# IN THE SHADOWS OF FAMILY LIFE: TOWARD A HISTORY OF DOMESTIC SERVICE IN LEBANON

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## ABSTRACT

*From a series of interviews with Lebanese middle- and upper-class women in their latter years, the paper traces an oral history of domestic service in Lebanon over the past century. The interviews reveal various periods when women and girls were recruited from the local village poor as well from among Syrians, Palestinians, Kurds, Egyptians, and others in accordance with convenience and regional political circumstances. The long-term employment of Arab women in domestic service, with a primary focus on "live-in" maids, may be characterized as carrying a "burden" of obligation and responsibility in terms of relations of patronage and fictive kin. For example, Arab women in service, after they left the employing family, continued to claim patronage and resources for themselves and sometimes for their children as well. The outbreak of the civil war in 1975, however, marked a radical shift in the source of domestic labor, from Arab to non-Arab migrant workers, where patronage obligations were no longer required (or claimed). The paper provides anecdotal testimonies of prewar relations, identifying a continuing dependency, but now on quasi-contractual arrangements with Asian and African migrant domestic workers.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The literature on global experiences of domestic work focuses to a large extent on the inequalities and paradoxes of women of poorer countries traveling to serve families of rich countries (see Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Zimmerman, Litt, and Bose 2006), despite benefits to the families of individual domestic workers and to the economies of their countries. Less known and understood are the histories and experiences of middle- and upper-class households in developing countries that draw on local, regional, and increasingly global sources of female labor for their families which are consistent with the "gendered nature of all national systems of care" (Cheng 2006, 129).

In this analysis, it is shown that the local and regional sources of domestic labor for Lebanese households became globalized during and after the Lebanese civil war, not so much because of the increasing education and workforce participation of women, but because of an increasing reluctance of Lebanese women to undertake such menial work in households other than their own, as well as a greater ideological (or perhaps emotional) comfort for employers to draw on non-Arab foreigners who were unrelated to the tense and complex sectarian enmities that had developed (see Khalaf 2002; Traboulsi 2007). For it was not until 1998 that compulsory primary education was introduced in Lebanon, and not until after 2000 that serious consideration was given to the rights of the child and to child labor. As has occurred in many countries (and certainly in most Arab countries), the racialization of domestic work is merely a perpetuation of the "sexist division of labor by [women employers] passing on the most devalued work in their lives to another woman—generally a woman of color" (Romero 1992, 131).

When a domestic worker, particularly a live-in worker, steps over the family threshold, a stranger is introduced into the household.[1] As a stranger in the family, the domestic worker is simultaneously close but distant, familiar but unknown (Simmel 1950). Much like the stranger that Simmel describes, the domestic servant is in the position of a permanent and irreconcilable dissonance. She may come from—and represent in the imagination of family members—a different class, ethnicity, or nationality that is by turns subservient, comfortable, or threatening as political and economic circumstances change. Thus, a Palestinian

maid from one of the refugee camps near Beirut might have entered the house as a lowly, defenseless young woman, only to challenge her status and treatment within the family when the war brought empowerment, albeit temporary, to Palestinians (see Ghoussoub 1998; Jureidini 2006).

The multiple roles of domestic help[2] and the changing face of domestic service over time have not been adequately accounted for in studies and literature on Lebanese middle- and upper-class families, despite the widespread presence of domestic workers in a significant proportion of these households for many generations. Such workers seem to be secreted in the shadows of family life. Yet they have often played critical roles in the relationality among intimates in Arab families (Joseph 1999, 2). The purpose of this study is to give some sense of the roles they have played within the families they served, other than the labor they performed. What was their level of importance? Those who worked for long periods were often so assimilated into the employing household that they could be considered "fictive kin," with kinship/patronage obligations toward them and dependency upon them constituting a significant part of the dynamics of everyday family life. Another reason for studying domestic workers is that it tells us something about not only labor migration within the region (and more recently, globally), but also internal migration between villages and rural-urban migration.

The historical trajectory of domestic service emerged as an important theme as I attempted to identify and trace the changes of employment of different domestic help, and how families managed the "maid market" over time. Here we find that the procurement of domestic maids was often related to the changing political circumstances of the region. Thus, geographical proximity was important for the nascent Lebanese state when children from ʿAlawite families in northern Syria, particularly ʿAkkar, were regularly placed in households to perform domestic chores and were raised with the children they were to serve. However, access to Syrians ceased in the 1960s when Hafez al-Asad came to power and young women were redirected into the developing manufacturing industries.[3] From the 1920s and 1940s and also beyond, Kurdish women in the region undertook domestic work. From 1948 the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon also became a source of domestic labor. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the merger arrangements between Egypt and Syria (see Traboulsi 2007), many Egyptian women entered Lebanon

as hawkers and were also found working in bars around the *bourj* (city center). Middle-class families scouting around would entice them from the bars and the streets into their homes to work.

But the watershed that changed the history of domestic service was the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990). Previous sources of local and regional Arab women eventually petered out. The onset of the war caused an abrupt exodus of Egyptians; reluctance on the part of Palestinians to work; unwillingness by Lebanese employers to employ locals; and an increasing unwillingness of Lebanese women to undertake such work as the Asians entered the scene. A few years after the war began, enterprising recruitment agencies started bringing in Sri Lankans who were increasingly becoming part of the foreign labor force of the Gulf states. From 1990 to 2006, the main source of domestic labor in Lebanon was Sri Lanka, followed by the Philippines and Ethiopia (see Jureidini 2004b; 2005a).

The major argument here is that middle-class Lebanese families have been highly dependent upon domestic labor for the work required to maintain their households. With local and other Arab women, there were often emotional ties that generated reciprocal obligations on the part of employers toward their domestic workers, often including the workers' family members in a more or less patron-client relationship.

