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# WHOSE JOB IS IT TO SAVE MODERN-DAY SLAVES?

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by RUTHIE ACKERMAN\*

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Beirut, Lebanon

**B**eneath a highway in Adlieh, Beirut—in the bowels of the Ministry of Interior’s dark, hot basement—lies the General Security Department’s Detention Center where migrant domestic workers are held, some for months, to hear what their future holds.

Many were arrested for running away from their employers, some after being abused physically, verbally or sexually. Others filed complaints that their pay had been withheld, only to find themselves arrested when their employer filed false countercharges against them claiming theft, or worse. The hope for many of those detained in Adlieh is that they will be deported back to the countries they left for the dream of a better life in Lebanon, where \$150 per month to work as a maid sounded like a small fortune. For those who have not completed their three-year contract, they will have to find a way to pay for their own ticket home or remain in detention until they can. Deportation would be a dream come true compared to the abuse they endured. The not-so-lucky will be sent back to their employers’ homes to be further abused and exploited until they finish their contracts, at which time the employment agency will pay for their plane tickets and they will be free to leave legally.

On a recent September morning I found myself standing in line under a highway, with the friends and loved ones of those imprisoned in Adlieh. The garbage can next to us was overflowing, forcing everyone to hold their noses to block out the stench. The beeping horns from the street right above felt like a personal affront. And the air felt aggressive as it pushed its weight against our bodies.

I was at Adlieh with Aimee, a domestic worker from Madagascar who has been in Lebanon for 12 years, and is now a community leader who often counsels young women. We were there to find Sonia, a 28-year-old Malagasy woman, with

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WHERE ARE

EXHIBIT A: IN A POSH KITCHEN IN THE SUBURBS



a 4-year-old child, who was imprisoned for trying to run away from her employer. Aimee and I lined up with the other visitors in a narrow hallway, with bars and a metal screen between us and the prisoners. There were small holes in the screen, barely enough to see through. When, a few minutes later, the guards started calling the prisoners into the room a few at a time, everyone in the tiny hallway ran up to the screen, pushing their faces against it, trying to get a closer look. In the confusion people started calling out to each other in their own languages—Malagasy, Filipino, Amharic—and as the din grew louder and louder more faces and ears and bodies were pushed closer and closer to the metal screen. It is so hot and crowded we have to

leave the visiting room, but before we go Aimee reassures Sonia we will go see her daughter, who has been living in an orphanage since her mother's arrest.

Back in the taxi Aimee sighs heavily. "These girls think their jobs with their employers are bad. But here," she says, pointing at the detention center, "here it's worse."

In Lebanon, the issue of migrant domestic workers is a case of modern-day slavery. It is an apartheid system, which is practiced openly. At some beach resorts signs are posted outlining racist policies: "Radios are not allowed. No cameras. Maids are not allowed." says one. IndyACT's anti-racism movement organized an action in July, where activists and maids went

## THE LEBANESE CITIZENS?

MADAM NO HERE! MISTER  
TRAVEL FOR WORK! I CLEAN,  
COOK, SWEEP & FEED BABY





to beach resorts with video cameras to document racist practices. The organization found over 15 resorts that barred certain workers from the premises including anyone who, because of their darker skin color, could be mistaken for a maid.

The Lebanese pride themselves on being able to afford domestic workers. Those with lighter-skinned Filipino maids, who also speak English, are considered wealthier; those with Sri Lankan maids, who cost less per month and are darker-skinned, are lower down on the economic ladder. But just because the Lebanese compete over their maids, this does not mean their workers are treated any better. Workers are bought and sold by agencies that confiscate passports and enforce contracts stipulating a six-day workweek. While some employers treat their workers with dignity, too many others abuse them verbally, physically and sexually, and withhold wages on a whim.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimates there are 200,000 migrant domestic workers employed in Lebanon. These workers come primarily from Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, the Philippines and Nepal, and the vast majority are women. Domestic work makes up as much as 10% of employment in some countries and is the single largest sector of employment for girls. In many countries, remittances from migrant workers are the single largest source

of foreign exchange. For example, Filipino migrant workers, according to HRW, sent home \$19 billion in 2008, 11.4% of the gross domestic product.

