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UNITED ARAB EMIRATES:

MIGRANT WOMEN IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
The case of female domestic workers

by

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Foreword

Changing labour markets with globalization have increased both opportunities and pressures for women to migrate. The migration process and employment in a country of which they are not nationals can enhance women's earning opportunities, autonomy and empowerment, and thereby change gender roles and responsibilities and contribute to gender equality. But they also expose women to serious violation of their human rights. Whether in the recruitment stage, the journey or living and working in another country, women migrant workers, especially those in irregular situations, are vulnerable to harassment, intimidation or threats to themselves and their families, economic and sexual exploitation, racial discrimination and xenophobia, poor working conditions, increased health risks and other forms of abuse, including trafficking into forced labour, debt bondage, involuntary servitude and situations of captivity. Women migrant workers, whether documented or undocumented, are much more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and abuse – relative not only to male migrants but also to native-born women. Gender-based discrimination intersects with discrimination based on other forms of “otherness” – such as non-national status, race, ethnicity, religion, economic status – placing women migrants in situations of double, triple or even fourfold discrimination, disadvantage or vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

To enhance the knowledge base and to develop practical tools for protecting and promoting the rights of female migrant workers, a series of case studies were commissioned. These studies were intended to provide background materials for an Information Guide on Preventing Discrimination, Exploitation and Abuse of Women Migrant Workers. The Guide, which is comprised of six individual booklets, aims at assisting and enhancing the efforts of government agencies, workers' and employers' organizations, non-governmental organizations and civil society groups in sending, transit and destination countries to protect the human rights of women migrant workers in the different stages of the migration process.

This working paper is based on one of the country case studies. The countries covered included Bolivia, Costa Rica, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and the United Arab Emirates. The focus was on the situation of the women migrant workers in their families, workplaces, communities and societies in sending and receiving countries and also on the initiatives, policies and programmes, “good” and “bad” practices implemented by government, private recruitment and employment agencies and a wide range of social actors to assist and protect women migrants against exploitation and abuse and to prevent them from being trafficked.

The case studies represent a collaborative effort between the Gender Promotion Programme and the International Migration Branch, as well as a number of Area and Regional ILO Offices. Katerine Landuyt had main responsibility for commissioning the case studies. Tanja Bastia provided technical guidance to the national consultants, while Minawa Ebisui and Tiina Eskola provided editorial and formatting assistance.

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Introduction

This report studies the reality of migrant women working in the United Arab Emirates as domestics and having migrated from different parts of South and South-East Asia. Domestics in the United Arab Emirates represent the largest and fastest growing work force in the United Arab Emirates. The United Arab Emirates is a newly emerging oil country (1971) in the Arabian Gulf region. It is a very peculiar social reality and a nation-state. Its work force is predominantly foreign, a reality that brings contradictions to the issue of foreign workers in general in the United Arab Emirates and to the way they are perceived and treated. Domestics do share the same level of contradictions and problematic. In fact, they are perceived more as a threat than others since their existence is immediately felt in the privacy of the United Arab Emirates' household.

The report concentrates on the reality of foreign female domestic workers (foreign female domestic worker), who in many international instances have been reported as victims of maltreatment, sexual abuse and other exploited work reality. This report sheds light on the GOOD and BAD PRACTICES in this relationship. It highlights all different perspectives and brings puts together the whole picture of the foreign female domestic worker reality in the United Arab Emirates.

This report is based on multiple interviews with domestics interviewed in their employers' household, at embassies in Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, at consulates in Dubai, the second largest city in the United Arab Emirates, and in the recruiting agencies. The report relies also on multiple primary resources and interviews with Government officials, United Arab Emirates labour minister, lawyers, officers in the migration office, employers, researchers in the field and recruiting agencies representatives.

The fieldwork was carried at different periods. One was conducted in the summer of 1995, and the second one in the spring of 2001. The one conducted in the summer of 1995, was updated during the spring of 2001. It is used in this report for its extreme relevance since it was carried out in the employers' houses. The domestics were observed and interviewed directly under the real situation of employment. Their narrations and that of the interviewer were directly based on participant observation of their real life under the immediate conditions of work.

The fieldwork included a non-participant observations and face-to-face interviews with 51 foreign female domestic worker of a predominantly Arab middle-class neighbourhood of Dubai, the second largest of seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates. When the fieldwork was updated in the spring of 2001, only some questions were readjusted to the changing situations. Not all domestics in the sample were still available; in fact most of them have changed. The two consecutive field works have helped drawing comparisons on the changing situations of the foreign female domestic workers (foreign female domestic worker) in the United Arab Emirates.

During the second part of the fieldwork conducted in the spring of 2001, another 30 foreign female domestic worker s were interviewed in different settings. Some were interviewed at their embassy as runaways or foreign female domestic worker s with problems, some at the Philippines consulate, and another group of 15 were interviewed at recruiting agencies in Dubai.

1. Overview of the socio-economic context

1.1. The United Arab Emirates: built on oil

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven Emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm-al-Qувain, Ras al-Khaimah, al-Fujairah. The federation was established in 1971, a mere nine years after oil began to be exported. Until then, the Emirates had no boundaries, no roads, no newspapers, no telephones, and no electricity (Tomkinson, 1975; Taryam, 1987; Codrai, 1990).

In a short time, oil has made the United Arab Emirates one of the richest countries in the world. In 1980, the United Arab Emirates was rated the wealthiest country in the world with a per capita GNP of US\$28'000 — in fact, closer to US\$100'000 for citizens (Peck 1986; Abdulla, 1985). “Oil income accounted for 88 per cent of total Government revenue over the period 1975–85” (Faris, 1996). Oil has given the United Arab Emirates the opportunity to break regional and international records in urban development and economic growth.

On the socio-economic level, the United Arab Emirates is a striking picture of contradictions. Its advanced urban development (80–90 per cent of the population) coexists with some of the oldest systems of social interaction, gender-segregation, and tribalism. In the United Arab Emirates today tribalism, Islamism, urbanism, modernism, consumerism and the welfare state are all vital components of the socio-institutional structure.

The development in human resources is impressive. The United Arab Emirates that, in the 1950s and early ‘60s, sent pupils to neighbouring Arab countries due to the lack of schools had, by 1990, succeeded in reaching the highest literacy levels in the region. In 1970, “the total number of pupils, boys and girls, was 27'745 and rose to 107'604 in 1982 and to 193'633 in the following year” (Taryam, 1987: 264). According to the 1995 UN Development Report, the United Arab Emirates has the “highest level of female literacy in the Arab world — 68 per cent — and overall illiteracy fell from 56.55 per cent in 1975 to 16.8 per cent in 1992. The Government is close to achieving 100 per cent literacy for both men and women by the year 2000”. (United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 1999). Women represent over 80 per cent of total enrolment in the United Arab Emirates national universities, and the State’s educational policies openly encourage and promote female education. In 1970, educated females represented only four per cent of the population; in 1993, the proportion had reached 80 per cent (Al Kassadi, 2000).

The number of female students registered at United Arab Emirates schools has increased 14-fold: statistics show that approximately 270'000 female students were registered in the academic year 1996–97 compared with 19'000 in 1972–73. Of 14'104 students attending local universities during the 1996–97 academic year, 11'125 were female and 2'979 were male. The 1975 census lists 3'005 females with a first university degree or equivalent. By the 1995 census that figure had risen to a staggering 61'496 (United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 1999).

1.2. Women in the United Arab Emirates’ workforce

Traditionally, United Arab Emirates women, as in most Arab Islamic societies, had their own order in the “harem” or the *women’s separate sphere*. Socialization in gender roles was clear and divided, with women taking their roles inside the household and men holding the power both inside and outside the household. Before the oil era, the realm of the private versus public was clearly divided. Nowadays, women increasingly participate in the work place and share the public sphere with men. United Arab Emirates female nationals have participated in the work force since 1970, when the United Arab Emirates

was established. Since 1985, the number of female nationals participation in the work force has increased, as has the number of foreign women working in the United Arab Emirates. However, the labour force participation of women is still only 11.6 % as compared to 88.34 % for men.

Table 1: Changes in workforce participation, by gender and nationality

Workforce	1975		1985		1995	
	N	per cent	N	per cent	N	per cent
Total	293'788	100.00	683'825	100.00	1'335'894	100.00
Women	9'803	3.30	65'415	9.70	15'5790	11.60
Men	283'985	96.70	618'410	90.43	1'180'104	88.34
Nationals	44'631	15.20	68'319	10.00	121'291	9.10
National women	1'086	0.37	3'997	0.58	15'729	1.180
National men	43'545	14.82	64'322	9.41	105'562	7.90
Expatriates	249'157	84.80	615'506	90.00	1'214'603	90.90.
Expatriate women	8'717	2.90	61'418	8.98	140'061	10.48
Expatriate men	240'440	81.84	554'088	81.03	1'074'542	80.43

Source: Ministry of Planning, Population Censuses 1986, 1997; Labour Report 2000, Ministry of Labour.

United Arab Emirates women are mostly employed in the federal and local Government sector, holding over 40 per cent of the total jobs. In 1980, 68 per cent of the United Arab Emirates female work force was working in the public sector. By 1990, this average rose to 94.1 per cent (Adel Al-Kassadi, 2000). Yet despite Government support, the number of female nationals lags far behind women migrants working in the United Arab Emirates.

Table 1 highlights the growing dominance of migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates work force¹. An abundance of capital on one hand and a dearth of domestic labour on the other have characterized the development of United Arab Emirates. Imported labour compensates for poor human resources but this compensation has shaken the demographic makeup of the country and created a very vulnerable social structure.

Table 2 below shows clearly how non-nationals predominate in all sectors of the economy, especially the private sector that is considered the most dynamic. According to this table, the majority of nationals are employed in the federal Government (60 per cent), but not in the local Government. When we calculate the amount of paid jobs, the percentage of nationals is insignificant (0.6 per cent).

¹ The 1995 Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) report on the United Arab Emirates sees this dominance as a major risk to internal stability: "One of the potential threats to internal security is the minority status of the indigenous population. Despite efforts to redress the balance by introducing programs to employ more United Arab Emirates nationals, this problem is not going to go away and is likely to get worse" (Economist Intelligence Unit, 1995–96:7).

Table 2: Changes in the workforce (national and non-national), by sector of economy

Sector	National	Non-national	Total
Federal Government	72'880	77'985	150'865
Local Government	25'601	147'256	172'857
General Sector	2'467	11'544	14'011
Joint Sector	4'196	34'609	38'805
Private Facilities	9'108	686'686	695'794
Other Facilities	289	6'077	6'366
Without Facilities	1'992	118'828	120'820
Outdoor	201	19'479	19'680
Private Services	424	103'942	104'366
Unspecified	94	225	319
Never employed before	4'039	7'972	12'011
Total	121'291	1'214'608	1'335'899

Source: Ministry of Planning, Department of Statistics (1997).

Table 3 below gives another more detailed picture of the total control of non-nationals over the most dynamic sector of the economy i.e. the private sector. If we take for example the rate of change of owners versus employers between the years 1985 and 1995; we see this rate is 33.5 per cent for nationals while it is 83.6 per cent for non-nationals.

If we take another indicator such as the independent businesses; we see a negative increase among nationals, while a good 53 per cent increase is shown among non-nationals. In addition, if we observe the total percentage change, we can see another stunning image whereby the change for nationals is negative (-2 per cent) while for non-nationals is positive (+122 per cent) increase.

Table 3: Changes in the private sector jobs according to employment sector, type of institutions and nationality

Types		Nationals			Non-nationals (migrant workers)			Total		
		1985	1995	% of change	1985	1995	% of change	1985	1995	% of change
Owner/employer	M	3'867	5'166	33.5	10'722	19'696	83.6	14,589	24'862	70.4
	F	20	56	180	227	775	241.4	247	831	236.4
	T	3'887	5'222	34.3+	10'949	20'471	87+	14,836	25'693	73.2 +
Independent business	M	4'123	2'114	48.7 -	32'127	47'495	47.8	36'250	49'609	36.8
	F	25	20	20.0 -	196	1'967	903.5	221	1'987	799.1
	T	4'148	2'134	48.6 -	32'323	49'462	53.0 +	36'471	51'596	41.5 +
Employee	M	3'752	3'650	2.7 -	325'945	736'957	126.1	329'697	740'607	124.6
	F	284	807	184.2	43'176	108'643	151.6	43'460	109'450	151.8
	T	4'036	4'457	10.4 +	369'121	845'600	129.1 +	373'157	850'057	127.8 +
Private establishment	M	6'458	8'475	31.2	285'486	938'790	228.8	291'944	647'265	121.7
	F	140	633	352.0	11'225	47'896	326.7	11'365	48'529	327.0
	T	6'598	9'108	38.0 +	296'711	986'686	131.4 +	303'309	695'794	129.4 +
Other establishment	M	131	162	23.6	3'064	5'306	73.1	3'195	5'468	71.1
	F	79	127	60.7	568	771	35.7	647	898	38.8
	T	210	289	37.6 +	3'632	6'077	67.3 +	3'842	6'366	65.7
No establishment + Private services	M	5'153	2'293	67.1 -	80'244	160'052	99.4	85'397	162'345	90.1
	F	110	123	11.8	31'806	62'718	97.1	31'916	62'841	96.9
	T	5'263	2'416	54.1 -	112'050	222'770	98.8 +	117'313	225'186	92.0 +
Total	M	11'742	10'930	6.9	368'794	804'148	118.0	380'536	815'078	114.2
	F	329	883	168.4	43'599	111'385	155.5	43'928	11'268	155.6
	T	12'071	11'813	2.1 -	412'393	915'533	122.0 +	424'464	927'346	118.5 +

Source: Ministry of Planning, Statistics Department, 1986–1997.

When it comes to education, table 4 represents another telling story of the United Arab Emirates work force and its pattern of educational development. In this table the percentage change of educated men and women in the work force is calculated for nationals and non-nationals. As a result one could see that nationals in the work force are improving qualitatively in terms of education in comparison with non-nationals.

