

# The Street of Slaves

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## Preface

According to a recent American report, Lebanon is one of the countries black-listed for engagement in human trafficking (The Daily Star). Domestic labor is one of the two occupations harboring the largest number of trafficked victims in the country, the other being prostitution (AFROL). Domestic laborers in Lebanon consist largely of African and Asian migrants. These are only permitted into the country under a job contract, which stipulates live-in arrangements, a 12-hour working day and one day off per week, usually spent at home (Kristianessen 11). It is only after the termination of their contracts that laborers may choose to work as free-lancers. Free-lancers may be defined as those who “live independently (either renting, or staying in a room in exchange for services rendered) and work on an hourly basis for different employers” (Jureidini and Moukarbel).

This paper focuses on the experiences of free-lancing Ethiopian female migrant laborers in the area of Ras Beirut in Lebanon. Six Ethiopian female migrants acted as the focus group from which information for this paper was gathered<sup>1</sup>. Of central concern to the interviews were issues regarding the process of trafficking from Ethiopia to Lebanon and the problematizing of race, gender and class within this context. The creation and perpetuation of social

networks across the two countries and within Lebanon is also addressed. I begin by presenting the data collected from the interviews, and proceed to frame the findings theoretically.

## Introduction

My interest in exploring this topic was generated by becoming aware of an apartment across from mine inhabited by Africans. As far as I had known, my area of residency in Beirut, known as Ras Beirut, and more specifically my neighborhood, was inhabited exclusively by locals and other Arab nationals. The street on which I live is known for some of the most luxurious residential buildings constructed after the Civil War (1975-1991), inhabited by wealthy Arabs. The remaining buildings, sprayed with bullets from the Civil War, are inhabited by lower or middle class locals. Behind this street is an isolated cluster of four buildings also constructed before the war, each no more than seven stories high. A narrow alley, barely noticeable even to the area's residents, leads to those buildings. The apartment I was interested in was situated among that secluded cluster.

I intended to speak to the locals of this cluster in order to get a notion of their perception of the African inhabitants only to find that Afro-Asian migrants were the predominant

inhabitant groups of three of the four buildings on the street. The locals estimated that the migrants added up to roughly 95 residents. "They're decent people," said one woman, "You know, they're not dirty. The only problem is that, because of them, our street is now known as Shari' al Abeed (The Street of Slaves)."<sup>2</sup>

I randomly chose one of the apartments as the setting for a focus group. Upon discovering that I had a few questions for her and her friends, my host insistently repeated, "Ask whatever you want. There's nothing here. We are all very happy here in Lebanon". Inside were four other female Ethiopians, all nodding their heads in agreement with her statements; except for one, who eyed me with a suspicious, blatantly unwelcoming frown.

"Are you a reporter?" she asked repeatedly. My negation would not suffice. She spoke angrily to the others in the room in sharp, disapproving Amharic, probably rebuking them for having let me in. She snatched my list of questions from my hand for scrutiny while waves of hands rejected my proposition to record our conversation. Meanwhile, the host re-asserted, "Ask all you want. We have nothing to hide. In the first place, we shouldn't complain. Didn't I choose to come to Lebanon? Did anyone force me to come? No, I chose to come here. I can't complain. Lebanon has been good to me ... it has been good to us." She was by far the eldest one among them. The rest were young.

Questions and probes soon revealed that these women were all but happy in Lebanon. The opening declaration of contentment was the result of frustration with reporters. Their stories of penance, they later told me, were manifested in the form of black and white newspaper columns for the reading enjoyment of the journalists and their audience. The painful recounts they entrusted to journalists in no way led to positive action. Their status quo was maintained, along with their suffering.

### Independence after Abuse

Domestic laborers arrive in Lebanon with a three-year contract during which passports are confiscated and salaries are occasionally withheld. They either complete the term of their contracts and return home (with the option of later returning to Lebanon), or else they run away prior to the completion of their contract. The latter case often occurs because of abusive treatment. The only reason Mary<sup>3</sup>, 28 years old, resides in Lebanon to this day is due to such an incident. Mary spoke of her "crazy Madam" who, upon the termination of her contract, refused to return her papers unless she was paid \$1000. Mary did not have the money and refused to endure more malnourishment and ill-treatment. "Even if I stayed," she added, "if I wanted to leave later, she would have asked for the same amount of money. My friend helped me pack my baggage and catch a cab.

