

'A Maid for Sale'

by Charles.S.Perera

To run away from the misery of poverty, and to let their families live, a number of Sri Lankan women leave their homes for countries in the Middle East, more particularly to Lebanon to work as domestic servants.

"Lebanon with a population of four million receives 800 000 immigrant workers, among them 150 000 are Sri Lankan women. Many among them find themselves in worse conditions, than they were, in their homes in Sri Lanka. For a few dollars, they find themselves without their passport, locked up in the home of their employer, and subjected to ceaseless work

had died in Lebanon since January 2008. About 40 of the cases were suicides, while 24 were described as workers falling from high-rise buildings, often in an attempt to escape their employers.

Al-Joundi has said that "Bonne à Vendre" (A Maid for Sale), was her attempt at shining a light on the situation, "and to give voice to these silent women" who have been suffering within a system which she characterizes as "modern day slavery."

She says, she remembers how she was pressed by over 60 Sri Lankan women waving goodbye to their families and friends, from the bus which was taking them from the airport exit



Filmmaker Dima Al-Joundi in Beirut.

until exhaustion. Some attempt to run away, while others commit suicide.

So begins an introduction to a documentary film, "Bonne à Vendre/ a Maid for Sale" produced by a Lebanese woman film maker Al-Joundi. It is a sad film of Sri Lankan women going to Lebanon to work as domestic servants, with hopes of earning money, with which they expect to make life for themselves, and their families better when they return to their homes in Sri Lanka.

But their hopes do not end with the realization of those tender hopes. But instead, in Lebanon, where there are no laws to protect domestic servants, their rosy dreams end, working as slaves from early in the morning to dawn the following day, at the mercy of their employer, without a moment of rest, scolded, punished, locked-up in rooms, none to speak to, and no way to escape. Their life of hope ends in being mutilated, raped, thrown from upper floors of buildings or in suicide.

Al-Joundi calls it modern day slavery. These poor women with their unrealised dreams, live in tears, and in pain, hoping for death to release them from the misery they had unknowingly courted in their search for dollars, and a better life back home. According to a report of the Human Rights Watch in Lebanon, released in August this year, 95 migrant domestic workers

lounge to the plane, which would take them with their hopes and expectations, to the homes of their employers in Lebanon.

They were in tears crying over the children and families they were leaving behind, and Al-Joundi found it difficult to hide her own tears. She decided to make this heart-rending episode into a documentary to open the eyes of the governments of Sri Lanka, of Lebanon and the humanitarians in the world, to the plight of the mostly poor village women of Sri Lanka, in their attempt to fight against poverty in their own way, by sacrificing themselves to an unknown life as domestic servants in Lebanese homes.

She starts her film with, Janika, a domestic worker from Sri Lanka, in her Lebanese, traditional pink uniform of maids, cleaning the vegetables, preparing dinner and washing the dishes in the home of her Lebanese employer. Janika says, ".....while working I think always about my country. My heart is with my husband and my children. Although I am here, for more than three years... I have cried for my daughter."

On investigating Al-Joundi found that there was more to it than the poor women going to Lebanon to earn and take back some money to make their conditions at home in Sri Lanka a little better. There was "big



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business in domestic servants from Sri Lanka to Lebanon and she carried out a one and a half year long investigation, flying between Lebanon and Sri Lanka before she made her film.

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ate. One of its recruits, for instance, was a woman who did not have enough money for the burial of a parent. A recruiting agent immediately stepped in to get her to sign a contract for employment in Lebanon and advanced to her the money for the burial.

To lure their future candidates, the employment agencies present Lebanon as a land of plenty and a place where one can earn high salaries. Many women tempted by the riches of the Lebanese families where they may find lucrative employment, get into debt without the fear of not being able to pay back, fees for training, for visas, and travel expenses.

The Lebanese employees also pay the agencies up to US\$ 3000 to find them a domestic servant. Thus the employment agencies collect money from both parties.

As for the domestic servants, when she pays back the debts she had incurred, there is often nothing to take back home, if she is one of the lucky ones to get back home.

It is only on arrival in Lebanon and at the home of the employer that the innocent Sri Lankan woman from the village, where she lived happily despite poverty, becomes aware of the reality of being a domestic worker in the Arab world. Her passport and the identity cards are confiscated, and she is locked up in a servant's room.

Al-Joundi says that for the Lebanese having a domestic maid from Sri Lanka is like having an internet connection which is open day and night for which you pay only a monthly fee. The domestic servants are not covered by any labour law in Lebanon and she can be made to do whatever work for any number of hours, according to the pleasure of the employer.

The employer's only liability is on the "kafalate", the agreement the employer has obtained for the duration of the contract. To protect their interests the employment agencies encourage the employer to confiscate the passport and other identification documents. To further strengthen protection, the employer keeps the maid locked up in a room.

The employment agencies have established "Training schools in Sri Lanka", which offer newly recruited domestic workers a 10-day Arabic course, training in the use of household appliances and a course on how to

please their new employer.

