

POLICING HOUSEMAIDS

The Criminalization of Domestic Workers in Bahrain

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This research stems from ethnographic observations in 2005 and 2006 of the women's sections of police stations in Bahrain. It uncovered details of a larger social and economic problem in the Arabian Gulf countries involving the unique legal status of the female expatriate guest workers. Housemaids or former housemaids formed the majority of female defendants who were ethnographically observed at Bahrain's local police stations. Observations revealed that this reflected an overall trend of criminalization of domestic worker-related labour disputes. This research presents the types of cases observed and discusses the women police as agents of social control whose job involves handling a larger socio-economic problem at the backend, through policing.

Introduction

In the Middle East, as well as in many countries around the world, domestic workers, or housemaids (*khaddamah*), who have migrated from their primarily South Asian home countries for work have become increasingly vulnerable to human rights abuses such as physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their employers. In the Arabian Gulf in particular, the situation is exacerbated by the lack of labour laws protecting these foreign workers, as well as popular attitudes that reinforce this legal imbalance.

This research stems from a larger ethnographic project exploring policewomen's roles in Bahrain (Strobl 2008). It focuses on the prevalence of housemaid-related cases in the women's section of Bahraini police stations. The use of local police stations to handle labour-related disputes represents a criminalization of housemaids even when their behaviour is not criminal. Furthermore, policewomen in general may have been able to enter, and maintain themselves as necessary to, the criminal justice system because of the criminalization of housemaids. Their willingness to enforce laws that are arguably detrimental to expatriate women in their society has contributed to their growth in numbers within policing. Today, they make up approximately 10 per cent of the total police force (Strobl 2008).

The term 'housemaids' is used in this research because it is employed by the press in the Gulf when these cases are reported. Furthermore, 'housemaid' is a better translation of the Arabic term (Modern Standard Arabic: *khaddamah*; Gulf Arabic: *khidamah*), which implies servitude and connects the phenomenon to the discourse of modern-day slavery. Historically, in the Middle East, this term was used for female slaves in Arabian Gulf tribes (Lienhardt 2001) who were attained as the spoils of war (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). In traditional Bedouin contexts, slaves formed the outer ring of the tribal clan, spatially delineated by the arrangement of their tents; the inner tent rings

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were the *shaykhs*, their immediate families and unrelated Bedouin families who had joined the clan (Abu-Lughod 1986/1999).

Two recent studies of housemaids in Lebanon, for example, connect them directly to slavery because the following conditions are present in their employment: abuse or violence (or the threats of abuse and violence), denial of freedom and exploitative work conditions (Beydoun 2006; Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004). One Sri Lankan former housemaid documents repeated beatings at the hand of her Lebanese sponsor in a recent book centring on modern-day slave narratives (Fernando 2006).

Criminalization

Recent work theorizing about the forces that contribute to criminalization views it as a process involving the decentring and diffusion of legal forms and practices across agencies and jurisdictions. This discourse brings criminalization into a global context in which international norms and capitalist system pressures influence criminalization within a particular state (Jeness 2004). Young (1999) highlights the irony of the discourse of meritocracy in global capitalism with the cementing of inequalities. This global system ‘promises self-actualization but it relegates a large portion of its members to service providers to the egos of the super-rich and the successful’ (Young 1999: 196). In a neo-liberal global economy, the pressure to modernize drives policy making (Garland 2001) and potentially directs punishment at those who become obstacles in this regard, as a back-end means of regulation (Pickering 2007; Fitzpatrick 2001). Migrant workers are then constructed as deviant and undeserving of state protection (Pickering 2007).

Many have documented that globalization has given rise to a particular dependency on female labour as individual women attempt to survive within the global context of World Bank structural reforms and other neo-liberal programmes (Willman-Navarro 2006; Boyle 2002). The same policies also increased the demand for female domestic work in receiving countries that need cheap labour for modernization endeavours (Misra *et al.* 2006; Willman-Navarro 2006). In addition, labour migration, both legal and illegal, means profits for those who control the migration networks (Sassen 2002). As such, many international migration flows today are arranged by contract and driven by a migration industry in which the women themselves become commodities on an open market (Boyle 2002), and private households employing these migrants become microcosms of social inequality (Lan 2003).

Criminalization also bolsters expanding criminal justice systems in modernizing countries, providing jobs (Pickering 2007). In the case of Bahrain, I argue that the expansion of women in policing can be attributed to housemaid-related caseload in local police stations—a situation that criminalizes housemaid-related conflicts in general. This inquiry fits into the larger discourse on post-colonial feminism in which the use of ‘women’ as a category of analysis is viewed through particular social contexts that illuminate the micro-politics of work, home or family (Mohanty 2003). Post-colonially, many former colonies have created a space for women’s work as part of a modernizing mission, initiating new relations of social production. On a superficial level, the representation of Bahraini women in their national police force appears to point to progressive gender relations, but, ironically, they are necessary precisely because they are deemed the appropriate state actors who can manage women, including foreign women, while still preserving traditional gender segregation (Strobl 2008). Where once women, including foreign housemaids, related to family or tribe, post-colonially, they must relate to the state and its bureaucracy for managing their contract labour. According

to Spivak (2008), it is the post-colonial ‘managerial’ state that exhibits poor gender values and ultimately is not held accountable, as it fails to protect the vulnerable. The promise of the post-colonial nation-state to better protect women from injustice has not been achieved in a way that protects all women, regardless of class, national origin or ethnicity.

