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The invisible hand of domestic service
Tsemsir and the production of social order in Casablanca

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The invisible hand of domestic service *Tsemsir* and the production of social order in Casablanca

Leila Bouasria

A. is seated at his appointed place, next to the cigarette seller, at the entrance of a large shanty-town. He is known as a *semsar* (broker).¹ People often resort to him, either to get a job with a family or to find female domestics. Addressing the crowd of girls gathered around him, A. speaks in a theatrical manner, as if he were invested with a decisive mission:

“I’m there like a bus stop, the bus will halt at the stop, and the stop next to it the clients. The people and the girls know where I am, and as soon as I see a car stopping and people looking round, I know it’s for me. I make it easier for people to deal with each other. If not, how are people going to find individuals to employ? You can’t just go up to the girls in the streets. [...] One is sitting there, so will you approach her, just like that, and say do you want work? Or when a girl is looking for work, will she be going around knocking on doors to ask them if they want a girl? No, we’re just an interface [*wasita*].²”

My conversation with A. is constantly being interrupted by phone calls from his clients and prospective employees, and he is in no great hurry to answer:

“I’ve got one girl who’s very good [...] I’ve known her for years [...] you want a cook? [...] I’ll check her availability and get back to you.”

As soon as he’s hung up, a young girl’s voice distracts him again from our conversation. After a few hasty rebukes, he promises her, as she continues to implore him loudly, that he will give her telephone number to a client.

L. is another *semsar* who is at the same time also car guard. In the middle of my conversation with him, he jumps as a car horn blares out from a Mercedes parked near the centre. A lady at the wheel lowers the window of her vehicle and waves him over. Before going to speak to her, L. turns to Amina, seated next to him, and mutters quickly to her: ‘Try to keep a low profile [*seghrirasek*], this is a good opportunity for you!’ L. joins the lady waiting for him and says: ‘This time it’s the right one; the only thing is you’ve got to reward me [*thalayfiya*].’³ A quarter of an hour later, the client waves Amina onto the back seat of her car.

These snippets of observations and interviews reveal the mediating activity of the *semsar* on the domestic labour market, where he answers to different requests. To employers,

¹ According to Jacques Berque, the ‘broker, *semsâr* is the one who puts the buyer and the seller in touch with one another (*ilâqî*), circulates from one to the other, presents samples, transmits offers, arranges the deal’. In the case of the souk that Berque gives as an example, the broker who accompanies the consignments of animals for butchery is involved in ‘sewing, *ikhyyeth*, between breeders and butchers.’ J. Berque and G. H. Bousquet, ‘La criée publique à Fès: étude concrète d’un marché’, *Revue d’économie politique*, 3, 1940, pp. 320-345.

² Interview with A., Casablanca, April 2012. A. is a *semsar* whose appointed place is the entrance to a well-known shanty town in Bourgogne, Casablanca.

³ Interview with L., Casablanca, May 2012. L. looks after cars, his post is outside one of the clinics in the Anfa district.

the *semsar* sells the profile of a female employee who is hard-working, submissive (*derwicha*), docile and home-loving; to employees, he promises good working conditions, a good salary and free time. How can he satisfy both parties, whose relationship is described by L. as ‘a war’ (*harb*)?

“Employers say that girls no longer want to work seriously, that they’re demanding and unstable. Employees feel they’re not considered as human beings [*bnadm*].⁴”

In recent years several attempts have been made in the legislative sphere to formalise domestics’ jobs and govern these different requirements while controlling possible social tensions resulting from it. When these attempts take the form of parliamentary bills, they rely on a vision that clearly puts in contrast a world of unskilled and informal employment, that needs to be eradicated, and a world of skilled and formal employment that needs to be reinforced, in which the demand and supply of skills can enter into a harmonious dialogue under market laws. The activity of the *semsar*, which generally corresponds to the first ideal-type of these worlds, would have no *raison d’être* in the second ideal-type: in the absence of labour regulations, the market is supposed to reconcile the requirements of both parties.

The activity of the *semsar* (*tsemsir*) is strictly speaking an activity of brokerage: it involves connecting people looking for work to people seeking to employ others for defined tasks. Little research has been done on brokering in domestic service, and to my knowledge none on the *semsar*. And yet the study of the practices of domestic employment shows that brokering is their keystone: far from being a mere intermediary, the *semsar* sets himself up as a true defender of the social and political order in which he operates, and his activities shed light on how power relations and modes of governing the social are changing today.

