

Stories from the Field

Introduction to the Six Stories

The six stories reported by Carole Kerbage and Omar Said are spread across a wide range of experiences from the world of work in Lebanon and shed light on widespread and fundamental problems of gender stereotyping, worker-life balance, gender wage gap, gender based discrimination, and overlapping discriminations based on gender and disability. The stories were originally prepared for a Sub-Regional Initiative of the ILO on Promoting Gender Equality in the World of Work in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

The story of the Syrian agricultural laborer family working in the tobacco fields of Lebanon where underpaid women's and children's labor abounds, stands out from the others in terms of its rural setting. The exploitative terms and conditions of work are two-fold in this story both from the side of the land owner and that of the family patriarch. The other stories when read together paint a bleak picture with only small glimmers of hope for change. The resilience of the women is remarkable considering the widespread endemic injustice. We see this in the story of the young woman where her employer blatantly discriminates against her for getting married and becoming pregnant. In another story, a health care sector worker accepts conditions of work that under normal circumstances would be intolerable, in order to secure a future for her children. We feel the rage and disappointment suffered by the young woman architect in the face of a blatant gender gap, despite the same level of education and even more years of experience, as practiced by her employer who clearly has a bias towards male bread-winners. The story of the handicapped woman underlines how gender discrimination and discrimination of people living with disabilities can overlap to create increased exposure to exploitation. Finally on a more positive note, we read about an employer who is aware of the issues facing workers with family responsibilities and demonstrates this awareness by making the necessary arrangements, such as teleworking, in order not to lose a talented worker to family responsibilities.

As one finishes reading these stories one cannot but help ponder how many more of these stories are needed in order to change perceptions and attitudes in the world of work.

Simel Esim

For My Children's Future..

Reported by Omar Saïd

This story puts in perspective the dilemma of a woman worker who accepts conditions of work that, under normal circumstances would be intolerable, in order to secure a future for her children.

"In times of hardship, it is important for parents to think about their children's future". Lubna

Lubna is a clinic assistant in a private medical center in a hospital in Lebanon. Her work experience exceeds fifteen years. She has been working in the clinic for just five years. She works from seven a.m. till five p.m., except for two days

when she works overtime until seven p.m. (one day is done on a voluntary basis in order to get a raise). Her salary is LBP 700,000 (US \$466) including overtime and the children's social security.

Lubna is a mother of three. Her eldest son is twelve, and the youngest is eight months old. In spite of her relatively stable working conditions, taking care of

her kids is her biggest concern. She says: “We are asked by the administration of the hospital to give a detailed schedule of our annual leave, but how can I plan my days off ahead when I have such young kids?” Lubna’s concerns become more relevant when we learn that over the past five years she did not enjoy a single day off for relaxation or for fun. All her days off are taken in emergency cases when one of her kids gets sick.

Lubna recalls waking up one morning to find her youngest baby extremely weak, with a 40 degrees body temperature. Of course, she had no choice but to stay with him. But the administration of the hospital was very annoyed with this fully justified short-notice absence, and deducted it from her annual leave. At her astonishment, she was warned by the management that such a sudden absence might lead to her dismissal from the job.

Lubna says: “The worst thing that happened to me was when I gave birth to my second baby during my first year as a clinic assistant. Then, I was only entitled to 49 days of maternity leave”. But owing to health problems, she had to rest for twenty days before giving birth, and therefore had to reduce her maternity leave, put her 29 day old baby in the nursery, and gave up breast feeding after the first month.

“My husband works for a government department on an hourly basis. He is paid LBP 6500 (around US \$5) per hour. The fact that he gets paid by the hour is very convenient given that his work is flexible and he can compensate for my absence when necessary”. Maybe this is what prevented the family from collapsing. In cases of emergency, the husband is able to sacrifice a six hour working day. So the couple is sharing the household responsibilities and the upbringing of their children. Here Lubna explains: “otherwise it would not have been possible for me to keep on working”.

Raising children is not a matter of improving their daily life, but of securing their future too. This is how Lubna sees things. The hospital contributes to the children’s school tuition fees, and later, it will fully pay the university tuitions, on condition that they pursue their higher studies at the university that the medical center is affiliated with. Lubna’s days are restricted to working and sleeping, in order to secure her children’s higher education.

Lubna, 34 years old, married, hospital clerk,
Kaskas.
Translated by Rada Soubra

My Supervisor is an Advocate of Workers’ Rights and of Gender Equality

Reported by Carole Kerbage

It is important to have an employer who is aware of the issues facing workers with family responsibilities. By making the necessary arrangements, such as teleworking, this employer was fulfilling a win-win scenario: a happy and productive worker who did not have to forego her professional goals or her family responsibilities.