Now we might look upon the employment of young girls who were placed by their parents into domestic service as a form of slavery (as the wages were paid to the family), but they were often treated as adopted daughters, being cared for, socialized, and educated until they were married off. Such obligations beyond the domestic worker were not required when her family was not in the vicinity, and the current practice of using exclusively foreign, non-Arab, domestic labor has created a far more commoditized employer-employee relationship. Occasionally, women who were related, such as a cousin who had fallen on hard times, entered the household to do domestic chores. They worked not for salaries, but more as a matter of reciprocity for the normative care, accommodation, and hospitality they received. It would have been insulting and distancing for them to be given a salary, but payment "in kind" would be made by meeting all their expenses as if they were literally a member of the family. Rima, for example, the wife of the paternal cousin of Nadia, an 83-year-old Druze, lived and worked in Nadia's household after her hus-

band died while in Mexico and left her with three children to support. Rima was most helpful because Nadia's mother "was always busy having or rearing children and hosting guests." Importantly, Rima "was not a maid," said Nadia, "she was a helper."[4] Thus, over time, relatively serendipitous situations created a variety of experiences for Lebanese families who had various strangers living and working among them, who have been largely ignored in analyses and histories of Lebanese family life.

The anecdotes presented in this paper are just a few of the many told during the interviews conducted. I have deliberately allowed much of this paper to be in the words of the interviewees in order to allow the nuances of the narratives to be grasped. They reveal the intimacy of relations between family and non-family members in the household, and the ways they serve to reproduce relations of servitude in terms of both gender and class or social status. What we can also hear in many of them are the structures of power and exploitative relations within the households. At the same time, there are stories that show a certain social mobility and educational development, particularly when poor and uneducated young girls enter the homes of the rich.

## METHOD AND MEMORY

The data gathering for the research was relatively simple. Using the method of snowball sampling, the aim was to conduct interviews with mainly Lebanese women (and some men) about whom they remembered working for them.[5] The older the interviewee, the further back in time we were able to go. We asked not only about who served them but also about their parents and possibly grandparents—in other words, to document an oral history of domestic service in Lebanese families going back to the turn of the century, or at least to the 1920s. All interviews were conducted in Beirut. Most interviewees also had houses in the mountains or in the South in their villages of origin. The 30 interviewees do not constitute a representative sample, so it is not possible to make generalizations to the population as a whole or to middle- and upper-class families.

The reason for the exclusivity of female employers in the study was that women were and still are primarily responsible for household matters. A husband, or male head of household, may procure domestic

workers, but women are responsible for managing them and their work. Growing up, girls were more likely to stay at home and deal with the maid, as compared with boys who have always had more freedom to pursue their interests outside. Thus, women were more likely to have remembered more details, and the maids, it was assumed, would have had a greater impact upon their lives. As one interviewee said, "I loved Manja more than anyone else, because she told us stories." In addition, some husbands would not deal directly with the maid. For example, a husband would ask his wife for what he wanted, and she in turn would make the direct request to the maid, even if it was merely to get a glass of water and even if the maid was present in the room.

Because we look primarily at those who were live-in domestic workers,[6] the study does not include casual domestics, nor family members such as grandmothers who often looked after the children and worked in the household, perhaps doing more cooking than cleaning, which latter the maids would have done.

Many of the interviewees did not remember all the maids they had hired over the years. Some were recalled by their nationality but not by their name or religion. Some interviewees recalled the names of domestic servants but did not remember exactly when they were hired or how long they stayed. Some families changed the names of those who came to work for them, ostensibly to bring them closer with "pet names," as one does with children, but also to de-individualize and mold them according to family requirements. As one Maronite interviewee explained quite matter-of-factly when she was asked:

> *What was her name?*
> Jamila. Her name was Jamal, but we called her Jamila. She stayed with us and I taught her. Mom would bathe her and dress her up and teach her. She taught her how to read and write. She took her to church and had the priest bless her so she could take part in Palm Sunday every year.
> *Was she not Christian?*
> No. She was ʿAlawite. But Mom didn't want anyone in the house at that time who didn't pray.

Too numerous and perhaps not seen as sufficiently important in their lives to remember them all, domestic workers came and went as

serial hiring was part of everyday life. Only when a domestic worker was particularly significant—one who stayed a long time and became part of the family, particularly during the interviewee's childhood—was she recalled with clarity. Perhaps also when one was particularly troublesome, or had a colorful story, was she remembered at the time of the interview.

In the larger households, several maids were employed at the same time (and still are). They may have "specialized" in cleaning floors, washing dishes, and dusting, but workers were also hired for the purposes of polishing silver, preparing food, cooking, gardening (usually males), and of course chauffeuring (exclusively males, who sometimes also served as bodyguards).[7]

Interviewees were typically (and for the purpose of this study, deliberately chosen from among) middle- and upper-class women. Table 1 shows their age, religion, education, occupation, and the occupation of their spouse. Two-thirds of the 30 women interviewed were housewives, regardless of age, religion, and level of education. The average number of children of the interviewees was 2.8, with a median of 3, ranging from 0 to 6. The two children of one interviewee were her husband's from a previous marriage. Those who indicated that they were retired include the two teachers, the public servant, and the hotel owner.

Although not exclusively, the data from the interviews suggested a preference by Druze families to employ Druze (mainly from the Druze mountains), and by Shi'ite families to employ Shi'a from the South, perhaps mainly because of proximity to the household. Christian and Sunni employers did not seem to favor any particular religion. Generally, however, it was a system of girls or women from poor families (and orphans) going to serve and live with wealthy families—from villages in the mountains and throughout the south, east, and north of the country as well as Beirut.

