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AÏCHA

STOP HUMAN
TRAFFICKING!

Aïcha: or the trajectory of a Senegalese domestic woman victim of human trafficking in Saudi Arabia

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Although little documented, the emigration of Senegalese domestic workers dates back several decades. Initially, they were directed mainly towards African countries such as Mauritania, Morocco and Libya. Mauritania is in fact one of the African countries which receives the most Senegalese domestic workers. These women, mostly young, are above all found in the city of Nouadhibou (BA, 2015¹, Ely, 2016²). However, the destinations of domestic workers have broadly diversified, turning, without diminishing the numbers of the initial destinations, to Lebanon and Gulf countries like Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. Departures of domestic workers to the Gulf countries have grown unprecedented in recent years, particularly between 2014 and 2016³, with a significant peak in 2015.

As well as in these African countries, as in the Middle East, Senegalese domestic workers have always faced enormous difficulties and have often been trafficked for domestic servitude. As a matter of fact, Senegalese press has long reported stories of migrant Senegalese domestic workers who are victims of networks of traffickers and various forms of exploitation, particularly in Lebanon and the Arabic Peninsula.

But up to now, this phenomenon seemed to hardly disturb or concern the majority of people. It was the sad affair Mbayang Diop⁴ which greatly contributed to putting on the spotlight this phenomenon and forced the Senegalese authorities to react.

The study⁵ which we recently conducted for the State of Senegal, through the National Cell of Combating Trafficking in Persons (CNLTP), and which is part of the technical assistance provided by the ACP-EU Migration Action, program implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), has shown that many other Senegalese women have experienced such a degree of humiliation, abuse and servitude that could have pushed them to commit a crime, such as Mbayang Diop.

The main objective of this technical assistance was to assess trafficking in women and girls by domestic servitudes at the national level in order to measure its scale, analyze its impact and formulate recommendations to guide public action. But given the current and serious nature of the issue, the study also looked at the phenomenon of Senegalese domestic workers abroad, mainly in Saudi Arabia. Among the women interviewed, there is one who, in many respects, symbolizes this trade, in all its forms, of domestic workers in Saudi Arabia.

This woman we call her Aïsha.

1 BA, N. I., 2015, Migration et Travail : conditions de vie et de travail des femmes domestiques migrantes et influence de ces dernières sur le statut de migrante : le cas des Sénégalaises à Nouadhibou. Mémoire de Master 2 de Sociologie. UFR des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis (Sénégal).

2 Mme Aminétou ELY est la Présidente de l'Association des Femmes Cheffes de Ménage (AFCF) en Mauritanie, connue pour sa lutte pour les droits des femmes et filles. Avec son association, elle a beaucoup œuvré ces dernières années à aider ces travailleuses domestiques en situation de servitudes domestiques en Mauritanie.

3 According to the Senegalese Police de l'air et de la Division des Investigations Criminelles (DIC).

4 The name of a Senegalese domestic worker in Saudi Arabia accused of murdering her employers and who is currently incarcerated facing death penalty.

5 Study conducted between January and June 2017

Aïcha. Or a chronicle of “common” trafficking for domestic servitude purposes

Aïcha, as plenty of other domestic workers from this country, is a victim of trafficking in persons in which the perpetrators are, many times, the networks of conveyors and employers.

During an interview, in tears, Aïcha, a 38 year old woman, tells us the journey that took her from Senegal to Saudi Arabia, passing by Mauritania:

“My journey started in Mauritania, in 2002, at Nouadhibou, town where I had worked as a cook for many years (...) There I gave birth to 2 daughters, aged today 11 and 6. Their father abandoned us when the smaller was only 2 months old. Without any resources, I found myself again in a difficult situation.

(...) Living conditions in Mauritania were very hard (...) I was unemployed and unsupported. It was then that a Mauritanian woman proposed me to go to Saudi Arabia and put me in contact with an intermediary agent. He found me a Saudi employer willing to pay 300,000 CFA per month. The employer would also pay for my trip (...) but I had to return to Senegal in order to obtain my visa to enter Saudi Arabia and to leave my daughters with a friend.

I took all the needed steps for acquiring the visa in Senegal at the costs of my future employer - he would send money to the agent and he, in turn, would give me only what I needed in order to handle the administrative process. Once the visa was obtained, I returned to Mauritania, from where I departed to Saudi Arabia (...) During the trip, there were other women with us, including Senegalese (...)

