

**IOM DAMASCUS**

**EXPLORATORY STUDY ON  
FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORK IN SYRIA**

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IOM International Organization for Migration

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IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental body, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and work towards effective respect of the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

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Executive Summary	7
Section 1: Introduction	9
Section 2: Methodology	11
Section 3: Literature Review	15
Section 4: Foreign Domestic Workers and Syrian Laws	23
Section 5: Profile of Foreign Domestic Workers	24
Section 6: Migration Reasons and Routes	25
Section 7: Syrian Manpower Agencies	27
Section 8: Work and Living Conditions	29
Section 9: Services Available and Accessed	33
Section 10: Services Requested	35
Section 11: Conclusion and Recommendations	36
Glossary	39
Bibliography	40



## **Executive Summary**

The term ‘feminization of international migration’ has been used to describe the recent increase in women’s independent migration, especially as labourers. Women’s migration, in order to work in the informal sector, including as domestic workers, has shaped this recent trend. There is, however, very little research on this trend, especially in the Middle East. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) attempts to begin to fill this gap in information with an exploratory study of the profile, legal standing, recruitment and migration trends, working and living conditions and services available to these migrant labourers. Through a literature review, interviews with embassies, manpower agencies and organizations working with foreign domestic workers, as well as in a survey of the workers themselves, this report provides a beginning point towards an understanding of the situation of foreign domestic workers in Syria.

As there are no official statistics available on the number and characteristics of foreign domestic workers in Syria, information was gathered from interviews with various embassies and Syrian manpower agencies, as well as the workers themselves. Several manpower agents estimated the number of foreign domestic workers in Syria at between 10,000 to 15,000, with the majority coming from Indonesia, Philippines and Ethiopia. The number of workers increased in 2001, following the adoption of law no. 234, which allowed Syrians to employ foreign domestic workers. However, the entry of foreign workers into Syria remains rather limited as the manpower agencies which ‘import’ foreign domestic workers have been banned by the government. There are also a significant number of asylum seekers who work as domestic workers, because their irregular status does not allow them to obtain work in the formal sector.

Foreign domestic workers have very little protection under Syrian law because even though their employment is legal, it is not regulated. While law no. 234 details the procedures to obtain a work and residency permit for a foreign domestic worker, there are few laws regulating their work, leaving their contracts as the sole regulator of their work. Also, the banning of manpower agencies has not stopped them from operating but has instead allowed their work to go unregulated, making them sites of further exploitation and abuse of many foreign domestic workers.

The work and living conditions of foreign domestic workers are regulated solely by the contracts that they sign in Syria. Contracts signed in their countries of origin are often changed or annulled on arrival in Syria, where they are forced to sign new contracts with lesser pay and longer terms. With no regulation of the hours and nature of domestic work, many foreign domestic workers work and live in exploitative and slavery-like conditions. These conditions include the withholding of their passports, forbidding workers from leaving the house alone, not having a day of rest, and an average work day of 17 hours. Foreign domestic workers living with their employers also face extremely difficult living conditions, such as lack of food, no private space and no access to the phone or post.

While embassies, churches and friends provide support to many foreign domestic workers, many don't have access to the services they need. These services include advocacy for better work conditions, legal assistance and counseling, as well as migration services and support during emergencies. Most pressing however, is the need to regulate domestic work and manpower agencies in order to protect foreign domestic workers and insure this migration and employment are humane.



## **1 Introduction**

Whether as African slaves in Europe, Mui Tsai in China or Koliya in India, women have migrated to work as domestic servants for many centuries. Women's migration, especially as domestic workers, is not a new phenomenon. However, the increase in the number of women migrating has become so great, that it has been termed the "feminization of international migration." Domestic work remains a major factor in women's migration as "the large majority of domestic workers throughout the world are migrant or immigrant women," (Jureidini, 2001) the majority of whom are women from developing countries. "In fact, Asian women are the fastest-growing category of the world's 80 to 90 million-labor migrants." ( Haque, 2002). Women migrants face few alternatives to 'unskilled' work in the informal sector, with the majority employed in domestic work, restaurant and hotel services, and entertainment work. "Domestic workers are employees paid by individuals or families to provide elderly care, child care, and/or housecleaning in private homes." ( Parreñas, 2001: 1).

Relegated to the informal and unregulated sectors, these migrants are not afforded the protection provided other labor migrants and face regular assaults on their rights (Omelaniuk, 2002: 18-19). This is coupled with rising migration restrictions in labour importing countries, leading many women to resort to irregular and illegal means of migration (IOM, 2003). The exploitation and marginalization faced by women working in these informal sectors is not specific to one country or one migration path, but is part of a world wide phenomenon, due to economic, political and social factors effective on the global, regional and local scale.

### **1.1 Labour Migration in the Middle East**

With ten per cent of the total of the world's migrant population, and the highest concentration of migrant workers in the world (IOM, 2003a: 4), the Middle East has been heavily impacted by the feminization of labor migration. Most Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) that employ a large number of migrant workers are putting in place policies of job nationalization in order to accommodate a growing national workforce and a slowing economy. However, "the demand for female migrants in the Middle East has increased particularly in the service industries through the creation of low-skilled and unskilled jobs that only migrant women are willing to take."(IOM, 2003a: 12) Women's labour migration is mainly concentrated in six Gulf countries, as well as Lebanon and Jordan, with most of these women coming from developing countries in Asia, such as Sri Lanka, Philippines and Indonesia (IOM, 2003a: 12).

### **1.2 Labour Migration in Syria**

Situated among many countries with significant foreign labour populations, Syria is not recognized as being a major labour-importing country. Rather, it is more considered a labour-exporting country. There are approximately 600,000 Syrian workers living in neighbouring countries and the Arabian Gulf, with the majority being in Lebanon. "Remittances from Syrians working abroad play a significant role in the Syrian economy." (IOM, 2003b: 1). With its high unemployment rate of 12%

and young population, the outflow of workers is expected to continue and increase in the coming years (IOM, 2003b: 2).

Although its population of labour migrants pales in comparison to those of its neighbours, Syria's foreign worker population consists of a significant number of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as labour migrants. Syria is home to refugees and asylum seekers from Palestine, Iraq and Sudan. Foreign domestic workers enter Syria as part of different migration trends and face different conditions. The foreign domestic worker population consists of labour migrants from East Asia and Africa, as well as Sudanese, Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. Although the status of labour migrants differs than that of refugees, there are many similarities in their working conditions and the problems they face.

Although Syria has been a country of destination for foreign domestic workers for many years, the flow has until recently been small and mostly geared towards non-Syrian residents as employers. Prior to the year 2001, the employment of foreign domestic workers by Syrians was illegal. There were migrant workers coming to Syria to work as domestic workers from various South Asian countries, particularly Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Many of these migrants entered Syria illegally through Lebanon. However, since the introduction of the law legalizing employment of foreign domestic workers, the demand for and migration of these workers has changed, according to a Syrian manpower agent.

In the year 2001, the employment of foreigners as domestic workers by Syrians was legalized. It is estimated by manpower agents interviewed by the researcher that there are 10,000 to 15,000 foreign domestic workers in Syria as a result of this legislation; however, these numbers may be low. Most foreign domestic workers come from Indonesia (estimated 5,000), Philippines (estimated 2,500) and Ethiopia. The migration of Indonesian workers, the most requested national group of domestic workers, only began after the 2001 law. Manpower agencies that import foreign domestic workers are illegal in Syria. However, many exist, either operating from a neighbouring country or illegally within Syria and are therefore unregulated.

Syria is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, but it hosts a significant number of refugees and asylum seekers from Palestine, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Sudan and other countries. Palestinians, making up over 99% of refugees in Syria, and "have the same social welfare rights as Syrians, but they are not eligible for citizenship." (IOM, 2003b: 2) Other asylum seekers and refugees do not have the same rights as Palestinian refugees.

About 3,000 to 4,000 Sudanese nationals have migrated to Syria to escape war, claim refugee status and find work. Ninety per cent of these migrants are Christians (Catholic Near East Welfare Association, 2003). This migration is facilitated by Syria's policy of allowing Arabs to enter without a visa. The Syrian government, at the behest of the Sudanese government, now requires Sudanese nationals to apply for residency permits, the conditions of which make the permits difficult to obtain. But "the majority (of the Sudanese) prefer to go to prison rather than return to their home country because of their fear of war." (Catholic Near East Welfare Association, 2003). Many asylum seekers in irregular residency situations, without residency and work permits in Syria, end up working as domestic workers or watchmen on farms.

Although home to some of the highest numbers of labour migrants in the world, the Middle East has limited information on the conditions of migrant labourers, especially women. However, recently, international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), have carried out studies and projects in various Arab countries with high migrant labour populations. A gap exists in information regarding foreign domestic workers in Syria that the IOM hopes to begin to fill with an exploratory study of the profile, legal standing, recruitment and migration trends, working and living conditions, and service available to this sector of migrant labourers. Through a literature review, interviews with embassies, manpower agencies and organizations working with foreign domestic workers, as well as in a survey of the workers themselves, this report aims to do the following:

- Build on research done by international organizations (IOs), such as ILO reports on foreign domestic workers in Lebanon and Bahrain and UNIFEM's Empowering Women Migrant Workers in Jordan Project; determining the particularities of migrant work in Syria
- Determine the patterns and scope of foreign domestic worker migration to Syria
- Construct a profile of these migrants in Syria, considering their gender, nationality, socioeconomic background, etc.
- Explore the recruitment processes and migration routes which bring migrants to Syria as domestic workers; as well as the extent of illegal migration/trafficking of women to Syria
- Investigate Syria's labor migration policies and practices and their effect on foreign domestic workers; to determine the consequences of the law no. 234 in Syria and the law banning manpower agencies
- Explore the living and working conditions of migrant workers in Syria
- Determine the services available to foreign domestic workers through the local government, embassies, manpower agencies and non-governmental organizations
- And explore the perceived needs of domestic workers, embassies, the Syrian government and other affected parties

## **2 Methodology**

Due to the lack of information on the demographics and migration trends of foreign domestic workers in Syria, as well as difficulties in accessing foreign workers for interviews, this research is based on a convenience sample, and is therefore an exploratory study. Although the findings from this study cannot be generalized, they are a first step in filling the gap in information on foreign domestic workers in Syria. This research was conducted through interviews with various officials and organizations working with foreign domestic workers, as well as a survey of the workers themselves. The research was begun by conducting interviews with officials from embassies of the various countries of origin, the manpower agencies operating in Syria, and organizations and individual advocates working in the field. In addition, 57 workers from a variety of communities were interviewed over a period of three months.