She is an instructor of political sociology at one of Beirut’s universities. One can see her preparing her baby’s feeding bottle in one hand, while carrying her eight month old baby girl in the other. She also tries to calm down her two year and a half firstborn telling her: “honey, please try to draw mom and dad”. Rita is putting her professional career on hold

for a few years until her two daughters are ready to go to school, while keeping her job at the university as faculty and staff member in charge of both the students’ exchange program between Lebanon and foreign countries, as well as the M.A. curriculum. When she accidentally got pregnant, she was not ready to be a mother or to put her social and

academic life on hold: “I was preparing my Ph.D., but now all my notes and books are in a closet somewhere in the apartment. Apart from working hours, I dedicate all my time to my kids”. In the beginning, this was quite a shock to her, but she decided to carry on fully with her maternal responsibilities. According to her, “Now I am really enjoying motherhood. I got over it. I have to forget about myself for a while”.

In addition to her husband sharing the household chores with her whenever possible, favorable working conditions, not to say “exceptional” ones, were very helpful. Knowing that the labor code provides for a 49-day fully paid maternity leave, Rita explains that her boss believes in social justice and in gender equality, so she was able to get three months fully paid maternity leave without even having to negotiate for it.

Rita used to work Mondays through Fridays, but she resigned after giving birth to her first child, because she could not cope with the standard working hours of the office. The chairperson of the faculty refused to accept her resignation, and she modified Rita’s contract in a way that complies with her family responsibilities: “So for the same pay, I started going to work twice a week with no regular office hours; the most important thing for me was to finish the assigned job”!

Rita was blessed to have a female boss that was supportive of workers’ rights while banning gender discrimination in the workplace. At the same time,

her boss was aware of the international labor standards concerning maternity protection and the rights of workers with family responsibilities to benefit from flexible working hours. In addition, Rita had previously assisted her boss in establishing this faculty in 2002, giving much of herself in the early stages of the project. So this exceptional favor was partly in recognition of Rita’s contribution to the success of the faculty.

Also, the couple’s sharing of the household chores constituted a positive factor. Although the husband works from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., he always tries to look after the kids and to help with domestic chores. In emergency cases, he does not hesitate to draw on his annual leave to help out.

Rita cannot afford leaving anything to chance. She gets up early to prepare breakfast and to get her eldest child ready for school. As for the little one, she only sends her to the nursery on her working days. She welcomes them home at 2:30 p.m.; they have lunch and then spend the afternoon together: “I think this was my sacrifice ... The age when the child is totally dependent on you is critical and very important for the child’s mental development”. She is silent for a moment then she admits: “I have not been able to read a single book, or attend any lecture for the past three years”.

Rita, 33 years old, married, instructor of political sociology and administrative assistant, Ashrafiyeh.

Translated by Rada Soubra

The Difference between \$500 and \$850 ... A Young Man who is Securing his Future

Reported by Carole Kerbage

The gender wage gap that a young woman professional suffered from despite the fact that she has the same educational background as her partner and even more experience points to the predominant male breadwinner bias in the world of work.

Jihane was extremely happy to learn that her newly graduated fiancé had been hired by the same engineering firm that she had been working for

for a year. But soon, she was disenchanted and her smile disappeared to be replaced by signs of shock and disappointment. Her fiancé was immediately

assured by the boss that his starting salary would be \$850 to be increased a month later depending on his competence. Noticing discontent on Jihane's face, the boss looked at her saying: "As you know, he is a young man who has to provide for his family".

After graduating from the School of Engineering, Jihane started her career as an interior decorator. As a student, she used to work for an engineering firm on a part-time basis, then she was hired by the same firm as a full-timer, i.e. from 8:30 a.m. till 5 p.m., for a monthly salary of \$500. Two months later, her salary was raised to \$700.

Same degree, same position, same working conditions, but despite her greater work experience, her salary was \$350 less than that of her fiancé. But because of her upcoming wedding, she could not protest. Her fiancé did not believe that his salary would be so high, so he kept quiet. She did not want to hurt him, and she shut her mouth, brokenhearted. But she kept wondering: "we are equal, as we are both financially contributing to establish our home, why would his salary exceed mine by \$350? Why should there be any difference?"

As a young woman, Jihane accomplished every task assigned to her. She did not hesitate to visit

the "construction site" during her working hours, in spite of the difficulties she encountered. She was at the site, with all the necessary tools, a measuring tape in one hand, her files in the other, supervising the construction works, giving the necessary instructions, and avoiding smiling, in order to be taken seriously by the workers.

