

# **INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION PAPERS**

## **47**

### **WOMEN MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN BAHRAIN**

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International Migration Programme  
INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE    GENEVA



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## Foreword

The *International Migration Papers* (IMP) is a working paper series designed to make quickly available current research of ILO's International Migration programme on global migration trends, conditions of employment of migrants, and the impact of state policies on migration and the treatment of migrants. Some ten to fifteen such papers are published each year as working papers. It continues the *Migration for Employment* series stated in 1975 under the World Employment Programme. Its main objective is to contribute to an informed debate on how best to manage labour migration, taking into account the shared concerns of countries of origin and employment for generating full and productive employment of their nationals, while at the same time respecting the basic rights of individual migrant workers and members of their families.

This report is part of the work conducted by the International Labour Office on the issue of women migrant domestic workers in Latin America and the Arab region. While a big number of domestic workers work in their own countries, a big percentage of them cross borders in search of better incomes. Poverty and unemployment seem to be pushing a large number of even well-educated women to leave their place of origin to seek employment abroad. However, they often find themselves victims of the worst forms of abuse at the workplace: deprived of their travel documents, often grossly underpaid, excluded from social insurance and given deplorable treatment. Representing in many countries up to one-third of the economically active women, internal or international migrant domestic workers remain excluded from the very scope of labour legislation in most countries since they are employed within the "private sphere". The specificity of their employment relationship is simply not addressed in most legislative enactments that deny them their status as "real workers" entitled to legislative protection. The problem is compounded for a large number of women migrant domestic workers who are unable to claim even basic human rights in some foreign countries. The issue is becoming pressing since international demand is increasing for childcare and care for the elderly and the demand is not being satisfied with nationals. As a result, the numbers of women migrant domestic workers (documented or undocumented) are growing.

This study prepared by Dr. Sabika Al-Najjar, Director of "Information International Research Consultants", identifies practices and patterns that are the key causes for women domestic migrant workers' vulnerability in Bahrain and provide alternative approaches for effective means for action. The research compiled base line data and had the aim of bringing policy makers and all other concerned actors into dialogue in finding solutions through practical means to improve protection and enhance working conditions for women migrant domestic workers. The study identifies and assesses legal and administrative arrangements in hiring domestic workers; comprises interviews with key people in Ministries of labour, border and immigration control with regards to general policies and procedures towards foreign labour, as well as interviews with labour officers in the embassies of the sending countries to assess the main issues domestic workers face and the means, measures and procedures taken to address them. In addition, the study assesses the role of NGOs on providing protection, and undertakes a limited number of semi-structured interviews with women domestic workers in order to generate qualitative data and case study material mainly on their working conditions.

Ms. Gloria Moreno Fontes Chammartin, Migration Specialist, acted as the ILO research coordinator and in collaboration with Ms. Mary Kawar and Ms. Maartje Peters, MDT Beirut, technically backstopped the Arab region studies.

Geneva, June 2002

Manolo I. Abella  
Chief



## International Migration Programme



total						
males	215819	224640	233841	243437	253445	263886
females	45603	47425	49321	51298	53358	55505
Grand Total	261422	272065	283162	294735	306803	319391

Source: Central Statistics Organization, Directorate of Statistics.

**Official statistics available concentrate on private sector workers covered by the Social Security Scheme (SSS). Nevertheless, these figures reflect labour force trends in Bahrain. Foreign workers covered by the SSS were estimated at 98,991 in 1999 (92,164 males and 6,827 females). Bahraini workers totalled 50,402, of whom 38,937 were males and 11,465 females. These numbers do not include expatriate casual labour, which is estimated at an additional 50,000, self-employed people, domestic workers and those who work in micro businesses<sup>2</sup>.**

**The building and construction sector employs a large number of foreign workers. A total of 32,304 foreign workers and 8,440 Bahrainis are employed by the building and construction sector. This sector does not appeal to Bahrainis and is expected to absorb more foreign workers in the future, as the Government is launching some major projects, such as the building of new schools, hospitals, housing and a bridge linking Bahrain with Qatar. Women are not encouraged, nor interested in taking up jobs in this sector, as the work involved is hard and strenuous.**

**The industrial sector employed 13,918 Bahrainis and 22,395 foreigners in 1999. Female workers are mainly employed in the ready-made garment factories. Although no statistics are available, the Bahraini female workforce in the industrial sector is generally low due to the following reasons:**

- Σηφτ ωορκ
- Στρεννους ωορκ ανδρ ποορ ωαγεσ (αβουτ Βαηραινι Διναρ (ΒΔ) 80 ρεχεντ λψ ραισεδ το ΒΔ 120 το ενχουραγε Βαηραινι φοβ σεεκερσ το εντερ ιντο τηισ σε χτορ).
- Υναπαιλαβιλιτψ οφ τρανσπορτ το ανδ φρομ της ωορκινγ πλαχε.

<sup>2</sup> Central Statistical Organization, Statistical abstract 1999, Bahrain: table no. 11.38 (retrieved from the Government of Bahrain website).

**The wholesale, retail trade, restaurants and hotels sector employed 20,786 foreign workers, compared with 7,711 Bahraini workers, in 1999. An additional 12,287 foreign workers were employed in the community, social and personal services, against 7,319 Bahrainis. The Government of Bahrain is planning to regulate the import of foreign workers and placing unemployed Bahraini youth (about 20,000 persons) in jobs mainly in the industrial, hotel and catering sector and information and technology.**

## **The Survey**

To be able to identify practices and patterns that are ‘key causes’ for migrant workers’ vulnerability and to provide alternative approaches, base line data was compiled. The objective was to bring policy makers and other concerned actors into a dialogue to develop a comprehensive ILO action plan that will address protective measures for female domestic migrant workers.

The sample group was composed of:

- 16 Bahraini housewives from different parts of Bahrain who had employed domestic helpers for at least two years. Another prerequisite was their experience with domestic helpers of different nationalities;
- 34 female domestic helpers chosen randomly from different areas in Bahrain from the following nationalities: 11 domestic helpers from the Philippines, 12 from Sri Lanka, five Indian women, three from Ethiopia, two women migrants from Indonesia and one from Bangladesh.
- Officials from the Embassies of Bangladesh, the Philippines and India.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with the women employers and questionnaires developed for the women domestic workers. The reasoning behind this was the difficulties encountered to conduct face-to-face interviews. Household helpers suspected that the information provided in the interviews would be handed to the police or Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and that their answers would be used against them. Also the location of the interviews (in the working place) turned out to be problematic since the workers were not able to answer freely as their employers were present during the interview. As a result, all the interviews took place in public places, such as parks, supermarkets or fast food restaurants where the domestic helpers accompanied the children.

The employers’ households had an average of four children and an average income ranging from BD300 to BD400, [36% of the sample group were working women contributing to the family income, and their level of education ranged from intermediate school to graduate].

## 2. Female Domestic Helpers in the Gulf Region

### 2.1. Historical Overview of Domestic Workers in the Gulf Region

Employing female domestic helpers is not a new phenomenon in Bahrain. Traditionally, before the discovery of oil in 1932, women from poor families used to work for wealthy families. Although they would be provided food, accommodation and clothes, they did not receive regular salaries. Prior to the oil boom in the seventies, certain rich families hired domestic helpers from Seychelles and India as a means to gain social prestige and have better access to a Western life style. Domestic helpers in those days were relatively well educated and spoke English fluently. They enjoyed a certain degree of respect and freedom, working mainly as governesses, in charge of children. They also performed certain tasks, which were considered "modern", such as ironing, while other household chores, such as cooking, gardening or cleaning were taken care of by other servants drawn from Bahrain, Oman and Al-Hassa district of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

In the past, the raising of children was a shared responsibility between the mother, the grandmother and any other adult living in the large house of the extended family. Household work was taken care of by all the daughters-in-law who lived in the same house. Nowadays, the extended family has been replaced by the nuclear family. Moreover, social obligations of women have increased. Despite all these social changes, housework has continued to be the woman's responsibility. Women, therefore have looked for assistance and the importance of hiring domestic helpers has gradually increased to the extent that they carry out almost all household tasks while national women have free time to devote to social activities.

The reason for the increase of Asian female domestic helpers is considered to be a result of the social changes that the country witnessed in the aftermath of the oil boom, and is expected to increase in the coming years. In fact, almost every household in Bahrain employs one or more domestic helpers. Moreover, the influx of foreign workers including domestic helpers has become a form of trade in human beings or *New Slavery* as some sociologists describe it<sup>3</sup>.

The Governments in both labour exporting and importing countries are endeavouring to study this phenomenon and regulate it. However, each party is tackling the matter from different angles, to obtain different objectives. While exporting countries promote labour migration, they also try to protect their nationals against abuse. Importing countries seek to contain any potential cultural and social effects that domestic helpers might

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<sup>3</sup> Saad El-Deen Ibrahim, *The New Social Arab System: A Study on the Social Effects of the Oil Richness*, Beirut, Center of Arab Union Studies, 1982, p. 33.

have on the society, in general, and its main institution, the family, in particular<sup>4</sup>.

In 1987 and 1988 some Asian Governments decided to ban placement of female domestic workers to protect their interests. The sending countries adopted national programs to prepare the women before leaving, adopted bilateral agreements and the Philippines Government established an overseas employment administration. However, since the financial advantages of working abroad could not be compensated nationally, the number of domestic helpers has grown several folds. In 1990, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs issued 2,065 work permits to domestic helpers, while in the year 2000 the work permits issued to domestic helpers were 23,495 most of which were for females.

**Table. 2. Work Permits issued for Domestic Helpers in Bahrain From 1974 to 1990**

Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Statistics on Labour Force.

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<sup>4</sup> Khalaf Ahmed Khalaf & Others, Socialisation: The Effect of the Media and the Role of the Family, Bahrain: Executive Bureau, 1994, p. 34-37.

**Table 3. Work Permits issued for Domestic Helpers in Bahrain 1996 to 2000**

<b>Renewed permits</b>	<b>New permits</b>
6209	13918
6416	15230
6613	15610
7078	15150
8114	17487

Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Directorate of Employment, Employment Section, Statistical and Financial Reports.

Various inter-connected factors have contributed to the increasing number of household workers in the Gulf region, in general, and in Bahrain, in particular. These factors could be summarized as follows:

### *1 - Social changes in the family*

Bahrain and the Gulf region have witnessed various social changes that have influenced the family structure. High revenues from oil exports resulted in higher living standards. Education and health services improved, construction boomed in the suburbs, and new cities emerged in the middle of the desert.

### *2 - Entry of women into the labour market*

The higher level of education encouraged Bahraini women to enter the labour market. However, working women are still responsible for all household work. Since this situation considerably increased their workload families started seeking household assistance. The changes in the way of living accelerated this process. Most young couples now live far from their families and there are only few kindergartens and day-care centres available to look after the children. As a result, families were obliged to hire somebody to take care of their children and help them with the household chores. Since Bahrainis are not willing to perform this type of work, because of the so called “culture of shame”, the only alternative is to employ foreigners.

### *3 - Social prestige*

As mentioned before, the presence of domestic workers in the homes of wealthy families, is not new to Bahrain. However, with the oil boom and the increase of wealth, it became possible for basically anybody to hire a domestic helper. Employing domestic workers became a status symbol, a means to acquire a higher social status and prestige<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Geertje Lyckmama, The Trade in Maids: Asian Domestic Helpers in Migration, Theory & Practice, A Paper presented to the planning meeting on International Migration and Women, APDC, 1989, p. 21.

