

# THE SOCIAL POLITICS OF ETHIOPIAN MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN LEBANON

## SURF Conference Panel Session 9A

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In 2012, a video of Alem Dechessa, an Ethiopian domestic migrant worker, screaming as she was being shoved and dragged into the car of her employer Ali Mahfouz went viral after she committed suicide.<sup>1</sup> The camera captured a group of men gazing at the public abuse of Alem at the doorsteps of the Ethiopian Consulate in Lebanon. Alem's story spread across the Ethiopian diaspora like wildfire; outrage, disappointment and questions surfaced. Then, this past summer, a different strand of narratives emerged: Ethiopian domestics attempting to injure and kill the families of their employers in Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup> This time Saudi Arabians were outraged, vehemently demanding the deportation of all Ethiopian migrant workers.

These tragedies in the Middle East regarding migrant workers are being framed within a polarized cultural and historical context that has perpetuated images of Arab men as oppressive, violent, and barbaric and Ethiopians as voiceless victims yet again of poverty and patriarchy. Understanding the presence of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers and the spectrum of daily, commonplace oppressions, microaggressions, to suicides requires more than merely reporting their occurrences but rather requires a critical examination of the historical and cultural relation of the sending and receiving countries.

My research project attempts to respond to the outrage and confusion regarding Alem's public abuse and the seemingly complicit response from the bystanders and members of the Ethiopian Consulate. My research asks how domestic work in Lebanon is gendered and

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1 A. Khaled Beydoun, "When Suicide is the Only Escape," *Aljazeera*, April 08, 2012, accessed May 2, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/04/20124775835431799.html>.

2 Sharona Schwartz, "Domestic Worker Accused of Killing 4-Year-Old With Scalding Milk While Debate Over 'Maids' Rages in Saudi Arabia," *The Blaze*, July 25, 2013, accessed August 20, 2013, <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/07/25/domestic-worker-accused-of-killing-4-year-old-with-scalding-milk-while-debate-over-maids-rages-in-saudi-arabia/#>

racialized and how Ethiopian women experience race. I approach these questions by 1) observing interactions and relationships both occupational, familial and romantic both local and abroad; 2) exploring the dynamic of the Ethiopian migrant population in Lebanon; and 3) investigating the resources of support and outlets of representation available to Ethiopian domestic migrant workers.

Methodologically, I lived with a group of four Ethiopian women in Southern Lebanon for two months and conducted participant observation and interviews with Ethiopian migrant workers, community activists, and organization leaders. The majority of my informants were out-of-home freelance domestic workers, locally known as “free-visas.” On average, the Ethiopian women have lived in Lebanon from four to ten years. I also interviewed representatives from the Ethiopian Consulate in Beirut and Anti-Racist Movement (ARM).

In order to stay away from sensationalizing, oversimplifying, and conflating the experiences of migrant domestic workers and overfeeding extreme narratives of Ethiopian women as complacent victims and Arab men as prone to violence, I will focus on the social dynamics of the Ethiopian migrant population including their inter- and intra-community relations. I will highlight the importance of intimate relationships during the processes of migration and integration; the standard of alienation in domestic work; the active, daily resistance of free-visas; and the class and ethnic tensions and affinities across migrant worker communities.

Due to insurmountable accounts of human rights abuses and death of Ethiopian workers, migration to Lebanon for migrant workers has been banned by the Ethiopian government since 2008.<sup>3</sup> As agencies that once mitigated sending migrants have dissolved, illegal brokers in Ethiopia have taken leadership in sending women to Lebanon by means of illegal and dangerous detours through Sudan, the Sinai desert, and Yemen, to name a few. Consequently, migration to Lebanon is now, more than ever before, dependent on personal networks with veteran brokers and expatriates abroad. With the withdrawal of legal agencies, the responsibility regarding the well-being of new migrants is left for usurpation to the veteran expatriate. This responsibility relies on the social ties and obligation of the two parties. For example, women who followed the lead of their sister, family friend, or someone tightly linked to their social milieu in Ethiopia were often provided for by the expatriate to at least feel the agency to speak out against abuse and demand respect for their contractual privileges. On the other hand, the women who had been neglected by their brokers and expatriate links—or as some refer to them as *Habesha Madams*—often endured longer periods of abuse and exploitation.<sup>4</sup> This is not to conclude that these relations deter the pervasiveness of daily aggression towards migrant workers but only to show that there is experiential evidence that supports that relations between the new migrant and their contact are founded on respect, honesty, and accountability. It lays the foundation for minimizing the subordination of migrant domestics. Two dominant factors that spoil this relationship are personal economic gains and means of alienation by employers.

