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Domestic *Bliss*

While it's typically a luxury afforded to the lucky few in the West, hiring domestic help is a norm in the Middle East. It could be one of the most important decisions in your life—and a relationship that could last a lifetime. *GHME* helps you navigate the (sometimes) murky waters... [Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna](#)

In 2007, there were some 268,000 domestic workers in the UAE, making up five per cent of the entire population. And while domestic workers can include everything from cleaners to gardeners, one of the most in-demand types of home help comes in the form of a nanny.

According to the *Journal of Childhood Research*, 58 per cent of children under the age of three in the Middle East spend 30 to 70 hours a week with domestic workers—that's four to an astounding 10 hours a day. In the United Arab Emirates, there's high demand for nannies, with many families claiming to need more than one.

Some even admit to

employing up to four housekeepers or nannies, with one for each child.

And it's easy to see why so many people want one: "After having my first child, I wanted to go back to work and to have someone in the house to help me take care of my son," says reader Maxine Elliot. As well as freedom and peace of mind, having a nanny also means busy parents have the option of keeping their young children at home longer. "I liked knowing my child was eating a healthy, balanced diet of home-cooked foods that I prepared myself. Having a nanny also allowed me to have a certain amount of control over who he was spending time with and what he was doing. Now that I have two children, I also enjoy the added flexibility a nanny brings—I can still enjoy nights out with my husband once in a while since I know our sons are safe with our nanny!" she adds.

While not all nannies help with housework, and some are hired purely to help raise children, many families in the region opt for someone who can also help with household tasks. "Since I had someone helping me out with the housework, when I got home from work I was free to spend my evenings enjoying quality time with

KNOW THE RISKS

There's no denying that hiring a nanny can offer a wealth of benefits, but it's not all sunshine: By letting someone into your home, you could be putting yourself at risk. Figures from Dubai Police show that in 2010, there were more than 660 crimes committed by housemaids, with stories of robbery, violence and child abuse, or absconding domestic staff appearing in the news. And the problem isn't just restricted to the risk for families—by dedicating their lives to living in a stranger's home, nannies or maids are also being exposed to potential danger. In 2011, a survey by *Sayidaty* magazine found that more than three million maids in the Middle East had either suffered some form of verbal or physical abuse, were living in deplorable conditions, or both.

my kids rather than making dinner or doing the laundry," says reader Sue Marrouk.

With the potential to become one of the most significant relationships in your life (and that of your children), it's important to take the time to find the right match for your family. We reached out to several different agencies to find out how to make it work for everyone in your household.

THE LOGISTICS

Your options fall into two main camps: You can either hire live-in help yourself and become your nanny's legal sponsor, or you can go through an agency. "It all depends on the type of nanny families are looking for—if they are happy with a less qualified person [such as an] au-pair,



occasional babysitter or junior nanny, then a local classified ads site should be sufficient. However, for a more qualified child carer we would definitely recommend using an agency," says Jana Valabikova, a senior consultant with UK-based company Nannies Incorporated. Jana has been working in nanny recruitment for six years, dealing with all overseas recruitment including Dubai and the Middle East in general: "An agency will do all of the necessary background checks on a candidate, will check their references and will carefully match families and nannies based on a set of their specific requirements and needs," she explains.

Word of mouth is another popular option, with many people turning to recommendations from friends, family and colleagues, websites like Dubizzle.com or newspaper classified sections to find a nanny. "There are advantages and disadvantages in looking for a [nanny or] housemaid yourself," says Denise McGinty, the general manager of Dubai-based maid service company Housekeeping Co. "If you are used to employing such staff, and have lived here and seen and been through several experiences, then you will be prepared for the ups and downs of employing from the local market. The problem [with looking for and hiring a nanny yourself] is the lack of references or background checks done by households in employing staff. Always follow your good intuition, and if you are employing staff to be nannies, then I suggest having your kids around [during the interview process] so

"In the region, 58% of kids under the age of three spend 30-70 hours a week with domestic workers"

you can ask them how they feel about the new nanny-to-be," Denise says. And remember—it's not just you interviewing the nanny—she is also interviewing you as a potential employer.