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#### 4 - Economic situation in labour exporting countries

The increase in wealth in the Gulf countries coincided with the rise of poverty in the labour exporting countries. Mainly due to these economic conditions, the governments in labour exporting countries were unable to take viable measures to contain poverty and unemployment that threatened their national security. They, therefore, encouraged their nationals to search for jobs abroad.

Remittances sent by overseas workers are a vital source of national income in labour exporting countries. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, for example, estimated remittances of overseas Filipinos to be \$6,794 million in 1999<sup>6</sup>, while the Central Bank of Ceylon calculated a total of \$922 million in private transfers to Sri Lanka in 1997<sup>7</sup>.

#### 5 - Cost effectiveness

Domestic workers' wages are low by all standards and so are the expenses for hiring a live-in household worker. Taking into consideration the standard of living in Bahrain, one could say that employing a domestic worker is within the reach of the majority of the indigenous population.

The high demand for expatriate workers in the Gulf region led to the creation of employment agencies to facilitate the recruitment process. These recruitment agents, in both labour exporting countries and labour importing countries, facilitate the movement and the placement of domestic workers<sup>8</sup>.

### 2.2. Statistics on the phenomenon of domestic helpers in Bahrain<sup>9</sup>

According to the 1981 population census, there were 10.4 female house workers for each 100 households. In 1991 this number increased to 15.05. They constituted 9.59% of the total non-Bahraini labour force and 59.07% of the total female non-Bahraini labour force (Table 4). Since then, the number of domestic helpers has continued increasing.

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<sup>6</sup> Central Bank of the Philippines.

<sup>7</sup> Malsisi Dias, *Female Overseas Contract Workers: Sri Lanka*, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on these factors please refer to Hanan Shaheen Al-Khalfan, *The Effects of Foreign Maids and Nannies on the Bahraini Families* in *Studies and Issues from the Arab Gulf Society*, Bahrain: Follow up Bureau, 1985, p. 118–127.

<sup>9</sup> Lack of accurate and sufficient data is the main problem faced in doing research on domestic helpers. It is hoped that the population census, which has been carried out in Bahrain recently, will provide accurate statistical information on this issue.



Bahrain Labour Law for the Private Sector, 1976, exempts *"domestic servants and persons as such"* from the purview of the law. This exemption is due to the private nature of housework. *"House workers are treated as a part of the family"* said a Ministry of Labour spokesman. *"Disputes should be settled internally whenever possible. Or else the privacy of households is desecrated"*<sup>14</sup>.

In case of a dispute, a house worker can appeal to the police or to the court. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is also dealing with workers' complaints, but according to an official its mandate is limited. Complaints are resolved amicably and, if not, they are referred to the court. Non-payment of wages and sponsors' refusal to provide a return air ticket after two years of work are the main complaints referred to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. It may be noted that domestic workers are largely unaware of the actions they can take, to secure their rights. They do not even know the address or the telephone number of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

Extreme cases of maltreatment, such as beating, sexual harassment or rape, are referred to the police and/or the court. Both the employers and house workers can appeal to the police on matters concerning their mutual relations. The majority of cases registered with the police are of runaway house workers (38.67% and 33.95% in 1990 and 1991 respectively. See table 5). Female house workers run away for different reasons. No data is available on this regard but observations revealed the following facts and causes:

- \_ Non-payment of salary;
- \_ Sexual harassment, physical and psychological abuse;
- \_ Excessive work and exhaustion;
- \_ Isolation, no permission to leave the house, receive visitors or have a partner;
- \_ Withholding of passport by sponsor (this is especially the case after the end of the two years contract).
- \_ Jealousy on the part of the Madame;
- \_ Inadequate food or medical treatment when required;
- \_ Misinformation about the nature of work as they come for certain other jobs and find themselves working as domestic helpers.

Most runaway cases take place after the lapse of the initial three months period, when the worker has completed the debt payment and the recruiting agent is no longer responsible for her. Running away from the employer's house is illegal. A police search

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<sup>14</sup> *Gulf Daily News*, 18 April 1988. Also see *Gulf Mirror*, 13 January 1983.

is launched and the runaway worker's photograph is published in local newspapers. Any person who hides or protects her is committing an offence. When found, she is deported at the expense of her sponsor. Usually, it is not easy to find a runaway domestic helper either due to the ineffectiveness of the search-and-find regimen or the craftiness of the runaways.

A worker can disappear for many years. However, a sponsor should report a runaway worker within one week, as required by the regulations of the General Directorate of Immigration and Passports. A special form needs to be filled out by the sponsor. He is also required to renew the runaway worker's resident permit in accordance with the law, until the worker is found.

Once the worker is found he/she is put in jail until his/her residence permit is cancelled then, the employee should be deported. According to the regulations in Bahrain all fees relating to the deportation, including the air ticket should be borne by the sponsor.

Only a small number of domestic workers file complaints at the police stations in comparison with the total amount of complaints registered per year (9.67% in 1990 and 5.53% in 1991 of the total complaints registered with the police). This low incidence is due to the fact that women house workers are unable to contact the police or they are afraid to go to the police, which could result in imprisonment and deportation. The majority of the cases concerning house workers fall within the 20 to 39 years age group (56.80% and 59.73% in 1990 and 1991 respectively). In the sector domestic work, it is mainly this age group that is represented. The largest number of cases involve Sri Lankans, who are the majority of domestic workers in Bahrain.

**Table 5. Cases registered with the police regarding domestic helpers 1990-1991**

Reason	1990	1991
	128	129
	29	35
	23	21
	5	2
	13	14
	14	5
	22	37
	2	2
stitution	3	10
	44	55
	42	65
	6	5

\* The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs deal with non-payment of salaries. To have a clear picture please refer to table 7.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs deals with labour disputes, such as those concerning non-payment of salary, airfare and of service indemnity and denial of annual leave. The Labour Relations Section at the Ministry has lawyers, inspectors and social workers. In case of a problem, the worker is required to fill out a special form explaining his/her situation. The Ministry calls the sponsor in order to solve the problem amicably. If this fails, the case is referred to the judicial system. In this case, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs appoints a lawyer representing the worker. It also follows up the matter. The following tables show the complaints registered at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs by female domestic helpers, the nature of these complaints, and the way they were solved.

**Table 6. Cases registered with the police regarding domestic helpers by nationality 1990/1991**

Reason	Sri Lankan		Filipino		Indian		Bangladeshi		Others	
	90	91	90	91	90	91	90	91	90	91
Running away	60	76	27	36	17	3	20	13	4	1
Refusal to work	16	19	9	10	-	1	4	5		
Committing suicide	13	15	8	5	-	-	2	1		
Non payment of salary	3	-	1	1	1	-	-	1		
Beating	10	5	2	6	1	1	-	2		
Maltreatment	8	2	4	3	1	-	1	-		
Theft	15	21	5	11	-	2	2	3		
Misunderstanding	1	-	1	2	-	-	-	-		
Pregnancy out of the marriage institution	2	4	-	5	1	1	-	-		
Other cases	17	29	17	14	5	4	5	8		
Prostitution	17	34	10	13	4	5	6	7	4	6
Sexual harassment & rape	3	3	2	1	1	-	-	1		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>

Source: Unpublished statistics with both Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs and Ministry of Interior

**Table 7. Number of cases Referred to the Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs and the ways they are solved, 1999 – 2000<sup>15</sup>**

Year	Resolved Amicably	Referred to Court
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<sup>15</sup> Information on Tables 7 to 9 was collected from a registration of cases with the Workers' Complaints Section at Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1999	7	57	1	14	79
2000	3	54	7	19	83

**Table 8. Cases Referred to the Ministry of Labour by nationality & Sex 1998**

Nationality	Male	Female
Filipinos	3	25
Sri Lankans	0	10
Indians	1	15
Bangladeshis	0	10
Other nationalities	0	9
TOTAL	4	69

**Table 9. Cases Referred to the Ministry of Labour by nature of complaints 1998**

Nature of complaint	Number
Non-payment of salary	60
Denial of air ticket	59
Non-payment of end-of-service entitlements	1
Denial of annual leave	1

In case of disputes of any nature sponsors have the right to request the concerned official department to blacklist a worker and, therefore, to ban him/her from returning to Bahrain. Under the current rules, a house worker who leaves the country should have a no-objection letter from her previous employer to be able to get a new job. If not, she must wait for six months before returning to take up another job.

The concerned authorities are currently reviewing this system to allow most categories of expatriate employees to return within the six-month waiting period, unless they are involved in criminal cases in Bahrain. Those who get a no-objection letter from their previous employers can return immediately to work for another sponsor. They can also transfer the sponsorship locally without having to leave the country.

The Government has also introduced, in 2000, a two-year multiple re-entry visa for all workers. Earlier re-entry visas, costing BD12, were issued for a single journey and for a period of one year. At BD.42 now every expatriate is granted a two-year multiple re-entry visa, valid for the duration of the residence permit for only BD.20<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> 1 US \$ = 0.376 BD.

### 3. Process of Assignment

#### 3.1. Recruitment Process

House workers usually come to Bahrain with the help of recruiting agents or through relatives and friends. In the first case, a woman seeking a job as a domestic helper applies to one of the recruiting agents in her country of origin. This agent works as a mediator between the applicant and the agent in the receiving country, in this case Bahrain. The latter keeps the worker's personal details and documentation in file to be shown to potential employers.

When the employer obtains a work permit from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, he selects a candidate from the recruitment agent's file. He pays a fee to the agent, which includes the cost of a one-way air ticket. Subsequently, the agent makes the necessary travel arrangements, in coordination with his counterpart in the sending country. The worker also pays fees to the agent in her country. In some occasions, it happens that the agent exploit the applicants and make them pay the air ticket, even though this is provided by the employer.

In order to be able to employ a foreign house worker, the sponsor in Bahrain has to fulfil certain conditions and requirements stipulated by law. Order Number 13/1976 issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs states, "*... An employer who wishes to employ non-Bahraini workers should submit an application in the prescribed form, for obtaining a work permit*". Although the Labour Law does not cover domestic workers, employers are required to comply with the above regulation.

Moreover the employer who wishes to recruit a household worker should fulfil the following conditions<sup>17</sup>:

- \_ Have a family income of at least BD. 350;
- \_ Have at least two children less than 15 years of age;
- \_ Submit a medical certificate if a house worker is appointed to take care of an ill or old family member;
- \_ The family should prove that they do not have a household worker. In case the previous worker has left or run away, appropriate certificates from the police and/or the Directorate of Immigration and Passports should be submitted to the concerned authorities at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in order to obtain a work permit for a new domestic worker.

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<sup>17</sup> The first two conditions are not respected.



