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*‘Making Visible the Invisible’:*  
A Glimpse into the History, Evolution and  
Current Dynamics of Domestic Work  
Relationships in Sudan

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# ***'Making visible the invisible': A glimpse into the history, evolution and current dynamics of domestic work relationships in Sudan***

**By Hadelzein M.E.S. Elobeid**

## **Abstract**

Domestic work is defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as: 'work performed in or for a household or households within an employment relationship'. Domestic work has largely been an invisible and mysterious occupation, considering that this kind of work takes place in private homes. Like many other countries, Sudan benefits greatly from the social and economic contributions of domestic work. However, very little is known about the marginalisation, and exclusion of domestic workers. This article attempts to expose the history, evolution and current context of domestic work in Sudan. It traces the history of domestic work to the practice of slavery in Sudan, when slaves were mainly used as domestic helpers. It then analyses the contextual factors that influenced the evolution of domestic workers from slaves to servants before examining the current political, legal, economic, and socio-cultural context in which domestic work takes place. The article concludes with empirical findings on the relationship between domestic workers and their employers in Sudan.

## **A General Profile of Sudan**

Sudan is located in the north-eastern part of Africa. It shares boundaries with seven other countries: Egypt and Libya to the north, South Sudan to the south, Chad and Central African Republic to the west, Ethiopia and Eritrea to the east.

Sudan has over 500 tribes and over 400 different dialects, most of these tribes live across boundaries. These tribes form two major ethnic and racial groups: Arabs and Africans. Most of the population adheres to Islam or Christianity.

## **The Historical Context: Slaves, Servants or Workers**

A slave is universally defined as a person who works without proper remuneration or appreciation, and who is excessively dependent on and controlled by someone else. A servant, on its part, is a person who performs duties for others, especially a person

employed in a house to carry out domestic duties. Meanwhile a worker is anyone who holds a paid employment job, with a stable (explicit or implicit) contract, on a continuous basis with a specific employer.<sup>1</sup> In many cultures and communities, the term servant is a synonym for a slave. This is particularly true in Christian communities and almost in the entire Arab world. Given its negative connotation and association with slavery, the term ‘servant’ has over time fallen out of favour and replaced globally with ‘worker’. However, in Sudan ‘servant’ remains the preferred terminology for denoting persons working in households universally recognized as domestic workers. The discussion below traces the historical roots of the modern practice of domestic work in Sudan.

The practice of enslavement in Sudan can be traced to the pre-colonial period from 1885-1898, when ‘noble’ groups controlled political and economic power while the enslaved, known as ‘subjects’ provided labour and paid tribute. Nobility implied a relief from performing menial labour even on one’s own land or at one’s own home. Institutions of slavery were more effective along the Nile River, where slaves provided labour for agriculture and domestic work. Domestic slavery became more common in Northern Sudan during the Turko-Egyptian rule. In the beginning of British colonization from 1898-1955, slavery continued to support the formation of the colony. British authorities maintained good relations with powerful Sudanese figures, including slave traders. This posture undermined the administration’s resolve to end slavery, in spite of the fact that Britain was at the forefront of the global anti-slavery

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<sup>1</sup> International Labour Organization, 2014, Definition of slave, servant and worker, [http://www.ilo.org/Search4/search.do?sitelang=en&locale=en\\_EN&consumercode=ILOHQ\\_STELLENT\\_PUBLIC&searchWhat=definition+of+slave&searchLanguage=en](http://www.ilo.org/Search4/search.do?sitelang=en&locale=en_EN&consumercode=ILOHQ_STELLENT_PUBLIC&searchWhat=definition+of+slave&searchLanguage=en) accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014

Anti Slavery Organization, 2014, Definition of slave, servant and worker, [http://www.antislavery.org/search\\_results.aspx?definition%20of%20slave](http://www.antislavery.org/search_results.aspx?definition%20of%20slave) accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014

Oxford Dictionary, 2014, Definition of slave, servant and worker, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/slave/servant/worker> accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014

