

Already 148 suicides of Ethiopian women in Lebanese families

The difficult adaptation of African household employees.

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ARTICLE #1

The last suicide of a housemaid happened but two weeks ago. This particular one was preceded by a murder. Before jumping off the balcony of her employers' apartment in Sahel Alma, the Ethiopian employee defenestrated Gina, their seven year-old daughter. According to the security's information, the Chidiac family who employed the woman in 2007, found her too aggressive, especially with their daughter. From the same sources, we also know that before the disaster, the housemaid had had a quarrel with her patrons. However, the direct reason for such a terrible act remains unknown. One is certain, the behaviour of the young Ethiopian was not normal.

It is not the first time Lebanon saw a similar tragedy. Usually, problems with foreign household service counted among short and sensational news items. But this time, a child lost her life in a dramatic way, and the case made quite a commotion. Strange that, according to the Consul General of Ethiopia, Adem Nurhussen Adem, already more than 148 Ethiopian household service employees in Lebanon took their lives, six of which recently, and nobody seemed to care. In light of the problems encountered by this community in Lebanon, and at the request of the consul, the Ethiopian government finally decided late April to block the inflow of Ethiopian women into Lebanon.

Despite these measures, Ethiopians are still the largest community of foreign household employees. They constitute at least a third of all registered foreign workforce. That would mean as much as 112'000 Ethiopians. Of course, it is difficult to indicate their exact number working at the moment in Lebanon, due to the lack of corroborating official statistics. It is illustrative however, that the Ministry of Labour issued in 2007 36'859 work permissions for Ethiopian women and the General Security registered 32'777 of them entering Lebanon's territory between 2007 and 2008 (however, without the exact dates). What are then, the problems and work conditions encountered by this community? What are the conditions of working and living for household employees coming from other African nations, such as Malagasy, Togolese, Beninese etc.? Their total number hovers around 5000 persons, according to estimates, but their work is not regulated by any law whatsoever. Worse still, the steering comitee of the International Labor Organization, which was tasked with developing the project of a law defending the rights of foreign household employees, has advanced lamentably little.

ARTICLE #2

Ethiopia blocks the inflow of household employees to Lebanon

The restraint premises of the Consulate of Ethiopia in Sami Solh are crowded with Ethiopian women who escaped their employers and now wait to see the person in charge. Some collapsed on the chairs with sullen faces. Other talk about their problems in small groups. Other still, cry in despair.

Mariam is only 17. Like many other young women, she falsified her birth date in the passport in order to be able to come to Lebanon, a country presented to her as Eldorado. But she quickly

became disenchanted. She worked for almost half a year for a family who beat her and who paid the Placement Bureau with her money, leaving her with the earnings from two months only (250 dollars). Tourounesh signed an employment contract for 150 dollars a month. But later, her patron decided that she would receive only 100 dollars. Even after that, she was paid but once in two months. Worse still, the employer criticised her for eating too much and working too little. Yaninash, on the other hand, is tired mentally. She had been working for 16 months, before ending up under the bridge. She does not speak, nor eat. Her compatriots say that she was mentally ill, her employers refused to treat her and the Placement Bureau didn't want to take her back.

Mariam's, Tourounesh's and Yaninash's problems are just examples among so many others. They reflect, however, the Lebanese reality, where living and working conditions of household employees are left to employers' discretion. 'We receive as many as five abuse complaints a day', says the Consul General of Ethiopia, Adem Nurhussen Adem. Apart from the cultural differences between the Lebanese and Ethiopians, the Consul names also the problem of 'Lebanese employers treating the salary as a warrant that the employee does not escape. If he or she should receive nine months' pay, they would only be paid for three months'.

Modern Slavery

'In most cases', the consul emphasises, 'the families employing Ethiopian women aren't really well-off. Having settled the costs of the Placement Bureau and the employees' living costs, there is not much left to pay the salary. As a consequence, they mistreat the housemaid and make her believe that her work isn't good enough'. The consul added that Ethiopian government tried to influence the Lebanese authorities to ensure a 150\$ minimum salary for Ethiopian household employees, but to no avail. Another problem is that household service are not granted a weekly day off. The consul remarks that 'in order to prevent them from escaping, the employers take the maid with them when they go out on Sundays. Some do not even let them go to church to pray! They don't realise that Ethiopians need to spend some time among themselves, speak their language and pray together'.