Al-Joundi says she was the first in 1996 to visit these training schools, which no one from outside had ever seen before. This is where the women learn how to tend to their household duties in Lebanon because the Arab women are very choosy about hygiene.

Blood and tears Al-Joundi adds that according to the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment, there are now over 86,000 Sri Lankan women employed as domestic workers in Lebanon. They constitute the largest population of female migrant workers in the country. Women from the Philippines, another big category, are more often employed as nannies.

There is a substantial economic gain by the government of Sri Lanka in this export trade in Sri Lankan women as domestic servants. In 2006, Sri Lanka received \$3.4 billion in remittances from migrant workers abroad, making it the second-highest form of foreign exchange and twice the amount the country receives in foreign aid and direct foreign investment. In fact, domestic workers now surpass tea as a Sri Lankan export product.

Kingsley Ranawaka, chairman of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) said that Sri Lanka is planning to cut the number of women migrants to the Middle East due to the growing number of complaints of ill-treatment, breach of contract, sexual and physical abuse and unpaid wages.

Until now, it seems the Sri Lankan government has been quite content to allow the trade to go on.

Al-Joundi says that one of the things she discovered while making the film was that the Sri Lankan government was very happy to export its women abroad and treat them like cattle because their contribution to the national income is helping to fund the war against the Tamil Tigers.

So neither the Middle Eastern nor Sri Lankan governments want this business to stop. But it is a national disgrace of Sri Lanka that has to stop, the sooner the better.

This is an earnest plea to the President of Sri Lanka to please stop this shameful slave trade of poor Sri Lankan women without further hesitation.

Music headphones can interfere with heart devices

by MARILYNN MARCHIONE

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Have a pacemaker or an implanted defibrillator? Don't keep your iPod earbuds in your shirt pocket or draped around your neck - even when they're disconnected. A study finds that some headphones can interfere with heart devices if held very close to them.

They might even prevent a defibrillator from delivering a lifesaving shock, say doctors who tested them.

"Headphones contain magnets, and some of these magnets are powerful," said the study's leader, Dr. William Maisel, a cardiologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and a heart device consultant to the federal Food and Drug Administration.

"I certainly don't think people should overreact to this information," but it's smart to keep small electronics at least a few inches from implanted medical devices, and not let someone wearing headphones lean against your chest if you have one, he said.

"The headphone interaction applies whether or not the headphones are plugged in

to the music player and whether or not the music player is on or off," he added.

Maisel's research was presented Sunday at an American Heart Association conference.

Nearly 2 million people worldwide have pacemakers, defibrillators or other devices to help their hearts beat faster, slower or more regularly. Tests by the FDA earlier this year concluded that iPods or other music players posed no threat to these devices as long as they were used properly.

Maisel and other doctors wanted to know if the same was true of headphones. They tested eight models - earbuds and those that hook over the ear - in 60 people with heart devices.

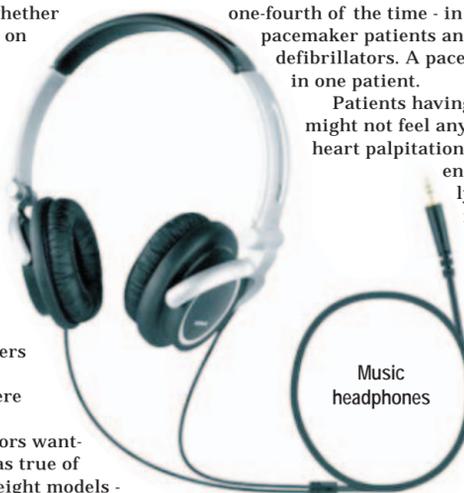
When headphones were about an inch from the device, interference was detected nearly

one-fourth of the time - in four of the 27 pacemaker patients and 10 of the 33 with defibrillators. A pacemaker reset itself in one patient.

Patients having such interference might not feel anything, or may have heart palpitations. But the interference could temporarily deactivate a defibrillator, keeping it from delivering a lifesaving shock if one were needed.

The magnet's effect falls off rapidly with distance from the device, and heart device function returns to normal as soon as the headphone is out of

range. The study did not test larger or noise-canceling headphones. The size of the headphone



doesn't necessarily relate to magnetic strength; small, portable ones typically use neodymium, which is one of the most powerful and concentrated magnetic substances, Maisel said.

A separate study presented at the heart conference found no danger to heart devices from cell phones equipped with Bluetooth wireless technology.

Cell phones, anti-theft security devices and a host of other electronics have sparked fears in the past, but studies generally find no danger to heart devices with ordinary, prudent use, said Dr. Douglas Zipes, past president of the American College of Cardiology and professor of cardiology at Indiana University.

"Reassurance to the public is what's warranted. I still get questions, what about my microwave?" he said.

Dr. Kenneth Ellenbogen, a heart device expert at Virginia Commonwealth University and a spokesman for the heart association, said the solution is simple: "Keep your headphones on your ears and when they're not on your ears, you shouldn't put them over your chest or your pacemaker."