Yes, migrant domestic workers are an important part of the economic sector, but that does not mean they are protected from exploitation or abuse. HRW found that on average at least one migrant domestic worker dies every week in Lebanon—in August 2010 alone there were six deaths. These deaths are primarily due to suicides or botched escapes, many because of falls from high buildings. The Philippines, Ethiopia and Nepal have banned their citizens from going to Lebanon to work, but economic insecurity has pushed many to ignore the bans. The abuse of migrant domestic workers is not only a problem in Lebanon, but throughout most of the region, where workers are denied critical labor protection, such as a guaranteed minimum wage, overtime, days off, including sick days and holidays, workers' compensation, social security, annual leave, and fair termination of contracts.

Just a few weeks before my visit to Adlieh, HRW released its most recent report entitled "Without Protection: How the Lebanese Justice System Fails Migrant Domestic Workers," which reviewed 114 judicial decisions in cases impacting migrant domestic workers. Not only did it find that the system

itself discouraged workers from lodging complaints, when complaints were filed the police and judiciary did not take abuses against domestic workers seriously. Of the 114 cases that the organization examined, none of the employers faced charges for crimes such as locking workers inside their homes, confiscating their passports, or denying them food. Complaints filed by workers against employers took months or even years to be heard. Making matters worse is that under the *kafeel*, or sponsorship, system, if a worker leaves an employer for any reason—even to file a complaint of abuse—they give up their right to live in Lebanon and face the possibility of detention and/or deportation.

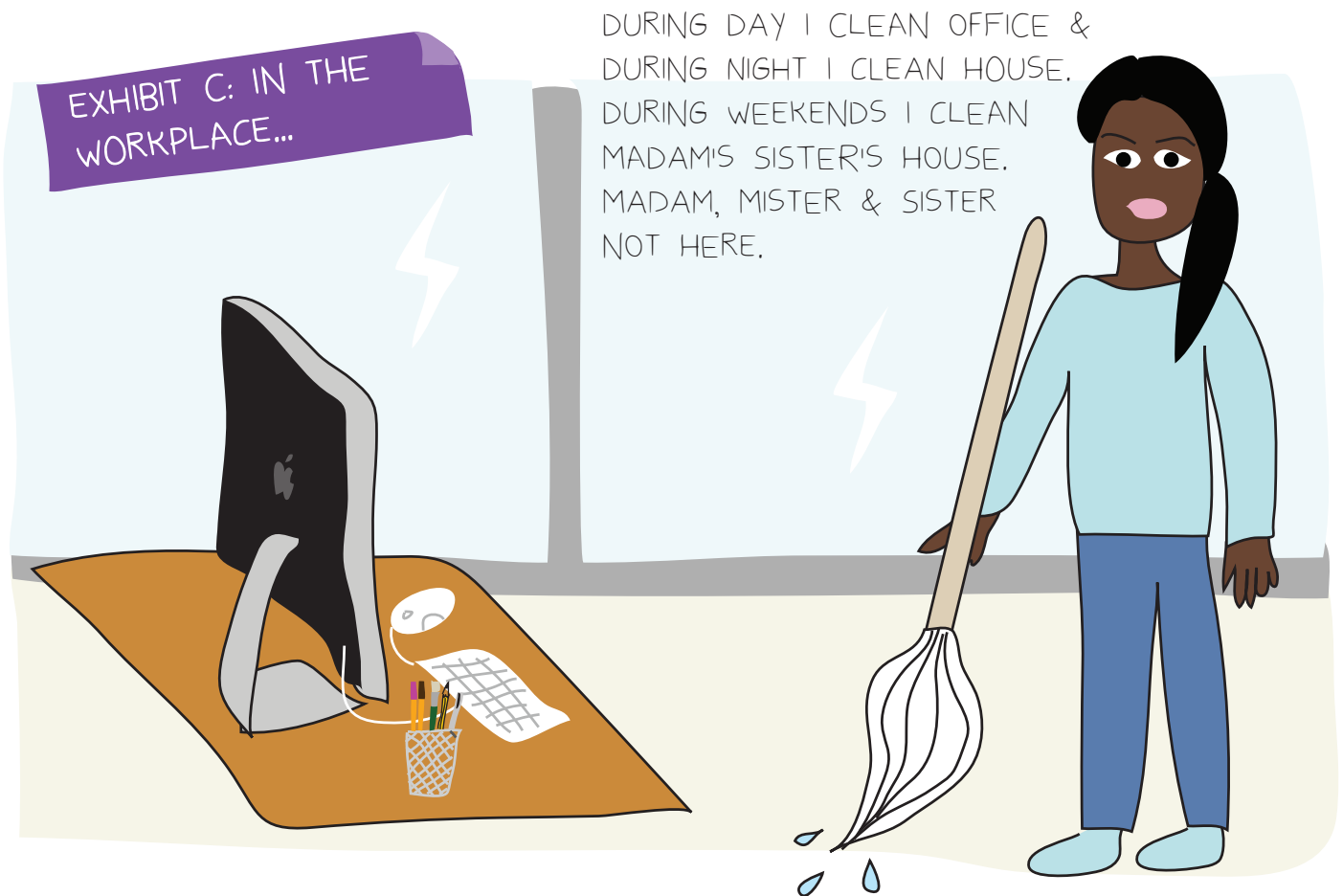
Lebanon's Minister of Labor, Boutros Harb, who attended the HRW press conference the day the report was released, responded in a letter on September 28 saying that the report's findings contained false information that harmed the image of Lebanon. Instead of focusing on the intent of the report—how the justice system fails these workers—Harb emphasized the work the labor ministry was doing on the workers' behalf.

