Film casts spotlight on abusive employers of domestic workers

DOCUMENTARY CALLS FOR PROTECTING RIGHTS OF HOUSEHOLD HELPERS

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EIRUT: "Finally, the Filipina omestic worker is arriving," egins Carol Mansour's latest ocumentary. "This is the first me I'm getting someone to elp at home ... I have no doubt iat she will help me a lot."

"Maid in Lebanon II," which reened on Monday evening at lub 43 in Gemmayzeh, is lansour's second film address- g the status of female migrant orkers in Lebanon.

Whereas the first film was ld from the point of view of a omestic worker, "Maid in ebanon II" is narrated by hada Najjar, who has em- oyed a woman called Jelly idez to help her manage the ousehold. Funded by the In- rnational Labor Organization .O) and filmed in Sri Lanka d Lebanon, Mansour's docu- entary is perhaps the most mprehensive study to date of e working conditions of mi- int domestic workers, their hts and obligations under banese law, and those of eir employers.

Often leaving their families d abject poverty behind them, ndreds of thousands of men from Africa and Asia vel every year to Lebanon and ntries in the Gulf to work as mestic workers. While some men are well treated by their ployers, others are not so

noticed and in official circles, ignored. The rights of migrant domestic workers are not protected under Lebanese labor laws, but with 200,000 of them thought to be living here – about 5 percent of the county's population, people are slowly becoming more aware of the fact that the rights of household helpers need to be protected.

Speaking to *The Daily Star*, Mansour says, "the problem is so obvious. Anybody, whether they are a filmmaker or a bank worker, can see it." According to Mansour, who has collected awards for her hard-hitting films on the summer 2006 war in Lebanon and Cairo street children, "there are definitely a lot of things [pertaining to the rights of domestic workers] that need to be talked about."

In a 2006 study conducted by Ray Jureidini of the American University of Beirut, the biggest complaint made by domestic workers was that their employers withheld their pay. One woman interviewed in the film says she worked for eight years without receiving "even 1,000 lira" from her employer, who shouted at her when she asked to be paid.

"There is no reason for employers to say, "We'll hold onto your salary," says Caritas representative Najla Chahda in Mansour's film. "Would I accept to work all month and not be paid at the end?"

governmental organization working with domestic workers in Lebanon and says it receives 40 new cases of women seeking help every month.

Jureidini's study also found that 60,000 to 70,000 domestic workers had been subject to "physical punishment, deprivation of food and forced confinement" and that 10,000 to 20,000 had been physically and sexually abused.

According to an August report released by Human Rights Watch, "at least" 95 women working as domestic workers in Lebanon had died between January 1, 2007, and August 15,

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2008, a figure that translates to more than one woman per week. Of the 95 deaths, 40 were "classified by the embassies of the migrants as suicide," said HRW, stressing that their list was not exhaustive. "Most deaths resulting from a building fall are failed attempts to escape" the ill treatment that Jureidini found so often haunts these women, a labor attache told HRW.

While domestic workers are required to undergo training courses in their home countries before taking up their posts in

entation course is yet demanded of employers. "Some receiving countries" are calling for employers to be trained in "cross-cultural communication ... and the rights and duties of both parties," Ghada narrates. "This practice is not yet established in Lebanon."

The attitudes toward domestic workers displayed by some employers in "Maid in Lebanon II" offer a convincing argument for the pressing need to introduce such courses.

"They demand so much," complains one woman of domestic workers. "You can't even beat them anymore because they've become so rude."

According to a Sri Lankan worker talking to Mansour from a safehouse, her "*madame* would not allow me to drink milk or Nescafe ... She would give me very little food ... I was not allowed to sit."

The attitudes that some employers have toward their house help needs to change, says Chahda. "They claim that since they paid money to get this girl, then they own her."

Mansour says she was "shocked" by the attitudes of some of the employers she filmed. "They wouldn't treat their domestic workers the way they do if they put themselves in her shoes," she says. "If I can change 10 percent of people's thinking on this issue, I'd feel like I was contributing to a bet-

Reacting to Lebanon's increasingly notorious reputation as a hotbed for domestic worker abuse, Ethiopia this year banned its citizens from seeking employment here. Likewise, Sri Lanka has said it will impose travel restrictions on those seeking employment in Lebanon.

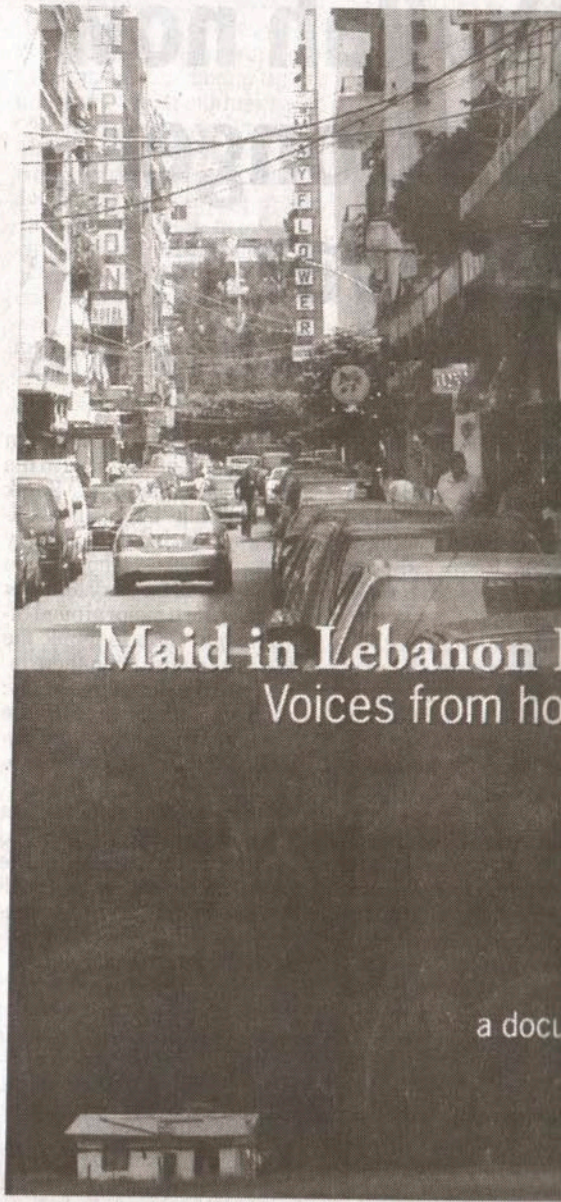
According to the Sri Lankan government, 50 women return from the Middle East in distress each day.

Lebanon is a signatory to the International Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment, but has yet to sign the 2003 Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

However, some improvement on the issue is being made.

In early 2006, an official steering committee was established by the Labor Ministry to ease the problems of domestic workers. According to the director of the ILO's regional office, Nada al-Nashif, whose organization is part of the committee, one of its goals is to introduce standardized employment contracts in Arabic, English, French and the native language of the worker.

These contracts "should protect the rights and responsibilities of both" the employer and employee, Nashif says in the film, and be "available to domestic workers upon their ar-



A poster advertises the documentary, "Maid in lebanon

mittee has also launched a public awareness campaign on the issue that "targets Lebanese public opinion."

The ILO is also pressuring the Lebanese government to formulate a new law for migrant workers. This follows a historic

when "a first step was ternationally toward ing domestic workers after the ILO agreed to formulating an inte convention that would their rights, narrates G