

Employment of Female Domestic Aides in the U.A.E. ^{22/4: 647-25}

VINITHA JAYASINGHE

Female domestic aides in the United Arab Emirates had several complaints to make to the Director of Sri Lanka's Women's Bureau, Vinitha Jayasinghe, when she visited the U.A.E. late last year. Excessive work; Lack of free time; Denial of earned wages, Low wages; Assault by landlord/landlady/Agent; and Improper conduct by landlord were among the main complaints made to her. Having read through a few controversial files at the Sri Lanka mission in Abu-Dhabi, and had discussions with the new Charge d'Affairs and also having met a few women who were employed as house maids, the Head of the Women's Bureau reported back to our Foreign Affairs Ministry making the following observations and recommendations.

Excessive work

The nature of work that a house maid has to perform is far in excess of that of a domestic servant in Sri Lanka. Most of the houses are large and families are large while all the work has to be done by a single person — the house maid.

Lack of free time

The non-availability of any free time is due to excessive work.

Denial of earned wages

Very often the employer has not paid the correct wage and in some instances has paid much less than the fixed rate.

Low wages

House maids are normally paid the sum of Dirhams 250 per day which in Sri Lankan Rupees is equivalent to Rs. 1,000/-. However, this rate is very much lower or the lowest in terms of other rates of payment for employees in the country. Considering the heavy load, the salary paid to a house maid is indeed meagre.

Assault by landlord/landlady/Agent

Very often assaults by landlord/landlady/Agent are reported. There are some instances where the house maid has even been burnt by the landlady. Inquiries revealed that such harassment has been caused as a result of the employee not complying with the landlady regarding work. Assault by the landlord has been very often due to the fact that the maids have been in the habit of leaving the home without the permission of the Master. The Agent has harassed the maids when they go to him with complaints.

Improper Conduct

Cases where the house maid has conducted herself in an improper manner have been reported while instances where a landlord has made improper advances to the house maid were also noted.

However, there were few women who expressed satisfaction about the nature of the work given to them. Some expressed the view that if while being a house maid she wins the confidence of the family employing her, her life can be more pleasant.

Suggestions for improving situation

The problems most in need of consideration were Excessive work; Low wages; and Improper conduct.

It is suggested that —

1. The Ministry of Labour wields greater control and supervision over the local recruiting agencies. The Foreign Employment Bill of Sri Lanka helps this to a certain extent.
2. All recruiting agencies should give a satisfactory job description before recruiting the house maid and it should contain the following information:

- a) a fair description of the country where

employment is found

- b) a detailed job description
 - c) hours of work and hours of rest or free time to be specified.
 - d) the information be prepared in Sinhala/Tamil/English and also Arabic.
3. The mission in Abu-Dhabi has to be responsible for all recruitment. A system whereby all available vacancies within the area of administration of the Foreign Mission have to be first intimated to the Mission which will then keep the Dept. of Labour informed. The Department of Labour will then inform the local agents accordingly. This will ensure that both the Department of Labour and the Foreign Mission have more control of the situation.
 4. All foreign recruiting agencies to be registered with the Foreign Mission in Abu-Dhabi and all local agencies to be registered with the Department of Labour. Also, a Clearance Certificate be issued to the recruiting agencies both local and foreign.
 5. All foreign recruiting agencies from the region be required to pay a refundable deposit to the Foreign Mission in Abu-Dhabi which can be used in the event an employee has to be sent back for not being able to carry out the work entrusted to her due to reasons beyond her control such as excessive work or assault or denial of earned wage or improper advances by the employer.

(According to a local agent, a private party who requires the services of a domestic aide from Sri Lanka has to pay the agent a sum of Dirhams 3,000,000 (equivalent of US\$ 900,00 approx.) Out of this the following commitments are made:

- a) one way ticket to UAE US\$ 440.00 (approx.)
 - b) commission to Sri Lanka agent-between \$ 50.00 and \$ 75.00
 - c) miscellaneous expenditure such as cable charges, transport from airport etc.
- After meeting the above commitments, it is said that an agent at this end makes a profit of between US\$ 200.00 to US\$ 2,500.00. Within this region, a refundable deposit could be made. This will ensure more control and supervision by the Foreign Mission over the foreign recruiting agents).
6. The Foreign Mission should be more closely associated with the employment situation and at least quarterly meetings with the employees (particularly the problem category of housemaids).
 7. It is necessary to set up a unit in the foreign mission comprising one Senior Officer, preferably a female, and another officer to handle exclusively the recruitment problem, that of house maids, in the first instance.
 8. The Foreign Employment Division of the Department of Labour too to be strengthened with a view to having more control and supervision of recruiting agencies through regular progress reports etc.
 9. In the case of the previous two recommendations (7 and 8 above) it will ensure:
 1. the regulation of the problem; 2. the opening of more avenues of employment.