Until the beginning of the civil war in 1975, Lebanese women were generally the most commonly employed as live-in maids. From over 150 significant domestic workers noted by our sample of interviewees,[8] 77 were Lebanese (up to 1990). Most of the others comprised 24 Syrians (up to 1962); 22 Palestinians and 18 Egyptians (up to 1975); and 8 Kurds (to the late 1970s, with one in 1987). After 1990, women from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Ethiopia predominated.

**Table 1.** Interviewees as of 2006

| Age | Religion | Education | Occupation | Spouse |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 56 | Shiʿite | Part High School | Hospital Director | Surgeon |
| 61 | Catholic | MA | Housewife | Dentist |
| 62 | Maronite | High School | Housewife | Caricaturist |
| 71 | Maronite | Part High School | Public Servant (ret.) | Journalist |
| 81 | Sunni | High School | Teacher (ret.) | Journalist (ret.) |
| 63 | Sunni | BA Arch. | Architect | Lawyer |
| 82 | Greek Orth. | Part Art School | Housewife | Businessman |
| 68 | Maronite | Part High School | Housewife | Businessman |
| 59 | Druze | BA Fine Art | Housewife | Architect |
| 57 | Sunni | Part High School | NGO Director | Architect |
| 58 | Greek Orth. | Part High School | Housewife | Businessman |
| 93 | Druze | BA Soc Sci | NGO Administrator | Former Minister |
| 58 | Sunni | BA Poli Sci | Not Employed | (Unmarried) |
| 68 | Shiʿite | Part High School | Housewife | Merchant |
| 84 | Druze | Business College | Housewife | Contract Engineer |
| 61 | Shiʿite | High School | Housewife | Businessman |
| 58 | Shiʿite | BA | Housewife | Ambassador |
| 79 | Maronite | High School | Hotel Owner (ret.) | (Divorced) |
| 50 | Shiʿite | Part High School | Housewife | Civil Engineer |
| 57 | Shiʿite | BA | Housewife | Businessman |
| 83 | Druze | Primary School | Housewife | Landlord |
| 73 | Greek Orth. | Teaching Diploma | Teacher (ret.) | Businessman |
| 75 | Protestant | MA | Housewife | Shiʿite MP |
| 60 | Druze | BA | Housewife | Co. Manager |
| 62 | Greek Orth. | High School | Housewife | Engineer |
| 76 | Sunni | High School | Housewife | Politician/Doctor |
| 79 | Druze | Part University | Housewife | Businessman |
| 46 | Shiʿite | Part University | Housewife | Psychiatrist |
| 44 | Greek Orth. | BA | Journalist | Film Director |
| 52 | Sunni | MA | Housewife | Architect |

## CHILD MAIDS

The story of domestic service in Lebanon prior to the end of the civil war is substantially one of child labor. Of the 66 Lebanese maids recalled in the interviews whose ages on entering the household were known, just over half were 15 years old or less: 11% were 7–9 years old; 15% were 10–13; and 25% were 14–15. Another 20% were 16–20 years old, and the

rest (29%) were over 20, mostly around 30 years of age.

The earliest employee identified by an interviewee was in 1905. This was a 12-year-old Ethiopian girl who eventually became *Teta* (grandmother) or *Sitti Mabruka* (i.e. the preferred grandmother) to the interviewee. She was "bought" in Ethiopia by the grandfather of our Sunni interviewee "when he was there doing business and she was offered to him by her family. It was a common practice with Africans at the time." Mabruka was not paid a salary, but remained there all her life and was treated as part of the family. She died in 1939 and was buried in the family plot when our 81-year-old interviewee was 14 years old.

In 1950, one of the interviewees employed a Palestinian. She explained,

> Her name was Hiyam, a Palestinian from... Mieh Mieh camp here [near Sidon]. Hiyam stayed with me for maybe ten years. They used to think she was my daughter. I took a long time to have children, so she used to help me in the house.... I raised her at home with me.
> *What do you mean by "raised"?*
> She was 12 years old when she came to me.
> *How old were you?*
> I had reached 21, even 22 by then.
> *What do you mean "raised"?*
> What I mean by "raised" is I taught her housework. I was alone with my husband with no children.

In this we see an example of particularly young girls being more or less adopted by the family. Of importance is the sometimes long and stringent process of training to ensure that the girl maid performs all her tasks with precision and according to the nuances of her employer's requirements. This training also includes moral training, as one interviewee emphasized rather strongly:

> I believe maids must be raised like my own children. A person must have morals and traditions. When you are an Arab woman like me, you should behave like me. You cannot be staying in my home and maintaining harmony in the house and act otherwise.

At times, girls were foisted upon a "good," prestigious family, particularly if the family was known to treat its employees well. From

around 1946, we have the following story from a Maronite interviewee:

> A man comes and knocks at our door, a Syrian man. He tells mom, "I heard that you treat servants very well. I have this daughter and I don't want to place her anywhere. Take her, keep her with you, and I don't want more than 300 pounds a year." She told him, "What do I want with her? I have a slave, and she doesn't even know how to greet visitors."
> *How old was she?*
> She was about 7 years old. My mother said, "What do I want with her? I've already raised a family of nine and you want me to begin child-rearing all over again?" He started to beg her and cry and say that he didn't want to place her anywhere and that we should keep her so she could learn. My brother arrives and tells my mother, "Mom, it's a good deed. Keep her with you. She'll help you. True, you have a slave, but he only speaks English. At least she speaks Arabic. Take her, 300 pounds is nothing." Mom cursed her luck because she couldn't be bothered with children anymore. She gave him 300 pounds; he gave her a receipt and left. He was from Safita in Syria.

