



SITUATION OF SRI LANKAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN LEBANON A POSITION PAPER

Background

The demand for migrant women to take low-skilled or unskilled jobs shunned by local labour force has increased in Lebanon in the last 10-15 years. Temporary foreign contract employees are the favourite type of migrants for the country, since there are no expectations of permanent settlement and/or citizenship rights. Moreover, seeing that till date the Middle East seems to have circumvented the current global economic crisis effects, migrant workers are willing to work in ME countries, of which Lebanon is part.

The majority of migrant workers in Lebanon are female originating from Asia and Africa, working as domestic helpers. They are everywhere in the country, in nearly every household, factory, or business. For rather low wages and under very tough work conditions, they cope with their situation, with the sole hope of sending their remittances or going back home and improving their financial situation and their families'.

Statistical information

According to the Lebanese Ministry of Labor statistics for year 2007, of the total **121,375** work permits delivered that year, **42,218** were for newcomers and **79,157** for migrants whose work permits were being renewed. A total of **87,668** were granted for house maids (**37,104** starting a new contract and **50,564** renewing their contract) and **247** for women working in the cleaning area (of which **31** were under a new contract and **216** renewing the old one). Officially, women represent 72.5% of the total migrant population. Breakdown by nationalities (but not by gender) is as follows: **2,468** Nepalese (**1,374** newcomers, **1,094** renewing their contracts), **7,063** Bangladeshis (**2,908** newcomers, **4,155** renewing their contracts), **21,294** Sri Lankans (**3,903** newcomers, **17,391** renewing their contracts) and **22,997** Filipinos (**1,924** newcomers, **21,073** renewing their contracts).

According to the Lebanese Ministry of Labour statistics for year 2008, of the total **131,112** work permits delivered that year, **36,714** were for newcomers and **94,398** for migrants whose work permits were being renewed. A total of **99,043** were granted for house maids (**32,649** starting a new contract and **66,394** renewing their contract) and **279** for women working in the cleaning area (of which **45** were under a new contract and **234** renewing the old one). Officially, women represent 75.8% of the total migrant population. Breakdown by major nationalities (but not by gender) is as follows: **5,399** Indians (**597** newcomers, **4,802** renewing their contracts), **6,738** Nepalese (**4,756** newcomers, **1,982** renewing their contracts), **11,032** Bangladeshis (**4,993** newcomers, **6,039** renewing their contracts), **16,644** Sri Lankans (**2,520** newcomers, **14,124** renewing their contracts), **21,685** Filipinos (**5,915** newcomers, **15,770** renewing their contracts), and **42,947** Ethiopians (**13,225** newcomers, **29,722** renewing their contracts). These statistics do not include though the migrant workers that are in an irregular status. NGOs and Diplomatic Missions of various sending countries estimate that the number of irregular migrants is equal if not more to the official figure.

Sri Lankans has long constituted the largest community of migrant workers in Lebanon, whereby figures amounted usually to 90,000 persons (both regular and irregular). However, a mere comparison in figures of 2007 and 2008 shows a clear decline in the numbers of Sri Lankan migrant workers, which would require a study of the causes behind this demographic change in the migration pattern.

Recruitment process

Sri Lankans, mainly women and domestic workers come to work in Lebanon through Recruitment Agencies. There is still though a small percentage that comes directly to work for a Lebanese person without passing by recruitment agents. The majority of Lebanese recruiting agents have counterparts in Sri Lanka who refer to them potential workers.

From partners in Sri Lanka, the Center is aware that Recruitment Agencies must register at the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment to be operational, and that there is a lack of agencies monitoring on the ground. This has led at times to the recruitment of Sri Lankan children/minors, whereby DOB has been increased in the passport. To address this issue and the problem of people returning to same country under another name, with a false passport, the Sri Lankan government has included in its new requirements for passport the mandatory provision of finger prints. This measure is perceived as good practice, as it regulates the faked passports issue and hence addresses the work of minors/children. Partners in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan beneficiaries in Lebanon informed the Center of the rather high fees charged by recruitment agencies in Sri Lanka. CLMC was not able to get reliable data regarding raids against illegal recruiting agencies.