Webster Dictionary 2014, Definition of slave, servant and worker, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/slave> accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014

discourse. As such, slavery continued for decades. One of the factors that contributed to the continuation of slavery was the perceptions of the British administrators towards the practice in Sudan. The British believed that a sudden termination of slavery would lead to social problems such as moral decay, vagrancy and prostitution. They reasoned that the continuation of slavery presented a win-win situation for all parties, as it guaranteed shelter and employment for slaves. However, the British colonial administration eventually came up with a strategy for the abolition of slavery in all its colonies. This strategy came in a series of bills among which are:

- The Vagabond Act of 1905, which assumed that freed slaves would either be criminals or prostitutes. It accordingly made provisions for punishments that included arrests and lashing, or even returning slaves to their ex-masters if they would take them back.
- Domestic slaves' guidelines issued by the British authorities in 1919, which included 15 provisions. This bill unified the terms 'domestic servant' and 'domestic slave' into one category, namely a Sudanese servant, which was defined as: 'persons who were enslaved or assumed to be'.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Evolution of Domestic Work in Sudan**

Domestic work is considered to be a degrading and physically demanding, and therefore not suitable for relatively affluent urban families. It is also associated with the notion of slavery. Not surprisingly, domestic work was often left to marginalised ethnic groups, such as people from the Nuba Mountains, South-West African migrants (Falata tribes), Ethiopians, Eritreans and Asians. The different phases of the evolution of domestic work in Sudan are outlined below.

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<sup>2</sup>Jok Madot, *War and Slavery in Sudan* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Idris Amir, *Conflict and politics of identity in Sudan* (Palgrave Macmillan Publications, 2005); Nugud Mohammed Ibrahim, *Slavery Relations in the Sudan: history, documents and commentary* (Dar Althaqafa Aljadida Publications, 1995); Sikainga Ahmed, *Slaves into workers: emancipation and labour in colonial Sudan* (University of Texas Press, 1997).

### ***1898-1955: Attempts by British colonizers to abolish slavery***

British colonial authorities had to manage the abolition of slavery in accordance with international principles and standards aimed at regulating the use of labour.

Accordingly, the British administration issued freedom documents to slaves, who were mostly domestic workers. This action led to rampant unemployment, which resulted in the adoption of the Vagabond Act. Among other things, the Act prohibited movement without permission.

### ***1960s: Scarce domestic work***

During colonization and throughout the 1960s extended family members assumed the role of domestic workers; thus there was no need for hired domestic workers. This practice still takes place in most of the rural areas today. During this period, male domestic workers were employed by government officials who worked in missions away from their extended families. However, given the conservative nature of Sudanese society, it was considered a taboo for men to employ male domestic workers. Moreover, the practice of employing domestic workers during this period was largely informal because the relationship still resonated with slavery and domestic workers often came from marginalized minority groups.<sup>3</sup>

### ***1970s: The rise of the nuclear family, inception of regulation and the influx migrants:***

With more women coming to the workforce and a corresponding increase in independent nuclear families, domestic work became more of a necessity than a luxury. As part of efforts to regulate the practice in the early 1970s, employers were required to issue 'domestic workers cards' to their employees. This was in effect an upshot of the Vagabond Act. In the mid-1970s, an influx of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees into Sudan, due to famine in these countries, injected abundant and cheap labour into the Sudanese society. A new variety of vulnerable, sweet and

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Elmustafa Mohammed Yousif, Associate Professor, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 12 February 2013.

obedient young women was now available to serve as domestic workers. The arrival of young and hardworking women from neighbouring countries also provided a solution to the problem of social taboo associated with employing male domestic workers. Yet, the informality of domestic employment relations continued because formal domestic employment meant more responsibilities for the employer and the government, in the form of providing protection and care to domestic workers, while also being exposed to the scrutiny of the international community.<sup>4</sup>

### ***1980s: Dominance of informality and absence of regulation***

Until the late 1980s, the employment relationship between employers and domestic workers was regulated. However, regulation and formality vanished towards the end of 1980s and has not been restored up to this date. In the 1980s, displaced people fleeing drought conflict in the west and south of the country, as well as the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile altered the dynamics of domestic work in major cities such as Khartoum. The influx of large numbers of unemployed Sudanese into the capital city increased competition for domestic work, as the supply of domestic labour far outweighed its demand. This in turn resulted in a decline in wages and the quality of working conditions. These new dynamics also contributed in entrenching domestic work as predominantly informal occupation in Sudan.<sup>5</sup>