Several manpower agents were interviewed to determine the scope of the agencies' operations in Syria, the effect of the laws on their operations, the recruitment and migrations routes of domestic workers as well as any demographic information they may have. Although manpower agencies are banned from dealing with foreign domestic workers in Syria, it was relatively easy to find agencies to contact and a few who were willing to speak about their activities. A look through the classifieds provided contacts for several agencies, all of which advertised an out of country number, either Lebanese or Jordanian. The first interview with a manpower agency was carried out in Lebanon, from where the agent claimed to do all his operations. It was later discovered that he had an office in Damascus, a fact he denied during the interview. Two interviews with manpower agencies were conducted in Damascus with agents who did not deny operating from Syria. One agent not only spoke of his activities in Syria but, unsolicited, shared how he beat domestic workers who did something wrong. Of course, not all agencies were this open. None openly refused to speak to me, but many told me that the person I need to speak to is away for a few months. However, the candidness with which the agent spoke about his illicit activities is either extremely careless or indicative of a tolerance for these operations by authorities.

Officials in several embassies and consulates of countries of origin of domestic workers in Syria were interviewed. Most embassies had an official or a branch that dealt with the affairs of ex-patriots working as domestic workers and most were cooperative and eager to share their experiences and problems in this area, especially the Indonesian embassy and the Philippines consulate. Although most interviews were conducted in Syria, the Sri Lankan and Ethiopian governments have no representation in Syria. The researcher conducted an interview with a Sri Lankan embassy official in Lebanon but was unable to do an interview with the Ethiopian consulate. These interviews provide a better idea of the particular problems of each migrant group and the services available to them through the embassy, as well as the efforts each government is making to protect its workers.

A survey of foreign domestic workers in Syria was conducted using a non-systemic and non-random sample. A variety of different methods were used to access different communities, as each community had different conditions and structures. The survey consisted of:

- biographical data
- recruitment and migration information
- work and living conditions
- an assessment of services used by, available to, and needed by participating workers.

The researcher interviewed a mixture of live-in caregivers and freelance/day workers. Live-in caregivers are domestic workers who live with their employers, while freelance/day workers do not sleep in their workplace. Live-in caregivers usually work for one employer, although they may work another job during their weekend. Freelance workers usually work for a variety of different employers. Since most foreign domestic workers coming to Syria under the 2001 law are live-in caregivers, the situation of these workers is the main focus of this study.

It may seem odd to differentiate between foreign domestic workers and the method of recruitment of participants to the survey based on nationality. However, nationality

plays a large role in determining the legal status, working and living conditions and pay of domestic workers, as well as the services available to them. Foreign domestic workers interviewed for this study associated with others of the same nationality. Therefore, nationality plays a defining role in the make up of these workers' communities and affects the type of access an outsider has to them.

A Sudanese domestic worker active in the Sudanese Christian community was the researcher's link to most of the Sudanese research participants. Using the snowball method, as well as going to church and community gatherings, the researcher was able to interview 40 Sudanese workers. It was relatively easy to get members of the Sudanese community to participate, compared to members of other communities, which accounts for their over-representation in the research sample. Sudanese workers were especially eager to speak out due to the status of many as rejected asylum seekers. IOM Damascus is known in the Sudanese community for its work with refugees and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). This contact made the research more legitimate and the researcher more trustworthy in the eyes of many Sudanese participants. Also, unlike other foreign domestic workers, most Sudanese workers have a day off to go to church and see their families who live here. Sudanese participants make up two-thirds of the research sample, but this is not representative of their population in Syria.

Indonesian workers were a difficult group to access, although they have a larger population than other groups in Syria, estimated at 5,000 women. Most foreign domestic workers aren't given days off or any unsupervised time outside the house. The researcher was unable to meet any Indonesian workers outside their employers' supervision. Therefore, all the Indonesian workers interviewed were runaways, taking shelter at the Embassy in Damascus. They represented appalling cases of abuse that do not necessarily represent the majority of foreign domestic workers' experiences. However, their stories were valuable, providing a glimpse of the extent of abuse and exploitation foreign domestic workers face and the way they seek and receive services.

In order to meet Filipina workers, the researcher first went to church, attending Sunday mass and speaking to Filipinas before and after the service. A couple of Filipina workers who have been working in Syria for a long time as domestic workers were comfortable speaking about their work and living conditions. However, most Filipinas were unwilling to speak, due to their suspicion that the researcher worked for a government agency, based on her Syrian nationality. A number of these women participated in a study conducted years earlier, but did not see any changes. This may account for their cynicism and suspicion of anyone wanting to get information from them. The researcher accompanied by a research assistant of Filipino background made contact with and attempted to interview these workers, however, their suspicions could not be overcome and their trust was not gained.

The researcher also went to the park with a Filipina domestic worker in order to meet her friends and interview them. This turned out to be a dangerous process, as there are local protocols about who may approach a domestic worker and how. Many domestic workers come to the park with their employers and are therefore unable to speak to other foreign domestic workers or other strangers. Some workers come accompanied by a Syrian fellow employee, such as a driver, who was charged with

keeping an eye on them. These workers were able to talk to fellow Filipinas, but speaking to a Syrian raised suspicions. This meant that the research contact and her Filipina friend took over coordinating the solicitation of participants and handed out the surveys to be filled out by them in their free time. This was the only way to access workers whose movements were always monitored and controlled. The surveys that the workers themselves filled out were of limited use, as there were questions that they failed to answer or explain their answers.

Unfortunately, the researcher was unable to make any contact with workers of Ethiopian nationality and only limited contact with Sri Lankan and other South Asian workers. The unavailability of organizations and safe gathering places for foreign domestic workers made the cultivation of personal trusting relationships with members of different communities of utmost importance. Not all contacts were helpful and relationships often took months to reach the level of trust demanded to refer one's friends to a researcher. Many employers offered to make their workers available for interviews, however, most offers were declined due to ethical concerns regarding consent, as well as concerns over accuracy of information gathered from such a referral.

The research began with an intention of interviewing male foreign domestic workers, as well as female domestic workers. However, all the foreign domestic workers that had come through agencies, from Indonesia and the Philippines, were women. There are male Sudanese and Sri Lankan workers, however their jobs usually vary from those of female domestic workers. Most Sudanese men, who work in private homes, work as caretakers for entire buildings or on farms. While there are many Sri Lankan men who work as free-lance domestic workers, many were caterers or waiters at dinner parties rather than domestic workers. The difference between the work of male and female domestic workers, as well as their treatment needs to be further explored, however with limited time and resources, this issue could not be given due attention.

There are other non-Syrians working as domestic workers in Syria, notably Palestinians from the refugee camps. It was very difficult to decide which communities of non-Syrians to include in this study and which to exclude. Sudanese workers don't usually migrate to Syria with the intent of working as domestic workers, however due to their legal status they are limited to informal service work. The work and living conditions of Sudanese domestic workers are similar in many ways to that of foreign domestic workers coming through the manpower agencies under the 2001 law, which is the main reason this population has been included in this study. Palestinian workers' status gives them the same access to work as Syrians and their condition is closer to that of Syrian domestic workers than non-Syrians, hence they are not included in this study. There is also a phenomenon of migration of young women from rural areas to urban areas to work as domestic workers. Along with the situation of Palestinian workers, their migration needs to be explored further. However, these workers fall outside the scope of this study.

## **2.1 Characteristics of Sample**

For this research, 57 domestic workers were interviewed; all except one participant were women. There were seven Indonesian female participants, all of whom were runaway live-in caregivers. 12 of the survey participants were Filipina women domestic workers, ten of whom were live-in caregivers, while two were day workers/free lancers. One Sri Lankan day worker was also interviewed. There were 37 Sudanese participants in the study, 36 women and one man. The majority, 26, were free lancers.

The youngest participant was 19, the oldest 62. However, 60% of participants were below the age of 30. 85% of Indonesian workers were 30 years or younger, this may be explained by the fact that migration from Indonesian is relatively recent and the migrants are all new to Syria. The older the participants the more likely it is that they have been in Syria for a long time. Lola, over 60 years old, has been in Syria for 19 years. She is part of an older migration trend, which includes Filipina and Sri Lankan workers, who came in the 80s and early 90s, who stayed finding their niche working for foreign and diplomatic employers. Most of the Sudanese workers are married and migrated to Syria with their families or to reunite with their husbands. The majority of Filipina workers are single.

All Indonesian workers interviewed are Muslims; their religion being a major factor in their recruitment and employment in Syria. Most Filipinas participants are Christian, with only two being Muslim. 31 of the 32 Sudanese workers were Christian from varying areas and denominations. The one Sri Lankan employee interviewed is Christian.