Table 4: Economically active people (aged 15 years and above), by education and gender

Education level	1985											
	Nationals						Non-nationals					
	Men	%	Women	%	Total	%	Men	%	Women	%	Total	%
Illiterate	21'466	33.40	595	14.90	22'061	32.0	153'743	27.7	9'564	15.6	163'307	7.27
Read and write	16'466	25.60	205	5.00	16'671	24.0	134'841	24.3	15'012	24.0	149'853	24.00
Primary	9'099	14.00	155	3.90	9'254	14.0	47'628	8.6	2'076	3.4	49'704	8.00
Elementary	7'206	11.20	192	4.90	7'398	11.0	64'030	11.6	3'882	6.3	67'912	11.00
Secondary	5'495	8.50	943	23.60	6'438	9.0	79'229	14.0	12'487	20.0	91'716	15.00
College	791	1.20	741	18.50	1'532	2.0	19'060	3.4	7'795	12.6	26'855	4.00
Graduate	3'475	5.40	1'140	28.50	4'615	7.0	50'238	9.0	9'825	16.0	60'063	10.00
Post-graduate	316	0.50	26	0.07	342	1.0	5'176	0.9	748	1.2	5'924	1.00
Unspecified	8	0.01	0	0.00	8	0.00	143	0.03	29	0.05	172	0.00
Total	64'322		3'997		68'319		554'088		61'418		615'506	

Education level	1995											
	Nationals						Non-nationals					
	Men	%	Women	%	Total	%	Men	%	Women	%	Total	%
Illiterate	15'227	14.40	612	3.90	15'839	13.00	264'438	24.60	19'806	14.00	284'244	
Read and write	11'567	11.00	222	1.40	11'789	10.00	159'481	14.8	17'391	12.40	176'872	15.00
Primary	19'650	18.6	512	3.30	20'162		161'934	15.00	14'723	10.50	176'657	15.00
Elementary	23'214	22.00	1'214	7.70	24'428	20.00	159'573	15.00	17'921	12.80	177'494	15.00
Secondary	21'349	20.00	3'712	23.6	25'061	21.00	162'890	15.00	30'436	21.80	193'326	
College	2'131	2.00	2'073	13.00	4'204	3.00	37'840	3.50	12'457	8.90	50'297	4.00
Graduate	11'303	10.70	7'189	45.70	18'492	15.00	114'915	10.70	25'450	18.00	140'365	12.00
Post-graduate	1'107	1.00	193	1.20	1'300	1.00	9'960	0.90	1'755	1.30	11'715	1.00
Unspecified	14	0.01	2	0.01	16	0.00	3'511	0.30	122	0.09	3'633	0.00
Total	105'562		15'729		121'291		1'074'542		140'061		1'214'603	

Education level	1985–1995											
	Nationals						Non-nationals					
	Men (%)		Women (%)		Men (%)		Women (%)		Men (%)		Women (%)	
Illiterate	-19.00		-11.00		-3.10		-1.60					
Read and write	-14.60		-3.60		-9.50		11.60					
Primary	4.60		-0.60		6.40		7.10					
Elementary	10.80		2.80		3.40		16.50					
Secondary	11.50		0.00		1.00		1.80					
College	0.80		-5.50		0.10		-3.70					
Graduate	5.30		17.20		1.70		2.00					
Post-graduate	0.50		1.13		0.00		0.10					
Unspecified	0.00		0.01		0.00		0.04					
Total	61.00		25.40		52.00		44.00					

Source: Ministry of Planning, General Population Census.

When we look at the percentage change of illiterates in the work force for nationals and non-nationals, we see that between 1985 and 1995 the percentage of illiterate national men decreased much faster than the percentage of illiterate non-nationals. The same could

be applied for women; the percentage of illiterate national women decreased with 11 per cent while in the case of non-national women this was only 1.6 per cent. A similar image could be seen in the case of those who only read and write. The category of read and write represent the very low educated which is still much higher among non-nationals, and is decreasing very slowly, contrary to the case of nationals.

If we look at the secondary level of education, we see that it improved by 11.5 per cent for male nationals while it is only 1 per cent for non-national men. Another obvious increase in education is seen among United Arab Emirates women in the graduate level where the increase have reached 17 per cent while for the non-national women this was only 2 per cent.

1.3. Population polemics and security issues

At the turn of the century, the population of the United Arab Emirates was around 80'000. Almost all were citizens of the region and the population growth rate was slow: over the next sixty years the number of inhabitants increased by a mere 6'000. Most of them were nationals (Ministry of Planning, General Population Census; Faris 1996; Taryam 1986). But in less than five years after the first export of oil, the number of expatriates in United Arab Emirates rose to 66'000, accounting for 37 per cent of the whole population during the year 1968 (Ministry of Planning 1994). In 1975, only four years after the establishment of the United Arab Emirates federation, 356'000 foreign workers were in the country, representing an average of 64 per cent of the population. Today, the expatriate community comprises more than 80% of the population, a percentage unmatched anywhere else in the world. Nationals make up less than one-quarter of the whole population² (Ministry of Planning, 2000, Faris 1996; Taryam 1987; alHamad 1994). Table 5 below is a reflection of this reality and the continuous decrease of Nationals in the United Arab Emirates population.

Table 5: Population changes in the United Arab Emirates

Year	Total population	Nationals	%	Expatriates	%
1968	180'425	114'607	63.5	65'818	36.5
1975	557'887	201'544	36.1	356'343	63.9
1980	1'042'099	290'544	27.9	751'555	72.1
1985	1'379'303	396'114	28.7	983'189	71.3
1995	2'411'041	587'330	24.4	1'823'711	75.6

Source: Ministry of Planning, Central Department of Statistics, 1986, 1997.

The demographic gap in the United Arab Emirates between nationals and migrant workers has many social, political and even security implications. When policy makers designed the migration policies in 1970, they were not fully aware of the implications. Labour, semi-skilled and unskilled workers, was imported under temporary contracts and these people were denied political, civil and naturalization rights, but granted education and medical benefits (MERIP Report 1985).

² The topic is of great concern to all political figures in the country. The issue is very sensitive and relative statistics are top-secret. Officials in United Arab Emirates stopped carrying out the five-year census in 1985. Most official numbers today are based on speculation.

United Arab Emirates citizenship is not granted automatically to any resident of the United Arab Emirates. At the time of establishment of the federation, it was given to any person who could prove affiliation to one of the tribes, indigenous families, or Sheikhs. Citizenship is stratified as follows: full citizen, citizen by law, and citizen by naturalization. Only holders of the first two categories are considered full citizens. Immigrants can spend generations in United Arab Emirates without getting any form of citizenship, unless granted by a ruling Sheikh. Under the male-centred kinship system, United Arab Emirates citizenship is only automatically granted to children whose fathers are full citizens. United Arab Emirates women who are not married to citizens cannot confer citizenship upon their children unless they are divorced, widowed, or if the father is unknown. In that case, the children have only their mother's national identity to follow. Another distinct precondition for citizenship is that no one may hold any other citizenship or passport besides the United Arab Emirates'; and when applying for naturalization, a prospective citizen must relinquish any previous citizenship in order to be granted the United Arab Emirates'. In short, nationalization laws of the United Arab Emirates have generated additional problems and controversies for a society that already has its fair share of dichotomy and conflict.

Turki al-Hamad, a Saudi scholar, has recently criticized the abnormal composition of Gulf societies that are supposedly operating on the basis of modern nation-states³ (al-Hamad, 1994). Other scholars and intellectuals from the region who fear a total loss of national control over the growing presence of foreign labour have voiced similar criticism. Daily newspapers, articles, talk shows and serious academic studies are filling Gulf state archives with analysis of and advice about the social predicament awaiting these states as a result of its total reliance on foreign labour.

The Government welcomes analysis and creative solutions to these unyielding phenomena. Abdul Razak Faris, a United Arab Emirates economic analyst, has addressed the rising demographics of the foreign-born children in the United Arab Emirates. (Faris, 1994) One of Faris' studies, was adopted as a base of a recent United Arab Emirates migration law (summer of 1994) denying family reunion to all low-income workers in the United Arab Emirates (wages less than US\$2'000) and regulating the influx of foreign female domestic workers to the United Arab Emirates by non-United Arab Emirates citizens. Inauspiciously, all citizens and Sheiks (ruling families) of the United Arab Emirates wish the problem solved, without making personal sacrifice. As a United Arab Emirates Government figure has succinctly said⁴: "No migration policies will limit the problem unless the Sheikhs themselves start limiting their personal ambition for luxury. A large number of the foreign female domestic workers imported to the United Arab Emirates are for the ruling families".

In short, the problem of foreign migration to the United Arab Emirates is growing perilously. "The United Arab Emirates' security forces maintain a close watch on all foreign communities and the Government has made it clear it will not tolerate inter-communal tensions or political movements". (Economist Intelligence Unit 1995-96: 7). A closer look at the politics of migration in the Gulf region, its interrelation with the issue of female migration to the United Arab Emirates and the contextual framework of the foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates is to be furnished in the following section.

³ His argument is based on the nature of the modern nation-state that Gulf societies are attempting to apply. Of the modern nation state, he argues, assumes and/or generates integration into society. The Arab Gulf states, however, are growing in a manner that will never accommodate integration of all foreign labour.

⁴ From a short interview made during the summer of 1994.

2. General trends in migration for employment and trafficking in the United Arab Emirates

Statistics shown earlier in this report indicate that the United Arab Emirates is a country with a high level of “pull factors” for foreign migrants and that its economy is becoming almost fully driven by migrants. Nationals are only concentrated in the federal sectors. However, both nationals and non-nationals follow policies designed, to a large extent, by the ruling royal elites. Policy is made according to the old traditional tribal system, whereby; the ruler listens to suggestions, but has the final say in decisions. Systems for popular participation are still lacking. As a result, discussion and inconsistency persist in the decision-making process. Predictability is very low, and scenarios of social change may take all directions⁵.

The United Arab Emirates attracts both male and female migrants. Since the mid-1980’s, female migrants have increasingly dominated the influx of workers, especially in the area of domestic work and personal services, in roles previously fulfilled by men in United Arab Emirates society. In the United Arab Emirates, a domestic worker (or *bishkar*, in the local language⁶) was traditionally a man but may now be a woman as well. As of today, some United Arab Emirates families still prefer male domestic workers. It is also noteworthy to mention that the United Arab Emirates is a society where slavery was in practice until as recently as the late 1960’s.

The United Arab Emirates grants an average of 300 visas every day to domestic helpers. Official Ministry of Interior statistics reported that 116,083 visas were given to domestics in 1999. An average of three domestics is reported to be working in each United Arab Emirates household. A 1984 study of domestic helpers indicates that the average number of domestics in Emirates’ households is 2.2 (Al-Jardawi, 1990: 59). The very sustainability of the United Arab Emirates household, as quoted by the United Arab Emirates women employers, is directly linked with the continuous import of female domestic workers.

Statistics on foreign female domestic workers suffer from accuracy, accessibility and transparency⁷ and there are no, updated statistics⁸. However, a comparison of the number of foreign female domestic worker between the years 1975 and 1985, according to the official census, shows an increase of 30'794. The table below indicates the dramatic feminisation of the workforce in the 1980s — an average increase of 2'398 per cent, compared to 649 per cent for male domestics. This factor also relates to the hiring of female drivers and cooks, occupations once performed primarily by males.

⁵ These factors have positive as well as negative implications, depending on the situation, and the elements involved.

⁶ *Bishkara* is the word used for a female domestic.

⁷ As most United Arab Emirates scholars point out, it is not easy to secure exact numbers, accurate and specific data on domestics. This is an issue that is still under-studied, requiring a vast institutional effort to manage the deficiency.

⁸ Statistics on foreign female domestic worker are difficult to obtain in the United Arab Emirates. Statistics from the 1975 census can be acquired internationally from UN publications.. Inside the United Arab Emirates, through personal connections, one can acquire the results of other census, such as those from 1980 and 1985. However, the results of the 1990 census are not given out.

Table 6: Domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates, by sex (1975–1985)

	1975	1980	1985	% inc. b.w. 1975–85
Females	1'340	7'348	32'134	2'398
Males	8'477	34'343	55'025	649
Total	9'817	41'691	87'159	887

Source: General Population Census of the United Arab Emirates, 1975, 1980, and 1985.

Statistics on foreign female domestic worker are crucial for analysing the high trend of feminisation and ethnic changes. Foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates are everywhere, in all homes, in all cities, large and small, and even in desert areas helping Bedouin milk their goats and make yoghurt and cheese. Foreign female domestic workers are employed in huge mansions as well as in poor welfare houses. They are easy to acquire, change and exchange. They come from diversified nationalities, in various colours, from different religions and levels of education, and with varying levels of expertise, etc.

If one calculates the rate of increase, applying it to 1995, it is easy to see that the number of foreign female domestic worker alone is higher or at least equal to that of the indigenous population. Due to this reason, in the summer of 1996, officials in the United Arab Emirates took measures to limit immigration. These measures were applied only to expatriates, who were required to pay to the Government Dhs.4'500, or the amount equal to one year (12 month) of a foreign female domestic worker minimum salary. Other serious measures were taken towards people who would hire a foreign female domestic worker on a visa sponsored by a third party. A higher penalty is to be paid in this case, where no differentiation is made between nationals and non-nationals. These measures were more successful at their introduction. Today, Dhs4'000 (which equals about US\$1'100) is much easier to pay than before, and the rate influx of foreign female domestic worker is again increasing.

Foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates come from different parts of the world; however, South Asian countries, namely India, Sri Lanka, Philippines and Indonesia, are the major providers. Recently, women domestics from Ethiopia are a new development.

The flow of female migration to the United Arab Emirates has evolved along ethical lines. In the early days of the modern United Arab Emirates, i.e. the 1970's, migrant domestics came from India, because of the strong historical, the intercultural and economic relationship between the two countries. As stated earlier, a large number were males, and these men were mostly cooks. From the late 1970's to today, the Philippines have become increasingly dominant in sending domestics.

Filippina foreign female domestic workers were traditionally most in demand among the elite in the United Arab Emirates. At one point, having a foreign female domestic worker from the Philippines was considered a family status symbol. Filipinas were preferred over other nationals because of their perceived level of modernity, education and ability to speak English. As a result, they were the highest paid foreign female domestic

workers (Dhs400–500 — per month — in the 1980's)⁹. Indians were at the bottom of the salary scale (Dhs300 per month) and Sri Lankans in the middle (Dhs350–400 per month).

In the early 1990s, the United Arab Emirates' domestic market began to attract Indonesians, who were first sent to Saudi Arabia and then to United Arab Emirates. Indonesian foreign female domestic workers started at the upper salary scale (Dhs700), and were paid, in most cases, more than foreign female domestic workers from the Philippines (Dhs600)¹⁰. Recently, the trend of foreign female domestic worker from the Philippines and India is receding. Foreign female domestic workers from the Philippines are moving up the employment ladder. Nowadays, a larger trend of Filipina drivers who perform domestic responsibilities is growing in the United Arab Emirates. As a driver, a foreign female domestic worker is paid more (Dhs800–1'200). In general, we could say, Indonesian foreign female domestic workers are taking over the place of Filipinas on the middle and upper echelon, and Ethiopians are taking the place of Indians in the lower echelon. This however does not mean that Indian and Filipina foreign female domestic workers are disappearing in the United Arab Emirates. Both ethnicities continue to exist, but their numbers are not growing at the same pace as before.

Indonesians on the other hand, are moving down the salary scale. The average payment for an Indonesian is Dhs600. Reasons are more related to such "push factors" as the increased poverty and turmoil in Indonesia. However, cultural "pull factors" are at work on the receiving end, such as the preference for Indonesian Muslims who have learned Arabic in Saudi Arabia (table 7 reflects most changes in trend of foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates).

