



The Arab Families Working Group

Historical Trajectories of Domestic Workers in Lebanon

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The role of domestic help (variously referred to as domestic workers, domestic help, maids, housemaids, housekeepers or servants when several are employed in the household) have not been adequately accounted for in studies and literature of Lebanese middle- and upper-class families. They seem merely to be secreted in the shadows of family life. The purpose of the study is to bring into relief some sense of what roles they have played within the families they served, other than the labour they performed. What was their level of importance? Those who worked for long periods were often so assimilated into the employing household they could be considered 'fictive kin' where kinship/patronage obligations towards and dependency on them constituted a significant part of the dynamics of everyday family life.

The historical dimension, the idea of historical trajectories, was considered important – to identify and trace the changes of employment of different domestic help and how families managed the 'maid market'.

The data gathering for the research was relatively simple. Using the method of snowball sampling, the aim was to conduct interviews with mainly Lebanese women (and some men) about who they remembered working for them. The older the interviewee, the further we could go back in time, asking not only about who served them but also asking about their parents and possibly grandparents - in other words, to document an oral history of domestic service in Lebanese families going back to the turn of the century, or at least to the 1920s. From 30 interviews that included 4 males, 8 were in their 50s, 8 in their 60s, 7 in their 70s, 6 in their 80s and 1 aged 93. There were 11 Muslim, 11 Christian and 8 Druze. This of course is not a representative sample, being skewed due to the snowballing technique, and it is not possible to make generalizations to particular religious sects, nor to middle- and upper-class families, nor to the population as a whole.

Generally, it seems, until the Civil War began in 1975, Lebanese and Syrian maids were widely employed among others. It is not entirely clear yet, but it also seems that until that time, no religious preference was evident. It was more a question of village girls or women from poor families (and orphans) going to work and live with wealthy families. It also seems there were certain waves of others at different periods. Loosely, we can identify that in the 1930s, Alawites and other Syrians from Akkar in the north were widely used – at least until 1961 when Hafez Assad came to power in Syria.

Following their expulsion, in the 1950s, Palestinians were procured from the refugee camps around Beirut and in the south. Indeed, from the 190s to the early 1970s, Palestinian women in the camps in Tyre (a *Semsara*) procured women, and sometimes couples for domestic work. At this time also, Kurdish women were employed and there is evidence of some Sudanese men serving as cooks.

In the 1960s, it was said that Egyptian women could be found working in bars around the Bourj and they “took them” from the bars to work for families. This practice stopped at the outbreak of the Civil War when they returned home.

1975 was a watershed that marked the beginning of the entry of Sri Lankans, then Filipinas and later Ethiopians. It is now estimated that around 1 in 7 - 10 families employ a non-Arab migrant domestic maid.

Summarily, the paper traces an oral history of domestic service in Lebanon over the past century. The Interviews reveal various periods when women and girls were recruited from the local village poor as well Syrians, Palestinians, Kurds, Egyptians and others in accordance with convenience and regional political circumstances. The long-term employment of Arab women in domestic service, with a primary focus on ‘live-in’ maids, may be characterised as having a ‘burden’ of obligation and responsibility in terms of relations of patronage and fictive kin. For example, Arab women in service continued to claim patronage and resources for themselves after they left the employing family and sometimes for their children also. The outbreak of the civil war from 1975, however, marked a total shift in the source of domestic workers, from Arab to non-Arab migrant workers, where patronage obligations were no longer required (nor claimed). The paper provides anecdotal testimonies of the pre-civil war relations, identifying a continuing dependency, but now on contemporary, quasi-contractual arrangements with Asian and African migrant domestic workers.