The Scope of the Housemaid Problem

Although there are no official statistics kept as to the number of housemaids being processed in Bahrain for either committing criminal offences or being processed pursuant to deportation, housemaids or former housemaids formed the majority of female defendants who were observed at local police stations (Strobl 2008). Some high-ranking male police informants, when asked about the prevalence of housemaid cases, denied that these cases were significant in number, even at stations where this was clearly observable. However, policewomen unanimously acknowledged the high workload generated by housemaid-related complaints.

The Ministry of Labor has reported that, in 2005, there were 40,000 housemaids working in Bahrain, and, in 2006, as many as 50,000 (*Bahrain Tribune* 2005; Filio 2006). According to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) data, at the end of 2003, there were 30,000 foreign housemaids in Bahrain, 95 per cent of whom are female, among approximately two million in the Gulf countries overall. On average, there is one housemaid for each household in Bahrain. The average is the same in Saudi Arabia and Oman. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait report a higher rate, having one housemaid for every two citizens. Qatar declined to report its figures (*Gulf Daily News* 2004b: 1). According to the Ministry of Labor in Bahrain, sponsors spend approximately 25 million Bahraini dinar (\$66.5 million USD) on employing housemaids, 90 per cent of which gets sent home to the housemaid’s native country, thereby ‘draining’ the Bahraini economy (*Gulf Daily News* 2003b). Indians and Sri Lankans each compose 20 per cent of total housemaids in Bahrain; Indonesians are 12 per cent; Bangladeshis and Nepalis make up 10 per cent each; Ethiopians are 7 per cent; and expatriate Arabs compose 3 per cent (Al-Tawashi 2003). Based on all accounts and personal observation, nearly every Bahraini household employs a housemaid. Unlike in Western countries, live-in housemaids are not the mark of upper socio-economic class status, but rather they are found in even lower, working-class homes. As such, ‘domestic helpers have become a major part of family life’ (Al-Tawashi 2003, no page number). South Asian embassy officials report that a majority of the labour complaints they receive stem from housemaid-sponsor problems. For example, a representative of the Philippines embassy indicated that 95 per cent of the labour conflicts they confront involve housemaids (Rosario 2005b).

Legal gap

The number of housemaid-related cases being processed at the local police stations is a consequence of the unique legal position of domestic workers in Bahrain and the Gulf countries. Unlike other guest workers, housemaids (and ‘houseboys’, who exist, but are far fewer in number) are not covered under the labour laws in Bahrain. Article 2 of The Labor Law for the Private Sector (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 1976) lists ‘domestic servants and persons regarded as such’ as exceptions to the labour laws. By default, domestic servants are treated as part of the family for which they work (Smith 2005); however, their cases are never processed in the *shari’ah* courts, where all other family-related matters are

litigated. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (2002), who studied Latina housemaids in Los Angeles, the notion of housemaids as family members is common rhetoric in these employer–employee situations: ‘Indeed this attitude has a long history in paid domestic work, and, as many analysts have noted, it helps blur the boundaries between paid work and unpaid favors, which in turn often leads to exploitation’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002: 67).

There has only been one case in Bahraini history in which a sponsor was ever successfully convicted of abusing a housemaid in a criminal court. A Bahraini woman was found guilty in June of 2005 of assaulting her housemaid, Anita Devi Verma. The incident took place in October 2003 and she was subsequently sentenced to three months’ imprisonment by the Lower Criminal Court (*Gulf Daily News* 2005). According to Verma, she was beaten daily by her sponsor. The final beating she received was so violent that neighbours phoned the police because they could hear Verma screaming. After this beating, Verma required 22 stitches on her head (*Gulf Daily News* 2003a).

Because housemaids do not fall under the labour laws, there is no legal regulation of the number of hours they work, the amount of money they are paid and the conditions of their live-in accommodation. For example, when pressed by housemaid recruiters and the Philippine embassy to interfere over whether the embassy has a right to set a minimum wage for housemaids, one Ministry of Labor official declared that the ministry has a ‘hands-off policy’:

A minimum wage for housemaids is an issue for employers, recruiters and sending countries to resolve. The governments of the countries from where the housemaids arrive have the prerogative to set wages. We are hands off because the maids sector is not under the labor law. (Filio 2005: 3)

Recruiters arguably take advantage of the demand for low-cost housemaids in the Gulf, the vulnerability and lack of education of the housemaids, and the social attitudes that turn a blind eye to the abuses within the system. Because of the lack of legal protection for housemaids, they are able to operate with little oversight. Recruitment agencies are organized under the umbrella of a professional group, the Bahrain Recruiters Society (BRS). There are 85 recruiting agencies in Bahrain, approximately 60 of which belong to the BRS. According to the Ministry of Labor, labour regulators monitor the activities of these agencies and, if three genuine complaints against an agency are registered, the agency’s license to operate will be revoked. According to the ministry, 64 agencies were closed during 2004 for ‘various irregularities’ (Baby 2005).

For other guest workers, like the multitudes of South Asian male construction workers, minimal regulations are provided by the labour laws and Memorandums of Understanding between the government and specific embassies (Singh 2008), though they are often deemed inefficient by human rights workers (personal communications: Marietta Dias, President of the Migrant Workers Society; personal communication, 6 December 2005; Nabeel Rajab, President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, 1 March 2006).