Table 7: Changes in the number of foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates, by country of origin, year and sex

Country of origin	1997		1998		1999		2000		2001		Followers/ Total family members*	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	0	5'293
Ethiopia	0	294	0	630	7	1'180	21	2'394	11	756	0	5'293
Philippines	70	1'712	105	2'604	95	3'990	228	6'856	53	1'795	0	17'508
India	5'254	3'696	6'675	4'540	7861	4'802	13'216	6'730	2'002	521	521	55'818
Indonesia	7	1'253	11	2'898	32	6'493	137	11'543	21	3'791	14	26'200
Sri Lanka	105	2'828	312	3'126	347	5'012	354	7'588	74	1'694	91	21'531
Total	5'436	9'783	7'103	13'798	8'342	21'477	13'956	35'111	2'161	8'557	626	126'350

Note: The above numbers are based on numbers related to the city of Dubai, then extrapolated due to the fact that Dubai represents 3.5 of the United Arab Emirates' population. In fact, most foreign labour is to be found in Dubai than in any other city of the Emirates.

* Family reunion is denied to all domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates.

Source: Department of Immigration (Dubai), Ministry of Interior.

In sum, the above table reflects the following:

1. The introduction of a new trend of foreign female domestic worker from Ethiopia;

⁹ Dhs500 equal US\$138. One US\$ is equal to Dhs3.6

¹⁰ In the 1990's, foreign female domestic worker from the Philippines were paid an average of (Dhs500–600, Indians Dhs350–400 and Sri Lankan Dhs400–500). This information is based on personal research and living experience in the United Arab Emirates).

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2. A growing trend of foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates in general, with a peak in the year 2000;
 3. Indians make up the largest group of domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates, in terms of gender and general number. This relates to the general trend of increasing number of Indians in United Arab Emirates, a reality that frightens nationals and leaves them insecure about the future of their country;
 4. The number of Indian men employed as domestics reflects a continuation of an old practice of hiring men for personal services. Under the category of household-domestics, other types of responsibilities exist such as cooking, driving and gardening.

This predominance of foreign female domestic worker comes with a high price, one that almost everyone in the United Arab Emirates today laments. Negative reaction against heavy reliance on foreign female domestic workers increasingly appears in newspaper articles, TV programs, Government studies and scholarly work. Even the police department now publishes informative booklets to alert Emirates to the danger of complete dependence on foreign female domestic workers. Yet, the trend appears to be beyond Governmental control.

In fact, the issue of domestics (foreign female domestic workers) appears to be taking on a life of its own. Foreign female domestic workers, brought as cheap labour to insure the transition of United Arab Emirates households from the pre-modern to modern lifestyle, are becoming an essential element in the disrupted social order. Foreign female domestic workers were once thought of as docile, obedient and helpful housekeepers easily absorbed and controlled inside the gender-segregated structure of the United Arab Emirates household. This perception of the foreign female domestic worker has now gradually become misrepresented.

The growing dependence on household domestics is structurally linked to the whole development of the United Arab Emirates state and social system. The increasing dominance of domestic house workers is part of an unspoken “bargain” between the state and the emerging civil society, by which the state provides a leisured life in exchange for complete political control. This unspoken state-civil society contract is part of a larger developmental policy that has led to a population imbalance between citizens and expatriates. This imbalance is now creating tensions and a sense of insecurity among the United Arab Emirates citizens, the minority in their own country.

Social thinkers and intellectuals in the United Arab Emirates are revealing the problems caused by the total reliance on foreign female domestic workers, including damage to the children, future society and household relationships (Al-Jirdawi 1990; Khalfan 1985; Abd Al-Jawad 1985). Recently, the United Arab Emirates has also found itself with a new and negative image internationally, that of the exploiter and abuser of poor women from other regions in the world. This issue of maltreatment of foreign female domestic workers is receiving considerable media exposure and is a serious concern of NGO's and human rights organizations outside the United Arab Emirates (Weinert, 1991: 25–26). Despite this criticism, inside and outside the United Arab Emirates, the flow of foreign female domestic workers continues to swell.

2.1. Foreign female domestic workers as socially perceived by Emirates

All academic writings from a local and Arab Gulf perspective see foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf states as a problem. No published study describes them as a necessity for the area's changing lifestyle. None

emphasizes their integral part in the nation's development or, furthermore, puts their own lives at the centre of the study. Issues addressed in these studies include the negative impact on United Arab Emirates children, language of children, values of children, defected socialization of children, ill-treatment of children, abuse of Islamic norms and values, health hazards, etc. (Khalifa 1986; Khalaf et al. 1987; Al-Khalfan Hanan 1985; Abd-Al-Jawad Issam 1985; Ministry of Work and Social Affairs 1990; and Al-Jirdawi 1990).

The above studies go into detailed descriptions of how foreign nannies negatively affect the children of nationals. Most of them place the main responsibility for this problem on the mothers themselves, portraying United Arab Emirates women as careless and superficial in their preference for a luxurious life over the well being of their children. Police studies are the most rigid of all on foreign female domestic worker. They base their conclusions on studies of foreign female domestic worker criminals and United Arab Emirates women's perception of foreign female domestic worker crimes. Their statistics show that most crimes committed by foreign female domestic workers in Dubai during 1991–92 are related to adultery (up to 50 per cent). The second highest crime reported was theft (30 per cent). The third is the violation of immigration laws (10 per cent), and the rest are less representative, for example, murder (Najib *et al.* 1993).

A more critical approach to the treatment of the foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates household is pronounced among some United Arab Emirates intellectuals and Government officials. Said Bin Bellelah, the General Director to the Dubai Migration office states: "United Arab Emirates society suffers from the degrading perception of the foreign female domestic worker. This negative perception is causing major problems in the relationship between the foreign female domestic worker and her sponsors. This wrong perception is also recreated along the new generation and United Arab Emirates children mistreat the foreign female domestic worker" (Kul Al Usra, March 2001). Another United Arab Emirates prominent figure says: "This society is recreating generations of dependent personalities who request that domestics do everything for them. Our full reliance on domestics in the household is encouraging the growth of an unproductive family" (Kul Al Usra, 2001).

In short, foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates have their own problems, brought with them in the migration process. These problems, however, are aggravated and mishandled on all levels inside the United Arab Emirates. Who is responsible? Who is to blame? Is it national poverty? Is it international poverty? Is it the United Arab Emirates' social context? Is it the United Arab Emirates' laws of migration and its foreign labour regulations? Is it the individual employers? Is it the foreign female domestic workers and their lack of knowledge and experience of the United Arab Emirates society? The situation is highly complicated and it is not easy to uncover all the facts. This report, however, addresses the issue from the foreign female domestic worker's own perspective given work conditions, life as expatriates, uprooted from their country and family.

2.2. Trafficking

Trafficking is generally understood as bringing in illegal persons to be exploited and pushed to work in illegal situations, such as prostitution or other illegal [nationally or internationally] forms. It is not an acceptable practice in the United Arab Emirates and the Government works hard to seal its borders and ports to trafficking. Accessing reports and information on trafficking is difficult, however, one would suspect that trafficking does exist in limited forms, especially since entrance to United Arab Emirates on a visit visa is easy and accessible even at travel agencies or hotels.

Even though no official information is available on trafficking, one could make some observations based on discussions with journalists, lawyers and public figures who do agree that trafficking is practiced undercover. Trafficking women for prostitution is practiced under the cover of other categories of migration, especially under the category of domestics.

The loose federal and tribal structure of United Arab Emirates society could play a role in easing the way to possible traffickers. This very structure which gives rulers of each of the seven Emirates (originally tribal rulers) a sense of ultimate autonomy, works contrary to the image of unity and integration, the country attempt to portray. Each head of the seven Emirates like to act as the ultimate authority over his own sheikhdom or Emirate which sometimes result in a high permeability of federal laws and regulations that are not implemented as similarly in the whole country. In few Emirates, specifically the ones with low oil resources such as Ajman, illegal acts are thought to take place without much Federal control. Because of its proximity (15 minutes drive) to Dubai (United Arab Emirates business centre), its inexpensive rental dwellings and the looseness of its regulations, Ajman is considered “heaven” to illegal immigrants and their agents. Attempting to find documented information on this issue is dangerous.

It is useful, in this context, to look at the raw statistics of the immigration office¹¹ (see table 8 below) on domestic workers in Dubai, which seem to raise questions if all of the nationalities reported in the domestic sector really are domestic workers and not employed in other sectors of the economy. While, of course, no generalized statements can be made, it would be useful to examine to what extent these numbers really cover men and women workers, legally employed in the domestic service, or whether they could also represent workers who entered the country with a visa to work as domestics, but who are in practice employed in other sectors, including the sex industry.

Table 8: Dubai: statistics on domestic workers, by nationality and sex

Nationality	1997		1998		1999		2000		2001		Companion	Total
	Male	Female										
Ethiopia	0	84	0	180	2	337	6	684	3	216	0	1'512
Azerbaijan	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Eritrea	0	2	2	4	1	11	1	10	0	4	0	35
Australia	2	2	1	1	8	2	17	3	3	2	0	41
Afghanistan	5	0	6	0	7	0	12	0	4	0	0	34
Argentina	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
Jordan	3	1	6	0	3	2	3	3	2	1	40	64
Brazil	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Algeria	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	5
Denmark	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Senegal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Sudan	49	0	68	2	86	2	111	6	25	2	189	540
Sweden	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2

¹¹Note that the Migration Department explained in an interview that the statistics were still very preliminary and needed to be revised.

Nationality	1997		1998		1999		2000		2001		Companion	Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female		
Somalia	2	2	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	0	5	14
China	0	0	1	1	1	2	3	8	0	1	0	17
Iraq	1	0	1	0	2	1	3	3	2	0	0	13
Philippines	20	489	30	744	27	1'140	65	1'959	15	513	0	5'002
Germany	0	1	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	5
Morocco	4	17	2	12	3	20	4	33	1	8	0	104
Mexico	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Austria	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
India	1'501	1'056	1'907	1'297	2'246	1'372	3'776	1'923	572	152	149	15'951
Japan	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Yemen	6	2	4	1	8	1	9	2	5	0	34	72
USA	5	1	1	0	5	2	4	3	0	0	0	21
Indonesia	2	358	3	828	9	1'855	39	3'298	6	1083	4	7'485
Uzbekistan	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	5
Ukraine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Iran	68	7	62	6	69	5	115	4	38	4	146	524
Ireland	13	1	7	4	9	2	20	7	3	1	0	67
Italy	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	3
Pakistan	1'078	33	1'309	38	1'335	41	2'034	42	377	15	701	7'003
England	19	6	15	6	24	10	43	20	4	3	2	152
Belgium	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Bulgaria	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
Bangladesh	585	70	589	102	598	149	678	316	81	14	376	3'558
Panama	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Benin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Burkina Faso	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Burma	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Poland	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Peru	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Thailand	0	3	0	5	0	2	0	8	0	3	0	21
Turkey	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Chad	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Tanzania	0	2	0	1	4	10	2	9	1	4	10	43
Tunisia	0	1	1	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	6
Jamaica	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
Guinea	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
South Africa	2	0	1	0	2	0	4	2	2	0	0	13

Nationality	1997		1998		1999		2000		2001		Companion	Total
	Male	Female										
Georgia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Russia	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	5
Romania	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Zimbabwe	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	5
Slovakia	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	5
Slovenia	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Singapore	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Syria	3	0	5	0	13	4	18	2	6	1	17	69
Switzerland	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Sri Lanka	30	808	48	893	83	1'432	101	2'168	21	484	26	6'094
Seychelles	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Ghana	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Guinea Besao	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
France	0	0	2	0	1	0	10	0	2	0	0	15
Palestine	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	53	57
Finland	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Karkistan	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Canada	0	1	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	6
Kenya	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	9	0	4	3	20
Lebanon	0	2	2	5	4	2	4	2	0	1	12	34
Libya	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lithuania	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Malaysia	1	0	0	0	0	0	6	5	0	0	0	12
Egypt	37	18	40	17	53	7	62	24	17	10	93	378
Mauritania	2	0	18	0	11	0	8	0	2	0	4	45
Mauritius	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	1	1	0	8
Nepal	4	16	3	9	19	15	43	26	4	3	0	142
Nigeria	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	3
New Zealand	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	7	1	0	0	13
Holland	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Hong Kong	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Yugoslavia	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1

Source: Department of Immigration (Dubai), Ministry of Interior (Dubai).

The following are remarks pertaining to the reading of this table:

1. Not all highly represented countries in this statistical table are senders of foreign female domestic workers. The major sender countries of foreign female domestic workers in the table above are Ethiopia, Philippines, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

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2. Migrants coming from countries such as Sudan (540), Iran (524), Pakistan (7'003) and Egypt (378) fall under the category of domestics but may be performing other jobs or are migrating to look for suitable job prospects.
 3. It seems possible that a large number of migrants from Pakistan are mostly male gardeners.
 4. The Sudanese and Bangladeshis listed as domestic workers may include children hired for camel racing (a sector where trafficking of children seems to be highly practiced)¹².
 5. Iranians and Egyptians are good examples of migrants who come looking for better opportunities. A very minimal number of Egyptian women reportedly work in the United Arab Emirates as domestic workers.

¹² See also the comments by the ILO Committee of Experts on the application of Conventions and Recommendations with regard to the application by UAE of Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour, Report III (Part 1A), International Labour Conference, 90th Session, 2002.

3. The situation of women migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates

3.1. General conditions

Isolation is a dominant feature of foreign female domestic worker work environment in the United Arab Emirates. Foreign female domestic workers are isolated physically, psychologically, socially, culturally and in all aspects of human existence. However, they differ in their level of isolation. Some foreign female domestic workers live in an abusive environment of isolation. Others are able to interact socially and break through some of the physical and psychological barriers they face.

Legally, once a foreign female domestic worker enters her employer's house, she is totally under his/her control, since the employer is usually her visa sponsor. Even today, United Arab Emirates labour laws do not recognize domestics as part of the labour force. The employer bears total responsibility for his/her domestic workers and has total control over them. However, during the first three months of the contract, both the employer and the employee have the right to contact the recruiting agency in order to report problems or to seek change in the status or employment of the foreign female domestic worker. Most recruiting agencies, however, do not encourage this practice, and often hide information from the foreign female domestic worker about their rights. The immigration regulations governing the status of domestic workers and the social practices towards foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates enslave them to their employers until the duration of their contract ends. Whether one is placed with a desirable or an undesirable employer is a matter of luck.

The isolation that foreign female domestic workers face in the United Arab Emirates makes their situation unique in relation to other immigrant workers. This isolation is partially related to their migrant status and to their total removal from family, society and roots. However, it is also linked to their live-in status in United Arab Emirates households. The foreign female domestic worker leaves her own society and moves into to a strange and new household that is totally isolated from the outside, surrounded by walls, and in most cases, is gender- segregated.

