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Contract Slavery? On the Political Economy of Domestic Work in Lebanon

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MARTIN BECK, FEB 6 2018

Labor migration in and to the Middle East has had an increasingly significant impact on the economic and social developments in this world region since the oil boom of the 1970s. Accordingly, social scientists, particularly development economists, have drawn attention to Arab labor migration flows mainly from relatively resource-poor countries with a comparatively high population (such as Egypt) to the oil-rich Gulf countries with low populations (Cammett et al. 2015: Chap. 13). Economists also covered extensively the growing dependence of the Gulf on non-Arab labor migration flows from South Asia, South East Asia, and East Africa (Abella 1995). Triggered by Qatar's highly disputed win in 2010 in the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup football championship and the international community's subsequent attention to the construction of infrastructure related to the championship, the perspective of "modern-day slavery" has been brought in (Guardian 2017; with reference to Qatar: Pattisson 2013). In academia, "new slavery" already became a prominent concept at the turn of the millennium (Bales 1999, 2000), including the concept of "contract slavery," which attempts to catch among others the highly asymmetric labor relations between some segments of Middle Eastern employers and Asian and African employees. Rather underdeveloped are, however, studies that link the economic and social dimensions by providing analyses of the political economies of labor relations between Asian workers and Middle Eastern employers. The present article attempts to contribute to this perspective by discussing crucial aspects of the political economy of domestic work in Lebanon.

Domestic work in Lebanon has been chosen because this female-dominated business—in terms of both supply and demand—is often neglected in analyses of otherwise highly male-controlled political economies. Moreover, in contrast to the Gulf States, Lebanon is an open society in which "Westerners" can easily gain access to the local population, thereby inviting researchers to engage in participatory observation of the political economy of domestic work.[1] The following first presents the main features of the Lebanese political economy of domestic work. Then its main components of foreignness and femininity are discussed in more detail. The subsequent two paragraphs critically discuss the political economy of domestic work in Lebanon, first on the basis of the concept of "contract slavery," then in a concluding paragraph with the rectangle state, class, race, and gender.

Main features of the Lebanese political economy of domestic workers

Employment for domestic work in Lebanon is widespread only in Beirut, where persons with a relatively high disposable income agglomerate: In 2010 11.6 percent of all households in the Lebanese capital had hired a domestic worker, most of whom lived in the residence of the employer (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 343, 348–349). With the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), a process of gradual replacement of thitherto mostly Syrian-Arab and (Syrian-)Kurdish domestic workers by foreigners from areas beyond the Middle East accelerated (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 590). Today the bulk of household "helpers"—in more traditional circles also referred to as "maids"—come from Asia and Africa. 97 percent of the 118,000 foreign domestic workers who lived in Lebanon in 2010 were women, most of whom came from Ethiopia (27 percent), the Philippines (25 percent), Bangladesh (20 percent), Sri Lanka (11 percent), Nepal (10 percent), and Madagascar (3 percent) (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 342).

If informality in labor relations is defined on the criterion of the worker's registration in the national social insurance system (Alloush et al. 2013: 2), the labor relations between Lebanese employers and foreign domestic workers in

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Lebanon appear to constitute a hybrid system: On the one hand, foreign domestic workers in Lebanon have an elementary accident and health insurance; on the other hand, they are not enrolled in a pension fund, enjoy no job protection, and are not entitled to social benefits (Directorate of General Security 2017). At the same time, the process of hiring a foreign domestic worker is regulated by the state in a very bureaucratic manner, as the employer who in most cases selects the worker via an agent must register as a “sponsor” for a three-year contract which has to be notarially certified. The worker is permitted to work only with the registered sponsor and must leave the country when the work relationship is terminated.

