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**Women’s International Labor Migration in the Arab World:  
Historical and Socio-Economic Perspectives**

**Prepared by**

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The Arab world has witnessed international labor migration as far back as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although statistical evidence is almost inexistent, many historians and social scientists have documented such immigrant labor flows, be it to America, Africa and/or Australia. For many of them, labor migration was basically a man's project who often was young and single. If married, the wife and children usually stayed behind and joined him only when summoned to do so. Few writers, however, "acknowledge that even early on, a number of women, both married and single, traveled on their own. Some may have done so at the behest of husband or father ... But many others seem to have been acting on their own initiative and for the same reasons as men. Above all, the siren call of riches" <sup>1</sup> (Shakir, 1997, p.28).

In this paper, an attempt will be made at:

- 1) tracing the evolution of labor flows, pointing out that various Arab countries have, at different stages of their economic history, been both senders and/or receivers of such flows;
- 2) examining the determinants of female labor flows;
- 3) suggesting potential policies which would be beneficial both at the micro and macro levels.

But before doing so, one should keep in mind the following:

- There is no Arab woman stereotype which could be considered as representative of the Arab female population. Despite the prevalence of many common denominators among them, like culture, language, and religion <sup>2</sup>, major discrepancies exist as well. One should remember that these women belong to twenty-two different countries, with dissimilar levels of wealth, legislation, and education. A look at the Human Development Index ranking indicates that four of these countries (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) belong to the high human development group, three (Mauritania, Yemen, and Djibouti) to the low human development group, while the balance clusters in the medium development category (United Nations Development Program, 2003).
- Employment statistics in the Arab World are characterized by wide gaps and a variety of sources, which are often contradictory. In addition, country specific data on international migration are often unavailable and, when available, not gender-segregated. In the light of the above, this presentation relies essentially on anecdotal evidence.

## **1. Evolution of Labor Flows in the Arab World**

The Arab world, and more particularly what was referred to as “Bilad As-Sham” (namely, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria) witnessed a labor outflow to the Western World since the end of the nineteenth century and this because of political, religious and most importantly economic reasons. In fact, the famine that plagued this part of the world, during and after World War I, was one of the main factors behind these immigration flows. During that period, many cases are reported of Lebanese married women living in rural areas who traveled on their own to the United States of America to work there in factories, leaving their husbands and children behind. A similar movement was witnessed in the 1930’s, when Lebanese young, unmarried female university graduates went to Iraq and Palestine seeking teaching positions in schools with the purpose of collecting enough money to pursue their graduate studies abroad <sup>3</sup>. These activities outside the familial set-up implied a certain independence, which was not admitted in the social context, but was necessary given the pressing economic needs.

These pressing economic needs decreased gradually as a result of the oil boom, both in Arab oil-producing countries as well as in non-producing ones, as a result of the inter-regional migration that took place between the latter and the former; migration which was mostly restricted to men. “During the 1970s and early 1980s rapidly increasing real wages made it possible for a small number of working individuals to support a larger number of non-working dependents and to simultaneously enjoy rising living standards” (World Bank, 2003, p. 50). Actually, the number of non-working dependents per worker in the MENA region is more than two, which is the highest in the world, with only Sub-Saharan Africa coming close to the same ratio. One of the main factors behind this high economic dependency ratio is the low female labor force participation rate which is actually the lowest in the world, despite the success achieved in closing gender gaps in education and health.

The stagnation that has been prevailing in the Arab world, since the mid – 1980s did not alter this situation. If the Arab countries were to be grouped on the basis on labor and resource availability one notices that the labor abundant and resource rich countries (like Algeria, Iraq, Syria, ... ) have lower rates of female participation in the labor force than do the labor-abundant and resource-poor countries (like, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia). As for the labor importing, resource –rich countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the female labor force participation is driven by foreign female workers. Within this group, the three countries with the highest rates of female labor force participation – Kuwait, Qatar,

and the United Arab Emirates – have a labor force with an 80% foreign participation. As a result, the female labor force participation for nationals is much lower than that reported in statistical surveys (18.4 % for Bahrain compared to 34.1 % and 31.3% compared to 37.8 % for Kuwait, and this for the year 2000 (Ibid.).

Thus, the Arab world has been witnessing an inflow of female foreign workers to replace nationals who are not joining the labor force for economic reasons (wage and legal discrimination, job segregation, ...) as well as social norms and traditions which still consider that the woman's role should center essentially around her family, hence restricting her activities to the private sphere. Female migrant workers engage – like in other parts of the world – in traditional female occupations in the service sector, namely nursing, domestic work and entertainment.

