is principally concerned with otherworldly affairs, nirvana and rebirth. One achieves salvation through right moral conduct, charity and meditation, with no assistance from a supernatural being (Spiro 1982: 140). Within this framework, there is no mechanism to cope with immediate human pain and, because it is difficult to attribute all present forms suffering to the karmic model, magic rituals have been incorporated as legitimate forms of action (Spiro 1982: 142-3). This includes 'instrumental rituals', of which vow performance is one, for the achievement of short-term goals (Spiro 1982: 192).

vow making is popular in South Asia, it is by no means unique to the region and similar types of contractual prayer are practised by Jordanians of both Muslim and Christian faiths.<sup>141</sup>

Vows made by Catholic and Buddhist Sri Lankans in Jordan are carefully deliberated petitions for help with an endless number of concerns relating to quotidian life. They can be requests to regularise one's visa status, obtain well-paid employment, bring a relative to Jordan, cure an illness or solve family problems in Sri Lanka. Payments typically take the form of an offering of money, gold jewellery or other valuable items in the name of the deity or saint, lighting candles, organising a *dane* (alms giving), fasting, or any combination of these. Throughout South Asia, it is not unusual for people to take vows involving devotion to deities outside their own religious traditions. As Raj and Harman (2006: 7) state, 'taking vows to deities of a different tradition becomes a bit like investing spiritually in a hedge fund. It becomes a quick and easy way to supplement the resources - possibly the limited resources - that characterise your own religious tradition'.

Devotees are ethically bound to fulfil the promises they make as part of a vow and those failing to do so face possible retribution from the deity (Goonasekera 2006: 108). Although vow fulfilment (*bara oppukaranawa*) is regarded seriously, it is difficult to assess the degree to which people do it. I encountered several cases in which Buddhist women who had made vows to the Virgin Mary and Saint Anthony did not carry out the promised votive acts. Although I cannot be certain, it is possible that because neither the Virgin Mary nor Saint Anthony is regarded as having a vengeful character or hot temper, as in the case of some of the gods from the Buddhist pantheon, notably Kataragama Deviyo, these women were less fearful of the consequences of failing to live up to their end of the bargain.<sup>142</sup> Just as there is greater seriousness attached to vows made to certain gods in the supernatural hierarchy (Goonasekera 2006: 111), these women may have felt that abrogating vows made to Christian saints was a less serious offence.

Among Sri Lankan migrants, the church in Madaba is the prime site for making vows because it is said in Sinhala to have '*haskam*', or divine potency. The other main site with this power is the Church of Saint George in Salt, an ancient town half an hour's drive from Amman. The churches in Madaba and Salt were likened to places with similar potency in Sri Lanka, namely Kataragama, the Kalutara Bodhi, Sri Maha Bodhi, Sri Pade and Saint Anthony's Church in Kochchikade. This

<sup>141</sup> For examples from other regions, see research by Cannell (1999) on the role of *promesas* among Christians in the Philippines and Christian (1989: 118-35) on instrumental prayers in northern Spain. In an Arab context, Nabti (1998) has described the practice of contractual prayers, or *nidhrin*, by Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and Maronite and Orthodox Christians in Lebanon, noting sect-specific differences with respect to the supernatural entities enlisted for assistance and the types of payments offered by petitioners.

<sup>142</sup> Busby (2006: 82-5), in writing of Christians in the predominantly Hindu Indian state of Kerala, has described the central importance of Mary, who was thought to possess *shakti* (divine power) and was considered a deity akin to Hindu goddesses. But in contrast with Hindu deities, Mary was not seen as having a hostile or vindictive character and her power was exerted only for good.

concept of power transcends religious boundaries; in Sri Lanka, Buddhist, Hindu, Roman Catholic and some Muslim sites can all have *haskam* (Bastin 2002: 5-6). Beliefs about the potency of the Madaba church may have been introduced to Sri Lankans by Jordanian employers, some of whom also believed in its efficacy. According to one local apparition story, thieves plotting to steal gold and other offerings crept into the church one night. As they entered the shrine room, Mary's hands came to life, glowing blue and waving to indicate that the men should not steal. The thieves fled, leaving the offerings untouched. Such stories may have inspired the notion that the place has *haskam*. But vow making in a place or to a certain entity is believed in on the basis of positive results.

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Figure 16: Lighting candles in front of the Church of Saint George, Salt

Seeta's story illustrates the particular significance of vows in the lives of migrant women. During her 7-year tenure as a live-in domestic worker in Jordan, Seeta had made many pilgrimages to Madaba to make and fulfil vows. Most concerned kin-related matters in Sri Lanka. On one occasion, Seeta's daughter's boyfriend had become violent and had threatened to kidnap her unless she married him. Her daughter refused, wanting to attend university before marriage. Seeta was terrified that her daughter would be snatched away, but as long as she was in Jordan, there was little she could do. Seeta made a vow to the Virgin Mary that if the boyfriend left the girl alone, Seeta would return with two pigeons that she would set free. In time, the boyfriend stopped making threats and so Seeta brought two pigeons from Amman in a plastic carrier and released them in the church courtyard. She told me she had freed the pigeons as a way of releasing her

daughter from her boyfriend's clutches. For Seeta and other women, ritual vows play a crucial role in allowing them to react to crises at home despite their physical separation. In Seeta's case, vow making enabled her to fulfil her maternal duty to protect her daughter in a way she could not have otherwise.<sup>143</sup>

Although it is common for Sri Lankan women in Jordan to visit shrines together, they generally do not discuss their own vows in detail with one another on such trips. Although not necessarily secret, vows are private, solemn matters. In some cases, however, several people may make coordinated vows. For example, three women who were close friends made a vow together. One was suffering from a back injury that prevented her from working. She and two friends made a vow at the shrine in Madaba in the hopes that her back would be healed. One of the women was unable to leave her employer's home to return to the shrine every Friday, and so the other two made the payments and performed the rites for her. Women also make vows on behalf of other domestic workers who are not permitted to leave their employers' homes.

Making vows in Jordan does not supplant doing so in Sri Lanka. Vows may be performed in both places concurrently or in a series. The way in which vow making at churches in Jordan overlaps with activities in Sri Lanka is highlighted by the example of Neeta, who was employed as a domestic worker in Amman for nearly 10 years and with whose family I resided in Sri Lanka. While working in Jordan, Neeta often made vows at the shrine in Madaba. Upon returning to Sri Lanka, she made vows at Saint Anthony's church in Kochchikade, the National Basilica of Our Lady of Lanka in Tewatte and several temples, including Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo. I accompanied her on some of these journeys and came to know what her vows were about. At 34 years of age, Neeta was unmarried, a fact that caused great distress. She was eager to tap all possible resources in the hopes that the problem could be solved and a suitable marriage partner found. Her sisters, who had never worked abroad, frowned on her frequent trips to the church in Kochchikade in fulfilment of her vow to Saint Anthony. They argued that spending money and time to get there was wasteful. It is possible that Neeta's exposure to churches in Jordan made her more inclined to seek assistance from saints than her siblings. However, it should be stressed again that it is not unusual for Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims in Sri Lanka, regardless of whether they have migrated, to make vows to Catholic saints or seek assistance from Catholic priests

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<sup>143</sup> Several scholars have written about the particular importance vows hold for women and marginalised groups. Uddin (2006: 94) describes sex workers in Bangladesh who, as a stigmatised group, are excluded from most formal religious practices in mosques and instead visit saints' tombs to make vows. As Hurman (2006: 29) writes, women in south Asia often take vows for the sake of family harmony, for example to maintain good married life, for fertility or for the health of their relatives.

known to have special powers.<sup>144</sup> Neeta's case illustrates the fact that the same vows can be made to entities associated with various faiths, as supplements.



Figure 17: Saint Anthony's Church, Kochchikade, Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, specific deities are solicited for assistance depending on the nature of the devotee's problem. For example, help from Pattini may be sought for problems relating to disease and fertility, whereas Saint Anthony may be helpful in finding lost or missing things. Among Sinhala Catholics, Saint Anne is generally sought for matters pertaining to religion, Saint Anthony for business, and Saint Sebastian for illnesses (Stirrat 1981: 187). Among Stirrat's informants, saints and gods had functional equivalents, such that Saint Anthony was said to be the same as Kataragama, and Pattini as the Virgin Mary (1981: 188). The popularity of deities varies over time (Goonasekera 2006: 109; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: Chapter 3).<sup>145</sup> Vows at the Madaba church were most commonly made to the Virgin Mary, although they varied greatly in

<sup>144</sup> Saint Anthony's Church in Kochchikade had become so popular for the performance of vows that, on a visit in the spring of 2008, I noticed a section explicitly marked 'Vows'. Nearby, a nun sat in a cubicle giving instructions and counselling Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims how to perform them. She told me that she welcomed people of all faiths because Saint Anthony helps everyone. Tuesday was the most popular day to come to the church, but Hindus more commonly came on Fridays after visiting a nearby *kovil* (temple).

<sup>145</sup> While Lord Buddha discouraged worship of deities as a means of seeking salvation, instead emphasising discipline and right conduct, deity worship pervades Sri Lanka. Most Buddhist temples have shrines for the Hindu Gods Ganesha, Vishnu and Shiva. Buddhists visit such shrines after attending temple to pay homage to the deities, who, unlike Lord Buddha, grant favours or bestow blessings. There is a rich literature describing the Sinhalese Buddhist pantheon. On how particular deities are associated with specific regions and how they have been used to legitimate political power, see Winslow (1984).

purpose. The manner in which Buddhists and Catholics made and fulfilled vows, and their reasons for doing so, appeared to be common. But evidence for this is sketchy and more information would be needed to draw a clearer picture of how migrants in Amman viewed the functional specialisations of the Virgin Mary or Saint George compared with the Buddhist pantheon.

Although this chapter has focused on pilgrimages for the sake of vows, Catholics and smaller numbers of Buddhists also make pilgrimages to other holy sites in Jordan, chiefly to the site on the Jordan River where John the Baptist is believed to have baptised Jesus and to Mount Nebo. Visits to such sites may be opportunities for serious pilgrimage and pleasurable tourism. Among my interlocutors, these sites were visited less frequently than the church in Madaba in part because they are located a greater distance from Amman and are harder for migrants to reach using public transport.

Pilgrimages to make vows at churches in Madaba and Salt were not viewed favourably by all. Father Gabriel tried to rein in these activities. During one of his Friday sermons, he instructed the faithful to put their trust directly in God rather than in such places. During the summer of 2008, I accompanied a large group of women on an all-day excursion that had been organised by Father Gabriel and several migrants. Three minibuses had been rented and dozens of parcels of rice and curry had been packed for the journey. The plan was to visit Madaba, enjoy a picnic lunch on the desert hills of Mount Nebo and then descend to the Dead Sea for a late afternoon float on its salty surface. When we arrived in Madaba, many were disappointed to learn that Father Gabriel had arranged for us to visit a new Catholic church on the outskirts of town instead of the far more popular Saint George's Greek Orthodox Church. This vexed some of my non-Christian companions, who did not wish to attend the service. They decided to skip it and took off in one of the minibuses, later rejoining the group on Mount Nebo. Father Gabriel's effort to discourage attendance at the Madaba shrine was not surprising given that it competed with his Friday Mass in Amman. As an alternative sacred source, it undermined his authority.<sup>146</sup> But his attempts to put an end to such activities generally proved unsuccessful. Pentecostal church leaders also disapproved of members attending churches in Madaba and Salt. Exclusivity and superiority over other religious traditions was strongly emphasised in their sermons; worshippers of 'statues' and 'false gods', as one missionary put it, would be condemned. They viewed vow making as degenerate, an affront to the Christian belief in Jesus as the unique and universal saviour. None of the women I knew who regularly attended Pentecostal services talked about going to either site or making

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<sup>146</sup> It is not uncommon for religious clergy to disapprove of the performance of vows. This has been documented, for example, among Catholic bishops in Tamil Nadu by Raj (2006: 62). Stirrat (1981) has described the competition that developed between priests and cults to the saints in Sri Lanka with specific reference to a cult surrounding Saint Sebastian at Mirisgama. In another vein, in his work on South Indian Catholics, Mosse (2006) has written of how specific cultural practices relating to possession, exorcism and sorcery were regarded by Jesuit priests as non-Christian corrosive influences.

vows, although they may have done so. Overall, despite the views of some clergy, for those Sri Lankans who have the opportunity to visit churches, vows to the Virgin Mary and Saint Anthony play an important role as the most direct way migrants can access divine power.

