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Modern day 'slave trade' in Sri Lankans

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In what has been termed a modern day slave trade, many Sri Lankan women are arriving in Lebanon only to find themselves abused, raped, hungry, imprisoned – and on their own.

Siriani P, 27, arrived to Beirut in a desperate attempt to

save her one-year-old baby and husband from a poverty-stricken life. But when ten months later, she found the opportunity, she ran.

Clambering into a taxi she sought help.

"Embassy, Sri Lankan embassy," she told the driver using the only little English she knew. But after searching in

vain for the embassy, Siriani got out and wandered up and down the streets of Hamra in tears. One eye swollen and a bump on her forehead, she grasped her throat where her employer had earlier tried to strangle her. Red marks on her neck tell of her 'Madam', who on many occasions had pulled her hair and banged her head against the wall. Claspings her well-worn dress, she sobbed as she remembered her mistress stripping her to her underwear and beating her thin body. Her tied hands forbade her to defend herself. The pain became even more unbearable when she was thrown to the floor and trod on repeatedly. "I'm going to throw myself from the ninth floor," she thought to herself. "I'd rather die than go on like this."

Her weight dropped considerably since she arrived in Lebanon. Woken up at 4am, she was not allowed to eat before 5pm. Even then, she was only

allowed tap water with her meagre meals while the family drank bottled water. Locked inside all day, she was unable to search for assistance.

Sri Lankan women are usually recruited to foreign countries by roaming local agents who visit villages and promise them riches. They are then required to pay a fee to the local agent – up to \$500 – a horrendous sum for them. Most borrow the money, incurring a debt which, in the future, may prevent them from returning to their country if their Lebanese employer denies them their wages.

On the other end of the spectrum are the Lebanese agencies, an unregulated industry which is reportedly making huge profits. At a cost ranging between \$1,500 and \$3,000, a Lebanese family can 'buy' a Sri Lankan maid. Her monthly salary ranges between \$100 and \$150. A contract is drawn committing the maid for two or three

years. But since the language is in Arabic, the Sri Lankan woman usually has no idea what she has agreed.

The contract stipulates that after three months the agency is no longer responsible for the woman. Any problems, henceforth, must be solved between the employer and the employee. If a dissatisfied employer brings the maid back to the agency, the woman, as reported by Sri Lankans, are beaten to render them 'obedient'.

After the three-month period, employers become fully responsible for the servant. Should the woman leave, the employer perceives it as a loss of investment.

Many, therefore, opt to lock them in and withhold their only passage to another job or leaving the country: their passports. "Keeping anyone locked up is imprisonment," protested lawyer Mirella Abed Sater.

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