## **2. Determinants of Female Labor Flows**

Given the disparity prevailing in the Arab world regarding women's employment and more specifically the paucity of information on female labor flows, the analysis of the determinants of these flows will be basically based on case studies – including both labor sending and labor receiving countries – namely:

- A survey carried out in Lebanon by “l'Université Saint Joseph de Beyrouth” on “Youth, Work and Migration” (“L'Entrée des Jeunes Libanais dans la Vie Active et L'Emigration”), the results of which were published in April 2003; with special focus placed on 19,926 migrants having left Lebanon since 1975, but who still have family members in Lebanon.
- A study carried out by the Gender Promotion Programme (International Labor Office, Geneva) on “Migrant Women in the United Arab Emirates, the Case of Female Domestic Workers”. The fieldwork for this study – which was carried out in 1995 and updated in 2001 – included non-participant observations and face – to – face interviews with 51 foreign female domestic workers in their employers' households, located in a middle class neighborhood in Dubai. When updated in 2001, not all domestics were still available and another 30 were interviewed in different settings. Some were interviewed at their embassies as runaways or foreign domestic workers with problems, some at the Philippines Consulate and another group of 15 at recruiting agencies in Dubai. (Sabban, 2003)

## The Lebanese Case Study

Before examining the determinants of the female labor flows in Lebanon, it would be interesting to draw a profile of the Lebanese migrant on a gender-segregated basis, relying on the Saint-Joseph University's survey covering the period 1975 – 2001:

- A little less than half of the Lebanese households in this survey (46.2 %) have at least one member of their families residing abroad, having migrated during the period under consideration;
- Men migrate much more than women: 16.4 % compared to 10 %;
- Migrant women are relatively younger than men: 22.4 % compared to 17.4 % in the 20-29 year age bracket, 30 % compared to 35 % in the 35-44 year age bracket, while the percentage is the same (17.7 %) for those aged between 30 and 34 years;
- The majority of the migrants are married (75.4 %), while the celibacy rate is lower among women than men;
- The rate of economic activity among the migrants aged between 15 and 64 is higher than that of residents, the gap being much more significant as far as women are concerned: 31 % among migrant women as opposed to 19.2 % for women residing in Lebanon;
- More than one quarter of migrant men (28 %) are holders of university degrees, compared to 20.8 % for migrant women.

It is interesting to note that more than half of the migrants (54.4 %) have left during the period 1975 – 2000, an average of 18 % for every five-year period. The same percentage was maintained during 1991 – 1995, while the period 1996 –2001 witnessed a resurgence in the rate of migration (26.6 %), which is associated with the severe recession that the country is facing.

As for the immigration reasons, more than half of the Lebanese leave either because they are looking for a job or for better working conditions (41.3 % and 10.9 % respectively); 17.1 % do so because of the prevailing political and social malaise and 5.3 % because of the civil strife.

The reasons for migration mentioned by both women and men are the same, but with quite a different priority scale. While work is the major reason behind migration for 57.2 % of the men, followed by the overall prevailing situation in the country (17.4 %) and more specifically the economic situation (12.0 %), education (11.9 %), war (5.5 %) the situation is

completely different for migrant women. Top priority is given by them to family reunification (50 %), followed by the overall prevailing situation (16.5 %), work (12.6 %), economic situation (8.8%), war (5.5 %), marriage (5.1 %), and education (4.3%).

These results fit quite well in the prevailing distribution of gender roles within the Lebanese household where the patriarchal system prevails with the man being considered as the breadwinner, while the woman is essentially conceived of as a home maker.

It is important to add here that migration which was basically prompted by economic reasons did not bear the results expected since more than half of the Lebanese migrants (57.8 %) do not send remittances to their families in Lebanon on a regular basis, the percentage of those who do amounting only to 14 %.

### The United Arab Emirates Case Study\*

Traditionally, United Arab Emirates (UAE) women evolve in their own separate private sphere, performing their roles basically within their households. When employed, they are mainly engaged in the government sector (94.1 % of them). The labor market is, however, dominated by migrant workers. In 1995, the percentage of nationals amounted to 24.4 %, while the balance (75.6 %) were expatriates. This demographic gap has serious implications, be it at the security, political, social or economic level.

The case study under consideration focuses on foreign female domestic workers who emigrate to the United Arab Emirates from different parts of South and South East Asia. A dramatic increase in the foreign female domestic workers has been witnessed during the 1975 – 1985 period, during which their number increased from 1,340 to 32,134 with a rate of growth of 2,398 % over the decade. It is worth noting that the UAE grants an average of 300 visas per day to domestic helpers and it is estimated that, an average of three domestics work in each UAE household. According to the Ministry of Interior Statistics, 116,083 visas were given to domestics in 1999.

Despite the great need for their services and their involvement in the development process, foreign female domestic workers are perceived as a source of problems. Obviously, they have their own problems brought with them in the migration process; but these problems seem to be accentuated and mismanaged inside the UAE. A close look at the situation of women migrant workers indicates that they live in a state of isolation. Legally, they are

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\* All figures reported in the text are taken from the case study prepared by Rima Sabban (See bibliography)

totally under the control of their employer and are not allowed to have any activities outside their place of work.