Reportedly, foreign female domestic workers are expected to have no activities outside their households of employment. Like all foreign workers, they are denied the right to organize. Most of them are given no days off and are expected to serve all household members from early morning to late in the evening.

The physical isolation that foreign female domestic workers encounter in the United Arab Emirates is linked to the rigid structure of the United Arab Emirates household and its segregation by gender. A combination of the above features and the anomalous growth¹³ of the United Arab Emirates society's reliance on foreign female domestic workers to maintain United Arab Emirates households during a time of change, have also created a social necessity among the United Arab Emirates employers to control the foreign female domestic worker and their impact on the United Arab Emirates household and society. This control is taking different forms, changing with the structure of United Arab Emirates society and the dynamics of the United Arab Emirates household.

Physical and social isolation of the foreign female domestic worker within the United Arab Emirates' society is one form of control. Once the foreign female domestic worker is

¹³ This growth results from the imbalance in the population and a high percentage of non-nationals (80 per cent) in the whole society.

inside the United Arab Emirates household, she becomes part of the *harem* structure¹⁴. The sexuality of the foreign female domestic worker has to be controlled, since she is now one of the *harem*. This includes control of her body and her general behaviour. In most cases, she is required to wear a veil or long robe like the rest of the *household harem*, or female members of the household.

This isolation is accompanied by another form of existence, due to their numbers and visibility. Foreign female domestic workers sometimes outnumber the household members. During the day, in the street, the most commonly seen people are foreign female domestic workers, since they are the ones who do the family's grocery shopping and take the children to the parks. Even in the waiting rooms of hospitals and doctors' offices, it is usually foreign female domestic workers who accompany their employers' children for medical examinations.

It seems that those foreign female domestic workers, who are not allowed to go out or to use the telephone or call a friend, are likely to meet other foreign female domestic workers when they do the shopping or take out the garbage. These contacts help them to form a collective ethnic-identity and to bond among themselves. The likelihood of meeting other foreign female domestic workers also helps to ease their harsh working conditions.

In reaction to this developing collective identity among foreign female domestic workers, the United Arab Emirates locals, threatened by the huge foreign female domestic worker community, seem to have formed an opposite stereotyped image of them. This prejudice worsens the working conditions foreign female domestic workers face, an environment already full of contradictions, challenges and hardships.

3.2. The field work

During fieldwork with 51 foreign female domestic workers (see appendix 1) in Dubai, 34 foreign female domestic workers reported that they were not allowed to maintain any aspects of their previous lifestyle. Only four said they were allowed to dress¹⁵, cook, and practice their religious beliefs freely. Some modern households allowed their foreign female domestic workers to dress as they please, but none would allow them freedom of behaviour.

It appears that once a foreign female domestic worker enters a United Arab Emirates household, her total physical existence, including body, appearance and choice of clothing, falls under that household's control.

During the course of an interview, this sort of physical control was directly sensed. The foreign female domestic worker in question was from Sri Lanka, and had been working for a given household for eight years. She took care of an elderly lady, constantly staying with her, and was not allowed to go out of the house. She seemed to be like a shadow to this elderly lady who was in poor health. At this instance, the young employer arrived, happily declaring the opening of a swimming pool in the backyard. She told the

¹⁴ As mentioned previously, not all United Arab Emirates households conform to the same *harem* structure. This is what makes the issue interesting, dynamic and also challenging, even to the foreign female domestic worker themselves. United Arab Emirates household structures are undergoing transformation, moving away from the traditional form of "harem" structure to a new one which is not totally modern, but rather, a combination of different structures. It is possible to call this new form "post-modern", for the immediate sake of this analysis.

¹⁵ One foreign female domestic worker complained about not being allowed to put on any make up, or even wear the Arabic eyeliner *kohol*, famous in the Gulf region, used by United Arab Emirates women themselves, including elderly ones.

exercises. Happily, the foreign female domestic worker put on her shorts, and came full of excitement. The young employer shouted: "Can't you see the little boys? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Go put on your long dress. We do not have women going in the pool with swim wear." In response, the foreign female domestic worker looked humiliated, but couldn't reply. She ended up obeying these orders.

In addition, most reported that their socio-physical existence is controlled and all their social interactions with friends and neighbours scrutinized. Because of the dominant stereotype of maids in United Arab Emirates society, foreign female domestic workers experience mistreatment based on their ethnicity and social status.

Loneliness is one of the effects of control foreign female domestic workers complain about:

"I am very lonely. Sometimes, I cry. I want to go back. I am getting very thin. The only source of appeasement I feel is only when I talk to other maids, while I am picking up the children from school (#11). Another foreign female domestic worker interviewed said: "I am not allowed to go out, not even to see a friend or meet a relative. It is only when I go to pick up the children from school that I see other maids with whom I share my feelings" (#18).

Demeaning treatment figured in complaints:

"We are treated like strangers, we are not allowed to sit on the furniture. It does not matter for them if you have a profession or not, you are here, you are a maid. I talk to other Filipina I see in the park, they say the same thing" (#11). "If by mistake, they see me sitting on their bed, they get angry. They think we are lower, we are not considered humans, and that we have the same necessities as they do" (#8). "Even after working for them for eight years, I still feel I am a maid, a stranger" (#23). "When they talk about us they say words like: stupid, knows nothing, or maid. We are always inferior in their place" (#24). "I feel I am treated as a lower person because I am poor. They order us in a way that hurts. They don't sympathize with us. We are vulnerable in their houses, because we are poor" (#49).

All 51 foreign female domestic workers complained about the hot weather in the United Arab Emirates. Living, cleaning and cooking in a place where the temperature reaches 128° F in the summer, and where humidity is around 100 per cent is challenging even for someone coming from the hot villages of southern India.

3.3. Adjustment to the United Arab Emirates

One of the toughest challenges of migration is adjustment. In general, adjustment means changing oneself to accommodate life styles, attitudes, habits and languages encountered in new living and work situations. Adjustment also means being healed of the emotional pain of separation from loved ones. Foreign female domestic workers face these challenges along with the pressure of being controlled, isolated and continuously living under someone else's authority without a break.

The adjustment measures foreign female domestic workers take varied. The following subsection discusses the adjustment difficulties foreign female domestic worker face, and the adjustment process they undergo.

Psychological difficulties

Difficulties adjusting psychologically and culturally are the most common adjustment problems faced by foreign female domestic workers, and probably the most challenging. It is very hard to adjust to a complete separation from what is known, normal and taken for granted. Out of necessity, the foreign female domestic worker makes these adjustments,

but at a high price. One respondent, who had been working in the same place for 14 years, recollected the early adjustment challenges she had faced:

“When I first came, I used to always cry. My employer said that I was not the type to survive the challenges and stay. Everything was different for me. I wanted to leave, but I could not afford the ticket. After six months, things started to get easier” (#13). A foreign female domestic worker from Sri Lanka attributed the hardships of adjustment to the reality of being in two places at the same time: “Adjustment is very hard. It seems we do not adjust as much as we force ourselves to live in two different places. This makes us very confused, and [therefore, we] cannot do things right. Sometimes, I spoil the food, especially when I get letters from my family. My employers are very understanding” (#45).

Emotional Difficulties

Most of the foreign female domestic workers in the sample reported having difficulty in adjusting emotionally to the separation from families and loved ones. However, most of the foreign female domestic workers had made tremendous adjustment efforts, retained a positive attitude and were determined to achieve what they had come for. However, some respondents actually seemed desperate and unable to survive. One of these felt that she needed immediate help, stating that if she remained in her employer’s house, she would probably die (#42).

The mother-child relationship is one of the strongest of interpersonal relationships, resisting physical separations of all types¹⁶. However, the modern pattern of female labour migration for domestic employment seems to be breaking even these bonds. Mothers initially submit to this separation for the very sake of their children, but part of the price they pay is guilt.

One foreign female domestic worker stated, “I feel guilty about having them. Guilty because I do not see them growing up by my side. Guilty because I cannot teach them the good things of life” (#29). Another Filipina was very troubled by the fact that she had to leave her only son behind and migrate with his father to the Gulf region to secure their future family life: “How I do it, I do not know. Sometimes, I try not to think of him. Sometimes, I cannot help but think of him intensely. It is very hard. All I think of is when we finish the house and live there” (#3).

Missing their children or feeling guilty about leaving them behind is not the only problem. Some foreign female domestic workers leave their children behind without even knowing if they are getting the daily care they need or if the person in charge of them is really capable. An Indian foreign female domestic worker, who had to leave her children with her old mother, was constantly worried about whether the latter was giving them the real care they needed, like sending them to school daily or giving them enough food (#4). Other foreign female domestic workers, especially those with daughters in the home country, live in constant fear of their children being raped or sexually abused. A Sri Lankan foreign female domestic worker, who had left her now 13 year-old daughter behind, was afraid that her daughter would be raped as her sister had been. This foreign female domestic worker said, “Everybody sends me letters to tell me how beautiful she is. I worry about her. In my country, drunk males attack houses, especially if they know that some members work in the Gulf. I am working hard and saving her lots of money, but I hope it is worth it” (#8).

Communication Difficulties

Language is an adjustment difficulty that some foreign female domestic workers face. First, the foreign female domestic worker themselves are very diverse ethnically and linguistically. Secondly, they have migrated to a country that has more non-nationals living and working in it than indigenous people. This makes linguistic diversity a challenge for United Arab Emirates household members, as well as for foreign female domestic workers.

¹⁶ Even during slavery and serfdom, mothers kept their children until they reached a certain age, at which point they became adult slaves themselves.

Households where more than one language is spoken are common. While Arabic is the official language of the United Arab Emirates, other common languages include Urdu¹⁷, Farsi¹⁸, Ajami and English¹⁹.

Communication seems to be difficult for foreign female domestic workers who do not speak Arabic or English and enter a house in which only Arabic or both languages are spoken. As one foreign female domestic worker related, “Until I learned the language, I felt I could not stay. My sister had been through the experience before me. She used to tell me: ‘Wait until you learn the language, things will get easier.’ She was absolutely right” (#5).

Foreign female domestic workers who speak English and work in households where English is spoken, are spared communication problems. However, even these foreign female domestic worker, especially English-speaking Filipinas who work in houses where not all members speak English, face difficulties. One Filipina respondent furnished a vivid example. She was employed in a household where everybody spoke English, except the old lady she took care of. As a result, this Filipina not only had to learn Arabic, but constantly had to shift languages as well, making adjustment very difficult (#2). All workers interviewed, during the course of this study addressed the issue of language adjustment. They all confirmed that it is one of the major difficulties foreign female domestic workers face in the United Arab Emirates.

3.4. Working conditions

The issue of housework has been one of the most complicated and controversial issues in social studies. Because of its invisible nature in the economy and the society in general, housework is not only devalued, but is also very hard to account for or measure. This research assesses the work of foreign female domestic workers based on their narratives and perceptions. Foreign female domestic workers were asked to describe a full working day, the regular and irregular work that do and the physical and emotional requirements of that particular work. Foreign female domestic workers were also asked about the heavy and boring work that they do and general work demands on them in the United Arab Emirates compared to those back home. The idea was to understand their jobs and to fit their actual work into an analysis of the migration process and its impact upon their lives.

In general, the working day begins at six o’clock in the morning and ends at eleven o’clock at night, with two hours rest in the afternoon. Foreign female domestic workers are required to clean their employers’ houses internally and externally, cook, and take care of children, elderly family members and animals. Not all foreign female domestic workers constantly do heavy work, but they reported being on-call all the time for all family members. Working an average of 15 hours per day, these women earn an average of Dhs550 or US\$150 per month to Dhs700 or US\$200. Working conditions, hours of work and work perceptions did not differ among foreign female domestic workers in the

¹⁷ The traditional links between the United Arab Emirates and India and the high number of Indian immigrants in the Emirates, has made it common for United Arab Emirates citizens to speak Urdu.

¹⁸ The history of migration in the region and the closeness to Iran has constructed a large community of United Arab Emirates citizens who are of Iranian origins. Iranians, especially older women, still speak Farsi, or a special dialect that is peculiar to south Iran. This particular dialect is called *Ajami*, or *aymi* in the local dialect, and it is a combination of Farsi and Arabic.

¹⁹ English is mostly spoken by the educated younger generation, who have been schooled either in private. The traditional links between the United Arab Emirates and India and the high number of Indian immigrants in the Emirates, has made it common for United Arab Emirates citizens to speak Urdu.

different United Arab Emirates household strata. Overworked and abused foreign female domestic workers can be found in all levels of society. The main difference is probably the amount of space, the appearance of the house and the special place designed for the foreign female domestic worker. The following subsection provides details about the work these women do. These details come from the descriptions and perceptions of the foreign female domestic workers themselves.

Working hours

Almost all foreign female domestic workers interviewed were overworked, with working days that average 11 to 20 hours.

Table 9: Hours worked by interviewed foreign female domestic workers

Number and description of hours worked	Number	Per cent
6–8 hours (minimum to regular)	2	3.9
9–10 hours (regular to high)	13	25.5
11–14 hours (high/needs change)	26	51.0
15–20 hours (high/unacceptable)	9	17.6
Missing	1	2.0
Total	51	100.0

As part of the interview, each foreign female domestic worker was asked to describe her working day, a pattern usually beginning between six or six thirty in the morning ²⁰ and ending at 11 o'clock at night. Some reported waking up earlier, i.e., between five and six. Others reported waking up between six and seven. No foreign female domestic worker reported being asleep after seven o'clock in the morning in a normal setting. Some mentioned going to bed or to their rooms at 22:30, while others said 23:30 to 24:00. Still others mentioned that, when there were parties or late night visitors, they were sometimes needed even later.

The foreign female domestic worker usually takes a two-hour break in the afternoon. Thus, 11 to 14 hours work per day is the norm. Typically, a foreign female domestic worker describes her working day as follows:

"I wake up at 6:30, and start to clean at 7:00. I finish at 11:00, take a shower and then iron until 14:00. We eat lunch between 14:30 to 15:00. I take a nap until 17:00, then clean outside until 19:00. Then I either iron, or we get visitors until 20:30. We eat dinner between 20:30 and 21:00, and I finish cleaning and then go to bed at 22:00."

Wages

Most foreign female domestic workers working in United Arab Emirates national households are paid between Dhs500 and Dhs700, or US\$130 to US\$200 per month. For the foreign female domestic worker, this salary amounts to four times, ten times, or for Indian foreign female domestic workers, as much as 100 times the wages they would earn

²⁰ Some reported waking up earlier, i.e., between five and six. Others reported waking up between six and seven. No foreign female domestic worker reported being asleep after seven o'clock in the morning in a normal setting.

in their home countries. One of the Indian foreign female domestic workers who had worked in the Gulf for 10 years is trying to come back to work in United Arab Emirates after a break of two years, spent in India with her daughters. She used to earn Dhs650. The recruiting agency refused to put her back on the market for more than Dhs500. She is now looking on her own with her previous employers to get a better offer, i.e. an offer that puts her at her previous wage level.