### ***1990s-2000s: A new phase of domestic work***

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Sudan witnessed another influx of migrants, mainly Filipinos, Bangladeshis, and Indonesians. Some of these migrants were affluent migrants returning from the Gulf region. Others arrived in the country with the help of employment agencies, which acted as intermediaries between domestic workers and prospective employers. Employment agencies also contributed to undermining the rights and working conditions of domestic workers. This era also witnessed the emergence of a rich upper class, which tended to perceive and practice domestic

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.



work as an act of flaunting and imitation.<sup>6</sup>

### **Current Dynamics of Domestic Work in Sudan**

The following section serves as an extensive discussion on the current context of domestic work and an attempt to expose all possible aspects albeit political, legal, social, economic and cultural. It is worth noting that the information illustrated in this section were extracted from semi-structured context interviews with scholars, politicians, activists, civil servants and clergy.

### **Political influences on domestic work**

Historical evidence of the politicization of domestic work in Sudan can be found in a speech by Father Philip Ghabosh back in the 1960s,<sup>7</sup> in which he argued that his people from the Nuba Mountains were restricted to serve solely as domestic workers, with no support from the government prospects or any prospects of climbing up the social ladder. The politics of domestic work has over the years been a rather grey area, usually mingled with legal, economic and socio-cultural aspects. As Atta Albattahani puts it: ‘the political aspect of domestic work in Sudan is not visible’<sup>8</sup>. Another dimension of the politics of domestic work is the government’s reluctance to ratify and implement international labour standards. Sudan has been a member state of the ILO since 1956. It has so far ratified 14 of the 101 conventions of the ILO. In 2011, the ILO adopted a distinct regulatory instrument for domestic work titled ‘Decent work for domestic workers’<sup>9</sup>. Only 15 countries have ratified this convention, and Sudan is not one of them. Even in cases where Sudan has ratified ILO conventions, ratification has not always been accompanied by measures to domesticate

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Humeida Omer, Teaching Assistant, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 17 November 2013, Interview with Khalfalla Mohammed, Professor, Nileen University, Khartoum, 5 January 2014; Interview with Kholajli Mohamed Ali, Labour Studies Scholar, Khartoum, 12 December 2013.

<sup>7</sup>Father Philip Abbas Ghabosh(1922-2008) was a political activist and advocate for the rights of the Nuba people, and the marginalized and vulnerable in general.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Albatthani Atta, Associate Professor, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 16 November 2013

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Elmustafa Mohammed Yousif, Associate Professor, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, February and August 2013

conventions. There is also a noticeable neglect of the Ministry of Labour, when compared to other government ministries such as those of Defence, the Interior and Education. This situation has contributed to weak governmental regulation of and support for the domestic work sector.

### **The legal dimension of domestic work**

In Sudan, domestic work is supposedly regulated by state labour offices, which are supervised by the Ministry of Labour. Until the late 1980s, there were designated sections within each labour office for handling issues relating to domestic work. These dedicated units used the 1955 Sudan Domestic Servants Act as their guide. However, these sections vanished eventually. Although state labour offices continue to deal with issues of domestic work, they no longer have separate units dedicated to this form of employment. A new law, the Khartoum State Domestic Service Act, was passed in 2009 and now serves as the basis for regulating domestic work. However, there is almost complete ignorance of the provisions of this law on the part of major stakeholders, including domestic workers, their employers, and even lawyers<sup>10</sup>. Like many other African countries, Sudan suffers from the problem whereby the adoption of laws is not matched with efforts to implement these laws. Additionally, Sudanese laws often fail to take into account the socio-economic and cultural context in which they are meant to be applied. These two ‘syndromes’ are even more pronounced in the legal framework dealing with the informal economy and informal employment.