31% of participants were unemployed in their country of origin. However, there is a large variety of work done by foreign domestic workers prior to their migration. 15% of participants were teachers or Sunday school teachers in their countries of origin. There is also a significant number of former students who migrated upon finishing high school or university. The large majority of these students are from the Philippines.

All but one of the Sudanese participants are illegally working in Syria. Most Sudanese workers are asylum seekers denied refugee status by the United Nations. Being illegal forces these migrants to work in the informal sector as domestic workers for the women and janitors/caretakers for the men. The majority of Filipina participants, 66%, are working in Syria legally. Some of the workers interviewed indicated that they are willing to speak because they are legal, but their friends with irregular status are scared to be interviewed. The majority of Indonesian workers interviewed were either illegal or didn't know their legal status.

## **3 Literature Review**

The literature on foreign domestic work is varied and covers migratory paths that span the globe. Foreign domestic workers are most often women from developing countries, especially South East Asia and the Caribbean, who migrate to North America, Japan, Malaysia, the Middle East and Europe. However, the bulk of the research focuses on women migrants from South East Asia, especially the Philippines,

Sri Lanka and Indonesia. When reviewing the literature on foreign domestic work, one can easily discern similarities in the causes for migration, as well as the living and working conditions of these workers in settings throughout the world. Although the research remains limited, academics and international and non-governmental organizations in various parts of the world have conducted numerous studies that reveal several patterns in the migration of foreign domestic workers. In order to understand this phenomenon, researchers have had to expand their analysis to transnational linkages that shape the lives of these migrants in a historicized and contextualized way. This has translated into literature that examines the lives of these migrants in light of both global trends and local contexts.

The research on foreign domestic workers includes a variety of methods and contexts and extends from a comparative study of Filipina domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles (Parrenas, 2001), to a report on migrant women domestic workers in Bahrain (Al-Najjar, 2001). The literature studying the conditions of migration of domestic workers analyzes global trends, national policies of sending and receiving countries, local hierarchies and power relations within the workplace. The research is consistent in analyzing transnational, national and local dynamics in order to assess the factors that affect migrant domestic workers' lives. While this research covers various contexts around the world using many levels of analysis, there remain gaps, some of which I attempt to address in this study in Damascus, Syria.

Although the global movement of ideas and people is not a recent phenomenon, the sheer quantity, speed and facility of migration has greatly impacted the way we do research. Ethnographers can no longer examine a community or trend as an isolated entity. Examining global trends and how they effect the experiences and choices people have and make within a local context, with its own history and sociopolitical dynamics, we can begin to understand the complex factors that shape the lives of migrant domestic workers. Research on migration of domestic workers requires an analysis of the intersections of gender, class, race and nationality in domestic work.

Researchers examining the migration of domestic workers have moved beyond 'push/pull' labor migration theories, which have not sufficiently explained this phenomenon. The 'push-pull' theory proposes "that factors such as high unemployment in sending countries act as a 'push' and perceived opportunities in receiving countries serve to 'pull' migrants from the Third World to the First World." (Chang, 2000). Researchers studying the phenomenon of domestic labor migration reject this theory, charging that it naturalizes the movement of labor from developing to advanced capitalist countries. Chin argues that the 'push-pull' theory "obscure[s] the constraints of global and regional economic structures and processes, which encourage the incorporation of the 'export-import' of labor in export-oriented development paths." (Chin, 1998). Analyzing global labor migration requires a theory which is more contextualized or historicized.

Migration systems theory has proved a useful tool in analyzing the causes and flows of international labor migration. Various authors on migrant domestic workers contend that the structure of global capitalism shapes international labor migration, which is sustained through various networks, institutions and cumulative causation to perpetuate a stable flow of labor across international boundaries. This structure "functions through and maintains an overarching world-system that organizes nations



into unequal relations and creates a larger structural linkage between sending and receiving countries in migration.” (Parrenas, 2001: 25). Labor and capital circulate between the dominant (receiving) core and the dependant (sending) periphery. Women from developing countries are in demand in this globalized capitalist market, as low-waged laborers in developing countries’ export-processing zones and in the advanced capitalist countries’ service industry.

The global economic system not only affects the source of migratory labor but also influences the nature of that work, which has gendered implications. Grace Chang, in *Disposable Domestics*, argues that a dismantling of social services in the First and Third World work together to create a market for foreign (Third World) domestic laborers, usually women. The dismantling of social services in the Third World countries is imposed through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), as a condition for further loans, by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. “This facilitates the commodification of Third World women for labor export as it becomes impossible for women to sustain their families at home under the devastation of SAPs and they are force to migrate, often to work as domestic servants in the First World.” (2000: 16). The destruction of social services also occurs in the First World, creating market demand for care workers. And since domestic work has remained largely women’s work, labor migration is also gendered. The increased migration of women overseas for work, including 1.5 million Asian women, has contributed to the feminization of migration (Migrant Forum in Asia, no date).

Migratory streams are created by colonialism and other cultural and economic ties, which are then sustained by networks and institutions created by these paths. Colonialism has played an important role in developing countries’ migration trends, not only in causing a disruption of their local economies leading to emigration in general, but it has also shaped the flow of that migration. For instance, Parreñas argues that the two most popular destinations in the West for Filipino migrants, Italy and the United States, both have colonial ties with the Philippines (2001: 2).

While Italy indirectly holds cultural dominance over the Philippines through the Catholic Church, religion has also played a direct role in the recruitment and creation of migratory paths for other groups. “The Middle East countries prefer workers with similar religious background which has led to migration of a particular group of people to Middle East from South and Southeast Asian Countries.” (Haque, 2002). Global events, such as the increase in oil prices, have also helped shape migratory paths between Southeast Asian countries and the Middle East. The increase in oil prices in the mid-seventies hurt the economies of Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, while benefiting Middle Eastern countries. This allowed Arab states to build an extensive infrastructure using foreign labor (Constable, 1997:34). Migration paths are not arbitrarily created, but are usually routed in historical and global events.

Literature on foreign domestic workers examines the national policies and laws of ‘exporting’ and ‘importing’ countries, in order to understand the role of the nation in shaping the supply of and demand for migrant domestic workers and their conditions. The national policies of governments in many South Asian countries, such as Philippines and Sri Lanka, have encouraged the export of their citizens as laborers. ‘Importing’ countries in the First and Third world have created migratory and labor policies that, although varying in ‘leniency’, leave domestic workers vulnerable as

workers and migrants. When investigating the policies of individual nations, it is important to keep in mind that “in most cases there is a ‘dependent’ bilateral relationship between the migrant domestic workers’ origin poor countries and the destination rich countries. These ‘asymmetric’ state relations sometimes create obstacles to ensure protection and welfare of migrant domestic workers.” (Haque, 2002). While examining the influence of nation-states on the migration process, researchers on labor migration must keep the power hierarchies between these nations integrated in the analysis.

An analysis of the policies of the government of the Philippines, an example of a sending country, reveals the great impact state actions have on the migration of citizens. Filipino labor migration is significant within the Philippines and in the global economy, with over 840,000 Filipino workers deployed overseas in the year 2000 (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 2001). The current wave of Filipino migration is marked by an active involvement of the Philippines government in encouraging the export of labor. Initiated by the Marcos regime, the Filipino government hoped to avoid unrest over extreme unemployment and increase the inflow of foreign currency by urging labor migration. The national labor export policies were coupled with nationalist rhetoric, encouraging a continued loyalty to the ‘homeland’ from the ‘new heroes’ of Filipino society, in order to ensure the remittance of wages by foreign laborers to dependents in the Philippines. The Philippines depends heavily on remittances as a source of foreign currency to pay off its large debt. The hope of sending unemployed, unskilled laborers abroad to gain skills, employment and wages to support development has been met with the reality of migration of skilled professionals as laborers and a lack of economic growth from remittances.

Pressure from migrants to take some responsibility for its support for out migration has forced the Philippines to offer its citizens support and protection abroad. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) were created to monitor and service the needs of Filipino labor migrants and protect them from abuse and exploitation. Among the services provided are ‘pre-departure orientation seminars’, an accreditation process for manpower agencies and a standard contract of employment for domestic workers (Jureidini, 2001). “However, the assistance the OWWA can offer its constituents is limited by its lack of power to override the laws and jurisdiction of receiving nations.” (Parrenas, 2001: 54). Sending nations are in a double bind, trying to gain access to labor markets for their citizens and at the same time trying to guarantee their citizens’ rights. Due to the unequal relationship between sending and receiving countries, the condition of foreign domestic workers remains largely at the mercy of the receiving country.

National immigration and labor policies of receiving countries most directly impact the entry and work conditions of foreign domestic workers. Most public policies dealing with foreign domestic work further contribute to the ambiguous position of this labor within systems structured along a division of the public and private spheres. Domestic servants work in households, which are situated within the private sphere, thus seen as outside state regulation. Many countries exclude foreign and local domestic workers from their labor laws. For example, “Article Two of the Bahrain Labour Law for the Private Sector, 1976, exempted ‘domestic servants and persons as

such' from the purview of the law. This exemption is due to the private nature of housework." (Al-Najjar, 2001). However, domestic workers are paid laborers, recruited by a variety of these governments to fulfill an important role in national economies. The ambiguity in the nature of domestic work is exemplified by the different migratory status often given to domestic workers and the lack of equal protection under labor laws.