It is important to note that not all domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates (foreign female domestic worker) earn in the range of US\$150 to US\$200, and only a minority of them earns higher salaries ranging between US\$250 and US\$350. Those at the high end of the salary scale do not work in the average United Arab Emirates local household but are mostly found in the non-national, especially British or American, households.

The wages of the foreign female domestic worker vary according to their ethnic background and are not based on their education or previous skills. A college-educated foreign female domestic worker from the Philippines is paid the same wage as a high school graduate or a middle school-educated Filipina, but would earn much more than a foreign female domestic worker from India, regardless of the latter's skills. When they were first introduced to the United Arab Emirates market in the 1990s, Indonesian foreign female domestic workers were the highest paid. Other factors also determine the wages that foreign female domestic workers earn in the United Arab Emirates. These factors operate at both the macro and micro level. One micro factor on the employer's side is the status and generosity of the employer. The macro factors are geographical position, relation and terms of trade of the particular country sending the foreign female domestic worker with the United Arab Emirates and the position and status of women in the sender country.

Nowadays, Indonesians are paid less than Filipinas. Hiring an Indonesian was once a status symbol in the United Arab Emirates as Indonesians were to be found only in upper-class households. The decline of the Indonesian foreign female domestic worker status in the United Arab Emirates is explained by factors including:

- higher demand and a greater supply, has brought the price down;
- embassy officials report that the Indonesian Government is encouraging poor Indonesian women to seek domestic work abroad. These Government policies are similar to the ones adopted in the Philippines during the 1980s to increase the country's foreign currency reserves and remittances via female domestics. The Indonesian Government is encouraging recruiting agencies to hire poor women and train them to compete on the international market. These policies initially made Indonesian domestics highly attractive on the receiver side. However, the increase in the "push factors" and the number of Indonesian foreign female domestic workers available on the market has reduced their price;
- the socio-cultural factors that initially played a leading role towards importing more Indonesian foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates market is now changing. Indonesian foreign female domestic workers were favoured for being: (i) muslims who spoke Arabic (all came to United Arab Emirates after a two- year contract in Saudi Arabia), (ii) well-trained at the start of their trip, better than Filipinas; (iii) modernized (clean and open-minded) like the Filipinas; (iv) more receptive to the demands of a Muslim culture (i.e., not dating). These features have

changed and Indonesian foreign female domestic workers are now perceived as “loose sexually” and not as strong and defensive as Filipinas²¹.

No days off

None of the foreign female domestic workers interviewed, or any other encountered in United Arab Emirates households, reported being allowed a day-off per week. Domestic service is the only paid job where employees are not allowed a day-off. For employers, giving foreign female domestic workers a day-off means relinquishing control of them, giving them opportunities to date or have a private life. Dating is forbidden in a conservative Islamic society like the United Arab Emirates. An employer’s relinquishment of control over a foreign female domestic worker by giving her a day-off during the week risks, according to popular thinking on this matter, to lead to unexpected problems.

However, not all foreign female domestic workers stay at home all the time. Some are allowed to go out, visit friends or go shopping with them. Some also sleep away from their employers’ houses on occasion. But these liberal practices still occur within the framework that the foreign female domestic workers must be controlled, with the employer always knowing where the foreign female domestic worker is going and why.

Perception of Work

Almost half of the foreign female domestic workers interviewed consider their work very heavy. However, despite its heaviness, housework was accepted, because it is the only choice. As one respondent observed, “The work is hard, but we came to work. We have to be strong” (#4). Housework is also accepted in cases where the employer approaches the foreign female domestic worker in an understanding manner. As an example, one foreign female domestic worker mentioned that, “It is not an easy job. It needs strength and a relaxed mind. However, my employers reward me constantly with their supportive words. They see how I care for the old lady. They say, that I am not a maid, I am a daughter” (#2).

3.5. Benefits and risks of household work

This section addresses abuse that foreign female domestic workers suffer at work. Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, it was not easy to approach or to get foreign female domestic workers to comment. In general, foreign female domestic workers found it easier to speak about previous experiences than current ones, although both types are reported here.

Some foreign female domestic workers reported incidents of physical and verbal abuse and even sexual abuse in their current work places. Abuse was not limited to the employers themselves. The children and relatives of employers as well as other house workers, especially male drivers, were also culprits.

Foreign female domestic worker narratives include the various types of abuse they suffered, in addition to assessing the extra benefits they get from domestic employment. Hence, this chapter treats both the advantages and disadvantages that the foreign female domestic worker working conditions present, in order provide an accurate portrayal of the foreign female domestic worker employment in its larger perspective and to answer the different questions raised by the study.

²¹ Based on interviews with recruiting agents in the United Arab Emirates.

Benefits

Generosity is a strong social value in the United Arab Emirates. Among other things, United Arab Emirates employers give tips to their employees during holidays and social events. They also buy them gold and give them money at the end of the contract to buy gifts and electronic devices for their families back home. United Arab Emirates employers also take up foreign female domestic worker shipping expenses for purchased goods and extra luggage. They pay from their contracts enables some foreign female domestic workers to buy land, a house, or even more. An Indian woman actually bought a house in India and rented a rice plantation for ten years as an investment.

Being a foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates gives one a chance to travel and see the world, because United Arab Emirates citizens travel every summer. More than one foreign female domestic worker mentioned travelling as one of the benefits they obtained in migrating to the United Arab Emirates (#15, #29, #17).

Foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates have recently obtained a new benefit, introduced with the Indonesian wave of foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates: the possibility of making the pilgrimage to Mecca. For a Muslim foreign female domestic worker, this is often the realization of a lifetime dream. An Indonesian foreign female domestic worker was delighted to talk about this opportunity. She made the pilgrimage with a group of other Indonesian foreign female domestic workers from Dubai. Her employer sponsored the entire journey, but she was able to be by herself and to enjoy herself with her friends. She recounted, “It was a once in a lifetime experience” (#12).

Despite all these benefits, foreign female domestic workers could still be considered underpaid as a result of the very low salary, compared to the level of spending and luxury in the United Arab Emirates. Because of the low wages paid to foreign female domestic workers, United Arab Emirates employers often hire more than one or two, instead of spending extra money on one of them. The supply of foreign female domestic workers is much higher than demand, and for each foreign female domestic worker migrating to the United Arab Emirates thousands more are available. Therefore, the employee’s total satisfaction is not so much a requirement as an ethical choice for employers. The United Arab Emirates is a society whose ethics are embedded in Islamic culture and teachings concerning good treatment of servants. But ethics in general leave plenty of room for idiosyncrasies and generalities. Also the rapid transformations the United Arab Emirates society is undergoing are affecting its value and ethical systems. The United Arab Emirates has been swept with rapid economic and capitalist development to which it has been trying to adjust. These sweeping transformations have left many United Arab Emirates citizens very uncomfortable and insecure in many areas, especially when they cannot connect these changes to old Islamic values. Islamic traditions do not offer clear and specific interpretations of these transformations, and do not necessarily help United Arab Emirates citizens scientifically interpret the increasing social problems confronting their society, such as the influx of foreign labour, and devise ways of dealing with it.

Earning a wage that is at least three or four times more than what they would earn in their home country, getting free accommodation, food and extra benefits are all factors that make migration to the United Arab Emirates appealing to many foreign female domestic workers, especially to women who live in extreme poverty back home. When a foreign female domestic worker goes home and reports about the extra benefits she receives, she motivates thousands of women who are looking for ways to improve their lives to migrate.

Extra benefits are not the whole story about employment as a domestic in the United Arab Emirates. There is, in fact, a probability that some foreign female domestic workers, embarking upon migration to the United Arab Emirates will be sexually abused, hit,

beaten, humiliated, etc., during the course of their employment. The following sub-section relates experiences of foreign female domestic workers interviewed for this study.

Damages

Once the foreign female domestic worker enters the United Arab Emirates household, she fits into the structural relations of this household, becoming part of the “harem.” However, she is not considered one of the regular female members of the household, because her status is lower. She is supposed to accomplish some female functions, like cleaning, washing, cooking, taking care of children, but her status is really that of a sub-woman. Her role is to relieve the real women of house of the dirty side of housework, and ultimately to give them higher status, and more time to engage in social life and in other aspects of the modern female role. A foreign female domestic worker in a United Arab Emirates household not only helps the women of the house to attain a higher status, she also serves the whole household so that it can accommodate itself to the new lifestyle of leisure and modernity.

A United Arab Emirates household, like any other household, is full of love, affection and personal care, but also tension, aggression and conflicts. When the foreign female domestic worker enters the household, she enters a whole New World of complications and challenges. She has no previous idea of this particular household’s dynamics or its interpersonal and inter-structural relationships and she is not equipped to handle them. In addition to her help and support, she herself brings factors of change for the family for which the family is not usually prepared. The family brings the foreign female domestic worker into the household as any new consumer goods, and most of the time its members do not take the possible consequences into account. The repercussions of this abrupt change are complications, tensions, conflicts, and the possibility of domestic violence.

The foreign female domestic worker’s position as the lowest-status within the United Arab Emirates household make them vulnerable to violence. Along with their low social status, their stereotyped image in United Arab Emirates society makes them easy targets and scapegoats for some facets of the emerging dysfunctional aspects of the United Arab Emirates family. The violence and damage they receive cannot only be measured by the violent act of an individual household member at a particular moment. Rather, violence can also be an accumulated set of acts, shaped by the history of United Arab Emirates society and its views on domestic work. It is also the result of the United Arab Emirates household’s continuous interaction with the new and of ongoing changes in United Arab Emirates society as well.

In telling their stories of abuse, the foreign female domestic workers complained more frequently of verbal abuse than they did of sexual and physical abuse. Labour attachés, recruiting agencies and migration officers have all mentioned the tendency of the United Arab Emirates employer to inflict verbal abuse on foreign female domestic workers. Half of the foreign female domestic workers interviewed reported being abused, verbally, physically or otherwise.

Physical abuse was the second most frequently reported form of abuse. Three foreign female domestic workers reported sexual abuse. Although relatively few incidents of sexual abuse were reported in this study, in comparison with other forms of abuse, it remains significant, because sexual abuse is a difficult issue to talk about. Another factor contributing to the low number of sexual abuse incidents reported in this sample is the area

itself²². The least frequently reported form of abuse was that committed by children against foreign female domestic workers. Not all foreign female domestic workers reported abuse, even in its minor forms such as verbal. However, since this is a highly important issue and not easy to talk about, the following part highlights the discourse of abuse as reported by the foreign female domestic workers interviewed.

Verbal and psychological abuse in the household of current employment

Verbal abuse included reports of screaming, shouting, demeaning language and name-calling. Foreign female domestic workers recounted:

"They say Indian, knows nothing" (#24). Another respondent stated, "My employer is a nervous person. She always make us feel that we are her maids" (#17). A third respondent said, "They shout, they scream at me, they call me names, they make me feel as if I am like *kashra* or trash" (#19). A fourth foreign female domestic worker recalled, "They say you are an animal, a donkey, crazy, stupid" (#42). As explained earlier, most of these forms of abuse are not only related to the specific interaction between the foreign female domestic worker and her employer, at the specific time or circumstances. Those forms of abuse are also related to a tense situation inside the household, or are rooted in the legacy of slavery and of subjecting the new house workers to the old forms of interaction between owner and slave.

One of these foreign female domestic workers works for a rich merchant family that used to own slaves. One of their previous slaves, an old black lady was always with the mother, following her, supporting everything she said, and acting as a family member and looking after the interests of the family. The household was an extended family, with all members living together: brothers, sisters, a divorced sister with her children, mother, etc. Family members in this household frequently attempted to silence each other during the interview. The house itself was large, with many rooms and divisions. Each division seemed to fulfil a separate business, acting as an autonomous unit within the whole. Servants, male and female, lived separately from the rest of the household, but their presence was constant and pervasive in the house²³.

Another verbal/psychological abuse case involved a household in a welfare-level neighbourhood of Dubai. In this household, sisters in their teens and older lived together, their father having deserted them after their mother's death. The older sister ran the household. Their maids complained that, "They fight every day, with me and with each other. The older sister turns my life into hell. She constantly gives orders, nothing pleases her and [she] makes me repeat the job over and over" (#35).

Each verbal/psychological abuse case was a story in itself, but each case of verbal and psychological aggression seemed to be rooted in the structural formation and interaction of the household members. When foreign female domestic workers enter such a household, they sometimes ease the tension, but most of the time, they get deeply involved in it.

²² Hamrya is known as one of the new housing developments in Dubai. It accommodates the rising educated elite, whose members usually consider themselves as more socially conscious and better equipped to deal with challenging human issues, such as the foreign female domestic worker.

²³ One of the male servants kept appearing and interrupting the interview until the researcher asked him to mind his own business, and refrain from interrupting if he did not want to be reported to his employer. He smiled and faded away.

Physical and emotional abuse in the household of current employment

Foreign female domestic workers who reported being physically abused were usually living in households where employers did not have a conscience about their behaviour towards housekeepers. Depending on its intensity and frequency, physical abuse can be very dangerous. Foreign female domestic worker recounted:

“Once I hit my employer’s car by accident. She started screaming at me. “Don’t you see? Is it the first time you see a car? Why are you so stupid?” She was wearing a ring. She smacked my face. My face was red for a long time. I cannot forget this moment” (#1). A second foreign female domestic worker related, “Once we were in the kitchen. I was cooking, [and] she got angry with me, after we got in an argument. She hit me with a plate”(#9). A third said: “She screams at me and hits me all the time. She does not give me food, only leftovers from the children. That is dirty, and I cannot eat it” (#42).

Those who reported being abused in households of previous employment related more dramatic events, since it is easier to report on former employers. They stated:

“She used to hit me, [and] spit at me. She says, “you are dirty, leave my house. Go to where you came from”. When I clean, she puts dirt. She hides my things, even my Tylenol. She says, ‘Sit in the sun, your headache would go.’” (#7) In another instance, the respondent said, “My previous employer was stingy. She didn’t give me lots of money. She didn’t give me enough food. She was always after my foot, she never trusted me. She screamed at me, and hit me so many times, until I decided to leave.” (#22) A third foreign female domestic worker related, “Both employers hit me, the man and his wife. They said, “You do not know how to work”. I was very young, I did not know anything then. They were very poor, they did not even have a washing machine, and wanted me to do all the work for them” (#41).

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse encompasses wider factors of analysis than physical abuse. It is situated not only within the category of human exploitation and degradation, but also stretches even further to gender relations and objectification of the female body. Feminist historians have succinctly pointed out the dual images of women developed by men. This dichotomy portrays the woman as the pure Madonna figure, and, simultaneously, as the low, devilish sex object. Historically, this dichotomy provided men with a sexual outlet embodied by females who did not represent a social or political threat.