#### *Domestic workers’ lack of awareness and knowledge leads to abuse*

Domestic workers are not aware of their rights and are therefore are inclined to accept employment on an informal basis. This situation often leads to the abuse and marginalisation of domestic workers. Accordingly, domestic workers in Sudan do not enjoy labour rights and do not demand even them. In addition to having to work without paid leave, they are often subjected to harassment and long working hours. Domestic workers also usually accept employment offers without written

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Abdelhmeed Zakaria, Head of Khartoum State’s Labour Office, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013

agreements<sup>11</sup>.

Foreign women are the most vulnerable in this situation. This category of domestic workers are often subjected to what Elsadig Elmahdi calls ‘double oppression’ because of the natural abusive attitude of society towards women and foreigners<sup>12</sup>. Maryam Takas reinforces this point with her assertion that: ‘Most domestic workers have dual precariousness; they are mostly women, refugees or displaced persons who do not have any personal identification documents, who are uneducated and accordingly are ignorant of their rights and obligations’<sup>13</sup>.

### *Absence of regulation*

The domestic work sector in Sudan is currently not subjected to any meaningful regulatory framework, resulting in the arbitrary treatment of domestic workers. This situation undermines domestic work as a decent form of employment.<sup>14</sup>In the words of a law enforcement officer:

Until the late 1980s, there was a solid process of registration, record keeping and statistics of domestic workers, including a process of liaison between the police and the Ministry of Labour. Each domestic worker had to be issued an identity card with important information (name, address, telephone, guarantee ...). Now it is a hassle, with neither regulation nor statistics of domestic work!<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the absence of proper regulation, most domestic workers do not receive after-service benefits they are entitled to, neither are they compensated for

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<sup>11</sup>Interview with Humeida Omer, Teaching Assistant, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 17 November 2013; Interview with Khalfalla Mohammed, Professor, Nileen University, Khartoum, 5 January 2014; Interview with Kholajli Mohamed Ali, Labour Studies Scholar, Khartoum, 12 December 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Elmahdi Elsadig, Leader of Umma Party, Khartoum, 7 January 2014

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Maryam Takas, Human Rights Commissioner, Khartoum, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2014

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Khalfalla Mohammed, Professor, Nileen University, Khartoum, 5 January 2014, Interview with Adeeb Nabil, Lawyer, Khartoum, 20 December 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Mohamed Elshiekh, Police Captain, Khartoum, 4 January 2014.

any unused leave.<sup>16</sup>It is worth noting, however, that some regulation takes place through employment agencies, which import domestic workers from Asia (mostly Indonesians and Filipinos). Domestic workers brought in from Asia are usually employed by diplomats and wealthy households who can afford the expensive fees charged by employment agencies. When a diplomat wants to employ a domestic worker, a contract is usually signed at the embassy and later reviewed and certified by the Ministries of Labour and Foreign Affairs. All complaints and issues arising from this contract are normally resolved through the labour office, while the employment agency handles relations between the domestic worker and his/her employer.<sup>17</sup>

‘Domestic workers are in a very vulnerable stance; I remember an incident of a female domestic worker who came to me in a very bad psychological state, complaining that she quit her job and when she asked for her after-service benefits her employers accused her of theft. Eventually she gave up her rights because she cannot fight for them. By the way, this is a common scenario!’<sup>18</sup>

The absence of an effective legal framework to regulate the domestic work sector has encouraged all kinds of abuse. The most recent form of exploitation comes from the activities of so-called informal agents. These individuals position themselves as middlemen for domestic workers, and are usually their acquaintances or relatives. They hold negotiations with employers on behalf of their ‘clients’, receive complaints, and give domestic workers instructions on how to perform their jobs. Resonating with the practice of human trafficking, these informal agents, locally referred to as brokers, exercise complete authority over domestic workers under their control. They determine the duration for which domestic workers would serve a given employer, using deceitful methods to rotate their ‘clients’ from one household to