In many countries, domestic workers enter under a different migration program and with different conditions than other contract workers. In Canada, domestic workers enter under the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) under which they are forced to live with their employers and can only apply for residency after two years as full-time live-in caregivers. The requirement to live with their employers leaves domestic workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. And while the ability to apply for residency after two years is generous in comparison with other countries, domestic workers cannot enter under the skilled workers program, which does not have this time delay. (Macklin, 1994)

The labour and migration policies of receiving countries, coupled with sending countries' concession in order to export workers, lead to an increase in illegal migration and trafficking. Labour importing countries use restrictive migration laws to control the number of migrants entering their country, however, this is usually coupled with a toleration of irregular migrants working in their country. "The practices of many states of tolerating the presence of migrant workers in irregular status to meet labour needs in certain sectors of the market constitutes a de facto employment policy in which part of the work force become a variable which can be reduced or even eliminated (in theory) in period of economic downturn." (Taran, Geronimi, 2002: 6). Restrictive migration policies in the face of strong supply and demand for labour result in the criminalization of migration not its decrease. "Trafficking occurs not only when borders are barriers to labour supplies meeting demands but when no knowledge is available about proper migration channels, when employment is itself illegal and/or underground, and where conditions of work much worse than legal minimums are tolerated or ignored." (Taran, Geronimi, 2002: 8). These restrictions impact the informal sectors dominated by women, such as domestic work, more severely than other sectors, resulting in further marginalization and exploitation of a vulnerable group of migrants.

Often the measures taken to prevent trafficking and exploitation of migrants are inadequate and lead to further marginalization of migrant workers. Some countries' anti-trafficking strategies consist mainly of restricting the movement and migration of women. For example, Indonesia has banned the migration of women overseas as domestic workers in the name of protecting these women. "This policy of banning certain women, if not all women, serves to promote illegal migration, and a further increase in the illegal workers' likelihood of being exploited." (Mattar, Borkholder, 2002). For example, Bangladesh's ban on women's migration alone lead to a rise in "entrepreneurial' brokers [who] took advantage of the opportunity to traffic women via false visas." (Mattar, Borkholder, 2002). Although these measures have proven to be ineffective in protecting women, many governments have not sought a different strategy that protects their migrant workers while at the same time allows them freedom and autonomy.

Legal measures in labour importing countries to regulate the migration of domestic workers often lead to the workers being further exploited. It is not unusual for receiving countries to tie the immigration status of temporary foreign workers to their employers (Fernandez, 2002:2). Workers are only allowed to work for the one employer listed on their work permit and risk losing their immigration status if they leave their employers. This creates bonded or “unfree labour” in the sense that they [temporary foreign labour] do not have the right to choose an employer without express permission from the state authorities. Nor do they have the right to withdraw their labour from their sponsor/employer without being rendered illegal and thus liable to arrest, imprisonment and deportation.” (Jureidini, 2001). This is true for many countries in the Middle East, including Lebanon. Domestic workers that are being exploited or abused will stay in dangerous situation rather than risk being deported and lose the investment they made to migrate.

Domestic workers often face violations of their reproductive and health rights as they migrate. Most receiving countries require domestic workers to take pregnancy tests and get tested for infectious diseases and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Migrant workers are often subjected to these tests without their knowledge and are not provided with pre or post test counseling. “In Malaysia, mandatory testing of migrants for HIV goes hand in hand with their notification and deportation permits.” (Fernandez, 2002:4). Mandatory testing discriminates against migrant workers due to their marginalized status. But more than being an issue of individual human rights, it is “about the health rights of poorer and less developing countries vis-a-vis their more affluent partners in the international trade of labour.” (Fernandez, 2002:6).

Gender, race, class and nationality intersect to form the migrant domestic workers labor force. Although most women site economic concerns as the main reason for their decision to work abroad, many migrants are from the middle classes. This is demonstrated by the high percentage of women with a degree or some post-secondary education that make up the migratory domestic labor force. The high cost of migration, which includes the cost of paperwork, travel and recruitment agency fees, plays a part in preventing poorer women from migrating. While the economic motivations, especially supporting family, are primary reasons for working abroad, women have a variety of other reasons to migrate.

Women’s position in patriarchal society influences their decision to work abroad as domestic workers. Roles ascribed to women are those of housewife and mother first and worker, second. Sacrificing and serving the family are the duties of women carry into migration. “In many of the countries, it is the male head of the household that decides that the woman goes to work as a domestic worker.” (Fernandez, 2002:8). However, women facing gender oppression often use migration as a way to gain freedom and subvert these roles.

Gender stratification in the family and job markets, encourages or forces women to work abroad as domestics. Most households, whether in the West or East, still depend on women’s labor for their maintenance. Women who participate in the paid labor force are still expected to do household duties. At the same time, women are still relegated to gendered roles within the public economy, such as domestic work or nursing and teaching. “Because independent migration frees working women of household constraints, migration is not just a family strategy but a covert strategy to

relieve women of burdens in the family.” (Parrenas, 2001:64). Working abroad is seen by some, especially single women, as a liberating choice as well as an economic imperative. Unfortunately, these choices are limited to domestic work in most labor receiving countries.

In her research, Parreñas found unfaithful, unreliable and abusive husbands to be another cause of labor migration among married women (2001:66). Women in abusive relationships or with cheating spouses use migratory networks to escape harmful situations and avoid ostracism by their communities that could result from divorce or separation. Other women migrate after being abandoned by their husbands, in order to support their children. Women are often pushed by or escape from their roles as dutiful wives, mothers and daughters into foreign domestic work.

Patriarchy plays a major role in shaping the working conditions of domestic workers in receiving countries. The public/private divide renders the family outside the scope of government, and thus the duties performed there outside their responsibility. Although, with the government’s encouragement, women have entered the labor market, they remain responsible for childcare and housework. Poorer, immigrant and migrant women are recruited as domestic workers to fill the gap. “In this process, both the state and the man abdicate their role in childcare. Thus domestic work is not seen as work.” (Fernandez, 2002:10). The domestic worker is not seen as a worker, but as a ‘member of the family’ and its responsibility. As the spokesperson for the Bahrain Ministry of Labor explained: “House workers are treated as a part of the family. Disputes should be settled internally whenever possible. Or else the privacy of households is desecrated.” (Al-Najjar, 2001). The public/private divide and the perceived need to protect the sanctity of the home serves as a reason to leave domestic work unregulated and domestic workers unprotected by labor laws. In Jordan, “Labor Ministry inspectors are prohibited from entering these homes [where domestic workers are employed] to inspect the work conditions or listen to workers concerns or complaints.” (UNIFEM, 2001). Even when law requires standard contracts, they are not monitored or enforced. This leaves domestic workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Since domestic workers are not covered by labor laws in most countries and are forced to live with their employers, their exploitation seems legally sanctioned. Studies from Canada to Lebanon indicate similar patterns of exploitation of domestic workers by their employers. Most domestic workers, as live-in employees, work many hours over the standard amount set for other jobs, and are considered ‘on-call’ 24 hours a day. They are often denied a regular free time or a day of rest. In a study of domestic workers in Lebanon, “88 per cent of Sri Lankans reported having no days off.” (Jureidini, 2001). It is common for employers to forbid their domestic workers from leaving the house, using the phone or receiving friends without permission. Domestic workers’ tasks are rarely limited to housework in their employer’s house; they often include prep cooking, childcare and cleaning other people’s house for no extra charge. This exploitation is possible in part because of the patriarchal notions that devalue domestic work and protect the home from public regulation.

There is little literature on women’s labour migration that discusses trafficking and research on trafficking is usually limited to trafficking for sex work and is discussed outside of women’s labour migration. However, “trafficking in women should be

located within the wider field of labour migration. Trafficking is not opposed to migration but an aspect of it.” (Blanchet, 2002). The latest instrument in international law that deals with trafficking is the United Nations Protocol to Suppress, Prevent and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. It defines trafficking in persons as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving and receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.” (United Nations, 2000). As is evident from this definition, trafficking in women is not limited to sex work and is applicable to the situation of many foreign domestic workers, especially in the Middle East.

Forced labour and servitude are not further defined in the UN Protocol on Trafficking, however, there are various sources in international laws and documents whose definitions of these terms include the experiences of domestic workers. From the various definitions of servitude available, for example the European Commission of Human Rights and the July 2000 draft of the UN Protocol on Trafficking, “two elements of a definition can be extracted... a dependent, economically abusive labor relationship/ and no reasonable possibility of escape.” (Human Rights Watch, 2003). The working conditions of many domestic workers, including being on-call 24 hours a day and having contact with others limited or forbidden, amount to servitude. The International Labour Organization “found that impoverished workers, ‘recruited on the basis of *false promises*’ of ‘good wages and good working conditions,’ did not voluntarily consent to their employment relationships.” (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Contracts signed in origin countries are regularly broken in destination countries, pay lowered, duties increased and contract length increased. There exists a strong link between trafficking and foreign domestic work, which deserves greater attention.

The literature on foreign domestic workers remains sparse but has steadily increased to cover migration patterns all over the world and various levels of analysis. The literature has examined some trends closely, especially the migration of Filipina and Sri Lankan women, but there remains gaps in the areas and trends studied. For instance, the migration of women from the Caribbean and Africa as domestic workers remains under analyzed. Studies on migrant domestic workers are focused on large migrant communities and almost exclusively examine women domestic workers. In many countries, research on this topic has come as a response to problems arising from the status of domestic workers and their working and living conditions, which are not addressed until these problems become a ‘crisis’ or ‘epidemic’. Communities with a small population of foreign domestic migrants, such as Damascus, remain unstudied. This gap leads to questions as to whether migrants face different circumstances as members of a small migration trend, and whether governments are willing to address the needs of these workers without being faced with a ‘crisis’.