As a broker, the *semsar* is at the heart of tensions and conflicts that run through society. His role as an intermediary is not limited to his sole function as broker or to his position: being in contact with wealthy clients while retaining a strong connection with ordinary people – as is shown by the fact that he shares the same language with the female employees – allows the *semsar* to move easily ‘from one world to another.’⁵ This strategic position between two worlds is at the heart of the social relations of gender and class, in an unequal society where domestic employment is still often the only possible entry into the workplace for women from disadvantaged social categories.⁶ The various levels on which these intermediary activities can be understood will be my starting point to explore ways in which the *semsar* exercises his activity of governing the social order.

⁴ The term *bnadem* also refers to the expression used by employers about female domestics, ‘*rjjehthabnadem*’ (‘I have made her into a human being’). N. Moujoud and D. Pourette, ‘Traite de femmes migrantes, domesticité et prostitution, à propos de migrations interne et externe’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 179-180, 2005/3, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ N. Moujoud, ‘Travail et service domestique au Maroc’, *Revue Economica*, 2014, pp. 28-31.

The professionalisation of domestic employment and the *semsar*'s new fields of intervention

The professionalisation⁷ of domestic work forces the *semsar* to adjust his field of intervention in order to keep up with these new transformations. The way employees assess their work experiences reveals ever-stressing requirements, notably in terms of the evaluation of working time and the tasks assigned to employees according to their skills. The difficulty of fitting into a formalised circuit, the discontinuous nature of employee activities and the absence of any regulation of the Moroccan domestic sector do in fact leave a lot of room for arbitrary and fuzzy negotiations, with many surreptitious practices and adaptations.

Specialisation of tasks and time accounting

The economic and social context is changing and the *semsar* is the first one to recognise this fact:

“Things have changed”, M. confesses to me, “girls nowadays claim rights. They have unrealistic wage demands, ‘khayaliya’,⁸ the times are gone when ‘the “maid” [was] taken care of appropriately but only received few allowances as remuneration on major holidays.’⁹”

One might wonder about the origin of this issue in terms of ‘rights’. According to the *semsar*, it goes hand in hand with the notion of specialisation:

“Before, the ‘khddama’ did everything. Nowadays, it’s not the same [...] the woman employer even asks us questions to find out what type of housework she does, large- or small-scale [*lménaj lekbir ou lasghir*], she directly questions the cook to find out how she flavours her dishes.¹⁰”

According to A., this specialisation – which he describes as a ‘problem’ – began in the late 1990s. Negotiations between employer and employee contribute to the transformations of the professional occupation of domestic work, which is recognised for its specific know-how and skills.

“Employers are increasingly asking for experienced employees; it’s not like it used to be, when the woman was at home and had all the time to train [*tcalem*] the employee.¹¹”

But the term ‘rights’ is also related to the temporal dimension of work: the demand for rights goes with a progressive recognition of working time, and with the associated

⁷ Here, professionalisation refers to ‘the structuring of knowledge and know-how, organised in a field of intervention and distributed by areas of skill’: J. Afchain, ‘La professionnalité’, in M. Chauvière and D. Tronche (eds.), *Qualifier le travail social: dynamique professionnelle et qualité de service* (Paris: Dunod, 2002), pp. 42-44.

⁸ Interview with M., Casablanca, May 2012. M. exercises the profession of *semsar* while also working as the custodian of a sports centre in the ‘Polo’ district of Casablanca.

⁹ M. Salahdine, ‘Les employées domestiques à Fès’, in M. Alhyane et al., *Portraits de femmes* (Casablanca: Le Fennec, 1987), pp. 107-124 (p. 116).

¹⁰ Interview with M., Casablanca, May 2012.

¹¹ Interview with A., Casablanca, April 2012.

regulations. Thus, according to several *semsar*, respecting a timetable is the second aspect of conflict that they have to manage: the young women they provide the jobs to do not want to be permanently ‘available’ any more. If, following E. P. Thompson, we consider time not as a given but as a constructed variable acquired in capitalist economic modernity,¹² the *semsar* plays a part in the capitalist socialisation of labour by advising the employee on the organisation of her working time and the negotiation of her timetable, and by using these as a leverage to negotiate.

