



# Law blind to maids' agony

By SALWA ALMOAYYED

**F**aces bearing the marks of poverty, misery and fear met me when I visited the Migrant Workers Protection Society (MWPS).

They were mainly domestic helpers who had been employed by sponsors who had abused them physically and mentally.

Some of them had not been paid their wages for several months, although they badly need the money to support impoverished families back home.

I wondered at the harsh conditions that forced such women to leave their home countries, families and children, to earn their living.

Instead, they found nothing but humiliation and deprivation, even of sufficient food that would have enabled them to carry out their difficult duties.

Is it possible to imagine that such abuse is committed by such unkind people, when Bahrain is renowned for its kindness?

I saw signs of beating on the body of one female worker and another told me that she was brought in to work in one household for a salary of BD50, but forced to work for three families, having to wake up at 5am daily and work continuously until 11pm.

Her employers only gave her one meal per day, but her suffering did not end there.

The payment of her salary was delayed for several months, when she badly needed it to send it to her sick sister, which was the reason she had come to work in Bahrain in the first place.

The shelter was set up by MWPS with the help of donations, to provide accommodation to such women until their cases are successfully resolved.

Most workers come here after paying recruitment agencies back in their home countries large sums of money for a work permit and are often forced by these agencies to pay for their own air fares and other costs out of their already meagre wages.

The inability to repay these 'loans', compounded by non-payment of wages, leads to a feeling of injustice and mental stress, driving some to the verge of suicide.

I was pained at the misery suffered by these unfortunate people, whose suffering has been caused by inhumane people, companies and manpower offices that are not subject to any government control.

Such unscrupulous people damage the reputation of the majority of kind Bahrainis.

Many foreign workers come to the country on the basis of a certain salary and a specific job description, to serve a single household.

Upon their arrival in Bahrain, however, they are surprised to find that what they agreed to in their contract is different from reality. In many cases, their wages are not paid for months.

But what does the Labour Ministry do with the manpower agencies that deceive their customers overseas? Most of the workers have borrowed money beyond their means in order to get an honest job in the Gulf region, but on arrival, they are deprived of their basic rights.

The MWPS is making every effort to protect them, but how much can a charitable organisation do, when there is no law to protect domestic workers?

Who can protect women employed in local households, if they are subjected to beatings or sexual harassment?

The premises of the recruiting agencies, where they are temporarily accommodated, are far from hygienic.

They are made to stay in small cramped rooms until the manpower agent hands them over to the household or company employing them.

Then, everything will depend upon luck and how the prospective employers treat them.

They may live in decent homes, or in households which lack any sense of decency or humanity. At this point, they begin their painful suffering and deprivation, until their cases come to the attention of the MWPS office. When cases do come before the judicial system, the suffering is further compounded by the slow pace of labour cases in the courts.

In the interim period, the worker is unable to seek alternative employment. Meanwhile, their families back home also remain without any source of income and suffer from poverty, misery and anxiety while waiting for justice to be done.

Domestic workers need a new law to protect them – and they need it now.