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<sup>16</sup>Interview with Abelhamid Zakaria, Head of Khartoum State Labour Office, Khartoum, 12 December 2013; Interview with Ibrahim Randa, Labour Inspector, Khartoum, 12 December 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Sabir Siham, Labour Administrator, Khartoum, 6 January 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Hafiz Hafiz, Reverend at the Anglican Church, Khartoum, 5<sup>th</sup> January 2014

another in a bid to make more money.<sup>19</sup>

### **Economic dimension of Domestic Work**

Opportunity cost is an economic term that refers to the value that is sacrificed in order to acquire the next valued alternative.<sup>20</sup> Domestic work represents a case of dual opportunity cost in that on the one hand, the domestic worker sacrifices her income, alternative spending possibilities and family time to work for other families, and on the other hand the employer sacrifices her income (and alternative consumption possibilities) to afford domestic care. The rise of nuclear families along with challenging economic conditions has resulted in the need for multiple sources of income on the part of many households. This has created incentives for more women to move into the workforce, a phenomenon that has resulted in the greater need for domestic workers. In this context, making use of the services of domestic workers has become more of a necessity than luxury. Given the high levels of unemployment precipitated by the economic crisis, many people have turned to domestic work as an alternative form of employment, including engaging in the activity on part-time basis. However, as pointed out above, domestic workers find themselves in a labour market that is not regulated, and which is completely dominated by employers. Other economic factors affecting the conditions of domestic workers include the imbalance between the supply and demand of domestic workers, as well as the economic hardship prevailing in the country, which dissuades households employing domestic workers from guaranteeing decent work conditions such as the provision of minimum wage and social security. It is also worth noting that the value and contribution of the domestic work sector to the national economy is yet to be fully recognised.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Interview with Kholajli Mohamed Ali, Labour Scholar, Khartoum, 12 December 2013; Interview with Jafar Zakaria, Informal domestic worker broker, Khartoum, 30 September 2013; Interview with Elmustafa Mohammed Yousif, Associate Professor, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 5 August 2013; See also Elnigoumi Maysoon, 'Alhabshia': reflections about Ethiopian/Eritrean domestic workers, 9 January 2014, [www.maysooniat.blogspot.com](http://www.maysooniat.blogspot.com)

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Humeida Omer, Teaching Assistant, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 17 November 2013;

## Socio-cultural dimension of domestic work

The dominant values and cultural practices in the Sudanese society play an important role in determining the norms underpinning domestic work. In fact, it has been observed that the 'rules of the game', as they pertain to the relationship between domestic workers and their employers, are often established during informal conversations at social gatherings. It is mostly during these informal encounters that information on domestic workers is exchanged and common employment standards are set, including the appropriate minimum wage and how domestic workers should be treated. The poor working conditions and general exploitation to which domestic workers are subjected are therefore a reflection of the contradictions and moral decadence in the Sudanese society. Maysoon Elnigoumi captures the contradictions in the Sudanese society in the following rhetorical question:

What does it mean to be linked and connected to upbeat technologies, to have our Facebook profiles full of applications of the Prophet Mohamed, or to claim civilization and modernity if we continue to treat our domestic workers with disrespect and indecency, and even brag about it?<sup>22</sup>

It is worth noting that although Christianity and Islam are the dominant religions in Sudan, none of these religions support the indecent treatment of domestic workers. In fact, the teachings of both religions encourage employers to treat their servants and slaves with decency and respect. In this regard, the Bible admonishes Christians as follows: 'Do not take advantage of anyone or rob him. Do not hold back the wage of someone you have hired, not even for one night'.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the Prophet Mohammed had this to say about the way employers should relate with to their servants and

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Interview with Khalfalla Mohammed, Professor, Nileen University, Khartoum, 5 January 2014; Interview with Kholajli Mohamed Ali, Labour Studies Scholar, Khartoum, 12 December 2013; Interview with Elagraa Mutasim, Economist, Khartoum, 20 January 2014; Interview with Umbada S., Economist, Khartoum, 20 November 2013

<sup>22</sup> Maysoon Elnigoumi, Blogger, email interview, 12 December 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Leviticus 19:13, The Good News Bible, 1994.

slaves:

Give the hired worker his wage before his sweat dries. Fear God in the matter of your slaves. Feed them with what you eat and clothe them with what you wear, and do not give them work beyond their capacity. Those whom you like retain, and those whom you dislike, sell. Do not cause pain to God's creation. He caused you to own them and had He so wished, He could have caused them to own you.<sup>24</sup>