Interestingly enough, most complaints of sexual abuse reported by the foreign female domestic worker were against older men, either in Saudi Arabia or in the Emirates. This is true in the case of the Filippina who was sentenced to death in the United Arab Emirates in 1995 for killing her employer who [she] reported raped her. Her employer was an old man in his seventies. Most Arab Gulf countries seem to be suffering from this social phenomenon of sexually abusive older men, which seems to be one of the outcomes of the oil boom and sudden accumulation of wealth in these countries.

The two cases of sexual abuse that were taking place in a foreign female domestic worker household of current employment involved two Filippina. One was very scared; she seemed to have been sexually abused by her employer and by another male house worker. She wept and shook as she spoke. She could not give details, but somehow she wanted to talk. When asked the sexual abuse question, “Have you ever had any trouble with the man in the house?” She nodded her head, and said, “What can I do? There is nothing I could do. I have to finish my contract, and leave. My problem is not only with my employer, [but] also the other male housekeeper, and she pointed at the door, saying, “They think because they work here, they have rights over us too” (#19). She could not explain in detail the amount of abuse she had had to put up with, the situation could not permit to speak freely with the interviewer.

The second Filippina seemed very comfortable, and at ease. She smiled and did not talk for a couple of minutes. Then she said, "Before I did not tell any one. I allowed him what he wants. After a while, he stopped. The lady [of the house] was angry with me. Now that he has stopped, she is fine. I do not know if he will try again" (#6). In the same household, the other housekeeper, who was an old Indian lady, answered, when asked the same question, that she avoided her male employer, and did not talk to him at all (#5).

Besides these two cases of sexual abuse, there were two other cases of sexual harassment. The difference as understood in this report between sexual abuse and sexual harassment is the sexual act in itself. In both cases foreign female domestic worker were sexually coerced into having forced sexual intercourse. However, in the cases of sexual abuse the act took place, while in the other it did not.

In one of the cases complaining of sexual harassment, it involved a male driver who worked in the household, but when the foreign female domestic worker reported him to her employer, they fired him (#7). The foreign female domestic worker in the second sexual harassment case said she had been harassed by the older brother in the house, and that since then, she had avoided him and did not enter the "inside part" of the house when he was there. She stayed mostly in the kitchen or in her room (#8).

Foreign female domestic workers reported two other cases, involving other foreign female domestic workers who were either sexually abused or sexually involved with their employers. The one who said she knew somebody who was sexually involved with her employer said, "I knew what the previous maid did, and she got fired as a result. I did not want to do the same" (#8). The second foreign female domestic worker reported, "My employer is very good, but I knew somebody here in the neighbourhood who used to get raped by her employer" (#22).

The most dramatic stories of sexual abuse reported by the foreign female domestic worker in the sample were stories of incidents occurring in houses of previous employment. They were all complaints referring to instances of sexual abuse in Saudi Arabia, each one perpetrated by old men. One respondent was a very young Sri Lanka girl who seemed to have great pride and integrity. "In Saudi Arabia they used to hit me, make me work a lot and did not give me enough money. Then the old man come to me, he says, "You want money, I give it to you. You are here for money". But I did not let him. I used to lock myself in. I would tell him, "You are a *hajji* (someone who performed pilgrimage), you are 65 years old, what do you want from a young girl like me?" I was very afraid of him. Once I told a friend of mine. I asked for advice. She said, "Kill him". I said, "No, I will leave". The previous maid in their house was from Sri Lanka, and she used to let him do what he wanted for money. He thought we are all the same. For me, this money is *haram* (forbidden). One day I threatened him to tell "mama" his wife, but I did not, because they would not have believed me" (#20).

The second story depicted a very traumatic experience. The foreign female domestic worker involved was from Indonesia, and had experienced actual, brutal rape as she described. When she spoke, she shivered. She said, "He was horrible. I will not forget it all my life. I still hear him knocking on my door. I still have nightmares. I used to see a doctor in Indonesia, but nothing seems to help me" (#32).

The last example was reported by a foreign female domestic worker from Sri Lanka, who also related that the incident had occurred in Saudi Arabia, where she was then employed. This respondent recounted, "He raped another housemaid in front of me. I also saw their son bringing women inside the house. One day I got the courage to tell mama (the female employer) who I think knew, but could not do anything. After she had finished her prayer, [I said], "Why are you praying? What is the use of your prayer? What is the use of your veil, if your son and husband do what they are doing?" (#16).

Despite its sensitive nature, foreign female domestic workers do talk about sexual abuse and their isolation, degradation and humiliation at work. Talking fulfils a need, because the type of life they live is very isolated, even in the best of situations.

4. Structural and legislative framework of the existence of the foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates

4.1. Conceptual framework of house workers in the United Arab Emirates

Female foreign domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates fall under the category of contract workers, although they are not equal to other contract workers in the United Arab Emirates. None of the foreign female domestic workers interviewed had a contract in their hands. Officially, the recruiting agency is authorized to provide foreign female domestic workers with contracts setting out rights and responsibilities. However, most recruiting agencies do not provide such contracts, limiting their interaction to satisfying employers. As a result, most recruiting agencies provide employers with a satisfaction-guaranteed policy for a maximum of four months. During this period, the recruiting agent will replace the foreign female domestic worker or attempt to reconcile issues and/or problems. Agents did report listening to both parties and attempting to resolve issues on both sides. However, extensive interviews with foreign female domestic workers and personal observation suggest that a foreign female domestic worker would never receive the same treatment as an employer at a recruiting agency. Beyond this period, employer and employee must resolve any conflicts themselves - or the police, in case of tragic incidents.

The United Arab Emirates established the category of contract workers to organize the large presence of foreign workers. This type of organization provides workers with the legal permission to work for two years under the sponsorship of their employer. When the two-year contract expires, renewal of the work permit and residence visa is allowed if the employer presents the official documents needed. To renew a foreign female domestic worker visa, a national employer requires: valid passport of the foreign female domestic worker, and his/her "maid sponsorship valid card". On the other hand an expatriate employer is required to pay the Government a one-year salary or Dhs4'000 (US\$1'000). If a foreign female domestic worker has a conflict with an employer and reports it to the police, the police is known to look after her rights or at least take it into consideration. As reported by all labour attachés in United Arab Emirates: the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, and Indonesia.

When a recruiting agency was questioned about this issue of binding contracts, the answer was that all foreign female domestic workers have a contract from their own embassies in which salary, and other rights and responsibilities are spelled out. Most foreign female domestic workers do, in fact, sign contracts issued by their embassies. However, these contracts are not binding on the employer or any other officials in United Arab Emirates. A Filippina foreign female domestic worker complained in the course of the interview, "Our contract stated that we would earn \$250 and have a day-off. In reality, none of it applies. They cheat us" (#17).

Officially, foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates fall under the category of contract workers. In reality, they do not engage in legal binding contracts setting out the protection, rights, responsibilities, terms of reference to their situation, earnings, hours of work, relationship to the employer or any other aspect. Their position is that of "visiting workers" who are allowed a work permit valid for two years. That this permit is not given to them in person indicates their true position under the migration laws and practices today.

Housework, a devalued framework internally and externally

The head of research in the Ministry of Labour adds a new dimension to the issue of domestic regulations in the United Arab Emirates in saying: “Comparatively speaking, we are a very young country. Our social organization and most of our internal regulations are modelled on outside experiences. When it comes to domestics in United Arab Emirates, our biggest drawback is the fact that foreign female domestic workers are considered unskilled labour, a category adopted from international practices. Until very recently, the international literature on migration did not account for women as immigrants.

“In the United Arab Emirates, we follow trends but we do not set them. If the status of domestics develops worldwide, we will be bound to follow. It may take longer here, because our society is very new to modernization and human rights issues. However, we are changing. I personally think once the concept of domestic work becomes valued worldwide, the status of domestics in United Arab Emirates will also improve” (Rashid Mohamad, 2001).

No binding contract

Contracts that foreign female domestic worker hold sometimes from the recruiting agencies are neither official nor binding to the United Arab Emirates Government. Dr. Mohamed Al Rukun, president of the United Arab Emirates’ lawyers’ association, explains: “These contracts cannot be adopted by United Arab Emirates officials, the migration officers or any official agency”²⁴. In order to have a contract that is internally binding, all parties have to be under the internal control of the United Arab Emirates. Since these contracts involve the Government of the foreign female domestic worker’s original country, they cannot be adopted internally unless there is a special form of bilateral agreement or understanding. To the best of my knowledge, however, these agreements still do not exist in the United Arab Emirates in relation to foreign female domestic workers.” (Dr. Mohamed Al Rukun, 2001).

Prospect of a binding contract

United Arab Emirates officials are in the process of preparing a contract to be binding internally. This contract, as an official figure in the Dubai immigration office²⁵ confirmed, is basically aimed at protecting both the employer and the employee, and at controlling bad practices at all levels, especially recruiting agencies in the United Arab Emirates (Salem Said, 2001). It will state all conditions under which a domestic has to work, including payment, benefits, etc. It might be similar to the one provided by sending countries, with the exception of the day-off. A minimum salary of Dhs400 to Dhs500 is to be specified along with other terms binding employer and employee.

The head of the office, Mr. Said Bin Belaila believes the issue of foreign female domestic worker will not be controlled until migrant domestics are considered as other workers in United Arab Emirates, and are included under the country’s labour laws. Otherwise domestic work will continue to be a loose-ended means by which other unskilled labourers enter the country (Said Bin Belaila 2001 and Latifa Al-Maissi: Kul-Al-Usra, 2001).

²⁴ Based on an interview conducted with Dr. Mohammad Al-Rukun, prominent intellectual in the United Arab Emirates and President of the lawyers association.

²⁵ Mr. Salem Said has been dealing with issues of migrant domestics for 15 years .

Legal context

As stated previously, the most serious issue relating to the legal and contextual presence of foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates is the fact that they do not fall under labour laws and regulations. All foreign female domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates, along with gardeners and male domestic workers, are considered as unskilled and fall under the category of maids, or house workers, the sole category exempt from all applications of labour regulations (United Arab Emirates labour laws: United Arab Emirates Official Gazette 1973). The immediate implication of such a regulation is the denial of such rights as limited working hours, weekly or yearly holidays, and end-of-work compensation.

The only regulation foreign female domestic workers fall under is the immigration law, which considers them more from a State-control perspective, a security perspective, than from a developmental or human perspective. In fact, the booklet of immigration regulations contains only four statements pertaining to foreign female domestic workers. The most important are one confirming the 1996 amendment under which domestics are clearly and strongly denied “family reunion” (Article 5 of 1995 Federal Cabinet decision regarding Migrant Workers Family Reunion-United Arab Emirates Immigration Law: United Arab Emirates Official Gazette 1973) and another emphasizing an amendment under which it states the conditions for non-nationals to hire domestics²⁶. These conditions are:

- A minimum salary of Dhs6'000 or US\$ 2'000 earned by the non-national living in the United Arab Emirates.
- Payment of one year's minimum salary or Dhs4'000 equivalent to US\$1'200 to be paid to the United Arab Emirates Government. (Article 22, No. 4, of Visa Condition Regulation-United Arab Emirates Immigration Law: Official Gazette, 1973).

The term domestic is spelt out in the Immigration regulation booklet when it addresses the issue of a “Domestic Card”. Theoretically, this card regulates the number of domestics a national can hire or bring in to the country. This specific regulation states only the cost of the card, which is Dhs50 (Amendment 1985 of the federal law 1973: Official Gazette, 1973). With this card the Department of Immigration can keep track of the number of domestics working for the sponsor. It is the sponsor's responsibility to make sure that the domestic has left the country or report her running away; otherwise, she/he will be considered as still under his/her²⁷ sponsorship. If the numbers accumulate above the allowed limits, a sponsor can be denied more domestics. This sets the limit for importing domestic workers according to family size, special needs, in case of sick person, elderly, newborn, or other family member. A family consisting of a mother, father and two children would be allowed two domestic helpers, a nanny, a driver, a cook and a gardener.

Foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates are left under the control of the visa sponsor or the employer. The sponsor, or *kafil* in Arabic, is part of a system peculiar to the Gulf countries and requires further explanation to understand the position of foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates.

²⁶ After an increase in the number of foreign female domestic worker in United Arab Emirates and the increased criticism of the growing number of foreign children born in United Arab Emirates, United Arab Emirates officials decided to limit the access of expatriates to importing foreign labour and specifically domestics.

²⁷ A woman can sponsor a domestic in case she lives alone, is widowed, divorced or if her husband has no “domestic card”.

Kafala, or sponsorship system

The sponsorship system in the oil states is one of the most peculiar systems developed affecting migrant labour. In the United Arab Emirates, as well as other oil monarchies, the law requires that each foreign labourer have a sponsor, *Kafil*, holding citizenship of that state (Beauge et Buttner, 1991). This system also extends to business and all economic and merchant activities. No business can operate in the United Arab Emirates without a sponsor, a shareholder, or a *Kafil*. State engineers established the Kafala system originally in order to insure control over foreign labour. This system has in itself become an opportunity for nationals, to make easy money out of trading foreign labour and sponsorship. A national sponsor can make thousands of dollars providing sponsorship to businesses and foreign workers. Needless to say, it has encouraged the economic non-productivity of the indigenous population and increased the class gap between nationals and expatriates.

The sponsorship system is one of the power-generators of migration politics in the Gulf. Ominously, it has shaped for the situation that breeds differences and forges calamities. The sponsorship system has embraced the migratory system, casting and creating policies for the United Arab Emirates opposing “insiders vs. outsiders,” “dogs vs. watchdogs,” “workers vs. policymakers,” “citizens vs. expatriates.” Beyond the fascination of making fast money, no one appears to like with the system. Foreign migrants complain about the citizens’ racist attitudes, while nationals lament their peripheral role in their own country.

Recently the Minister of Labour has himself strongly criticized the *Kafala* system, calling it the main cause of corruption of United Arab Emirates nationals and the reason behind their decreased economic productivity (Mattar Humaid Attayer, 9 May 2001 and Hanan Jad in Al- Khaleej News Paper: 8 May 2001). He has called for its abolition. However, since many benefit from it, nationals as well as non-nationals, *Kafala* remains strong, and will require strong Governmental as well as structural measures to eradicate it.

Officials in the United Arab Emirates are putting stronger measures to regulate and control sponsors’ behaviour, especially those who are trading in visas, and bringing in migrant domestics to work under other sponsors. Federal Law Number 13, regulating the entrance and exit of foreigners, was approved in 1996. A three-month prison sentence and a fine of Dhs10'000 are the penalty for employing someone who is not under one’s own sponsorship, or vice versa. In this case, both sponsors are penalized. The migrant is not freed from this penalty. However, one can easily find domestic workers, males and female, going from house to house, working part time and on an hourly rate. These freelance domestics are to be found usually under the sponsorship of a national or a non-national, who is not their immediate employer, and who charges them a fee for his continuous sponsorship services.

