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## Asian women workers in the Middle East: domestic servants in Jordan

### **Abstract**

Economic development based on oil export has produced a pattern of autocratic family regimes sustained by the large scale import of technology, capital and labour. Family monopoly control over the state, bureaucratic and military apparatus has been reinforced by close economic and political alliances with the Western states. These family autocracies, among which are some of the wealthiest states in the world - measured by per-capita income - have sought to protect themselves against the impact of massive social change and population growth by attempting to preserve a political and cultural integrity which celebrates an indigenous culture and distinct national identity. Wealth, far from being the basis for political and economic integration of the Arab states, has generated strategies of defence of privilege based on the segregation of those who are entitled to share the wealth as citizens from those who are legally regarded as merely sojourners.



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Asian Women Workers in  
The Middle East: Domestic  
Servants in Jordan

Michael Humphrey

*Occasional Paper no. 22*

**ASIAN WOMEN WORKERS IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST:  
DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN JORDAN**

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## **ASIAN WOMEN WORKERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST : DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN JORDAN**

**Michael Humphrey**

Economic development based on oil export has produced a pattern of autocratic family regimes sustained by the large scale import of technology, capital and labour. Family monopoly control over the state, bureaucratic and military apparatus has been reinforced by close economic and political alliances with the Western states. These family autocracies, among which are some of the wealthiest states in the world - measured by per-capita income - have sought to protect themselves against the impact of massive social change and population growth by attempting to preserve a political and cultural integrity which celebrates an indigenous culture and distinct national identity. Wealth, far from being the basis for political and economic integration of the Arab states, has generated strategies of defence of privilege based on the segregation of those who are entitled to share the wealth as citizens from those who are legally regarded as merely sojourners.

The political strategy of circumscribing privilege through citizenship laws and promoting the 'indigenisation' of the workforce to reduce the need for foreign workers hides the social reality that many foreign workers are likely to become residents and that the need to recruit foreign labour will continue. Demographic patterns amongst long-term temporary residents suggest that a large proportion will eventually become citizens while growth in the service industry has created demands for labour which will have to be met by continual recruitment of temporary labour. Immigration and labour policy has become entangled in the politics of legitimacy of autocratic family states. The privileged patterns of consumption, social mobility, services and economic security for the indigenous population has been provided for by the state making available cheap and temporary foreign workers who are excluded from these benefits. While non-national skilled and professional workers may share in the lifestyle and salaries, their orientation and social trajectory is divided between investment in strategies for mobility and class security between their country of origin and country of residence. For the non-national Palestinian migrants the issue of social trajectory and future orientations is compounded by either their legal or political position in the host or occupied societies in which they are resident. They, the unskilled and low paid as well as the professional and highly paid, confront the double dilemma of how to secure the social and economic advantage achieved in the host country in either their original place of residence or a third country.

country in either their original place of residence or a third country.

In this paper I will explore the cultural and political dimensions of segregation for regime stability and defence of national identity in Jordan.<sup>1</sup> The regulation of immigration and restrictive citizenship laws has created a fundamental social cleavage which has become articulated in the assertion of discrete Arab national identities in opposition to the ideology of Arab unity, nationhood and regional integration.<sup>2</sup> The strategy of segregation has gone furthest in the Gulf where the member states of the Gulf Co-operation Council have increasingly coordinated immigration and labour policies to limit the size of the foreign population, Arab and non-Arab, "to consolidate power, to preserve identity and to 'protect' the so-called interests and rights of the indigenous population"(Baquer 1988:1). Jordan too has sought to bring labour migration under control by increased regulation of the system of work contracts. Permanent and temporary residence, race, ethnicity, sect and gender are used to socially differentiate individuals throughout the class structure.

The fundamental social cleavage of national and non-national broadly delineated by government policy on immigration and labour regulation is further differentiated by patterns of social interaction and consumption. Residence, household composition, food and possessions - in short distinction reflected in taste - articulate the relations between social categories. These categories are new and articulate social relations stripped of traditional normative relations and located in the new class relations of the state. However the national ideology which distinguishes a separate core society - permanent members - from a secondary society - temporary members - overlooks the consequences of the formation of interdependent class structures through the process of international labour migration. The emergence of new middle and working classes, social mobility, universal education and improved standards of living have created rising political expectations amongst indigenous populations for political democratisation. At the same time the achievement of social and economic benefit and the rising political expectations for democratisation are juxtaposed with the denial of the same legal and economic rights to a large proportion of these societies; the temporary foreign workers and their dependents. The division between permanent and temporary populations is all the more marked because of the scale of labour imports in the Gulf states and Jordan. By the early 1980's it is estimated that in Kuwait migrants represented 58% of the population and 78% of the labour force and in Jordan foreign workers had climbed to around 50% of the labour force.<sup>3</sup>

The site of analysis for the interaction of permanent and temporary population is the status and position of domestic workers in the labour importing Arab states, in particular Jordan. The case of Jordan is unique in the Middle East because of the large flows of replacement labour for Jordanian workers who themselves went as labour migrants to the Arab Gulf states for employment.