Individual sponsorship

The immigration sponsorship laws that apply to all expatriate guest workers in general, often referred to as a *kafala* (sponsorship) system of individual sponsorship (Longva 1999), create additional hardships for housemaids and for foreign workers in general. All foreign housemaids must be recruited through a recruiting agency. Direct hiring is illegal. Any sponsor bringing in a foreign housemaid must first obtain a work permit

from the Ministry of Labor, which costs 30 Bahraini dinar (\$80 USD). The sponsor then must arrange an exit visa for the housemaid at the relevant embassy, followed by arranging a work visa from the Directorate of Immigration, Nationality and Passports—a police function within the Ministry of the Interior (Smith 2005). Sponsors who earn less than 1,000 Bahraini dinar (\$2,660 USD) per month are entitled to only one housemaid. Those earning more can receive visas for additional housemaids. Unique to Gulf systems of individual sponsorship—and contrary to international immigration standards—each domestic worker recruited is contractually bonded to the employer as her sponsor, usually for a period of two years. If the sponsor withdraws sponsorship at any time, for any reason, stated or unstated, the housemaid no longer has legal immigration status.

In some cases, workers are hired by Bahraini employers illegally. In this situation, workers arrive in Bahrain on a tourist visa despite laws that state that all foreign workers must be hired by licensed recruiting agencies. Often, the worker has agreed to pay back the cost of the free visa through their eventual salary, but end up earning too little in order to pay it back. Based on information received from Indian male construction workers, who refused to be named out of fear of losing their employment, the illegal ‘free visa’ scheme is not perpetrated by local organized crime figures. Rather, they implicated two members of the royal family who make additional income simply by signing off on sponsorship paperwork for workers who are working for someone else, in a direct violation of the sponsorship laws. One informant indicated that one of these members of the royal family is his sponsor whom he has never met and for whom he does not actually work (personal communication, 15 March 2006). In addition, a Bahraini sales manager revealed that he takes money from three guest workers to whom he provides sponsorship through phoney employment in a shell company he created. One Filipina ‘free visa’ worker he sponsors was listed as a ‘physical metallurgist’ in her visa paperwork to the government, despite having less than a secondary school education and working as a housemaid once she arrived in Bahrain. He stated that ‘everyone’ participates in schemes like this in order to make extra money, and that his behaviour was not deviant, though technically illegal (personal communication, 12 April 2006).

Moreover, embassy bans on housemaids from their countries have been implemented in order to send a message to recruiters as well as to buy time so that embassies can study the labour issues and implement their own solutions. Bangladesh and Indonesia have banned the recruiting of housemaids from their countries for a period of time during the past two years and the Philippines embassy has been contemplating such a ban (Al-Qahtani 2005; Rosario 2005*a*; 2005*e*). Blacklists are also kept by Indonesia (Rosario 2005*a*), India (R. Raghunathan, under-secretary to the Indian Ambassador to Bahrain, personal communication, 8 January 2006), and the Philippines; exit visa permission to work as housemaids for blacklisted employers is not given by these embassies.

Recruiters have been known to mistreat housemaids, as aforementioned, often illegally demanding money from housemaids in order to arrange their passage to Bahrain (Ravi 2005). Although cases of violence by recruiters are rarely reported, advocates believe that it often occurs (personal communication, Marietta Dias, 6 December 2005).

Criminal justice connection

Of particular importance to this study is the central role police play in handling housemaids entering and exiting the country. Because immigration is a police function

in Bahrain, all changes in sponsorship status come immediately to the attention of police authorities. The local police station is the site at which sponsors register complaints against their housemaids in order to initiate a revocation of sponsorship at the General Directorate of Nationality, Passports and Residence. Despite registering housemaids with a work permit at the Ministry of Labor, as aforementioned, no subsequent regulation or oversight is provided by that ministry with regard to housemaids.

Deportation of housemaids occurs when (1) a sponsor decides to revoke sponsorship for any reason; (2) the housemaid has been convicted of a criminal offence; or (3) the housemaid wishes to leave and she has the funds to buy herself out of her contract (giving the employer money equivalent to her outstanding labour owed by the contract) and pay her way home. Housemaids rarely have the funds to leave the country without their sponsors' support. Although some funds are available from private charities such as the Migrant Workers Protection Society (MWPS), there is not enough money to meet the demand for stranded housemaids. As such, they swell the numbers of women in prison as they wait for the financial means to leave. To date, no sponsor has ever been held formally accountable for refusing to pay for their former housemaid's return ticket. In many instances, however, policewomen attempt to apply informal pressure on sponsors, in the form of shaming them in the police stations, to provide return tickets.

Washing one's hands of housemaids

Early terminations of housemaid–sponsor relationships are rarely amicable. Housemaids and sponsors' families reside in the same household. Housemaids come to know sponsors intimately because they are cleaning up after them and taking care of their children; they are privy to the private lives of their sponsors. Because there are no regulations or oversight over the work environment for the housemaid, the nature of the work experience is at the whim of the particular sponsor. Although there are many sponsors who treat their housemaids with respect and care, numerous reports have been documented in the last decade of exploitation and abuse, ranging from physical punishments for allegedly doing the job poorly to sexual abuse and rape by male members of the household.