"I am doing my job, but the workers have a problem with me; they look at me as a woman, and it is hard for them to accept the fact that I am an engineer!" She adds: "They make me feel that I don't belong here". One exception is a construction worker who welcomes her whenever she visits the construction site, and facilitates her task as much as possible, "because his daughter is an interior decorator like me. He probably sees her through me".

Whether in their love relationship, their career, or their common aspirations, Jihan and her fiancé are equal. They are "evenly" deprived of any social security coverage or health insurance because the "bylaws of the firm" do not approve of registering the employees for social security. Equal in everything except for this salary issue...

Jihane, 24 years old, engaged, interior decorator, Baabda.
Translated by Rada Soubra

The Farmer, His Wife, and the National Tobacco

Reported by Carole Kerbage

This is the story of the Syrian agricultural laborer family working in the tobacco fields of Lebanon where underpaid women's and children's labor abounds. The exploitative terms and conditions of work are two-fold in this story both from the side of the land owner and that of the family patriarch.

M.M: supervisor.
Nationality: Syrian.
Place of work: Tarayya, in the Bekaa.
Number of children: 22.
Number of Wives: 2, Umm Ali and Umm Husain.
Type of work: picking and piercing tobacco leaves.

The landlord is Lebanese. The workers are Hanane (Umm Ali), the wife, along with eight kids, and the

daily benefit ranges between LBP 30,000 (US \$20) and LBP 40,000 (US \$27) for a family composed of a man with two wives and 22 children.

M. received us with a smile, insisting that we come in. He was surrounded by his children, whose ages ranged between 10 months and 18 years. The family lives in a tent made of tree trunks and canvas covered with vegetable bags, and surrounded by a

hole around the tent to ward off rain from coming in during winter times.

The landlord pays LBP 1000 (US\$ 0.6) only per tobacco thread, which is over 2 meters long, and takes nearly two hours to be finished! Who does the job? M. answers: "Umm Ali, my wife, and initially eight of my eldest children, but this little girl does the piercing sometimes", pointing to his 4 year-old daughter. When asked how many threads he finishes a day, he answers with a smile while his wife serves coffee: "I cannot forbear the piercing process. I just supervise the work and deal with the landlord". The landlord receives 25 dried kilograms of pressed dried tobacco leaves wrapped in canvas. He is not responsible for any work accident that might occur to any of the farmers, under the pretext that "Syria is close, so they can go there to seek medical treatment!"

In addition to the abuse of the landlord who owns the means of production while exploiting the farmers' labor, abuse takes place within the family too, in line with the prevalent patriarchal mindset.

Rosy-cheeked Umm Ali, whose face is marked by signs of fatigue, relates her life conditions. Umm Husain, the other wife, is in Syria with the rest of the kids, so she has to raise twelve kids on her own, with three of them less than four years old. Of course, she has to do the daily cleaning and the cooking, and to finish five threads of tobacco, therefore she constantly juggles the double role of reproductive care work, and the productive one of being a tobacco worker. Meanwhile her husband's work consists of supervising the work of his wife and children, and dealing with the landlord, i.e. cashing their daily wages.

Whereas the father elaborates on the abuse he and his family are subjected to by their employer, who is accumulating more and more money, he does not know that he is also exploiting the labor of his wife and children. This, in short, is the manufacturing journey of the national cigarette that poor people buy.

Hanane, 38 years old, married, tobacco farmer, Chmistar.
Translated by Rada Soubra

The Price of Motherhood

Reported by Carole Kerbage

This story is one of many in the world of work in Lebanon, where employers blatantly discriminate against women workers who marry and become pregnant.

Razane is a working woman who was fired from her job. The reason for that is not the financial crisis, the closing down of the firm, or incompetence on her part. It had to do with her personal life, namely marriage and pregnancy.

She had been working for seven years for a private Lebanese firm as an assistant in the marketing department. She benefited from her 40 day fully paid maternity leave (before the amendment to the labor law), but she kept on working until the last moment before giving birth, i.e. just a few hours prior to her admission to the delivery room! The last stage of pregnancy was very difficult because she

had to spend long hours in the toys warehouse in a windowless basement without any ventilation shaft.

She did not dare to contest her work conditions although she knew that, according to the labor law, maternity leave should be split between the three phases: pregnancy, delivery, and breast feeding. She understood then that the boss was not happy with the situation, and did not feel comfortable with pregnant women and with mothers: "I felt as if I was a burden to the firm, and to the boss in particular, so I started avoiding him, even when I got back to work. He told me sarcastically "That's it!? It is over?" Although the nursery was close to her work, Razane did not

breastfeed her baby daughter properly after getting back to work. According to her, “I want to deprive the boss from any alibi he might use to fire me”.