The case of domestic workers highlights the range of social and political dimensions of the relations between nationals and non-nationals in the Arab labour importing states. Their employment and residence in households puts them into direct contact with middle and upper classes, whether nationals or relatively privileged non-nationals. This contact is shaped by class differences and expressed in class cultures. Their employment lives out in political and symbolic acts their fundamental difference to privileged groups that employ them. In contrast to the position of most foreign workers who have been separated from privileged groups by the geographical remoteness of the workplace or ethnic/national recruitment into occupational niches, domestic workers are made aware of their subordinate status by the etiquette, authority system, and spatial arrangements of the household. Moreover they experience directly the way race, legal status and gender are used to differentiate and locate workers and the segregated system.

Because domestic workers are overwhelmingly Asian, temporary and female, their role and position in Arab households acts as a foil in the constitution of indigenous (Arab) women's identity. Their employment in the household reinforces a gender ideology which permits employment of women in caring and nurturing roles and elevates status of women in the employing household by their withdrawal from menial domestic tasks. In most cases the employment of foreign maids is an item of privileged consumption more often than an essential childcare requirement in order to pursue one's own career. Whether Arab women's withdrawal from work is a transitional phase in the process development as Nath (1978) suggests in the Kuwaiti case or becomes an important symbolic dimension of cultural segregation as in the case of Saudi women will depend on the nature of the economic and political strategies of the host state. Maids also highlight the ambiguity of a women's position by the sexual threat they can pose to a wife.

An analysis of the position of domestic workers is a window on the patterns of interaction created in the segregated labour importing societies in one site, the household. Can Arab societies whose development has been based on the large scale importation of labour and a fundamental division of rights and privileges effect political liberalisation when the broad distribution of these privileges is based on their denial to a large section of the population - the foreign workers and their dependants?

### **Domestic Workers**

The position of domestic worker has historically expressed a variety of class relationships in different social contexts. These include the relationship between landlord and tenant in feudal societies, freemen and slaves, coloniser and colonised people and employer to wage worker in class societies. Whichever the particular historical or social setting the implied relationship of employer to employee is that between a social superior and inferior. This relationship is expressed in terms of existing social dichotomies of inequality of the particular society; e.g. rich/poor, male/female, urban/rural, ethnic majority/minority, religious majority/minority and independence/dependence. In other words the position and status of domestic workers is consonant with the broad social cleavages and cultural ideologies which differentiate populations.

As wage workers in the service sector of contemporary class societies domestic workers "tend to exhibit similar characteristics all over the world: isolation, dependence, invisibility, low level of union organisation" (Gaitskell et. al. 1984:87) In addition domestic service also tends to have certain gender and social characteristics. Firstly it is done by women. The tasks of cooking, cleaning, washing and childcare are assumed to be women's work. They are also connected with the idea of service usually associated with a wife's role. Secondly domestic service is "performed by socially inferior groups: immigrants, blacks and ethnic minorities" (Gaitskell 1984:88).



### **Temporary Workers in Jordan**

In traditional Arab society domestic service was commonly a dimension of the landlord-tenant relationship. The wife or daughter of a tenant provided labour to the landlord's household as part of the obligations of tenancy. The landlord might live in the countryside or, more often, was an absentee landlord living in the city. Young girls would live in the landlord's household where they would be responsible for household tasks. The employment of village girls as domestic servants for urban families articulated a traditional relationship between urban and rural life. City quarters commonly had direct connections with particular regions where they held land and/or had family ties. Rural women employed as domestic servants in urban households articulated traditional class relations often reinforced social status determined by sect or ethnic difference. In Ottoman cities domestic servants were drawn from a larger social group referred to by Dengler (1978) as a 'servitor class'. This group contained both men and women many of whom were of servile origin. As well as domestic servants they were employed in household labour as cooks, housemaids, washerwomen, servants, entertainers and prostitutes. Non-Muslim groups such as Armenians, Jews, Christians and gypsies regarded outside Ottoman social order were considered appropriate for the role of entertainers and prostitutes. The other household tasks however were not seen as particularly demeaning and for a few there was the prospect that marriage might provide an opportunity for upward social mobility.<sup>4</sup>

### **Domestic Workers in Jordan**

Since the 1950's the relationship between employing households and domestic servants has reflected the basic social cleavages of Jordanian society. One is the traditional relations between city and countryside, the other between East Bankers and the Palestinian refugee population. While the former articulated the social links between rural and urban life (domestic service was one of the few respectable occupations open to poor rural women seeking wage work) the latter expressed a relation between privileged urban class and a poor urban class formed by dispossession and flight caused by war. Thus domestic servants were Arab women from poor rural households or from Palestinian refugee families from the camps in the suburbs of Amman employed mainly by the Amman middle and upper class.

