

# Human trafficking in Lebanon

by Sigma Huda

*The UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Aspects of the Victims of Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, recently visited Lebanon.*

Lebanon has a significant problem of trafficking in persons that particularly affects foreign women recruited as domestic workers and foreign women in the sex industry. The trafficking of Lebanese and foreign children into street begging and sexual exploitation is a quantitatively smaller but no less serious problem.

Large numbers of migrant women come to Lebanon to serve as domestic workers in private households. NGOs estimate that there are between 120,000 and 200,000 domestic migrant workers in a country of only four million people. Sri Lankan women are the largest group, followed by Filipinas and Ethiopians. The government fails to exercise due diligence in protecting them from exploitation and abuse:

- The authorities confiscate passports on arrival and hand them to employers who retain them to control their 'investment' of \$1,000-2,000 for the agency charge and the airfare.
- Without passports, women are liable to arrest, criminal conviction as an undocumented migrant and deportation.
- Women generally sign a contract prior to departure for Lebanon but on arrival find themselves forced to sign another contract for a significantly lower salary; only this contract has legal validity in Lebanon even though it was concluded in a situation characterised by deception and duress.
- Domestic workers are not allowed to change employers during their stay.
- They are excluded from the protection of the country's Labour Code and its regulations on working hours and holiday entitlements.
- Officials condone restrictions on movement and turn a blind

eye to frequent beatings of maids.

- Hardly any attempts to prosecute employers for deprivation of liberty, withholding of wages or even sexual assault result in convictions.
- Abusive and exploitative employers often succeed in making unfounded allegations of theft against runaway workers who, after being convicted for theft and illegal presence in Lebanon, may have to wait months for an NGO or fellow national to help them return home.

Thousands of women from the Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Moldova provide sexual services in nightclubs catering to affluent Lebanese and Gulf tourists. Many have been made to believe that they would be expected to perform striptease dances but find on arrival in Lebanon they are expected to have sexual relations with customers. The visa system designating the women as 'artists' facilitates the deception. They are often kept in the sex industry through a system of debt bondage. Many women do not receive any income until the impresario has recovered his actual or supposed costs of recruitment and transfer. After six months the women are rotated to a nightclub owner in Syria or another Mediterranean country and the debt game starts again. Women in the unregulated sex sector – Sudanese or Iraqis escaping conflict or domestic workers who have fled abusive employment and have no other option – are deprived of any state protection and are extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

Street children and other children from marginalised backgrounds are also exploited as beggars by organised groups of adult handlers who take a large share of their income. Having been moved

out of a zone of relative protection into an area of vulnerability they must be considered to be internally trafficked children.

Law enforcement officials and civil servants lack a clear understanding of the concept of human trafficking, failing to distinguish it from the cross-border smuggling of migrants. They are unaware that persons can be trafficked despite having valid visas.

Lebanon's invitation to me to undertake a mission, together with recent indications of high-level government recognition of the need to pay attention to trafficking in persons, are encouraging. However, the government's commitment to address the trafficking situation has yet to translate into the necessary legal and institutional reforms. My key recommendations are that:

- the government should enhance national and international cooperation, adopt legal reforms to criminalise all forms of trafficking, strengthen labour laws and identify, protect and safely repatriate trafficked persons
- sending countries should offer effective consular protection to their nationals in Lebanon, preferably on the basis of bilateral agreements on migration concluded with Lebanon
- civil society, human rights organisations, the media, trade unions and the international community need to challenge the discriminatory attitudes which contribute to exploitation of migrant workers, foreign women in the sex industry and street children.

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