“I prefer to work as daily worker, otherwise I have to be available on call the whole time, asked to work even at night. I’m the last one going to bed and the first one to get up in the mornings and they exploit me [*yehertoucliya*]. Here, I learned to negotiate my work schedules from the beginning.”¹³

The organisation of working time has become a matter of social struggle and resistance. This question expresses an awareness of the exploitation induced by unpredictable and fragmented time schedules.¹⁴ The fact that you can be free at the end of the day marks a break between professional and private life, and may even provide an opportunity for employees to explore alternative employment opportunities by leaving the situation of ‘spatial captivity’,¹⁵ which they increasingly associate with a form of ‘modern slavery’.¹⁶

The *semsar* therefore stands at the crossroads of different understandings of domestic work that have been transformed over time, but have not necessarily evolved in the same way for employers and employees. We are simultaneously witnessing a shift in, and a confrontation between different norms of work: from a domestic who is permanently available to her employers and fulfils all the necessary tasks, to that of domestic employment considered as a job like any other, a job that one does by knowing beforehand which house(s) one will be taking care of, for how long and following what schedules, and in return for what remuneration; a shift from a completely indefinite job to a specialised profession, or at least one that is becoming specialised; from a sphere where work conditions are negotiated on a case-by-case basis to a sphere of rights.

Defining the profile of the domestic employer

When the *semsar* mention this change, they also refer to the new profiles of domestics, who are as from now one ‘adult’ and ‘entrepreneurs’.¹⁷ As slavery gradually faded away and disappeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, the recruitment of domestics was first of all usually carried out by word of mouth, by recommendation or via informal intermediaries. In a context where access to the private sphere was conditioned by a ‘dual

¹² E. P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’, available online at <https://libcom.org/files/timeworkandindustrialcapitalism.pdf>.

¹³ Interview with Fatima, a cleaner, Casablanca, February 2012.

¹⁴ E. P. Thompson hypothesises that several types of social time overlap here, and gives the example of women involved in domestic work, who talk about their working day more in terms of individual moments than of a timetable. See his ‘Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’.

¹⁵ C. Bénit and M. Morange, ‘Les domestiques, la ville et l’accès à l’emploi au CAP et à Johannesburg: logiques de proximité et logique de réseau’, *Revue Tiers Monde*, 179, 2004/3, pp. 539-565.

¹⁶ B. Destremau and B. Lautier, ‘Femmes en domesticité. Les domestiques du Sud, au nord et au sud’, *Revue Tiers Monde*, 170, 2002, pp. 249-264.

¹⁷ In the sense that they assume an active role in overcoming their personal condition that is keeping them away from the market. See I. Bono, ‘L’activisme associatif comme marché du travail: normalisation sociale et politique par les “activités génératrices de revenus” à El Hajeb’, *Politique africaine*, 120, April 2010, p. 26.

aptitude of respect and of transcending boundaries between the sexes and the generations',¹⁸ these intermediaries quickly developed as experts in the recruitment of domestics.

To describe the new employees, *semsar* use the terms *fakou* (meaning more or less that the women in question have woken up), *tewrou* (they have progressed), *wacawor kafzat* (they are more aware of their rights), as opposed to terms such as *niya*, *ghaflat*, *ghouchmiyat* or *boujadiyat* which can be translated, with some nuances, as the naivety of women in bygone days. Employees nowadays no longer expect that 'mistresses licensed in this type of transaction'¹⁹ will notice their ability to perform domestic work; on the contrary, they assume an active role in their search for jobs and become familiar with ways of mastering the market. Terms such as *kedebber cla rasha*, *ketsselek rassha* used by the *semsar* directly refer to this form of entrepreneurial initiative connected with the new market standards and the increased accountability of the actors.

These transformations are shaking up the typical power structures, organized in hierarchical and pyramidal way, and where negotiations were carried out between the female intermediary and the female employee or her guardian. Perhaps the vision of a *semsar* in full negotiation with an employee in a public space reflects a form of decentralisation of configurations of power in terms of gender?²⁰ Indeed, until the end of the Protectorate, private transactions carried out via specialised brokers predominated in the search for jobs so as to offset the labour shortage. Thus, young girls were taken from poor families in the mountain regions to be resold to wealthy city dwellers.²¹ Sales of relatives remained a common practice until the nineteenth century and, during periods of scarcity, many families from the interior entrusted their children to wealthy families in exchange for a few measures of wheat.²²

Free domestic help was another form of these practices: children (in the context of fosterage, also known as *confiage* or 'entrusting') and women circulated within kinship groups in order to give a helping hand.²³ The employment of women and children was rendered invisible, and thus made possible the shift from family logics based on an adoption system towards wage-earning logics of child labour.²⁴ The breakdown of certain traditional systems of servitude and systems of adoption has led to the development of domesticity among the population of young girls known as "maids".²⁵ These young girls were 'minor daughters' (*kassirat*) who had not yet reached the age of majority allowing them to work. The

¹⁸ Z. Salim, 'L'entreprise féminine à Fès, une tradition', in *Initiatives féminines* (ed. collective), Éditions Le Fennec, 1999, p. 34.