## 4 Foreign Domestic Workers and Syrian Laws

Although the Syrian government does not want to encourage the employment of foreign domestic workers in Syria, it has recently taken several steps to organize this migration. The measures taken aim to regulate the migration and employment of foreign domestic workers but also try to limit this trend. Foreign domestic workers are also impacted by Syrian laws applicable to foreign workers and the labour code's partial regulation of domestic work.

While legal foreign workers are provided with protections equal to those of Syrians under Syrian law, they remain vulnerable to exploitation due to their marginal status. Defining foreigners as non-Syrians and non-Arabs, law no. 91 of 1959 dictates that foreigners need a work permit from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and a residency permit in order to work in Syria. This definition of work explicitly includes domestic workers. With this permit, foreign workers are provided with the same protections, such as insurance, vacations and workers compensations, as Syrian workers. "Foreign workers theoretically receive the same benefits as Syrians but are often reluctant to press claims because employees' work and residence permits may be withdrawn at any time." (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). Foreign domestic workers are doubly marginalized as foreign workers and as workers in an informal and unregulated sector.

Syrian labour laws have for the most part excluded domestic workers from the protections available to other workers. On 10/12/2000, Law no. 24 amended the labour law to regulate some minimum wage and other employment issues for casual or temporary workers, including domestic workers. However, the working conditions of domestic workers remain regulated almost exclusively by their contracts. There is no standard contract or mechanism to enforce employment contracts signed in other countries. Although legal contracts must maintain Syrian labour standards as a minimum, foreign domestic workers often must sign contracts upon arrival in Syria that are contradictory to their basic human and labour rights.

The Syrian government's regulation of the employment and migration of foreign domestic work is limited to registration and tax collection, as opposed to protection of the rights of the workers or provision of complaint and conflict resolution mechanisms. On March 19, 2001, the Ministry of Interior passed law no. 234 allowing the employment of foreign domestic workers by Syrian nationals and regulating the residency and work of the workers. The employment of foreign domestic workers by diplomats and international organizations, which has always been allowed in Syria, has different procedures than those of other employers, in that they must go through the Ministry of Exterior's diplomatic branch first. All applications by employers to employ a foreign domestic worker go through the Ministry of Interior, for a residency permit. The employer or employee must submit this application within the fifteen days of the worker beginning work. The application must include:

- A document proving the workers is free of contagious diseases,
- A written promise (contract) by the employer to pay for the return ticket of their employee in case she's laid off or is denied a renewal of her permit,
- Receipt of US\$ 1000 by the Syrian Central Bank.

On receipt of a residency permit, the domestic worker or her employer must get a work permit from the Department of Social Affairs and Labour. Domestic workers cannot switch employers without the prior permission of the Ministry of Interior.

A three-month amnesty was given on passage of law no. 234 giving an opportunity for foreign domestic workers with irregular work or residency status to legalize their stay. The Filipino embassy is aware of many Filipino workers who took advantage of this amnesty to legalize their stay.

A year after this law was passed, the Syrian government banned manpower agencies that deal with foreign domestic workers. Many agencies, which had opened after law no. 234, were shut down and agents that continued to work in this field were arrested. The aim of this law was to limit the number and abuse of foreign domestic workers. However, during the course of this study the researcher met with and heard of many manpower agencies that still operate within Syria, the role of which will be discussed further on.

Syria is signatory to a number of conventions which affect foreign domestic workers, including:

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- Protocol to Prevent Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (13/12/2000)
- Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land and Sea (13/12/2000)
- Convention concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (26/07/1960)
- Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (23/10/1958)

## **5 Profile of Foreign Domestic Workers**

As there are no official statistics available on the number and characteristics of foreign domestic workers in Syria, the researcher has compiled a rough sketch of the trends and routes of their migration. This sketch is based on interviews with various embassies identified as representing countries of origin of workers, Syrian manpower agencies willing to speak about their work, and information gathered through interviews with the workers themselves. In this section, the numbers and characteristics of foreign domestic workers in Syria will be described.

Several manpower agents estimated the number of foreign domestic workers in Syria at 10,000 to 15,000 workers. This is an estimate of migration subsequent to the 2001 law that legalized and regulated the employment of foreign domestic workers by Syrian employers. Domestic workers come from Indonesia, Philippines, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Bangladesh, with the first three being the most prevalent. Embassies have little information on their nationals in Syria and what information they have is collected largely through informal sources. However, as there is not other information available, these numbers must be used in order to get an idea of the migrant domestic worker population in Syria.

The Indonesian government does not have a clear idea of the number of its nationals in Syria. The embassy formed a committee in late 2002 to find out the number of Indonesian workers in Syria. They found around 5000 workers registered through the Department of Immigration. However, it is estimated that about fifty Indonesian



domestic workers come in weekly on flights from the Gulf. Therefore, the Indonesian embassy believes that the number of Indonesians in Syria is likely over the number of registered domestic workers.

After the institution of the 2001 law, the number of Filipino workers in Syria jumped from 151 in 2000 to 1,705 in 2001 (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 2002). However, this number declined again in 2002, after the ban on manpower agencies was instituted. The Philippines Consulate does not have information on the number of its nationals in Syria; however, it estimates that there are now approximately 2500 Filipina domestic workers in Syria. This information was obtained by the embassy through meetings they had with manpower agencies.

The Sri Lankan embassy, with no representation in Syria, has no information on the number of Sri Lankan employees in Syria. The information that the embassy has regarding domestic workers in Syria consists of an informal survey conducted by the Ambassador on one of his trips to Syria, consisting of discussions with Sri Lankan workers encountered on the streets of Damascus. The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment puts the number of domestic workers in Syria at 20 (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2001); however, this number is extremely low compared to the actual number of workers.

It is hard to gage how many Sudanese domestic workers there are in Syria. The migration of Sudanese nationals to Syria consists of economic migrants, migrants escaping war and persecution, and business people. Syria doesn't require an entry visa from nationals of Arab countries; however, they are required to get a residency permit after three months in Syria. Most Sudanese workers don't come with the intention of working as domestic workers and are obliged to take up work in the informal sector due to their irregular residency status. IOM sources estimate the number of Sudanese nationals in Syria at around 3000 living in Damascus, its surroundings and Latakia. The Sudanese embassy has noticed a rise in the cases of migrants coming in order to find employment as domestic workers; however, their contact with these workers is limited to those who seek assistance from the embassy.

## **6 Reasons for Migration and Routes Taken**

The reasons why people migrate and work as domestic workers in Syria vary, depending on the country of origin and gender of the worker. Most survey participants from Indonesia, Philippines and Sri Lanka listed economic reasons as the main cause of their migration. 71% of Indonesian participants and 58% of Filipina participants listed economic reasons as the motive for their migration as domestic workers. Of Sudanese participants, 81% listed war and political problems with the government as their main reason for migration. All groups reported secondary reasons for migration, such as escaping an unhealthy relationship, reuniting with family members, gaining independence, and the desire to see the world. Many, especially from Sudan, come after hearing that there are opportunities to make a better life in Syria, with good money. Unfortunately, their information is limited to these vague accounts without accurate information as to other relevant facts. Many Filipina and Indonesian workers are duped into coming to Syria: they are told that they are going to the Gulf, only to find out shortly prior to departure, or even upon arrival, that they are, in fact, going to Syria.

## 6.1 Migration Routes

Few countries of origin of domestic workers allow their nationals to migrate to Syria due to the lack of regulation of domestic work and manpower agencies. This affects the nature and routes of migration of domestic workers, who may use illegal channels and documentation to come to Syria. Using two different tickets, false passports, and tourist visas to gain entry are common methods used in the migration of participants from countries banning and discouraging labour migration to Syria.

The Philippines and Sri Lankan governments do not allow their nationals to work as domestic workers in Syria due to the ban, and therefore non-regulation, of manpower agencies. The Philippines government is also against domestic workers coming to Syria because no legally binding contracts are signed between employer and domestic worker. Also, salaries for Filipina domestic workers in Syria, around US\$ 150, are not acceptable to the Philippines government, which wants a minimum of US\$ 200 for its citizens. In May 31, 2001, the Philippines Department of Labor and Employment warned Filipino workers against accepting jobs as domestic workers in Syria. The Sri Lankan government, on the other hand, would like to encourage the migration of its nationals to Syria as domestic workers. It would, however, like to see manpower agencies legalized and regulated first.

The Indonesian government has gone from regulating to banning the migration of its female nationals for work as domestic workers. In order to protect its workers and to provide them with better training, the Indonesian government instituted a temporary ban on the migration of women as domestic workers, babysitters, and caregivers to the elderly. Critics of this approach to protection argue that “the ban would put many women in a more vulnerable situation that would lead them to leave the country through illegal and improper channels.” This claim is supported by the experiences of the Indonesian participants in the study, the majority of whom were deceived about their migration and work conditions.

The effects of these policies are that many domestic workers coming to Syria are brought by illegal manpower agencies or through unregulated channels. Three of the Filipina workers brought to Syria by manpower agencies used illegal agents, while two didn't know the legal status of the agency they used. Five of the seven Indonesian participants didn't know the status of the agency they used. Manpower agents told five participants that they were going to another country- Saudi Arabia, Jordan, England and Kuwait - but were sent to Syria instead. Some left their countries without seeing their travel papers and were only aware of their destination once on the plane or in the airport. These are alarming occurrences that exhibit the characteristics of trafficking.