On the one hand, the exploitative relationship between domestic workers and their employers can be understood from the perspective of the history of slavery in Sudan. On the other hand, this relationship is emblematic of the culture of unprofessionalism and informality that is embedded in the Sudanese society, and which makes it difficult to set rules and standards. Another dimension relates to the influence of conservative 'Eastern' culture, which sees domestic work as a 'private' activity, to be subjected neither to societal nor governmental regulation. Such conservative mentality hinders the implementation of the key pillars of a decent work programme.<sup>25</sup> This suggests the need for a paradigm shift in the way in which production relationships are understood in the Sudanese society. Such fundamental change is essential for the emergence of a decent culture, for as Nabil Adeeb correctly points out, 'a culture of indecency towards vulnerable groups, such as domestic workers, prevails in the Sudanese society, resulting in abuse and the denial of the basic right of being human'.<sup>26</sup> This abusive and exploitative culture can be inferred from the works of prominent Sudanese literary personalities such as Taha Jafar and Mohamed Elshiekh Medani. For example, in one of his poems titled 'In need for a fine-tune', Medani exposes the misfortunes and sufferings of marginalised and

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<sup>24</sup> A saying (hadeeth) by Prophet Mohammed cited by Ibn Majah in Al-Mutaffifin 83:1-6, found in Interfaith workers' justice's website: <http://www.iwj.org/resources/islam>, accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup> 2014

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Khalfalla Mohamed, Associate Professor, Nilein University, Khartoum, 5 January 2014; Interview with Takas Maryam, Human Rights Commissioner, Khartoum, 9 January 2014; Interview with Adeeb Nabil, Lawyer, Khartoum, 20 December 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Nabil Adeem, Lawyer, Khartoum, 20 December 2013.

minority groups in Sudan. A section of the poem describes the precarious conditions of domestic workers as follows:

*We are silence*

*We die, when chosen -within the trade-off- by the houses*

*Our blood colour escapes us...*

*And so do poems*

*Or they exchange impartiality*

*In silence, the path converses with us*

*While the country's ways desert us<sup>27</sup>*

### **The dynamics of domestic work relationship: An empirical overview**

This section presents the empirical findings of household interviews conducted with employers of domestic workers. The findings were derived from an analysis of the general themes underlying (decent) domestic work.<sup>28</sup> Household interviews were conducted in Khartoum State, which is made up of three main towns: Khartoum, Khartoum North and Omdurman. Residential areas in the towns were divided into three categories (A, B and C), on the basis of their socio-economic status:

- Category A represents affluent areas at the top of the social class with high incomes,
- Category B represents the upper middle class, with above average affluence and incomes,
- Category C represents the middle class with average affluence and incomes.

As depicted in Table One, a total of 20 interviews were conducted for each category in a number of residential areas selected through a random process.

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<sup>27</sup> Medani Mohammed Elsheikh, NA, In need for a fine tune, unpublished poem

<sup>28</sup>Thematic analysis is a rich description of the data set where themes are an accurate reflection of the content of the entire data set. See Guest Greg, Kathleen MacQueen and Emily Namey, *Applied thematic analysis* (California, Sage Publications, 2011)



Areas \ Categories	Khartoum	Khartoum North	Omdurman
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alryad</li> <li>• Amarat</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kafuri</li> <li>• Alsababi</li> </ul>	Almulazmeen
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hay Almatar</li> <li>• Khartoum 2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alwaha</li> <li>• Almughtarbin</li> <li>• Alsafia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alarda</li> <li>• Alhashmab</li> <li>• Albusta</li> </ul>
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Khartoum 3</li> <li>• Jabra</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alhalfaya</li> <li>• Shambat</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alhijra</li> <li>• Wad Nubawi</li> <li>• Almasalma</li> </ul>