Upon returning to work following the maternity leave, the decision to fire her was already taken, although in an indirect manner, because dismissing a pregnant employee from her job is penalized by the Lebanese Labor Law. Thus her employer “suggested” to her the dismissal decision a week after she resumed work: either she works 4 extra hours to be added to the standard 8 and a half working hours (from 7:30 a.m. till 4 p.m.), a total of 12 hours and a half per day, or she quits her job “with a two month bonus” and without an end of service indemnity.

She was the only one to be asked to work an additional 4 hours. Therefore she quit her job because she considered this “suggestion” to be an arbitrary dismissal in disguise, as her employer knew very well that she cannot leave a newborn baby until 8 o’clock in the evening. In any case, asking her to work for 12 and a half hours, and putting an end to her seven-year service without indemnity were illegal decisions. She had to quit her job at a time when she was in

need to meet the baby’s additional expenses. Thus she decided to file a lawsuit against her boss in the labor court. The country was paralyzed then due to the vacancy in the presidential post, so the procedure lasted two and a half years without any glimmer of hope. Her employer suggested to her to accept a settlement consisting of LBP 7,000,000 instead of the LBP 18,000,000. Owing to the financial difficulties she was going through, she decided to take his offer.

Three years later, Razane is still looking for a job. She describes the psychological and financial problems she faces as a housewife and is quite aware that marriage and motherhood are limiting her chances to be hired. During job interviews, some firms ask about her marital status, most of the times taking it as a pretext for refusing her candidacy, while others blatantly reply: “we don’t hire married women”. This is what happened to her colleague in the department of marketing. The employer hired her under one condition: not to get pregnant before she finishes her first year!

Razane, 38 years old, married, marketing attendant, Saïda.
Translated by Rada Soubra

The Problem Seems to be with the “Cane”

Reported by Carole Kerbage

The story of the disabled woman recounted her underlines how gender discrimination and discrimination against people living with disabilities can overlap to create increased exposure to exploitation.

He stares at Sawsan’s feet then looks at the cane in her hand, finding it odd that she should apply for a job. His answer is: “just fill in the form, and we will contact you later”. This took place in one of the public sector institutions she knew were looking for accountants. She applied for the position along with some of her acquaintances, all of whom ended up being hired, except herself. The problem seems to be with the “cane”...

Sawsan has suffered from polio since she was a child. She studied accounting, got married, then gave birth

to a baby girl, who is six now. What’s wrong with that? Everybody studies, gets married, and then has kids. The problem is that whenever she applies for a job, the employer does not take her degree or her competences into consideration, he just stares at her limp!

But she insisted on finding a job. She found a position at the watch department in one of Lebanon’s consumer store chains, COOP. She did not hesitate to give it a shot. But this time, the boss was quite straightforward, and did not ask her to “fill the

application form, but said abruptly: “how will you be able to sell?” She answered confidently, “try me for a week of unpaid work, and hire me if you are satisfied with my work”. And this is what happened. She worked at the watch department as a full timer for four years, for a monthly salary of LBP 575,000 (around US \$383), with no social security.

Then she became a cashier at the COOP for the same salary, but with a promise to benefit from social security. “Here I was doing almost everything: cashier, accountant, secretarial work, marketing, attendant at the toy department... They exhausted me, literally”. She was also forced to do extra hours without overtime.

“Not-discriminating against women with disability does not mean keeping them standing in the marketing department for 8 consecutive hours”. Then she added: “if overworked, a worker cannot fulfill properly his/her duty”! Sawsan resigned or was “made” to resign, after she was asked by her boss to work until 11 p.m. for the same salary. She tried to explain to him that she had a baby and that she cannot go out at night. After resigning, she discovered that she was registered with the social

security four years after becoming a cashier (i.e. eight years after starting to work at the COOP!).

Following this, she decided to assist her husband who works as an account manager in a grocery shop for a monthly salary of \$200. She maintained that although she started as accountant her job became diversified i.e. dealing with customers, selling, taking charge of the merchandise... But the salary remained unchanged: “I worked for four years in the grocery, doing everything... I asked for my own salary, but they refused to pay me, so I refused to stay”.

She tried to work from home, doing some canvas painting and glass painting to sell it to her friends and relatives, but the doctor asked her to stop this kind of work due to some inflammation in the spinal column. Sawsan has been looking for a job since the grocery store episode. She had gotten used to working and to being financially independent: “I am not used to asking my husband for money, neither is he used to be asked for money. This is the first time since our marriage I have this feeling of helplessness, I am upset because of my disability”.

Sawsan, 38 years old, married, jobless, Corniche al-Mazraa.

Translated by Rada Soubra