While the social class and perhaps religious backgrounds of the employing household-domestic servant may have differed they were still part of a traditional social and cultural continuum. This is despite the fact that

the traditional social basis of the relationship located in tenancy was undergoing radical change with the formation class relations in Jordan. The attitude towards servants was itself expressed in an ideology of obligations towards the poor. Servants were not regarded as impersonal wage labour but as part of the family sharing in family meals, participating in family celebrations and life crises. Private labour was incorporated within the family facilitating minor patronage and channels of influence for servants and their families. Moreover this relationship often persisted well beyond the service of an individual servant or their family establishing a link which could be reactivated in times of need - it did not provide significant opportunities for social mobility. A significant change occurred in the character of the employer-domestic servant when the Jordanian economy became closely tied to oil based development boom in the Gulf states. Domestic workers were recruited from the international workforce, both Arab and Asian, which was mobilised to work both labour importing and exporting states.

### **Temporary Workers in Jordan**

In Jordan labour immigration was stimulated by the process of Jordanian labour emigration to the oil states. The latter began in the early fifties and has continued until the present. With few natural resources Jordan developed an economy in which the bulk of its income derived "directly or indirectly from services it is able to provide for its Arab neighbours" (Owen 1983:88). The Jordanian government entered bilateral agreements for the secondment of government personnel (especially military) and during the boom phase of migration between 1973-85 the Jordanian state saw its role as providing the necessary educational infrastructure to train their workforce to meet the demand for skilled labour in the Gulf (Shaw 1983). It was during this period that replacement Arab and Asian labour entered Jordan stimulated by labour shortages but also an economic boom brought about by the wealth flowing back from workers in the Gulf. Because of the Jordanian government's laissez-faire policy on migration accurate figures on both the number of emigrant and immigrant workers are difficult to find. Estimates suggest that in 1984 there were around 325,000 Jordanian workers abroad and some 154,000 immigrant workers in Jordan.<sup>5</sup> As Seccombe (1986) points out this was a larger number of labour migrants than oil states such as Bahrain and Qatar hosted. The inflow of labour was replacing a massive exodus of Jordanian workers which some estimates put as high as 47% of the domestic workforce by the early eighties.<sup>6</sup>

The government policy of facilitating labour migration necessitated the acceptance of foreign labour in the area of agriculture, construction and services. Of this labour 83% were from other Arab states (98% from Egypt) and 15% from Asian states including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines. However Jordanian acceptance of Arab and Asian workers occurred on very different bases. Arab workers entered Jordan without visas or work permits while the entry of Asian workers was closely regulated from the beginning. In addition Arab migrant workers were largely unskilled and worked in jobs without contracts (e.g. Egyptian workers represent 37% of the agricultural workforce) whereas Asian workers were largely skilled and held jobs regulated by contracts.

From demographic data both emigrant and immigrant share characteristics which suggest they are temporary workers. Both immigrant and emigrant workers are mostly married with dependants in their country of origin. In the case of immigrant workers they are predominantly Arab, male and unaccompanied - only 7.3% have come with their families. Almost half of the male workers and around two-thirds of the female workers were married. According to Smadi's (1986) survey about three-quarters of migrants interviewed indicated they expected to stay in Jordan less than 18 months.<sup>7</sup> Amongst Jordanian labour emigrants only 33.8% were single while 66% were married.<sup>8</sup> In other words two-thirds of the emigrants and almost half of the immigrants have dependents in their home country.

Another factor underlines the temporary character of Asian labour migrants in Jordan. Unlike their Arab counter-parts they were only able to enter Jordan with work permits and visas. Moreover the terms of their contract which oblige them to return home after two or three years reinforce their temporary status. The current climate where increased unemployment has seen demands for the 'Jordanisation' of the workforce has seen stricter enforcement of compulsory return home before entering into new contracts and in conspicuous service areas such as the hotel industry the virtual elimination of Asian contract workers in favour of Jordanian or Egyptian workers.

## Recruitment of Asian Women as Domestic Servants

The employment of Asian domestic servants in the mid-70's coincided with the outflow of Jordanian workers and inflow of remittances from the Gulf. The choice of Asian and not Arab female workers probably also derives from the Gulf experience where they had become a fashionable item of consumption for the new national and immigrant working classes. Lack of statistics on the number of domestic workers prior to the influx of Asian workers makes it difficult to quantify overall increases in the total number of domestic servants employed in Jordan. However the fact that recruitment of both Asian skilled workers and domestic servants coincided with the growing needs of the emerging Jordanian middle class whose new wealth derived from their employment in the Gulf oil economies strongly suggests that the occupational category underwent considerable expansion. While Asian construction workers from Korea and the Philippines were employed to build their mansions in Amman Sri Lankan and Filipina women became domestic servants in their households. Seccombe (1986), in an occupational survey of immigrant workers in Amman, found that 'housemaids/nannys' were 19.1% of the sample.

