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A Human Face to Expatriates

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The twelve-hour stopover in Amman proved to be an education. Rather than seeing the South Asian expatriate community in the Middle East as mere statistics, I was able to add a face. I met an interesting woman in her early 30s from South Asia who worked as a 'care giver' in Israel. Having worked in three different households in three years and two months, she was more than happy to share her experience. Let us call her Diana.

Diana's work had involved taking care of an elderly woman in the household. Her first abode was an Arab Christian household in Nazareth in the north and then two Jewish families in the city of Jerusalem. She counted herself lucky since she has been treated not only well but also as a member of her host family. Her household activities involved taking care of a sick and invalid senior citizen and ensuring her food and medicine.

In the first two households her work load was heavy which forced Diana to move. And she did this without much problem and with favourable recommendations from her previous employer. She left the third household because of pressures from home. Her eleven-year old son would not be satisfied with Skype chats every other day. Even though her hosts wanted her to continue and were even ready to organize the visit of her son to Israel, Diana decided to pack her bags and return.

Contrary to myriad media reports, Diana had little problem working as a care giver. Her hosts were nice, friendly and kind. She was given a separate room and the children of the family treated her with dignity. None of her hosts ever intruded into her personal life. Diana was free after five in the evening and Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, was her day off and she used to spend it with a visit to the Holy Sepulchre. She made a deal with God to accept her Sunday services on Saturdays!

As a married woman whose husband is working with the US forces in Iraq, she had very few friends in Israel and chose to spend her time reading. Indeed, when I saw her with a sleek Dell laptop and with her polished English I was confident she must be an official or a teacher. The usual extras one normally comes across in airports such as colourful dresses, jewellery and high-heels were absent. A simple jeans and decent T-shirt was what she was wearing.

Did Diana interact with others from her native country? Apparently not. She did not want to be clubbed into an ethnic mould. But as her country does not have a diplomatic mission in Israel, she had to deal with the Indian embassy in Tel Aviv if she needed any consular or other assistance. Fortunately for her there was no need and she completed her stay without any problems. As a legal worker her papers were in order and she had no hassles with the Israeli authorities.

How was the situation of others in Israel? Going by her account or at least to the best of her knowledge, there were little problems. Sexual harassment, a common concern for many South Asian workers in the Middle East, was not widespread. Many, including her, were paid their salaries on time. With her accommodation and part of the food expenses taken care of, Diana was able to save a large portion of her US\$ 1,000 a month salary and remit to her family.

In Amman I noticed a number of people who appeared to be expatriate labourers and Diana was more than happy to share her insights on them. Rich Arab households employ more than one maid to take care of maintenance, cooking and/or childcare. But salaries in the oil-rich countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are paltry when compared to Israel – a mere US\$ 200 as against US\$ 1,000 in Israel. Moreover, in Israel they are designated and treated as care givers while those who are employed in the Gulf are treated as maids. Because of their smaller salaries, Diana informed me that many workers were forced to accept additional or illegal jobs to make ends meet and part of this extra income normally went to their ‘legal’ employers.

According to Diana, many of these maids are subjected to sexual harassment by family members of the household and their salaries are not paid regularly. We noticed a few women who did not have their passports and were paying fines at the immigration counter in Queen Alia international airport. Apparently they had either lost their passports or they were stolen. Due to harsher working conditions, maids often run away from their legal employers and start working elsewhere. Since their passports are taken the moment they report to their legal employers, many become illegal workers and are vulnerable.

Many of these workers whom I encountered in Amman were in their 20s and I could follow some of their conversations. At a young age, they had shouldered heavy family burdens. Besides taking care of themselves in a strange land with limited resources or previous exposure, they had to regularly remit a significant amount back home; partly to pay for their working visas and primarily to take care of their family members. Their remittances back home have to not only be

significant but also have to be regular. These young, mostly unmarried girls are taking care of their parents and other members of the family. One was actually complaining: “I sent 25,000 last month for the marriage but they want more.”

The work visa has a price. It cost Diana US\$ 6,000 and she was lucky that she did not have to borrow that money with heavy interests. In practice, it meant that Diana’s first six months’ salary went to settle her visa fee. Others are less lucky and often borrow money with heavy interests. Currently the cost of getting a work visa in her country is around US\$ 10,000. If a maid’s salary is a meagre US\$ 200, how long will it take to repay their debts before they start earning?

I found it odd that a maid’s salary is a mere US\$ 200 in the oil-rich Gulf countries. The answer came promptly: “Otherwise I would have gone there myself. I chose Israel because the salary was US\$ 1,000.”

Until I met Diana, the South Asian Diaspora in the Middle East meant figures, statistics and remittances. My knowledge and interest were limited to six million Indians, US\$ 50 billion annual remittances and problems of evacuation during crisis situations. Diana put a human face to that understanding. Thanks, friend.

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