After a work permit is obtained, the employer selects a candidate and then obtains an entry visa, called a No Objection Certificate (NOC), for the prospective worker. Once the domestic worker arrives in Bahrain, the agent takes her to his office from where she is collected by the employer. Before she goes to her employer's house, a short meeting is held between the three parties where the employer states his conditions, mainly dos and don'ts. The house worker is also asked if she wants to say anything but, according to the agents, she usually keeps silent. The NOC gives the worker the right to stay in the country for four weeks, this period should allow for the regulation of her stay. Before the end of four weeks of his/her arrival the worker has to undergo a mandatory medical check-up including chest X-ray, blood, urine, vision tests etc. Special attention is paid to infectious diseases mainly tuberculosis, hepatitis, AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis. He/she is then issued a written medical certificate stating that he/she is physically fit for work. The employer can, then, go ahead and apply for a residency permit. In the case where the worker is found unfit for work, the employer is notified. Rigorous action is taken in case the worker is found to suffer from an infectious disease. Ministerial Order Number 11/1976 states that if the Medical Commission finds the worker neither physically fit nor free from infectious diseases, the Commission shall notify the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of this fact within 24 hours. The Ministry of Labour then requests the Directorate of Immigration and Passports to deport the worker at the employer's expense.

It would for this reason it would be convenient if this medical test could be undertaken in the country of origin. In this case, the worker would not lose all the money that has to pay to the recruiting agent in his/her country

The employer is legally obliged to bear all the costs related to the foreign worker. These costs are as follows:

**Table 10. Cost of Different Procedures Concerning Domestic Helpers\***

Procedure	Cost in BD	Concerned Ministry
Work permit	30	Labour & Social Affairs
Renewal of work permit	40	Labour & Social Affairs
No Objection Certificate (NOC)	20	Immigration & Passports Directorate
Residence permit	22	Immigration & Passports Directorate
Renewal of residence permit	22	Immigration & Passports Directorate
Insurance certificate	12	Immigration & Passports Directorate
Medical check up	10	Health
Registration of Personal Registry (CPR)	1	Central Statistics Organization
Bringing house worker at the airport	8	Civil Aviation Affairs
Departure fees	3	Civil Aviation Affairs

\*Sponsors should pay all these cost. 1 US\$ = BD. 0.376



As mentioned before, not all female domestic helpers find jobs through recruitment agents. Some of them came to Bahrain through relatives or friends working in the country. For the worker, this is a cheaper option, since they only pay a small fee to the person who assisted them or nothing at all. Also a considerable number of sponsors use this method to avoid paying high fees to agents. However, according to the author this method is not always in the interest of the sponsor or the worker: the sponsor cannot request replacement if he/she is not content with the performance of the worker and the domestic worker has to accept the working environment she is in, without having the possibility to make use of the three-month probation period during which, theoretically speaking, she has the right to ask for a change of sponsor.

Of the women house workers interviewed, 52.94% got their jobs through recruiting agents while the remaining 47.06% were helped by friends and relatives already working in Bahrain. The majority of workers from the Philippines come through accredited recruiting agents, while in the case of the Sri Lankan domestic workers, this is not always the case. The Sri Lankan government obliges its nationals to have health insurance before departing to work overseas. The insurance policy covers the worker's deportation to Sri Lanka in case of death, illness or accident. It also covers hospitalisation while working abroad and up to 60 days medical treatment after returning to his/her home country.

**Table 11. Means of getting the job by nationality**

<b>Agents</b>	<b>Relatives</b>
17.65	17.65
23.53	8.82
5.88	8.82
5.88	11.77
<b>52.94</b>	<b>47.06</b>

### **3.2. Recruiting Agents in Bahrain**

A Ministerial Decree, issued in 1993, puts employment agents under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. A new agent should obtain a licence from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs against BD500 to be accredited to recruit foreign workers. He is then required to get a commercial registration license from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, for the amount of BD100 per year. According to officials at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs about 70 official recruiting agents are operating in Bahrain.

Employment agents arrange the placement of workers with different skills, including house workers. The average number of female domestic workers placed by an agent ranges from 15 to 20 per month. In addition to Bahrain, some agents provide services to the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia. They charge different fees for these services depending on religion and nationality of the worker. The fees are not provided for by any bilateral agreements between governments, but are fixed by the recruiting agents

themselves.

**Table 12. Fees charged by employment agents regarding House workers in Bahraini Dinars.**

Nationality	Religion		Remarks
	Muslim	Non-Muslim	
		370	All religions
		320	All Muslims
	250	200	
	220	160 – 200	
	220	All religions	

Source: Employment Agents in Bahrain

In the case of domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia, the fees are divided into two parts: gross and net fees. The net fee represents the charges received by the recruiting agent while the gross fee represents the entire fee paid by the sponsor/employer. The sponsor recovers the difference when the worker starts working in his house. For example, gross fees for a domestic helper from the Philippines is BD. 370, while the net is BD. 220. The difference of BD. 150<sup>18</sup> is paid to the agent in the country of origin to cover certain costs, such as a passport and other government fees. In the absence of clear protection policies by governments, such costs are borne by the workers. As a result, the domestic helper has to work for three months without salary to cover these costs. Indonesian workers need to work only one month without salary, as the difference between gross and net fees is smaller. These arrangements can become sources of dispute between domestic helpers and their employers as some of them are unaware of such arrangements before their arrival in Bahrain.

According to the standard agreement between the recruiting agent in Bahrain and the sponsor, there is a three-month probation period for new domestic workers, during which both the worker and the sponsor can terminate the work contract. Theoretically speaking, the worker can refuse to work in the house of her new sponsor if the latter treats her badly or if any member of the sponsor's family sexually or physically abuses her. In this case, the agent should find her a new employer. During the research it became clear that in such cases the agent provides the sponsor with another house worker or force the women domestic workers to continue working with their sponsors under any conditions. Also the sponsor her/himself has the possibility to contact the agent and ask for a replacement of the domestic worker in the specified period of time. In this case, too, the agent is obliged to assign another household worker or return any fees he paid. It should be noted that governments or embassies of labour exporting countries have no contact with the domestic workers nor do they have any input in the above-mentioned contractual arrangements. What is surprising in this process is that the employer that abuses a domestic worker or treats her badly does not end up on a black list. Furthermore, the agent does not refuse his services in order to protect the women recruited through his agency.

<sup>18</sup> One US\$ is equal to BD. 0.376 (UN standard rate August 2001).

The probation period for Indonesian house workers is six months as a result of the Indonesian government's intervention to ban its nationals from working as domestic helpers in the Gulf, except Saudi Arabia, following reports of physical and sexual abuse. In the case of Bahrain, the ban was lifted only a year ago. Wages are determined according to the nationality of female domestic helpers instead of their experience. Although the nature of work and the workload is almost the same for all house workers, Filipinos, for example, and Indonesians with some years of experience get BD.50 per month, while inexperienced Indonesians, Sri Lankans and Indians get BD.40 per month. Domestic workers from Bangladesh get the lowest salaries, BD.35 per month <sup>19</sup>.

Five recruiting agencies were questioned about the main problems they face with domestic helpers. They were almost unanimous on the following:

1. Inexperienced house workers have difficulties understanding instructions because of the language barrier;
2. Employers are impatient with new workers;
3. Some ladies of the house are jealous, especially when the domestic worker is a young and attractive woman;
4. Recruiting agents are facing many problems from the moment a woman decides to run away from her employer's home, since they have to deal with the employers, fees etc. According to the agents *"... domestic workers sometimes escape from their employers' homes to work as freelance workers, for which they are paid at a rate of about one Bahraini Dinar per hour. They also work in restaurants, bars, and nightclubs or join prostitution networks. The police do not take serious measures to stop this and no investigation into cases of runaway workers takes place and accomplices are not punished.* When the workers surface at the end of their residence term, the sponsors are obliged to provide air tickets to return home.

### 3.3. Recruitment Fees

The majority of domestics do not have enough money to meet the expenses of taking up a job overseas. Sometimes, the agent agrees to receive the fees in instalments. It was found that only seven interviewed domestic workers were able to pay the agent in cash, while the others mortgaged properties, borrowed money from banks or from money lenders, at very high interest rates. The Government of the Philippines for example allows accredited employment agents to receive the fees directly from the sponsors in Bahrain, on condition that the domestic helper works without wages for the first three months. Given this situation, a new worker is under tremendous pressure and is willing to accept any work and any kind of living conditions in order to be able to pay off her debts and send some money to her family.

Sponsors are required to provide air tickets to and from Bahrain for the domestic

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<sup>19</sup> 1 US\$ = BD. 0.376 (UN standard rate. August 2001).

workers. Despite this, only 31 of the interviewed domestic helpers got free air tickets to Bahrain. Those who got jobs through recruiting agents usually receive a free one-way air ticket. However, even though the agents receive money from the sponsors for an air ticket, they let the female domestic workers know that they have to purchase their own tickets.

Domestic helpers who got their jobs through relatives or friends sometimes bear the cost of their travel to Bahrain. Since no contract or agreement is signed in advance women risk receiving their salaries irregularly, or are not provided with the return ticket.

### **3.4. Working Contract, Salary and Medical Care**

The socio-economic conditions of Asian female workers are such that they refrain from insisting on clear contracts with their sponsors. Consequently, after arrival they discover that the working conditions are not what they expected. The survey found that 44.12% of the house workers signed contracts prior to their arrival including 63.64 % of Filipino domestic helpers, 25% of Sri Lankan women and all of the Indian domestic workers.

However a contract is not effective in protecting the worker's rights as some sponsors tend to pay salaries lower than what was stipulated in the contract. Moreover, the contract is not legally binding since the Labour Law does not cover house workers. Two interviewed domestic workers signed a contract stipulating different terms of reference, while three of those who did not sign a contract were promised other jobs, such as tailors or saleswomen. On arrival, the recruiting agents gave them the choice to work as house workers or go back to their home country on their own expenses.

There are several cases where male sponsors bring women to work as domestic helpers and lock them in apartments and force them into prostitution. Unfortunately, due to the non-existence of a monitoring system or contact with domestic workers, it is hard to trace these cases.

Although a few low-income families might not be able to pay regular wages, many complaints registered with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs came from domestic helpers working with wealthy families. Certain sponsors hold up to three months wages from them, to cover the cost of a return air ticket in case the helper, for any reason, has to return home before the expiration of her two-year contract.

In case of sickness domestic helpers can be treated at the nearest health centre. In fact, medical services are provided free of charge for nationals, while foreigners have to pay a symbolic fee of one Bahraini Dinar (about US \$2.78). The survey showed that only 64.71% interviewed workers had benefited from these facilities, while 8.82% domestic helpers said they had not required any medical service.

As many families are totally dependent on the domestic worker to do all the household chores, some refuse to acknowledge any illness that might occur. A sponsor said that his family lives in chaos if his house worker falls sick. Other employers choose to take the domestic workers to private clinics where they receive better treatment.

## 4. Profile of Domestic Helpers in Bahrain

### 4.1. Homeland – Bahrain

Domestic workers are making a big sacrifice by leaving their homes, to seek work overseas in an unknown world. For most of them, the move to the Gulf is also the first time they leave their village or town. Many immigrants consider the different Gulf States as the land of opportunity. The reality is far different from that. Their days consist of heavy and long hours of work, loneliness in a society that is totally strange to them.

Half of the interviewed domestic helpers came from villages, 20.59% lived in their country's capital and 29.41% came from other cities or towns. Those who come from remote areas are more vulnerable to the social and cultural shock than those who come from cities since they have lived a more protected life. A woman said that her house worker came from a place where there was no electricity and, as such, she did not even know how to switch on lights in the house. A teacher said that the baby-sitter she employed to take care of her little son had never seen a television or a washing machine in her life. Many women do not know the heavy chemicals that are sold in the region. This situation might pose danger to the workers. It could also lead to the breakdown of the machines if instructions are not explained well enough. However, employers expect domestic workers to be able to learn everything in a very short time, which causes a lot of pressure and stress on the women and within the household.

