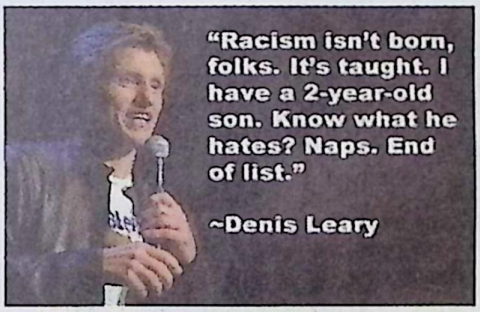
that according to the agency Human Rights Watch, 17 out of 27 private beaches in Lebanon even very recently refused to allow foreign workers into swimming pools. Presumably they believe that class disadvantage can be contagious!

In a deeply cynical defence, one manager claimed that workers were not allowed as guests because maids were already allowed to enter "for free". Such provisions are aimed at attracting families with children, who want to bring their maids along for childcare without paying for an additional ticket. Shades of discrimination vary. At least one resort in Lebanon allows Asian and African workers to swim in the sea but not in the pool (perhaps they feel that the salt water counteracts the possibility of contagion?!) while at another, they are not even allowed to wear bathing suits.

But apart from the widespread discrimination that this category of foreign workers faces – I mean, can one imagine a European au pair doing a similar job ever encountering such restrictions? - Lebanese labour law does not protect even their basic rights, let alone their right to enjoy leisure activities. Nor is there an anti-discrimination law in Lebanon that victims of racism can appeal to. In fact, in a Dickensian twist, a revised employment contract approved by the Ministry of Labour that gave workers the right to a full day off bizarrely failed to give them permission to leave their employer's houses during that time.



All of this, of course, pales in comparison to the experience of many foreign workers - domestic or otherwise - living in Saudi Arabia. According to Mehboob Qadir, a retired brigadier in the Pakistan army who clearly did not enjoy his time in the country, Saudi Arabia was one of the last countries to officially end slavery in 1974, and its inhabitants still retain all the instincts of slave runners. 'Miskeen' or 'miserable wretch' is a familiar word used primarily to denigrate the Asian labour force, while there are different terms used for those of African and North African origin. Needless to say, such discrimination is utterly contrary to the dictates of Islam, which emphasises equality and the brotherhood that exists between *all* Muslims, regardless of class or race.

This tendency to categorise people in terms of their race is further evident in the markedly different treatment received by European and American expatriates - who are treated as dear friends, according to Qadir - and the fair skinned Central Asians, Lebanese and Syrians, who are valued for their 'companionship' attributes. The latter is an interesting twist, not least because, whether they like it or not, the Lebanese engaged in such service provision find themselves in a not dissimilar power relationship with the Saudis, to the one that some foreign workers in Lebanon (mentioned earlier) face in their interactions with the Lebanese.

Saudi attitudes relating to the nationality of domestic workers allowed into the country have come into sharper focus since disputes over wages and working conditions arose with several maids from Indonesia and the Philippines. Saad Al Baddah, director of the labour recruitment committee at the Saudi Chambers Federation, stated that the government was considering turning to countries which "allow their domestic workers to move to other countries without preconditions..." - an ominous criterion if there ever was one. While the countries under consideration included Morocco, as well as some East Asian and Southern African countries, an unexpected problem cropped up over the issue of Moroccan maids.

The Shura council (the Gulf kingdom's appointed parliament) stated that it had been deluged by demands from Saudi women urging it to veto the plan to use Morocco as a source of housemaids, because Moroccan women were too beautiful and would "cause continuous anxiety and concern in Saudi families"! Some even claimed that the Moroccans would use sorcery to entrap Saudi husbands, and threatened to leave their jobs and stay at home so that their husbands wouldn't be alone with their Moroccan maids. While this undoubtedly speaks volumes about the sexual abuse of foreign maids by their employers, it is hard not to suggest that a better solution would perhaps be to prevent employers from molesting their domestic workers, rather than banning maids belonging to particularly irresistible nationalities.

Nor are racism and discrimination foreign to us in this country either, even if the problems do not fall into the specific power dynamic outlined above. The way that many Bengalis view religious and indigenous minorities is nothing short of shameful. I was shocked by the extent of the prejudice that prevails after I first became aware of it years ago, when a school mate of mine indignantly asked me why people from the Adivasi communities are referred to as *upojatiyo* - "I mean, it can't possibly be because they are higher than us in status, right? It's very confusing. They should just be given a name that makes it clear that they are inferior"! Sadly, news headlines today make it evident that not much has changed, with respect to our attitudes, in the intervening years.

Sources for this article include Associated Press, BBC, Emirates 24/7, Pakistan Daily Times and various other Internet sources