We can say that from the 1920s through to the 1950s, ʿAlawites and other Syrians from ʿAkkar in the north were widely used. One interviewee, a 73-year-old Greek Orthodox retired teacher, recalled that as a child she would hear the shouting, "The ʿAlawites are coming, the ʿAlawites are coming, coming with their families!"; and then the ʿAlawite father would negotiate to place his daughter, or daughters, and return annually for their wages until he took them back to be married.

This interviewee explained that the ʿAlawites stopped coming after 1961 when Hafez al-Asad came to power in Syria and they were redirected into industrial labor. From other interviews, however, we find Syrians still being employed until the 1980s. A 12-year-old ʿAlawite, for example, was employed by our 93-year-old interviewee in 1988 ("someone brought her"), but she only stayed for one year:

> I brought an ʿAlawite maid once. She was very bright.
> *When was this?*
> I think I was still living in my parent's house—I was still downstairs. She was 12 years old. She was a beautiful young lady and learned

> quickly. She was smart. And you can't imagine how little time it took her to learn to read and write. Not more than three months. She was illiterate and she began to read and write.
> *Did you teach her?*
> Yes, I did, because she was bright and I know how to teach. So she learned quickly and after she learned, I started giving her something to read to learn more. Eventually she used to read whatever she liked. She started to read stories. Once I came into the kitchen and found her on the balcony that overlooks the street down below. I found her there looking down, holding a piece of paper she was about to throw. I told her, "Give me the paper," but she threw it down. Imagine! She was just 13 years old and already she was making contact with the construction workers who were building downstairs. She was writing letters to one of the workers.
>
> We sat down and I told her, "You are 13 years old and the future is before you and I want to teach you more." But it was no use and she didn't feel ashamed. I told her, "I'll tell your mother if you keep doing this. I'm a very busy person and I leave the house frequently. If this man were to come to the house, he might do something to you and I won't be held responsible." She just looked down and kept quiet. When her mother came to take her money, I told her, "Your daughter is doing this and that...." I didn't want her anymore. I couldn't take it. I asked her mother, "Could you take her? Because she's become too old."

Mentioning the girl's age was deemed an acceptable way to save face. It would seem that the younger the girl, the more acceptable was greater control over the child, including restrictions on her freedom to leave the house, just as in the case of young daughters of the family. The ages of the Syrian maids from our sample varied across time from 12 to 30 years, but it is noteworthy that all of those mentioned who were employed prior to 1945 were between 6 and 9 years old. Typically also, the girl was taught not only to do the housework, but also to read and write.

In the 1950s, following their expulsion, Palestinians were conveniently procured from the refugee camps around Beirut and in southern Lebanon. Indeed, from the 1950s to the early 1970s, Palestinian women (referred to as *semsara*, agent) procured women, girls, and sometimes couples for domestic work from 'Ain al-Hilweh. From the interviews,

"many" Palestinians were employed throughout the 1950s, fewer in the 1960s, but also in the 1970s. The majority were under 15 years of age, and most of them were between 7 and 9 years old.

It is unclear how prevalent was the procurement of poor young girls who were adopted. In Turkey, Özbay's (1999) research highlights the role of "adopted daughters." Similarly, in Lebanon from the late 1960s, we are told,

> I remember once I went with my friend who wanted a maid, and in the [Palestinian] camp in Sour [Tyre], they gave her a little girl. They told my friend, "Take her. Nobody here is going to take care of her. Her father used to beat her." My friend took her and cared for her as her daughter.

In the 1960s, it was said that Egyptian women could be found working in bars around the *bourj* (city center), and "they took them" from the bars to work for families. This practice largely stopped at the outbreak of the civil war, when most Egyptians returned home. Naturally, most of the Egyptian women who migrated were adults. In our study, the only examples of young Egyptians being employed go back to the 1940s, when over a number of years several were procured into a Christian family that had familial and business roots in Cairo. Sanya was brought from Upper Egypt in 1969 at the age of 13 and stayed six years. For many years after that, young relatives of Sanya would replace one another, coming to Beirut and working for a few years until they returned to Egypt to get married.

The adoption of fictive kin through the intensive and intimate work that is preformed by domestic workers often required obligatory patronage. In some cases, particularly for local Lebanese, the employing family performed roles that were traditionally those of the parents, even though the employee's parents might be close at hand. A suitor, for example, might approach the lady of the house, rather than the girl's mother or father, to ask for her hand in marriage. When a child entered the house and remained for a long period, she was cared for as an adoptive daughter. So also might her subsequent family be treated as fictive kin after she became independent.

From Dima, a 61-year-old Shiʿite interviewee from the Beqaʿa who married into a prominent Shiʿite family in the South, we learn of the

experience of her mother, Lina, who in 1938, at the age of 13, received a 5-year-old Syrian orphan girl named Sobhiya, whom Lina's family adopted de facto. Lina married in 1940 at the age of 15, and subsequently had twelve children. Her daughter Dima was born when Sobhiya was 13 years old; Dima was 12 when Sobhiya left at age 25 to marry and start her own family. Lina organized Sobhiya's wedding party and bought everything she needed for the marriage, including the furnishings for her home. The family also found a job for Sobhiya's husband. Later, when Sobhiya's children grew up, the family employed her two sons as drivers. Though Sobhiya no longer worked for the family, she visited regularly with her children who became "like brothers" to Dima and her siblings. Sobhiya still visits and is now 74 years old. Dima also described Sobhiya's companionship and how she would entertain her:

> Sobhiya used to love and be loved by our drivers. She used to come and tell me these funny little stories, that a driver told her that she was pretty, or that he loved her—only this.... She never went out alone.... My mother used to take care of her and did not let her go out alone anywhere.[9]

## MAIDS AS MOTHERS: BRINGING UP THE CHILDREN

It is not entirely clear how maids directly influence the socialization process of young members of the families they live with. It was clear that for many of the interviewees, having employed many maids over the years, at least one stood out as significant. She was usually the person who had an impact on their childhood, someone who "brought them up." There were clear expressions of deep love, companionship, and gratitude toward these women; and according to the interviewees, the feelings were reciprocal.