When the cab driver found out what had happened, he claimed to be an agent and offered us a well-paid job in return for \$500 each. My friend took care of the expenses since I had no money, but we never heard from the cab driver again."

A common denominator among the interviewees in this apartment is the a priori ignorance of the job they are supposed to be given in Lebanon before arrival. They had all been lured in by an illusory work-study program, unaware that they would be working as domestic laborers. One of them explained that she had had twelve years of schooling, after which she attained a diploma in typing. They had all fallen into the same trap. A job offer posted on the front glass-pane of an agency announced an offer of a work-study program; work during the day, studies in the evening, and a monthly stipend of \$300 to \$400 (as opposed to the meager \$100 they received on average as their pay upon their arrival to Lebanon). None of them expected to be working as domestic laborers. "I never even used to sweep the floor of my own mother's house," said the typist, "And here, I was expected to do everything. My life with them was intolerable. I had to leave with or without my papers."

With no money, no papers, and no justice to expect from the Lebanese judiciary system, migrants find no other option but to become free-lancers while they are held as detainees in the larger jail, which is Lebanon. By running away, these migrants have acted out their desire to depart, but the system will not allow it. The government does not deport illegal aliens immediately (Al Zougbi: b). "I wish they would," was one comment. Instead, they are arrested and imprisoned.

### The Darak and the Jail

According to the locals, the Darak (the internal security forces) conduct regular busts of the migrant residents of the street. "Those who are illegal aliens pay some \$100 and then they are let loose," said a local grocery shop owner. The reaction was different when I brought it up among the migrant apartment inhabitants. "Sure, if you have \$100, they'll take it and go. But if you do not, you think they care? They'll arrest you and take you to prison."

Harking back to the debtor prison tradition, Lebanese legislation favors imprisonment over deportation. According to an officer in the Hobeish police station in Ras Beirut, the duration of imprisonment is calculated based on the fine to be paid (Al Zougbi: b). For illegal residency, the fine amounts to up to \$1500. The duration of imprisonment is based on an calculated time equivalent of the monetary amount owned the authorities (estimated at around three months in prison). Upon release, the migrant is expected to pay 5000 Lebanese Pounds (approximately \$3) for each day spent in prison. If the detainee has the money, she is

released. If not, she must remain incarcerated until she pays the money owed for her jail stay (this is usually covered by friends residing in Lebanon). Only after that are illegal migrants gathered in a form of communal housing of sorts, until they add up to a sufficient number for transportation, after which they are deported as a group.

In prison, "They don't care whether you're a murderer, a thief or just someone with no papers. They throw you all in together," said the suspicious one. "They don't even give Kotex [sanitary pads] to women who need it. You live in your dirt and mess."

### Ethnic Enclaves

As a result of the difficulties they face, Ethiopian migrants have created tightly knit ethnic enclaves. In times of hardship, this migrant group constructs a strong sense of community and solidarity. My host told of an old, blind Ethiopian lady who had been living in the very apartment in which I was conducting the interview. She was also an illegal resident. Due to her age and physical disability, the woman could hardly work and therefore had no source of income. The people in the building would take care of her by providing her with food, clothing and money. On one of their regular busts, the police arrested her and imprisoned her in spite of her deteriorating health. In collaboration with the Lebanese Red Cross, Ethiopians from all over the country donated money to support her case. "There was money coming in from Jounieh, from Kaslik, from Sidon ... from all over Lebanon," said the one I had regarded as suspicious. They gathered enough money to pay her fines and send her home.

"We do that for the needy. We help each other out," said the elderly one before she left, saying she had a job appointment.

### A New Form of Remittance

Remittances sent home by Ethiopian migrants are not economic in nature. "We barely make enough money to make ends meet here, between rent, food and clothing," said one. Remittances are sent in the form of warnings. Network theory suggests that a bank of information is created as a result of information remittance; a bank of information consisting of the knowledge that the initial migrant has collected about her new environment, which she sends back home (Hugo ; Massey et al. 448). Networks are created as facilitators for the next wave(s) of migrants. Potential migrants are informed of what to expect in the country of destination. They then travel there and are received by the previous migrants who are better acquainted with the ways of the foreign land. In the case of the Ethiopian migrants, the networks created act as virtual blockades. As such, the type of informational networks created do not serve as "pull" forces by the country of destination, as the literature assumes would be their primary function (Taylor). On the

contrary, the information sent back home serves the purpose of halting the arrival of a new wave of potential sufferers.