### 4.2. Age

Most of the domestic workers interviewed were between 20 and 40 years of age. Only 17.65% were over 40 years and they performed jobs, which required experience such as taking care of a disabled or elderly person. Employers consider workers with many years of experience as honest and reliable. The majority of employers prefer house workers between 20 to 40 years of age as women in this age group are physically strong and able to carry out the heavy workload and also because they are *"mature and respect the traditions, more than teenagers who want to go out, have boyfriends and enjoy themselves"*, as one of the employers stated.

It should be noted that the concerned government authorities do not encourage the recruitment of house workers less than 20 years of age since young people may be immature and would find it difficult to abide by the relatively conservative social norms in Bahrain. In fact, the Directorate of Immigration and Passports does not issue visas for domestic workers under 20 years of age. For Filipino domestic workers, the minimum age is 30 years, in accordance with stipulations put by the Government of the Philippines.

**Table 13. Age categories of the domestic helpers**

<b>Age</b>	<b>%</b>
Less than 20	0
20 – 25	11.76
26 – 30	29.41
31 – 35	14.71
36 – 40	26.47
More than 40	17.65
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

### **4.3. Husband and children**

Of the domestic workers interviewed, 16 were married, one divorced, four widowed and 13 were single. Within the category of married women, seven out of 16 women had one or two children, 11 interviewees had three or four children and three had more than four children.

There is no indication that marital status is an element in employers' preference for domestic helpers. Those who prefer unmarried domestic helpers think that single women have less difficulties in adjusting to their new life in Bahrain, while those who prefer married domestic helpers assume that married women are more responsible and dedicated as they need to educate their own children, build a house and ensure a better standard of living for their families. Also, as such workers earn higher wages than their husbands, and in many instances they are the main, if not the sole, financial resource for their families, consequently, they end up working abroad for several years.

### **4.4. Educational Level**

Among the interviewed domestic helpers, 5.88% were illiterate, 26.48% could read and write in their native languages, 17.65% had primary education, 8.82% had studied up to the intermediate level, 17.65% had finished high school and 23.53% held a diploma or college certificate. All diploma/university degree holders were Filipinos. It is worth mentioning that educated employers prefer house workers who have a certain level of education, especially those who speak English. Such domestic helpers are considered an asset to the household as they provide an opportunity for the family members, mainly children, to strengthen their English language skills.

On the other hand, an illiterate house worker has to depend on others in communicating with her family or sending wages back home. Also, it has been indicated that illiterate workers are more vulnerable to maltreatment, such as non-payment of salary or excessive workload. The presence of a compatriot in the neighbourhood considerably facilitates communication with the host family or with the family correspondence. A good alternative, instead of sending letters, is sending cassettes. However, since this is a more expensive mode of correspondence, some employers are reluctant or refuse to bear the postage cost.



**Table 14. Educational Level by Nationality<sup>20</sup>**

Nationality	Illiterate	Can read & write	Primary	Intermediate	High School	Diploma/ University
Filipinos	0	2.94	0	2.94	2.94	23.53
Sri Lankans	2.94	11.77	5.88	0	14.71	0
Others	2.94	11.77	11.77	5.88	0	0
Total %	5.88	26.48	17.65	8.82	17.65	23.53

Not all house workers are unskilled people. One can frequently find professionals, such as pharmacists, teachers, nurses etc. working as domestic helpers either to escape the unemployment problem in their countries, or the low salaries they received there. Another possibility is that they were deceived by the employment agent in their home country or in Bahrain. Such people could have been promised other jobs but, upon arriving in Bahrain, they discover that they have been brought to work as house workers. They can return, but at their own expense, which is impossible for most as they have loans to pay, so they agree to work as house workers until the end of the contract.

Also educated women seek to work as house workers as a temporary alternative. They hope to find employment that better suits them as soon as they arrive in Bahrain. However this hardly ever happens because of the restrictions and regulations on the expatriates' freedom of movement in Bahrain. The presence of educated/skilled domestic helpers illustrates the brain drain in the labour exporting countries. The following table shows the occupation of the female house workers in their countries of origin.

**Table 15. Occupation in the Home Country**

Occupation	Rate
	67.65
	8.82
	8.82
	14.71

<sup>20</sup> Since the findings are based on only 34 domestic helpers from 6 different countries, we cannot consider this table a valid representation of domestic workers in Bahrain divided by country.

#### 4.5. Religion

Half of the interviewed workers were Christians (50%), followed by Muslims (35.29%), then Buddhists (14.71%). All of the Ethiopian and Indonesian women interviewed were Muslims, while all Buddhist women came from Sri Lanka.

Bahrain is a Muslim society. Yet, it is more open to other cultures than any other society in the Gulf. However, with the increase in Islamic fundamentalism in Bahrain, it is expected that the demand for Muslim domestic helpers will increase in the future.

Discussing domestic helpers is a favourite subject of Bahraini housewives. Their conversations reveal the reasons for their religious preferences concerning house workers. Fundamentalists believe that employing non-Muslim is an act against Islam. They also believe that a non-Muslim negatively influences the family as the children could be affected by her beliefs. Dr. Baqer Al-Najjar Professor of Sociology at Bahrain University thinks, *"It is still too early to judge whether house workers are affecting the upbringing of Gulf youth"*. According to him, *"It will take at least a generation to assess their influence. However, there is no reason why the youth should become alienated from Islamic beliefs and Arab traditions. If the parents want their children to retain the old values, they will raise them accordingly"*<sup>21</sup>.

Bahraini women who prefer to employ non-Muslims helper/nannies said that non-Muslims are usually more educated and that their standard of living in their own countries is higher than that of Muslims. *"I can communicate with them easily and I can trust them with my children,"* said a Bahraini housewife. Asked if she had any concerns that her house helper's religious beliefs would influence her children, she said, *"The mother should be the main educator of the children, not the worker"*.

**Table 16. Domestic Helpers by Nationality & Religion**

Nationality	Muslims	Christians	Buddhist
	5.88	14.71	14.71
	2.94	29.41	0
	8.82	5.88	0
	17.65	0	0
	35.29	50.00	14.71

<sup>21</sup> *Gulf Daily News*, 16 September 1986.

## 5. The Host Family

### 5.1. Expectations and Experiences

#### Housewives

Asked what qualities they expect women house workers to have, the interviewed housewives mentioned the following: obedience, honesty, cleanliness and hygiene. Mothers with young children said that domestic helpers should also be kind and that the children should accept her. They said house workers should also refrain from discussing the employer's family matters with others. Finally it was said that they should be dressed decently, especially in front of men and children in the family<sup>22</sup>.

Housewives mentioned that on arrival some domestic helpers pretend that they do not know English or Arabic to avoid a heavy workload. Sometimes, as interpreted by the housewives, they also pretend not being able to follow instructions given to them, so they can get away with slipshod work. *"However"* they explained, *"this kind of behaviour is not in the interests of the house worker as employers can easily return them to the recruiting agents if they are not satisfied with their performance"*. The majority agreed that they have to supervise the workers closely otherwise, they will not do the job well.

#### Women Migrant workers

The survey tried to ascertain the first impressions of woman house workers on arrival to Bahrain and how they overcame any fears or homesickness.

The majority of interviewed domestic helpers had mixed feelings about working in Bahrain: only 26.47% said they were happy, the others were afraid, upset or homesick. A familiar sight at Bahrain International Airport is a group of Asian women, sitting together, waiting for the agent to collect them. Each one holds a plastic file, with her papers, in her hand. On asking them to describe initial feelings, some said that they cried for days when they first arrived. They regretted leaving their homes and wished they could go back. *"But, I had to think about my family. Everybody there is dreaming of a better life and I could not disappoint them, so I have to make a sacrifice,"* said one worker. It is hard for every one to adapt to the new environment, especially those who have left children behind. Newly arrived house workers can neither build new relations with Gulf nationals nor with other workers from their own countries, for the following

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<sup>22</sup> For more details about the relation between domestic helpers and host families please refer to: Effects of the Foreign Baby Sitters on the Characteristics of the Family in Bahrain, Bahrain: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, p. 69.

reason: "...If I let my house worker to mix with others, they will spoil her. Domestic helpers compare their situation with others and they start claiming for more," said a sponsor.

On the other hand, a woman house worker mentioned that receiving orders is the only conversation she has with her sponsor's family members: *"Nobody talks to me at the house where I am working and spending my whole day. If anybody talks to me, it is only to order me to do something"* Another said, *"I am not allowed to watch TV or listen to music from my country or to the radio. If I am free and this is rare, I lock myself in a room and cry"*. In general it could be stated that domestic workers in Bahrain are socially isolated which could even lead to psychological disturbances or depressions<sup>23</sup>.

Female house workers consider letters, bearing good news from their families and friends, as the best means to help them through the first difficult stage. The help and moral support they receive from other domestic workers comes next, followed by good treatment from the employer's family, especially the housewife.

**Table 17. Means of adjustment to the new life**

Means of support	%
from my family encouraged me	55.88
house workers helped me	32.35
st family treated me nicely	32.35
forced by the employment agent to continue working	11.76

## **5.2. Inter-Cultural Miscommunication**

<sup>23</sup> *Gulf Mirror*, Bahrain, April 1985.

The degree to which a house worker is able to adjust to her new environment depends, to a great extent, on her relations with the host family<sup>24</sup>. Most of the time, lack of knowledge about local traditions, customs and social values makes it difficult for certain domestic workers to forge such relations.

Certain labour exporting countries tolerate male-female relations outside the marriage institution, while such relations or even receiving of a visitor or simply talking with strangers by phone or on the street is categorically rejected by the Arab-Muslim society in Bahrain.

At the same time, the way employers handle the domestic helpers reflects their lack of knowledge about the workers' social and cultural background. In most cases, the employers' approach is based on prejudices that are the result of ignorance about the traditions, customs and social values of the employees who will come to work and live in their houses. Local media, in general, is not interested in addressing this issue. Moreover, employers do not show any interest in learning about their employees' societies. In sum, the relation between employers and employees is determined by power and money.

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<sup>24</sup> Malsiri Dias, Female Overseas Contract Workers: Sri Lanka, in *The Trade in Domestic Helpers: Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences*, Selected Papers from the planning Meeting on International Migration and Women, APDC., Kuala Lumpur, 1989, P. 220 - 221

### **5.3. Necessities and Requirements**

#### **Accommodation**

Some female domestic helpers live indoors in the sponsor's house. However, most of the interviewees had private bedrooms (61.76%), while others sleep with the children or a female adult (17.65%), with other female workers (17.65%) or even in the kitchen (2.94%).

The private bedroom usually has a bathroom. In some cases, it is situated in an annex out of the main premises (villas) where the employer and his family sleep. Usually the room has basic furniture such as a bed and a cupboard. A few are given a television, radio or a small refrigerator.

This type of accommodation is the most comfortable and allows the worker to have a certain degree of privacy. However, since this type of accommodation is situated out of the main building, some female workers feel isolated, lonely and scared at night. Others use the opportunity to receive friends or their partner during the night. The latter is not accepted in Bahrain and, if discovered, the worker and her partner will be imprisoned. Such cases are frequently registered with the police. To avoid this problem some families build a room for the female worker on the roof of the house.