In addition, they face all kinds of difficulties adjusting to the new environment in which they evolve, be it at the communication level, and this because of language problems; the emotional level being separated from their families, or the cultural level.

Obviously, the main reason for their presence in the UAE is an economic one. They earn on average between US \$130 and US \$200 per month, a salary that “amounts to four times, ten times or for Indian domestic workers as much as 100 times the wages in their home countries” (Sabban, pp. 23-24).

All the interviewed foreign female domestic workers complained though, about the fact that they were not allowed to have a day off per week. Some of them, however, do not stay at their employer’s house all the time. They are allowed to go out, visit friends or go shopping. Another source of complaint is the heavy load of work. A more serious issue addressed the abuse they are subjected to at work, be it physical, verbal, or sexual. Out of the most serious issues facing the foreign female domestic workers in the UAE is their legal status. They actually fall under the category of contract workers, yet none of the ones interviewed had a contract. The contracts given to them, sometimes by the recruiting agencies, are neither official nor binding to the government. In fact, the labor laws and regulations do not apply to them. That is basically why their working hours are not clearly specified. In addition, while a working male foreign is entitled to sponsor his wife and children, the same privilege is not granted to a working foreign woman, even if she earns more than the stipulated salary for that purpose.

### **Foreign Women Seek More Family-Friendly Rules**

by Meena Janardhan

**DUBAI** — After her husband died of blood cancer in the United Arab Emirates, Indian national Rupsha Mathur had no choice but to continue working in the country because she faced staggering hospital bills.

But her decision came at a cost to Rupsha, a researcher in an oil firm in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates. She had to leave her six-year-old son back in a hostel in India, because the UAE's labour laws do not permit foreign women working here to sponsor their children.

"I really hate myself for leaving my little child in a hostel. But if I have to repay the hospital bills and give him a good education, I need to keep this job that pays me at least four times what I would have got in India," she said, her voice quivering with emotion.

"Why is it that only expatriate men can sponsor their families? As long as women meet the required criteria, they should also get the same treatment," Rupsha added. ...

Source: <http://www.ipsnews.net/migration/stories/friendly.html>

Foreign female domestic workers in the UAE do, however, admit that they receive some benefits. Among the ones mentioned are tips and presents they receive on holidays, and the chance to travel every summer with their employer's family <sup>4</sup>.

### **3 Potential Policies**

Improving the lot of foreign female migrant workers would be beneficial not only for them but for the sending and receiving countries as well.

- At the personal level, female migrant workers should be better prepared emotionally and psychologically to the new mode of life they will be facing. They should also be better informed about the working conditions in the host country and their legal rights. Non-governmental organizations as well as recruiting agencies could play an important role in this respect.
- At the level of the host country, the legal status of the female migrant workers should be clearly spelled out and their rights preserved. The formulation of more family friendly rules would obviously facilitate the lives of these women and improve their productivity. In addition, close contacts between representatives of the sender country and those of the receiving one could be quite fruitful.
- At the level of the sender country, there is an urgent need to formulate adequate policies that would take care of the children of these migrant women that are left behind. In addition, training programs specifically designed for them and geared towards their future employment would definitely be beneficial not only for the women but also for the country as well, since they constitute one of its most important sources of foreign exchange, and hence of potential and sustainable development.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Oral history seems to indicate that some of these women did return home. One of the nieces of such a woman recalls that her “Aunt Mary” was about twenty four twenty five years old when she returned back to her home village in Lebanon in 1903, after having made a lot of money peddling in the USA ... “She was in her prime and glory, ... silk and ostrich feathers and diamonds and a watch pinned to her chest ...” (Shakkir, 1997)

<sup>2</sup>“In an Arab cultural context, intellectual heritage represents a component of culture, language is said to be the carrier of culture, religion is the major comprehensive sorter that directs the life of this culture, and values (moral, social, and political) are the judges of the actions directed within it. Thus, intellectual heritage, religion, and values and language stand as the most decisive determining and instructive elements of formal Arab culture ... (United Nations Development Program and Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2003, p.113)

<sup>3</sup>Very many women of Lebanese origin have succeeded in being “firsts” in very many fields and in very many parts of the world since the beginning of the twentieth century till today. Among them one could mention Mary Bashir, the first woman state governor in Australia who was quoted – in an article published in An-Nahar newspaper in its March 31, 2001 issue – as saying: “I am a woman activist and I will persist in playing this role, because I am proud of women’s achievements in various areas. I believe, however, in the necessity of achieving more gender equality. My mother and my parental aunts (who were born in Lebanon), succeeded in reaching equality with men, without adversely affecting the respect they had for them”.

<sup>4</sup>“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 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”(Sabban, n.d., p.26)

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