### **Magic and Miracles at the Church of Saint George**

In addition to the church in Madaba, the other primary site seen as having *haskam* is the Church of Saint George (*Kineeset Abuna Jereis*) in the town of Salt. Like the shrine in Madaba, it is a popular pilgrimage point for making vows. But it is also a site where magic is practiced. This includes protection spells to avert evil, cure illnesses or lessen negative planetary influences, in addition to sorcerous spells (*kodiwina*) and retributive charms to exact revenge for sorcery (*paligahanawa*). I use the term ‘sorcery’ to refer to acts designed to harm others using supernatural forces. ‘Magic’ denotes a broader field of action designed for beneficial or harmful purposes. Among migrants in Jordan, accusations of sorcery may crop up to explain illnesses, calamities or actions that might be considered shameful. For example, women may allege that they had been seduced by men after having been charmed. Stories about Sri Lankan women performing charms to make men fall in love with them are also common. Such charms of attraction, or *vashi*, typically come in the form of food and involve men from other countries, namely India, Pakistan and Egypt. Women also accuse other migrants of bringing charmed oils or sweets from Sri Lanka to destroy friendships or cause illnesses. I heard several stories about Keralan migrants in Amman who perform Malayali *gurukam*, a type of charm originating in Kerala that are reputed to be especially powerful and difficult to counteract. While simple charms can be performed by non-specialists, in Sri Lanka it is common to turn to professionals to do the work, and I was not able to locate any in Jordan.<sup>147</sup> People would have been reluctant to admit knowing how to perform sorcery, and even possessing knowledge of others with such skills could raise suspicion. Given that this was such a delicate subject, I only asked women I knew well about sorcery. My questions were often met with raised eyebrows and amused surprise that I would know about such things. One friend teased me for having asked and jokingly performed an impersonation of a *yakka* (demon) to see if I also knew about that. Many of the women I knew best had worked in Jordan for many years and had a cosmopolitan sense of what people from other cultures did and did not believe. They assumed I did not believe in sorcery, and their amusement at my questions may have related to a sense of awkwardness about the matter. Those who spoke most freely about sorcery professed not to ‘believe’ in it. Upon further discussion, however, it often became clear that in fact they believed it was immoral to practice sorcery, not that doing so would necessarily be ineffective. They may not have believed a particular illness or

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<sup>147</sup> Similarly, although astrology is an important part of Sri Lankan culture, I was not able to identify any Sri Lankan astrologers in Jordan.

misfortune had been caused by sorcery, but they often had a degree of doubt and would not rule out the possibility.

A case of alleged sorcery occurred in the summer of 2008. Hemawathi, a woman with whom I spent time regularly, and I went to visit the home of her friend Delani. Both women are Buddhists employed as domestic workers. Unlike Hemawathi, Delani does not live with her employer. The previous day, Delani had moved into a new apartment, which she was renting with Lakmal, a man commonly known as her 'husband', and two of his male friends. This was our first visit to their new abode. In the main sitting area, Delani had arranged bowls of oil, water and turmeric to ward off *ess vaha* (poison eye) and evil spirits. Several weeks previously, I had made a trip to Beirut. Knowing that I would be going there, Delani had asked me to bring her a statue of the Virgin Mary. Like other migrants, Delani believed that having such a statue in her home would confer protection and ward off danger. She said there were nicer Virgin Mary statues available in Lebanon, and she wanted a large one. I brought one back for her, and when I gave it to her, she said my having done so would bring me *pin* (merit).<sup>148</sup> She placed it on top of the television, a prominent spot from which it could be seen from all points of the room. Delani gave us a tour of the apartment, and we then went into the kitchen to prepare lunch. While doing so, Delani and Hemawathi spoke of another woman, Lata, who was known to be jealous of Delani's relationship with Lakmal. Delani thought she would be especially envious to learn that they had moved into a new apartment together. They joked about whether Lata might try to do something bad to Delani. As they were saying this, Delani placed a Pyrex dish on top of the gas stove to heat some food. Minutes later, the Pyrex dish exploded, sending shards of glass and bits of food shooting through the air. We froze in startled amazement. As we began to clean up the mess, Hemawathi and Delani laughed about whether Lata had cursed Delani's new home or if, as Hemawathi suggested, the accident had simply been the result of them foolishly having placed a Pyrex dish directly onto a gas flame.

Jordanian employers could also be the victims of sorcery. In one especially grave example, a Sri Lankan woman whom I shall call Kumudu was said to have caused her employer's suicide. The employer was said to have treated Kumudu very well, even helping to bring her boyfriend to Jordan. When the boyfriend began spending too much time at the employer's house visiting Kumudu, the employer objected. Eventually, under circumstances not explained to me, the boyfriend had to return to Sri Lanka. Kumudu was incensed and blamed the employer for her boyfriend's departure. A year later, the employer committed suicide by taking poison. The women who relayed the story to me said that the employer had seemed happy, had been well educated,

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<sup>148</sup> Buddhists acquire *pin* when they do actions conforming to Lord Buddha's teachings, and this assists in their ultimate salvation. As Spiro writes, '... the greater the merit, the more pleasurable the rebirth' (1982: 69).

had a good job at a bank, and had two children. Hence, they reasoned, she had no reason to kill herself. Sorcery was the most logical explanation. Kumudu, who was not well liked by the women who told me this story, must have cursed her.

Tales of Sri Lankan, Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers who performed magic on their employers were also told by Jordanians. These stories, most often recounted by female employers, commonly involved a domestic worker performing a love charm on a male employer to seduce him.<sup>149</sup> In several cases, such allegations explained why Arab men had married or taken Asian women as mistresses. They underlined fears that domestic workers might exceed their stations, threatening employers' own positions in the household or creating competition for the affections of men and children. Apprehension about sorcery parallels broader anxieties about the unseen practices and hidden motives of foreign women working under employers' very noses.

Like Sri Lankans, Jordanians distinguish between different categories of magic (*sihr*, in Arabic). 'Black magic', or that with harmful intent, is most commonly referred to as '*sh'awadha*'. 'White magic', on the other hand, is meant to have beneficial or protective effects. Although black magic is expressly forbidden in the Quran, both types are practiced. While the cultural inflections differ, some forms of magic performed in Arab contexts resemble Sri Lankan varieties. Tying knots and blowing into them, as mentioned in Al-Bukhari's *hadith*, is similar to string tying (*nuul bandinawa*) in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankans and Arabic-speakers alike share a fear of evil eye, known as *ess vaha* (poison eye) in Sinhala and '*ain al-hasad* (envious eye), or simply *al-'ain* (the eye), in Arabic. Verbal curses, or *kata vaha* (mouth poison) in Sinhala, are also a cause of concern in both cultures. As with the evil eye, they need not be intended to have results. One Sri Lankan woman told me she was recruited by her Arab Christian employer to perform charms on the employer's own children; one to break up her daughter's love affair with an unsuitable boy, and the other to encourage her son to study harder for his *Tawjihi* exams (the general secondary examination). The son eventually discovered the charm, which had been hidden under his pillow. When confronted, the employer blamed the domestic worker for having made it.

Should a Sri Lankan migrant want to instigate or counteract sorcery in Jordan, she could choose from several options. The first would be to bring, or have someone else bring, pre-prepared materials from Sri Lanka.<sup>150</sup> Provided that she has the requisite knowledge, a second option would be for her to perform her own magic at home or at the church in Salt. Charms vary in their elaborateness. The simplest versions involve tying a string onto which *mantras* (incantations to

<sup>149</sup> These stories are not unique to Jordan. In 2007, four Indonesian domestic workers were accused by their Saudi Arabian employers of having practiced 'black magic' on the family's teenaged son (Human Rights Watch 2008b: 88). Two died from the injuries inflicted upon them, and the other two were detained by Saudi authorities. Other domestic workers have been convicted of witchcraft in Saudi courts (*ibid*).

<sup>150</sup> Likewise, in the absence of Ayurvedic practitioners in Jordan, many women brought their own pre-prepared indigenous medical supplies.

invoke supernatural beings) are whispered.<sup>151</sup> Another simple charm involves writing the victim's name and/or name and birth date on a piece of paper and tying it lightly. The victim's personal effects, such as fingernail clippings or strands of hair, may be incorporated to increase the strength of the charm. Another common charm involves carving a *yantra* (ritual drawing) onto a thin metal sheet that then is rolled up and placed in a metal capsule. The item then can be hidden in the victim's home. If discovered, retaliatory charms can be enacted to reverse it. A final option involves soliciting the assistance of a ritual specialist through the mail and/or telephone. This requires a substantial sum of money and access to the telephone or post. This latter option, and the practice of magic at the church in Salt, will be discussed in the following paragraphs.<sup>152</sup>

One Friday morning in July of 2008, Hemawathi and I took a minibus to Salt, a town half an hour's drive from Amman that was once an Ottoman regional administrative centre. The town has retained some of its old charm, with beautiful though now ramshackle late Ottoman-era sandstone houses with high-arched windows. Hemawathi and I ambled through the town's winding streets to the Church of Saint George. We arrived shortly before 9 am, and aside from the church caretakers, the only other people present were half a dozen Sri Lankans, some of whom Hemawathi knew. Over the course of the three hours we spent at the church that day, dozens more Sri Lankans trickled in, most of them women in groups of two or three but also couples with young children. By 10:30 am, a group of 30-odd Arab Christians poured in, thronging the small church. There is an ebb and flow to the popularity of this site and the church in Madaba. During the summer of 2008, the Salt church was gaining near cult-status among groups of Arab Christians as well as Sri Lankans, but it was not clear how long its notoriety might last. Not all of the Christians in Jordan with whom I spoke had heard about the miracles associated with the church. Nevertheless, the site provided a rare instance in which Arabs and Sri Lankan domestic workers inter-mingled as devotees on equal footing. While Arab Christians frequently encountered Sri Lankans at churches, the extent to which non-Christians used such sites probably extends beyond what local patrons would imagine. Interestingly, however, Sri Lankans have been incorporated into the miracles told about the church by Arabs.

Soon after we arrived, Hemawathi bought some candles and went to pray in front of a painting of Saint George. She then knelt in front of a statue to the Virgin Mary, touching its feet and then putting her hands on her face. Physical contact with such statues was common and played an important role, as has been described in other contexts (e.g. by Busby 2006: 90), for it enabled

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<sup>151</sup> Some *mantras* are unintelligible to non-specialists, while others are known invocations to deities or other spirits.

<sup>152</sup> Another option, which I was unable to investigate, involves going to a local Arab specialist of magic. I was told of a 'dark-skinned' Palestinian man in one of the refugee camps who performed magic. The brother of one of migrant was taken there before travelling to work in Iraq in the hopes that he would be protected.

people to transfer power from a shrine or statue to themselves. Hemawathi then went to the back of the church and knelt before a small, cavernous hole. There is no pre-established order in which to visit these parts of the church, but the cavernous hole was the focus of most of the attention. According to local legend, it marks the spot where a local shepherd was sleeping one night when Saint George appeared before him on his horse and asked him to build a church. Local residents say that when the church is shut at night, the sounds of Saint George's horse's footsteps can be heard from outside, alerting people to the fact that the church remains active with the presence of the saint. My Sri Lankan interlocutors said that the cave marks the spot where Saint George killed the dragon, and this is what gives it '*anuhas*', or influence or power to grant wishes. For Sri Lankans, the church has a mixture of positive and negative energy. Positive for the good works that Saint George has performed, but also negative because it is associated with the dragon he slayed, and this lends it dangerous, violent potency.<sup>153</sup> Inside the cave, devotees placed a bowl of oil and a small bouquet of jasmine flowers in front of an image of the saint, similar to the lotus flowers that might be left as offerings at a Buddhist *devale* (shrine room) in Sri Lanka. Behind this was a basket into which money had been tossed. The cave was also littered with strips of white paper, folded or crumpled up, onto which requests had been written. These strips of paper are available at the entrance to the church and both Arabs and Sri Lankans used them. Many Sri Lankans took off their shoes prior to kneeling before the cave, though Jordanians did not. Not far from the cave, an Arab woman was rubbing holy oil on the heads of other worshippers, some of whom were Sri Lankan.

During our visit, I was greeted by one of the church caretakers, who gave me a tour. While doing so, he gave me a vial of holy oil, holy salt, a pamphlet about the church, and several strips of green cloth, green because Saint George is known as '*al-khidr*' ('the green one', in Arabic). The green cloth was used in several ways. Sri Lankans tied coins in it and made vows, as in the manner described above for the white cloth in Madaba. Hemawathi had tied a strip to her wrist on a previous visit and there it remained, frayed and worn. The caretaker recounted stories of people who had been blessed by the church, including a woman whose diabetes had been cured, and a crippled man who miraculously regained the use of his legs. The caretaker explained that a series of new miracles had begun taking place, one of which involved a Sri Lankan woman who had given birth to a blind child. According to the caretaker, in January 2008, the woman brought her daughter to the church and placed her on a spot on the floor where an imprint from one of Saint George's horse's feet is said to be visible. The infant's sight was miraculously restored. This wondrous story was told by Sri Lankans and Arabs alike. According to Sri Lankans, the Salt church was unique in being the only church in Jordan where sorcery could be performed. Like the

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<sup>153</sup> This is similar to the dual nature of gods in Sinhalese Buddhism and Hinduism, in which they can be a source of help or destruction. Places like the Seenigrama Devale near Galle in Sri Lanka are said to have both beneficial and perilous potency and can be visited for the purposes of sorcery or protective magic.

Madaba shrine, it may have gained its fame among Sri Lankans from Christian Arab employers. But the emphasis on the site's dangerous potency due to its association with Saint George and the dragon represents a Sri Lankan interpretation.