#### **Nutrition**

The majority of the interviewed workers said they get adequate quantities of food and of good quality. Some of them stated that the food is more than enough, and that they are free to eat any kind of food available in the house. Only one mentioned that she had to wait until 4pm or 5pm to have lunch and that she was not allowed to have breakfast until the Madame of the house gets up in the morning while she (the worker) started work at 6:00 am.

#### **Clothes and toiletries**

The employer has to provide the domestic worker with suitable clothes, in addition to other items such as shampoo, toothpaste, soap etc. The interviewed housewives agreed that house workers should be provided with free accommodation, food, clothes etc. Only one house wife said that she provides free clothes to the worker on arrival in Bahrain but, after that, it is for the domestic helper to buy whatever she needs from her own salary.

Almost three-quarters of the interviewed domestic helpers said they get free clothes for both winter and summer and another 73.53% of them are provided with toiletries.

The Bahraini employers deem the dress code very important. Some Bahraini housewives regard the wearing of tight pants, sleeveless and short dresses as a ploy to attract their husbands, while conservative Muslims believe that such dresses are against Islamic norms and must not be worn.

Female domestic workers who are working with wealthy families usually wear uniforms,

while those working for middle and low-income families usually wear the *jalabia* (the traditional long local dress). Some of them are requested to wear the *hijab* (head scarf) even though they are not Muslims. A few educated house workers, especially Filipinos refuse to wear *jalabia* and consider it as humiliating and against their human rights. It is worth mentioning that those who are not provided with free clothes, or those who reject the clothes offered to them, have to spend some portion of their meagre salaries buying clothes.

#### **5.4. Friends and Visits**

Making friends with other house workers in the neighbourhood helps the newly arrived domestic helper to adjust to her new environment. They can help her in understanding the culture and the traditions of the employer. Also they can explain to her any difficult household tasks, especially if she does not speak Arabic well. A little sympathy for her problems, being able to express her feelings and speaking in her own language can be a great relief to her.

Housewives do not accept that the workers residing in their houses receive male friends or relatives at home. Outside Bahrain, these practices are considered violation of human rights. Nevertheless, the issue should be looked at within the context of the social order in Bahrain. Women are not allowed to go out in public with male friends or even to receive them at home. Freedom of movement for women is relatively restricted. Thus, according to the researcher, such a situation implies that female domestic workers should also abide by local norms and traditions.

Only one interviewed housewife allowed her domestic helper's husband, who is working in Saudi Arabia, to visit her and stay with her during weekends. 41.18% of the interviewed women domestic helpers were allowed to go out in the neighbourhood to visit other female workers, while 29.41% were permitted to receive female visitors at home.

Some house workers pointed out that, at the beginning, they were not allowed to go out and meet people, but once their employers became confident about the manner in which they would conduct themselves, they were allowed to go out. Nonetheless, this is not always the practice and more than half of the domestic workers are deprived of this right despite their correct personal conduct.

#### **5.5. Practicing Religion**

Some interviewed house workers pointed out that their Muslim employers did not allow pictures of Jesus or Buddha to be in the house, so they have to hide those pictures or sculptures in their bags. Only a very few Christian domestic helpers, working mainly for wealthy families, are allowed to go to church.

It should be noted here that normally there is complete freedom of worship in Bahrain and people are free to practice their religion. Besides two main Catholic churches, there are Jewish synagogues and other places of worship for Hindus, Buddhists etc. For

domestic workers who are allowed to go out, the place of worship provides a good support to them to help them adjust to their working environment and help them to solve some of the problems they face. The churches also provide financial assistance to foreign workers. They collect funds for helping needy workers and visit sick workers in hospitals. In addition they provide counselling to workers with problems and are able to establish a link between the workers and their embassies or the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

## 5.6. Watching Television Programmes and Using Telephone

When the interviewed domestic helpers were asked whether their employers allowed them to watch television programmes of their choice, the majority said they rarely had enough time to enjoy this type of leisure and, if they did so, they did not have freedom of choice. They had to watch whatever the employer's family was watching, mainly Arabic programmes.

Those who are allowed to use the telephone for personal calls said they had to pay for any international calls they made, while local calls were free of charge. They usually had to ask permission before using the telephone and they were not allowed to use the telephone excessively, or to spend a long time chatting. One house worker mentioned that she was allowed to call her family on the sponsor's cost twice a year: on her son's birthday and on New Year's Day, but all other international calls should be paid by her.

**Table 18. Frequency of some practices allowed by house workers**

Matters	Yes %	No %
alls	38.24	61.76
outside the house	29.41	70.59
n	58.82	41.18

## 5.7. Maltreatment

The survey attempted to find out whether female house workers face any mistreatment, including humiliation, verbal insults, physical or sexual abuse.

1. Verbal humiliation is the normal practice in many houses. Adults and even children insult domestic helpers. Verbal insult is frequently uttered. A word like stupid is used often on workers, who are unable to retaliate. Verbal abuse is a common practice in which even children of the employer indulge. This is a reflection of the level of discrimination and xenophobia against foreign workers not only in Bahrain but also in



the Middle East in general.

2. Physical harm is considered a crime by law. However, according to a lawyer with whom the matter was discussed, it is very difficult to prove this, especially when the abuse does not leave any mark on the body. The house workers who experienced beating, sexual harassment or rape were asked if they had approached their embassies or the police. They replied they had not because they felt scared, ashamed, or because they were afraid they would lose their jobs when they report it to the police. They were aware that if they complained, they would be deported to their countries and deprived of a livelihood. Staff at the Workers' Relation Section at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs also highlighted this fact.

It should be noted here that domestic workers are not only vulnerable to sexual abuse by their sponsors but also by the sponsor's sons or other male teenagers visiting the house or other foreign workers, especially if the worker's bedroom is situated outside the house.

3. Six of the domestic helpers interviewed were, at least once, deprived of their meals as punishment. Three were temporarily imprisoned in their room as a form of punishment.

The social attitude towards immigrants in general influences the treatment meted out to the domestic worker. Some nationalities are looked upon as being inferior and this racist view is reflected in the treatment of domestic helpers.

**Table 19. Frequency of Mistreatment Faced by Domestic Workers**

Kind of treatment	Always	Sometimes	Never
Verbal insults	20.59	26.47	52.94
Beating	2.94	11.77	85.29
Sexual harassment	2.94	5.88	91.18
Rape	0	2.94	97.06
Non-payment of wages	0	20.59	79.41
Being left alone at home while the employers go on vacation	0	8.82	91.18
Denial of food as a form of punishment	0	17.65	82.35
Being locked in a room as punishment	0	11.75	88.24

## Working Hours

The great majority of domestic helpers work more than 11 hours a day. Most of them said they get up between 5am and 5.30am and are not allowed to sleep until about 11.30pm. Sometimes they work until 1am or 2am if the employer is entertaining guests

for dinner. Some said that they do not get enough sleep, as they have to take care of babies during the night. In sum, as the house worker does not have fixed working hours, she is on duty all the time.

Table 20. Working hours

Working hours per day	Domestic helpers
	20.59
	26.47
	14.71
	38.23

A total of 47.06% of the interviewed domestic helpers get a weekly day off. It should be noted that sponsors and recruiting agents do not encourage female domestic helpers to take a day off, as they do not allow them to go out on their own. Some female house workers are also reluctant to have a day off, either because they are not allowed to go out or because they have no place to go to. A few wealthy families give Christian workers a half-day off on rotation basis, to go to church.

Nearly all sponsors interviewed refuse to give their house workers paid annual leave. Only one housewife said she provides paid annual leave to the worker. However, 17.65% of the interviewed house workers get one month paid annual leave per year<sup>25</sup>.

Since the Labour Law does not cover domestic workers, they cannot demand a weekly day off or paid annual leave. They work continuously till the end of the contract, which is two years, or more, after which they have the choice of either taking unpaid leave for two or three months to visit their families or to leave Bahrain forever.

## Workload

Heavy workload is one of the main complaints from domestic workers. The employers expect them to perform a variety of household tasks ranging from routine cleaning such as dusting, washing dishes and clothes, ironing, beating carpets and taking care of children, to gardening and washing cars.

Those who master the English language well, assist children in their homework. Moreover, they take children to and from school and are seen with children in fast food restaurants, in the parks and at children's parties and recreation activities. Those who take care of babies are expected to feed them, wash their clothes, play with them and put them to bed.

Female house workers often accompany the ladies of the house shopping, to carry the bags. Also, they accompany the family during social visits in order to take care of the children. If the family goes for a walk or for a picnic, the house worker goes along, to help.

Some families expect the domestic helpers to even mend their clothes, sew new ones

<sup>25</sup> Service agreements between sponsors and domestic helpers entitles house workers to 15 days paid annual leave but in most cases this condition is not respected by sponsors.

for them, massage them and sometimes take the role of a hairdresser etc. In sum, certain families require a super woman to work for them.

The table below shows all chores that the women house workers are responsible for. Some are also in charge of buying daily necessities for the family such as bread, milk and fruits. Nevertheless, although it is another task added to their heavy workload, going to the supermarket or the nearby grocery is an opportunity for the domestic helpers to meet others and make friends. Therefore, employers try to curtail this social interaction as much as possible, to prevent their workers from mixing with strangers, especially males.

Car cleaning is considered a man's job. Usually Asian expatriates, especially those on free visas, go from house to house cleaning cars. Nevertheless, many women domestic helpers are required to clean the employer's cars. The survey found that 38.24 female house workers are in charge of this task.

Cooking is largely the responsibility of the domestic helper and 88.24% of the surveyed workers do all the cooking. Those who do not cook, make all the preparations for cooking (such as cleaning rice, cutting vegetables etc). In other words the worker participates in the cooking process, and in some cases she stays in the kitchen ready to take any command from the housewife.

**Table 21. Workload**

Task	%
General cleaning of the house	100
Washing clothes	100
Washing dishes	100
Cooking	88.24
Buying groceries from the neighbourhood store	38.24
Cleaning cars	38.24
Ironing	88.24
looking after the children	79.41
Taking children for a walk	38.24
Assisting children to get ready for school	50
Assisting children with their homework	11.76
Caring for the elderly	38.24

In addition to their normal work, some domestic workers also work in the homes of the employers' relatives, especially when they have visitors. In fact, Bahrainis have a tradition of weekly gatherings of the extended family where sons and daughters, their spouses and children spend a day in the parent's house. Women house workers accompany their sponsors on such outings, taking care of the children, feeding them and, cleaning and washing dishes. Although it is a hard work, the majority of them like these gatherings because it is their only chance to meeting other domestic workers. Of the surveyed house workers, 14.71% said they worked in relatives' houses while 64.71% said they do so from time to time. Only 20.58% had not worked in another

house. One said her employer asks her to work in the neighbours' houses. The employer pays her only BD.20 while she gets another BD.20 from the neighbours. Another one said that after finishing the work in the employer's house, she is obliged to go to the residence of her sponsor's daughter to help with household chores and looking after two children (aged 2 years and a newborn).

A heavy workload and long working hours do not in any way determine the domestic helper's monthly remuneration. Average salaries are normally determined by the number of years spent with the same family, domestic helper's nationality and degree of satisfaction on the part of the employer. Wages tend to increase with length of service. Certain nationalities, especially Filipinos and Indonesians, receive higher wages than others, while women from Bangladesh get the lowest. Of those interviewed, 58.82% receive between BD.40 and 50, while 17.65% get less than BD.40<sup>26</sup>.