Mr. Adem goes even further than that – 'It is modern slavery', he says and explains that some Lebanese think that since they paid the Placement Bureau, their employees are now their property. 'Local immigration offices do not help us in any way. As a result, a number of Ethiopians are imprisoned for escaping the household or for having invalid documents, which happens because their patron didn't prolong them. We don't even know how many people are imprisoned'. In fact, if an employer declares having been robbed by their household employee, it usually suffices to put the accused one in gaol for weeks or months even.

The consequences are devastating. According to the Genral Security, 455 Ethiopian women have been imprisoned in 2007 and in February 2008, 118 of them where still there. Worse still, the consul reveals that already 148 household employees committed suicide. 'In other Arab countries, this does not happen. The housemaids are both treated and paid better; this is why everyone wants to go there.', he explains. Moreover, many women become mentally ill, or depressed. 'The employer is obliged to treat them if such problems occur', insists the consul.

These are the reasons for which the Ethiopian government, with recommendation from Consul General Adem, decided to block the inflow of Ethiopian women into Lebanon, and at the same time, to facilitate (with the help from International Organisation of Migrants) the returns of those who are not satisfied with their working conditions. 'The women who are well-treated and happy to work for their employers are welcome to stay and return', the consul concluded.

ARTICLE #3

While awaiting employment contract, Togolese community managed with minimal resources

Fidel Abidi is the president of the Assembly of the Togolese in Lebanon. She has been living in this country for 20 years now. She works as a housemaid in a village in Mount Lebanon. Fidel survived in a house where rest was forbidden, the salary – scarce, and falling ill – seen as slacking, not to mention all kinds of racist innuendos. ‘They called me “Abdé” (slave), especially the people who knew nothing about Africa and who didn’t travel much. I didn’t feel accepted as a human being. But now, things are different.’, she says. In the neighbourhood, everybody knows Fidel and calls her affectionately “The chocolate princess”. ‘People get used to our presence here’, says Fidel. She works for the Assembly in order to improve the situation of household employees from Togo. She admits that ‘things are already better by 100%’. (...) But abuse is still frequent, especially if the employee works on contract and stays at their patron’s house.

Fidel denounces certain Lebanese citizens, living in Togo, who bring local people to Lebanon and pay them ridiculous salaries of e.g. 50 dollars a month. ‘Of course, such cases are not very frequent, but they do exist’. She precises, however, that most Togolese employees are paid 150\$ a month. The young woman explains as well, that African housemaids are often being exploited: ‘They have to take care of everything: cleaning, ironing, cooking and babysitting. Sometimes, they have to work in several houses at the same time’. Fidel reveals cases of mistreating, irregular payments, accusations of theft, prohibition of resting or falling ill. She mentions as well the prohibition to touch some foodstuffs. ‘Some of the employers are quite generous, but others forbid their housemaids to eat some of the food, claiming that it is solely for the children’. Another issue is the warrant system which ties the employee to their patron. ‘The Lebanese government should enable us to take care of our documents ourselves, without the warrant’s intermediary’. Fidel sums up calling the Togolese government to manage the inflow of Togolese employees into Lebanon more efficiently. ‘Of course, the General Consul of Togo is of great help to us, but he should do even more to solve all the problems. Indeed, the way some employers treat our people is unforgivable’.

Meeting days

The Consul General of Togo, George Boustani, is doing his best to manage the (...) 450-persons (...) community with what little resources he receives. ‘The main problem is that Togolese people come to Lebanon without us knowing about it. We learn of their existence only when there is a problem and they come to the consulate’. In order to improve the situation, mr Boustani tries to establish a contract which would be signed by all Lebanese citizens who wish to employ Togolese household service. Only after the contract had been signed, the police would issue a visa (a similar procedure was established by the consul of Benin). ‘The request should come from the Togolese government’, the consul emphasises. Mr Boustani declared that he himself proposed to his government to adopt this approach.

In the meantime, the consul tries to ensure a 150-dollar minimum salary for household employees from Togo. (...) He says that the living conditions in Lebanon are not always easy for his compatriots. They must work 12 to 14 hours a day, overcome tiredness, adapt to the food and to a completely different culture. Even though generally, they are treated well, some come into conflict with the employer who considers them as property. ‘Besides, every year I am personally confronted with at least twenty cases of mistreatment’, concludes Mr Boustani.