### Sex and Servitude

During the course of our conversation, the one I regarded as suspicious had stepped out. When she came back, she was wearing a vibrant green dress. I complimented her taste. "You think it's pretty," she replied, "Other people call me a whore<sup>4</sup> when I wear this dress."

If they go out in modern attire rather than their traditional clothing, these women are often physically and verbally harassed by Lebanese men. "When we're walking in the streets, guys on motorcycles slap our asses and say nasty things." "Once I took a cab," said the typist, "There was another woman already inside. When she was dropped off, the cab driver started saying all sorts of nasty things to me. I told him, 'Why are you saying this to me? Why weren't you saying these things to her?' I wanted to get out, but he wouldn't stop. Then he picked up another local lady and he just stopped talking altogether. 'Why don't you say anything to her? Come on, tell her the things you were telling me,' I said to him right in front of her."

Her friend added, "Once I went to visit my friend in prison. I had to wait two hours before they let me in to see her. When I got home, it was dark. My boss called me a whore for staying out this late." "Why are we called whore when Lebanese women dress worse than we do?" asked the suspicious one. I asked her what she thought. "Because we have no family behind us," she replied, "Usually if anyone messes with you, they have your father and your brother to deal with. We have no one."

### Discrimination: Gender, Family and Race

There are various ways of dealing theoretically with the phenomenon of gender discrimination described above. The race/family interface is a good starting point. To this day, females are associated with domestic servitude (OSCE 17) in the Arab world; this exacerbates the discrimination migrant women encounter. But the disparate inconsistency in the treatment of local woman and migrant woman is rooted in notions of racism and a lack of familial support. The protection of the family's reputation through the preservation of the woman's honor (Schneider 19) is central to Arab culture, as it is to Ethiopian culture as well (AFROL). As such, the local woman does indeed have her 'father and brother to stand up' for her, while the migrant woman is here alone. Family ties, kinship and the lack thereof play a central role in the discrimination faced by these women.

Racism is also central to the Ethiopian experience. Associations between skin-color and servitude have long been embedded in Arab culture. "In Arabic, the term abed

is used to denote both a 'black' person and a 'slave' (Jureidini 2). This can be traced back to the Jahiliyya (the days prior to Mohamed's prophecies). The hadith<sup>5</sup> abounds with stories of how the Prophet freed black slaves and denounced their subordination<sup>6</sup> (Khoder 16-18). This indicates the presence of black slavery in the past. The association of servitude with black-skinned people is carried through to this day.

### Cultures of Honor

Discrimination goes beyond gender, skin color and family ties. Culture also plays a decisive role, as can be seen in the following juxtaposition of the Lebanese and Ethiopian experience in the "Diaspora." In his article, Citizenship and Honourability, Ghassan Hage invokes Levi-Strauss' idea of 'communal living' to define 'mutual obligation' as "an ethical structure of reciprocity that can only exist and be reproduced in societies that valorize, or honor their members" (7). From that perspective, he argues that the reason heightened tension exists between Australians and the Arabs in Australia is because the Arabs are "well-versed in the game of honour" (7) whereas Australians are not. Drawing upon their own cultural practice and 'etiquette', the Arabs define their status in Australia as that of 'guests' and resent the 'refugee' treatment they actually receive from the Australian community, which Arab culture would deem 'humiliating'. In defining themselves as a 'culture of honour', the Arabs differentiate between themselves and the Australian community at large. They invoke this 'characteristic' of Arab culture not because 'honour' and 'guesthood' are unconditionally adopted in their culture, but because in their subservient position in the Australian culture, invoking this notion delineates the differences between their culture and Australian justifications of the maltreatment of the Arabs in Australia. It is ironic that the Ethiopian community in Lebanon, an Arab country, is suffering from the same maltreatment. This same Arab culture of honor serves as a source of humiliation for our "Ethiopian guests", who, for their part, question the validity of the concept of 'cultures of honour' in the Middle East altogether.

