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Shame of Imported Labor in Kurdish North of Iraq

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SULAIMANIYA, [Iraq](#) — The tiny Filipino woman's hands trembled. She was in hiding, fearing capture at any moment.

She and a friend had come to Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish north as guest workers six months earlier. Now they worried they would be forcibly returned to Erbil, where they had been locked in a house for a month and made to work for free, they said, after their passports, cellphones and plane tickets were taken away.

The two had escaped by begging their captor to let them attend church, then making contact with other Filipino workers, who spirited them away.

Thousands of foreign workers have come to the Kurdish districts in the last three years, a huge turnaround for a place that had hardly any before, making it one of the fastest-growing Middle Eastern destinations for the world's impoverished. They come from Ethiopia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Somalia, supporting an economic boom here that is transforming Kurdish society.

But nearly all foreign workers interviewed over a two-week period here said they had been deceived by unscrupulous agents who arrange the journeys. Unable to communicate, some arrive not knowing what country they are in. Once here, their passports are seized by their employment agencies, and they are unable to go home.

Some are satisfied with their decision to come here, but agents' fees are high, often as much as two years' wages. To come up with the money, many borrow at high interest

rates and find that their wages are equal only to the interest. In essence, they say, they end up working for free.

While war rages to the south, mile after mile of new buildings are rising here, and wages for Kurds have risen sevenfold since 2003. Billions of dollars in investment are flowing in from Turkey and the United States, and large-scale oil exploration has just begun.

For the Kurds — guest workers themselves in Europe for generations — the newly arrived Asians and Africans are met with ambivalence. There are too few Kurds to take all the low-paying menial jobs, and many are uncomfortable hiring local Arabs, given the longstanding animosity between the groups.

Foreign women are integral to another transformation. As in some wealthy Persian Gulf states, the traditional Kurdish lifestyle is adopting some European ways: the rich and powerful want live-in maids, nightclubs need non-Muslim women to serve alcohol and men want intimate relationships before marriage — all roles largely forbidden for Kurdish women.

Importing such workers relies on a far-reaching network of recruiters in poor countries, and for most of the 150 Bangladeshis cleaning the streets here, the journey to Kurdistan began at 5 Bonany Road in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the headquarters of the Travel Mix agency.

“They said at the agency that I would make \$300 a month and work as a waiter in a restaurant,” said Tufazil Hussan. He said that he took out a \$3,000 loan with monthly interest of \$150 to pay the agency, but that upon his arrival his passport was taken and he was put to work sweeping the streets seven days a week for \$155 a month.

Optimistic, Mr. Hussan, 30, thinks he will soon get a better-paying job; other Bangladeshis say he will probably sweep the streets until the end of his three-year contract, then go home with little or nothing.

His supervisor, Abdul Khadar, is not much better off. A farmer from Tangai, Bangladesh, he makes \$185 a month. Mr. Khadar said he borrowed \$4,000 to pay Travel Mix. He estimates that for his first two years in Kurdistan, he will work only to pay off his loan.

For the city, the guest workers fill a manpower shortage while saving money. “We need 1,500 cleaners; we have 350,” said Razgar Ahmed Hussein, Sulaimaniya’s director of cleaning operations. “I never wanted to bring foreign workers to this city, but we had no other option. Kurds do not want the jobs.”

The city pays the local Lion Gate agency \$325 per month for each cleaner. “The company takes more than half of that,” Mr. Hussein said. “It’s not a fair arrangement. Groups of Bangladeshis have tried to run away to Turkey. If you pay them what they need, they won’t run away. Three months ago the situation was so bad, they were living in a garage, their food was so little. They were begging for money in the street.”

Lion Gate officials said conditions had never been bad and were getting better. “We pay for the workers’ housing, food, electricity and plane tickets,” said Nizar Mustafa Chawjwan, director of the company’s Sulaimaniya office. “We take care of the workers’ health, and we have brought a cook from Bangladesh for them.”