Even in situations that are problematic, but do not rise to the level of abuse or exploitation, the close nature of the housemaid–sponsor relationship itself makes these situations dramatic and emotional. The women's section of the police station becomes the forum for sponsors' passionate re-telling of how they have been wronged by their housemaids and the housemaids' subsequent emotional rebuttal, laced with their fear of a criminal justice system they may not necessarily understand. Disputes quickly rise to the level of a criminal investigation as accusations of theft, assault and other criminal behaviour on the part of the housemaid are alleged to the police.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (2002), in her analysis of interviews with Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles, referred to these pressured domestic situations that suddenly turn emotional and ugly as 'blowups':

It's a dramatic way to end a job, but not an uncommon one for domestic workers who often spend months or years in daily contact with the most intimate aspects of their employers' lives. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002: 55)

Intimacy in the employer–employee relationship was also highlighted as a source of conflict in Constable’s (2002) study of Filipina housemaids in Hong Kong:

The relationship between a household worker and her employer is potentially intense and complicated. Working in her employer’s private domain she often observes behaviors to which only the closest family members are otherwise privy. (Constable 2002: 118)

Hondagneu-Sotelo (2002) further found that most of her interviewees had experienced a blow-up style termination, which became the norm, in her study of how these employment situations come to an end:

Domestic work ... produces relationships that fall somewhere between family and employment yet are often regarded as neither. Caught betwixt and between, the domestic worker also finds herself on the losing end of a highly asymmetrical balance of power and privilege between employer and employee. Taken together, these conditions comprise a recipe for abuse and abrupt job endings. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002: 67)

The largely dramatic and emotional cases in Bahrain that featured housemaids were observed daily during the ethnographic period in local police stations.

Human rights activists have denounced the current system in Bahrain and other Gulf countries as criminalizing victims. Housemaids who report harassment, abuse and ill treatment are still expected to work for the sponsor for the rest of a contracted two-year period. According to the MWPS, judges deciding about runaway cases in Bahrain’s courts rarely consider the housemaids’ reasons for running away, focusing narrowly on the running away and ordering jail time followed by deportation (Fakhri 2005).

Methodology

The ethnographic data here were collected as part of a larger inquiry that sought to understand Bahraini female police officers as they performed their duties and included semi-structured interviews about their attitudes toward their work and toward gender segregation (Strobl 2008). It consists of unanticipated, but important, findings that warranted further investigation.

The researcher shadowed Bahraini policewomen for approximately eight months in 2005 and 2006. Twenty-two policewomen were shadowed for three or more days, respectively (and many more were observed within the workplace during the course of shadowing a particular officer) in the gender-segregated Women’s Police Directorate, the women’s prison, juvenile detention centre, social care unit and child protection units. Additional women were observed in the General Directorate of Traffic, National Directorate of Passports, Citizenship and Residency and the Criminal Investigation Division (CID). Approximately five of the eight months spent with policewomen in Bahrain involved observation in the kingdom’s local police stations. Eleven police stations were visited, each over the course of several days. In Manama, the capital, policewomen were observed at Nabih Saleh, Hoorah and Naim police stations. In addition, the researcher spent time at stations in Muharraq, Hidd, Khamis, Madinat Isa, Madinat Hamad, Riffa’ and Budaiyah.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted about the policewomen’s attitudes toward housemaids and housemaid-related cases. Eighty-four of the 368 policewomen on the

force in May of 2006 were interviewed over the course of the research. The research involved both the English and Arabic languages. The researcher, though not fluent in Arabic, is able to read daily newspapers, converse and understand what policewomen are saying as they are observed. All data derived from oral Arabic were double-checked with policewomen for comprehension. Often, interaction with policewomen and other research subjects involved code-switching between English and Arabic—a common means of communication in Bahrain.

Criminal Complaints against Housemaids

There were five major typologies identifiable in cases observed at local police stations that involved housemaids: the amicably departing housemaid, the thieving housemaid, the runaway housemaid, the indiscrete housemaid, and the violent housemaid. Because the Ministry of the Interior did not permit the researcher to examine case files or any other written documents, the typologies described below were based on observations of interviews, interrogations and investigations of housemaids being performed by policewomen during the observation period. Because the criminalization of housemaid-related cases is a new academic frontier, the researcher developed the below typology after reviewing field-notes and grouping the cases into categories related to the housemaid's alleged behaviour as described by the complainant. Over the course of the observation period, the investigation into 150 cases against housemaids was viewed at some point in the policewomen's involvement in the matter. Most often, the researcher observed interviews with the housemaid and the housemaid's sponsor about the criminal complaint. In more rare instances, the researcher shadowed a policewoman to court, where a housemaid-related case was being adjudicated.

The first typology identified is an amicable dissolution of the housemaid–sponsor relationship. Even in cases in which the housemaid and sponsor agree to end their contract and sponsorship early, and the agreement has not been prefaced by any alleged criminal behaviour, both must appear at the local police station and/or the Directorate of Immigration, Nationality and Passports—a division of the police.

The remaining four typologies represent cases in which the housemaid's conduct is allegedly criminal, at least at the stage at which the situation is brought to the attention of police. The second typology identified is the thieving housemaid who stands accused of stealing from her sponsor. Under the third typology, the runaway housemaid, she is found by police having run away from her sponsor and is supporting herself through illegal employment, sometimes as a prostitute (although, at other times, she is found illegally employed by a legitimate employer). The fourth category, the indiscrete housemaid, represents situations in which a housemaid is caught in the sponsor's home with a man. The fifth typology is the rarest, but has occurred. This type of case, the violent housemaid, involves housemaids believed to have assaulted their sponsors. In some cases, a combination of the criminal typologies is found; for example, in one case in Riffa' police station, a housemaid was found to have run away from her sponsor after allegedly stealing from the home to finance her escape.

An example of each typology is presented below.