Another factor to consider is whether you want to hire someone solely as a nanny. Many families in the region hire housemaids, then ask them to watch their children as part of their responsibilities. While this can be convenient, it is important to remember that most of these women are not trained, qualification-holding child carers.

Experts warn that while this can be an economic alternative to a qualified nanny, a maid's lack of experience and training in caring for children may have a negative impact on the child's physical, emotional, social, cognitive and independent development. Whether it's knowing to only speak in the employer's language of choice around the children or being able to take constructive criticism from her employers without reacting badly, professional nannies will have experience in handling such etiquette and take it in their stride, while a maid-cum-nanny might not. It is for this reason that experts believe if you only need help with occasional babysitting,

the school run or preparing meals for the kids, for instance, asking a housemaid to temporarily step into the nanny role is fine—but for those looking for a more permanent, full-time childcare option, a professional nanny is suggested.

While sponsoring a nanny yourself may seem like a more cost-effective option, there are several points to remember. According to UAE law, for instance, only the head of the family can sponsor a housekeeper or nanny. The sponsor must earn a minimum salary of Dhs6,000 themselves, and the sponsor should cover the expenses associated with obtaining the nanny's residence visa (including the required medical and fitness tests), and National ID, processing fees and so on, with the total costs running up to Dhs7,000. Many embassies also require employers to pay a refundable security deposit, and sponsors are expected to cover visa and National ID renewal fees as well. With so many costs and tricky procedures involved in hiring a nanny, some people prefer to forget the hassle and leave it to an agency instead, where many of these costs are absorbed into the fee and the parents can focus only on the decision of which nanny to hire. It's also important to make sure you follow the law to the letter: The illegal hiring of nannies or housemaids is punishable by law, and violators can be charged with hefty fines reaching up to Dhs100,000 or even imprisonment, followed by deportation of the employer. "Borrowing" a nanny part-time on someone else's sponsorship is also illegal, leaving sponsoring your own nanny or →

"MY LIFE AS A NANNY"

Leizl, a 42-year-old Filipina nanny based in Dubai, shares her story with *GHME*.

"I have been a nanny since 1996. I love children, and it was an easy way to find a job outside of the Philippines that pays well. When I first left to work overseas, my son was 8 months old—it was worth it to make money because there were no opportunities in the Philippines, but it was hard. I've worked in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the UAE is very different. It also depends on the family—some families want you to work seven days a week, they spoil their children and get angry

if you discipline them, while for others the most important thing is that you take care of their children.

"Me, I'm very lucky—I haven't worked for any really bad families.

Everyone has been very good to me. I love the children I look after now. I see them growing up, and I'm with them morning and night. They love me and I love them. I have had some difficult experiences in past jobs, though—once, when the parents went out of the country their son refused to give me my food allowance. I did get it eventually, but it wasn't easy.

"I like living inside my employers' house—it is better like that, because if you live on your own, you have to buy everything. When you stay in the

house, everything is free. For me, it is no problem that I am a nanny and that I need to do other things too because in this country, a nanny is also a housemaid. It's more important that I am treated well. I need money of course, but even if they pay you a lot but don't treat you well—for what?

"With the family I currently work for, when I talked with Sir for the first time, it was like I had already known him for many years. When I met Ma'am and their children, I knew their family would be good to me—I'm comfortable with them and felt that it was right. Even now, we communicate with each other—trust and respect are the most important—and they are always there for me."