The actual number of Asian women migrant workers who entered domestic service can only be estimated but it was considerable. Based on survey and census data Smadi et. al. (1986) suggests that 5.3% of the migrant workforce was employed as domestic servants. This is more than twice the number who worked in professional or skilled areas - e.g. nursing, hotel receptionists and clerical workers.<sup>9</sup> Based on 1984 figures of foreign workers this puts the number of women employed as domestic servants during the peak period of labour immigration at around 8,000. Figures on work permits issued to non-Jordanians during this period suggest that this figure is a reasonable estimate.<sup>10</sup>

Asian domestic workers, along with all Asian migrant labour, were recruited under contract through local agents who represented private or national labour recruiting agencies mainly in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Their contracts stipulated their employer, monthly salary, residential and board arrangements, period of employment and the obligation of the employer to pay a servant's return airfare home at the end of their contract. Essentially these contracts placed obligations on employers for the supervision of their workers in Jordan and their return home at the end of their service. Debt incurred by workers to secure an

overseas job contract such as agents fees and airfares reinforced domestic servant's dependence on their employer. Moreover the common interest of an agent and employer in guaranteeing their continued service - the former to garnish wages for the repayment of the debt and the latter to get their money's worth - also ensured workers were tied to their place of employment. Thus many domestic servants were employed under contracts which closely resembled those of indentured workers. Under these wage contracts the employer-domestic worker relationship no longer imply any enduring relationship between social superiors and inferiors as occurred when domestic servants were drawn from social groups within Jordanian society - e.g. between Jordanian employer and Palestinian domestic servant. As wage workers from outside Jordanian society no obligations, economic or social, extended beyond the contract period.

The domestic worker contracts regulated a relationship which was heavily weighed in favour of the employer and were highly individualistic. Their experience of contract labour was ultimately dependent on the goodwill and consideration of their employer. As private labour employed by households these workers did not come under the provisions of the labour law and what legal redress was prohibitively expensive to pursue. Moreover any disputes with an employer were regarded by police as a domestic matter in which they preferred not to become involved. Gender and race also reinforced male prerogative to exercise of patriarchal authority over servants as temporary household members - i.e. over an extended household.

The household was by far the most common site of employment and residence of domestic servants. While this can be interpreted as a matter of convenience for employer and domestic servant it is also a dimension of the supervision and control of Asian contract workers in Jordan. Amongst Asian contract workers generally there is a high level of live-in employment. One study found that some 70% of workers lived at their place of employment.<sup>11</sup> The only figures for domestic servants available come from my own sample of 30 domestic servants interviewed in Amman.<sup>12</sup> Only two of the sample lived outside their place of work in rented accommodation in apartment blocks with other Filipino workers as neighbours.

As mentioned above one consequence of their live-in status was their incorporation within the social relations of the household. Their obligations to their employer were extra-legal in the sense that their obedience was confirmation of the patriarchal authority over all women of the household. Under these

circumstances the prospect of changing jobs was remote. Only if an employer agreed to sign a certificate of release could a domestic servant consider leaving - otherwise she would be subject to deportation for failure to meet her contractual obligations and suffer the double penalty of losing her job and having to pay her airfare home. However on occasion domestic servants did change employers as a result of dissatisfaction with service or disagreements. If another household was willing to takeover the terms of the contract - i.e pay the agreed wage and airfare home - then the worker could be released. But the further into the contract the greater the immobility of workers between contracts since one could not normally extend the period of temporary residence beyond the period initially agreed upon. Because of the obligation of employers to pay return airfares the relative cost of employing a maid escalated the shorter the period of the contract.

Sometimes servants became 'hand-downs' in the same family. One respondent explained how his domestic servant, a Sri Lankan woman, was offered to him by his brother-in-law who was having problems selecting a domestic servant who met with the approval of his wife and mother-in-law. They had objected to this particular servant on her looks and poor English language proficiency. It was only after eight servants that they found one satisfactory to all members of the household. The remaining four were employed by other households of the family, those who could not afford to be so choosy. He now doubted whether he could afford to re-employ a maid because the cost of a work permit had increased 300%.

The idea of 'approval' introduces the key to the employer-domestic servant relationship. Domestic servants are essentially an item of consumption with specific value in the hierarchy of symbolic practices. What underlies their employment in households is their symbolic value against certain costs. Thus the decision to employ live-in servants is more than just the question of the ability to afford them. For the employing household it is a matter of social necessity confirming new wealth and social position in Jordanian class relations. Domestic servants are an essential aspect of what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as 'presentation', the ability of upwardly mobile classes to give the impression of living effortlessly and without apparent cost or sacrifice. The immaculately groomed interiors and exteriors of the Amman mansions appear almost unchanging as if they simply remained as they had originally been conceived and created without the intervention of busy hands.



