

OUR DOMESTIC DILEMMA

By

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Once a domestic servant came to his master in great anger and told him: "Look, I am not going to serve you any longer as you do not have any faith in me, though I am serving you so loyally for the past seven years."

Master: "What is the matter? I have faith in you, that's why I have given all the keys of the house including those of the safe, to you."

Servant: "No, you do not have faith in me, I am sure."

Master: "How do you say that?"

Servant: "I tried all the keys and not one fits in the safe!"

Every housewife has had their fair share of drama with their domestics. In Ramadaan, surely

the hottest topic after discussing recipes and how housewives punish their husbands by making the chutney extra-hot, is about domestics. Personally, I call domestics “Panado Tablets.” If they arrive on time in the morning, the day will go well; but if they don’t pitch, you will have a migraine the entire day!

There are two times in the year when Muslim housewives undergo real stress, not the normal stress where children need to get to bed early in order to avoid a beating with the *champal*. This is serious stress, maybe even a tsunami! This is in December when their domestics take their annual leave, and the other is the week or so before the day of ‘Id. You see, if you do not have 20 types of biscuits decorated in every shape and colour, 15 types of desserts not even found in the recipe books, 12 types of curries, and 8 types of starters on the table, even if the moon is sighted, ‘Id can not take place! Of course, the domestics get to feel most of the stress, so it’s important that our relationship with them is good all the time.

Most Muslims in South Africa employ domestic staff as a norm. For some, domestic helpers are a priceless resource who significantly eases our day-to-day chores, but for others, they can be a source of great distress. Many women complain to each other about the trouble they face from the incompetence, and treachery of their domestics. However, we need to remind ourselves that it is in managing our helpers according to Islamic injunctions where the secret lies to get the best out of them. Here are some pointers to improve that relationship:

1. Think of their pay as Sadaqah (charity): Indians can extract water from stone, so we tend to extract “full value” for the money we pay. Don’t regard the salary as an expense, but as a charity. In this instance, even if a domestic makes a mistake or becomes sick, her employer will not say: “I pay her to work, so she must work.” She will rather say: “She is also a human-being and she also has a family to feed. Lets not be too hard.”

2. Counsel them when they need it: Domestics also have problems and worries, just like us. They may be disturbed on some days. Ask them what is troubling them, then advise them to have patience and hope in Allah's mercy. Keep the counsel short and do not become over-attached to them, but show them that you care.

3. Forgive and Forget: It's not pleasant to have your past mistakes and wrongs thrown in your face repeatedly. As a human being, you also make mistakes. Forgive them for the sake of Allah, and do not be harsh when scolding them. Remember that just as they are at your mercy, you are also at the mercy of others.

4. Do not accuse them of stealing on mere Suspicion: This is a huge problem in South Africa. As soon as something in the house goes missing due to our own absentmindedness, the domestic helper is squarely accused of theft. Many of our children are irresponsible and don't put things on their place. Many housewives overspend their budget, and then think that money went missing from their purse! Our Almighty says: "O you who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin." (Qur'an 49:12). Ask them casually if they have seen the missing object, and do an investigation. If things routinely get missing, then there is cause for suspicion and action should be taken. In this regard, don't leave your jewellery, cash, or expensive gadgets lying around, as these can be very tempting.

5. Informally teach them Islam: One of the rights of our domestics have upon us is that we portray Islam to them through our character, and also teach them about Islam - if they are non-Muslims. Without being pushy, give them small doses of the truth and engage them in discussion. Don't think that if they become Muslims, they will become your equal and will have to pay them more. This is very selfish. This will eventually make them love and respect you for the sake of Allah – which results in a sincere relationship devoid of mistrust and treachery.

6. Share your Utensils: Some people treat domestics as if they are unhygienic beings from another planet. They not only give them left-overs to eat, but food that has gone absolutely rotten. Sit at one table and allow them to use the utensils from which you and your family eat. If they have dirty habits, teach them hygiene. But do not separate their utensils as if they are untouchables. This will belittle them and will create a desire in them to harm you at the first instance. No one returns an insult with loyalty or obedience. Many a gruesome burglary or murder have been committed against housewives due to this resentment. It is said that the Sahabi, 'Abdullah bin 'Umar would never eat food except in the company of an orphan.

7. Give them Gifts: In addition to giving them a fair wage, reward their work with occasional bonuses in the form of cash, clothing, shoes or other items that you use yourself. Do not give them unusable, torn or damaged goods. Give them dignity and respect. This is part of the Islamic etiquette taught by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." (Al-Bukhari)

8. Ease work when they are Sick: Allow your helpers to go home early by reducing their chores when they are not feeling well. Help them if they need money for medicines or medical treatment. Consideration such as this, without reminding them of these favours later, is a good way to establish a relationship based on mutual trust and care. Remember that domestics are human beings with feelings and self-esteem. Scolding them in public, pointing out their faults before others, and allowing your children to mock at them, hit them or treat them disrespectfully are totally unacceptable.

9. You are not Superior: “It is We Who portion out between them their livelihood in the life of this world: and We raise some of them above others in ranks, so that some may command work from others.” (Qur’an 43:32) It is one of Allah’s laws of the universe that some people possess higher worldly ranks than others, so that they employ the services of the latter in return for wages. But this doesn’t mean a wealthy person is superior to a poor person. Almighty’s Messenger (peace be upon him) said to the Sahabi, Abu Dharr regarding his treatment of his worker: “They are your brothers and servants whom Allah has placed under your authority. Anyone who has his brother under his authority let him feed him the same food as he eats and dress him in the same clothes as he wears. Do not overwhelm them with work and if you give them work to do then help them with it.” (Al-Bukhari)

Finally, employing domestics is not a license to live sloppily – throwing our clothing all over the house, spilling tea on the carpets without care, not packing our wardrobes regularly, or leaving the table in a mess after dining. Our domestics are there to clean up, not to create undisciplined and untidy children. Train our children to do their own domestic chores because in South Africa, domestics are still the norm, but in other countries, they are a very expensive luxury.