Right from my arrival in that country I could see that something was not right (...) The airport agents took our passports and put us in a room like animals waiting to be collected (...) I waited more than 9 hours (...) when a Saudi man came to pick me up and take me to my employer (...) My first surprise was to see that I would be working in a house and not at a restaurant, as I had been told.

Not long after arriving, at around 21h, I started working (...) the house was big, and almost every child of the lady who was my boss lived there with their partners (...) I did a bit of everything: cleaning, washing, I really did keep busy with everything (...). On top of it, the Indonesian domestic worker I met there was at the end of her contract and returned shortly after my arrival. I found myself alone having to do everything in that big house (...) I would get up at 5 in the morning and would not sleep until 1h or 2 am. I did not have

any breaks, not even to sit down and eat - the pressure was too strong (...) At times, I was even woken up during the night, especially by one of the sons of the lady (...) I had to stand the abuses of my boss and her son, both of whom kept saying even dogs were better considered there (...) I worked seven days a week (...) I ate rests of food (...) I was so tired that I fell sick multiple times.

I had to endure daily harassment from the boss' son, who tried to rape me (...) I endured things I cannot even speak about (...) The lady was unpredictable. She would call for me screaming, would insult me to the point I asked to quit. But in order to quit I would have to re-pay them the costs of travel since I had not done my mandatory 2 years (...) I could not reimburse that amount because I did not get paid. After the first two months they cut my payment saying that I refused to work and that I wanted to leave anyway (...) but I did not refuse to work - I was simply too tired or at times sick.

I did several hunger strikes and tried to hurt myself in vain (...) the story of Mbayang had terrified me, because I was at the verge of doing like her (...) Similar situations pushed young girls into running and becoming sexual slaves to rich Saudi men (...) a young guy even proposed the same to me (...) but these networks are worse than working at a home (...)

I worked for that family for 2 years, as stipulated in my contract, before I could come back to Senegal. I left Riyadh in 2016, empty hands and only with 50 Riyals that their driver gave me and my ticket back (...) upon my arrival in Mauritania, I spent the night at the airport in Nouakchott and, the next day, I went to the UNHCR office, which directed me to the IOM in Mauritania. They helped me return to Senegal and kept supporting my rent and giving me support in order to start a small business, which unfortunately did not work out (...)” (Dakar, March 2017)

This woman, unemployed, without family support, with an IOM reintegration aid that has not worked, may find herself in another form of exploitation here in Senegal to feed her children and shelter them, according to her own words. Her testimony highlighted the fact that Saudi employers see foreign domestic workers as a resource in which they have invested money. They are indeed considered to be private property of the employer, as one of the other people interviewed says so well when she mentions that in “Saudi Arabia, employers think they have bought us”.

In their report, Human Rights Watch, (2008)⁶, a highly evocative title, “As If I Am not Human: Abuses against Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia”⁷, highlights the human rights abuses faced by domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and which, in many cases, amounts to slavery. This is the case of Aïcha, who worked almost 20 hours a day, 7 days a week, without any breaks or financial compensation for overtime worked in inhumane conditions and who endured intimidation, harassment in her everyday life, social isolation, lack of food, and all, without being paid.

Her testimony confirms that some domestic workers are also victims of sexual assaults by men of the families who employ them. It is known that sexual abuse is one of the ways to control, own and degrade a person. Women in these families can also be equally cruel to domestic workers through emotional and verbal abuse that undermines their dignity.

She was also the victim of kidnapping without the possibility of stopping working, even when ill, because she could not reimburse her employer and obtain permission to leave that job and their home. Domestic workers who wish to leave their jobs before the end of the 2-year contract must first pay the employer’s expenses or find another employer who agrees to reimburse them. According to the testimony of other women, workers who wish to leave their job before the end of the contract and who cannot afford to pay for themselves are exchanged between Saudi employers in a location that in many ways resembles the slave market where the masters exchanged, sold or bought them.

It is also clear from her speech the use of deception by several networks to take these women into that country and put them in a situation of modern slavery. In fact, if some women leave their country knowing that they are going to work as domestic servants, they are completely unaware of the actual working conditions and the exact location (ILO, 2010⁸). In the case of Aïcha, however, she was promised a job in a restaurant because she graduated from this sector.

Victim of trafficking but not of migrant smuggling

The situation of foreign women domestic workers increases their vulnerability and accentuates the consequences of trafficking. Aïcha, like many others, is a victim of trafficking by servitude. For her, migration rhymes well with trafficking, although these two concepts are not necessarily synonymous. Indeed, the links between trafficking and migration are very close, if not obvious, to these female domestic workers in the Arabic Peninsula.

