

The life and times of a Sri Lankan migrant worker

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Chandima Gayani, a 40-year-old Sri Lankan woman, told me her horrifying story as a migrant worker for 22 years in a number of Middle East countries and in Cyprus.

Chandima was born in Matara, a hundred miles from Colombo. She was compelled to go abroad due to her family's dire poverty. She was a teenage mother of two children when she first left Sri Lanka to become a housemaid in Kuwait, in 1990.

Sri Lanka, a country of 20 million people, obtains half of its foreign exchange earnings by exporting labour to other countries. A quarter of its total workforce of 8 million are migrant workers, most working in Middle Eastern countries in conditions that can only be described as modern-day slavery. The majority are female and unskilled, working as housemaids or domestic helpers for their employers, surrounded by unimaginable wealth and privilege.

Supplying this mass workforce is an army of more than 700 licensed foreign employment agencies that have sprung up over the last three decades. The government and relevant authorities are indifferent to the fraud, abuse and other mistreatments workers face.

According to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, there were 14,704 complaints in 2010 alone—for breach of employment contracts (21.5 percent), non-payment of wages (19.6 percent) and physical and sexual harassment (14.1 percent). Reported migrant worker deaths due to accidental, suicide and “natural” causes totalled 331.

This is Chandima's story:

I was able to go to school only for four years as my parents couldn't afford to send me. Today, I regret that I couldn't have a proper education, but I have been able to learn about the sort of society we live in by my own dreadful experience of being exploited as a

migrant worker.

I married when I was 14 years old and gave birth to my son in 1987 when I was 15. It was during the terrifying political situation created by the government and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Government forces raided our home several times, as one of my uncles was in the JVP. He was detained by the police for some time and murdered by the army later. We faced harassment from the JVP as well.

My daughter was born in 1989, and at that time my husband was addicted to alcohol. We did not have any means of living and educating our two children. I was also dreaming of having my own house to live with my children independently.

With great difficulty, I was able to find some money to go to Kuwait as a housemaid in 1990. I worked in Kuwait for three and a half years. During that period, I had to flee to Saudi Arabia with the family I was working for because of the invasion by Iraq and live in schools and refugee camps. When we got back to Kuwait, I did not get the wages due to me, as my employer said his properties were looted. All I got was an air ticket back to Sri Lanka in the middle of 1993.

I had to spend nearly 15,000 rupees (\$US120)—a lot of money for us—to get a visa for Saudi Arabia and pay the employment agency that sent me there using someone else's passport. I was just 22 when I started working as a housemaid again in Saudi Arabia. After I had worked there for some time, my master started trying to force me to marry him and to convert me to his religion. Because I refused his proposals, I faced a lot of harassment—eating the left-over scrap food or starving for days.

It became intolerable, and I ran away. It still shocks me when I think about what I did. I lowered myself onto the wall using a cloth, jumped down the other side

and ran along to a road. I pleaded with a taxi driver to drop me at the Sri Lankan Embassy and gave him my wristwatch and earrings as his fare. The embassy sent me back to Sri Lanka.

In 1996, I was sent to Bahrain using another person's passport. I worked as a housemaid to a policeman and his wife, a teacher. My wages were never paid properly, and I did not get enough to eat and drink. Again I escaped and started working in the Gulf Gate Hotel in Bahrain as a waitress. I was able to save some money, but I had to pay 500 dinars (US\$1,400) to my previous master to get my passport back—they are normally confiscated—to return to Sri Lanka in 1999.

Without the involvement of an agency I managed to obtain a visa for Bahrain in the same year. But I had to spend around 200,000 to 250,000 rupees (US\$1,600-US\$2,000). I worked in Bahrain as a housemaid and a waitress for six and a half years and returned to Sri Lanka in 2002. I decided I would never work abroad again.

I started a boutique in Tangalle near to my native village and got married again. But the boutique went bankrupt and closed after just three months, and my marriage broke up. I ended up abroad in the same year—in Cyprus, where I have been working ever since.

Migrant workers who come to Cyprus as housemaids or domestic helpers receive €326 (US\$425) per month and can only work for the family that sponsored them. They get an extra one-month salary when they complete 12 months of work. Five of us live in a two-bedroom house and pay in total €380 (US\$500) per month. Each one has to spend another €100 (US\$130) for food.

Only two of us have got the normal four-year visas allowing us to work. I know some people who have lived here more than 11 years. If anyone is caught without a visa, they are put in prison and deported. We have no choice, as there is nothing for us in Sri Lanka.

I have been sent abroad by altering my identity more than five times by various agencies. I had to go abroad when my children were still very small. I was able to send some money to my mother-in-law, but I wasn't able to encourage and support my children when they were at school. My son stopped his education after doing ordinary level, and my daughter stopped two years before doing it. Hearing of their problems made me so depressed and distressed.

We have to pay 100,000 to 125,000 rupees (US\$800-US\$1,000) for the employment agencies to get our false passport. They charge 20,000 rupees (US\$160) for a police report, which normally is given free, and 36,000 rupees (US\$290) for a bogus spoken English certificate. For the four-year Cyprus visa and plane ticket, they charge 400,000 to 500,000 rupees (US\$3,200-US\$4,000). That is how these agencies grab the money we earn and make us indebted even before we start work abroad.

The government rakes in the foreign exchange we earn, but what have they done to secure our future? Nothing! Public sector workers get a pension, and company workers get the Employee Provident Fund and Employee Trust Fund when they retire. What will we have? Do we have any say in the political process in Sri Lanka? No. We do not have a vote. We do not belong to any country.



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