The thieving housemaid

A common complaint by sponsors is that their housemaids have stolen money or possessions from their home. According to the president of the Migrant Workers Protection Society (MWPS), although this is sometimes a legitimate complaint, it is often used as a means for the sponsor to quickly rid themselves of legal sponsorship of a housemaid that they no longer want for other reasons (personal communication, Marietta Dias, 6 December 2005). Based on ethnographic observation, many accusations of theft were adamantly denied by the housemaids. Often, there was no hard evidence, particularly with the theft of money, to determine who was most likely telling the truth. However, discerning whether the housemaid is guilty ends up being irrelevant to the outcome in most cases. Under the law, once a sponsor would like to revoke sponsorship of a housemaid, the housemaid has no right to contest this. Once the sponsor cancels the sponsorship, deportation proceedings begin.

Numerous accusations and investigations of housemaid theft were witnessed during the course of the ethnographic observation. In one case, an Indian housemaid, Swati,¹ was accused of stealing 1,500 Qatari riyal (\$412 USD) and 220 Bahraini dinar (\$585 USD) from her male sponsor's bedroom. According to him, she gave the money to a Filipino guest worker, whose name he provided, in order to wire it to her husband and family in India. Swati had only been in Bahrain working for the sponsor for 10 days prior to the accusation. The sponsor dropped the housemaid off at the local police station in the middle of the night and she was subsequently taken to the women's prison for holding until being returned to the local police station for interrogation the next morning. At this time, the sponsor and the labour recruiter who placed Swati in the sponsor's home were summoned to the women's section of the police station. The sponsor, a Bahraini man in a traditional robe (*thaūb*) and wearing an expensive watch and shoes, and the recruiter, a well dressed Indian expatriate, were each interviewed and their statements taken by the policewomen. Additional details were revealed by the sponsor, including that the Qatari riyal was found tucked in the housemaid's sari after the theft and that she had admitted to him that she had stolen the money. The recruiter provided little insight into the ordeal, but vouched for the credibility and good character of the sponsor.

Subsequently, Swati was brought into the interview process, but the sponsor and recruiter were not dismissed. Her interview and statement-taking were conducted in the presence of her accusers. Swati spoke in broken Arabic, but was not provided a translator in order for her to speak in her native language of Malayalam. She denied stealing and said that she never placed any money in her sari and that she never confessed to the sponsor as to the crime. She began to cry and to repeat over and over again that she was a good person. The sponsor and recruiter then began to argue with her in Arabic and Malayalam—an argument that escalated to yelling and screaming. The policewoman interviewing Swati tried to re-establish control by yelling even louder. Eventually, the housemaid became silent, tears streaming down her face, no longer participating in the argument. The policewoman explained that she could be prosecuted for the theft, which is punishable by imprisonment. Swati agreed that in exchange for agreeing to be deported at her sponsor's financial expense, she would not contest the allegations

¹ Name has been changed.

against her. The solution, however, was not agreeable to the sponsor and he began to argue with the recruiter, saying that the recruiter should pay for the deportation and pay him back the stolen money. A fight between the sponsor and recruiter ensued. Meanwhile, the housemaid signed a statement written in Arabic, which she could not read. In fact, because she was illiterate, she was unable to sign her name and was simply instructed to mark an 'X' as her signature. The policewoman then had her make an ink imprint of her right index finger beside the 'X'.

Dramatic arguments, crying, screaming and other emotional outbursts by sponsors, housemaids, recruiters and policewomen were common throughout the ethnographic observation of housemaid-related cases, re-enforcing Hondagneu-Sotelo's (2002) findings that such drama is common in the termination of the housemaid–employer relationship.

The runaway housemaid

Housemaids often run away from their homes in order to escape abuse. In other situations, employers find that the easiest way to rid themselves of workers whom they don't want to pay for is by going to the police and reporting the worker missing (Horton 2005). According to ethnographic observation, police do not independently investigate the credibility of reports of runaway workers, but rather wait until the worker is found to make any inquiries.

Housemaids on the run often support themselves by taking illegal work at local hotels. In one situation, two Indonesian women, Farida and Devi,² were reported to the police by an anonymous tipster of working as waitresses in a hotel bar without the proper work visa and sponsorship. Subsequent interviews by policewomen revealed that the women had originally entered the country as housemaids, but had both left their mutual sponsor, reportedly because the sponsor had not paid them in many months. The policewomen contacted the sponsor to let him know his housemaids were found. When inquiring about their salaries, the sponsor said that he had paid them; this response was satisfactory to the policewomen. Once the housemaids were away from their sponsor's home, their immigration status automatically became illegal during the three months they had been working at the hotel bar. As such, they had criminally violated the statutes against running away from one's sponsors and overstaying a residency visa.

A policewoman from the local station accompanied them to their appearance before a judge in the Lower Criminal Court in Manama, where they admitted that they ran away from their sponsor. They indicated that they wanted to return to Indonesia rather than continuing to work for the sponsor; however, they lacked the funds to make the trip. They explained that the sponsor had not paid them their salaries for several months when they were working for him. Like the police, the judge did not choose to follow up on this allegation of non-payment. The judge sentenced them each to ten days' imprisonment. According to the judge, the only way he can compel the sponsor to finance Farida and Devi's trip home is if the sponsor agrees to terminate their outstanding two-year contract. Alternatively, the sponsor has the right to request them back to the home to finish their two-year work contract, in which case Farida and Devi could only return home if they could find the financial means to do so. The judge ruled that a decision about deportation was pending further information as to the sponsor's desires.

²Names have been changed.