Abusive employers are aware of the significance of alienating the migrant workers to the benefit of increasing their own influence. This is revealed in their preference for hiring young and non-Arabic-speaking domestics. The age preference is to maximize on the domestic’s labor

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3 “Anti-Racist Movement Ethiopian Suicides and Nepalese and Eritrean and Bengali and Sri Lankan and Filipino and Malagasy who work as domestic workers in Lebanese homes.” *Migrant Domestic Worker Suicide* (Blog). August 20, 2010; accessed May 3, 2013. <http://ethiopiansuicides.blogspot.com/2010/08/ethiopias-consul-general-in-lebanon-ban.html>

4 Lemlem, formal interviews by author, July 28, 2013; Ruth, formal interview by author, July 26, 2013.

production, and the language preference is to ensure a complete dependence on the employers.<sup>5</sup> Carter G. Woodson's states in *Mis-Education of the Negro*, "If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions."<sup>6</sup> Woodson is making the point that dominating the mind of the Negro is a productive means of control because it dictates the actions and initiates a self-disciplined subjugation. From the outset, such opportunistic employers have requirements in hopes of minimizing resistance, maintaining order, and enhancing full control over their domestics. Thus, the largest stream of domestics is that of teens and young women from the rural regions of Ethiopia.

Head of Diaspora Affairs at the Ethiopian Consulate of Lebanon, Medhin Alemayehu, observes two simultaneous trends: 1) a decline of migrant workers from the urban capital of Addis Abeba and 2) an influx of domestic workers from the Sidamo region of Southern Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> Frey, a hairdresser from *Tigist Yewubet Salon* (Tigist's Beauty Salon), also suggests a pervading presence of domestics from the Wollo region of northern Ethiopia, where she is from, with little knowledge of Amargina (Ethiopia's national language), let alone Arabic.<sup>8</sup> Alemayehu implied that the favorable attitudes toward migration from the urban capital have declined due to awareness of the abuses in Lebanon, which has increased through documentaries and news outlets. Therefore, brokers have been targeting and trafficking young women from rural villages. This is trafficking because the women from the Sidamo are falsely led to believe they will be journeying to South Africa (which they believe to be the only country outside of Ethiopia) and are led to believe that domestic work means caring for toddlers and elders only. This disillusionment is shattered violently upon arrival to expansive villa homes, 18 or more hours of daily labor, and an alienated work environment.<sup>9</sup> Their young age, lack of knowledge of Amharic and Arabic, and lack of cultural capital surmounts layers of vulnerability that is fertile for exploitative employment. These disadvantages inhibit new migrants from connecting with other Ethiopians and exasperates their isolation, feelings of non-belonging, and exposure to abuse and trauma.

Lebanon is a country of migrants, expatriates, and refugees. In total, there are approximately 200,000 migrant workers from countries including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, and about 18,000 of them are identified by the Consulate as Ethiopian.<sup>10</sup> During my stay, I observed more bubbling affection among Ethiopians, be they strangers or neighbors, than there ever was between, say, an Ethiopian woman and Sri Lankan woman. The few times we were in the presence of a domestic from Bangladesh, the Philippines, or Sri Lanka, there was a recognition of each other's presence but always a stifling tension. The women around me spoke of Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi women as being "backward" on the basis of their conservative dress choice and their thickly accented Arabic, which they found to be outrageous after years of remaining in Lebanon. They also commented that these women were complacent for their willingness to work at lower wages. Similarly, the Filipina women were demonized for being proudly picky over the sects of the domestic sphere in which they chose to be employed. This disdain is further fueled by Lebanese who desire and pay Filipina domestics more because they typically speak English, a language they want their kids to learn.

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5 Hanna, primary informant, informal discussion with author.