Although not connected with the use of sacred sites in Jordan, another option for the performance of magic available to the Sri Lankan diaspora involves transnational commercial networks. *Medaperadiga*, a Sinhala-language magazine popular with Sri Lankans in the Middle East, is peppered with advertisements for Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka performing astrological interpretations, charms and protective spells. Such charms run the gamut from help with addictions (*suraava suduwa*) and assistance in bad astrological periods (*graha apala*) to female and male attraction *yantras* (*stri purusha vashi yantra*). One such advertisement, from a Buddhist monk in Matara (which is located on the south coast and is an area infamous for the performance of sorcery), stated that people living overseas could use DHL to contact him and would receive a response with a solution within three days. The advert also mentioned that people of all religions, castes and nationalities would be treated equally. Another advertisement linked to a website, on which a Buddhist monk in Panadura whom I will call Ananda Thero offered to perform Malayali love charms, spells invoking 'evil spirits to make your business or anything successful', charms to expedite marriages or enable conception, as well as protection against black magic. During field research in Sri Lanka, I visited the Venerable Ananda Thero in the hopes of learning about his clientele in the Middle East. Having called in advance to make an appointment, my friend Roshini and I travelled to the town of Panadura to meet him. We arrived at his office early one morning and sat in a large room alongside 12 clients waiting patiently. While waiting, a woman in tattered clothes with three children in tow addressed all of those present and began to tell her story, sobbing as she spoke. She had travelled from Hatton, a town in the upcountry district of Nuwara Eliya, to see the monk in the hopes of being released from a charm cast by her husband's mistress. The charm had caused her business, a *kadde* (small shop), to fail. Ever since she had been cursed, she had been plagued by the smell of cigarettes. Indeed, a smell of smoke seemed to emanate from her, provoking mild alarm among those present. Hours later, when it was finally our turn to see Ananda Thero, Roshini and I entered his air-conditioned consultation room, depositing on his desk a thick stack of betel leaves, the customary gift for such occasions. Ananda Thero sat perched behind a computer. Stacks of mail and DHL envelopes were scattered on his desk. He explained that in addition to the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Catholic clients in Sri Lanka who visited him, he served Sri Lankan migrants throughout the Middle East, Europe, Canada and Australia. He estimated that he received between 100 and 200 requests per month by mail, three quarters of which were from the Middle East. He said that most of his clients were women, adding with a chuckle that this was because most problems were caused by men, and women had to deal with them. The most popular request he received from the Middle East was from domestic

workers wanting *hithawath wenawa* (friendship charms) for employers. They wanted to 'win the hearts' of their employers so that they would be paid more, trusted, and given more freedom. In such instances, clients sent him a photo, the name and in some cases bodily substances and personal effects belonging to the intended target. Ananda Thero then prepared the materials, enclosing them in a metal capsule. He said he received requests for *kodiwina* (evil charms) but that these were less popular than charms to befriend employers or *vashi* to attract members of the opposite sex. Whereas he repeated a *mantra* 20 or 30 times for a client in Sri Lanka, he repeated it hundreds of times for a client living abroad. This was time-consuming and, hence, required more money. While those who came to visit his office could pay as little as 700 Rs (\$6) for a charm, clients abroad paid a minimum of 12,500 Rs (\$114). Given that many domestic workers earn only \$125 per month, this is not an insignificant sum. The greater the distance the charm had to travel, the more *mantras* he had to repeat to ensure that it would retain its potency en route. Thus, the power of the charms was charged up like batteries and gradually wore off in time.<sup>154</sup> It may seem paradoxical for monks meant to eschew material pursuits to profit by making charms. Some Sri Lankans, including my friend Roshini, frown upon the practice. But Ananda Thero evidently did not feel sheepish about his activities. Further information would be required to draw firm conclusions about the popularity of such long-distance charm providers, the kinds of charms performed, and their clientele. Ananda Thero's account, and the abundance of advertisements for similar services in magazines catering to expatriates, indicates that this is one of several options available to Sri Lankans in the Middle East. Given the high cost of such services, however, it is one that few domestic workers could afford.

I have included these sections on the practice of sorcery chiefly to illustrate another way in which migrants have appropriated Christian churches as places in which to access divine powers. Like Bastin (2003), I do not wish to pathologise the use of magic as symptomatic of social problems particular to migration. As I have described, many of these practices are routine throughout Sri Lanka. They do not necessarily play a more central role in migrants' lives. But given the limited supernatural resources available to migrants, they provide a valuable means by which individuals can assume an element of control over their lives.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how, faced with the curtailment of many of their personal freedoms, Sinhala Buddhists in Jordan have 'discovered' alternative rituals and places of worship. Inspired by local stories of miracles, many have made Christian churches sacred spaces where divine

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<sup>154</sup> This is similar to Busby's description (2006: 87-89) of icons of Mary or the Holy Family in Christian households in Kerala; the images were brought into people's homes because they brought with them the presence of God and warded off evil and danger, but their power ran out over time and needed to be recharged in ceremonies performed by a priest.

powers can be tapped, whether for benign or malevolent purposes. Vow performance is particularly important in this context. No involvement on the part of religious officials is required, enabling migrants to perform them on their own, undetected, as and when they wish. These rituals constitute a crucial means by which women maintain links with kin at home and gain a sense of authority in matters over which they otherwise may be unable to act.

The private and individualised practice of vows is one of the most common reasons Sri Lankans patronise churches in Jordan, but it is not the only one. Other migrants find solace in shared communal activities, including Catholic Mass and Pentecostal worship. New engagements with evangelical groups provide a sense of belonging as well as a source of healing. Moreover, as Liebelt (2010) and McKay (2010) point out, such affiliations allow domestic workers to craft positive self-images amidst otherwise socially alienating work. They also enable migrants to cope with uncertainty, alienation and the difficulties of being separated from loved ones in Sri Lanka. One matter that remains elusive is what those domestic workers who are confined to their employers' homes do when their ability to display outward signs of religiosity is restricted. But for those who have the freedom to leave their workplaces, churches have acquired meaning and potency that exceed religious divisions.

At an analytical level, this chapter makes two points. The first is that ritual activities and church attendance have important ideal, as well as pragmatic, functions and should not be viewed in narrowly instrumental terms. Communal religious activities provide migrants with a feeling of fellowship and belonging. Moreover, through ritual, migrants are able to negotiate social and ethical concerns about respectability, shame and insecurity. Vow performance enables those separated from loved ones to gain a sense of control over kin-related matters about which they may otherwise feel powerless. Although many of the activities described here are motivated by immediate concerns arising in the context of migration, they are not reducible to the 'problems' of being a migrant. Rather, they relate to wider moral and ethical questions about one's sense of self and place in society. This is a view of religion as affective, emotional and therapeutic. In this way, the analysis is complementary to other approaches that stress the importance of aesthetics and performance in Sri Lankan religiosity (Kapferer 1983, Samuels 2008).

The second point is that although some of the activities include the adaptive use of Christian sites of worship by Buddhists, this is not a case of Buddhism transformed. Rather, these activities should be interpreted as Buddhism by other means, a further instance of a pluralist approach to the divine. The context at hand intersects with other accounts of 'plural worship' in Sri Lanka (Bastin 2002). Examples include Obeyesekere's (1978) work on the popularity of the Kataragama temple, Gombrich and Obeyesekere's (1988) studies of the rise of *bhakti* (Hindu devotional) religiosity among Sinhala Buddhists, Stirrat's (1992) account of Catholic shrines with miraculous efficacy

for Catholics and Buddhists alike and Bastin's (2002) work on a Hindu Munnesvaram temple where Sinhala Buddhists worship alongside Tamil Saivites. Belonging to one religious tradition does not preclude the possibility of seeking divine assistance from entities or sites associated with another. This is true for Sri Lankans in Jordan and at home. It is not something peculiar to Theravada Buddhism or Sri Lanka, as Mosse (2006) has shown with reference to Catholic communities in South India. Although the ritual practices described here represent varied influences, the paradoxes that may be implied by the interweaving of diverse elements are not conspicuous to most practitioners. Portraying their activities as 'syncretistic' or as a composite of different layers would not be accurate because such layers are often 'indistinguishable' to the worshippers themselves (Obeyesekere 1963). This is not to say that people do not recognise differing traditions. Indeed, the harmonious aspects of religious synthesis do not rule out conflicts, contradictions and competition when individuals attempt to impose boundaries. However, for my Sri Lankan interlocutors in Jordan, no particular problem is posed by members of one group invoking deities or engaging in practices associated with another. They have an implicit belief in the existence of a sacred continuum comprised of multiple religions. For them, several faiths make up an unbounded field from which they can pick and choose in their search for ways of coping with everyday life. This is not an instance of Buddhism capitulating to Christianity, but of Buddhism practised by other means in a diasporic setting.

### *Consequences and Contradictions*

It is generally assumed that people from 'poor' countries who take up higher-paying employment overseas gain from having done so. Much of the social science literature on migration is based on the premise – explicit or implied – that labour migrants are 'better off' for having gone abroad, though few authors elaborate on what 'better off' entails (Bartram 2010: 355-358). The conventional view has been buoyed by a 'new surge of interest' in migration as a driver of economic development in poor countries (Newland 2007). Academic studies and policy statements alike emphasise the positive results of migration for migrants and their home countries (Castles 2008: 2). More nuanced analyses of the impact of migration take into account the ways it is conditioned by the specific circumstances of employment, and the overall political and economic context. Yet the question of how migrants themselves evaluate the consequences is often overlooked. In the case of Sri Lankan labour migration to the Middle East, migrants' views are rarely straightforward. It is hoped that migration will lead to improvements in living standards, but this outcome is not automatically assumed, and the possibility of tragic consequences may even be emphasised. Migration is a gamble, but it has become such an entrenched pattern in Sri Lanka that a woman's decision *not* to migrate could raise questions, especially if her family's financial circumstances are poor (Gamburd 2008a: 24). This chapter brings migrants' own views into focus by posing the question of how they judge the material, social and emotional implications of their sojourns.

A second line of inquiry that will be taken up relates to the 'temporary' nature of so-called 'return migration' to Arab countries. Guest workers are regarded as entering Arab labour markets for limited periods before returning to their home countries. As discussed in chapter 5, this assumption lies at the heart of the *kafala* system, which precludes permanent settlement. Yet for many migrants, what is intended to be a temporary stay ends up being anything but such. Some Sri Lankan women stay in Jordan for dozens of years and may even decide to remain indefinitely. The possibility to settle permanently in legal terms is limited to those who marry citizens, yet migrants manage to stay on by paying Jordanians to act as their sponsors or residing without residence permits. Given the dismal conditions of employment described in chapters 5 and 6, why do some migrants choose to remain? And what are the experiences of those who eventually return to Sri Lanka after substantial periods abroad?

To investigate these questions, I draw on the reflections of four women to illustrate, through brief sketches, the contradictions experienced by many migrants during and after their sojourns. Only

one of the four is Buddhist, the others are Christian. They do not reflect the demographic makeup of the majority of Sri Lankan women who migrate to the Middle East. While there are no reliable statistics, Christians appear to be in the minority, as they are throughout Sri Lanka as a whole. I met two of the women described in this chapter at Catholic church services in Amman, this being one of the only places we could meet and socialise regularly. I have selected their stories not only because these are some of the women I know best, and as a result they confided to me about their lives and difficulties, but also because they represent a range of attitudes in relation to the consequences of migration and what it means to go 'home'.

### **Lucy**

Lucy and I met soon after I arrived in Jordan in August 2006, and over the course of my first year of research she gave me weekly Sinhala lessons. Lucy worked for a group of British expatriates, cleaning their office and preparing South Asian meals for a monthly salary of 150 JD (\$212). Several days a week, she worked in a foster home for abandoned children. She also supplemented her income by giving private Sinhala lessons to a small group of children with Sri Lankan mothers and Arab or South Asian fathers. Those with Jordanian fathers had Jordanian citizenship and could attend Arabic-language, government schools, and apart from interactions with their mothers, this was their only opportunity to learn Sinhala. Lucy had been living in Jordan for twelve years, during half of which she had been without a valid residence permit. As a result, she owed more than 3,000 JDs (\$4,231) in overstay fines. Not having a visa also meant that she ran the risk of being questioned by the police and held in detention, and that she had been unable to leave Jordan to visit her family in Sri Lanka. She longed to see her sons, Christopher and Malcolm. Christopher had come to Jordan briefly on a tourist visa but had himself been detained and sent back to Sri Lanka because he did not have a residence permit. Lucy spoke with or sent text messages to her sons nearly every day and sporadically sent them small amounts of money and gifts. When I planned a visit to Sri Lanka and told Lucy I would be willing to bring her sons a small parcel, she gave me three large shopping bags full of items, including mobile phones and other gadgets, watches, belts, clothing and candies. These were tokens of her love, ways she continued to act as mother to her sons despite her lengthy absence.

At the age of 54, Lucy suffered from high blood pressure and arthritis and had experienced several bouts of illness during which time she had been unable to work. She earned more than many other Sri Lankan domestic workers in Amman but had no savings and was burdened with debt acquired during her illness. When unable to work, she had struggled to pay the 40 JDs (\$56) she owed in rent for the small room she and her daughter Rose shared near the Second Circle, a neighbourhood in western Amman. When her health deteriorated further, a non-governmental organisation that assists migrants began negotiations with the Jordanian government to waive her

fines so that she could return home. In light of her condition, an agreement was eventually reached to allow Lucy and Rose, along with several other women in poor health, to go back to Sri Lanka. Several weeks previously, Lucy had told me her life had been 'ruined' by coming to Jordan; she believed she would be in a better position had she had stayed in Sri Lanka. She often expressed the idea that the time she'd spent working as a domestic worker had been wasted. Upon struggling to recall a name during a conversation, she said, 'My dear, this is what life in Jordan does to us [Sri Lankans]. We are cleaning and doing hard work all the time and don't get to use our minds. So our memories just go. My mind isn't like it used to be.' On another occasion, she said Sri Lankan women in Jordan didn't get to make full use of their own talents and skills while engaged in tedious work for others. The sense of wasted time or of not being in control of one's own time was expressed by other domestic workers but seemed particularly acute for Lucy, who had come from a relatively well-off family and had expected more from life. She often referred to her life as a series of missed chances and unfulfilled dreams. Although she had never been enchanted by Amman, once the prospect of departure was looming, she felt ambivalent about leaving. She looked forward to being reunited with her sons but was heartbroken that she would be returning without savings.

Lucy grew up in the hill country south of Kandy where her father worked as a tea plantation manager. Her family had been relatively comfortable, and Lucy had excelled in school and completed her A-Levels. She fell in love with her cousin (FZS), but her father refused to let them marry. Although they were cross-cousins (*neana-massinā*) and might have been considered a perfect match, the parish priest frowned upon marriage between cousins, and Lucy's father, who was a devout Catholic, forbade the union.<sup>155</sup> The couple eloped and went to live with the groom's family (who evidently had not opposed the union) until they could afford a small, one-room home of their own. Lucy's husband was killed in a motorcycle accident some years later, and Lucy was forced to sell her saris, jewellery and other items to support herself and their three children. She worked as a private tutor, turning her home into a makeshift school and giving lessons to children in her neighbourhood. Inspired by the mother of one of her students, she eventually decided to seek work abroad. At the age of 42, she entrusted her mother and sister with caring for her children and left for Jordan.