Foreign female domestic workers under the Kafala system

Under the *Kafala* system, foreign female domestic workers are at the mercy of their sponsors. Legally, once a foreign female domestic worker enters her employer’s house, she is totally under his/her control, since the employer is usually her visa sponsor. The employer bears total responsibility for his/her domestic workers. He/she holds the foreign female domestic worker passport and all official papers until the day of departure. During the first three or four months²⁸ of the contract, both the employer and the employee have the right to report problems to the recruiting agency or to seek changes in the status or

²⁸ Depending on the recruiting agency’s terms of business conditions

employment of the foreign female domestic worker. The laws governing the status of domestic workers and the practices toward foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates enslave them to their employers until the duration of their contracts end.

In an interview, Mr. Mattar Attayer, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, supported the idea of moving foreign female domestic workers under the Ministry of Labour and treating them like any other worker in the United Arab Emirates. The only reservation he raised is the issue of the day-off. Most employers reject the idea of giving the housekeeper a day-off, not because they want her to keep working but because they do not want her to go out on her own. The United Arab Emirates is a conservative Islamic society that does not approve of dating and sexual intercourse outside of marriage (Mattar Attayer, 2001).

The United Arab Emirates has a large number of single male workers and complaints of crimes committed by migrant males are increasing. In 1985, there were 185 males for 100 females. Figures for 1995 show 200 Males for every 100 Females, with the highest figure in Dubai, 226, and the lowest in Ras Al Khaimah, 142. Today, it is expected to be even higher, after the 1995 regulation that denied "Family Reunion" to all low-paid workers who are mostly males (Ministry of Planning, General Population Census).

4.2. Ratified conventions and bilateral agreements relating to migrant workers

The United Arab Emirates, as confirmed by lawyers and other officials, has no bilateral agreements pertaining to domestic workers. The United Arab Emirates has ratified ILO Convention No.100 regarding equal pay for work of equal value between women and men. Discrimination against foreign female domestic workers is clear in the payment of salaries: a male housekeeper is always paid more than a female one. Male housekeepers interviewed all got more or less the same salary, the difference of Dhs100 to 200. Male cooks get an additional Dhs.400 to 900. Male drivers are also much better paid than females, even though the latter perform housekeeping responsibilities along with driving, while a male driver is only a driver with fewer hours of work.

The United Arab Emirates has ratified the following ILO Conventions: Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919 (No.1); Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29); Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81); Night Work (Women) Convention (Revised), 1948 (No. 89); Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105); Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111); Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138); and Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (no. 182). (Ministry of Labour, 2001)

4.3. Immigration rules and regulations

Besides the above-mentioned immigration rules and regulations, one should note that Article 4 of Cabinet Decision Number 6 in 1974, pertaining to the organization of immigrants' visas, forbid the employment of children under the age of 14. However, children, mostly Pakistanis and Sudanese, and recently also Afghans, are employed in camel racing. Despite the fact that the United Arab Emirates Government has signed on the agreement (138) forbidding this practice, one still sees small children riding camels in the practice area. No cases of girls under the age of fourteen working were reported.

4.4. Legislation related to the employment of migrant workers

As most of the issues have been addressed in earlier sections, a note on family law is added here. The United Arab Emirates applies the Islamic Sharia Law, which is applicable to all parties alike, migrants and non-migrants. However, differences occur among Islamic trends and schools of thoughts and also among the different Emirates in the United Arab Emirates. The differences in application of laws and regulations in each Emirate extend to criminal laws. In earlier criminal charges against foreign female domestic workers, the penalty often depended on the Islamic school of thought and the place of trial (a situation similar to most federal political regimes).

4.5. Legislations pertaining to trafficking

The United Arab Emirates Immigration Laws and regulation forbid trafficking in person. This is clearly stated in the Federal Law No. 13, 1996, Article 33, which specifies a penalty of a minimum of three years in prison and a maximum of 15 years and a fine of Dhs15'000 for anyone engaging in trafficking and/or helping it. The United Arab Emirates Government will, in addition, penalize and confiscate any means of transportation used in the process. It will also send the people caught in trafficking back to their home countries (Official Gazette 1973).

Article 34 of the same law penalizes the falsification of documents, visas, passports or any means used in trafficking.

4.6. Implementation and enforcement

According to the head of the Department of Immigration Law Enforcement and Penalties in the Department of Immigration in Dubai, the regulations are applied “by *al-baraka*”, a concept meaning “grace” (Salah Bin Salom, 10 May 2001). According to this interview, it seems that laws are not enforced according to a clear system but based on experience and personal decision-making. Idiosyncrasies seem to be highly visible in a country that is still very young most of whose rules and regulations are imported. National lawyers and law enforcement officers are newly taking their roles in the system and may need another generation or so to build real experience.

A United Arab Emirates female lawyer confirmed the above observation, saying that there is no system that can be evaluated and developed, and that the problem of foreign domestic workers is growing, but is not given any special attention. It seems that “both legal and political systems are full with contradictions, and the status of foreign female domestic worker is one of them” (Amna Jalla f, 5 April 2001).

5. Private initiatives for protecting female migrant workers and enforcing their rights

In the absence of laws and regulations, foreign female domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates have no social security, as stated earlier in this report. No relevant organizational practices or private initiatives exist. No NGOs protect their rights, no activists look out for them. Workers are restricted from organizing themselves under any legal forum.

In the United Arab Emirates, the Government does not take any initiatives to protect domestic workers. Their effort is concentrated during the times of conflict reported to police or immigration office. The only time foreign female domestic workers can interact and exchange information is while they're picking up or dropping off children at school or when they meet in other public places, such as parks and shopping centres. Even then, domestics are not totally free. They are constantly watched and supervised by the children, drivers and other members of their sponsor's household. In UAE, there is no situation such as, for example, in Singapore where foreign female domestic workers reportedly meet freely in public places and can organize themselves.

Trade unions seem not to be tolerated in the United Arab Emirates for any type of workers, neither the professional nor the labour class. The Government in all its activities pertaining to social organization closely watches working locals and expatriates. The only level of organization allowed relates to cultural and social issues. Workers' rights are considered a sensitive, political issue that could affect security, especially as the majority of workers are foreigners. As a result, any organization that advocates workers' human rights is absent. Even religious groups do not address labour issues as in other parts of the world.

5.1. Recruiting Agencies

The United Arab Emirates' recruiting agencies seem to be part of the problem. Not only they do not care for the well being of domestic workers, they also discriminate against and abuse them. Three housekeepers interviewed had serious complaints about their recruiting agencies. The first said, "We are treated not treated as humans", the recruiting agent and his staff "scream at us, address us with bad names, use foul language, if we do not listen to them immediately, kick us, hit us on the head, or beat on us". Another one said, "I think recruiting agents are worse than employers. I wish we never had to come through agencies, we are asked to sleep in one dirty room, on the floor without pillows or blankets. The worse is when a woman has to stay in the agency for a long time for she will be constantly shouted at, called names and sometimes sexually assaulted by the manager of the agency". A third one recalled, "Once I saw the recruiting agent take gold from one of the housekeepers. I fail to understand why they do that, we can't resist them or answer them back, they control our life" (The three foreign female domestic worker were from Indonesia).

An interviewer herself sensed this bad treatment at one of the agencies. "She was directed to an unpleasant room with a broken sofa to speak with the foreign female domestic workers. Foreign female domestic worker were mostly Indonesian and few Ethiopians sitting on the floor. They looked so vulnerable, yet smiling because someone was talking to them and giving them some attention. After spending more than an hour with them, suddenly the recruiting agent stormed in, kicking the door and screaming at one of them to come out because her employer had arrived to pick her up. The agent had forgotten that the interviewer was there and was taken by surprise when he saw her. He immediately calmed down and said: "I didn't know you were still here! Do you still need more time?" She understood the message, and replied "No thank you, I am leaving in a minute" (based on a field work at a recruiting agency in Dubai 2001)".

In the United Arab Emirates, recruiting agencies are licensed by the local Government, but are not closely monitored. Most agencies try to please the employer, rather than looking after the employee's well being. Even when they see suffering, the most they will do, if the woman is still under the four-month warranty — When a domestic is brought in through a recruiting agency, there is a four-month warranty period during which a full satisfaction is promised to both sides. This warranty is later applied only in case of major problems such as contagious disease and/or pregnancy — is to find another sponsor or send her back to her country. Recruiting agencies mostly mediate employer-employee situation only when the employer is complaining and not vice versa. Usually, housekeepers do not bother complaining to their recruiting agencies.

In addition, recruiting agencies in United Arab Emirates are blamed on both sides: employer and employee. Since many operate from different parts of the Emirates without a license, they have a reputation of cheating and mishandling situations. As one agency representative said, "If a recruiting agency is illegal, he does not mind doing all sorts of illegal things, such as taking money and running away, promising a warranty period and not delivering, mistreating domestics and so on. A legal agent would not dare to do such a thing, since the penalty is high and could cost his license. Illegal agencies have less to lose, only a table and a chair, and are called "mobile agents" because they move from place to place, depending on the amount of trouble they get themselves in".

In short, the United Arab Emirates is still lagging behind in terms of *awareness-raising regarding migrant workers' rights and advocacy for pro-migrant policies and legislation change*. No NGOs are working on these issues that remain social taboos. The only institutions remotely working for the well-being of domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates are the embassies, in particular, the labour offices pertaining to these embassies.

5.2. Assistance and support services

Embassies, specifically labour offices, can be considered in some cases, as NGOs. The Labour Attaché at the Philippine Embassy confirmed this attribute while talking about the programs and support her office provides to Filippina domestics and other unskilled labour in the United Arab Emirates.

The Embassy of the Philippines in the United Arab Emirates is considered as the most active in terms of supporting its domestic workers. Among those who see the embassy of the Philippines as highly active one could state: recruiting agencies, United Arab Emirates immigration officers, and domestics themselves. Since this research began in the mid-nineties, Philippines Embassy personnel have been the most willing to openly address the topic, the most enlightened, active, and efficient in tackling the problem. Nowadays, they offer the best programs for educating foreign female domestic workers and helping them to move out of the unskilled labour category. The most recent program carried out at the Dubai consulate on weekends is exemplary as self-sustained community work.

Under this program, the embassy provides classes ranging from computing to cooking and sewing, to photography and other skills free of charge. Filipinos from the Dubai and United Arab Emirates community themselves sustain these lessons, teaching and organizing classes free of charge.

A visitor to the consulate on Friday, the holy day in the United Arab Emirates, would find it busy with Filipino men and women, sometimes accompanied by their children, going in and out of classes, registering, chatting, and asking for information, in the atmosphere of a fair.

Three domestics were interviewed there. One, taking a computer course, said, “I work for a Lebanese family and they allow me to come on Fridays to take this course. I am very happy because I can now use the computer but also because I make friends here and see different people every Friday. When I go back to work, I feel happier and have more energy to bear staying and working in the house the whole day”. When asked if she could use this training to improve her future, she replied, “Of course, I can, especially when I go back to Philippines and can apply for a different job. I will not have to live as a housekeeper all my life”.

Another one said: “This is my third course in cooking. I have finished two levels. Next term, I will be teaching elementary courses. Additionally I help the consulate in registration and in reaching out to other domestics to come and apply for these courses”. She claimed that the classes have helped improve her career as a housekeeper. “Now that I am a better cook, my employer is much more satisfied with me and has increased my salary by Dhs300”.

A third one said, “I am taking sewing courses and hope to be able to sew my clothes and my children's when I get married. I am engaged and will marry after I finish my contract”.

According to the Philippines Labour Attaché, this program had been recently developed to help unskilled labour move up the ladder. Since then, they have succeeded in minimizing the average number of housekeepers in United Arab Emirates from 35 per cent to 15 per cent (Arriola, 2001). Most have been moving to higher ranked jobs. This program is most successful among domestics who work in non-Arab households. Arab households do not allow domestics to go out on Fridays. However, one could find rare exceptions in cases of liberal employers.

As for other services provided to domestic workers, the recruitment of an Arab-speaking representative seems to have helped in resolving problematic cases.

The labour office in other embassies is less organized, with no special programs for domestic development.

The Indian Embassy, due to the large number of regularized, men working in United Arab Emirates and the decreasing number of foreign female domestic workers, does not give the issue of female domestics priority.

The Sri Lankan Embassy has been working along the same methods for the last 15 years. They do follow up on extreme cases, working on legalizing their situation, solving their problems, appointing lawyers as needed. But their work is more routine follow-up and, in most case, they lack modern skills and professional approaches and training. They do not seem to have the resources and training for development as shown by the Philippines Embassy.

The Indonesian Embassy houses domestic workers with problems and teaches them basic skills. Quite a few are provided temporary jobs, until their cases are cleared at the immigration, with the police or the sponsor. The labour officer, fluent in Arabic, seemed to be knowledgeable and highly supportive to domestic workers. Since he has been in the United Arab Emirates for a long time, he was capable of helping labour attachés, who usually arrive from Indonesia with limited knowledge of local culture. During the researcher's first visit to the Indonesian Embassy, 70 domestics were living there and could be seen at the front desk, receiving papers, arranging appointments.

Though the Indonesian labour officers are highly active in supporting the domestics, they are helpless in resolving their daily routine problems. The Embassy has lodged strong complaints about bureaucratic corruption in Indonesia. Reportedly, the domestic workers

must pay a security deposit to the Government before leaving the country to be used in emergencies but Indonesian officials often do not release the money. Domestics at the embassy suffer as a result of Government corruption in Indonesia.

Indonesian embassy officials seem not to have professional resources to set up programs like the one offered by the Philippines. Most Indonesian migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates, are unskilled, domestics unable to lead or sustain training.

The Ethiopian embassy does not exist in the United Arab Emirates and there are no officials to support Ethiopian domestics in difficulty. This has an impact on the way the Ethiopians are treated in United Arab Emirates.

5.3. Migrant workers and freedom of association

Domestics are not allowed to organize in support groups, unions or enlightened labour gatherings. As pointed out earlier, the issue of labour organization is more than a social taboo. It is a national security issue and any bridging of it results in imprisonment and deportation from the country, with a ban on future entry.

Domestics usually gather information during informal contacts or through illegal groups seem to be active in encouraging domestics to run away and in helping them get other types of jobs, such as working in stores, supermarkets and, in some cases, into illegal prostitution. In the year 2000, United Arab Emirates police reported 11,798 cases of domestics running away (Al Maissi, 2001).

Running away is continuously growing in the United Arab Emirates and taking the shape of organized movements. Police reports also reflect the fact that some domestics come in on domestic visas and then run away to find another type of job. Run-away domestics become illegal. When they are ready to leave the country after two years, they go to the police, get their exit form and then leave. The police track these forms of organizations and persecute them. They sometimes succeed in catching them, however, the situation is not equally strict in all Emirates of the United Arab Emirates.