**Table 22. Wages by Nationality**

Salary in BD	Filipinos	Sri Lankan	Indian	Others	Total
Less than 40	5.88	5.88	0	5.88	17.64
40 – 50	17.65	26.47	11.77	2.94	58.83
51 – 60	2.94	0	2.94	5.88	11.76
More	5.88	2.94	0	2.94	11.76

## 5.8. Aspirations and Future Plans

It goes without saying that foreign workers' motivation to leave their country is to make a better life for their families and for themselves. In addition, female domestic helpers choose this job to escape unemployment in their countries of origin or simply as a survival strategy.

The following table shows that the aim of these workers is to provide for a better life for their family members, not themselves. Single women are more self-focused as their top priority is usually to save money for their marriage. If the worker is lucky and works with a family, that appreciates her work, she might receive gifts for herself. Some are able to save some money and buy gold or other jewellery. This would be sold on her return and the money spent on family necessities.

The same table shows that a large part of the workers salary is spent on daily consumption, instead of being invested in establishing a micro- enterprise for herself or her family. Since there is no regular income anymore upon return home of the domestic workers, after some time, the economic situation of the family starts deteriorating and the woman once again has to take up a job as a domestic worker abroad.

64.71% of the domestic helpers said they saved a part of their salaries in bank accounts in their countries of origin. Most of them do not have accounts in Bahrain because they

<sup>26</sup> One US\$ = BD. 0.376 ( UN standard rate. August 2001).

do not save enough or because they are not allowed out of the house.

**Table 23. Motivation to work as domestic helper**

Motivation	%
	23.53
	29.41
return home	8.82
	2.94
and	2.94
	5.88

In sum, working as a domestic helper can put a person at the mercy of others, without any kind of legal protection. It is one of the most humiliating occupations, especially in societies such as the Gulf. The majority of interviewed house workers are not new to this type of job. It is noted that a woman house worker prefers to continue work for several years until she is able to build a small house or until her children finish school. The majority of domestic workers do not make the decision to work or to continue working as house workers. In fact their husbands or fathers decide for them or the future of their children is their main drive.

## **6. Embassies**

The government of Sri Lanka and Indonesia do not have embassies in Bahrain. The nearest embassies for these two countries are found in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. As a result, Sri Lankan and Indonesian workers in Bahrain have neither access to nor protection from their governments.

### **6.1. Bangladesh**

In 1989, the Government of Bangladesh banned the export of domestic workers to all countries. The Bangladeshi embassy in Bahrain conveyed this decision to the Immigration and Passports Directorate through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to an official at the embassy, reasons for the ban were as follows:

- A Bangladeshi women working as domestic workers abroad have too often been exposed to harassment and sexual abuse;
- Domestic helpers face many difficulties due to the social and cultural differences between her and her employer in countries in the Middle East;
- Many Bangladeshi domestic helpers are illiterate, poor, and need time to adapt to the different life style in Bahrain;

- Communication causes problems and training them is difficult because of the language barrier. Therefore, instructions could be interpreted wrongly;
- Sponsors and their families treat the domestic worker badly. Many household workers are verbally and sometimes even physically abused;
- Domestic workers from Bangladesh receive very low salaries and, in some cases, are not paid for several months or not at all;
- From the administrative point of view, the government does not have the capacity and is not well-equipped to follow up all the domestic workers' complaints;
- Domestic helpers' remittances from Bahrain are relatively low. Their saving are economically not productive as the families of workers consume the vast portion of the remittances and hardly anything is left to invest in the establishment of a business or as savings in the bank;
- The Government of Bangladesh recently initiated national projects to encourage women to work and stay in their home country.

According to the embassy the ban is still in a transitional period. There are still a considerable number of Bangladeshi women working as domestic workers in countries in the region. The embassy knows little about their whereabouts however, they are informed as soon as a worker is arrested or appears before a court. Nevertheless, little is done to assist female domestic helpers. The embassy considers illegal migrants outside their responsibility. The embassy is of the opinion that arrested women receive fair treatment from both the police and the Bahraini court.

The embassy estimates that a monthly number of 20 to 30 Bangladeshi domestic workers are arrested for charges like theft or disobedience to their sponsor. This number, according to the embassy, is negligible and does not necessitate their intervention.

## **6.2. The Employment Bureau at the embassy of the Philippines**

The Government of the Philippines adopted a policy to protect their immigrant workers. The Department of Labour, established an Employment Bureau in the embassies to look after the welfare and interests of Filipino workers, including house workers. The Bureau is also in charge of promoting the export of Filipino skilled labour. In addition, the Bureau assists in the repatriation of sick workers and, in case of death; it supervises the repatriation arrangements of the body and compensation for the family of the deceased. In some cases, it bears the cost of such arrangements. The Bureau also holds training workshops aiming at upgrading the skills of the workers and making them more attractive to the Bahraini labour market but also enabling them to take up new jobs or become self-employed on their return back home.

Although statistics are not accurate, the embassy estimates Filipino workers at 18,000, of whom 60% are female domestic helpers, 30% skilled workers and 5% professionals. This number of workers increases by 10% each year.

According to the Labour Attaché, the exclusion of domestic workers by the Labour Law in Bahrain hinders the promotion and protection of these workers. Nevertheless, there are increasing numbers of women who come to the Middle East to work as domestic workers. Therefore, the Labour Department accredited recruitment offices that comply with a specific set of criteria. The embassy monitors the 21 accredited agencies' work. Any violation of the rules by these agents results in black listing. Nevertheless, these measures have not prevented recruitment of domestic helpers by other illegal agencies, which are active mainly in remote areas.

The embassy provides shelter in case the worker has problems or disputes with the employer. Some disputes can be solved amicably with the employers; others are referred either to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs or to the courts, with the embassy normally bearing all the costs involved in the litigation. The house worker usually leaves Bahrain after the dispute is resolved. In some cases, the embassy, in coordination with the recruiting agencies, can succeed in finding a new employer for the domestic helper. This is possible only if she did not complete the probation period of three months. According to the Labour Attaché at the Philippines, three months is too short a time for a new woman house worker to get used to her new environment. He believes that the recruiting agent should be responsible for the domestic workers for the entire duration of their contracts.

The embassy does not have direct contact with all Filipino domestic workers in Bahrain. Those who are working with wealthy families may have some contact with the embassy, while others enter in contact, only when a problem arises. The embassy receives 25 to 30 run-away women house workers every month. Most of the run-aways turn out to be first timers.

### **6.3. Embassy of India**

The embassy estimates Indian domestic helpers to be around 1,500. They come mainly from three areas in India: Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Goa. The large majority of them work for influential families.

The embassy is reluctant to have any relations with Indian domestic workers except when a worker encounters a serious problem and appeals for assistance. The negative attitude of the Indian embassy is due, mainly, to the following reasons:

- The Indian Government embassy does not have a clear policy towards domestic workers;
- The embassy avoids having confrontations with local families;
- Sponsors, generally, deny female house workers access to their Embassies;



- \_ Sponsors and the Bahraini Government do not encourage the embassy officials to visit or call the Indian house workers;
- \_ The embassy is inadequately staffed to deal with all worker-related problems.

The embassy receives only about six to ten cases per month involving female house workers. An attempt is made to resolve the dispute amicably; otherwise it is referred to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

The embassy does own a shelter for women workers in problem situations, as is the case with the Philippines embassy. Should the situation require, the embassy, in cooperation with the many Indian societies and clubs, finds accommodation for the woman house worker and raises money for her repatriation. In case of a dispute between the house worker and the employment agent, the Indian authorities are informed and the agent is banned or blacklisted. However, blacklisted agents simply change their name and continue their business under a different commercial name.

## **7. Case Studies**

### **7.1. Case Studies: Migrant Women Workers**

#### **Case 1**

Among the various interviewed women house workers for this research, the case of Indra was chosen for the following reasons:

1. Indra has worked in several houses in different villages and cities. She has also worked in two Gulf countries (Bahrain and Kuwait);
2. She has experienced different types of treatment from her employers;
3. She has experienced risks.

Indra is a Sri Lankan Buddhist, about 39 years old. She is married and has two children, a girl of 14 years and a nine-year-old boy. Her husband works at the Ministry of Transport in Sri Lanka. As his workplace is far from their house, he comes home only during the weekends. Her mother-in-law lives with the children. She is elderly and blind. Indra has hired a woman to take care of the household, at a salary of 400 Sri Lankan rupees per month.

Indra came to Bahrain in 1985. She worked for a very traditional Muslim family living in a village. The family had a place of worship where women met almost every day to listen to religious recitation. Indra was required to attend together with all the women, besides performing the routine household tasks ranging from cleaning to cooking etc. She said her workload was extremely heavy and her salary of BD.30 was not at all

commensurate with her workload. She had no weekly day off or annual leave. She was provided with clothes of cheap quality. Since Indra was not happy with this family, she returned to her country as soon as her two-year contract expired.

She then took up a job in Kuwait, which was a strange land for her. She had to pay SR15,000.00<sup>27</sup> (fifteen thousand Sri Lankan Rupees) to an agent in Sri Lanka to get the job. When she arrived in Kuwait, she was stopped at the airport, as she did not have a copy of her visa or the visa number. The recruiting agent in Kuwait was supposed to meet her at the airport but he did not show up. As she did not know his name or address, she was stuck at the airport for three days. The airport authorities provided her with meals. While she waited for the next flight back to Sri Lanka, an Indian passenger gave her 10 Kuwaiti Dinars<sup>28</sup> to call her agent in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan agent, who forgot to inform his partner in Kuwait about her arrival, gave her the telephone number of the Kuwaiti agent and also sent him a fax. So, after three days at the airport, Indra was able to enter Kuwait.

At the agent's office she was introduced to Mrs. (F.) for whom she would work. The woman was pregnant and had six other children. Indra had to look after all the children, she had to cook and clean the house. Mrs. (F.) was employed, so she would leave the house early in the morning. In the afternoon she took a nap, then she went out again. Indra slept with the children who would wake her up often during the night. As Mrs. (F) had relatives in Bahrain, she used to leave the children with Indra while she visited Bahrain during weekends and holidays.

During his wife's absence, Mr. (F) tried several times to rape her but he did not succeed. Once, when she threatened him with a knife, she managed to injure him but not seriously. She was scared when she was alone with him in the house and she would always lock her bedroom door. The children did not respect her and were a source of frustration. Mrs. (F) always shouted at her and insulted her. Indra was miserable and cried often.

Mrs. (F) took Indra from time to time to clean her mother's house. Indra was not paid for the first three months, and she was not allowed to send letters to her family. She ran away from the house and took a taxi to the police station. The police warned Mr. (F) to pay her wages. Her employer paid her 30 Kuwaiti Dinars for each month. She rejected this as her contract stipulated KD. 40 and threatened to complain to the police, so she was paid in full.

Indra never went out for shopping. She could go out in the neighbourhood to buy things or with the children whenever Mrs. (F) wanted her to do so. Nearing the expiration of her contract, she gave Mrs. (F) KD. 50 to buy a gold chain which she wanted to take back for her daughter. Mrs. (F) took the money but did not buy the chain. Moreover she refused to let Indra go back home after the expiration of her contract. When Indra threatened to complain to the police, Mrs. (F) took her to the airport the very next day, without giving her a chance to pack and prepare for her departure. Indra lost KD50 and her final month's salary, but she was happy to return home.