As an item of consumption ('presentation') domestic servants are differentiated according to gender, looks, etiquette, skills and language and this in turn influences their costs. In Jordan domestic service is almost exclusively a female occupation. The traditional sexual division of labour in Arab households which associates women with caring and nurturing and the restrictions on male outsiders entering private and familiar household spaces makes domestic service a female occupation. If males are to be employed then they would be allocated outside jobs such as gardeners or guards. In the occupational hierarchy domestic service is from the outset low status because of its gender (female) specific character.

Within the female category 'domestic servant' employees are further differentiated according to looks, skills and language. Individuals are tacitly graded and valued on the basis of categories which reflect higher and lower status of the employing household. Maids are ranked against categories such as race (lightness/darkness of skin), communication ability (English/no English), education (high/low qualifications), attractiveness (beauty/ugliness) and presentation (fashionable/unfashionable appearance. The first of the pairs of opposites denotes higher status and thus the ability to command greater wages. On this basis Filipinas who were generally more educated, familiar with English, fairer complexion and dressed in Western fashions (especially the ubiquitous jeans) commanded higher wages than the Sri Lankan women workers who were generally less educated, had little English, dressed in poor village fashions and were dark skinned. Whereas a poor uneducated Sri Lankan domestic servant would command a salary of perhaps \$70-\$100/month an educated Filipina domestic servant might command as much as \$250/month.

Within the household itself the proximity of the contrasting social statuses and social trajectories of employers and employees was expressed within daily routines by rules of etiquette and culture which served to regulate and demarcate social space. Patterns of consumption - food, leisure and self-presentation - were an integral part of delineation of difference between social superior and inferior in the household and underlined the inequality of the relationship. The differences in the allocation of personal space and personal time were however not merely arbitrary but related to the whole economy of practices associated with consumption and cost. The valuation of domestic servants - looks, skills and language - and the wages they commanded was reflected in the regulation of time and space within the employing household. Eating, social interaction, dress and personal mobility outside the household articulate social difference and social

position of employer and employee. They also reflected the ease or tension the employing household felt in aspiring to a lifestyle compatible with having Asian maids.

Commensality was restricted to household members and guests. Domestic servants ate after the household members and consumed the same food that they had cooked for the household or they prepared separate dishes of food they had purchased for themselves. Maids' interest in maximising savings and remittances meant they usually preferred to adapt themselves to the cuisine of the household rather than spend any earnings on food. In fact the consumption of food was one area where employers could reduce the cost of maids either by permitting the consumption of cheaper food or by forcing maids to spend money on buying their own food.

Leisure time was another area which was manipulated by employers to enhance control and maximise the labour of maids - i.e. reducing the costs of maids. A domestic servant may or may not have personal time allocated for her own leisure. Within the household she may be expected to be on-call day and night or may be designated set time off during each day. Maids in Amman frequently commented that 'their time' was regularly encroached upon especially in households that engaged in extensive entertaining. Even the right for maids to one day off a week was not always granted. Some households permitted maids their day off freely, regularly, outside the house and even for special occasions on non-scheduled days off. Others refused permission for maids to go out or conceded the right grudgingly, and irregularly showing resentment about the maids absence from the house.

Since leisure was an issue of rights stipulated in work contracts the ability of maids to assert their rights rested with themselves and with resources and networks they had outside the employer's household. While individual personality played a part the 'culture of Asian maids' structured both the choice of the employer and their treatment on the basis of nationality. For example Filipinas were regarded as assertive while Sri Lankan maids were regarded as submissive. Hence the general belief amongst employers was that Filipinas would resist more strongly encroachments on their rights while Sri Lankans would not. Filipina maids in Amman shared this perception of the differences between Sri Lankan maids and themselves. They regarded the Sri Lankans as helpless and simple village girls who need protection. Filipinas expressed the hope that

one day "they would find the pot of gold and become wealthy. They would then make the Jordanians their servants and put the Sri Lankans in charge of their households so that they could have their revenge".<sup>13</sup> By putting the Filipinas in charge this dream of social inversion merely emphasises the relationship of Filipina to Sri Lankan in Amman.

The relationship between valuation, wages commanded and attributes of Sri Lankans and Filipinas is further emphasised in the allocation of personal space. Whereas Filipinas are likely to demand their privacy and the right to see friends and even have them around the Sri Lankans are not. Employers expect Sri Lankan women to accept casual sleeping arrangements on a floor in the corner of a room or couch while Filipinas are expected to demand a separate bedroom. By allowing maids the right to private space an employer's ability to exercise continuous supervisory control is diminished. Increased opportunities for social interaction with other maids is likely to improve their knowledge about working conditions in other households and lead to demands which could add to the cost of their employment.

Paternalism is also employed to enforce dependence and restrict mobility of maids outside the place of employment. Employers emphasise the hostility and danger of the world outside the household and contrast this with the protection and security offered maids in their houses.