Rather than explain discriminating behavior in terms of "cultures of honour", perhaps the notion of power relations would serve as a better explicator. Hage's notion of empowered practical prejudice proposes that racism is the result of "subordinating a racial group and maintaining control over that racial group" (Sivanandan in Hage 2000, 35). Portraying Afro-Asian migrants as inferior and incompetent maintains their subordinate position in the looking-glass of both the self and the other; locals reinforce the culturally embedded servile position of dark-skinned people, which in turn impedes the migrants' ability to discard this status.

### Problems of Integration

In light of what has been revealed regarding the conditions under which the Ethiopians live, issues of integration and communal belonging can provoke further discussion. As these women's declarations have pointed out, the interviewees were not interested in staying permanently in Lebanon. The return home is a journey they await desperately. This is of primary interest to this study, specifically in light of the publication of Massey et al., in which the suggestion is made that once migration has begun, it is not only maintained, but is also more likely to reoccur. Massey further suggests that the duration of stay in the country of destination positively affects the probability of permanent settlement, despite earlier intentions to eventually return home (1986). How, then, can we explain the lack of interest in settlement shown by these women?

Theories that argue for the perpetuation of migration, such as Institutional Theory (Massey et al.) and the Theory of Cumulative Causation (Massey, 1990), may be used to explain the depreciation of migration, as we did before in explaining the transmission of negative information through the use of Network Theory. Institutional Theory suggests that the market adjusts within migratory cultures encouraging the activities of private profit-oriented institutions and voluntary human rights organizations. The private institutions (in the form of recruitment agencies) find a profitable business in coordinating migration between sending and receiving countries<sup>8</sup>. Humanitarian organizations then arise to ensure the establishment and enforcement of migrants' rights and to restrain possible abuse, be it physical, verbal or emotional, along with other forms of discrimination. Hence, migration is encouraged due to the lessening of red tape, the facilitation of finding a job in the host countries, and enforcement of rights through the creation of humanitarian organizations. Although recruitment agencies abound in Lebanon, the activities of humanitarian organizations are still underdeveloped. As the anecdote of the old, blind lady demonstrates, migrant communities must rely largely on themselves in times of hardship.

The theory of Cumulative Causation stipulates that the tendency to migrate is reinforced through a cycle involving the social labeling of jobs as unsuitable for locals, and the migrant's development of a taste for the host culture (Massey et al. 462)<sup>8</sup>. Although domestic labor has indeed become an occupational reserved for migrants<sup>9</sup>, the extent to which the migrants have developed a taste for the host culture is questionable.

Racist reactions and living conditions typical of illegal residents – often encountered by migrants in the country of destination – are a vital cause of disinterest in remaining in a host country. In Lebanon these are most certainly not the only factors repelling migration. Research by Leo Chavez

has shown that despite racist conditions, undocumented migrant Mexicans in the US persistently voice a desire to belong to the community. This he attributes to their “overcoming feelings of isolation, developing a network of family and friends in the local community, acquiring local cultural knowledge, and reconciling [themselves] to the possible threat of deportation” (62). As such, these undocumented migrants choose to stay in the US due to fabricated networks.

This can be contrasted with Lebanon’s migrant population. The migrant community in Lebanon is predominantly single; they either leave their families behind or are unmarried. As such, there are few migrant family units. As we saw in Chavez’s findings, forming a family and giving birth to children in the country of destination can help incorporate a migrant, legal or not, into the new community. The children begin attending local schools, acquiring local culture, and interacting with local children. Furthermore, the process of integration is easier for a family unit than an individual unit as the community interaction of each individual can then be carried back into the household in which the family members themselves interact. Information about the community, friendship networks and cultural knowledge can thereby be acquired and transmitted at a more rigorous rate as several individuals—rather than just one—are being exposed to the new community. On a different level, the need to belong is in itself satiated by being a member of a family. In a strange environment, a sense of family mitigates one’s alienation and makes one more willing to endure difficulties. The company of men and children is absent from most women’s lives in Lebanon. When I brought up the subject of family, silence surged into the room. None of them saw the founding of a family as a possibility in the near future.

According to Chavez’s findings, a steady source of income also serves as an invitation to permanent settlement. Ethiopian free-lancers are often illegal residents who find jobs either through word of mouth or through illegal agencies (Al Zougbi: c). A steady source of income is therefore far from what the clandestine market offers free-lancing migrant laborers in Lebanon.