The reality is that Lebanon harms its own image by not protecting migrant domestic workers living in the country. But Lebanon alone is not to blame. The governments in the sending countries need to do more as well—and recruitment agencies in the workers' home countries should be held accountable. Many promise great jobs and high wages, and only once the contract is signed and the worker arrives do they realize they have been tricked into a low wage,

round-the-clock job. For those workers brave enough to file a complaint against their employer, they risk being detained for breaking their contract or being charged with crimes they did not commit, and imprisoned. If workers claim they have been abused, the burden of proof is on them—and it is a long, arduous process. Even those found not guilty are detained for an average of three months. Yes, Lebanon has introduced reforms such as a hotline workers can use to phone in the event of abuse, and a compulsory standard employment contract, but even these reforms come with their own challenges: the hotline was never (has never been? *toujours pas?*) advertised to communities of migrant domestic workers, and as of July 2010 has yet to receive any calls, also, the employment contract is in Arabic, which most workers do not understand.

"Migrant domestic workers are filling the gaps in the Lebanese protection net. The government doesn't offer affordable childcare—they're filling that need. They don't offer affordable elderly care—they're filling that," said Nadim Houry, the Beirut director at Human Rights Watch. "They're a very important source of income for their own countries as well as an essential part of the Lebanese economy."

The good news is that countries are starting to enforce stricter labor laws, says Houry. In the Philippines, where there is a very strong lobby from domestic workers who have gone abroad and returned home, labor laws state that countries have to have an embassy, a labor attaché, and protection for workers. The downside is that this has pushed employment agencies to



find new markets in countries with little or no government supervision such as Bangladesh and Madagascar.

The answer needs to be global labor standards. "Right now there is a complete vacuum for domestic workers because globally the home hasn't been a place that is respected or where laws are easily applied," said Houry. "It's not just a question of changing the laws. It's also a question of implementing the laws."