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<sup>155</sup> Sinhalese kinship is related to the Dravidian type of South India. The offspring of ego's mother's brother and father's sister are considered 'cross-cousins', whereas that of the mother's sister and father's brother are 'parallel cousins', or classificatory siblings. Marriage between cross-cousins has been and in some communities remains the 'ideal' (Leach 1961, Tambiah 1965 and Yalman 1967). There is, however, some dispute as to whether cross-cousin marriage was prescribed, preferred or merely a seldom-attained ideal. Leach wrote that despite the formal rule, its actual incidence was rare in Pul Eliya, a Sinhala Buddhist town in the dry zone of Kandyan hill country. (1961: 88). Marrying a close relative in a nearby locality was more important. Leach also wrote that in practice, marriages may occur between classificatory siblings (1961: 128). Yalman writes that for the inhabitants of Terutenne, a Sinhala Buddhist village in the Kandyan highlands, cross-cousin marriage is 'strictly prescribed' (1967: 210).

Lucy initially worked as a live-in domestic worker, an arrangement she preferred because it enabled her to save her earnings. After just a year, Rose came to Jordan when it was decided Lucy's mother could no longer look after her. Rose, then seventeen years old, was mentally unwell and could not be left alone for long periods. Lucy's employer did not want both of them in her home, so the two sought other employment. For most of the eleven years they spent together in Jordan they lived in their own rented accommodation. They were cheated several times by people promising to act as their sponsors but failing to provide residence permits, and eventually they gave up and lived without visas.

As the date of her departure for Sri Lanka approached, Lucy became increasingly anxious. One evening I visited her home as she was packing her belongings. 'My heart is in pieces. I cry all the time,' she told me. She felt conflicted -- tired of feeling trapped in Jordan but saddened at the thought of leaving and uncertain of her future. Despite the financial problems she encountered in Amman, as long as she had been in good health she had been able to find work. Prospects were much more insecure in Sri Lanka. A main concern for many migrants in relation to going back is the fear of not being able to generate income. For Lucy, leaving Amman also meant bidding goodbye to many friends. She had been an active member of the Sri Lankan Christian and Buddhist Association and was well-known amongst the loose-knit network of migrants. The day before she left Amman in May 2007, I accompanied her to the market, where we bought several kilos of oranges and apples to take to Sri Lanka. Are oranges difficult to find in Sri Lanka? I asked. They are less expensive in Jordan, she explained. More importantly, people would expect her to have become wealthy during her tenure abroad. 'At least this way I will have something to give them. I won't come empty-handed,' she said. Migrants are expected to return laden with gifts and gold jewellery, an index of the success of their sojourns. Lucy felt ashamed not to have accumulated more savings. She had been able to send some money to her sons but aside from this had little to show for her time away.

In November 2007, Lucy and I met in Sri Lanka. Her health problems had continued, and she had been unsuccessful in her attempts to find a job as a care worker or private tutor. She also had new worries. The plot of land and small home she had left behind in Kandy District had been neglected while she was in Jordan. The villagers said they never expected her to return, and her neighbour had begun encroaching on her land, laying claim to more than a quarter acre by planting fruit trees. 'Why didn't you ask a relative to look after it for you?' I asked. 'That would have been worse than giving it to a stranger. Then I'd never get it back!' Lucy laughed. The villagers and the local Grama Sevaka refused to involve themselves in the dispute. Lucy had the deed to the land but lacked the money to initiate what she assumed would be lengthy legal proceedings against the neighbour. When I spoke to her again several weeks later, her son had been hospitalised following a fight with the neighbour's son, and Lucy hoped the police might

finally take action on her behalf. Lucy's reflections about her decision to migrate shifted at various points during the time we spent together in Jordan and may have changed again since we last spoke in 2008. The fact remains that despite a dozen years abroad, she returned to a financial situation that had changed little. By her own assessment, her economic aspirations had not been met.

### **Jayanthi**

At the age of 55 when I met her, Jayanthi had spent the better part of her adult life - more than two decades - working in Arab countries. From a family of eleven children in Jaela, a suburb north of Colombo, she married at the age of 16 and had four children. Her husband's salary as a bus conductor did not allow the young couple to build their own home, and at times Jayanthi resorted to working as a manual labourer to support them. In 1985, with the help of a sister who had migrated previously, Jayanthi travelled to Jordan with the goal of earning enough money to build a house. She worked for a French family and sent remittances to her husband every few months. At the end of her first four years in Amman, Jayanthi returned to Sri Lanka to discover that her husband had squandered her earnings by gambling. She had been suspicious about how he might use the money but was indignant upon learning the extent of the problem. The house she had intended to build was only partially constructed and was infested with weeds. 'He had no money left. None. My daughters had no gold earrings in their ears - the holes had even closed up! He owed money to so many shops. I was so fed up, absolutely fed up. I was through with married life,' Jayanthi said bitterly. This time she left her children with her mother and returned to Jordan. Months after arriving in Amman, she received word that her husband had been killed during a JVP uprising.<sup>156</sup> In haste, she returned to Sri Lanka, where she learned about yet more debts that her husband had incurred and for which his creditors now held her responsible. Jayanthi's husband had been the local JVP treasurer and gambled with party money, using Jayanthi's remittances to cover his debts. 'He wasted every last bit. That's why I have no house. I could only send my children to school. I paid for them to be educated. I'm glad for that, that I did that for them. But I couldn't do more after that, and they've never done anything for me. I don't ask them for anything, and they don't ask me for anything.' Sending money home is an act of faith. Stories about husbands spending their wives' earnings on alcohol, gambling or other women are frequently told. Research on husbands who are 'left behind' suggests this behaviour is common in contexts in which men are expected but unable to live up to the idealised role of breadwinner (Gamburd 2000, Oishi 2005: 136-7). Aware of the risks, some women send only a portion of their earnings home or remit money to female kin, though even this does not guarantee that their

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<sup>156</sup> The JVP, or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front), is a populist Sinhalese political party. Tens of thousands were killed in JVP uprisings in 1971 and in 1987-9. On the political violence during this period, see Wickramasinghe (2006: Chapter 6).

savings will remain intact; I encountered several stories about women whose remittances were misused by their mothers or sisters.

Saddled with debt, Jayanthi went abroad again, this time to Kuwait. Months after her arrival in 1990, Iraq invaded and she was forced to flee. She spent two years working as a nanny in Dubai before returning to Jordan, where she has remained since 1992. Jayanthi now works on a freelance basis for six expatriate families, cleaning their homes, and caring for children and pets. Her ties to her own children have diminished over the years. She seldom mentions them in conversation and has no specific plans to return to Sri Lanka. ‘What is there for me to go back to?’ she said on one occasion when asked about her plans. When she does return for short visits, she stays with sisters rather than her children. Over time Jayanthi’s focus shifted from Sri Lanka-centered projects to enjoying life in Jordan. Her home is an indication of this. She lives with a new husband, a Punjabi tiler who has been working in Jordan for 24 years. Together they rent a small, ground-floor flat in Jebel Akhdar, a low-income neighbourhood in eastern Amman. The owner of the building is Jayanthi’s *kafil*. She and her husband have decorated their home with great care, which is telling of their settled existence. Two noisy parakeets in a pink cage greet guests as they enter through the front door. An eclectic mix of Bollywood posters, Indian magazine cut-outs and depictions of Hindu deities adorn the walls. In the living room, a large television with digital reception provides access to Sinhala and Punjabi channels. Jayanthi’s settled existence in Amman has not meant a complete severing of ties to her family. Four of her nine sisters have worked in Jordan at some point, and two remain. One is married to a Sri Lankan man and has an eleven-year-old daughter who was born in Jordan. The other is married to a man from Pakistan and lives across the street from Jayanthi.

Jayanthi’s story echoes those of other ‘freelance’ domestic workers who have been in Jordan for long stretches. Many stay longer than initially planned. While none of those I know said they imagined staying in Jordan until they died, many had no imminent plans to return. In such cases, connections to kin in Sri Lanka may weaken over time. But the expectation that Sri Lankan mothers *should* maintain close relations with their children does not just evaporate. This may partially explain Jayanthi’s impulse to blame her former husband for the fact that she has no home in Sri Lanka, and hence no reason to return. This glosses over other complicating factors relating to the life she now shares with her new husband in Amman. Jayanthi’s relations with her family in Sri Lanka appear to resonate with performative models of kinship as a process to be developed and negotiated through close contact (e.g. Carsten 1997, 2004). Years of separation put her relationship with her children at risk. But long-term physical separation does not invariably erode familial bonds, as is suggested by Lucy’s relationship with her two sons despite her twelve-year absence. One important difference is that Lucy’s children were over the age of 10 when she first migrated in comparison to Jayanthi’s children, the youngest of whom was a toddler. Other

accounts of long-distance mothering suggest that women redefine their roles, demonstrating 'motherhood' by providing for their family's material well-being even if they cannot provide nurturing in close proximity (Asis et al 2004, Gamburd 2000: Chapter 8, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Parreñas 2005a). The contrast between Lucy's case and Jayanthi's reminds us of the flexibility of kinship and how it may be redefined rather than simply deteriorate when family members are separated for long periods.

### Theresa

Like Lucy and Jayanthi, Theresa spent more time abroad than initially intended, first for four years in Lebanon and later 14 years in Singapore. Although she never worked in Jordan, I have included her story because her experiences in Lebanon were not substantially different; salaries and working conditions in the two countries are similar. Theresa's story also illustrates a wider point about migrant trajectories. An initial period of work in the Middle East can serve as a stepping stone to employment in more desirable destinations in Southeast Asia, Europe or North America. As Liebelt writes of Filipina domestic workers in Israel, in contrast to binary models of migration suggesting that migrants move 'back and forth' between sending and receiving countries, many move 'on and on' through a hierarchy of destinations (Liebelt 2008b: 568). Countries are typically ranked according to differences in salaries and benefits, the financial costs associated with migrating, and their subjective and imaginative attractiveness (*ibid*). Amongst Sri Lankan migrants, Jordan, Lebanon and other Arab countries occupy spaces at the lower end of the hierarchy, below Southeast Asian, European and North American destinations, where one can earn higher wages.

Theresa and I met in Sri Lanka in January 2008, and during the course of a series of over-night visits to her home we did several recorded interviews about her life. When narrating the story of how she decided to go to the Middle East, Theresa began with her childhood. 'When my mother and father married, my father was in the Royal Navy. He was well paid... But then the British were sent away, and my father [began working] for the Sri Lankan Navy. When my mother was pregnant with me, my father lost his job. My mother thought I was bad luck for the family.' Theresa pointed to this as the reason she was sent to be her grandmother's servant while she was still a young girl. When she was a teenager, her grandmother passed away, and she was sent to live in a convent, where she looked after elderly nuns. One day the convent was visited by a man working for a recruitment agency who was hiring women to work in the Middle East. 'He made it sound like a dream. He said we would only work for 8 hours a day. We would have one day off each week, and we would earn good money.' Theresa said the opportunity to see a new place initially attracted her, but like many migrants, she rationalised her decision in terms of devotion to her family: by going to Lebanon she would earn money for her younger siblings' education. In

1979 at the age of 18, Theresa travelled to Lebanon as part of a group of 20 women. She remembers the first days in vivid detail. She and the other women were brought to a recruitment agency, where they waited to be chosen by employers. 'The office was on the seventh floor. There was an elevator, but they wouldn't let us use it. We were so tired carrying our bags up those stairs after the long flight. This was the first taste of the hard work we would have to do.' She was brought to the home of a Lebanese family, where she was paid a monthly salary of \$150 in addition to an occasional cash bonus, the bulk of which she sent to support her siblings. Her employers owned four houses, including a summer home in the mountains and a large flat in Beirut. 'Cleaning was easy in the main home because there were vacuum cleaners and washing machines. But in the summer home, I had to carry buckets of water from a stream up four flights of stairs. They had all-night parties on the weekends, and I barely had time to rest. But I never grumbled. I just worked.'

After four years in Lebanon, Theresa returned to Sri Lanka for what was meant to be a three-month visit. Her mother had been ill and died soon after her arrival, leaving Theresa responsible for looking after her thirteen-year-old sister and eight-year-old brother. She worked as a cashier in a grocery store, earning 3,000 Rs per month (\$27), a fraction of her pay in Lebanon. She resolved to go abroad again when her siblings were older. Several years later a relative arranged for her to work for a Chinese family in Singapore. Comparing them to her previous employers, she said: 'They treated me like a family member. We all ate around the same table. It wasn't like Lebanon. There, every woman is a *madame*. In Singapore, I called [my employers] "uncle" and "auntie", not "sir" or "madam". In Lebanon, they told me never to eat with my hands, but in Singapore they also eat this way, and the food was more to my taste.' She emphasised the fact that her life in Singapore was not necessarily easier, however. 'When I came to Singapore, I was already trained. I knew how to do everything.... But the Chinese do not like to praise you. They think if they praise you, you will not learn to do things better. So they never say you've done a good job. Whatever you do, they say you could have done better... Their way of saying I'd done a good job was to ask me to do it again.' Theresa said the key to her success had been her determination to work hard without complaining. 'Whatever job they gave me I did. I didn't say, I am a maid, not a cook. Or I'm a maid, I'm not here to look after granny. Whatever they wanted, I did. I earned more money that way.' Theresa worked in Singapore for 14 years, initially earning a salary of 180 SGD (\$140) that was eventually raised to 520 SGD (\$405). Cognisant of the fact that by law she could not continue working in Singapore past the age of 60, and having saved more than \$20,000, Theresa decided to return to Sri Lanka.