Moral and humanitarian factors also determined who might enter the household. Older women were sometimes "rescued" by secure and comfortable families. One Shiʿite respondent related the story of a young Shiʿite woman in her mid-20s who had been beaten and then banished by her husband for being "loud-mouthed." She was eventually sued by her husband and imprisoned. The family continued to care for her and visited her in prison. After she was released, she stayed and worked for the family for many years. She attended the birth of the children and

still visits and receives money from various members of the family: "The door is never closed to her, and others in need, but she was the best remembered and most loved of those who worked for us."

Ongoing and sometimes lifelong patron-client relations typically ensue from deep reciprocal intimacy, particularly but not exclusively with Lebanese domestic workers. For Dima, Sobhiya was significant and she depended upon her a great deal during her formative years:

> I remember when I got sick, I would not feel better unless Sobhiya came and took me to sleep near her [commonly, maids slept in the same room with the children]. I remember when other maids used to bathe me, I would start crying because they hurt me, but I quickly stopped the moment Sobhiya put her hand on my head. I could feel her hand and know it was her.

The expectation that, in addition to domestic chores, maids are required (and entrusted) to care for children has become a global political issue (see Chang 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Agrawal 2006). In a number of Arab countries, xenophobic attitudes have included criticism of foreign domestic workers raising children who are being taught Tagalog, Sinhalese, or Amharic, the languages of those who take care of them (see Jureidini 2004a; 2004c; 2005b). Therefore, parents will insist on a certain distance between the maid and the children to ensure that the family's culture, traditions, and morals are inculcated. This applies not only to foreign but also to Arab domestic workers who are invariably from a lower class. One interviewee explained, "Mariam had a hand in bringing up my two girls, but not in their moral upbringing."

On a similar but lighter theme, our 93-year-old Druze interviewee related that her mother only cooked *mjadara* (a lentil and rice dish) and they used to get sick of it. One day, her maid, Salima, took her into the kitchen to force the mjadara down her throat. She ran to her mother in tears. Consoling her, her mother told her,

> You can do whatever you like with her [the maid]. You can hit her!
> *So what did you do?*
> I hit her! I was only 8 years old and my mother thought I could vent my frustration.

> *What about Salima?*
> Salima accepted.... She agreed with my mother and it was over.[10]

Even though this class of Lebanese women greatly depended on domestic labor, there was no sense in which they employed domestic workers in order to facilitate their own participation in the workforce.[11] While domestic workers obviously lightened the workload of housewives, their presence was also required for the social construction of the family and as a counterpoint to the proper social roles of other women and girls in the household. A fundamental part of motherly care for the family is of course food preparation, cooking, and serving. This also has to be managed carefully. For example, one interviewee was asked if she ever helped in the kitchen when she was young. She replied,

> You will laugh. My mother always said that you don't have to work, but you don't have to look stupid in front of your help. So during the summer we would go into the kitchen just to see how things were made but not to make them; perhaps when we took home economics, to make some cake or something, but not the real cooking. For the real thing she would always say, "You shouldn't look stupid in front of your employees; you should know how *kobayba* [traditional meat balls] should be made and of what; and the vine leaves too; and what is *rosto* [roasted meat], what is *yakhna* [standard sauce]."

Here her mother reveals a very instrumentalist approach to status within the household rather than knowledge and skill in the kitchen as something intrinsically required or valued in her daughters—know how to teach and supervise rather than know how to do, which is part of becoming the *sitt al-beit* (woman of the house).

## THE CIVIL WAR

When Sabat married in 1973, her first maid was an Egyptian, but she left when the war broke out. Sabat noted, however, that she needed someone because she had never done any work in the house: "I knew nothing. I was very young, 18." She went on to explain, "I also used to bring Palestinians, but during the civil war they became so strong, we stopped asking them to come for housework because we were afraid of them." Another interviewee corroborated similar circumstances:

> During the first period of the civil war, some Lebanese women who had Palestinians were threatened by the maids themselves. If the lady of the house said something displeasing to the maid, she would tell her, "I'll get the Palestinian police." They became scary and we started being afraid of them.... But they were clean and sincere and honest. Those Palestinians still working now only work during the day and do not sleep in the house.

Basically, Palestinians ceased to be employed at the outbreak of the civil war (three interviewees hired Palestinians in 1972, but they only stayed for two years). There were two exceptions from the interviews. In 1976, for example, Mariam from ʻAin al-Hilweh camp began working in the South for the family of one of our interviewees, a 56-year-old Shiʻite. Mariam was born in 1943, and her family left Palestine in 1951 when she was 8 years old. At age 9, she began working part-time in Lebanese households as a *lafaya* (the term is derived from the Arabic root *laff*, whose meanings include to belong to, relate to, be attached to, or be affiliated with). She came once a week and cooked special dishes, since our interviewee's siblings used to stay with her almost every weekend and sleep over on Saturday and Sunday. Mariam remained with this family for 29 years and was still there at the time of the interview (at around 63 years of age). Having funded her pilgrimage to Mecca, the family members sometimes refer to her as "Hajji." She was their chaperone when her mistress traveled and they like her a lot. Now they call her "Teta" (grandmother).

The second case of a Palestinian after 1975 was Snaya, who was sheltered by a Sunni family along with ten to twelve others in 1976 when they escaped during the terrible siege of Tel al-Zaʻatar, the Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Beirut. (Snaya's younger sister had worked for friends of our interviewee since she was 7 years old—"she was raised and married off there"—and so there was some familiarity.) Later, in 1983, when Snaya was around 31 years old, the family hired her and she has remained with them to this day. Our 81-year-old interviewee noted how close she is to Snaya. They eat together as well as with others "who can handle eating with a maid," she said sarcastically.

