

In Service to the Movement

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In the pre-dawn hours of March 25, Mila Windsari Affendi, a 15-year-old maid from Indonesia working in the home of a prominent Gaza attorney, climbed the stairs of her employer's four-story residence, unlatched a window, and perched her small, shaking body on the frame. While the three young children she cared for slept soundly, Mila clutched her handbag and flung herself off the ledge.

Whether it was an attempt to escape her abusive work conditions and run away, or to end her life, Mila's jump accomplished neither. After crashing onto the dusty street below, she was alive but could not move. One of the girl's legs was paralyzed; the other was fractured. She was bleeding internally from a punctured liver.

While her story provided sensational headlines and a buzz of gossip that spread like wildfire across Gaza, Mila's desperate leap from the window cracked more than just her frail bones. For the first time, it seemed, the news media and the public broke their silence and began to examine the increasingly prevalent practice of hiring foreign women like Mila to work as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy Palestinians.

Even in the wake of her jump, however, the precarious situation of these women persists, as it has since they first began to appear in the West Bank and Gaza following the return of the PLO in 1994.

When the former revolutionaries and freedom fighters came home, some of them brought with them trappings of the lifestyle they had grown accustomed to in places like Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf, where employing live-in maids from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines is commonplace. (A dismal human rights record accompanies this phenomenon.) There, in well-to-do homes, shirts are ironed, floors are mopped, tea is served and children are cared for by hired domestic workers who migrate thousands of miles to earn a mere pittance for their services.

"You would never have seen this happening here during the [first] Intifada," says one former activist and political prisoner, who has several friends who now have maids. "Many things have changed in our society since then. Our values have changed."

In recent years, the custom of hiring foreign maids has trickled down from returning PLO cadres to the mass-

es—those masses with the cash, that is. The up-front cost for obtaining a maid is \$2,500, made payable to the Palestinian agency that facilitates the maid's trip from her homeland.

On a typical Thursday evening in Ramallah, the open-air Al Sirreyeh social club is buzzing with families out to enjoy conversing with friends. It is not uncommon to spot half a dozen Sri Lankan women chasing after toddlers and feeding ice cream to children, while their parents drink tea, smoke argilas, and chat with friends. In Bethlehem, maids can be seen sweeping the front steps inside the ivy-covered gated entrances of some of the town's grandest homes. And in Gaza, an estimated 500 women are employed in the offices, beachfront homes or high-rise apartments of the new returning elite.

There are currently an estimated 1,000 foreign maids working in the West Bank. They come for two-year terms to escape countries of devastating poverty and earn salaries of \$100-\$150 per month. Their employers are required to provide them with food, clothing and shelter and to pay for their medical expenses. The maids typically range in age from early twenties to early forties; often they are forced to leave behind their own children, in order to seek a living by caring for someone else's.

It is customary for a maid's passport and work permit to be confiscated and held by either her employer or the agency that brings her. She is often kept isolated from other maids, for fear she will escape.

"The agency that arranged for our maid told us not to let her out of the house and not to let her talk to other Sri Lankans," says a Ramallah woman who hired a maid to care for her three young children while she and her husband are at work. "We ignored this. But there are four or five Sri Lankans in our building, and sometimes I see them whispering to each other from the balcony."

If this weren't enough cause for concern, there's the fact that these workers have no legal rights and sign no work contract. "We have a new labor code now, but maids working in people's homes aren't mentioned in it," says Ghazi Al-Khalili, general director of planning and information at the Palestinian Ministry of Labor. "These women are working all day and all night. The law says nothing about their hours or their wages."

Following Mila Affendi's jump, Al Resaleh newspaper in Gaza wrote a series of articles that resulted in the closure of Morning Star, the agency responsible for bringing this young maid from Indonesia. Though successful, the campaign focused less on rooting out a system that brings women there, virtually as indentured servants,

and instead condemned the specifics of the girl's case. Morning Star had allegedly smuggled her into the country and forged the age on her passport, representing her as a woman of 27, instead of the five-foot, 80-pound teenager she really was.

"The problem is bringing people into the country illegally," says Ghazi Hamad, editor of Al Resaleh. "To bring girls who are too young, or to deal with these servants in a bad way, this is a problem." However, Hamad says he sees no problem with the concept of having a servant. "It's not a bad thing as long as people deal with the servant as a human being," he says. "Islam tells us to deal with anyone who is serving you as your brother."

But if brotherly love does not extend to one's unlucky maid, as was the case with Mila Affendi, then what? Terrified and desperate in a situation where she was being beaten, Mila could not simply walk out the front door of her employer's home, passport in hand, and file a complaint. Perhaps it is not surprising that she had to exit from a fourth-floor window.

"Palestinians are generous by nature, kind by nature. We don't mistreat these women, like in other countries," says Mohammed Faris, owner of Rosy, one of three companies in Gaza that bring in maids from Sri Lanka and Indonesia. (The other two are Al-Wafah and the Sri Lanka Office for General Services, which advertises "Sri Lankan and Philipinian (sic) charwomen.")