In its work with Sri Lankan migrant workers in Lebanon, CLMC has come to know that recruitment agencies in Lebanon are still receiving the migrant workers' wages for the first three months and sometimes more, if they change employer.

Pre-departure orientation sessions

Those Sri Lankan migrant workers coming through recruitment agencies have to attend a 2-week pre-departure orientation session (PDOS) and get a certificate, in order to get clearance for travel from the SLFBE. Majority of attendees insisted on the lack of efficiency of these sessions as they are led immediately prior to departure, when the workers are distracted by a multitude of concerns, and hence pay little attention to information provided. Additionally, too many topics are tackled and a large load of information is provided at a time, which impedes the migrant from memorizing/assimilating the knowledge shared. Country-specific information on their rights and responsibilities in Lebanon is not given. The focus is mainly put on the use of household electrical appliances. The sessions do not contribute to empowering the migrant workers, as no pertinent information is provided.

The lack of these PDOS' efficiency has been also highlighted by partners in Sri Lanka, who have raised the urgent need for more informative sessions, which should be country-specific for a better result.

Recourse of Migrant Workers to protection and assistance of consular authorities

There is a Labour welfare Officer in the Sri Lankan consulate in Lebanon, the current officer is a lawyer. CLMC doesn't have any reliable information as to measures taken to ensure the Labour welfare Officer's training regarding the Lebanese labour laws. The Center has coordinated/coordinates closely with the Sri Lankan Labour welfare Officer to ensure protection and assistance of Sri Lankan migrant workers in Lebanon. CLMC does not have though any reliable data relating to the Sri Lankan consular section's number of beneficiaries, and activities. It is worth mentioning that there is no signed Memorandum of Agreement between the Governments of Sri Lanka and Lebanon to ensure a protection of Sri Lankan workers.

Some Sri Lankan migrant workers are aware of the consular services provided by their country's diplomatic mission, but others no. Unfortunately, no figures are available.

During the 2-week PDOS, those Sri Lankan migrant workers bound to Lebanon are given the Embassy's number to call in case of trouble. However, several come without having attended the training, and hence don't have access to this information. Furthermore, even if the Sri Lankan migrant workers have the Embassy's number, inside Lebanon one has to dial the region code, which might be an issue for the migrants. Moreover, one has to bear in mind that not all migrants are literate, and can have access to telephone.

CLMC offers to migrant workers (detained and non-detained) orientation sessions on their rights, responsibilities and services available for them in Lebanon. During these sessions, migrant workers are informed of the consular services available for them and the relevant Embassy's contact information is shared with participants.

Not many Sri Lankan migrant workers and members of their families living in Lebanon are aware of how the exercise of their right to vote overseas is facilitated.

Provisions for family unity

According to CLMC's Sri Lankan beneficiaries and partners, no laws were passed by the Sri Lankan Government to preserve family unity of Sri Lankan migrant workers and their families. There were talks at governmental level about banning women mothers of children aged less than 5 years from travel, in an attempt to mitigate the huge social cost of women's migration. However, till date, such law was not passed. CLMC has reservations though as to the efficiency of such ban and its respect for women's rights.

Social security

Migrant workers who have been in Lebanon for over 20 years and those who had recently arrived (asked by CLMC) were not aware of the existence a welfare fund and a pension scheme for migrant workers abroad, as reported in par.42 (f) and par 221-222 of the State party report.

Re the insurance, Sri Lankan migrant workers who had been home and came back to Lebanon in 2009 second and third quarters reported having paid an insurance fee ranging between 3000 and 11000 Rupees on average, which might be aptly described as "exorbitant".

Remittances

Sri Lankan migrant workers assured that the Government did not impose any taxes on remittances. However, it didn't develop any measures to reduce remittances transaction costs. The business/private sector (Western Union, Cash United) facilitate remittances' transfers, which could be quite costly at times. No study was undertaken on the fees collected by private facilities vis-à-vis public/government managed ones.

Exemption of migrant workers from import and export duties and taxes regarding personal and household effects

Sri Lankan migrant workers has assured that the government did not levy any charges on imported personal and household effects, and they hence enjoy exemption from import duties and taxes in respect of their personal and household effects upon their final return.