The Foreignness Component

The recent massive influx of Syrian refugees—more than one million—to Lebanon (Beck 2016) has not significantly affected the character of foreignness of domestic work in Lebanon: Domestic work is still a domain for women from East Asia and Africa. This is remarkable, as in other low-skilled job segments of the informal sector, Syrian male day laborers have partially replaced Lebanese workers (Turner 2015). However, when it comes to women, other strategies of poverty alleviation that are arguably more degrading than working as a domestic worker—for instance acquiescing to marriages with Lebanese men whose attraction is mainly based on their capability of “feeding” a woman, mother-and-child begging, and prostitution—are more widespread. Why are domestic workers in Lebanon not re-replaced by Syrians en masse? Jureidini and Moukarbel (2004: 590) trace the reluctance to hire Syrians back to unhealed wounds of the civil war. This is only partially convincing, as also in Jordan domestic work remained the domain of foreigners despite the recent high influx of Syrian refugees (Hunt et al. 2017). Moreover, other jobs related to the household that also require a rather high degree of trust—such as that of a concierge, which in Lebanon is a male domain—are often filled with Syrians of various faiths. What seems to be of higher relevance is that the vast majority of Syrian women, regardless of their marital status, would not sleep in their employer’s house, whereas foreign workers who are either unmarried or come to Lebanon without their husbands do, thereby increasing their exploitability. Another “cultural” reason is that abusive and violent behavior toward workers can be legitimized on the basis of racism, which in the Lebanese context is rather widespread toward Africans and Asians but applicable to (Levantine) Arabs only to a lower degree (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 597–600). However, there is also an institutional-pragmatic reason with high explanatory power: Contrary to the case of Syrian women, a functioning market for foreign domestic workers exists including women who often stay after their three years and work in irregular positions.

The Component of Femininity

Professional domestic work in the Middle East in general and Lebanon in particular is highly feminized. More than twenty percent overall of female employees in the Middle East are domestic workers (whereas in the Global North it is only 1.3 percent) (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 341). Moreover, although only five percent of households employing domestic workers in 2005 were headed by a woman (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 343), not only employees but also the vast majority of employers is *de facto* female: It is the “madame” who gives orders to the domestic workers and surveilles their work (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 585–6). Thus, in the highly asymmetric system of professional domestic work in Lebanon, women take the role of both the exploiters and the exploited. Exploitation becomes manifest in (extremely) long working days, few (if any) days off, and (very) low wages. Jureidini and Moukarbel note a salary range between USD 100 and 350 per month (which correlates to the ethnic heritage and different educational levels of the employees); however, by 2017 the *de facto* minimum wage had reached approximately USD 150. What is without doubt a low salary from a global and Lebanese perspective is still attractive from the view of income-generating conditions in the sending countries: Sri Lankan domestic workers, who are at the bottom of the wage scale of domestic workers in Lebanon, still make up to ten times more money than they would back home (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 587). Moreover, a higher degree of vulnerability notwithstanding, female foreign domestic workers are arguably not exploited to a higher degree than male Syrian daily workers, whose salary in Beirut for a twelve-hour day dropped to USD 20 per day with no insurance and side benefits such as housing and food supply due to the recent massive influx of refugees into Lebanon.

Given a per capita gross national income of USD 14,100 in 2016 (World Bank 2017), affordability of a domestic worker is not confined to the Lebanese upper class but trickles down to middle class families. Thus, it is not unusual

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that households headed by high school teachers or journalists hire domestic workers. From a feminist perspective, it is worth noting that households headed by women are more likely to hire foreign domestic workers. Moreover, there is a correlation between families with children below six years and employment of foreign domestic workers (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 347). Thus, Lebanese mothers with a career job are among the beneficiaries of the system.

To Apply or Not to Apply the Concept of Contract Slavery to the Lebanese Case of Domestic Work

Sometimes, the concept of “slavery” may be applied to Middle Eastern cases out of sensationalism. However, slavery does exist and Bales’ (1999) concept of “contract slavery” employs a serious academic approach. Thus, the question whether the political economy of domestic work in Lebanon is based on contract slavery is worth being seriously addressed (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004).

Note that the concept of slavery, like fascism or racism, is among those notions that are normatively so negatively loaded that there is no “neutral,” purely analytical way to apply them. As persons who uphold a Nazi or slavery system violate basic human rights in a systematic way, it is hardly possible to credit those who actively participate in slavery and contribute to its maintenance with any legitimacy, at least not in the postcolonial era.