A two-story operation, located in the wealthy Remal neighborhood, Rosy doubles as a \$1.5 million luxury beauty salon and gym. Upstairs, while women from Gaza's elite are slimming their thighs in an aerobics class, having their eyebrows shaped or dipping into the jacuzzi, Faris is busy downstairs matching maids to work in homes like theirs.

His large desk is littered with xeroxed copies of work permit applications and passport photos for hundreds of maids seeking employment in Palestinian homes. Young, empty-eyed faces stare searchingly into the camera; they engage in a bizarre silent exchange with the posters that hang on Rosy's walls. There, creamy-white European models with pouting lips advertise cosmetics and miracle skin treatments: "Without distress and doubts," they promise, "100 percent herbal; 100 percent effective."

How did Faris decide on the name Rosy? "See, I believe every woman is a rose," he says. "Every woman has her own ... essence." Just then, one of the three Sri Lankan "roses" that work for him enters with a tray of coffee. She wears a white cotton shirt and a black skirt. Her

nails are filed into points and lacquered with bright red polish, most likely courtesy of the salon upstairs. She makes no eye contact and says nothing, nervously setting down the coffee cups and exiting the air-conditioned office, back into Gaza's blazing afternoon sun.

Formerly the owner of a household appliance store in Gaza City, Faris sounds like any other entrepreneur when he describes how he got into the maid business. He leans back in his black leather desk chair, takes a drag from his cigarette and explains: "I got the idea to start this business because my dad was sick with diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis," he says. "We got a maid and paid her \$125 per month. Slowly my friends started to bring them, and I thought if there's a demand, why not open an office for it?"

The agency makes a written agreement with the employer, or "second party" that reads something like a warranty for a refrigerator or a TV. "The second party has the right to exchange the servant within 30 days from the date of receiving her if she is ill or unable to work," it states. "After 30 days from the date of reception, the second party may not return her or exchange her." The contract also requires that the family treat the maid well. But, in the absence of laws to protect her, that is largely up to the family.

"The problem with this type of migratory labor is that these women are working in hidden settings, private homes," says Rema Hammami, a professor and researcher in Birzeit University's Women's Studies Program. "They don't have legal rights, nor do they have relatives and family around for support. This puts them at incredible risk."

Tales of abuse, though mostly still recounted by word of mouth, are rampant. Maids have attempted to flee their employers' homes, some escaping into Israel where salaries are higher, though there as well abuse and lack of legal rights remain a problem.

Nonetheless, Faris is right when he says there is a high demand for maids. "There are families who have elderly people living with them, big families with many children. Sometimes because of people's financial situation, the women have to work. But who will look after the children and the house, who will clean and cook?"

"You can't find a Palestinian woman to do this work," he adds. "The Arabic man won't allow a wife, a sister or a daughter to work as a servant in another person's home."

But some women who have hired Sri Lankan maids say

they did so because it was the only affordable option. "I needed someone to work 4-5 hours a day to help care for my elderly parents and my brother who is disabled," says Iman, a 45-year-old Ramallah woman who never married and now carries the responsibility for these family members, in addition to working on her master's degree. "I tried to get a Palestinian to help us, but it would have cost 6,000 NIS (\$1,500) per month. That's more than my monthly income."

The burden is perhaps even more crushing for married women with children. As more and more of these women pursue degrees in higher education or careers outside the home, the social expectations to produce many children (the average Palestinian household has four), cook fresh meals every day, and keep the home immaculately clean, have remained rigidly in place. "We are a male chauvinist society," Faris says. "If the woman has to work, the man is not going to help her around the house."

Yet, cheap as they may come, Sri Lankan maids are still too expensive for some middle-class couples. "I wish we had the money to bring in a Sri Lankan," sighs Nawal, a 34-year-old mother of three young girls. A former Intifada activist with a local women's committee, she now works full time as a nurse in a West Bank clinic, taking classes at night to complete her bachelor's degree. Members of a leftist faction, she and her husband once espoused Marxist principles of class conflict and worker's rights.

In more recent years, those ideals have gotten lost in the shuffle of a hectic daily schedule. "Every morning I'm up at 5 a.m. to prepare breakfast and get the girls ready for school. I arrive home from work at 2:30 p.m. and begin making dinner. Somewhere in there, I have to find the time to study for school. My husband won't help clean the house; he won't even pick up a dish or peel a potato. I feel like a zombie."

In the context of this dilemma, foreign maids, even in their fragile circumstances, end up playing a mediating role. "The whole issue of sharing work between men and women gets buried," says Hammami. "In the absence of a major transformation in domestic gender relations, hiring a maid solves the problem for everyone."

End Notes

* In 1999-2000, Mary Abowd lived in Bethlehem, Palestine, where she worked as a journalist. This article originally appeared in Palestine Report (September 2000) and was published just before the outbreak of the second Intifada.