### **Maids and the Household as a Site of Conflict**

The difference in the treatment of maids and the system of symbolic practices which grades them as valued items of consumption are ultimately determined by the ability of households to afford them. Declining household incomes as a result of an economic slowdown in Jordan, the return of Jordanian emigrant workers and reduced salaries and remittances from the Gulf have made it more difficult to afford maids. However reduced household incomes have not led to the wholesale sacking of domestic servants. The power relationship between employers and immigrant workers is clearly expressed in the ability of employers to reduce costs of domestic service. The household in this instance becomes a site of class inequality, a microcosm of relations that exist more generally in a society which has used cheap immigrant labour to facilitate the social mobility of the new Jordanian middle classes and allow them to maintain an affluent lifestyle.

While in recent years the Jordanian government has sought to implement stricter laws to regulate immigration and the labour market to demonstrate its support for the employment of Jordanians employers regularly manage to evade these measures. Only in the government sector are the measures for the 'Jordanianisation' of the workforce effective. The private labour market remains open to foreign workers across the spectrum of professional, skilled and unskilled work. As Seccombe (1986) points out there has been the mistaken view that foreign workers were 'replacement' labour to fill jobs vacated by Jordanian emigrant workers. He argues that while "large numbers of immigrant workers, especially Asians, are filling a replacement role as defined earlier, it is apparent that the majority of immigrant workers are employed in non-replacement roles in agriculture, construction and services" (Seccombe 1986:383) The reason for the growth in employment beyond replacement and their continued employment in times of rising unemployment is they accept much lower wages, according to one survey up to 30%-60%<sup>14</sup>

Even in the professional areas more readily controlled by the system of work permits foreign workers are still employed. Because large relative wage differentials continue to exist between country of origin and Jordan, Arab and Asian overseas professionals still accept reclassification of their positions (and lower salaries) to occupational categories which are not regulated by work permits. Employers are in fact assisted by the system of work permits and quotas to force down the wages of immigrant workers. For example one private company which wanted to renew the work contract of an Egyptian accountant simply reclassified his position to that of janitor, paid him a lower salary and continued to use him as an accountant. The Egyptian worked for JD250(\$1000)/month. A Jordanian accountant would not accept less than JD400 (\$1600)/month. In the unskilled area Asian workers continue to obtain work permits to take up jobs such as truck driving even though this category is restricted. Filipino drivers accept as little as JD60(\$240)/month and sleep in their truck whereas a Jordanian driver would expect JD200(\$800)/month.

What has become increasingly apparent is that foreign workers have not merely been replacement labour for Jordanians working outside the country but cheap labour which continues to be recruited because of the system of discriminatory wage rates. As Seccombe (1986) points out it is the continued recruitment and supply of this labour which allows the lower reserve price. The Jordanian government's earlier political

solution of Jordanian emigration for social mobility is now increasingly buttressed by the political and legal structures which empower the new middle classes and deny immigrant workers, especially the unskilled, adequate legal protection or any political right as workers to become unionised. The example of the Asian maids highlights in a very direct and intimate way the structures which facilitate class relations based on a social division between residents and non-residents.

The class inequality of the employer and employee are expressed in the isolation of maids, their lack of adequate legal protection to ensure terms of employment are complied with and their inability to act collectively against their employers. Jordanian resentment towards foreign workers taking jobs, the low status of Asian workers, and police reluctance to become involved in any disputes involving maids creates a climate which empowers the employer. Moreover in the streets of Amman Asian workers have come increasingly under police scrutiny and subject to spot checks on the validity of their work permits. This climate which serves to increase the isolation of maids (they keep off the streets) allows employers to more easily manipulate their working conditions to reduce costs.

Employers are able to reduce the cost of having domestic servants in a variety of ways with very little possibility of their maids resisting them. Contracts written overseas are sometimes torn up by employers on their arrival in Amman and new ones written in Arabic with changed conditions or wages which maids are obliged to sign. Employers are late with their monthly payments. Employers may refuse to fulfill the obligation to provide food and force their maids to buy their own food or expensive imported items (e.g. toothpaste and coffee). Employers also manage to avoid increased government charges of work permits for maids - increased from JD50(\$200) to JD150(\$600) - designed to restrict their employment by deducting it from their monthly salaries. They also reduce costs of domestic service by employing only one servant to do the work previously done by two.

Where maids have been subjected to abuse or violence by employers there is little prospect of legal intervention or remedy since police generally regard violence against maids as domestic conflicts. Maids are treated as if they were an extension of the household with no distinct rights. Police are especially reluctant to intervene in cases where unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuse or rape are concerned. The solution in such cases is to get rid of the problem - send the maid home.