She stayed with her sister and brother-in-law until his frequent requests for money prompted her to move to a house of her own. She chose a small plot of land and newly-built two-bedroom house an hour's drive away in a housing development near the town of Seeduwa, on the western coast of

Gampaha District. Hers is one of fifty houses built in neat rows in the planned community which Theresa refers to as 'the settlement'. Like Theresa, most of the inhabitants come from other parts of the island and have moved within commuting distance of Colombo. Buying a home there enabled Theresa to make a fresh start. Like many migrant domestic workers, she did not want to discuss the details of her life abroad when she returned. She had no interest in telling people of her hardships, nor did she want to be identified as a domestic worker. To avoid stigma, Theresa tells people she was a secretary in a legal office in Singapore. Theresa serves as the treasurer of the settlement's welfare society, a position she believes she would not have obtained if they knew her previous job.<sup>157</sup>

Theresa's house is noteworthy because it differs dramatically from the homes of other people from her socio-economic background in Sri Lanka. During my first visit, she gave me a tour in which she proudly indicated items imported from Singapore. The front parlour has a large couch, an exercise machine, and a coffee table on which sits a stack of Good Housekeeping magazines. On the walls hang dozens of framed needlepoint tapestries featuring idyllic American or European pastoral scenes. In the living room, a collection of photographs in silver frames show Theresa at various stages in her life. Aside from a few photos of her Chinese employers in Singapore, most of the images depict Theresa alone. The water pressure in the bathroom is low, Theresa explained, so only a trickle of water comes out of the faucet. She considered fixing it until she discovered it offered an advantage: with only a trickle of water, guests are less apt to splash water on the bathroom floor, making it dirty. This is one of dozens of strategies with which Theresa ensures that her house stays in pristine condition. Her countertops are lined with new appliances, including food processors, Pyrex casserole dishes, a water filtration system and microwave, all of which are spotless. Theresa's home is striking not only because it is so well-appointed but because it shows how fastidious she is about cleanliness. Its sparkling, white tiled floors are swept and polished each morning. Like all guests, I was encouraged to rinse my feet upon entering her home - Theresa dislikes visiting houses in which the floors are not clean. She has acquired habits while living abroad which set her apart from her siblings, whom she seldom visits.

Theresa's story illustrates several points. Unlike Lucy and Jayanthi, she lived with her employers throughout her entire career abroad. On the basis of her long-standing relationship with them, she was able to negotiate pay increases and accumulate savings that substantially altered her financial situation. The fact that she worked in Singapore, where wages are higher, also made a difference. Jayanthi was able to purchase and furnish her own home, and five years after returning to Sri

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<sup>157</sup> The society acts as a communal collective. Members pay dues each month, and the money is then used for improvements in infrastructure or maintenance work, for example cleaning the well or purchasing a new water pump.

Lanka still had savings off of which to live. Her financial gains have come at a cost, however. To save money for her own use, she spurned requests from relatives.

When you come back, everyone is asking for money. They think you are rich and must help them. But they never ask how you spent your life there, how hard it was. I was in Lebanon, and they knew there was a war. They never asked what it was like, whether I was scared. We are also shy to tell people about our problems... Only when we get together with others who have also been outside Sri Lanka do we share.

In many cases, unless there is a radical break from the family, requests for money and assistance from migrants' relatives continue, and those who deny them may be regarded as selfish. Migrants can also feel a sense of estrangement during their sojourns and upon their homecoming, and in Theresa's case this has led to social isolation. Though she initially defined her decision to migrate in terms of her responsibilities to her siblings, she has since grown distant from them. She values her own independence over companionship, a disposition she attributes both to her years abroad as well as her upbringing. When asked how she thought she differed from women who had not gone abroad, she replied:

Some women are like roses. They have thorns, but you can still pluck them. I am like a cactus. There is a beautiful flower there, but no one can reach it. I cannot be united with other people. If I had grown up with my family from a small age, and if I had never been outside of Sri Lanka, I could never live the way I do now.

Not long after returning from Singapore, Theresa briefly considered a marriage proposal from a lecturer from Anuradhapura who was a widower and had three children. When he requested a dowry of 1 Lakh rupees, or nearly \$1,000, she refused. 'I don't want to have to beg money from a husband... In Sri Lanka, women give everything to men when they get married and then they have to ask him when they need something. I didn't want this. I have worked all my life. Now I want to enjoy it.'

Theresa's status as a single woman is at least partially a legacy of the years she spent abroad. Although she is perhaps more socially isolated than most, she was not the only migrant I met who had decided not to marry. Some women who *do* marry upon returning to Sri Lanka find that they cannot have their own children. Shanika, first introduced in chapter 2, worked in Jordan for 13 years and used her earnings to construct a house which is now one of the best-equipped and spacious in her village and is one of only a handful with electricity. By her own account, migration had mostly positive results, but she says she paid a price: having spent most of her childbearing years abroad, when she returned she discovered she could not bear children. While many women migrate *after* having had children, it is possible that women's out-migration has played a role in decreasing Sri Lanka's overall birth rate. As Theresa's and Shanika's stories suggest, taking advantage of economic opportunities can require making trade-offs in terms of family, marital or parent-child relations.

## Diviya

It is just after mid-day, and Diviya is preparing a lunch of dhal, rice, leeks and jackfruit curry. She cooks on an outdoor fireplace at the back of the house, and as we chat smoke and ashes come streaming into the bedroom. She lives with her daughter and husband in a small, two-room wood-panelled shack in a town near Galle on the southern coast. Rusted metal sheets have been cobbled together to form the roof. Next to the entrance, a cracked fragment of mirror hangs from a nail next to a window that is missing its glass panels. The front room is crowded with worn, blue plastic chairs and a rusty metal container used as a table and study space for Diviya's seven-year-old daughter. In the bedroom is a refrigerator imported from Jordan which no longer works and now acts as a storage space for clothing. Next to it is a large television, another import from Jordan that is broken.

Diviya and I were first introduced by Malini, in whose home I lived during the course of field research in Sri Lanka and who had become friends with Diviya in Jordan. Malini had lived in her employers' home, and Diviya, who lived in her own rented flat, would come to visit on the weekends. Malini and Diviya had not seen each other for several years, and one day in March 2008 I accompanied Malini on her first trip to Diviya's home in a small seaside town near Galle on the southern coast. When we arrived, Malini was shocked by the dishevelled and run-down state of the house. Diviya's circumstances were considerably worse than Malini had imagined, and she wanted to know how this had come about.

Diviya speaks in mostly positive terms about her experiences in Jordan. With assistance from her *punchi amma* (father's brother's wife), Diviya travelled to Amman at the age of 25. She was married at the time but had no children. She initially lived with her employers in Jordan but left after one year because she could not cope with the burden of looking after their five young children. Diviya went to live with her aunt and worked on a freelance basis in private homes and as a cleaner in the South African embassy before being hired by a recruitment agency. She acted as a liaison between Sri Lankan domestic workers and agency staff, collecting new arrivals at the airport, explaining the conditions of employment, and acting as a translator. Out of every 10 women the agency placed in employment, Diviya estimated that at least three returned to the agency complaining of abuse or other problems. It was hard to know whether they were telling the truth or lying because they did not want to work, she said. She earned a monthly salary of \$150 and was given a bonus when agency profits were high. With no bank account of her own, she invested her earnings in home appliances and gold jewellery. She occasionally sent money to her husband and spent the rest on her own living expenses. When Diviya received word that her mother had become ill, she returned to Sri Lanka for what she expected would be a three-month

visit. She became pregnant during this time and subsequently felt she had no choice but to remain in Sri Lanka.

While she was in Jordan, Diviya's husband began consuming large amounts of alcohol. He had resented her absence, felt lonely and began spending time with friends who drank. Soon he began indulging in even larger quantities of alcohol. While she alluded to the fact that their marital troubles had started before she left, their relationship deteriorated further while she was away, and his drinking had become a source of constant quarrelling. According to Diviya, he wastes what little money they have on booze and is unable to hold down a job. Diviya blames the alcohol for their problems but also points to the fact that her absence precipitated his heavy drinking. 'Ninety percent of families have problems if the husband or wife goes away to work. Going to the Middle East is better for unmarried ladies. Married people should go together or not at all.' She said her story should be a warning to other women about the risks migration could pose to families.

Diviya now works for an Italian NGO that provides psycho-social counselling to children and earns barely enough to cover their daily expenses. Bit by bit, she has sold all the gold she bought in Jordan. At one point during our visit, Malini asked why Diviya's mobile phone was turned off at night. Diviya explained that her husband is jealous of her job and suspects her of having a boyfriend. If the phone rings at night and he hears it while under the influence of alcohol, he will smash it to pieces. Divorce is not an option, and though Diviya would like to migrate again, her mother passed away and there is no one on whom she can rely to look after her daughter. Our visit ended on a sombre note. After we left, Malini expressed dismay at how sad Diviya seemed in comparison to the light-hearted woman she'd known in Jordan.

Heavy alcohol use among men is frequently blamed on wives' absence while working abroad. But as we saw in chapter 2, alcoholism and marital conflict often *precede* migration and may be one of the reasons women migrate in the first place. Other accounts have suggested a similar pattern. As Gamburd writes, 'in cases where a husband drinks heavily, in most instances he drank before his wife went abroad, and continues to do so after her return' (2008b: 115). In this instance, Diviya herself alludes to migratory separation as the trigger, although she referred to the fact that they had had problems before she left. How her husband viewed matters I cannot say, but their situation can be interpreted as part of a wider pattern. Alcohol use is a potent symbol of masculinity in Sri Lanka, and because it provides temporary physical and emotional relief, men may be more apt to drink during difficult periods (Gamburd 2008b: 110). In their search for self-esteem and supportive social networks, many turn to the bottle, and their reasons for doing so may be heightened if their wives are abroad earning money that they cannot (Gamburd 2008b: Chapter 5).

## Analysis

In presenting these four sketches, attention has been paid to the economic and social aspects of migration in order to reflect the emphasis women themselves place on these dimensions. Migrant narratives overwhelmingly centre on issues relating to the material well-being, and it is primarily on this basis that the success or failure of time abroad is judged.<sup>158</sup> But as each of the four stories also reveals, social issues, including potential disruption to familial and marital relationships, may be of equal if not greater concern in the aftermath of time spent abroad.

What do these stories indicate about the financial consequences of migration? For some migrants, income earned abroad can improve their families' circumstances, enabling better housing structures, greater access to education, or simply additional support for daily living expenses. But not all remittances are directed towards family projects. Jayanthi and especially Theresa provide examples in which working abroad has afforded women their own economic and personal independence. Moreover, working abroad does not guarantee financial security. Lucy and Diviya returned to financial circumstances little different from those they had left. Domestic workers who reside independently of their employers have greater freedom and flexibility in employment but may also have a harder time saving their earnings. Even when migrants are able to budget carefully and save large sums, remittances may not be used in the ways intended. Lucy and Jayanthi's experiences in this regard are specific but not unusual. They reflect the fact that a migrant's sacrifices may not yield the anticipated results. In a context in which migrant women are stereotyped as greedy and selfish for leaving their families, returning without having made a significant contribution to the family's financial well-being can be a source of shame. Leaving home may not be as hard as coming back empty-handed, and so those who have been unable to save significant sums may be reluctant to return. According to one study, after working abroad for five or more years, only 54 percent of Filipinas and 67 percent of Sri Lankans said they felt they had saved enough (Oishi 2005: 139). These figures dropped to 23 percent and 18 percent respectively among those abroad for four years or less (*ibid*). The length of time one stays abroad tends to increase the ability to save large amounts, but it may also reduce migrants' desires to *want* to return as they adjust and build new relationships abroad. An example of this is 60-year-old Malkanthi, who arrived in Jordan in 1981 at the age of 34 and has remained ever since. She initially migrated with the goal of purchasing land and building a house. Gradually over the course of 26 years, she has accomplished this goal, and her house is nearly complete. She plans to return to Sri Lanka eventually but for now is content to stay put in Amman, where several of her family members also live. Four of Malkanthi's seven sisters and one of her sister's daughters worked in Jordan for periods ranging from three to twenty years. Her eldest daughter arrived

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<sup>158</sup> In a similar vein, Constable (1999: 205) describes Filipina domestic workers who stress economic elements over and above other more complex factors relating to their decisions to migrate and to remain.

seven years ago and married another Sri Lankan migrant, and the couple now have a two-year old daughter. Malkanthi's son-in-law's mother and several other relatives are also in Jordan.

Figure 18: Friends enjoy a picnic lunch atop Mount Nebo

Migrants' narratives about their experiences abroad tend to change depending on whether they are still overseas or in Sri Lanka. Many of those who have returned concentrate on the economic benefits achieved by migrating rather than the hard work they did overseas, which is a point of emphasis among those still in Jordan. Women's day-to-day experiences working in the Middle East are seldom discussed with people at home in Sri Lanka. Working under someone else, doing other people's work (*wena keneku yatathe weda kirima*) or 'low work' (*pahath weda*) can be considered demeaning. Also, because there is some stigma against women who have worked in the Middle East, migrants avoid talking about the problems they encountered abroad because doing so may reinforce the idea that they should not have left home in the first place.