After a few months she succeeded in getting a job with a Bahraini family, through a

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<sup>27</sup> 1 US\$ = 89.59 SR (UN standard rate as of 30 June 2001).

<sup>28</sup> 1 US\$ = 0.307 KD (UN standard rate as of 30 June 2001).

relative working in Bahrain. She did not sign a contract but the family was kind with her. At the beginning, her salary was BD. 40, which was increased to BD. 45 after three months. After a year, she was paid BD. 60 and her employer covered all her expenses including air ticket and living expenses.

Indra considers herself lucky to be working for such a family. Everybody in the family treats her well and respects her. She arranges her daily work routine. The work is hard: she gets up at 5am to prepare breakfast. Then she does the general cleaning of the house and assists in the kitchen, although she cooks occasionally. The family trusts her with money. When she needs to buy anything for the house she takes money from a wallet of petty cash kept in the kitchen and buys what is needed without needing the approval of the lady of the house.

Indra said she does not need a day off, because she considers herself as part of the family. "Nobody here takes a day off," she said. "Household work has to be done even during weekends." She is allowed to visit friends in the neighbouring houses. She also goes out on Friday afternoons to see her cousin, a man living with his wife in another city. They are also allowed to visit her.

She eats with the family and there are no restrictions on what she eats. She is at liberty to buy what she likes from the supermarket, paying from petty cash. Indra is provided with new clothes of acceptable quality. She wears long dresses in the house, like everybody else, but when she goes out she puts on modern, but decent attire.

Indra said she gets presents, in cash and in kind, for herself and for her children. Also she has sent back gifts for her family twice since she has been in Bahrain. Most of the gifts were presents given to her by her employer's family. However, before sending the gifts, she asked her employer to check the boxes in which they were sent, to protect herself against any accusations of theft. But the employer refused to take her offer. "You know, they trust me," she said happily.

After working with this family for one year and a few months, her daughter became seriously ill and her employer provided her with a return air ticket to go and see her daughter. The family is not rich but they are humane, she said.

Asked about her aspirations and future plans, she said she is satisfied with her work, but she does not plan to continue working in Bahrain for too long. She wants to be with her children. While working overseas, she managed to buy a house and a small piece of land. Her children are at school and she would like them to continue their education. She does not have other plans for the future.

## **Case 2**

Jean had completed 17 months of her two-year contract when she took refuge at the Philippines. According to her, she was in charge of the children. In addition, she used to clean two cars and did the entire domestic work, including cooking. She had to wake up at 4:30am and worked until 11:30pm, without rest. Her salary was BD. 50 per month.

In October 2000 she became sick and was first taken to the public health centre and then to a private clinic. She had to pay all the costs of her treatment, which totalled BD.

53. As her situation became worse, she took refuge in the Philippine embassy. The embassy paid for her medical treatment. Jean said that she did not want to go back to work, so she was waiting for a no-objection certificate from her sponsor, so that she could take up another job in Bahrain or return home.

### Case 3

This case was taken from a letter written to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

*"My name is Sue, from India. For the past 11 years I have been working as a housemaid in the house of Mr. X. During these 11 years I have been sent back to India only twice. But for the last six years I have not been able to go back to India on leave despite my repeated requests. Besides that, for the last 14 months, my sponsor has not paid me a salary nor has he renewed my residence permit and CPR (personal identity).*

*Recently, I have been more distressed as I am suffering from severe bleeding. The doctors who have treated me have strongly suggested an immediate operation. Failing to do so, I might get cancer. Despite my repeated requests either to treat me for the operation in Bahrain or to send me to India, my employer has not taken any action and just turned a deaf ear on my requests.*

*Now I am in total distress as the bleeding has increased in the recent weeks, and I have no money to go to the doctor. I have no relatives here in Bahrain, so I am desperate to go back home. I don't know what to do, and I sincerely seek the help of the Labour Ministry to intervene in this regard and help to send me home to India as soon as possible, so that I can get the right medical treatment for my bleeding problem. At this point I feel totally helpless and desperate and just put my total trust on the intervention and help of the Ministry of Labour."*

## 7.2. Case Studies: Sponsors

### Case 1

Mrs. Sami is a teacher in a high school. She has had a domestic helper for about 13 years. According to Mrs. Sami, the helper was very kind and decent. She was slow in her work but what she did, she did well. She used to receive telephone calls from men whom she said were relatives. As Mrs. Sami is well educated and believes in human rights, she did not object to the calls. She often saw that her domestic helper had money but was told that her mother had sent it to her to buy gold when she returned home.

After thirteen years of service, the house worker asked to return home for good. On the day of departure, a man came to take her to the airport. She introduced him to Mrs. Sami as her cousin. Next day Mrs. Sami went to the Immigration and Passports Directorate to get a departure certificate, which is required to obtain a fresh work permit from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. To her surprise, she was told that the house worker had not left the country.

She was eventually found, with the help of the police, after more than one year. She was working in a nightclub as well as practicing prostitution. Mrs. Sami was shocked to discover that the domestic helper had been a prostitute for the past 13 years, and that she used to leave the house at night and come back before every body got up in the morning.

## Case 2

Mr. Mohammed made arrangements with a recruiting for a female house worker. He completed all the necessary arrangements and paid all the costs. On the day of the worker's arrival, Mr. Mohammed went to meet her at the airport but she did not appear, although according to airport authorities, she had entered the country. The police investigated in vain. The recruiting agent refused to take responsibility but returned all the money Mr. Mohammed had paid him.

After about eight months, the recruiting agent called Mr. Mohammed to tell him that the worker was found working with somebody else. He asked Mr. Mohammed to provide a no-objection certificate for that woman and offered to reimburse him the fees of the certificate.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

As has already been mentioned, Bahrain's Labour Law does not cover domestic workers. Also, foreign workers do not have the right to organize themselves in trade unions. Their embassies endeavour to help only those who appeal to them, and most of the time the embassies are reluctant to openly intervene in order to maintain good relations with the Government of Bahrain (this fact was mentioned by an embassy official, who was interviewed for this study). Churches, mosques, societies and clubs (local and foreign) do not engage in any activities that would provide human rights protection of domestic helpers. In sum, workers in general, and female house workers, in particular, are left alone to face their destiny in a strange land.

Female domestic workers, especially those arriving for the first time face difficulties in adjusting to their new lives in Bahrain. Their relations with the host families, mainly the housewives, are not always smooth. In most cases this is due to lack of knowledge of each other's culture. Moreover, female house workers are confronted with numerous restrictions, which make it difficult for them to build friendships in general and with people from their own country in particular. Therefore, they often feel lonely and not cared for.

Different factors can, however, provide a support network to the newly arrived house worker and help her adjust to her new situation. Letters from their family and friends play a great role in encouraging and motivating them to continue working. Good news from the family helps a lot. Unfortunately, house workers normally receive letters full of stories of illnesses in the family, non-serious accidents, death etc. Such news, undoubtedly, increases their anxiety in a land where they have very few people with whom to share their feelings or who can understand them. Although some host families are compassionate and sympathetic, others are impatient and do not like to see their tears and ask for a replacement. If a new house worker is returned to the recruiting agent, he shouts at her, threatens her and even beats her. Finally, she goes back to the employer or to any other family if the first sponsor refuses to take her back.

In order to enhance the female domestic helpers situation in Bahrain it is recommended to do the following:

1. Laws and regulations should be amended to cover the rights of domestic workers;
2. There is a need to create a body, which would comprise Government authorities and the concerned Embassies to deal with workers' issues and problems;
3. Sending and receiving countries should meet regularly to discuss issues pertaining to house workers;
4. Both labour importing and exporting countries should adopt policies vis-a-vis domestic workers, in view of globalization and free markets;
5. Passport is the property of the worker and should be in the worker's possession;
6. The media, NGOs and social centres in Bahrain should undertake public awareness campaigns on the culture and civilization in the exporting countries as well as on the human rights of domestic helpers. The holy Quoran, Islamic traditions and the way Prophet Mohammed treated his domestic workers should be used as examples;
7. Domestic workers should receive some kind of orientation prior to taking up their jobs, in order to acquire some understanding of the social and cultural traditions and values in their employers' countries. The media can play an important role in this regard and, labour exporting and importing countries should cooperate in producing appropriate materials such as pamphlets, films and radio dramas, to raise awareness on these matters;
8. House workers should have training on household work before arrival to the host countries;
9. Domestic workers should sign contracts before leaving their country of origin;
10. Concerned Embassies should keep track of house workers and should not deny them protection of their rights;
11. Embassies should be adequately staffed to deal with issues of migrant workers;
12. Before leaving the country, a domestic worker should be given the full address of the employer and some useful addresses like the concerned embassy, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the recruiting agent;
13. A woman house worker should be covered by social insurance;
14. Employment agents in both the sending and receiving countries should be controlled and monitored by the authorities in order to prevent exploitation of overseas workers;
15. The workers should be encouraged and receive training on how to start micro-businesses in their countries upon return. In coordination with international organizations, repatriation could be facilitated if the domestic workers could enter in a micro-credit project;
16. Labour exporting countries should adopt a viable economic strategy aimed at creating jobs and solving the problem of unemployment in order to encourage their nationals to stay in the country;
17. A central registry of domestic workers and a database should be created to monitor the well being of the migrant women.





## Annex 1. Helpers

## Questionnaire on Domestic

### Personal Data

1. Marital status: .....
  2. Age:
    - ☐ Less than 20 years
    - ☐ 20-25 years
    - ☐ 26-30 years
    - ☐ 31-35 years
    - ☐ 36-40 years
    - ☐ more than 40 years
  3. No. of children if any.....
  4. Nationality .....
  5. Where do you live in your country?
    - ☐ in the capital
    - ☐ in a village
    - ☐ in another city
  6. What is your occupation in your country of origin? .....
  7. What is your religion? .....
  8. What is your level of education? .....
  9. Do you speak English?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No
  10. Did you speak Arabic before arriving in Bahrain?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No
- After arriving in Bahrain?
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
3. How did you get this job?
    - ☐ Through a recruitment agent
    - ☐ Other means. Please specify .....

3. If through an agent, how much did you pay? .....
4. How did you manage to pay? .....
5. Did you pay the agent in Bahrain?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
3. If yes, how much? .....
4. Did you previously work as a maid?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
7. If yes, where? .....
- How long? .....

### **Working Conditions**

8. Did you sign a contract?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
11. Did you know that you would work as a domestic helper before your arrival in Bahrain?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
14. If no, what was the job you were promised to have? .....
15. How long have you been working with this family? .....
16. How many persons live in the house? Adults ..... Children .....
17. How big is the house? ..... No. of bedrooms .....
18. How many maids are there in the house? .....
19. Who trained you to work?
  - ☐ The house worker who worked before me
  - ☐ The housewife
  - ☐ I had previous experience
  - ☐ Other specify

24. Please check the tasks you are in charge of:
- ☐ General cleaning of the house
  - ☐ Washing clothes
  - ☐ Washing dishes
  - ☐ Cooking
  - ☐ Buying things from the supermarkets
  - ☐ Cleaning cars
  - ☐ Ironing
  - ☐ Caring for children
  - ☐ Washing dishes
  - ☐ Taking children for walk
  - ☐ Assisting children to be ready for school
  - ☐ Assisting children in their homework
  - ☐ Caring for elderly
38. Do adults in the house help you?
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
41. Are you asked to work in other houses?
- ☐ Yes always
  - ☐ Yes sometime
  - ☐ Never
29. How much is your salary?
30. Do you get a weekly day off?
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
33. If you are sick, do you stay in bed?
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
36. Are you entitled to a paid annual leave?
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
39. How many hours do you work per day? .....

