

On the political economy of domestic work in Lebanon

Martin Beck

News

Triggered by Qatar's highly disputed win in 2010 in the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup football championship and the international community's subsequent attention to the construction of infrastructure related to the championship, the perspective of "modern-day slavery" and "contract slavery" has been brought in analyses of foreign labor in the Gulf and the Levante.

Summary

The present news analysis is the first part of a short study on foreign domestic work in Lebanon. Domestic work in Lebanon has been chosen because this female-dominated business—in terms of both supply and demand—is often neglected in analyses of otherwise highly male-controlled political economies. Moreover, in contrast to the Gulf States, Lebanon is an open society in which "Westerners" can easily gain access to the local population, thereby inviting researchers to engage in participatory observation of the political economy of domestic work. The following first part presents the main features of the Lebanese political economy of domestic work. Then its main components of foreignness and femininity are discussed in more detail. The second part of the study which will be uploaded in March is a debate analysis on how to categorize best the political economy of domestic labor in Lebanon.

Key Words

Lebanon, Labor Migration, Domestic Work, Contract Slavery, Political economy

About the Author

Martin Beck is Professor for Contemporary Middle East Studies at the University of Southern Denmark. An overview of his latest publications and activities can be found at <http://www.sdu.dk/staff/mbeck>.

Note

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Analysis:

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

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

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

Main features of the Lebanese political economy of domestic workers

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

If informality in labor relations is defined on the criterion of the worker’s registration in the national social insurance system (Alloush et al. 2013: 2), the labor relations between Lebanese employers and foreign domestic workers in Lebanon appear to constitute a hybrid system: On the one hand, foreign domestic workers in Lebanon have an elementary accident and health insurance; on the other hand, they are not enrolled in a pension fund, enjoy no job protection, and are not entitled to social benefits (Directorate of General Security 2017). At the same time, the process of hiring a foreign domestic worker is regulated by the state in a very bureaucratic manner, as the employer who in most cases selects the worker via an agent must register as a “sponsor” for a three-year contract which has to be notarially certified. The worker is permitted to work only with the registered sponsor and must leave the country when the work relationship is terminated.

The foreignness component

The recent massive influx of Syrian refugees—more than one million—to Lebanon (Beck 2016) has not significantly affected the character of foreignness of domestic work in Lebanon: Domestic work is still a domain for women from East Asia and Africa. This is remarkable, as in other low-skilled job segments of the informal sector, Syrian male day laborers have partially replaced Lebanese workers (Turner 2015). However, when it comes to women, other strategies of poverty alleviation that are arguably more degrading than working as a domestic worker—for instance acquiescing to marriages with Lebanese men whose attraction is mainly based on their capability of “feeding” a woman, mother-and-child begging, and prostitution—are more widespread. Why are

domestic workers in Lebanon not re-replaced by Syrians en masse? Jureidini and Moukarbel (2004: 590) trace the reluctance to hire Syrians back to unhealed wounds of the civil war. This is only partially convincing, as also in Jordan domestic work remained the domain of foreigners despite the recent high influx of Syrian refugees (Hunt et al. 2017). Moreover, other jobs related to the household that also require a rather high degree of trust—such as that of a concierge, which in Lebanon is a male domain—are often filled with Syrians of various faiths. What seems to be of higher relevance is that the vast majority of Syrian women, regardless of their marital status, would not sleep in their employer's house, whereas foreign workers who are either unmarried or come to Lebanon without their husbands do, thereby increasing their exploitability. Another “cultural” reason is that abusive and violent behavior toward workers can be legitimized on the basis of racism, which in the Lebanese context is rather widespread toward Africans and Asians but applicable to (Levantine) Arabs only to a lower degree (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 597–600). However, there is also an institutional-pragmatic reason with high explanatory power: Contrary to the case of Syrian women, a functioning market for foreign domestic workers exists including women who often stay after their three years and work in irregular positions.

The component of femininity

Professional domestic work in the Middle East in general and Lebanon in particular is highly feminized. More than twenty percent overall of female employees in the Middle East are domestic workers (whereas in the Global North it is only 1.3 percent) (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 341). Moreover, although only five percent of households employing domestic workers in 2005 were headed by a woman (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 343), not only employees but also the vast majority of employers is *de facto* female: It is the “madame” who gives orders to the domestic workers and surveilles their work (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 585–6). Thus, in the highly asymmetric system of professional domestic work in Lebanon, women take the role of both the exploiters and the exploited. Exploitation becomes manifest in (extremely) long working days, few (if any) days off, and (very) low wages. Jureidini and Moukarbel note a salary range between USD 100 and 350 per month (which correlates to the ethnic heritage and different educational levels of the employees); however, by 2017 the *de facto* minimum wage had reached approximately USD 150. What is without doubt a low salary from a global and Lebanese perspective is still attractive from the view of income-generating conditions in the sending countries: Sri Lankan domestic workers, who are at the bottom of the wage scale of domestic workers in Lebanon, still make up to ten times more money than they would back home (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004: 587). Moreover, a higher degree of vulnerability notwithstanding, female foreign

domestic workers are arguably not exploited to a higher degree than male Syrian daily workers, whose salary in Beirut for a twelve-hour day dropped to USD 20 per day with no insurance and side benefits such as housing and food supply due to the recent massive influx of refugees into Lebanon.

Given a per capita gross national income of USD 14,100 in 2016 (World Bank 2017), affordability of a domestic worker is not confined to the Lebanese upper class but trickles down to middle class families. Thus, it is not unusual that households headed by high school teachers or journalists hire domestic workers. From a feminist perspective, it is worth noting that households headed by women are more likely to hire foreign domestic workers. Moreover, there is a correlation between families with children below six years and employment of foreign domestic workers (Fakih and Marrouch 2014: 347). Thus, Lebanese mothers with a career job are among the beneficiaries of the system.

Part two of this short study is a debate analysis (to be uploaded in March 2018) on how to categorize best the political economy of domestic labor in Lebanon.

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