However, she was not a victim of migrant smuggling, even if there were border crossings. She, like many others, is a party with a formal contract. (Even though these contracts are often written in Arabic, a language which the applicants does not necessarily read, and therefore does not always understand the clauses).

Sometimes the terms of the contract do not correspond to the reality (the exact tasks, the amount of the salary, the working conditions, etc.) that is deliberately concealed. This is the case for Aïcha.

These women cross borders but with legal travel documents. This is one of the reasons why the Senegalese security services are also deprived of these departures. They have no legal means to prevent them from going to a country where most will be subjected to the worst forms of exploitation.

Fight against this phenomenon, some actions of the Senegalese authorities

Faced with this unprecedented magnitude, the Senegalese authorities have been trying to respond to the situation, under the influence of criticism from the national civil society and media pressure, and the beginning of a better awareness of the gravity of the situation.

Senegal has ratified most of the international conventions and African regional and sub-regional anti-trafficking instruments. The country also has a law called 2005-06 of 10th May on the fight against trafficking in persons and related practices and the protection of victims. However, the fact that these women leave under legal conditions, the lack of cooperation on this issue with the destination countries, the hidden nature of this phenomenon and the diversity of the actors involved make this struggle difficult.

6 HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2008, Arabie Saoudite : Les travailleuses domestiques sont confrontées à de graves abus. Extrait du Rapport « As if I am not Human : Abuses against Domestic workers in Saudi Arabia ». Sources : <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2008/07/08/arabie-saoudite-les-travailleuses-domestiques-sont-confrontees-de-graves-abus>

7 « Comme si je n’étais pas un être humain : Abus contre des travailleurs domestiques asiatiques en Arabie Saoudite »

8 BIT, 2010, Le travail domestique sur la voie de travail décent, rétrospective de l’action de l’OIT, Genève

Actions are being taken against the internal ramifications of these networks. For, it must be noted, these networks extend at least between Senegal and the countries of destination, which necessitates a coordinated struggle in the various territories concerned.

In recent months, the Criminal Investigations Division (DIC) of Senegal has dismantled networks, following complaints from victims returning from the Gulf countries but also through proactive investigations. According to a police officer, these networks consist of established tour operators, health facility workers to issue medical certificates, employees of embassies concerned, recruiters and facilitators who are in direct contact with recruitment agencies located in countries of destination.

Although the DIC has identified several victims of these networks, the police official says the number of women victims of these networks should be in the hundreds or even thousands. But one of the notable facts revealed by the surveys we have carried out is the large number of women involved in these conveyor networks, in which they play an essential role thanks in particular to their good knowledge of the Gulf region.

This phenomenon is based on a strong complicity in the embassies of the countries of destination. This important role of embassy staff was emphasized by the women interviewed. Some of them even claimed to be recruited or brought into contact with the Saudi employer by an employee of one of these embassies, who is engaged in this parallel activity.

Conclusion

The journey of Aïcha is representative of those of most Senegalese women domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. They are subject to working and living conditions that involve forced labor and slavery and are victims of networks that generally use deception. In addition to systematic confiscation of their passports upon arrival, confinement in homes and social isolation, domestic workers are often victims of psychological, physical and sexual abuse. In addition, there is a lack of knowledge of the culture and language of the country, which reinforces their vulnerability.

The State of Senegal tries to respond and its efforts have resulted in the dismantling of networks by the DIC, the preventive imprisonment of members and the opening of five (5) procedures which are currently under investigation. According to the DIC, police efforts and complaints by some victims, as well as the Mbayang Diop case, have led to a marked decrease in departures. This situation is confirmed by one of the women interviewed and still living in Saudi Arabia and according to which, since the Mbayang Diop case, Saudi agencies recruit less in Senegal.

However, although the lull seems to be evident, the phenomenon does not end. In the opinion of police officers, there is a renewal of routes. The networks send women to land routes that lead them to Mali or the Gambia, from where they fly on. This means that despite the risks, the phenomenon continues. There is therefore an urgent need for more effective policy actions, including regulation of international recruitment and placement, as other countries faced with this phenomenon have done, particularly Ethiopia⁹.

Cooperation between Senegal and the destination countries is also key in order to better combat the conveyor networks located in the two countries and to develop a common approach to managing migration based on Human rights and guaranteeing respect for the basic rights of these workers. Encouraging women workers to register their contracts beforehand with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Senegal and subject to Saudi authority, once arrived, before its execution is also important.

9 Senegal could be inspired by Ethiopia's legislation regulating the domestic workers recruitment market