Many Egyptian women were recruited in the early 1970s by a particular agency that was operating at the time. According to one

interviewee, they had to look for alternatives after the Syrians stopped coming because "nobody else would work." However, by contrast to others, generalized disparaging remarks were made about them. A number of interviewees said that Egyptians had stolen from them. Several were fired because of this. One was caught stealing jewelry in 1972 and taken to the police, but it is not known what happened to her after that. Another, Hanem, fled to Jounieh during heavy bombing in 1977 and was able to secure passage on a ship back to Egypt. After she left, it was discovered that she had stolen a number of "small valuables."[12]

## THE CIVIL WAR (1975–1990) AND THE POSTWAR ERA

The year 1975 was a watershed that marked the beginning of the entry of Sri Lankans, then Filipinas, and later Ethiopians. Much more has been written about this period (see Jureidini 2004b). In conjunction with the increasing reluctance of Lebanese women to undertake domestic work outside their home, the civil war also meant that families were unlikely to employ someone of another religious sect in their own home. This was perceived soon after 1975. While families could more safely employ women from their own religious communities, it can be argued that, by the end of the war, all Lebanese who remained in country during that period had been politicized, and the idea of employing Lebanese women and girls in such a servile position was anathema to a national pride that was emerging along with the country's physical and social reconstruction.

It is not possible to explain this historical moment simply by reference to "modernization" or to the increasing educational attainments of Lebanese women, particularly during the fifteen years of vicious disruption of daily life during the civil war. Similar to the experience in Europe, economic and demographic changes such as the absence of a welfare system, an aging population, increased female workforce participation, and nuclearization of family structures do not adequately account for the increased demand for migrant domestic workers; just as important are status, lifestyle, and power relations (including racial) between women which need to be factored in (see Anderson 2003). It may also be significant that, at the end of the civil war, when many thousands of Lebanese returned from their safe havens abroad, and from the Gulf

states in particular, the practice of importing a plentiful supply of Asian women as domestic workers was replicated in Lebanon. Furthermore, although the rate of female participation in the labor force increased by 50% between the 1960s and 1975, it had only increased to around 20% by 2005. In a study by this author in Lebanon in 2005–06, only 29% of the female employers of migrant domestic workers were in the workforce (N=514 households). In other words, while in some individual cases it may be true, the rise in the employment of domestic workers was not intended to facilitate Lebanese women entering into the paid workforce.

By the 1980s, Sri Lankans were increasingly entering Lebanon, with some evidence of their arriving in the early 1970s, initially with Lebanese returning from the Gulf states, but also with the rise of migration agents who had established connections in Sri Lanka and later in the Philippines and Ethiopia. One interviewee sarcastically remarked, "Imagine the Lebanese business mind—to bring in Sri Lankans during the war!"

As foreign domestic workers were brought in under more formal contractual terms, there is a clearer picture of the number of domestic workers in Lebanon, although the figures change according to periods of conflict and uncertainty. During the survey period, there were some 120–150,000 Sri Lankans, around 30,000 Filipinas, and approximately 30,000 Ethiopians and various others. However, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in July–August 2006, the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration announced in January 2007 that it would more vigorously enforce the changed contractual requirements that had been announced earlier in 2006. These had doubled the minimum wage to USD 400 per month for all Filipina domestic workers in the GCC and other Arab states, the rule taking effect for all new and renewed contracts from March 3, 2006; the minimum age for migration was increased from 18 to 25 years (for emotional and psychological maturity); and a maximum two-year contract was specified.[13] It is likely that these restrictions were instituted to discourage Filipinas from going to Lebanon and the Middle East generally.[14] Lebanese employers have been reluctant to agree to such conditions, so agencies began looking to alternative countries, such as in Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea, and Indonesia), but also Francophone countries in Africa, particularly Senegal, Gabon, and Ivory Coast. Many governments in countries such

as India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Sierra Leone have banned female labor emigration to Lebanon. It seems that Ethiopian women have been the most numerous entering Lebanon since August 2006, taking up the places left by Sri Lankans and Filipinas.

In some sense, employing families had to learn how to adjust to migrant domestic workers coming in from widely different cultures which they knew little about. Indeed, it is likely that most families still know little about Sri Lanka, the Philippines, or Ethiopia, and are not very interested to learn, for their primary interest is to have the housework done, with the expectation that migrant domestic workers are the ones who need to adjust to local mores. All kinds of fear and trepidation must have been present during the initial years following the war. For example, there was one case of a Tahitian being employed in 1994 who was fired after two years when she took a lock of her employer's hair and threatened her with a voodoo spell!

## LEBANESE VERSUS FOREIGN MAIDS

While the availability of Lebanese domestic maids began to decline from the 1960s, the civil war reduced it even further and new entries of Lebanese women into domestic service simply dried up. On the one hand, it became *'aib* (shameful) for a Lebanese woman to work as a maid and such employment is now associated with the assumption that the woman will never marry. On the other hand, as Sri Lankans in particular began to dominate in these domestic service positions, the occupation became racialized. That is, the position of maid came to be known as *Sirilankiyya* (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004). Thus, it is now beneath Lebanese nationals to work as a maid. An interviewee in her 80s summarized the reluctance of Lebanese women to undertake this work anymore:

> I prefer Lebanese [maids], but they no longer accept to work as maids. And they'll put about twenty conditions on you if they do come, like "I want Saturday and Sunday off," so that it would be like you serving her and not the other way around.