Table One: Household interviews' sample distribution per category and area

*Khartoum*

Most of the heads of household interviewed referred to their domestic workers as *Shaghalin*, the Arabic word for a worker, as opposed to one interviewee who uses the term *Khadamin* (servant) to refer to domestic workers. This difference could be attributed to differing levels of education and profession of the respondents. Most of the interviewees indicated that they were not familiar with the concept of decent work. Most domestic workers in Khartoum are females of Ethiopian origin, and perform typical household chores such as cleaning, washing and cooking. These foreign domestic workers are mostly employed through informal brokers who monopolize negotiations with household heads. Negotiations cover issues such as ‘the market rate wage’, the nature of the work environment, and the agent’s commission. Such negotiations are concluded without any written agreement. It was also observed that most of the female domestic workers recruited from Ethiopia by informal brokers do not serve for a long period, as opposed to their Sudanese counterparts (mostly Falata, Nuba and Darfurians) who tend to stay in the same job for an extended period of time. Most of the domestic workers interviewed indicated that they do receive annual increments whenever the prices of goods and services increase. Household heads described the nature of the relationship they have with their domestic workers

as falling along a continuum, which ranges from ‘close integration with respect and trust’ to ‘respect for redlines and boundaries’. It is worth noting that there were a couple of households which employed foreign domestic workers (mostly Filipinos and Ethiopians) on the basis of written contracts, copies of which were given to the employees.

### *Khartoum North*

Most of the heads of household interviewed in Khartoum North refer to their domestic helpers as ‘workers’, while a few call them ‘servants’. It was also discovered that households in this town knew nothing about the concept of decent work. Compared to Khartoum, the ratio of domestic worker to household members is lesser in Khartoum North. However, most domestic workers in this town carry out the same chores as their counterparts in Khartoum. The majority of domestic workers are Ethiopians, who perform chores such as cleaning, washing and cooking. There is also a fair share of Sudanese domestic workers (mostly Nuba and Darfurians), who serve mainly as guards and drivers. The areas studied in this town are also familiar with the concepts of informal agents, verbal contracts, and market-rate wages with fluctuating annual increases. In terms of the social relationship between domestic workers and their employers, there seems to be a strong preference for the options of ‘no integration’ and ‘integration with respect for limits’.

### *Omdurman*

Seven areas in this town, representing three socio-economic classes, were included in the study. The household heads in this area were mostly housewives who refer to their domestic workers as ‘servants’. Interviewees did not know anything about the concept of decent work. Most domestic workers are females from Ethiopian, who perform indoors chores such as cooking and cleaning, while Sudanese males from the Nuba Mountains Darfur perform outdoor chores such as gardening and laundry. One of the areas studied is dominated by Falata domestic workers, who perform every domestic chore. The concept of ‘neighbourhood-rate wage’ is used in Omdurman as opposed to that of ‘market-rate wage’, which is common in other areas. However, the

practice of annual increments subject to increases in prices is also practiced here. Finally, there seems to be a higher level of social integration between domestic workers and their employers in Omdurman than is the case in the other two towns.

## **Conclusion**

This article analysed the historical and current dynamics of domestic work in Sudan. It has been argued that most domestic workers are still unable to exercise their basic rights, including the right to free movement, the right to retain possession of their identification documents, to negotiate better working conditions. This situation is encouraged by an almost complete absence of law enforcement. Accordingly, the predominant relationship between domestic workers and their employers continues to be one of servitude (master/servant) rather than a formal workplace relationship (employer/employee). This relationship is also characterised by exploitation and the indecent treatment of domestic workers.

Findings from household interviews with employers were also used to illustrate in greater detail the contemporary dynamics of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers. In addition to highlighting additional concepts and practices that are common in the domestic work sector, such as the use of neighbourhood-rate wage and annual increments based on price increases, the findings from the household interviews also revealed that both domestic workers and their employers were not familiar with the concept of decent work. Arguably, this revelation explains why very few employers and agents treat domestic workers with decency and respect.

Going forward, there is need for more pragmatic efforts in the administration and regulation of domestic work. First, the government should re-establish the special units in state labour offices, which were dedicated to regulating the domestic work sector. Second, in order to move towards decent domestic work in Sudan, more empirical studies should be conducted to better understand the dynamics of the sector, and the government should work closely with the ILO in implementing the

decent work agenda. Moreover, both the National Assembly and the Khartoum State Legislative Council should consider reviewing, and where necessary, amending existing legislation dealing with the domestic workers, in order to address any loopholes. Finally, measures should be adopted by the government and civil society to raise awareness about the rights and obligations provided in these pieces of legislation.