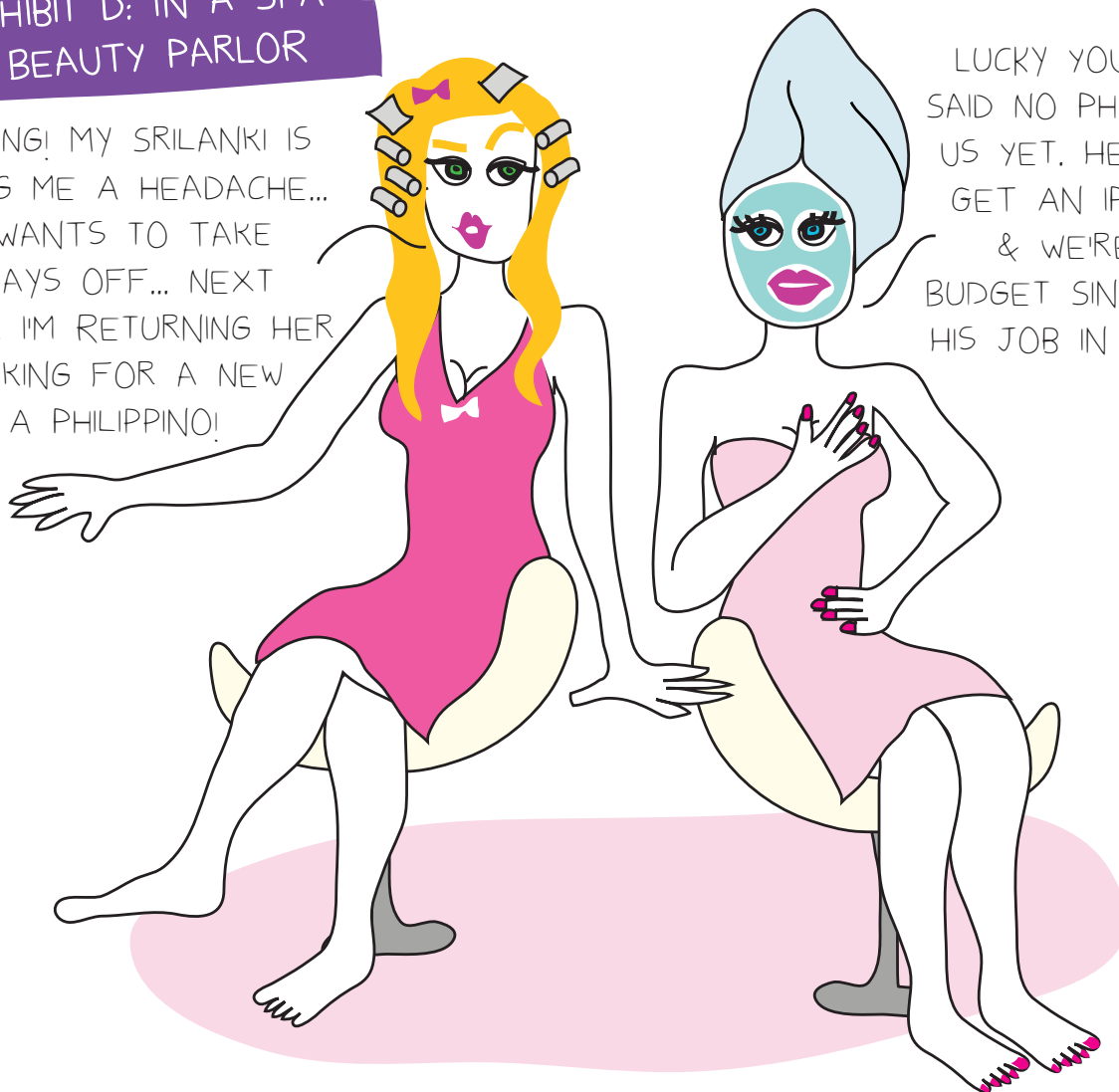
Until laws are implemented and protection is guaranteed, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon will be forced to rely on each other for protection (or support?). So far they have created informal networks and an underground railroad-type system to hide workers and keep them safe. Aimee—whose phone rings non-stop with calls from young women, many of whom she does not even know—says that most of the time the workers just need someone to listen to them. Yet she knows the limit of what her words can do. "It's frustrating when you want to help, but you cannot," Aimee says. "And it's dangerous."

Aimee learned about the dangers the hard way. On a recent Sunday morning, the employer of a young domestic worker she was trying to help came and dragged her out of the church where she works, and beat her in the street. The police, who were guarding a nearby building, walked over and asked for his identification card. When it showed that he was a member of the military they stepped out of the way and allowed him to keep hitting her. "He beat me like I was an animal," Aimee said as she waited at the police station to file a complaint. In a twist of logic that highlights the need for protection for workers, Aimee herself could have been charged with a crime if she had been found to be hiding the girl or helping her escape her employer. Even after beating Aimee, the employer dragged the worker, screaming, into his car and drove away.

Yet the phone keeps ringing—and Aimee continues to risk her life to answer it. "If I silence the phone for one hour the women panic," she explains. "Sometimes I forget they are not my own sisters." ❖

## EXHIBIT D: IN A SPA & BEAUTY PARLOR

DARLING! MY SRILANKI IS GIVING ME A HEADACHE... SHE WANTS TO TAKE SUNDAYS OFF... NEXT WEEK I'M RETURNING HER & ASKING FOR A NEW ONE. A PHILIPPINO!



LUCKY YOU! MY HUBBY SAID NO PHILIPPINO FOR US YET. HE WANTS TO GET AN IPAD BEFORE & WE'RE SHORT ON BUDGET SINCE HE LEFT HIS JOB IN THE GULF...