Just as often as seeking illegal work in legitimate businesses, runaway housemaids turn to prostitution rings to support themselves. In one such case, Ratna³ was arrested for prostitution after neighbours complained of the heavy traffic of men coming in and out of her apartment in Muharraq. When interviewed by policewomen, Ratna stated that she originally had been a housemaid, but had run away from her sponsor after he accused her of beating his child. According to the housemaid, she never hurt the child, but rather was a victim herself of the sponsor's wife's regular beatings. Ratna wept as she described the blows she took whenever the wife was dissatisfied with the food she prepared or the way she cleaned the house. One time, she was beaten for putting the baby in front of the television when it was on an Indonesian station instead of a station that shows cartoons in Arabic. After enduring the abuse for seven months, the housemaid ran away after being promised a job at a hotel by an Indonesian man. Instead of being taken to her new job at a hotel, she was reportedly locked in the Muharraq flat and forced into prostitution to earn her keep. Ratna could not identify her pimp beyond a first name, so police were unable to capture him. Despite the horrific details alleged by the housemaid, the interview with her was approximately 20 minutes long with few follow-up questions. Later that morning, when the housemaid's sponsor and his wife were brought into the station, their interview with policewomen lasted well over an hour and their denials of any abusive treatment of the housemaid appeared to be believed. At the end of the fieldwork period, this case remained pending.

The indiscrete housemaid

Complaints that a housemaid is acting inappropriately in the home also are lodged at the local police station. In particular, many cases observed featured housemaids found being intimate with a man in the sponsor's home without the sponsor's permission. In one such case, which was prosecuted in the Lower Criminal Court, a Bengali housemaid, Madhu,⁴ was allegedly found by her sponsor's son in an embrace with an Indian man in the middle of the night in the sponsor's garage. Both were prosecuted for the offence. During court proceedings, the offenders appeared at the same time before the judge and were questioned in Arabic despite the fact that they were not capable of fully expressing themselves in the language and often misunderstood questions.

According to Madhu, her brother, who is employed in the same house, had been causing her problems four months previously. Her brother gave her a letter from the male defendant by way of introduction. He requested a meeting with Madhu, who explained that she did not reply to the request. Her brother, however, arranged for the two to meet in the middle of the night and, from there, the two began a relationship. However, Madhu and her boyfriend adamantly denied having sex during the relationship. Ultimately, the judge sentenced both to one month in prison followed by deportation. Neither would be permitted to return to Bahrain for three years.

In another case, a housemaid arrived at a local hospital suffering from excessive bleeding. After medical tests, it was determined that the housemaid was pregnant. By law, the hospital is mandated to report to police that she was in violation of the statute against pregnancy out of wedlock. The police then contacted her sponsor, who had been

³Name has been changed.

⁴Name has been changed.

unaware that she was pregnant. Although she had lived and worked with her sponsor's family for a year and a half without any problems, her sponsor decided to fire her from her employment. Once pregnant, explained one policewoman, it becomes clear to the sponsor that the housemaid had violated the household and shamed them. As a consequence, she must be let go. But, because the sponsor agreed to forego any criminal prosecution for the pregnancy and agreed to cancel the housemaid's visa (a 'no objection letter'), and pay for her plane ticket home, the case was resolved without prosecution.

The violent housemaid

This category represents a rare situation in which the housemaid stands accused of violent behaviour. The most notorious housemaid-related case remains that of Ethiopian Youshirik Dhafta Zodi, who, on 1 December 1998, beat to death her Filipina employer, Sadiya Beltar, with a hammer and then hacked up the body with a machete and boiled the body parts. Her Bahraini husband found the body parts in the laundry machine and called the police. According to trial testimony reported in the press, the housemaid alleged chronic physical abuse by the employer, which led to the killing. Despite pleading insanity, the maid was found to be sane by the High Criminal Court and sentenced to the death penalty (*Gulf Daily News* 2000). However, her life was later spared when the Supreme Court of Appeals commuted her death sentence to life imprisonment after external pressure from human rights groups (*Gulf Daily News* 2004a).

During the ethnographic observation period, only one case out of about 150 witnessed involved charging a housemaid with a violent offence as a result of an episode with her sponsor. In one case, Rosa,⁵ a Filipino housemaid, engaged in a physical fight with her sponsor after nine years of service. According to the medical report, the sponsor's wife suffered scratch marks and bruising over her face, chest and breast and trauma to her neck muscles. The sponsor's wife told policewomen how 'shocked' and 'surprised' she was that, after such a long relationship, Rosa would attack her. However, according to Rosa, she had been overworked during Ramadan, a religious month in Islam during which Muslims fast during the day but break their fast with a large feast (*iftār*) each evening. During the month, households find themselves overburdened with feast preparations for extended family members and guests. The incident occurred when, according to Rosa, she had been working several days for 18 hours straight with no breaks and only approximately five or six hours per night to take care of herself and sleep. She said that she was required to cook and prepare the house for numerous guests, plus take care of the children in the household—a job that was too much for just one person. Although the sponsor initially wanted to seek prosecution for assault, the policewomen managed to convince her to seek a quick resolution by agreeing to terminate the housemaid's employment, cancel her visa and pay for her deportation plane ticket.

According to the Philippine's embassy, reports of housemaid abuse spike each year during Ramadan. In the first ten days of Ramadan 2005, there were 100 cases of housemaid abuse reported to the embassy—approximately ten per day. The number of housemaids sheltered by the embassy swelled from approximately 30 on average to 44 (Rosario 2005a; Filio 2006). Housemaids reported that the reason they left

⁵Name has been changed.

their workplace was that they were overworked during Ramadan, physically and sexually abused and were not being paid (Rosario 2005*c*). The Indonesian embassy reports an average of three runaway housemaids a day during Ramadan (Rosario 2005*a*).