6 Carter G. Woodson. Forward to *Mis-Education of the Negro*, xiii. The Lumumba Book Printers, 2006.

7 Medhin Alemayehu, formal interview by author, July 27, 2013, Ethiopian Consulate of Beirut, Lebanon.

8 Frey, hairdresser at Tigist Yewubet Salon, interviewed by author, July 24, 2013, Sur, Lebanon.

9 Lemlem, formal interview with author.

10 Medhin Alemayehu, formal interview by author, July 27, 2013, Ethiopian Consulate of Beirut, Lebanon.

At work here are layers of prejudice both within the migrant communities and between the laborers and employers. The attitudes toward one another are interpellations of class and race produced by the dominant group and circulated by the migrants. The animosity among the migrant communities resembles Marx's "potatoes in a sack" dimension of laborers who "live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, their culture from those of the other classes and put them in hostile opposition."<sup>11</sup> Migrant domestic workers' conditions and positions in society are produced by their relation of power to the dominant Lebanese population, but there is a lack of unification across the communities due to different processes of sexualization and racialization of the ethnic groups.

Despite the distinction the Ethiopian women make between themselves and other migrant worker communities, they acknowledge a shared burden of representation. This was apparent when Beth was embarrassed at a public display of affection between a Sri Lankan woman and a local Lebanese man. As the only two domestics in the taxi, she said she felt embarrassed and cringed at the thought of other passengers associating the Sri Lankan's "prostitute-like" behaviors with herself. With the trope of migrant workers as prostitutes already circulating, she was afraid those around her would not differentiate her, the Ethiopian, from the Sri Lankan woman. This process of homogenization is perpetuated by the term "Sri Lankiye," which has, overtime, become interchangeable with *shigeliye*, or maid.<sup>12</sup> This term is racialized and gendered to refer only to migrant domestic female workers, ignoring Palestinian and Syrian people who labor as domestics. "Sri Lankiye" has evolved to be used in derogatory reference to those foreign to the region and those darker in skin color. The clumping of all migrant workers under one term exemplifies an ethnic typification of domestic workers as a class of their own. This objectification and refusal to acknowledge difference sets the stage for daily practices of prejudice and discrimination.

Migrants from the neighboring Sudan and Ethiopia have, however, a unique reciprocity of respect and camaraderie and a noticeable closeness that often evokes jealousy and anger from Lebanese locals, especially from the men. Beyond the circumstantial factors, such as the proximity of their work spaces, there is a level of solidarity with one another which is expressed in ready responses of support for each other economically, physically and emotionally. This was clear in the way information would circulate between the two groups as well as sharing of household appliances, celebration of Ethiopian and Sudanese festivals, and even the inseparability of Sudanese artists from Ethiopian musicians touring in concert, to name just a few. Additionally, I observed that Sudanese men have particular love and respect for Ethiopian women and their culture. This was seen through the efforts of Sudanese men to speak Amharic (some enough to speak fluently, others for pick-up lines alone); by the ritualistic visits to the Ethiopian Orthodox churches to pick up women; and hangouts of Sudanese neighbors who casually listened to Ethiopian love songs.

In conclusion I want to give attention to the free-visas for freelance domestic workers. All except one of my informants were out-of-home domestics. While two of them had diplomatically convinced their sponsors/employers to allow them to live on their own, the rest had run away from abusive environments. Either way, they constitute a marginal sector of domestic workers. Unlike *contrat* or in-home workers, these women live in groups of two and sometimes 20, as in Beirut. Although these group of women are romanticized by *contart* workers as having the ultimate freedom, they do exude incomparable indignation and free-spiritedness. They are

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11 Karl Marx. *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852; accessed August 25, 2013. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm>

12 Hanna, informal conversation with author.

constantly trespassing local expectations of domestics in their style of dress, creative hair styles, outing locations, and leisure activities. After our trips to the beach on Sundays or ice cream breaks after a long run, we were met with quizzical looks and hostile responses from local residents. Furthermore, free-visas have a culture of consciousness-raising that resembles the beginnings of the Black Feminist movement.<sup>13</sup> I believe it is normalized in the collective living circles that hold fierce potential for organizing migrant workers. Within these group-living situations lies the wisdom, experiences, and support for successful collective resistance to the dominating oppressive powers of being a migrant domestic worker in Lebanon.

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<sup>13</sup> Introduction to *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. Edited by Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim. Second Edition. Routledge, 2003.