The legal and political environment in Jordan allows limited intervention in the situation of maids. Inadequate legal regulation of maids' employment conditions, prohibitive legal costs and the state's prohibition of labour organisations mean disputes and crises are dealt with on an individual basis. The main refuge and help for foreign workers in Jordan are their embassies. Filipina workers in Amman for example, can take their problems to the Labour Attache at the Philippines Embassy. The Labour Attache acts as an intermediary between maids and employers in disputes and, if necessary, helps to arrange airfares and complete official exit requirements should a maid have to leave before the end of her contract.

The Philippines Embassy, however, has conflicting interests in the position of their workers overseas. They want to protect the rights of workers but also ensure there are continued employment opportunities for labour migrants overseas to maintain the flow of workers' remittances to the Philippines. Because the Embassy does not want Filipino workers to be regarded as 'problem workers' they seek to resolve disputes quietly on a personal basis rather than demanding rights in the courts or the Ministry of Labour. These conflicting interests are reflected in the activities of two Philippines government organisations, the Philippines Overseas Workers Association (POWA) and the Overseas Workers Welfare Association (OWWA), which were established on the one hand to promote labour migration and on the other to look after the welfare needs of workers.

In reality the embassy has little authority, only prestige. The embassy's real role comes down to mediation in minor disputes or negotiating the release of contracts in more serious ones. But it can only intervene when disputes are brought to its attention. Because many Filipino workers do not join the POWA and OWWA to avoid registration fees (\$150) the embassy does not have an accurate record of workers in the country. By evading compulsory registration and certification of contracts before leaving the Philippines workers further



isolate themselves and put themselves totally in the hands of their employers.

In addition to the embassy Filipina maids in Amman can seek help from the church and from the Philippines Community Association. The church provides both a public meeting place for Filipinas and a focal point for socialising. The nuns of the Teresanto House who are part of a pontifical mission from the Vatican to Jerusalem and Amman also look after the welfare needs of workers. Yet the church and nuns are a passive and not active source of help. The Philippines Community Association (PCA) is a more active organisation. Its core are long-term Filipino residents, some married to Jordanians, who actively help individuals financially or by providing refuge for Filipina maids who have runaway from employers because of abuse or harassment. They have often had collections for burial costs of Filipino truck drivers killed on the highway or for airfares back to the Philippines. They also regularly provide refuge for Filipina maids in trouble with their employers in a network of 'safe' houses within the Filipino community. One informant estimated that an average of two maids per month sought refuge through the PCA because of physical abuse or rape.

But the sources of community and institutional help are not available to all Asian maids. As if to confirm the inferior status of Sri Lankan maids in the system of symbolic practices these maids are denied help from their consular representative. As the honorary Sri Lankan consul declared in a newspaper advertisement indicating the availability of consular services in Amman - all Sri Lankan nationals were welcome, except domestic servants! In other cases maids have only the protection of sympathetic individuals who by chance hear about their plight. In one case the Italian Embassy intervened to secure the release from contract of two Somali maids who were being harshly punished by their employer for the minor transgression of eating the household's food after a meal instead of their own.<sup>15</sup>

Gender conflict is also highlighted in the position of maids in the household. The relationship between Jordanian women and Asian maids is ambivalent. On the one hand the Filipinas are a foil to Arab women's social identity as a symbol of the latter's mobility while on the other their presence is a source of tension between Arab men and women over the changed roles of women through class mobility.

The class dimension of the relationship between Arab women and Filipina maids is clearly expressed in the strong resentment Filipinas feel about their social designation and treatment as servants by Arab women, their bosses. They reject this status and described themselves as 'help' around the house. They conceive of the relationship in much more traditional terms - i.e. that although they worked for a family they were also part of it. In middle class households Arab and Filipina women confront each other with distinct social aspirations and trajectories which are running parallel but with reference to different national class structures. Frequently the Filipina women who work as maids are educated and skilled - e.g. teachers, technicians, secretaries. They face the contradiction of having to accept lower status work in another society for upward mobility in their own. Moreover they are often married with children who are looked after by their spouse or parents in the Philippines.<sup>16</sup> At the same time as being their servants these Filipina women are an example of women's independence, an independence inconceivable for the very women they work for.

The very presence of Asian maids is seen as alien and an invasion of the privacy of the household. The topic of maids is sensitive precisely because of the intimate domain they inhabit. Arab men regularly complain that maids are culturally subversive for the children. This view is clearly expressed by Sherbiny (1985) in a study on the impact of capital and labour flows to the Arab world. He argues that maids have a detrimental effect on the language and customs of the young Arab children in their care "because those maids come from lower strata of their countries of origin, their educational attainments are poor, if any, and they tend to transit hazy, marginal and erroneous impressions of their values, cultures and traditions to Arab children" (Sherbiny 1985:65). But beneath this unflattering view of maids is a criticism of their Arab women who either neglect their children by pursuing careers outside the household or through their new found leisure gained from class mobility. The sentiment that women's place is in the home is congruent with the growing impact of unemployment. If increasing numbers of Jordanian males cannot find work then why should Jordanian women take jobs men can fill?