Similar perceptions were expressed by another:

> Now, if you give me the choice of who to hire, I wouldn't have a Lebanese maid.

> *Why?*
> Because now the Lebanese maid has so many demands and she is conceited, whereas the foreign maid comes more or less just for work, because she comes from a poor country.... We don't have that much poverty here in Lebanon anymore, for you to get a maid from here. And even if you brought one, they're all open now. There is television and demands and they've opened up a lot. No Lebanese girl will come and stay in a house anymore. They might come as cleaning ladies but they have become more difficult than the foreign maid.
> *Why?*
> She has become demanding. She wants to sit and chat with you. She wants to sit and drink coffee or have a cigarette. She wants to rest. You can't have it like before. Today, you can treat the foreign maid well and she'll work all day. Even though she earns less than the Lebanese day-cleaning lady, you can still make her work, whereas you can't with a Lebanese.

More than that, however, Lebanese women working in domestic service now invariably invite ridicule. They will be taunted by being called "Sirilankiyya." In one case, a Lebanese-American academic asked a young Lebanese woman to work for her. The girl required that she be referred to only as the children's "nanny," although she would only do the cleaning. She needed the money, but within two weeks she could no longer bear to continue, and she left. In one interview with May, there was a sense of empathy with these dynamics:

> There is no longer the same level of deprivation that there was in the old days. I prefer it if she's a foreigner. I wouldn't like a fellow national to come and work in my house. No. For her sake, I wouldn't wish that she come to me. I wouldn't want that for her. For her own sake, I'd like my fellow national to come and visit me but not serve me. For her own sake, so that I don't hurt her pride or her feelings. But in the case of the foreigner, I don't know her, and she has willfully left her family in order to come here and work. She knows where she's going to be employed at our place. This gives me peace of mind.

May's parents both came from influential political families. Although members of the family were never formally employed by them, many

people, including family members, would stay in the family home for protection or other reasons and help out around the house. Of the twelve children, the first ten were breast-fed by wet-nurses, some of whom still visit their former charges and ask for money and the like. The maids were protected by May's mother and were not allowed to go out alone. The family had Lebanese servants until the 1960s, as well as Syrians, Kurds, and Palestinians (until the Palestinians became so strong that "we were afraid of them"); then they mostly employed Egyptians (who came in the mid-1960s, many to trade goods brought from Egypt and to work as maids until they were able to return to Egypt with things to sell); Sudanese (mostly men employed as cooks, who showed up before the Egyptians); and Sri Lankans (May hired one in 1981 when it was still rare). May said that the family would "buy" young girls for a few years for a set sum and bring them to the house, mostly Lebanese and Syrian girls. She said that her family was close to their maids, especially the Lebanese ones, although she likes having a Sri Lankan maid now because, even though the relationship is impersonal, she knows the maid cannot run away: "Now there is a guarantee that your maid won't run away: you have her passport, and if she runs it happens only once, while with the Lebanese, every time she goes to visit her family you're afraid she won't come back."

Alternatively, Maria expressed a clear preference for Lebanese. When asked why, she replied,

> They were different. They were different in terms of their affection. And then there was more loyalty and more sensitivity. The Lebanese maid is like us, after all. We share the same feelings.... For example, the Philippine maids are indifferent. If someone else offers them five dollars more, they'll leave you. They're not straight, either. They're liars. They like to lie a lot. You have to be up for the challenge to be able to control everything with them.

Yet there were also expressions of frustration with Lebanese. For example, 75-year-old Masla told of her last Lebanese maid and the difficulty of finding another one. Of particular interest was the maid's perception that it was not a proper employment relationship:

> We treated her like a daughter and even my daughter taught her how

> to read and write. I taught her to knit, how to make a *kanza* [woolen pullover], how to use the sewing machine, and then one day she came and said, "I have found work in the factory and I'm going there because I will be an employee." She's no longer a housemaid, she is an employee.
> *How did you feel about that?*
> I told her, "*Sahteen 'al 'albik* [to your health; go for it]. We protected you and you have been here for five or six years." But she decided to become an employee. It is not prestigious for her to be a housemaid, though we used to treat her like my daughter.
> *Did you feel deceived a bit that…?*
> Not deceived. I said, "Would it harm you if you stayed with us a couple more years until you get married?" She said, "An employee is better." Okay, an employee is better, so goodbye.

The relatively new development of global migration of domestic workers has been likened to a new form of "contract slavery." Bales (1999) calls them "disposable domestics" because they are often and easily replaced. The patronage and sense of obligation to long-serving maids (and their families) have more or less disappeared in Lebanon. When asked about emotional involvement with foreign domestic workers, one interviewee[15] replied,

> I think that when they stay too long, whether with me or anybody else, they become very involved, very familiar, and that's not a good thing. You lose the freshness, and like my mother-in-law used to say, "New brooms sweep clean." And she used to say, "You shouldn't keep your washer"—the woman who washed by hand—"You shouldn't keep your broom or your washer more than two years." The house's sense of sanctity and privacy is lost when they stay too long.

It can also be argued that the commodification of domestic service through contract migrant labor in Lebanon (and globally) is an improvement over the feudalistic relationship of patronage.[16] Child domestic labor has been abolished, while local and international interventions have sought the acknowledgment and regulation of domestic work as a formal employment relationship. For example, in February 2009, the Ministry of Labor in Lebanon signed off on a rights-based standard labor

contract for migrant domestic workers as a first step toward new labor legislation to regulate paid domestic work. This was the culmination of a comprehensive campaign through a ministerial steering committee established in 2005 that comprised a number of stakeholders such as the International Labour Organization, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, human rights NGOs, and embassies of the migrant-sending countries (see ILO 2008; OHCHR 2009).

