Sri Lankan housemaid tells of systematic abuse in Saudi Arabia

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Tens of thousands of Sri Lankans are driven by financial need and poverty to become contract workers in the Middle East. Their conditions are appalling. Many are treated as slave labour and abused, mentally and physically. A number have died in unexplained circumstances. The Sri Lankan government, concerned above all to protect a lucrative source of foreign exchange, has taken no action to defend its citizens.

According to a report by the Information Department in Colombo, 64.5 percent of the 1.5 million Sri Lankans employed abroad are women. In 1986 the proportion was only about a half of it, at 33 percent. Most are employed as housemaids or are involved in other menial forms of work. The *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed one housemaid who described at length the exploitative conditions she was forced to endure.

Padma, 39, went to Saudi Arabia in May 2003 hoping to be able to help her son and daughter financially. She had previously worked in a factory but left the job after marrying. She decided to look for work in the Middle East where pay is substantially higher than in Sri Lanka. She returned after a harrowing experience that is typical for many contract workers.

Padma explained: "To get the job I had to pay 7,000 rupees [$US70] to the Faiz Travel Agent, a local employment agency that arranged my job. To find that amount and to buy essential things for travelling, I sold the furniture and electrical goods from my house. I thought after earning money in Middle East I would be able to replace them. But now I am struggling as I came back more or less empty handed.

"Agency promised me monthly pay of 450 Riyal [$US120]. I registered as a foreign housemaid at the government-run Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment before departure." $US120 or 12,000 rupees is about double the average wage of a factory worker. The private agency was to collect a further sum of money through Padma's employer in Saudi Arabia.

Padma was one of a group of 123 housemaids who landed in the Saudi capital of Riyadh. The Faiz Travel agent in Riyadh took them all to the agency house where they were treated roughly. If anyone fell asleep due to tiredness, the agency's officers would kick them to wake them up. Everyone had to stay awake until they were assigned to their workplace. Sometimes women stayed there for three or four days sitting in a chair.

From the outset, Padma was shifted from one place to another. "My first place was the house of an army officer in Riyadh. In Saudi Arabia, women are discriminated against. Even a housewife can speak directly only to her husband and the son. I did not understand the language so a Sri Lankan driver translated for me. He passed on the orders of the master from behind the wall of a room."

The officer complained that he had wanted a young person, not a middle-aged woman like her. The driver warned her not to say she was Buddhist as the employer was hostile to Buddhists. It made no difference, however.

After four days, Padma was suddenly asked to pack her bag without explanation. She was put in a vehicle and dropped back at the agency house. She had no freedom. All contract workers have to surrender their passport to their employer when they get a job. It is only returned when the contract is completed.

Padma said: "After I was returned to the agency, they asked repeatedly about my age. The Sri Lankan agent had lied about my age. I was quite disturbed and started crying." The agency owner took Padma to his house. She was there and at the agency house for 16 days without work. She had no chance even to post a letter to her husband and children in Sri Lanka.

"One day when I was at the agency an Indonesian girl returned there because she had trouble at the house where she worked. She was in her 20s. In front of me, the agency owner hit the girl with his hands and legs. I was so

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shocked. We could not speak to each other because of the language difference. But she understood that I had no money and gave me 10 Riyals to send a letter to Sri Lanka," Padma explained.

Finally, the agency arranged another house. "My new mistress was a doctor. In that place, I did not get enough to eat. After four days, at my request, the doctor dropped me back at the agency house," Padma said. She was sent to another employer where she worked for five months without being paid her monthly wage.

"In that house there were 28 people, including 16 children. I worked from early morning—5 a.m. to 11 p.m. First I had to do all heavy housework alone. A few days later another Sri Lankan girl joined me. Some days both of us would wash 30 heavy items. We had to clean the house, wash the carpets and toilets and also help with the kitchen work. I worked without any pay and could do nothing about it."

Without her knowledge, Padma was sold to another job firm, the National Recruiting Office, just like a slave. The new agency sent her to another place in Gaseem, 300 km away from Riyadh. Because she only had a visa for Riyadh, she could not go outside.

"The Gaseem house was good compared to the others," Padma said. Her new employers were teachers. She worked there for nearly one and half years and was paid her promised monthly salary. But the house owners' mother pushed her into making a loan of $US1,200 or equivalent to 10 months salary, which was never returned.

Padma went back to the agency because her visa was due to expire in May 2005. She was hoping to return to Sri Lanka but, without informing her, the agency had renewed her visa for six months. For another four months, she worked at the house of a relative of the agency owner.

The agency owner then took Padma to his own house before passing her on to another agency, Samirah Mohamed, four days later. The previous owner had kept her bag during her stay and when she opened it she found two gold rings and a chain were missing. She reported the theft to new agency, but nothing happened.

Padma received no help from the Sri Lanka Embassy in Riyadh. When she telephoned, the official told her to come to the embassy. "I told them if I left the house, the mistress could complain to the police saying that I stole money and I would be arrested. I insisted they visit my place and investigate my circumstances," she said. The official refused.

Padma was very angry about the failure of the government to protect its citizens even when their lives are in danger. "It is not only our government. There are women workers from India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who have been neglected by their governments. We all face the same problems. Governments are not taking any responsibility to stop abuse. Employers beat housemaids and sometime they burn them. In many places, workers are not paid and not even given food. There are cases of housemaids being murdered. But nothing is done."

Padma finally returned to Sri Lanka. On her way home, she met two Indian women at Riyadh airport. Both were in a similar position to her. They had worked in Saudi Arabia for eight months but had not been paid, given enough food to eat or clothes to wear.

When she reached Sri Lanka, Padma was in distress. She is still fighting to get her unpaid wages and has received little assistance from the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment and other government officials. Her experience highlights the failure of successive governments to in any way alleviate the plight of thousands of Sri Lankan contract workers.

Speaking about the conditions of migrant workers, labour relations minister Athauda Seneviratne recently told the media: "I am telling everyone—let us do our best to prevent these abuses, as this is a grave human issue. We are not exporting goods, we are dealing with humans." He made no concrete proposals, however.

The government is far more interested in boosting this modern day slave trade, which netted $US1.6 billion in remittances for Sri Lanka in 2004, than in insisting that employers in the Middle East and elsewhere provide proper conditions and pay for their cheap contract labour.

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