An element which emerges clearly in migrants' accounts while they are abroad relates to the emotional hardships of being separated from loved ones. The magazine *Medaperadiga*, which caters to Sri Lankans employed in the Middle East, includes a section called '*Idigas Arana*' (Palmtree Grove) featuring poems submitted by expatriates. The following examples are English translations from the March 2008 issue.<sup>159</sup>

*Sathuta*

*Ratak watina puthek ekka*

<sup>159</sup> The English translations convey the general content of the poems but do not provide context for all of the idiomatic expressions. The order and verb tense has been changed to clarify meaning in English. I am grateful to Jagath Perera for helping with the translation.

*Thidenek doowaru heduwa  
Hetak unta hadala denna  
Boho Weeriya deruwa  
Reyak dawalak nomethiwa  
Un gena mama sithuwa  
Kalak guya thenadi  
Un loku than wala wisuwa  
Mathak wana witadi  
Mage nethu aga  
Sathutu kandalu reduna*

#### Happiness

I raised three daughters and a son for the country  
I made many efforts  
To provide them with a bright future  
I have thought about them day and night  
With the passage of time  
They are living in better positions<sup>160</sup>  
Tears of happiness come to my eyes  
When I think of it

By Seeta Ranjani, Jordan, from Watinapaha

#### Thanikama

*Ada thaniwela saharawe ma dukakse  
Kal gewanawa wedapala  
Karamin dawase  
Dewasara gewa yannata  
Mawbima wetha situse  
Dina sahi ganinawa ma hema dawase*

#### Loneliness

Today I am living alone with pain in the Middle East<sup>161</sup>  
Spending time doing work  
Counting days and weeks  
To go back to my motherland  
After two years

By Rohini Gunasekera, Kuwait, from Minneriya

The concept of loneliness (*thanikama*) invoked in the second poem has many different senses but among migrants is most often defined in terms of separation from kin. Many of my discussions with women in Amman led to tears when conversation turned to the issue of their families, particularly children. More than once I stopped an interview when a woman became too upset to continue, and over time I grew hesitant to broach the subject if I knew a woman had arrived in Jordan recently or had young children. Migration often entails severe emotional strain, and this may make the experience of being abroad unbearable. The amount of money a woman earns and the conditions of employment are important factors. Those whose employers do not allow them

<sup>160</sup> A more literal translation of '*lu*ku *than* *wala*' would be 'big positions', conveying a sense of affluence and prestige.

<sup>161</sup> The literal translation of the word referring to the 'Middle East' is 'Sahara'. In common parlance, the region may be referred to as *durukanthara* (faraway desert) or *welikanthara*, (sandy desert), both of which convey a sense of barrenness.

time off, who are not permitted to own mobile phones or who cannot afford to call home regularly may have only sporadic communication with their families, a pattern which has also emerged amongst Filipina domestic workers (Parreñas 2005b: 329). This may heighten their sense of isolation and damage their relationships with kin at home.

A language of sacrifice is central to the way many women conceptualise their experiences as migrants. The ideal migrant is one who remains firmly committed to her family and focused on her goals, does not spend money frivolously, sends all of her earnings home, and remains celibate during her time abroad. Many of the sermons given by the Sri Lankan priest, Father Gabriel, during Sinhala-language masses on Friday centred on the theme of fiscal prudence and filial piety and emphasised women's responsibilities to their families. Similarly, during a Wesak ceremony at the Sri Lankan embassy in May 2007, a visiting monk led a group of migrants in prayer before giving a speech in which he urged them to focus on why they had come to Jordan and the importance of achieving their goals. Migrants' evaluations of the successes and failures of other migrants affirm this discourse. Veteran migrants' advice to newcomers often includes lessons on how to prove one's self to an employer, how to show that you are 'good' by avoiding needless trips outside of the house, and the importance of saving. Young women are told to 'remember why you came' or 'remember your goal'. Migrants who have spent substantial periods of time in Jordan also warn newcomers about the dangers of running away from their employers and living alone. In their view, many of the rules employers impose help young women to avoid running amuck. Those who run away from their employers and start romances are portrayed as anti-heroes who set bad examples. Such is the view of fifty-five-year-old Chaturani. 'We came here to work. We have to listen to the *madame*, not be the *madame*,' she quipped, describing the attitude she tried to maintain. She is critical of younger generations of Sri Lankans arriving in Jordan who are not serious about working hard. 'Now, the girls are coming and they don't want to work. They come just to run away and have fun.' Despite the low-status nature of their work, salaries in Jordan provide access to consumer goods that otherwise would be unavailable. But migrants who splash out on new clothes or lavish gifts for their friends may be accused of 'showing off' or being careless with their earnings.

Narratives about 'good' and 'bad' behaviour for domestic workers resemble patriarchal discourses of kinship common in Sri Lanka, with the idea of the sacrificial wife/mother/daughter who makes sacrifices for her husband/children/parents as an important ideal (Marecek 2000). These expectations are not always fulfilled. Future-oriented thinking is not always sustainable with the passage of time, particularly given that life abroad presents new opportunities for relationships and consumerism. There is a constant tension between home and away, between what migration *should be* – a money-making enterprise – and reality. The migrant ethic emphasises thrift, but many of those who do not have much money to begin with or who have no immediate plans to

return to Sri Lanka prefer to live well in Jordan. Kanthi, for example, insists on riding in taxis rather than taking the bus and spends a substantial portion of her monthly pay packet on mobile phone cards, clothing and socialising with other migrants during her free time. When asked how she could afford to take taxis, she said she saw no point in scrimping. 'You never know what will happen. I may die tomorrow.' She joked that as long as she had money for a coffin, there was no reason to save. Although said in jest, her comments express a feeling shared by many migrants that life in Amman should be not just endured but enjoyed.

### Boys, Booze and *Baila* Music

One Friday in June 2008, several women and I made our way to an outdoor theatre to attend a concert. By the time we arrived, a mob of people had engulfed a small table where tickets were being sold. At 7 JD (\$10) each, they were expensive for most of the workers present. The concert had been organised by a group of migrants, and a *baila* band and singers from the popular television show Superstar had flown in to perform.<sup>162</sup> The crowd was spirited, joyful and excited.

Figure 19: Concert at King Abdullah Gardens, Amman

Apart from some Indian and Bangladeshi men and a handful of Filipina women, the concert-goers were overwhelmingly young Sri Lankans. Most of those I knew worked as freelancers. Many of the women wore makeup and tight jeans. As dusk fell and the band started to play, the dancing and drinking began. Young couples embraced, dancing closely as music boomed out of the loud speakers. Bottles of cheap spirits were opened, and the smell of alcohol percolated through the air.

<sup>162</sup> *Baila* is a type of dance music popular in Sri Lanka. As its Portuguese name suggests, it has colonial roots and blends Portuguese, African and indigenous Sri Lankan elements. Regarded as uncouth by some middle-class Sri Lankans, *baila* music is particularly popular among the youth and those from lower-income groups (Hewamanne 2003: 85).

As the evening wore on, some men became so intoxicated that they could barely walk. When one staggered over to a spot near me and passed out, his friends doused him with water to rouse him. The women sitting nearby shook their heads in disapproval but seemed unsurprised. Although considerably more men were seen to be drinking alcohol, some women also drank.

In Jordan scenes of women consuming alcohol and dancing closely with men are typically restricted to nightclubs and bars of the super-rich. Jordanian women from modest backgrounds tend to avoid wearing revealing clothes, and public displays of affection between men and women are considered distasteful. Against this backdrop, the revelry at the open-air concert stands in dramatic relief. This was a migrant oasis, a spot in which for a short period of time, 'guest' workers claimed part of the city as their own. The transgressive elements contrast not only with Jordanian norms of respectability but also with those prevalent in Sri Lanka. Prohibitions against consuming intoxicating substances apply to men as well as women, but according to village norms, respectable Sri Lankan women do not drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes (Gamburd 2008b: 16, 70-72).<sup>163</sup> Female abstinence is a marker of a woman's status and femininity (*ibid*: 71), and while of course some unmarried couples do have sexual relations, public displays of affection between lovers are generally looked down upon.

This helps explain why the concerts are not viewed favourably by all migrants. Some women voice concerns on moral grounds, viewing them as part of a pattern of profligate behaviour to which too many youngsters fall victim when they go abroad. Others view getting dressed up and buying tickets for such events as a waste of money better saved for Sri Lanka. The scenes at the concert – and the reactions to them - resemble accounts of garment factory workers in Sri Lanka (Hewamanne and Brow 1999, Hewamanne 2003, Lynch 2002). Hewamanne (2003) describes women working in textile factories in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone who wear heavy makeup, drink beer and dance with men at parties (Hewamanne 2003: 77-88). These activities might be considered unremarkable among urban youngsters but provoke moral panic when practiced by women from rural areas who are expected to uphold village traditions (Hewamanne 2003: 91). Like migration to the Middle East, work in garment factories is associated with rampant sexuality and loose morals.

For those who do attend the concerts, however, the occasion provides a rare opportunity to have fun and a brief respite from otherwise tedious working lives. As one young man said, 'I work 365 days a year. This is the one time I can dance and have fun.' The concerts also provide an opportunity to meet and flirt with members of the opposite sex. Public gatherings such as these are possible in Beirut and Amman to a greater extent than other parts of the region. Restrictions

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<sup>163</sup> Alcohol use among women is reportedly more common among Catholics, in urban areas, and in upcountry estates (Gamburd 2008b: 71).

on women's mobility and alcohol use in Saudi Arabia, for example, mean that there are fewer opportunities for migrants to 'get into trouble', and thus many veteran migrants consider it a 'safer' destination for young women. Jordan and Lebanon, which offer more opportunities to socialise with other migrants, can be more dangerous but also alluring to those seeking adventure.

The presence of so many couples at the concert helps explain why the Middle East conjures up images of sexual licence in Sri Lanka. Many migrants – particularly those who live separately from their employers - engage in extra-marital relationships while in Jordan, a pattern which has also been described in Lebanon (Smith 2010). Such relationships can provide a modicum of physical and economic security, as well as a measure of social insurance against gossip that a woman engages in prostitution. Given that roughly eight out of ten Sri Lankan migrants in Jordan are women, romantic relationships are often formed with men from other South Asian or Arab countries. Outside of their home villages – the village being the moral core in Sri Lanka - some women abandon their *lajja* (shame/restraint) and engage in practices that would be considered shameful at home. As in Ventura's account of Filipino migrants in Japan (1992), the absence of traditional sources of authority is conducive to hedonism and a kind of utopia among many young migrants. The absence of older kin and the expectation that their stay in the host country will be merely temporary means that drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and having boyfriends may incur few social penalties.

### **Views from Those 'Left Behind'**

How migrants' families assess the outcome of migration has not been explored in depth in this thesis. I have not made it the focus here because in comparison to studies of migrants' experiences in Arab host countries, a good deal more research has been done in South Asian 'sending' contexts. It is, however, important to acknowledge the fact that family members often narrate the consequences of migration in ways which differ from the accounts of those who have travelled. Decisions that may be cast in a language of sacrifice by migrants may be interpreted as abandonment by their children and husbands. This is reflected in scenes from the documentary film *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas* (directed by Nilita Vachani, 1996), which follows the story of Josephine Perera, a widow who leaves her three children in orphanages to work as a domestic worker in Greece. While taking care of someone else's child in Greece, Josephine misses her own son's childhood. She sends all of her earnings home, yet the letters she writes to her daughter are left unanswered. When she finally returns home after nearly a decade abroad, she finds that her youngest son has been caught stealing and is performing badly in boarding school, and her daughter has chosen to marry a man with poor financial prospects. Her children express a sense of reticence in relation to her lengthy absence. This theme also emerges in the film *Anak* (directed by Rory Quintos, 2000), about a Filipina woman who leaves her family to work as a

domestic worker in Hong Kong and returns after ten years to find that her children, who grew up without knowing her, deeply resent her for being gone and blame her for their own misfortunes.

One of the motivations for migration most commonly cited by women is to earn money for their children's education, and so it is ironic that a connection is often made between women's migration and children's poor performance in school. Migrants as well as their children in Nilpanagoda and Watinapaha remarked upon this connection. Several returned migrants in Nilpanagoda said their children began getting poor marks or dropped out of school shortly after they went abroad. Poor school performance is attributed to the child feeling lonely and depressed or not being encouraged to study, a task usually carried out by mothers. Girl children who have to look after siblings and do domestic work that otherwise would have been done by their mothers may also be forced to neglect their studies. Malini's family, with whom I lived in Watinapaha, provides an example. Malini has two older sisters and a younger brother. Their mother went abroad when Malini was doing her O-Level exams, at which point the older sisters had already completed their schooling and were doing further studies, one to become a nurse and the other to learn computer skills. Both sisters now have relatively well-paying jobs. Malini says that because her mother wasn't around to encourage her, she didn't study and performed badly on her exams. Unlike the two older sisters, Malini and her brother dropped out of school after their O-Level exams and later joined their mother in Jordan. They draw a connection between their need to work abroad and their mother's absence at a crucial point during their studies. A number of women interviewed at training centres expressed similar views, attributing their own low marks in school to the fact that their mothers were abroad and saying that the only option they had to earn money was to follow in their mothers' footsteps and migrate. Several studies have indicated a relationship between poor educational performance and migration. A study by Save the Children (2006) found that the absence of mothers for work abroad negatively impacted children's school performance and attendance, particularly among boys. Children of migrant mothers were also found to exhibit more emotional and behavioural problems. Gamburd (2008) examines four families affected by women's migration and concludes that while the children of migrants do not necessarily suffer more abuse and neglect, as is commonly claimed by the media, there is evidence that they fare less well in school. The link between educational performance and migration is a complicated one, however. Women often decide to migrate as a way of coping with financial problems and other strains which adversely affect their households, and so while a correlation may be drawn between poor school performance and migration, it is not always clear that these are *caused* by a migrant's absence. As Biao (2007: 179) has noted with respect to China, many of the problems of those who are left behind cannot be attributed solely to a family member's absence but have their roots in the material circumstances that give rise to migration in the first place.