Policewomen's Attitudes toward Housemaids

Policewomen exhibited similar attitudes regarding housemaids as could be found in the larger society. As such, housemaids who found themselves at the local police stations were often looked down upon. Policewomen made little effort to comprehensively investigate their claims, and often more readily believed a Bahraini sponsor's side of the story over the foreign housemaid. Many policewomen stated, over the course of the observation, that housemaids usually had ill intentions. As one explained:

The fault in these cases is usually with the housemaid wanting either sex or money. People in Bahrain have good hearts. They give their housemaids everything, but they always want more. The housemaids always claim they are mistreated, but if that is so, why do they run away and work illegally in hotels or become prostitutes? If they are so mistreated they should go to their embassies. Here we have no solution other than making a case against them.

Another policewoman said:

The housemaids who have problems with the police have something wrong in their hearts. They have stolen money or run away because their own character is weak. What can we [policewomen] do? We cannot change them.

It should be noted that Bahraini policewomen identify more with sponsors rather than housemaids, likely due to their own social position in society. The vast majority of policewomen were raised in households that heavily relied on housemaids for their daily functioning. Known as the 'nanny state', labour watchdogs have explained that Bahrainis find that jobs involving manual labour or domestic work are not theirs to undertake, but rather are perceived as the exclusive domain of foreign workers (Horton 2004). This is common across countries that experience female labour migration as a 'global transfer of services associated with a wife's traditional role' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002: 4).

In addition, the notion that impoverished conditions from which housemaids come justify abuse and exploitation in Bahrain (the 'it could be worse' argument) is widespread among policewomen. This was echoed by one policewoman when she said:

It may seem like housemaids here are treated badly, but it's so much better than their lives at home. There they have absolutely nothing. At least here we give them a job, food and a place to live.

In addition, policewomen's careers have benefited from housemaids who are able to handle the cooking, cleaning and childcare while the women work outside the home. In essence, the forward trajectory of Bahraini women in the workplace has been made more possible by the cheap availability of housemaids:

Women in [rich] countries have increasingly taken on paid work, and hence need others—paid domestics and caretakers for children and elderly people—to replace them. (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002: 6)

Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002) attribute the insatiable demand for housemaids as a consequence of wealthier countries' unwillingness to provide public childcare for working mothers. In addition, men in most households failed to increase their contributions to domestic chores as women entered paid employment.

According to a survey of policewomen undertaken in February 2005, pursuant to this research, 25 per cent of respondents who have children indicated that their children were in the care of housemaids while they were working. The number jumps to approximately a half when considering only respondents who have children below the age of 12. The other half of the policewomen put their children in the care of their mother or sister.

Of the handful of policewomen known socially outside the workplace during this research, all employed a live-in housemaid to assist them with cooking, cleaning and raising children. It should be noted that all these policewomen appeared to treat their housemaids with respect and care—and, in some cases, had a strong friendship with their housemaid. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the policewomen would be unable to go to work and devote the hours required of their police careers without the housemaid's labour filling in the gap at home. In no Bahraini households visited were male family members ever primarily involved in child rearing, cleaning or cooking. Only one household featured a Bahraini father, a policeman, assisting in this regard on a regular basis (though the housemaid took primary responsibility).

In another example of the social attitudes prevalent in Bahrain, the following headline appeared in the *Bahrain Tribune* on 17 January 2006: 'Indian Maid Unlucky for Second Time' (*Bahrain Tribune* 2006: 4). The story describes the plight of Stella Mary, who left her first employer after being overworked to exhaustion and made to sleep outside on a mattress without any blankets. When she returned to Bahrain to work for a second employer, she was beaten by the sponsor's wife with kitchen appliances and high-heeled shoes and was kept prisoner in the children's nursery, having to ask permission to use the bathroom. In a final showdown before Stella left the household, the sponsor's wife accused her of not feeding the children and began tearing off her clothes in a fit of rage—in front of the housemaid's male sponsor. The headline stating that the housemaid was 'unlucky', when coupled with this story, implies that the fate of this particular housemaid is a fluke—part of some terrible streak of luck—rather than being an all-too-common situation. This is a typical framing of the female labour migrant's situation in Bahraini discourse, where employment and migration are viewed as a 'personal choice' and its consequences are seen as 'personal problems' (Hochschild 2002: 27). Although the end of the newspaper article quotes Marietta Dias, President of the MWPS, who defends the housemaid and attempts to place the situation in its larger context, her statement pales in comparison to the headline's message.

'Dumping' Housemaids in the Criminal Justice System

The problem with housemaids transcends the authority of local police stations, yet local police stations, and particularly the policewomen, have been tasked as the primary responders. Police are unable to directly confront the larger socio-political, economic and legal issues surrounding the problem and instead must utilize the tools at their disposal to handle the influx of housemaids. Because of this, housemaids tend to be criminalized and incarcerated even in cases in which this is not appropriate. Police

cannot operate in a manner not provided for by law; they have only the procedures of criminal investigation at their disposal. Furthermore, policewomen are at the back-end of the problem, being made aware of situations only after they have reached the point of crisis. As such, they cannot make up for the lax regulation of the housemaid industry, the unethical recruitment practices and the cruelty of sponsors, nor do they have the information, means or mandate to prevent these problems before they happen. Coupled with their own aforementioned identification with sponsors and employers over housemaids, the dumping of housemaids into the criminal justice system often creates further trauma for housemaids. The result is that the housemaids are punished for the exploitation and abuse of their sponsors; as aforementioned, there is only one example in Bahrain of a sponsor being convicted of a crime against a housemaid.