According to Indonesian Embassy officials, most Indonesian workers begin their route in Singapore, from which they travel all over the world. To Syria, they come over land from Lebanon and Jordan, and by air from the Gulf. There are several routes and airlines that regularly bring in around 50 workers per flight. Many domestic workers get visas on arrival, not making contact with Syrian officials in Jakarta. The majority of Indonesian workers interviewed used passports in other people's names. These were usually provided by the travel agency upon the workers'

acceptance of a job offer. 3 of the seven Indonesian workers passed through Kuala Lumpur and all transited through various Gulf countries.

According to the Philippines consul in Syria, prior to the law of 2001, Filipina domestic workers came to Syria illegally, over land from Lebanon. However, the route changed with the law, with workers now transiting through the Gulf. Most domestic workers are given two tickets, one to the Gulf and one to Syria, so that the Philippine government doesn't detect that they are going to Syria. The majority of Filipinas interviewed reported using tourist visas to enter the country. Two participants indicated using passports not in their name. None of the Filipina interviewees reported going through Lebanon, including the workers that entered prior to the law of 2001. Two participants, after asking to change employers, reported that they were transferred to Syria from Jordan by manpower agents.

The fraud involved in various points along the migration process, uncovered in a limited way through these interviews, is cause for concern. The policies of sending and receiving countries, which are supposed to protect workers, have instead pushed them into illegal situations. One of the most alarming aspects of this trend is that five participants were deceived about their destination. This fraud, coupled with the abusive and exploitative working conditions of these workers, which will be discussed further on, are indicative of trafficking in migrants which may be occurring on these routes.

## **7 Syrian Manpower Agencies**

The banning of manpower agencies that import foreign domestic workers has not stopped them from operating in Syria, but has instead allowed their work to go unregulated. The Syrian government has taken several steps to take out any possible middlemen in the migration and employment of foreign domestic workers. In addition to banning manpower agencies' work in this field, the government instituted a law allowing only the employer to receive the worker at the airport. These steps were taken as part of the efforts to regulate but also limit this migration. However, the lack of regulation of manpower agencies has only allowed them to operate unrestrained and to become the site of exploitation and abuse of many domestic workers in Syria.

Although illegal, manpower agencies operate relatively openly, placing advertisements in the local classifieds. These ads usually give an out-of-Syria mobile number, on the pretext that they operate from other countries. According to one agent who operates on such a basis, the agency takes calls in Beirut and sends a representative to Syria with a catalogue of domestic workers to choose from. The Syrian client applies for the work visa for the employee desired. The agency then takes care of the rest of the documentation. The worker goes straight to Damascus where her employer picks her up. The agency's role ends when the worker is received, unless she is found to be ill, in which case she is replaced, at no extra charge to the employer. However, the operations of many manpower agencies extended beyond this scenario.

There are over 15 manpower agents bringing in foreign domestic workers that are operating all over Syria. Two agents, of the eight contacted, were willing to speak

about their work. Both agents are operating illegally within Syria in relation to their work with foreign domestic workers. Both agencies put the number of domestic workers they bring in at 400-500 women a year each. This is a high number of workers per agency compared to the number of workers estimated to be in the country, especially since there are agencies known to bring in over a thousand women a year.

### **7.1 Recruitment Process**

The way domestic workers are recruited is no different than slavery, according to one agent. Syrian manpower agents either have recruitment branches in countries of origin or have agreements with agents in those countries through which they get profiles of workers for Syrian clients to choose from. This process is based in large part on racist and sexist stereotyping, which then extends to the fees and pay of these workers. Domestic workers are classified based on ethnicity and religion, on which assumption on their intellect and morality are made and their salary is based. These stereotypes were expressed by all agents that were spoken to.

The stereotypes are vital to the choosing of a worker and affect the worker's working and living conditions in a profound way. Indonesians are most in demand because they are Muslim, they are also seen as hardworking, stupid and conservative. Christian Filipinas are seen as smart but likely to have boyfriends, while Muslim Filipinas, one agent claims, are oppressed, uneducated and stupid, which is why he stopped bringing them. Ethiopians are seen as ignorant and uncivilized, without sensitivity or etiquette. They are also seen as likely to have boyfriends. These stereotypes are relevant to the recruitment and employment of workers not only for their emotional but for their financial impact on workers.

These stereotypes affect the pay of domestic workers, with Filipinas being paid 50% more than Indonesian workers because they are seen as being more educated, English speaking, and smart. Agents also charge different fees for domestic workers from different nationalities. The agency fees are highest for Filipina workers, for whom they charge between US\$ 2000 and US\$ 2500. The fee for workers from other nationalities is US\$ 1000 to US\$ 1200. The nationality of a domestic worker becomes a status symbol for her employer, over and above the status of having a foreign domestic worker in itself.

When a domestic worker arrives in Syria, by law she is to be picked up by her employer. All agents interviewed affirmed that this is the procedure. One agent said that a representative of his agency is also on hand to meet the worker, in order to bring back client and worker to the agency in order to finish the paper work. The domestic worker is also given a health checkup, testing for communicable disease and STDs. Agents also provide a 15-30 day probationary period, during which the employer can refuse and return the worker. The agency will either find a new worker for the employer, or charge the employer for the costs incurred and end the contract. Only one agent admitted to having contact with the workers beyond this point.

One agent claimed that his office is the place where domestic workers are abused, as opposed to the employers' home. This is corroborated by interviews with various participants. This agent openly spoke of hitting the workers that come through his

office in an effort to have them act ‘morally’. He also admitted that he hits domestic workers when they run-away for no ‘good’ reason, because the agent loses a good deal of money in such cases. He tells his clients that if they have a problem with their employee, not to hit her, but to bring her to him. Some of the interviewees confirmed that this was their experience with manpower agencies.

Five of the seven Indonesian workers, and four of the twelve Filipina workers, had had contact with a Syrian agency. Of those who had contact with an agency, all but one were picked up by the manpower agency at the airport. Two of the interviewees had their medical checkups done at the agency. Three of the participants were abused at the agency. Ari, a 22-year-old Indonesian woman, ran away to her agency from her physically and sexually abusive employer. She was beaten at the office but spared severe abuse, because they had her working as a translator, due to her knowledge of Arabic. Ari saw women locked up in rooms, allowed to use the washroom only once a day. Aan was one of these women. Her employer who had accused her of stealing sent her back to the manpower agency. She was beaten very badly, locked up, given only a bottle into which to urinate, and threatened to be hit with a chair. 19-year-old Mouna worked out of the agency for three months as a day worker, with the agency pocketing all her earnings. She was finally placed as a live-in caregiver, but ran away after working 20-hour days and not getting paid. Returning to the agency, she was badly beaten and her long hair was cut off. Gracie, on the other hand, was picked up at the airport by the agency, given a medical checkup and sent to work in Aleppo. When the placement didn’t work out, she returned to the agency, which found her another job. As all of the Indonesian participants were runaways sheltered at the embassy, their experiences are not representative of the experiences of all workers; however, they do give an idea of the type and extent of exploitation and abuse that occurs, even if it may not be rampant.

Most Sudanese workers came to Syria and had to find work upon arrival through the church, friends, and Syrian manpower agencies. 14 of the 37 Sudanese participants used a Syrian manpower agency to find work. For a fee that varied between US\$ 20 and US\$ 400, the agency found the Sudanese workers jobs as domestic workers. Most workers paid a fee between US\$ 60 and US\$ 100, which were either deducted from the workers’ salaries or taken up-front. This is usually the sole interaction between the Sudanese workers and manpower agencies.

## **8 Work And Living Conditions**

The work of foreign domestic workers is regulated solely by the contracts they sign in Syria. Contracts that are signed in their countries of origin are often changed or annulled on arrival in Syria, and workers are forced to sign new contracts with lesser pay and longer terms. With no regulation of the hours and nature of work of domestic workers, many foreign domestic workers work and live in exploitative and slavery-like conditions. No regulation, coupled with a view of domestic work as not real work, creates an atmosphere in which domestic workers’ rights, as workers are not acknowledged by the employer or by the authorities.

Of the 18 participants that got their jobs prior to arrival in Syria, 15 signed work contracts in their home country. Seven participants said their original contracts had changed or been cancelled; in all cases, their pay had been changed and/or their

contract's length extended. Although Filipino government regulations limit the length of domestic worker contracts to two years, in Syria foreign domestic workers' contracts are often extended to three years, because two years is seen as too short a time for the initial investment of US\$ 1000 to US\$ 2500. Also the minimum wage acceptable for the Government of Philippines for Filipina domestic workers is US\$ 200 a month, however, the average pay for a Filipina worker in Syria is US\$ 125-150. All the Filipina women I interviewed received US\$ 150 or more, with four of the ten women being promised more than they were paid. Indonesian workers were usually promised US\$ 125, however, all but one didn't get paid for their work.

Foreign live-in caregivers' travel documents are taken by the manpower agency or their employer as soon as they arrive in the country or begin work. While it is against all international conventions to seize someone's passport (Jureidini, 2001), this is such a common practice with foreign domestic workers in many countries that it is seen as a normal part of employment procedures. Syria is no exception, with all but one of the Indonesian and Filipina live-caregivers not having possession of their papers. In most cases, papers are held by the employer or the manpower agency in order to insure that the worker doesn't run-away and leave the country. A couple of the Sudanese live-in caregivers, as well as two day workers, had to give their travel papers to their employers. Most Sudanese interviewed, however, were not forced to hand over their travel documents to their employers, as their status as asylum seekers made them unlikely to escape to their country of origin.

All the Indonesian workers interviewed didn't have their passports and all were waiting to be returned to Indonesia by the embassy. Although the embassy provides these women with travel papers and offers to pay for their ticket home, the workers cannot leave without an exit visa issued by their employer. Some employers, having invested over US\$ 1000 US on the work permit and agency fees, refuse to allow the workers to leave until the cost is reimbursed. The embassy cannot pay these costs, which puts pressure on runaways wanting to return home to take a new job in order to pay off the amount to return home.