NANNY AGENCIES

If you're looking for a trained, qualified nanny, the experts suggest hiring one through an agency. Here are five options to consider:

1. **NANNIES INCORPORATED:** Based in the UK, they place mainly English and French trained and qualified nannies, au pairs and governesses all over the world, including the Middle East. Visit www.nanniesinc.com or give them a call at +971 55 880 4217.
2. **ROYAL NANNIES:** This high-profile company places nannies and governesses in London and overseas (including the UAE). Visit www.royalnannies.co.uk.
3. **GREAT AU PAIR:** An international online job-matching service, this allows employers to post adverts searching for help. Nannies, au pairs, babysitters, and other child care pros from all over the world can also post searching for jobs. Visit www.greataupair.com.
4. **NANNIES DUBAI:** With nannies, governesses and housemaids of various ethnic backgrounds based in the UAE, this company strives to suit their diverse clients' needs. Visit www.nanniesdubai.com.
5. **MAJESTIC NANNIES:** Recruiting and placing experienced child care professionals, they have offices in Abu Dhabi and London. Visit www.majesticnannies.com.

using a reputable agency as the only two legal options.

MONEY MATTERS

Wages for nannies in the region run the gamut from considerably low to amounts that are surprisingly high, depending on what you are looking for, with factors such as experience, education, and even nationality affecting the expected wage.

For an experienced child care professional of a Western background (particularly native English or French speakers), who specialises in providing child care, helping raise children and perhaps teaching them languages, you can expect to pay up to Dhs3,500 to Dhs6,000 a week. Typically, a nanny of this calibre will not do any cooking or household cleaning duties and they are found and hired through dedicated,

highly specialised agencies.

For less experienced nannies, or nannies-cum-housemaids, who do not hold any specific qualifications in child care but who are happy to help parents watch and care for children (in addition to housekeeping duties such as cleaning the house, washing cars, doing laundry and cooking), minimum salary requirements have been established based on their country of origin. In the UAE, employers looking to sponsor a domestic worker can currently only hire them from India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal* and Indonesia. In July this year, the Ethiopian government placed a temporary ban on employment of its nationals as domestic workers in the UAE. The minimum salary for Filipinas is Dhs1,400, for Indians Dhs1,100, Sri Lankans Dhs825, Indonesians Dh800, and Bangladeshis Dhs750 a month, many with the requirement of free food, accommodation and return airfare from their home country each year, as mandated by their respective embassies. A pre-paid mobile phone is often included as part of the package, whether optional or mandated—we suggest checking with the individual embassies for the specifics before committing to hiring a nanny.

Of course, you're always welcome to pay your nanny more—experts also recommend ensuring your nanny receives regular raises, appraisals, and bonuses during the holiday season. Karen, a Dubai-based nanny with 20 years of experience, agrees: "I don't see why being given a raise in salary should be any different for a nanny than any other profession. However, in all of my experience I have always had to ask for one. It would be good to discuss this before taking a position."

FINDING "THE ONE"

Once you've figured out the logistics, the next (and arguably most important) step is choosing someone to work with. Going into your interview asking all the right questions is essential to setting up a good working relationship down the line. Jana recommends discussing everything from working hours, house rules and dietary and medical requirements, to travel expectations, what she plans on doing with the kids and whether she is willing to socialise with other nannies and kids.

"[It's also always good to ask a nanny] how she disciplines a child, and if she has

first aid training," Karen adds. Indeed, experts claim that a majority of families in the region—almost 75 per cent—do not ask if nannies or housemaids are trained in first aid. Disciplining naughty children is another important topic—"These crucial issues need to be discussed very early on in the relationship and there should be clear rules on discipline and the nanny's role," Jana says. She also stresses how important it is that the nanny feels supported by the parents when she is disciplining their child. Karen agrees: "I definitely think disciplining children is part of a nanny's job. A child needs to learn using boundaries, and a nanny cannot do her job properly if the parents do not allow them to discipline the child."

Karen says that this is the reason why she feels so strongly about families hiring a qualified nanny over a housemaid to help with raising children—in her experience, maids are often too afraid to discipline their charges, either because they feel they aren't paid to do this or because they fear backlash from the parents or the children themselves. "I feel that the maids see their role as just to be present with the child, rather than to engage and entertain the child, which is what a nanny should do," Karen explains.