## Conclusion

Questions about the consequences of migration have no easy or obvious answers, but this chapter should encourage us to avoid assuming that migrants are necessarily 'better off' in the long-run. Four narratives have shed light on the contradictions and ambiguities arising in relation to overseas employment and have drawn out some of the particularities of Sri Lankan migration to the Middle East. While many women are aware of the potential difficulties associated with migrating, there is an expectation that they and their families will enjoy a better standard of living. These aspirations do not always materialise, however, and the failure to generate savings can be crucial in decisions about whether and when to return to Sri Lanka. The salaries domestic workers earn are relatively low, and many women must stay abroad for lengthy periods to generate enough for large expenditures. Even this does not ensure an improvement in one's economic circumstances in the long-run.

This chapter also indicates that an exclusive focus on the material aspects of migration can obscure other sources of tension which may be just as important to how women judge the outcomes of migration. For some, migration can lead to familial estrangement as a result of years of separation. The fact that women work inside private households and are typically discouraged if not altogether forbidden from venturing out means that life in Jordan can be lonely and alienating. But this chapter – much like the one preceding it – also reveals the diversity of experience among Sri Lankan migrants. The description of the concert suggests that not all domestic workers lead drab, cheerless lives. Despite the highly restricted and ostensibly temporary nature of their employment, some women manage to construct elements of stability and enjoy a greater sense of satisfaction in their homes away from home. Strongly felt concerns about those left behind are often interlaced with desires to enjoy life abroad, and opportunities for consumption and new relationships may compete with the ethic of sacrifice and thirst. Decisions about whether and to whom to send remittances can be fraught, and demands from kin often interfere with women's own plans and projects. These elements reflect deep ambivalence about the consequences of migration. By considering some of the emotional and social costs often left out of the migration equation, mixed and contradictory outcomes emerge.

### *Conclusion: Unfree Labour, Old and New*

By way of concluding, I would like to return to two central questions: First, how should we analyse the position of migrant domestic workers in Jordan in relation to other labouring groups? Second, what implications does the material presented in this thesis have for a wider understanding of contemporary forms of unfree labour?

Slavery, indentured servitude and other variants of unfree labour are commonly thought of as relics of the past and as incompatible with modern capitalism. For Marx, free labour – or workers who are ‘free’ to sell their labour-power as a commodity to any capitalist – was thought to be the *sine qua non* of capitalism. The destruction of feudal bondage was considered to be a necessary precondition for the creation of the working class (Patnaik 1997: 78). Labour could only participate in a truly capitalist economy, it has been said, if free from the bonds of slavery and serfdom. Unfree labour was thought to be ‘an obstacle both to market formation and expansion, and to the installation of advanced productive forces’ (Brass 2009: 743). This view has been challenged. Consider, for example, Mintz’s account of the history of sugar-cane plantations in the British Caribbean. We are disposed to think that industry emerged in post-feudal Europe, yet Mintz has argued (1985: Chapter 2) that the production of sugar – ‘the first mass-produced exotic necessity of a proletarian working class’ (1985: 46) – was in essence an industrial enterprise which arose *before* European factory-based industry. That enterprise, Mintz shows, was run on coerced labour of various sorts rather than so-called free labour (1985: 51). This runs counter to ideas about early forms of industry being based on the use of proletarian labour. We might also consider the American context. Steinfeld has suggested that when forms of what we think of as ‘free’ labour first appeared in the American colonies in the eighteenth century, rather than displacing indentured labour, the two systems flourished alongside one another (1991: 6). Up until the early nineteenth century in the United States, forms of apprenticeship and indentured labour enforceable with criminal sanctions were used alongside ‘freer’ forms of labour. They were all variants on what was considered ‘normal employment’.

If we conceive of unfree labour as an extreme form of attachment between worker and employer through the use of economic and/or extra-economic coercion, many scholars would now agree that it has yet to disappear. Contemporary accounts show that unfree labour continues to co-exist with so-called free labour to facilitate rather than hinder capitalist accumulation (Brass 1997: 338–339). Examples include the use of child slaves in cocoa production in West Africa (Manzo 2005), forced labour in nut and mining industries in Bolivia (Sharma 2006), bonded labour in agriculture in the Pakistani Punjab (Martin 2009), the brick industry in Nepal (GEFONT 2007), and the gem-

cutting industry in South India (Kapadia 1995). Unfree labour is not restricted to 'developing' countries. Examples also can be found in the gangmaster system in the British food production industry (Anderson and Rogaly 2005, Brass 2004) and in prostitution, domestic work, agriculture and sweatshops in the United States (Free the Slaves and Human Rights Center 2004). Many contemporary cases involve migrant workers, suggesting a paradoxical relationship between the mobility of labour and the absence of freedom (Bose 1988: 912).

To the list we can add migrant workers employed in bonded labour in the Middle East. As demonstrated in this thesis, the use of the *kafala* system to tie workers to individual employers is a relatively recent phenomenon, having emerged in the last four decades. Although migrants may enter into the *kafala* system at will, they cannot opt out until they complete their two-year contracts. They are prevented from selling their labour to the highest bidder or deciding when to quit, and those employed as domestic workers are prohibited from leaving their workplaces without permission. The fact that many abscond suggests that the system is not always effective, but the police, recruitment agency staff and in some cases even embassy staff can be relied upon to enforce the bondage relation. From the employers' point of view the system is not problem-free, but there are benefits in terms of imposing authority and reducing labour costs by preventing competition among employers. Physical violence is not *always* used, and not *all* workers are forcibly confined to the homes in which they work. But employers are structurally positioned to hold workers captive and use force with impunity.

The thesis has focused on the example of women employed as domestic workers and has discussed the ways their working conditions have been shaped by ideologies of gender and conceptions of the domestic space as a private arena which should not be subject to government oversight. But it is important to bear in mind that women *and* men migrants who are employed in other sectors – for example Egyptian agricultural and construction workers and Indian garment factory workers in the Qualifying Industrial Zones – are also subject to the *kafala* system and are bound to their employers for the contract period. In relation to debates about free/unfree labour and capitalism, this context provides support for the argument that unfree labour is not only compatible with but facilitates capitalism. As chapter 4 described, migrant workers employed in bonded labour have played an integral role in capital accumulation in the garment industry, agriculture, construction and the service sector. Moreover, unfree domestic workers contribute to the reproduction of highly-educated elites, many of whom later leave the kingdom to take up highly-skilled jobs abroad and in doing so provide one of Jordan's most important links with global capital. Given the numbers of migrants employed through the *kafala* system in the Middle East, the contribution that bonded labour has made to the accumulation of capital in the region should not be overlooked.

## **'Free' Versus 'Unfree' Labour and the Role of the State**

'Free' wage labourers are of course not completely free. Like bonded labourers, their decisions about when to take up or end employment are circumscribed by social obligations, expectations, economic realities and market forces (Ortiz 2002: 396). They may be subject to pecuniary as well as non-pecuniary pressures - the use of penal sanctions to prevent breaches of employment contract for wage labour in nineteenth century England being one example (Steinfeld 2001). Another, from a contemporary context, is work permit schemes that prohibit non-citizens from moving from one employer to another, or from one sector to another (O'Connell Davidson 2010: 253). Labour relations usually involve a mixture of forms of freedom and unfreedom. So-called free and unfree labour should be seen not as fundamentally separate but rather as part of a spectrum involving varying forms and degrees of coercion.

Sri Lankan migrants employed in bonded labour differ from other labouring groups in Jordan in that they face more severe economic *and* extra-economic coercion backed up by the power of the state. Bearing in mind the dangers of reifying 'the state' as a single agent, I use the term to denote a complex of powers, one of which is made manifest in bureaucratic processes. Central to the context at hand are those processes relating to the control and regulation of migration. This includes agencies and individuals associated with the 'sending' state (i.e. staff of the Sri Lankan embassy and Bureau of Foreign Employment) and the 'receiving' state (i.e. the Jordanian police, the courts of law, and staff of the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Coercion is evident in the use of brute force to perpetuate bondage, including forcibly returning women to homes or recruitment agencies. Tactics are used to keep workers inside their employers' homes and to prevent contact with the outside world. The failure to enforce laws that might give workers some autonomy, for example those prohibiting the confiscation of passports, facilitates coercion. Although the precarious situation of migrant workers is often conceived as a *failure* on the part of the state to protect them, in this instance it is at least in part the *product* of state interventions aimed at control and discipline. The state is not merely turning a blind eye but actively enabling bonded labour.

The state's role in brokering unfree labour is not the result of a conscious strategy but a confluence of interests. As outlined in chapters 2 and 3, the Sri Lankan state is well served by migration that generates a steady flow of remittances and provides a source of employment. The main agency tasked with overseeing migration, the Bureau of Foreign Employment, is partially controlled by recruitment agents, and some of its employees themselves own recruitment agencies. This gives it a vested interest in the business of migration, one that has yet to be seriously challenged. There are few mechanisms for migrant workers themselves to make their voices heard. Although their remittances provide the largest single source of foreign exchange for

the Sri Lankan economy, they have no representation on the Bureau's board of directors, and while abroad they do not have the right to vote in national elections. In Jordan, the influx of easily exploitable, low-paid migrant workers has suited the interests of employers. Although local NGOs and international organisations have called attention to human rights violations, there appears to have been relatively little opposition from citizens or trade unions in Jordan. It is not clear to what extent Jordanian policymakers have weighed or chosen to ignore the potentially negative impacts of recruiting large numbers of workers from outside the kingdom, for example the loss of money to the Jordanian economy through remittances, or the loss of jobs for citizens.

Although migration is typically portrayed as an individual decision, a variety of factors at the household, local and national levels constrain migrants' options. Many Sri Lankans see few alternatives to migrating to the Middle East. There is a tendency to assume that people who become involved in forced labour have been duped. Indeed, some migrants are deceived by brokers or recruitment agencies promising higher salaries, and many are not informed of the rules of the sponsorship system or the specific conditions under which they will be employed. But we have seen that many women migrating to the Middle East are not naïve about the dangers. Many are prepared to work in bonded labour because, however unequal and exploitative, it provides a source of income when few others are available. They are neither uniformly accepting of their working conditions, nor do they have to be forcibly constrained throughout the employment period. Rather, they accept the situation when no better option is available. At the individual level, many are motivated by the hope of material improvement or social mobility for their families, whether through buying land, building homes, or paying for educational expenses or dowries. Many are also propelled to migrate in the aftermath of family crises, such as the death or illness of a spouse or parent. Their decisions are not the result of a blind, unreflective performance of duty but rather of the way they understand themselves as social beings. Often, this is bound up with rights and duties vis-à-vis kin.

If at a general level many Sri Lankans feel compelled to take up bonded labour in the Middle East as a result of the scarcity of well-remunerated employment at home, understanding what perpetuates unfree labour requires us to ask questions about political economy and models of 'development'. The circumstances fuelling Sri Lankan migration were brought about at least in part by the turn towards neoliberal political-economic practices since the 1970s, including privatisation and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision. The decades-long civil conflict also played a role. It is not coincidental that the withdrawal of the Sri Lankan state from the provision of welfare went hand-in-hand with an intensification of its role mobilising citizens to leave the country for overseas employment. A similar pattern emerged in Jordan, where structural adjustment appears to have indirectly encouraged Jordanians and Palestinians to migrate to the Gulf states. These trends are part of broader geopolitical dynamics,

including the power of the ideology of neoliberalism among organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

If unfree labour has endured and even thrived under global capitalism, what, if anything, is 'new' about contemporary forms? I mentioned my reservations about Bales' revision of the concept of slavery in chapter 5. But setting aside issues of vocabulary, if we speak more generally of unfree labour, Bales' reflections on the contrast between new and old forms is relevant. According to Bales, 'old' forms of unfree labour were based on legal ownership, required large investments, and tended to involve permanent or semi-permanent relationships (1999: 15). In contrast, 'new' forms do not involve ownership, can be arranged at relatively low costs, and are often temporary. Population growth and processes of impoverishment have created a glut of potential slaves who can be used and then disposed of; there is no need to maintain and invest in their upkeep (1999: 14). My research generally supports these conclusions. Bonded labour in Jordan is contractual and arranged for a prescribed period of time rather than being life-long and hereditary. The employer's relationship is only with the worker and not members of her family. Work is performed in exchange for wages, albeit low wages. It is more harsh in the sense that workers can be easily banished and replaced. In this way it is in harmony with the wider trend of 'flexibilisation' of labour. Another difference is that rather than being forcibly captured, workers are now pushed into unfree labour by poverty.

I have doubts, however, about another aspect of Bales' conception of 'new' slavery. This is the element of illegality. Because slavery is thought to be repugnant to 'modern' society, Bales argues, it must be hidden from view. 'Since slavery is illegal in all countries, it must be concealed. Even in places where the police work hand in hand with the slaveholders and share in their profits, no one wants to advertise the fact that he or she is a slaveholder' (1999: 26-27). Slavery, according to Bales, is 'a shadowy, illegal enterprise' (1999: 8). What follows from this assertion is that with improved oversight and regulation, new forms of unfree labour can be eradicated. Bales advocates taking steps to 'intercept' the slave trade. 'At airports and border crossings around the world there should be officials searching for slaves. Investigators should be tracing the flow of slaves and confiscating cars, trucks, boats, and aircraft' (1999: 251). In the next section, I will illustrate why these assumptions are misleading.

