

Contract slavery? On the political economy of domestic work in Lebanon

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Summary

The present debate analysis is the second part of a short study on foreign domestic work in Lebanon. The first part was put online in February 2018 as a news analysis. The present debate analysis firstly scrutinizes the application of the concept of contract slavery. In its second part, the author elaborates on the issue and critically discusses the political economy of domestic work in Lebanon by applying four basic categories of political economy: state, class, race, and gender. The result of the latter analysis is a more nuanced image of the political economy of domestic work in Lebanon.

Key Words

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

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Note

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To apply or not to apply the concept of contract slavery to the Lebanese case of domestic work

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

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

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

are not per se immune in terms of abusing employees, generally ascribing attributes of slaveholding to Lebanese employers of domestic workers appears problematic in the light of the above depictions. This finding constitutes an incentive to revisit the issue of framing the political economy of professional domestic work in Lebanon engaging in a critical discussion of the specific role of four basic categories: state, class, race, and gender.

State, class, race, and gender of professional Lebanese domestic work

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

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

This is where racism comes in: There is a strong trend among Lebanese employers of foreign domestic workers to refrain from applying a rights-based approach toward them. For instance, although most employers of foreign domestic workers in Lebanon would

consider it appropriate that an employee foreign practices her religion (particularly if she shares the same faith), quite a number of the Christian employers interviewed would not consider it the right of their “girls” to freely choose the church and the service they preferred. Those who “allow” them to attend a service of their own choice tend to do so out of an attitude of benevolence. Note that there is a maternalistic aspect in this: Not allowing the workers to freely socialize is often justified with the “fact” that they are not capable of dealing with freedom in a responsible way, particularly when they are “pretty” and therefore might be solicited by “male sharks.”

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

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