As was illustrated through the story of the old blind lady, the Ethiopians have managed to carry their ‘imagined community’ into this new country, by establishing a strong network of friends (Anderson). However, the isolation of the ‘Street of Slaves’, its name, and the locals’ reaction to the migrants, reflects the marginalization of this migrant community. Social discrimination, political policy and abusive treatment illustrate the larger community’s refusal to imagine the intruders as part of their own community. Official attempts at assimilation, integration or multiculturalism have yet to be introduced. On the contrary, there is a complete lack of attention to the migrants’ presence. One rea-

son for this is a disregard of the culture, beliefs, and language of migrants. The Lebanese see the Ethiopian presence as a physical phenomenon divorced of any humanity. These workers are expected to perform manual labor with no consideration for the human identity, culture, beliefs and language, which these migrants automatically bring with them. Another reason is the assumption that the migrants’ stay is temporary and therefore ineffectual. According to my sources, however, the stay of those illegal migrants I interviewed may not be temporary after all.

### Conclusion

The information gathered on the living conditions, remittance practices, ethnic enclaves and problems of integration among the Ethiopian migrant community in Lebanon allows for two conclusions. First, the decision to work independently among the interviewees arose from work in abusive households, signifying a direct relation between household abuse and free-lancing, in isolated cases. Furthermore, none of the interviewees wanted to remain in Lebanon. Free-lancing seems to be the middle ground between avoiding live-in abuse and the inability to go home. It must be noted here that whether or not this can be generalized to all free-lancers is questionable. Previous research has shown that domestic abuse is the exception rather than the rule (Jureidini & Moukarbel).

Second, the incorporation of this migrant community into the larger Lebanese community does not seem likely in the near future. This I attribute to the lack of family units, unstable sources of income, racist surroundings, and the isolation of the migrant community from the local imagined community. Perhaps if the aforementioned factors were present, the interviewees would be more likely to choose permanent settlement over departure.

On a final note, human trafficking and exploitation has certainly been of academic as well as a humanitarian concern. Current legislation policies and procedures in Lebanon have proven inadequate to reform and correct the trafficking and household abuse of domestic migrants. This is because trafficking and undocumented settlement is approached primarily a security and an illegal migration issue. Consequently, most law enforcement strategies target victims of trafficking and household abuse and not the agents that traffic in and/or abuse them. Hard academic results achieve little when they merely reprimand the perpetrators within a system of abuse, who victimize female immigrants. Lebanon is one of those countries that facilitate the negative conditions under which immigrant women live; it turns a blind eye to the abuses they undergo. The Ethiopian interviewees who have been provided a voice in this study have successfully survived the slavery in the households of their initial employers. They continue to suffer from the entrapment of a prison on a much larger scale.

## End Notes

1. It must not be assumed that all labor migrants in Lebanon are trafficked. The scope of the research in this study does not permit further in-depth work on this issue.
2. Abeed is plural for Abed in Arabic. The term Abed may be used interchangeably to mean 'slave' or 'black-skinned'.
3. Pseudonym; all names used in this paper are fictional.
4. With the authors consent, the authentic Lebanese term sharmoota, which the Ethiopian domestic workers continuously used in their interviews, has been replaced with the English term "whore", with respect to the sensitivities of certain readers.
5. The hadith is a collection of statements made by 'reliable' individuals, usually relatives of the Prophet, about the life and undertakings of the Prophet.
6. Stories about Bilala al-Habahi, a slave turned Muslim whom the Prophet designated to call for prayer, are among the most popular in the hadith. 'Ubadah ibn Samit was another former slave who rose to prominence.
7. Lebanon is infested with such agencies for housemaids, which take care of an immigrant worker's paper work and guarantee her a job prior to her arrival. In Lebanon, these agencies have attained a notorious reputation regarding their abuse of maids. Cases have been covered by such journalists as Reem Haddad.
8. Finding proof contrary to neoclassical claims, Massey further contends that the decision to migrate soon no longer necessarily relies on wage and employment opportunities alone, but also on networks present in the country of destination.
9. It is considered unsuitable for locals to work as domestic laborers today, but in the past, domestic help came from local women. (Jureidini)

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