In addition to withholding their passports, which is "a violation of the workers basic human rights," (UNIFEM, 2001) some employers forbid their employees leaving the house alone. One agent explained that contracts signed through his agency include clauses banning workers from going out alone. His reasoning, and that of many employers, is that the worker may meet a man, tell him information about her employers, such as when they are home or not, and he could come to rob the house. Fear of theft and a desire to control the morality of their worker lead many employers to hold domestic workers in captivity. 14 of the 28 live-in caregivers interviewed indicated that they were not allowed to leave the house alone. Some were allowed to go out to watch the children while they played in the street or to take out the garbage, but could not have time off outside the house.

Not being able to leave the house extends to live-in caregivers not having time off or a day of rest, as they live in their workplace and may not leave without the approval of their employer. According to the Philippines consul, there are no provisions for a day of rest in most contracts. This is supported by interview results, where 17 of the 28 live-in caregivers had no regular days off. All but one of the live-in caregivers

interviewed who had a weekend were Sudanese workers, whose weekend is usually Saturday night till Sunday evening or, in some cases, only part of Sunday.

Many live-in workers were forbidden to speak to other domestic workers from their nationality. Other workers are perceived as a threat to the employer, giving the worker the strength and knowledge to talk back or ask for her money or rights. Some workers were only allowed to speak to the employees of their employer's friends or relatives, while others are not even allowed to speak to those workers, even if they happen to meet in the same house.

The Philippines consular explained that domestic workers contracts usually require the workers to work 24 hours a day except when eating, sleeping or praying. Participant live-in caregivers work an average of 17 hours a day. Most participants work between 17 and 19 hours a day. Those who worked with the elderly, cleaned and did regular household chores during the day, considered their work hours 24 hours a day. Most workers begin their day 6:00 or 7:00 AM and go to bed between 10:00 and 12:00 at night, most with no break except to eat lunch. Only six of the 28 live-in caregivers interviewed had breaks other than when eating or praying.

Domestic workers' jobs usually entail cleaning, child care or elder care, or a combination of the three. Often when a worker agrees to one set of duties, she is expected to do the other jobs as well. The work duties of 18 of the participants, live-in caregivers and day workers, were changed after they agreed to work. Most often, duties were added and hours of work were extended. Two workers, who had agreed to do childcare, found themselves cleaning, while others agreed to clean and were expected to take care of the elderly or children. five live-in caregivers were expected to clean other people's houses, usually houses of relatives or neighbours of their employers, for no extra pay.

According to one agent, the main reasons that most domestic workers run away, where the employer is responsible, are exploitative, slave-like work conditions, lack of food, and physical or sexual abuse. Four of the participants had been or are being physically abused by their employers, while one admitted that her employer attempted to sexually assault her several times. There were many more cases of emotional abuse, including shouting and swearing, but also the constant questioning of the quality of work that the workers did. Most participants worked in extremely exploitative work conditions and many also experience extremely difficult living conditions, including lack of food, no private space and no access to the phone or post.

Of the 28 live-in caregivers interviewed, eight did not get enough food and many more had conditions on what and when they could eat. Ten of these participants said they could only eat what they were served, usually whatever it is that the family is eating and often leftovers. Foods like fruits and deserts are luxuries not accessible to some participants. One worker had the cost of anything she ate, which was not given to her, deducted from her salary. Another worker said that she took less food than she needed so that her employer wouldn't think she ate too much and hold it against her.

Although many employers claim to treat their domestic worker as 'one of the family', often this translates into an invasion of the workers' privacy and a denial of their

rights. Although domestic workers have a right to “suitable adequate, sanitary living space” (UNIFEM, 2001), most live-in caregivers do not have proper accommodation. Of 28 caregivers interviewed, only ten had their own room to sleep in. Six slept in the living room on a mattress, couch or sofa bed. Four slept in the children’s room, while another four slept in the attic or stock room. Two participants slept in a glassed balcony. Not having a private space in which to sleep often means that workers must stay up till the employing family goes to bed and must get up with or before them, without space to rest during the day.

Further restrictions on domestic workers’ ability to communicate with family and friends increase the difficulty of their living conditions. 13 of the live-in caregivers were not allowed access to the phone. Many had not had contact with their families since they began their employment. 12 were not allowed to use the address of their employer to receive mail. Isolated from their families in their home countries and not allowed to make new friends, foreign domestic workers lead extremely lonely lives.

Although freelance/day workers don’t have the same restrictions on their freedoms as live-in caregivers, their work has its own difficult conditions. 29 freelance / day workers were interviewed, some working six days a week for the same employer, with others having three to five different employers. There were great irregularities in the pay the workers received, with some earning US\$ 5 while others made US\$ 8 to US\$ 10 per day. Freelance workers usually work eight to ten hours a day, with no break or a ten to 15 minute lunch break. Several workers mentioned spending nights at their employer’s house as babysitters if the adults are going out or to help cook and clean if the employer is having guests over in the evening. Although freelance workers have less stable work than live-in caregivers, they have greater opportunity to leave exploitative and abusive jobs.

## **8.1 Medical Conditions And Care**

While the researcher was interviewing one agent, a doctor came in to check on a domestic worker that was being housed in the office. While discussing her case with the agent, he mentioned that many workers stop menstruating after a short period of work. Participants indicated that they suffered several other health problems associated with their work. The most common ailments were fatigue, back aches and joint aches. Several domestic workers complained of chest pains and breathing problems caused by cleaning agents they were using. Two of the participants had several miscarriages, each caused by exhaustion from work. Most workers had to depend on themselves or charity organizations to treat their medical problems.

Thirty four participants pay their own medical expenses while five depended on their church. Only 11 participants had employers who paid for their medical expenses. Some employers took no responsibility for the medical health of their employees. For example, when Amo went to the doctor she had to get a note to prove her whereabouts. Another worker fell during spring-cleaning and twisted her ankle. Not only did she have to pay for her own doctor’s bill but she could not get paid for the work she did until she finished cleaning the rest of the house. With no legal enforcement of any obligation by the employer to take care of the medical needs of their domestic workers, and without the resources for the domestic workers to press



for their rights, domestic workers have little protection against abusive and exploitative employers.

## **9 Services Available And Accessed**

There aren't many non-governmental organizations or charities that help foreign domestic workers, however there is some aid available to these workers through embassies and churches. Although some use these services, many are unaware of help available to them or cannot find the appropriate help. Services are few and inadequate at addressing most of the needs of domestic workers, which include advocacy for better work conditions, legal assistance and counseling.

### **9.1 Embassies**

One of the primary sources of assistance available to foreign domestic workers is their embassy. Many embassies provide legal assistance and repatriation services to their nationals. Embassies of countries of origin for foreign domestic workers are working on ameliorating the conditions of their workers, negotiating with the Syrian government for more effective regulation of this field. However, the work that the embassy can do with these workers is limited by the fact that they don't have access to these workers unless they come to them asking for help.

The embassies of the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka in Syria are all lobbying separately for better regulation of the work and migration of their nationals as foreign domestic workers. The Indonesian embassy has been lobbying the Syrian government to license and regulate Syrian manpower agencies, regulate the recruitment and placement of workers and provide a dispute-resolution mechanism. The Sri Lankan government has had discussions with the Syrian government regarding the condition of Sri Lankan workers. The major point of contention in these talks was the legalization and regulation of manpower agencies, which the Sri Lankan government lobbied for but the Syrian government opposes. This is also the case for the Philippines consulate in Syria, which has lobbied for the licensing of well-qualified manpower agencies and the enforcement of contracts that are signed in the country of origin under the supervision of the government of origin and the embassy of the destination country. These efforts have been received warmly by the Syrian government but have not been met with positive action yet. A concerted effort by all parties involved, with backing from the international community, has been proposed by several of the officials involved in the negotiations as a possibly effective way of lobbying the Syrian government.

Embassies work with foreign domestic workers involves providing assistance to those who run-away, are in trouble with the law and/or would like to be repatriated. The Philippines consulate helps imprisoned workers by giving them access to the consulate's lawyer and helping them resolve their issues to get out of jail. They also repatriate around 200 to 250 domestic workers a year. The Sri Lankan government has no representation in Syria; however, it has assisted, through the Sri Lankan embassy in Lebanon, five workers detained by the Lebanese General Security after they ran away from Syria. In all cases, the women had their money and gold taken by manpower agencies. The Embassy took the agencies to court but could only recover up to US\$ 500 of the thousands taken from each worker. The Sri Lankan government

is in the process of getting insurance for domestic workers on a two-year basis, which is the length of contracts. This insurance would cover them even if they ran away. The embassy lawyers provide legal services to the workers and embassy staff assists them in recovering their travel documents and money from employers, agents and lawyers.

In order to provide Indonesian workers with the embassy's contact information, staff at the Indonesian embassy goes out to the airport to meet flights coming in from the Gulf that are known to carry domestic workers from Asia. Staff hands out business cards to in-coming domestic workers and tells them to contact the embassy if they face any problems. However, due to the illegal status of most of the migrants and the lack of contracts, the Indonesian embassy has limited ability to intervene on their behalf to demand their rights. The embassy houses runaway domestic workers, encouraging them to find other employment here if possible. For those that insist on leaving, the embassy provides the women with travel papers and offers to pay for their ticket home.