As for allegations that Lion Gate business partners in Bangladesh cheated workers, Mr. Chawjwan said, “If Bangladeshi agents take money from them, we don’t know anything about the deals they make over there.”

Nisha Varia, an investigator with [Human Rights Watch](#), said the combination of unscrupulous brokers in the workers' home countries and labor practices in Kurdistan left the workers with few options.

“Each side denies that it knows what other is doing,” she said. “In reality, they are much more interconnected than that. They are doing business together, and that leads to these recruiting fees and debts, and puts the workers at risk of forced labor.”

Mr. Chawjwan argued that the wages workers got were higher than those in the Persian Gulf, and that his company had good reason to hold the workers' passports. “We keep the passports to stop them from running away to Turkey,” he said. “We spend a lot of money to bring each one here.”

But Ms. Varia rejected that argument. “It is a violation of international law to take someone's passport,” she said. “You don't own a person because they signed a contract.”

Guest workers are a new phenomenon here, and government workers acknowledge that there is no agency to monitor their labor conditions.

An agent who has brought in hundreds of Asian and African women in their teens and early 20s said that some had complained of unwanted sexual advances. She told of one client who expressed interest in an exceptionally beautiful young Ethiopian woman, offering extra money for her. He disappeared with the woman for several months, then inexplicably sent her home at his own expense. “I suspect he got her pregnant,” the agency manager said, insisting on anonymity.

Another Filipino, who gave her name only as Kikay for fear of retribution from her employer, said she and other young women came expecting \$600 a month to work in restaurants in Kurdistan, which they were told was near Greece.

“In the Philippines, they said we get the contract in Dubai, then in Dubai the agent said the contract is at the airport,” she said. “At the airport, they grab our luggage and push it through the X-ray machine, then they start shouting at us, ‘Go, go, your contract in Kurdistan.’ We are confused. We don’t know what to do.”

In Sulaimaniya, Kikay said, an agent from the Qadamkher employment agency met them at the airport. He was carrying a gun and was friendly with the police and [immigration](#) officials.

“They took our passports and then drove us to a house,” she said. “We couldn’t understand what they were saying. We were very scared.” Once there, Kikay said, the women were presented with a contract paying them \$200 a month to work in a hotel.

If the women wanted to leave, they say now, they had to pay \$2,000 to get their passports back. Cold and hungry, clad only in T-shirts in the winter chill, they signed the contract. As with the Bangladeshis, Kikay says, her wages are about equal to the interest on the loans she took out to come to the region, which she was surprised to learn is part of Iraq.

The local Qadamkher agency rejected allegations that workers were brought here without their knowledge or consent. But several of their contracts specified that foreign workers must pay \$100 to \$350 for every month left on the contracts if they break them. Most contracts run two or three years.

Sana Muhammad, a Qadamkher employee, said business was growing rapidly. The agency collects a one-time fee of \$2,500 from Kurdish families for each domestic worker.

“We have requests for 10 Indonesian girls right now that we’re trying to fill,” she added. “We have Ethiopian girls available but clients don’t want them. They say their faces are ugly — the black skin is unfamiliar.” (Similarly, the city cleaning supervisor said the Bangladeshi cleaners had to be moved away from the market because they were being racially harassed.)

Eva Enju is one of the Indonesian women in demand here. This fall, shortly after her 18th birthday, she arrived here believing she had landed in Turkey. She makes \$150 a month and has had the good luck to be placed as a maid with Latifah Noori, a kind and funny 75-year-old who is partly paralyzed.

“I came here so that I could save money to buy a house,” Ms. Enju explained.

Ms. Noori says Ms. Enju has been a godsend, working around the clock without complaint. “Enju has no one here,” she said. “She has just me to serve.”

But Kikay’s situation is less amicable. “My manager has my passport and identification,” she said. “Do you think they will let me leave at the airport without it?” If not, she said, “then I am trapped, and there is no future for me here.”