6. Institutional framework

6.1. Bodies to promote, enforce and supervise policy and legislation

The only institutions in the United Arab Emirates that could promote, enforce supervise policies and legislations is the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of the Interior. Domestics do not yet relate to the Ministry of Labour as they are grouped under the Ministry of Interior as unskilled workers. All laws and regulations pertaining to domestics are considered internal security measures. Lately, when the House of Representatives, the United Arab Emirates National Council, met to amend the labour laws, they had a closed session. No media and visitors were allowed in.

It appears highly unlikely that these institutions would promote any laws and regulations benefiting domestic workers. Their only priority seems to be the issue of population structure and its implications. Officials at the Embassy of the Philippines, however, seem to be working on a contract form with the United Arab Emirates Immigration Office that could be binding on both parties, employer and employee. Some aspects of this agreement, will improve the conditions of the employee. Until now, there has been no binding contract for the employer or the sponsor.

6.2. National and international coordination efforts

The only national and international coordination efforts practiced in the United Arab Emirates today are the ones done through official channels such as the ILO and the UN. United Arab Emirates officials are active when they are invited to attend and present their opinions. In general, the attitude towards labour issues is “Silence”. However, when faced with international pressure, they do not want to be seen to break international agreements. There is great awareness of the United Arab Emirates’ international image and officials would bend to pressure if they see it affects the country’s status worldwide.

NGOs are not active in the United Arab Emirates for reasons mentioned above. Yet, from time to time, one hears of activists visiting and researching the labour situation. These activists who visit and leave, keep their work under a low profile and do not like to affiliate themselves with United Arab Emirates officials and/or locals out of fear of being denied an entry in the country.

International women NGOs need to be much more active on this level and in places like the Arab Gulf region.

6.3. Prevention of exploitation of the female migrant worker

The United Arab Emirates Government has done little to protect migrants against abuse. Labour rights are not a priority in the United Arab Emirates. The formation of trade unions, labour unions, or any other organization that concentrates on the issue of rights is not allowed. The only form of organization that does exist are professional associations such as the Lawyers’ Association, Sociologists’ Association, Women’ Associations and so on. However, they cannot operate freely in the United Arab Emirates and have to get a special Governmental permission from the Ministry of Labour and submit to continuous scrutiny by Government security agencies.

Non-nationals do have the right to have their own organizations, under similar limitations. In the United Arab Emirates, there are 17 associations of civil society pertaining to non-nationals, and 83 for nationals (Ministry of Labour Report, 1997).

No training or awareness campaign has taken place in the United Arab Emirates regarding the issue of foreign female domestic workers and protection of women migrants.

6.4. Protection of female migrant workers

As previously stated, the United Arab Emirates Government has no special plans to protect migrants and domestic workers, nor recognize their status as workers (Al Jallaf, 2001).

It appears that immigration officers do not receive any specific training for responding to the concerns of the abused women (Bin Saloom 2001).

There is a general impression that the Government does not consider its responsibility to protect domestic workers or solve any conflict that arises between them and their employers. Problematic cases are dealt with on an ad hoc basis, and sometimes they lead to forcing the employer to pay due wages or to releasing their domestic workers.

6.5. Assistance and services

According to the Philippines Labour Attaché, some embassies have expressed satisfaction with the United Arab Emirates Government services and confirm that services have improved. Serious attempts are made to help domestic workers solve their problems. (Arriola, 2001).

The Immigration Office also seems to try to improve its work and is gaining experience in handling cases. However, the Office considers a close cooperation with the embassies of the sending countries crucial to solving problems (Said 2001).

The experience, involvement and follow-up by officials from the sending countries play a key role in improving practices on the receiving end. When compared to other migrant nationalities, Filipinos are thought to give a better impression. This was also confirmed by the Dubai Police (Frandon, 2001). Indeed, when an Indonesian migrant (Karikender) was convicted of adultery, officials in the United Arab Emirates did not give her the same attention, even though international NGOs were active in the case. Clearly, the level of involvement, experience and sustainable improvement of practices of the sender country, make a difference in the life of the migrant.

The involvement of the sender countries is, however, not sufficient in itself and the receiving side has to improve its practices. In the case of the United Arab Emirates, the situation is, in general, unacceptable. The many people interviewed for this report all agree on the need to change the legal and contractual status of foreign female domestic workers.

6.6. Migrant workers' freedom of association

As mentioned before, no migrant workers are allowed to form any type of association as it is considered threatening to the state and internal security. In fact, United Arab Emirates police and security are very active in suppressing association. This issue relates to all workers in the United Arab Emirates, males and female, although discrimination against male workers organizing is considered more important than females.

6.7. Migrant workers' assessment of Government initiatives and suggestions for future interventions

The strongest complaints from foreign female domestic workers about United Arab Emirates Government practices concern waiting time at the immigration. If something goes wrong between foreign female domestic workers and their employers, requiring the foreign female domestic worker to return home, the foreign female domestic workers are imprisoned by the immigration authorities until their papers are cleared. “I do not understand why we have to be treated like that when our employers are the cause of the problem. Even when they abuse us and we have to leave, we have to wait in detention. This is unfair. We are treated like prisoners only because we are poor” (# 50).

Many foreign female domestic workers continue to put up with harsh conditions to avoid this detention. The situation is improving, because more officers have been added to this section to process papers faster, and help release the foreign female domestic worker faster. Embassies play an important role in helping process papers more quickly, and in contacting employers and getting foreign female domestic workers released.

Conclusion and recommendations

To conclude, the role of the different players — Government, recruiting agencies, embassies, employers, employees, NGOs and the ILO — should be emphasised. The contribution of all participants is extremely important as we are in a highly interactive age where dimensions feed and strengthen one another.

However, the most important recommendation in relation to domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates, would be to move them from the category of unskilled workers to the category of skilled workers. This change would bring domestic workers under the cover of United Arab Emirates labour laws. Unless this change is made, domestic workers will continue to be at the mercy of individual employers and sponsors.

Recommendations at the Government level

Moving domestics to the category of worker

Domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates under the individual sponsorship of the employer are often in a situation of slavery. The employer seems to decide the fate of the domestic workers and controls their lives. The only difference is that they are not bought and sold. This similarity with slavery must be pointed out to clarify their current status and total vulnerability to the head of the household. Needless to say, not all sponsors in the United Arab Emirates are bad, but the situation itself encourages abuse.

Implementing a binding contract for both the parties

Domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates are considered as contract workers, but they do not have binding contracts. When they start working, they discover the reality of the promises made in the interviews. Government and immigration officials are trying to change this situation and are working on a contract to be binding for both the parties. This has not yet occurred and serious efforts have to be channelled to make it a reality.

The recruiting agencies

Treatment of domestics by the recruiting agencies

The treatment of domestics by recruiting agencies needs to be monitored by the Government (licensing body). This supervision could be made by setting up a cell dealing with the complaints and grievances of the domestics, both by the recruiting agents and the employer. Under the present legislation, this appears impossible, as the Ministry of Labour, that licenses agencies, is overwhelmed with more demanding problems, such as controlling illegal agencies. If these issues are addressed by international organizations and are part of the agenda of the international meetings, it will be taken seriously.

Enforcing better living conditions at the agencies

The living conditions along with fair treatment should be criteria for licensing of recruiting agencies. These criteria have to be spelled out clearly in the license. For example, domestics need to be provided a proper place to stay, sleep, eat and live if they are staying in the office for more than a day.

Embassies and labour offices level

Programs to educate domestics and help them to move up the work ladder

As seen in the case of the Philippines Embassy, embassies and labour offices need to move from their current passive role of solving problems to a more proactive role of educating domestics to move up the employment level, and become aware and conscious of their situation.

Embassies and labour offices should develop places for domestics to meet and interact in a safe environment managed and sponsored by NGOs. The social clubs could provide them with support services, and means to interact with their families such as Internet, etc.

They also need to provide counselling service (psychological as well as social) to support problematic cases of abuse. This type of help is also needed for all sort of regular situations too.

For example, programs of literacy, computers, cooking, and other skills that help female workers to develop and feel better about themselves could be provided through such places. Also counselling sessions on United Arab Emirates society, history and other information that would ease their integration into the society and minimize cultural shock could be of great help.

Domestic workers level

Training programs in home countries

Training programs for housekeepers are almost essential and make a big difference in the quality of service provided and the experience and satisfaction on the job. Indonesian housekeepers go through some type of training in housework before they embark on the journey and this training puts them on a higher level than others. Unfortunately, and because of the increasing number and greater demand for Indonesian housekeepers, Government control over this service seems to be diminishing and training programs are not enforced as strongly as they used to. New domestics are brought from remote villages and enter the market without training.

Training is essential not only for teaching housekeeping skills but others as well. Training should take place on a larger scale, where an understanding of the nature of the job, its challenges and the meaning of living in a foreign culture and with a foreign family are all addressed before the housekeeper leaves her country. Emotional skills and cultural shock are some of the issues that need to be addressed and discussed with domestics before their migration journey. Domestics who have been through this journey need to take part in such programs to bring in their experiences and the lessons learned.

Screening programs

Screening programs should be enforced to provide domestics with good advice and limit the migration of domestics who should not embark on the journey. Screening should be based on a number of criteria such as: age of domestic worker, age of children, number of children, health status, family status and many other aspects that need to be taken into consideration at the start of the trip.

Employer level

Employer training and different types of involvement

Employers in the United Arab Emirates often have stereotyped images of domestic workers, as lazy, weak, stubborn, careless, unintelligent. These stereotypes are clear in the employers' private discussions, and how they treat their domestic workers, speak to them, or how United Arab Emirates children perceive domestics.

Most employers in the United Arab Emirates are not highly educated. The average education of female employers is at elementary schools. The need to educate employers about the treatment of domestics is a pressing fact, yet its attainability is far from reach. This issue is seldom addressed in academic and intellectual writings in the United Arab Emirates, although, recruiting agencies and other institutions following up on problems of domestics are aware of this necessity.

Programs to educate and develop the communication skills of the employers are necessary if at the goal is a cordial relationship between employers and employees. United Arab Emirates women's organization and NGOs need to be encouraged to get involved in such practices. They could provide the bridging solution to such problems.

Women's organizations in the United Arab Emirates carry on many programs, educational and other sort. Although they have ongoing conferences, they have never addressed the issue of domestics, despite the large number of female domestics in their own households.

Social level

Altering the stereotype of domestics

The social image of domestics is one of major problems in United Arab Emirates society. Issues of racial discrimination have to be addressed widely. Social problems related to domestics are overwhelming in the United Arab Emirates, yet United Arab Emirates citizens tend to address only the ones they perceive. There is no attempt to listen to domestics or to include their views as a socially valid. TV programs could create a major change on this level.

NGOs level

International NGOs

International women's NGOs should be encouraged to include the United Arab Emirates and the other parts of the Arab Gulf under their immediate interests. Issues of domestic work and domestic workers should get more attention at international and women's fora. Interaction among women's organization at the Global Level need to include domestics on their agenda.

ILO

Programs and studies

The ILO needs to increase the level of studies and research and develop further into producing different types of media production such as short movies, videos, Internet sites etc.

Governmental pressure

The ILO is the world organization that could bring pressure on individual countries when it comes to workers. In the case of the United Arab Emirates, the ILO could play a major role in changing some of the current discriminatory regulations.

In addition, the ILO could encourage the development of a network of offices in countries with high degree of sending and or receiving female domestic workers. Such offices could play an integral role in following up issues and connecting all players, and serving to eliminate the discriminatory aspect of these policies.

Networking could be one of the best ways of releasing pressure on vulnerable women under such global circumstances. The main problem that such poor women suffer from is isolation. A network of offices related to the ILO could be the way to enforce better practices and continuous evaluation of these practices.

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Appendix 1

Profile of the foreign female domestic workers in the sample

Number	Nationality	Age	Marital status	Habitat	Education	Religion
1	Philippines	22	Single	Small city	College	Christian
2	Philippines	23	Single	Village	College	Christian
3	Philippines	33	Married	Small city	College	Christian
4	Indian	29	Married	Village	Primary school	Buddhist
5	Indian	36	Married	Big city	Illiterate	Muslim
6	Philippines	26	Single	Village	High school	Christian
7	Sri Lanka	31	Single	Village	Middle school	Buddhist
8	Sri Lanka	33	Married	Big city	Middle school	Christian
9	Morocco	26	Divorced	Small city	Illiterate	Muslim
10	Sri Lanka	39	Single	Village	Middle school	Buddhist
11	Philippines	28	Single	Small city	College	Christian
12	Philippines	23	Single	Village	Primary school	Muslim
13	Sri Lanka	31	Single	Big city	High school	Christian
14	India	37	Married	Village	Primary school	Christian
15	Mauritius	30	Single	Village	High school	Muslim
16	Sri Lanka	39	Married	Big city	Primary school	Christian
17	Philippines	24	Single	Small city	College	Christian
18	Philippines	26	Single	Big city	College	Christian
19	Philippines	24	Single	Small city	High school	Christian
20	Sri Lanka	18	Single	Small city	Primary school	Muslim
21	Sri Lanka	43	Married	Big city	Primary school	Christian
22	Sri Lanka	29	Single	Village	High school	Buddhist
23	Philippines	36	Married	Small city	High school	Christian
24	India	22	Married	Village	Primary school	Muslim
25	India	35	Married	Village	Illiterate	Muslim
26	India	30	Married	Village	Primary school	Muslim
27	Sri Lanka	38	Single	Village	College	Muslim
28	Sri Lanka	22	Married	Village	Middle school	Muslim
29	Philippines	34	Married	Village	College	Christian
30	Indonesian	17	Single	Small city	Primary school	Muslim
31	Philippines	27	Single	Big city	High school	Christian
32	Indonesian	30	Married	Big city	High school	Muslim
33	Philippines	29	Married	Small city	High school	Muslim
34	Philippines	36	Single	Small city	College	Muslim
35	Indonesian	19	Single	Small city	Middle school	Muslim

Number	Nationality	Age	Marital status	Habitat	Education	Religion
36	Sri Lanka	18	Single	Village	Primary school	Muslim
37	Sri Lanka	30	Widowed	Village	Illiterate	Christian
38	Philippines	36	Single	Small city	College	Christian
39	Sri Lanka	33	Married	Big city	Primary school	Buddhist
40	India	33	Widowed	Big city	Primary school	Muslim
41	Sri Lanka	18	Single	Village	Illiterate	Muslim
42	Sri Lanka	19	Single	Village	Middle school	Buddhist
43	Sri Lanka	31	Divorced	Village	High school	Buddhist
44	India	30	Married	Village	Illiterate	Christian
45	Sri Lanka	20	Single	Village	Middle school	Christian
46	India	25	Married	Village	Primary school	Buddhist
47	India	30	Widowed	Village	Illiterate	Christian
48	Sri Lanka	38	Single	Small City	High school	Christian
49	Philippines	33	Married	Village	Primary school	Christian
50	Sri Lanka	33	Married	Big city	Primary school	Buddhist
51	India	30	Married	Village	Primary school	Buddhist