•

Flanked by Fort Railway Station to the south and the Central Bus Stand to the north, the avenue known as Olcott Mawatha is one of Colombo's main arteries. It slices through a maze of small lanes and narrow passageways comprising the bazaar district of Pettah. It is perhaps the most

crowded and frenetic area in all of Sri Lanka. Rickshaws, automobiles and exhaust-belching buses surge past. Commuters rush in all directions, and porters charge through the crowds pulling or carrying huge loads. Almost nothing stands still. But even amongst all this activity, it is impossible to miss the giant billboard towering over the intersection. In the spring and summer of 2008, when I was completing the Sri Lankan component of the research, the billboard displayed a poster with photographs of two men. The man on the left was hanging out of an airplane, his face panic-stricken and his legs dangling in the sky. Below was a single word: 'Avadaanamdeh?' ('Are you in danger?') To the right is another man sitting calmly on an airplane with the following text: 'Sudhaanamdeh?' ('Are you prepared?') Small logos indicated that the poster was sponsored by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the British government.

Figure 20: Billboard in Pettah, Colombo in 2008

The poster conveys the message that planned migration through officially regulated, legal channels is less treacherous.<sup>164</sup> As part of the same information campaign, IOM and the British government created a series of smaller posters in Sinhala and English with a similar message. Again, the posters featured two men - one of a man holding out a passport, and another of a man in handcuffs. The photographs were accompanied by the following text:

Peril or Precaution? Think twice before you choose your route to migration. Do you dream of finding a better job and earning well? Sometimes the appeal of that dream is so strong you might even risk your life to make it come true. There are many who have tried to enter a foreign country through illegal means, only to end up in prison, or even losing their lives. Their children, wife and aged parents who depend on them end up in a worse position than ever before. Think twice before you risk

<sup>164</sup> Similar slogans have been used in information campaigns elsewhere. In Peru, posters used in an IOM campaign featured a photograph of a dog, jaws agape bearing long fangs, accompanied by the text: 'No te arriesgues. Viaja por la legal.' ('Don't risk yourself. Travel through legal means.') (IOM 2003: 59).

everything. You don't need to gamble on what's important to you. If you contact us, we will keep you informed of job opportunities suited to your qualifications and help you with the legal aspects of migration.

The fact that these campaigns feature young men suggests the intended audience is men contemplating migration to Europe rather than domestic workers headed for the Middle East. But it is not unlike the approach adopted by the Bureau of Foreign Employment in promoting women's migration to the Middle East. While the Bureau's training courses do not pretend that domestic workers will be safe from abuse when they go abroad, women are still encouraged to migrate and are required to do so through officially-regulated channels. In both the poster campaign and the training programmes for domestic workers, migrants are constructed as a problem in need of 'management' by the state. The discourse of 'managing' migration has become hegemonic among policy-makers. Irregular migration – or that taking place outside regulatory norms – is seen as a security threat, and governments face increasing pressure to manage their borders and clamp down on unregulated flows. This discourse makes an explicit connection between irregular migration and the risk of exploitation and abuse (e.g. IOM 2003: 60). Bizarrely, within this framework legal immigration controls are presented as a solution to human rights abuses (Anderson and Rogaly 2005: 9).

In a similar vein, at a policy level much attention has been paid to the importance of eliminating human trafficking. What constitutes trafficking is debated, but the predominant view is that, like slavery, it occurs in zones outside of official oversight.<sup>165</sup> Within the conventional framework, traffickers must be 'exposed' and 'victims' rescued. As O'Connell Davidson suggests, trafficking is seen as part of a package that includes smuggling and 'illegal migration' which, when taken together, 'assume a neat line of demarcation between oppositional categories of migration – voluntary and consensual versus involuntary and non-consensual migration...' (2006: 9). The interpretation of who counts as 'trafficked' is so narrow as to exclude the vast majority of people actually involved in unfree labour. Also neglected in this framework is the fact that people may willingly enter into unfree labour if they see no other options to earn a living.

The notion that legal, government-regulated migration is 'safer' may be hegemonic among policymakers but has not been incorporated into the way many migrant workers approach

<sup>165</sup> Trafficking has been defined by the United Nations as: 'The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.' (Protocol to Prevent, Suppress Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, also referred to as the Trafficking Protocol, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 2000)

migration. For perfectly good reasons, they may prefer to skirt the system and migrate through trusted social networks involving relatives, neighbours and friends in lieu of government-licensed recruitment agencies. Migrating through informal channels may be cheaper and advantageous if a worker is at risk of abuse because personal contacts may be more inclined to intervene on the worker's behalf than recruitment agency staff with a financial interest in satisfying employers. This is not to say that unregulated migration is a solution to the problems migrant workers face. Rather, the point I wish to emphasise is that the discourse on 'regulating' migration is myopic at best: It appears to be driven by states' desires to control borders rather than concerns about workers' welfare.

The assertion that 'planned', 'managed' migration is any less dangerous is perverse when we consider the realities of life for hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan women in the Middle East. They migrate through legal channels only to find themselves in situations in which employers have absolute power. The fact that they arrive legally with valid visas and work contracts does not lessen the risk of mistreatment. Their movement across national borders may be regulated, but the work itself seldom is. When it *is* regulated, it is done in ways that are heavily slanted in favour of the employer. One of the ironies of this situation is that the only way migrant domestic workers can escape subjugation is by illegally absconding from their employers. In this context, it is not unfree labour which is hidden. It is those who try to flee from the fetters of legal, state-sponsored bonded labour who must hide. 'Free' wage labour, not unfree labour, has been criminalised. Legal migration may sound more respectable and orderly but in this instance is not any more humane or less risky for the worker.

The situation of migrant domestic workers in Arab states is the result of both legal *and* extra-legal processes: legal in the sense that the terms of the *kafala* system bind workers to individual employers, and that employment contracts explicitly forbid leaving employers' homes without permission; extra-legal in the sense that legislation which could allow them to break free – for example prohibitions against slavery and trafficking – is ignored or interpreted so narrowly as to be irrelevant to most instances of unfree labour. In Jordan and elsewhere in the region, various sources of the law contradict one another. Unfree labour is illegal according to the 1929 law prohibiting slavery, but the legal regulations and contracts comprising the *kafala* system facilitate it. Some forms of unfree labour are accepted, whereas others are not.

The idea that states play a role in enabling forms of unfree labour through tacit or active means is not new. What appears distinctive about this context is the production of bonded labour through migration policies which are presented as 'good' for the worker. The truth is that the state plays midwife to bonded labour because it offers certain benefits, often at the worker's expense. In the same vein, the material presented here challenges the myth that unfree labour occurs in an unseen

world beyond legal oversight. This is simply not true. It is not just that the state overlooks unfree labour; it is that the state promulgates policies and legal processes that enable the practice. In assessing the contemporary variants of slavery, we must therefore consider the extent to which migration policies may create and nurture forms of unfree labour.

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## *Annex A: Restricted Nationalities List*

The nationalities indicated here need to obtain an entry permit prior to arrival in Jordan. This list was last updated on 8 March 2010.

Source: [http://www.hashweh.com/Restricted\\_Nationalities\\_List.pdf](http://www.hashweh.com/Restricted_Nationalities_List.pdf) (Accessed 5 Jan 2010)

### **Africa**

- Angola
- Benin
- Burkina Faso
- Botswana
- Burundi
- Cameroon
- Chad
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Djibouti
- Eritrea
- Ethiopia
- Gabon
- Gambia
- Ghana
- Ivory Coast
- Kenya
- Liberia
- Madagascar
- Mali
- Mauritania
- Central African Republic
- Mozambique
- Morocco (Females 18 – 35)
- Namibia
- Nigeria
- Seychelles
- Senegal
- Sierra Leone
- Somalia
- Sudan
- Tanzania
- Togo
- Uganda
- Zambia

### **Asia**

- Afghanistan
- Bangladesh
- Cambodia
- Iran
- Iraq
- Malaysia
- Nepal
- New Guinea
- Uzbekistan
- Pakistan

- Philippines
- Republic of Laos
- Sri Lanka
- Vietnam

Australia

*None*

Europe

- Albania
- Macedonia
- Moldova

North America

*None*

South America

- Belize
- Colombia
- Cuba

*Annex B: Special Working Contract for Non-Jordanian Domestic Workers*

**Premises**

**1. First Party:- A- (Employer)**

Name: .....

Sex:.....

Nationality: ..... I.D: ..... I.D number:.....

Profession: ..... Work Tel:.....

Work address:.....

Residency address (city) .....Street: .....

Residence no.:..... P.O.Box:.....

**B- Special Agency for Bringing and Recruiting Non-Jordanian Domestic Workers**  
Recruiting Agency:.....

Tel No. :.....

Address: .....

Ministry of Labour License No.:.....

**2. Second Party (Worker):**

Name: ..... Place and Date of

Birth:.....

Sex: Female/ Male

Nationality: ..... Marital Status: .....

Passport Number: .....

Place and date of Issue: .....

Date of Expiry:.....

Address in the Country of Origin: .....

Phone no.: .....

Worker's agent in his/her country.....

**Contract date:** (Day).....(Month).....(Year).....

**Contract period:** Two years upon the Second Party's arrival to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan..... The contract may be renewed for other periods with the agreement of both Parties and subject to the condition that the First Party obtains the required working and residency permits for the Second Party during the contract's duration in compliance with articles 3 and 9 of the contract.

As the First Party wishes to employ the Second Party to work in his/her residence, whose address is mentioned above, in the profession of..... and as the Second Party is ready to fully perform this work, this contract has been signed with the approval and consent of the Two Parties to the following conditions:

**Terms and Conditions**

**First:** The introduction of this contract is an essential part of it and shall be read altogether.

**Second:**

**A)** The First Party shall provide the Second Party with a two-way ticket under the condition that the Second Party has spent no less than a period of two working years. The First Party shall provide the Second Party with a return ticket if he/she wishes to end the Second Party's work before the contract expires. The First Party shall not bear the responsibility of providing the Second Party with a return ticket in case of transferring the Second Party to another employer or if the Second Party does not complete the contract's duration due to reasons caused by him/her.

**B)** In case of transferring the Second Party to work with a new employer and in order to complete the duration of this contract and following the approval of the concerned authorities, both parties and the new employer, an annexed contract shall be signed that will regulate the commitments of each Party including the return ticket.

**Third:** The First Party shall obtain the required working and residency permits at his/her own expenses for the Second Party. If the First Party fails to obtain the permits, he/she shall pay the penalties stated in article (34) of the Residency and Foreigners Affairs Law.

**Fourth:**

**A)** The Employer shall pay a monthly salary of..... JD or its equivalent in foreign currencies within seven days of the due date. Both parties shall sign a receipt verifying that the Employer has paid the salary and the Second Party has received it provided that both Parties shall keep original copies

**B)** The payment of the above mentioned salary To a Third Party shall not be considered quittance from paying the salary unless the Employer gets a written approval from the Second Party permitting him/her to pay the salary to a Third Party.

**Fifth:** The Employer shall not employ the Second Party in any place other than the usual address of the Employer's residence. In case of moving to another country, the Employer shall notify the concerned Embassy and shall get the approval of the Second Party.

**Sixth:** The Employer shall not employ the Second Party in any work other than the one described in the premises. The Second Party shall faithfully and loyally perform his/her duties without

violating the general social norms, morals and Laws. The Second Party shall not leave the Employer's residence or be absent from work without the Employer's approval.

**Seventh:** The Employer shall provide the Second Party, and in a suitable way, with accommodation, meals, clothing and medical care. The Employer must not place any restrictions upon the Second Party's correspondence.

**Eighth:** Both Parties shall treat each other in a humane way that complies with Jordanian Laws and the International Conventions ratified by Jordan. The Second Party shall be given one rest day weekly provided that the Second Party shall not leave the residence without the permission of the Employer.

**Ninth:** The Second Party has the right to nullify, without prior warning, the contract if the First Party does not abide by the Third and Fourth Articles. Therefore, the First Party shall bear the full civil and penal responsibility for violating the two mentioned Articles or any of the contract's Articles with full obligation on the part of the First Party to what is stated in the Second Article.

**Tenth:** The First Party has no right to withhold the Second Party's passport or any other related personal documents.

**Eleventh:** The Recruiting agency (B-First Party), and in case the Second Party appears to be infected, before entering the Kingdom, by any of the contagious or dangerous diseases or if found to be unhealthy or physically unfit or if turns to be pregnant, shall bear any financial expenses that the Employer had to pay when bringing the Second Party or any other expenses caused by any of the aforementioned reasons and shall send the Second Party back to the Country of Origin.

**Twelfth:** The First Party shall obtain a life and accidental insurance policy for the benefit of the Second Party, issued at an accredited insurance company recognized by the Second Party's Embassy, with an annual fee that shall not exceed JD 20, of which the Second Party shall pay half of the agreed amount to the First Party. In case the Second Party is from a nationality that its Embassy does not recognize any insurance company then the First Party shall insure the Second Party at any registered insurance company.

**Thirteenth:** Any dispute between the Employer and the Second Party shall be resolved in a friendly manner with the involvement of the agent (B- First Party) mentioned in the premises, and where necessary using the good offices of the Embassy. Both parties have the right to refer the matter to the judicial authority in order to solve it according to relevant laws.

**Fourteenth:** The First Party shall give the Second Party a grant equivalent to a 15- day salary at the end of the two working years at the same Employer.

**Fifteenth:** Three copies of the contract will be issued to the First Party (A+B), Second Party and concerned Embassy in the Kingdom in, Arabic and English. The Embassy's copy shall be kept at its offices without any expenses from the First Party.

**Sixteenth:** this contract has been executed in.....day.....

Date.....

**Additional Conditions that shall not violate any of the contract's articles:**

1.

2.

3.

**First Party:**

**A) Employer**  
**B) Agency.....**

**Second Party**

*Seal of the Ministry of Labour*

*Seal of the Concerned Embassy*

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