Still, due to the fact that fascist and slavery systems exist, it is still potentially fruitful from an analytical viewpoint to apply these concepts. However, as the concept of (contract) slavery bears the potential of being abused as a moral cudgel, we should exercise extreme caution in labeling relations between employers and employees as slavery. There are some arguments for applying the label “contract slavery” to the labor relations of domestic work in Lebanon, particularly with reference to the high degree of vulnerability of the employee. Thus, foreign domestic workers are ill-protected against overexploitation (for instance by imposing around-the-clock availability on them), unilaterally imposed alterations of payment methods (for example when employers retain one or several monthly payments of a worker in order to make sure that the she does not run away), and practices that violate basic rights of freedom, such as confiscation of passports and being locked in the house (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2014: 596–603). Yet, there are some benefits—particularly the salary—that set foreign workers apart from “slaves.” In his conceptualization of “contract slavery,” Bales (2000: 464) clearly states that a contract slave “is paid nothing.” Moreover, particularly on the side of the employers, there are some features that are hardly compatible with what could be called a mainstream image of a slaveholder. As there is a strong correlation between high educational credits and the likelihood of employing a domestic worker in Lebanon, particularly in Beirut (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 348), one would have to subscribe to the idea that a typical Lebanese slaveholder is a highly educated urban dweller. Furthermore, if we apply the concept of contract slavery to foreign domestic workers in Lebanon, there is no way not to denote postmodern career mothers with a feminist identity as slaveholders. Even if we assume that not all those who have a feminist identity fully subscribe to the values of justice that feminism is committed to (cf. Richards 1994), a feminist slaveholder would have to bridge extreme cognitive dissonances. In other words: Although one might argue that even well-educated bourgeois and middle class women are not per se immune in terms of abusing employees, generally ascribing attributes of slaveholding to Lebanese employers of domestic workers appears problematic in the light of the above depictions. This finding constitutes an incentive to revisit the issue of framing the political economy of professional domestic work in Lebanon engaging in a critical discussion of the specific role of four basic categories: state, class, race, and gender.

State, Class, Race, and Gender of Professional Lebanese Domestic Work

Fakih and Marrouch (2014: 340) indicate that foreign domestic workers can be grasped as a substitute for the institutional care with which the state in the Global North provides its citizens. This observation may be taken as a starting point for re-introducing the state. There is a rather broad consensus that the Lebanese state is weak (Mikaelian and Salloukh 2016). In the realm of education, public schooling and child day care centers are highly underdeveloped. Thus, modern segments of the urban middle class rely heavily on rather expensive supplies from the private sector. Thus, by providing its citizens with access to cheap foreign labor, the Lebanese state makes up for the lack of direct offering or promotion of services like kindergarten and after-school care.

However, for a comprehensive understanding of the system, one has to shed some more light on state–society

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relations. The fact that the state in the Global North enables its population to get access to institutional care is not just a result of obscure forces often labeled with ill-defined catchwords such as “modernity” or “globalization.” Rather, as a result of a complex historical struggle between entrepreneurs and their organizations, the labor movement, and the state of the Global North, a capitalist system emerged that included the regulation of labor relations sanctioned by the state. Although foreign workers were not meant to benefit from this system, due to the rule of law labor regulations are generally applied to all participants in the labor market. Thus, when socioeconomic forces of globalization in general and the increasing participation of women in the formal labor force in particular put pressure on the politico-economic systems to relieve women of the urban middle class from burdens related to bringing up children and managing the household, the response of the Lebanese system differed from the Global North: Instead of upgrading the Lebanese system of institutional care, the state of Lebanon privileged its urban middle class by enabling its citizens to import cheap and “flexible” labor.

This is where racism comes in: There is a strong trend among Lebanese employers of foreign domestic workers to refrain from applying a rights-based approach toward them. For instance, although most employers of foreign domestic workers in Lebanon would consider it appropriate that an employee foreign practices her religion (particularly if she shares the same faith), quite a number of the Christian employers interviewed would not consider it the right of their “girls” to freely choose the church and the service they preferred. Those who “allow” them to attend a service of their own choice tend to do so out of an attitude of benevolence. Note that there is a maternalistic aspect in this: Not allowing the workers to freely socialize is often justified with the “fact” that they are not capable of dealing with freedom in a responsible way, particularly when they are “pretty” and therefore might be solicited by “male sharks.”

The gender dimension of the political economy of foreign domestic work in Lebanon manifests itself in the first instance in an exploitative maternalistic system in which both the victims and the main actors are female. This implies that in the present case solidarity between women is less significant than class-compliant affiliations. At the same time, it can very well be argued that this maternalistic system serves the higher purpose of letting the overall paternalistic system remain widely untouched: The abovementioned pressure in the Global North to relieve mothers from household-related burdens in order to accelerate their integration into the formal labor market is not only directed toward the state but—on the societal level—to a certain degree also to men in their capacities as husbands and fathers who are encouraged to scrutinize established methods of labor sharing between the sexes as outdated and to take a share in upbringing the children and managing the household. Insofar as the political economy of domestic work in Lebanon does not require active male interference, what appears at first sight to be a maternalistic system is in fact contributing to the maintenance of a neo-patriarchal system (cf. Sharabi 1988).

Notes

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[1] The author frequently visited Lebanon in 2016 and 2017 in the frame of research projects supported by the Carlsberg Foundation, as well as between 2010 and 2012, when he covered Lebanon in his then capacity as the resident representative of a political foundation in Jordan.

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