## Conclusion

Domestic workers are a specific case of the more general example of temporary workers in Jordan. Their presence is the product of the internationalisation of labour markets and the willingness of workers in one society to seek social mobility and improved lifestyles through individual adventure. Yet in that enterprise they are confronted with the social realities of the transformation of Arab societies. In the site of the household they experience directly the class relations of Jordanian society and the political powerlessness and personal vulnerability of ordinary workers in Jordan. They themselves are symbols of status, items of consumption the socially mobile are compelled to employ to affirm their achievements. For the new Jordanian middle classes maids are a social necessity. Their ability to continue to afford them in the face of declining incomes reveals the class inequality in the power of the Jordanian middle class to exercise personal authority and control over these immigrant workers by forcing down wages. The state officially seeks to limit the presence of foreign workers and to promote the Jordanisation of the workforce. It tacitly accepts their exploitation through inadequate legal protection or political rights to organise collectively.

## NOTES

- (1) This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Amman, Jordan, in June and July 1988. It is a working paper which will later be expanded to compare the impact of the strategy of segregation in Jordan and Kuwait.
- (2) For a detailed discussion on the issue of citizenship and integration in Arab states see Russell (1988).
- (3) See for further details on population and labour force proportions in Gulf states see Choucri (1983) 'Table 3-8 Population and Labour Force by Nationality in 1980-81 for Select Labour Importing States.'
- (4) See Dengler, Ian C. "Turkish Women in the Ottoman Empire" in Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie (eds.) *Women in the Muslim World*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1978.
- (5) See Smadi et. al. (1986:40)
- (6) See El Ahmad (1986)
- (7) See Smadi et. al. (1986) Table 4.14 'Distribution of Guest Workers in Jordan by Nationality and Expected Period of Stay in Jordan 1984', p. 119.
- (8) See Smadi et. al. (1986:68-9)

- (9) In Smadi et. al. (1986)'s national study entitled **The socio-Economic Impact of Guest Workers in Jordan** housekeepers were excluded from the sample. This is a curious exclusion on two counts. Firstly the number of female immigrant workers is about twice the number of those employed in other occupations based on figures that are quoted Smadi et. al. (1986) from government statistics - the total number of female migrant workers is 7.8% when 'housekeepers' are included and only 2.5% when they are excluded - see Smadi 1986 Table 3.6 'Distribution of Guest Workers in Jordan by Marital Status and Sex, 1984', p. 69. Secondly while undertaking fieldwork in Jordan it was the 'housekeepers' who are most frequently raised as a social problem because of their maltreatment and because they are regarded as subverting Arab cultural values through their position in the household. In this whole study housekeepers (female migrant workers) are hardly mentioned. The reasons for their omission is that unlike the professional and skilled workers they are recruited by private agents rather than government instrumentalities (e.g. hospitals) or private companies (e.g. hotels). Another anomaly in their position is that they do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Labour Law as employees of private households.
- (10) Seccombe (1986) provides data on the number of work permits issued to non-Jordanians by nationality between 1978-84. In 1984 the figures for work permits issued to Sri Lankan and Filipino workers are 6,100 and 1,832 respectively. If the permits for the previous year are included, on the basis that work contracts are issued for a 2 or 3 year period, then the number of Sri Lankan and Filipino workers climbs to 11,059 and 4,305. Of these Seccombe (1986) points out that 79% of Sri Lankans and 47% of Filipinos were employed in the service sector.
- (11) See Smadi et. al. (1986) Table 8.4 'Distribution of Guest Workers in Jordan by Type of Residence and Nationality', 1984, p. 274.
- (12) Interviews were conducted with 30 Asian domestic servants in Amman in June-July 1988. Of these 25 were Filipinas and 5 Sri Lankans. Access to workers was difficult because there were few places to actually meet with them outside the household. Interviewing domestic workers inside an employers household was very difficult and usually very unproductive. The issue of employment of workers was always sensitive because it was considered a private matter dealing with social spheres considered too intimate to be revealed to outsiders. The accessibility of Filipinas was due to their regular Sunday church attendance and other social gatherings promoted by nuns, the Philippines consul and individuals active in welfare. Lack of a common religious organisation, social club or Sri Lankan Embassy meant there was no social focal point for the Sri Lankan maids. The Filipina maids believed the Sri Lankan maids were generally worse off than them because they were often denied the right to leave their employers house at all.
- (13) This was expressed to the author in an interview with a Filipina who had become an organising force in the community in Amman looking after the interests and welfare of Filipina and Filipino workers in Amman.
- (14) See Seccombe (1986:383)
- (15) This example can from interviews with women active in the Filipino community in Amman who through personal connections were able to bring the case of the Somalis to the Italian ambassador.
- (16) See the case of Celi in Cruz & Pagnoni's (1989) **Filipinas in Migration: Big Bills and Small Change**.

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