

Nepalese women torn between slavery in Lebanon and poverty at home

Many migrant workers suffer terrible conditions in Lebanon, but poverty and lack of opportunity in Nepal drives them back

(Adapted from) *The Guardian*, 9 May 2014

When the 39 Nepalese migrant domestic workers spilled out of the arrivals gate at Kathmandu airport last month, many vowed to return to the country in which they had experienced terrible hardship. Some had been beaten and forced to endure slave-like conditions; the majority had been trafficked. For years, the women lived illegally in Lebanon, with no means to return home after fleeing abusive employers. The country's stringent *kafala* system, which binds migrant staff to their boss, meant that when the women escaped, they lost everything: their legal status, passports and wages. It was only with the help of a local association, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), as well as the Nepali embassy in Egypt (Nepal does not have an embassy in Lebanon), that the women were eventually able to return to home.

There are an estimated 12,000 Nepalese migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Many suffer harrowing conditions, according to a report published this week by Anti-Slavery International. Almost half of employers never give domestic staff a day off; a third of workers say they are locked in the house when their employer goes out, the report says.

"My madam used to scold me for nothing. I was forced to work all the time, yet madam was never happy. She even asked her husband to beat me. I was often beaten with sticks," says Anita Niraula, 27, who was one of the group recently returned to Nepal.

Niraula arrived in Lebanon in 2009. She had agreed to work for \$150 (£89) a month in order to support her family. But after two years of abuse, she ran away, leaving behind her passport, which her employer had confiscated, and \$1,800 of unpaid wages.

But, like hundreds of Nepalese women in Lebanon, Niraula found that by working illegally in the informal sector, she could earn 10 times what she made as a domestic worker.

Two years after arriving in Lebanon, Niraula was finally able to pay her debts and support her family. But it came at a price. As an undocumented worker, cut adrift from her employer and without a passport, she had no means of getting home.

"After working for so many years, I felt that I should return home at least once. I was missing my children. How are they?" she says.

Niraula tried several times to return to Nepal without her passport – even attempting to bribe a police officer to help her – before she heard about the Non-Resident Nepali Association in Lebanon. The organisation helped Niraula get her and the other women to a safe house and the IOM and the Nepalese government helped get them repatriated.

But when Niraula was reunited with her family, she discovered jobs in Nepal were scarce and there was no way she could earn enough to make a decent living.

"I want to go back to Lebanon. There is nothing here in Nepal. I do want to live with my husband and children, but the problem is how will I secure my children's future?" she says.

According to Audrey Guichon of Anti-Slavery International, this is not a decision migrant workers should have to make. "The choice in Lebanon should not be between low-paid, and too often unpaid, legal work, and better paid illegal work," she said. "If the Lebanese system guaranteed that women were paid well and treated fairly in the first place, they wouldn't be forced to live illegally in order to make a living.

(613 words)