The Sudanese embassy does not usually work with Sudanese nationals in Syria, as many of them are asylum seekers. The embassy has had domestic workers coming to them for help, in which case they have tried to protect their rights. The embassy negotiates with employers and provides tickets to repatriate those that want to go back to Sudan. The Sudanese Embassy is in the process of collecting information in preparation for talks between the Sudanese and Syrian governments regarding this issue.

## **9.2 Churches and Christian Organizations**

Many Sudanese domestic workers are also asylum seekers and refugees that receive assistance from churches and various Christian organizations. Christian charities provide health care, food subsidies and a gathering place for Sudanese asylum seekers. A local charity provides asylum seekers with food subsidies for the first six months of their stay in Syria. Church staff refers asylum seekers in need of medical care to a hospital where they can get treatment for free. Members of the Sudanese community usually hold multi-denominational prayer services hosted by a different church each month. These gatherings provide one of the few opportunities for members of the community to gather and talk about their issues. The church is also a site for job referral, as several of the Sudanese participants in the study found their jobs through the Church. The church and Christian organizations provide vital services to new Christian immigrants and diasporic communities.

## **9.3 Sources of Assistance**

The workers interviewed turned to various sources for assistance, of which some were helpful, while others were the cause of further exploitation. As most services available are based on religion or nationality, the resources accessed by workers were different depending on nationality. Sources of aid included manpower agencies, embassies, friends or family, church and the UNHCR.

Domestic workers got mixed results when they turned to manpower agencies for help. Three workers ran away from their employers and took refuge at their agencies;

however they faced severe abuse there and were forced to flee again. Three other workers requested to be moved due to problems with their employer. Two had their request approved and were moved to a new employer, while one remains with her old employer. The two workers whose requests for aid were granted were working in Jordan at the time and their agents transferred them to employers in Syria. According to various embassies, domestic workers, and agents themselves, agencies are usually sites of exploitation and abuse for domestic workers.

Most Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers would turn to or have turned to their embassy for assistance. All Indonesian workers interviewed were runaways taking shelter at the embassy. Most did not know where the embassy was prior to arrival and were taken there by a kind-hearted taxi driver or told by a friend or acquaintance. They were all waiting to be repatriated by the embassy. Only one Filipina worker sought the consulate's help, however, she was unable to make contact with it. However, seven of 12 Filipina workers listed the consulate as a source that they would turn to for assistance. This indicates a level of trust in the ability and willingness of the consulate to assist domestic workers.

Sudanese workers interviewed were usually deeply suspicious of their embassy and sought assist from the UNHCR, Red Crescent and church groups. 34 of 35 Sudanese workers applied for refugee status, two were approved by UNHCR, two have their cases pending, but most have been denied. These workers feel their lives are in limbo, with no future in Syria as illegal migrants and too scared to return to Sudan. The Red Crescent helps those with refugee status get medical care and financial support. The church has helped Sudanese workers find work and get medical care, while Christian charities have supported many workers on their arrival by providing them with food subsidies. Six Sudanese workers listed the church as the source they would turn to for assistance, while an overwhelming 59% said that they had no one to turn to.

Seventeen participants listed their family or friends as sources of assistance, with the highest percentage being Filipina workers. Half of the Filipina workers listed their friends as a source of aid, while only one Indonesian worker listed a friend as a source of aid. Sudanese workers listed family, as well as friends, as sources of aid, reflecting the different makeup of the Sudanese community versus other foreign domestic workers' communities. Friends and family are sources of emotional and financial support, as well as valuable sources of information to domestic workers. Although there are some services available to foreign domestic workers, most are also nationality or religion specific and do not specifically address the needs of these workers as such.

## **10 Services Requested**

When asked what services they would like to see in place for foreign domestic workers, participants' answers were dependent on where they were in the employment process. Their needs were different depending on their legal status, whether they were in between jobs or were runaways. Some Sudanese participants requested educational opportunities in order to get better work or a job referral service. However, most participants requested services, including migration services, legal

advice, counseling/support and advocacy, in order to improve their work conditions and support them during emergencies.

Migration services requested include repatriation services, family reunification and assistance to leave Syria. Five participants, runaways workers, said they want assistance to return to their home country. Many Sudanese workers wanted assistance migrating from Syria to a country where they would have more opportunities and security. Several Sudanese participants requested assistance finding family members separated by war and reunifying them with these members. These migration services were requested by participants unhappy with their work and status in Syria, however, there were many other services requested to ameliorate the work and life of foreign domestic workers in Syria.

Many workers requested legal services and counseling in order to improve their work conditions in Syria. Some participants requested help obtaining legal travel documents, including passports. The Sri Lankan worker interviewed wanted services by its government in this country, which doesn't have representation in Syria. Others wanted counseling services, including support for exploited and abused workers. One worker, a Sudanese woman, said that there were no services available for her as a single woman. She wants someone to whom she can tell her problems and get solutions or options. Another participant suggested a service which would allow foreign domestic workers to communicate with and support each other. These services would support workers on an individual or group basis to ameliorate their work conditions; however, participants also want advocacy to change the conditions of work on a bigger scale.

Advocacy to change regulations in order to improve the work conditions of workers on a structural level is one of the most important services required by foreign domestic workers. Workers wanted the contracts they signed in their country of origin to be respected by the government of the destination country. They want to have the length of contracts and minimum wages known and respected. Participants of all nationalities want their working conditions to improve by better regulations, more support services and emergency assistance if they want to leave.

## **11 Conclusion And Recommendations**

Through this exploratory research study, IOM has tried to fill in some of the gaps in the knowledge regarding the migration trends and routes, as well as the living and working conditions, of foreign domestic workers in Syria. The study presents a rough sketch of the situation in Syria, but there is room for much more extensive research in this area. Nevertheless this research provides us with important information that can be useful in better regulating the structures shaping the work of foreign domestic workers, as well as protecting the workers' rights.

The Syrian government has taken numerous steps in recent years to legalize and regulate the employment of foreign domestic workers by Syrians. In 2001, a law was passed regulating the procurement of residency and work permits for foreign domestic workers. Syrian labour law doesn't fully include domestic workers in its regulations, therefore their contracts are the sole documents that regulate the work of foreign domestic workers. The Syrian government has banned private manpower agencies

dealing with these workers in a bid to end the abuse and exploitation of domestic workers that occurs in these offices. Although the government's intent is to protect these workers, as well as regulate them, the steps they have taken are not adequate at protecting these workers and ending the exploitation and abuse they face.

Many governments of countries of origin see the ban on, and therefore non-regulation, of manpower agencies as a major obstacle to their endorsement of Syria as a country of destination for their migrant labourers. Although the ban on agencies was meant to stop their exploitative practices, manpower agencies that import domestic workers continue to operate in Syria. As interviews with agencies, embassy officials and domestic workers have shown, manpower agencies remain active and remain exploitative, functioning as one of the main sources of abuse of foreign domestic workers. The ban on manpower agencies means that important parts of this migration remain unregulated and illegal.

Like Syrian domestic workers, foreign domestic workers are not covered under most Syrian labour laws. This has left the contracts that they sign upon arrival in Syria as the sole source of regulation of their work. Although many workers sign contracts in their own countries, on arrival in Syria they are often obliged to sign new contracts with conditions that are less amenable to them. They are often forced to sign away their basic rights, without the power to negotiate or the knowledge of any other recourse. The lack of consistent regulation of their work leads many workers into exploitative and abusive employment.

The legalization of employment of foreign domestic workers must come hand in hand with regulation of their migration and employment, including regulating the agencies that bring them to Syria and their work conditions on arrival. Neighbouring countries have begun to enact these regulations, in recognition of the abuse and exploitation non-regulation causes. Foreign domestic worker contracts, manpower agencies, and domestic work in general should be regulated in order to protect the workers and insure that this migration and employment are humane.

Although it is viewed by the Syrian government as encouraging the employment of foreign domestic workers in Syria, the legalization and regulation of manpower agencies is a responsible and logical step in regulating this work. Most domestic workers entering under the 2001 law, enter using manpower agencies, which are operating visibly and in significant numbers in Syria. The ban on these agencies has put domestic workers at greater risk of abuse and exploitation and should thus be lifted and accompanied by regulations that license and strictly regulate the work of agencies.

Domestic work should be recognized as real work and domestic workers treated as real workers under the labour code. The blurring of the line between worker and 'member of the family' that happens in domestic work leaves much room for abuse and exploitation. The government should take the lead in recognizing the value of the work that these women do, raising awareness of the rights of these workers and working to protect them. This cannot be applied to foreign domestic workers solely, but must be a recognition of the work of Syrian as well as foreign domestic workers.

As a contract is the primary regulating document of the work of foreign domestic workers, a standard contract covering such things as payment, work conditions, freedom of movement and passport possession should be put in place. Jordan has recently introduced a ‘Special working contract for non-Jordanian domestic workers’ which details the terms and conditions of employment. These include agreed upon remuneration, working conditions, treatment, day of rest, insurance and a dispute resolution mechanism. This contract can be used as an example or starting point for a contract written in sync with Syrian standards and laws. A standardized contract, worked out with the input of embassies of countries of origin, would be a powerful instrument in protecting the rights of foreign domestic workers and regulating their work.

Workers have indicated that they need various types of support in order to improve their work and living situations. Services, such as repatriation, family reunification, legal counseling and information provision, were suggested during interviews with domestic workers for this study. This study provides some idea of the needs of labour migrants and asylum seekers in Syria, and a basis on which to further develop programs that serve these communities.

## **Glossary**

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Countries
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IOs	international organizations
LCP	Live-in Caregiver Program
OWWA	Overseas Workers Welfare Administration
SAPs	Structural Adjustment Programs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women

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