## CONCLUSION

This potted history of domestic service in Lebanon reveals much in the way of the serendipitous procurement of domestic workers evolving from a form of internal colonialism to a more globalized and state-facilitated access to a gendered and racialized transnational labor force. Until the mid-1970s they were primarily Arab women—local, regional, and refugees. The intimacy of adopted child maids often became lifelong relationships that included the myriad experiences and reproductions of class, status, ethnicity, and gender; of love and care, sexuality, hostility, and grief; moral and financial patronage. The hiatus of the fifteen-year civil war altered these relationships, though in some ways a greater intensity of problems associated with ethnic and status differences has ensued. The structures of domestic employment have changed through the more formal and contractual exclusivity of Asian and African migrant domestic workers that ushered in a fundamentally new set of both pragmatic and problematic attitudes and experiences of domestic service.

We saw that before the civil war, child domestic workers often entered Lebanese households and became an integral part of the family, not only working, but being educated as well as caring for and being companions to the children of the families they served. Importantly, however, the introduction of migrant domestic workers has also resulted in the eradication of child maids. Excluding the incidence of the trafficking of child labor in other parts of the region, the Lebanese experience has meant that only adult migrants are able to enter the country to take up these positions.

The dependency upon domestic labor in the household was (and continues to be) not just a matter of work that cannot be done by the female head of household or other members within the family, but a

normative tradition from generation to generation that requires such assistance. The status and expectations of orderliness and cleanliness of the houses and families of the middle class necessitate household help, for despite the problems of training and managing, no self-respecting wife and mother would do such work herself if she did not have to.

Many of the stories of domestic workers in Lebanese families tell us something about their importance over time not only in enabling the wealthier class to cope with domestic chores, but also in raising children, in the social construction of the household, the place of women within it, and the patron-client relations of dependency and obligation. Indeed, the shift to foreign domestic workers has also meant fewer or no further obligations toward poor Arab women and their families that previously could last through two or possibly three generations. This does not mean that those patronage relations were based on intra-Arab solidarity and equality. Indeed, the types of abuse and exploitation of Arab women and child domestic servants are no different from those experienced by contemporary foreign domestic workers in Lebanon and seen throughout the history of experiences of local, regional, and foreign domestic servitude in most countries (see Jureidini 2004b; 2006).

Some of our interviewees' stories related here clearly show the lasting impact made on their lives by some of the women and girls whom their families employed, and although otherwise undocumented and unacknowledged, they have not been forgotten. What was also striking was the fact that the interviewees grew up without having to do housework, and with the assumption that they would need to employ domestic workers when they married and left their parents' homes. Husbands sometimes employed a maid to "please" their wives—like the gift of a household appliance—particularly when first married. We might note, finally, that dependence on domestic workers has not diminished, but perhaps increased. No self-respecting architect or builder in the Middle East would design an apartment without maid's quarters; and despite nationalist programs to reduce dependence on foreign workers, in the Gulf states, for example, domestic maids and other so-called unskilled workers will always be in strong demand.

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## NOTES

1. Asian maids in Lebanon are not only "strangers" in the house, they are also foreigners and thus ethnically, religiously, and visibly different (Jureidini 2006).

2. Variously referred to as domestic workers, domestic help, maids, housemaids, housekeepers, or servants when several are employed in the household.

3. Much as occurred at the end of the nineteenth century in England and France (see Anderson 2000).

4. The changing terms for what are now called "domestic workers," which has more of an industrial-relations connotation, are also worthy of further discussion, e.g. from slaves to servants, to maids, to domestics, domestic workers, househelp, househelpers, housekeepers: each term reflecting various expressions of political correctness.

5. Care has been taken to preserve the anonymity of the respondents in the study. Where names are used, they are fictitious.

6. The dynamics in the relationships and treatment of domestic workers are quite different for those who live in the household as compared with those who only work a number of hours per day or week and return to their own homes and families to sleep. Women who work casually are less likely to become "part of the family" and thus significant in the lives of those whom they serve (see Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004).

7. Male employees who served in the latter categories were not considered in this research, for the focus is on female domestic workers within the home.

8. Significant in the sense that they were live-in, were remembered well, and there was some story about them. Not all were considered part of the family, and not all had a deep relationship with the interviewee. There were clearly many more than 150 domestic workers. References were made, for example to "a number of Syrians," or "many Palestinians" being brought into households, but no details were recalled.

9. While the issue of "care" for maids is addressed later, it is worth noting here that such restrictions on the movements of foreign domestic workers are now seen as a human rights violation.

10. The twist in the tale was that our interviewee's young friend, who was visiting at the time, ate the mjadara for her when Salima's back was turned!

11. While female workforce participation rates in Lebanon have always been low, they are still unreliable. It is impossible to ascertain the population of domestic workers prior to the 1990s because it was always in the informal sector (see Tzannatos and Kaur 2003). For the period after the 1990s, when migrant domestic workers basically took over this occupation in Lebanon, somewhat more reliable estimates can be made from Ministry of Labor, General Security, and foreign embassy data.

12. It is interesting to note that a similar study recently conducted by the author found that the same reputation of Egyptian domestic workers exists in Egypt.

13. From a personal interview with the Philippines consul in March 2007.

14. It should also be noted that, while contracts with Filipinas may state USD 400, "agreements" are made to pay much less in reality. Agencies continually find ways to circumvent the new policy. In what is called "contract substitution," sending and receiving agencies have one contract that enables workers to leave the Philippines, and when the worker arrives, substitute another contract for the first, with lower wages and increasing the contract period from two to three years.

15. This interviewee expressed a dislike for Filipinas because "They think... they're part of the American race. And they're very devious. I have not met one who is sincere."

16. I am grateful to the anonymous JMEWS reviewer for raising this issue.

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