The interview process is also the time when you should set ground rules for holidaying with the family, having the nanny's friends visit in the family home, or how to distinguish between work time and private family time. According to Jana, a professional nanny should

"It's important that you as a family trust your nanny, and that she also trusts you"

understand your need to draw the line—in fact, she will probably appreciate it—and will not want to intrude. "Many nannies become part of the family after some time, though," she says.

"The important thing to remember is that your family holiday is not actually a holiday for your nanny—yes, she may be in a different and lovely environment, but she often has to work even more. If you ask the nanny to join you on your holiday, then you will be expected to cover all expenses related to this," Jana explains.

"Hopefully the parents would respect the nanny's time and ensure she had her

Photography: Corbis, Getty Images. *The Nepalese government has recently lifted the 10-year ban on their nationals working as domestic staff in the region, provided that they are older than 30 years of age.



space. The only time I've found it tricky [to draw a line between personal and work time] is with younger children who obviously don't understand that you have finished work. For me, closing the door works!" says Karen. "I lived in when I was younger, but now I choose not to [since it allows me a better] work/life balance."

A HAPPY ENDING

When someone is that integral to your life, it's important to make sure that you as a family trust your nanny, and also that your nanny trusts you—and this takes time. Jana suggests asking the nanny to keep a diary of activities that keeps you involved in the child's life, showing interest in her, supporting her and spending quality time with her. "If your nanny is happy working for you and you have a good, trusting relationship, then your children are going to be happy in her care, too—a happy nanny means happy children, after all!" she says.

Mutual respect is also important, especially in a region where the melting pot of different cultures can cause some clashes. "The bottom line is the parent's opinion must be the final one. I don't see myself as a parent substitute—just an extra person in the child's life, and the children I have looked after know this," Karen says. She believes a nanny's chief role is to help her charges to learn and develop their personalities in a fun

environment in keeping with the kind of upbringing favoured by the parents, and she has loved her experience of being a nanny. While she doesn't know how long she will keep nannying for, she definitely hopes to continue working with children in some way in the future.

"I have a little bit of all of the families [I have worked for] with me, from my love of a certain type of bread to the Russian vocabulary I picked up from the great grandparents of two girls I looked after

for two and a half years," she says. "I have spent summers abroad with families I've lived with, shared birthdays—mine and theirs—and been to parties with them, and I have always been included as if I was one of the family. I keep in touch with the children I looked after for 13 years—who are now 17 and 19—on Facebook, and along with another family I worked for, visit them whenever I am [in town]. I will always be a part of their families, and I am very grateful for that." ■

JUST WANT A HOUSEKEEPER?

Even if you're not looking for a child care expert, finding a maid can be just as hard. While the same rules apply in terms of visa sponsorship and fines for illegal hiring, there are many agencies to choose from if you don't want to sponsor a housemaid yourself. Standard fees run at Dh\$30-40 per hour, and not all companies provide cleaning materials—often, they will add a charge for bringing products, or they can use your own. Here are some of the most popular:

- 1. HOUSEKEEPING CO.:** A premier maid service for apartments, villas or commercial environments that also offers eco-friendly cleaning. Visit www.housekeepingco.com.

- 2. MOLLY MAID:** One of the oldest maid service companies in Dubai, offering high quality services for either the home or the office. Visit www.mollymaidme.com.

- 3. PERFECT MAIDS CLEANING SERVICES:** While they don't provide cleaning material, they offer a full range of services, including party help. Visit <http://perfect-maids.com>.

- 4. SUPER MAID:** In addition to regular cleaning services, they also offer holiday cleaning, moving cleaning and spring cleaning packages. Visit www.supermaid.ae.

- 5. HOWDRA:** Not only do they provide hourly maid services, they can also hire out live-in maids, as well as A/C cleaning, pool cleaning and window cleaning services. Visit www.howdra.ae.