According to a high-ranking female police officer, the Ministry of Labor refuses to accept responsibility for housemaid–sponsor conflicts and, by default, all these cases are ‘dumped’ into the Women’s Police Directorate (WPD). Once the police have responsibility for a housemaid who has been cut loose by her sponsor, who has run away or who refuses to return to her sponsor’s home, she is incarcerated, even if she has not committed a criminal violation. Approximately 70 per cent of all detainees in the women’s prison in 2004 came from South Asian nations, the majority of which were housemaids (Strobl 2008).

The high-ranking female police officer further opined that the hands-off policy on the part of the labour ministry has consequences for policewomen. She stated ‘No one wants to take responsibility for the problem and so we are stuck with it’. She suggested that housemaid cases that do not involve allegations of violence should be dealt with by the Ministry of Labor in a special sub-agency devoted to housemaid issues. She believes the ministry should also be responsible for housing runaway workers in order to relieve the women’s prison of overcrowding. However, the government continues to move in a direction that would maintain the status quo, despite public statements to the contrary. The Ministry of the Interior is currently working on converting a dry dock in Hidd to incarcerate housemaids in order to separate them from the general population of women detainees.

Housemaids and Policewomen’s Careers

The role of housemaids in the development of policewomen in Bahrain represents an important shifting of the original policewomen’s mission of helping women with problems such as domestic abuse. Because of the social attitudes and discriminatory legal code in Bahrain, this original mission does not extend to poor, mostly South Asian women working as housemaids. Instead, these victims are criminalized, treated as people who do not deserve the special treatment that the female police are said to offer. This indicates that economic class and nationality are significant barriers to the care policewomen provide. Because policewomen do not identify with housemaids as fellow women, but feel that they are an identifiable ‘other’, there is a lack of what many Western scholars would call feminist consciousness apparent in the police stations. Ironically, the rise in the number of policewomen in the last decade occurs contemporaneously with the rise in housemaid cases. From 2004 to 2006, the number of policewomen in Bahrain nearly doubled (Strobl 2008). Although this does not prove that policewomen owe their sustained and increasing presence to the criminalization of housemaids, one can’t help

but wonder whether the amount of female personnel in local police stations, immigration and the women's prison would be required if these cases were properly diverted to another agency.

In the historical development of Bahraini policewomen, opportunities were shown to originate from the need to keep customary gender segregation intact within police stations and the criminal justice system in general. Policewomen found themselves in the liminal space between genders, empowered to act as authorities, but in a capacity designed to keep men and women's roles in society delineated. As policewomen were becoming symbols of progressive female roles in Bahrain, they were simultaneously re-enforcing social customs that perceived women as suitable for quite opposite roles within private domestic spheres. Likewise, the policewomen today are deployed to maintain the complicated boundaries of employer and housemaid in the realm of the family. The continued exploitation and criminalization of housemaids make policewomen the indirect, back-end agents maintaining Bahrain's patriarchal social and economic fabric, which relies so heavily on cheap, female foreign labour. As such, policewomen find themselves as agents of social control in ways that are not necessarily compatible with women's best interests in a general sense, whether conceived of in the Western, Arab or Muslim feminist literature.

Most stakeholders agree that solutions to the housemaid problem do not rest within the Women's Police Directorate, the police or the Ministry of the Interior. All critics emphasize larger political and social reform as the best hope for housemaids, involving a revamping of labour laws—a response that must occur at the top levels of government and have the support of parliament, the consultative (*shura*) council and the royal family.

The deployment of women police is often a reification of patriarchal social control because policewomen are largely used in order to control the behavior of women and to enforce laws that are patriarchal in nature. As one sees in Bahrain, policewomen can be both markers of liberalizing policies designed to win over the hearts and minds of the global, capitalist community, yet be deployed in ways that further reinforce customary patriarchal notion about the role of women, such as being used to handling housemaids (Strobl 2008). The overwhelming extent to which policewomen's daily work involves responding to the larger, socio-economic problem of housemaids draws into question whether the interests of women globally and collectively are met by the existence of policewomen in some national forces.

Notions of feminism that privilege particular cultures, identities and other essentialisms problematize the imagining of a police system that empowers the diverse members of a given society, per the general framework of community policing and policing in democratic countries. Feminisms with nationalist, secularist or Islamic orientations, though useful as a means of resistance, ultimately fall short and displace ontological anxieties on yet another group. As such, these forms of feminism have a theoretical limitation in imagining women and the criminal justice system in diverse societies. At the same time, as An-Naim (1992) has persuasively argued, any transcendent human-based approaches to justice must nurture cultural rethinking and reinterpretation from within a local milieu in order to be authentically created and maintained. Therefore, feminist thinking must begin to work within cultural spaces while simultaneously imagining a transcendence of identity politics and discriminatory policing that fuels the 'devastating rhetoric of "us vs. them"' (Suleri 1992: 756).

Instead, the notion of ‘planetary’ feminism could be employed—a framework that includes all human women (Spivak 2006: 107) and can be approached through Spivak’s ‘politics of the imagination’ (Sharpe and Spivak 2002). Because the link between capitalism, patriarchy and criminal justice is part of the imaginative power of the politics of corporate globalization, ‘it requires an equally forceful appeal to the imagination for contestation’ (Sharpe and Spivak 2002: 610).

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