40. Do you experience one or more of the following treatments by the family you are working for?

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Never</b>
Verbal insults			
Beating			
Sexual harassment			
Rape			
Not paying you the salary			
Leaving you alone in the house and traveling			
Not giving you food			
Punishing you by locking you in a room			

### **Adaptability & Living Conditions**

41. Where do you sleep at night?
- ☐ In a private room
  - ☐ In the kitchen
  - ☐ Sharing a room with other workers
  - ☐ Other specify
5. Are you allowed to:
- ☐ Visit friends
  - ☐ Receive visits
  - ☐ Use telephone for personal calls
  - ☐ Practice your religion
  - ☐ Watch T.V.
11. Please check the item that you get free of charge
- ☐ Meals
  - ☐ Soap, toothpaste, shampoo, etc ...
  - ☐ Air ticket
  - ☐ Clothes
  - ☐ Medical treatment
  - ☐ Accommodation
18. To whom do you refer if you have a dispute regarding your work? .....
19. Do you get presents & gifts from the family you are working with
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No

22. How did you feel when you arrived at this house?
- ☐ Happy
  - ☐ Scared
  - ☐ Sad
  - ☐ Home sick
5. How did you adjust to this new life?
- ☐ My family and friends send me letters to encourage me
  - ☐ Other maids in the house or in the neighborhood helped me
  - ☐ The family treated me nicely
  - ☐ I wanted to go back, but the agent threatened me
  - ☐ I wanted to go back, but I thought of my family and stayed

### **Perspectives**

11. Why do you work as a domestic helper? .....
12. How do you spend your salary?.....
13. Do you save money?
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
16. How long do you plan to work as a maid? .....
17. What are you planning to do when you go back home? .....

## Annex 2. Request for No Objection Certificate, Resident Permit

**STATE OF BAHRAIN  
MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR  
GENERAL DIRECTORATE OF THE  
IMMIGRATION DIRECTORATE  
VISA DIVISION**

<b>APPLICATION NO :</b>	<b>FILE NO :</b>
-------------------------	------------------

<b>APPLICATION FOR</b>						
<b>1. NO OBJECTION CERTIFICATE</b>	Visit		FAMILY		EMPLOYMENT	
<b>2. RE-ENTRY VISA</b>	Multiple		-		SINGLE	
<b>3. ENTRY VISA</b>	2 Weeks		1 WEEK		72 HOURS	
<b>4. EXTENSION OF VISA</b>	2 Months		-		1 MONTH	

**VALIDITY:**

<b>VALID FOR</b> (Month (s))
------------------------------

**APPLICANT DETAILS:**

<b>NAME IN FULL</b>			
<b>PASSPORT NO.</b>		<b>NATIONALITY</b>	
<b>PLACE OF ISSUE</b>		<b>SEX</b>	
<b>DATE OF ISSUE</b>		<b>PLACE OF BIRTH</b>	
<b>VALID UNTIL</b>		<b>DATE OF BIRTH</b>	
<b>ARRIVAL DATE</b>		<b>MARITAL STATUS</b>	
<b>OCCUPATION</b>		<b>RELIGION</b>	

**PARTICULARS OF CHILDREN ENDORSED**

DATE OF BIRTH	PLACE OF BIRTH	SEX	No.	FIRST NAME
			1	
			2	
			3	
			4	

**PARTICULARS OF SPONSOR**

<b>C.R. NO.</b>		<b>CPR NO.</b>	
<b>PERSONAL / COMPANY NAME</b>			

ADDRESS	Block	Town	Road	Bldg.	Flat

<b>NATIONALITY</b>	<b>P.O. BOX</b>
<b>SEX</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>

<b>DATE OF ESTABLISHMENT</b>	<b>DURATION OF RESIDENCE IN BAHRAIN</b>	<b>TELEPHONE NO.</b>
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**DECLARATION OF SPONSOR**

**I DECLARE THAT THE ABOVE PARTICULARS ARE TRUE AND CORRECT TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF AND THAT I HOLD MYSELF RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GOOD CONDUCT OF THE PERSON(S) NAMED HEREIN AND THAT I WILL UNDERTAKE TO REPATRIATE HIM/THEM AT ANY TIME UPON ORDER TO DO SO BY COMPETENT AUTHORITY I FURTHER AGREE THIS DECLARATION IS BINDING UPON ME UNTIL RELEASED BY AUTHORIZED OFFICIALS OF THE GENERAL DIRECTORATE OF IMMIGRATION & PASSPORTS.**

**SIGNATURE OF SPONSOR:****DATE:****APPLICATION FORWARDER DETAILS:****NAME IN FULL****CPR NO.**

<b>ADDRESS</b>	<b>Block</b>	<b>Town</b>	<b>Road</b>	<b>Bldg.</b>	<b>Flat</b>

**FOR OFFICIAL USE**

### **Annex 3. Foreign Worker**

### **Complaint of a Runaway**

#### **CAUTION**

ACCORDING TO ARTICLE (270) TO ARTICLE (276) OF THE PENAL CODE 1976, APPLICANTS GIVING FALSE INFORMATION ON THE APPLICATION ARE SUBJECT TO MAXIMUM OF TEN YEARS IMPRISONMENT.

NAME IN FULL: .....

PASSPORT NO: .....

NATIONALITY: .....

C.P.R. NO: .....

OCCUPATION: .....

DURATION OF WORK: .....

OCCUPANT ARRIVAL DATE: .....

C.R. NO : .....

C.P.R. NO: .....

NAME: .....

PRIVATE ADDRESS: .....

OCCUPATION: .....

TEL. NO: .....

COMPANY/ESTABLISHMENT. NAME: .....

TEL. NO: .....

ADDRESS: .....

REPORTED DATE: .....

#### **CONDITION**

THE SPONSOR SHOULD REPORT ABOUT THE RUNAWAY WORKER WITHIN ONE WEEK & THE RESIDENT PERMIT SHOULD BE VALID



**ASSURANCE:**

1. THE RESIDENT PERMIT SHOULD BE RENEWED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE RESIDENT PERMIT & LABOUR REGULATIONS TILL THE EMPLOYEE IS ARRESTED.
2. RESIDENT PERMIT OF THE ARRESTED EMPLOYEE SHOULD BE CANCELLED & THE EMPLOYEE TO BE DEPORTED.
3. ALL THE FEES RELATED TO THE EMPLOYEE DEPORTATION WILL BE PAID BY THE SPONSOR.

SIGNATURE OF SPONSOR: .....

## **Annex 4. Agreement Contract between Sponsor & Women House Workers**

### **AL FARDAN SERVICE AGENCY**

#### **SERVICE AGREEMENT**

This agreement is made on ..... Between Mr.....  
(hereinafter called the EMPLOYER and Mr./Mrs/ .....  
holding ..... Passport No. .... Issued at  
..... on ..... (hereinafter called  
the EMPLOYEE), hereby it is agreed as follows:

1. The EMPLOYEE agrees to work for the EMPLOYER in the capacity of ..... for a period of ..... years commencing on .....
2. The EMPLOYER shall pay the EMPLOYEE a salary of the rate of ..... per month, provided that the EMPLOYEE should work at the time, place and days specified by the EMPLOYER
3. The EMPLOYEE shall be on a probation period of ..... month (s).
4. The EMPLOYEE shall be entitled to ..... days leave with full pay after completing this contract.
5. The EMPLOYEE shall be entitled to receive free medical treatment at any government hospitals and clinics, through the EMPLOYER, provided that the sickness or injury is not caused by the EMPLOYEE himself or through alcohol or drugs, and the EMPLOYER is not responsible, in any case, to treat the EMPLOYEE outside the country where he works.
6. The EMPLOYEE hereby guarantees to fulfil his duties with honesty and to be of good conduct and to keep the secrecy of the EMPLOYER and not to involve himself in any political or internal affairs in the Country of his work or residence and not to refuse any duties given to him or to cause any disturbance among other, otherwise disciplinary action will be taken.

**Almansoori**  
**Manpower**  
**FLAT 406.: 280, ROAD, BLOCK : 309, P.O. BOX : 15789, KUWAITI BLDG,**  
**MANAMA-BAHRAIN**  
**TEL: (00973) 262676 (3 Lines)**  
**FAX: 262474**

## **SERVICE AGREEMENT**

This agreement is made on ..... between ..... (hereinafter called the EMPLOYER), and ..... and holding ..... Passport No. .... issued at ..... on ..... (hereinafter called the EMPLOYEE), whereby it is agreed as follows :

1. The EMPLOYEE agrees to work for the EMPLOYER in the capacity of ..... for a period of ..... Years commencing on .....
2. The EMPLOYER shall pay the EMPLOYEE a salary at the rate of ..... per month, provided that the EMPLOYEE should work at the time, place and days specified by the EMPLOYER.
3. The EMPLOYEE shall be on a probation period of ..... Month (s).
4. The EMPLOYEE shall be entitled to ..... Days leave with full pay after completing this contract.
5. The EMPLOYEE shall be entitled to receive free medical treatment at any government hospitals and clinics, through the EMPLOYER, provided that the sickness or injury is not caused by the EMPLOYEE himself or through alcohol or drugs, and the EMPLOYER is not responsible, in any case, to treat the EMPLOYEE outside the country where he works.
6. The EMPLOYEE hereby guarantees to fulfil his duties with honesty and to be of good conduct and to keep the secrecy of the EMPLOYER and not to involve himself in any political or integral affair in the Country of his work or residence and not to refuse any duties given to him or to cause any disturbance among others, otherwise disciplinary action will be taken.

7. The EMPLOYER shall be providing to the EMPLOYEE a living accommodation with free electricity and water till the end of this Agreement.
8. Free food shall be provided to the EMPLOYEE by the EMPLOYER
9.
  - a) The EMPLOYER shall provide the EMPLOYEE passage facilities from the country of origin to the place of work by air Economy Class.
  - b) After the completion of this Agreement or on the termination of the EMPLOYEE'S SERVICE by the EMPLOYER not due to the reasons which are stated below in Clause C the EMPLOYER shall repatriate the EMPLOYEE to the country of origin by air economy class.
  - c) The EMPLOYER forfeits his right to the above Clauses A and B and therefore reserves the right to recover from the EMPLOYEE entitlements such as cost of passage and any other expenses incurred in connection with his employment if the EMPLOYEE'S services are terminated for any of the following reasons:
    - 1) If the EMPLOYEE resigns before the completion of this contract.
    - 2) If the EMPLOYEE commits breach of the provisions of this agreement.
10. In case of death of the EMPLOYEE, it will be the responsibility of the EMPLOYER to send the dead body and personal effects of the deceased at the EMPLOYER'S expenses to the EMPLOYEE'S country of origin.
11. Both parties are to abide by the law of the place of work towards each other.
12. Other conditions:  
Will not change the employee without the following:
  - a) if employee, was found to be ill from a long time before, a medical certificate from a government hospital has to be presented.

This agreement is signed by both parties and each will keep a copy

---

Signature of Employee

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Signature of Employer / Agent

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