¹⁹ M. Salahdine cites in particular one especially well-known female intermediary: 'I know one in Bab Ftouh, whose networks go beyond the national border. You just have to specify the desired profile to get what you want.' See Salahdine, 'Les employées domestiques à Fès', p. 115.

²⁰ By analogy, I refer here to the idea of the various modes of brokering that takes place in 'more fragmented [contexts], in which the configurations of power are somewhat "off-centre"'. T. Bierschenk, J.-P. Chauveau and J.-P. Olivier de Sardan (eds), *Courtiers en développement, les villages africains en quête de projets* (Mainz and Paris: Apad and Karthala, 2000), p. 15.

²¹ R. Aouad-Badoual, "'Esclavage" et situation des "noirs" au Maroc dans la première moitié du XXe siècle', in L. Marfaing and S. Wippel (eds.), *Les Relations transsahariennes à l'époque contemporaine: un espace en constante mutation* (Paris: Karthala, 2004), p. 346.

²² M. Ennaji, *Soldats, domestiques et concubines, l'esclavage au Maroc au XIXe siècle* (Casablanca: Eddif, 1994), p. 130.

²³ A. Philippe and A. Guillaume, 'Une expression de la solidarité familiale à Abidjan: enfant du couple et enfants confiés', in *Les Familles aujourd'hui* (Paris: Association internationale des démographes de langue française, 1986), pp. 289-297, www.erudit.org/livre/aidelf/1984/index.htm.

²⁴ Nassima Moujoud points out that the term *rbba*, which means 'to educate' or 'bring up', is used when child labour is brought in. Moujoud and Pourette, 'Traite de femmes migrantes'.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

creation of the new category of ‘minors’ is emblematic of modern Morocco, where the phase of life between childhood and adulthood is no longer defined by sociocultural criteria but by age²⁶ and gives access to a genuine status – that of ‘youth’ – in which specific characteristics are recognised.²⁷ For example, commonly accepted norms see the *carte nationale* (national card, i.e. ID) as a veritable passport for entry into domestic work.

“Nowadays nobody wants to take the risk of having a girl who is a minor [*kassira*] working for them [...] they show them on TV, burned, beaten or killed. [...] with all the things that happen, you’ve got to be really careful.”²⁸

‘I’m not a semsar’

Transformations in norms concerning the exchange of services and the evolution of the domestic market illuminate the configurations that are woven around the question of mediation.²⁹ We are witnessing the commercialisation of services which are ‘exempted as a matter of principle from trading arrangements’.³⁰ On the one hand, they are situated at the intersection of two registers (personal and professional) that overlap; on the other hand, they are strongly feminised, and thus also excluded from the criterion of ‘qualification’, since they are associated with ‘innate’ and ‘natural’ skills. The *semsar* is thus at the centre of a series of superimposed logics in which professional and personal dimensions overlap. While seeking increasingly to delimit the profile of employees and the tasks they are called upon to perform, the *semsar* has to face the ambiguity of the boundaries that separate a personal domestic universe based on ties of affection, and work done for free, from a universe that is professional, mercenary and impersonal. His position lays bare this binary opposition long hidden by the naturalisation process mentioned above. This complexity lies at the very heart of the intermediary’s profession. One of the difficulties is the paradox of the professionalization of the profession, which takes place in the private sphere: how can these professions be subjected to the dominant ideal-typical norm of labour³¹ (in other words: to salaried work, defined by an explicit contract), while many of their features go against these standards?

In addition, the personal dimension – inherent in the space in which the *semsar* intervenes – is mobilised, albeit insidiously, as a mode of adjustment between very different visions of domestic work. Language can be a powerful tool for making things invisible when the *semsar* draws on a ‘personal rhetoric’ to blur his practices of brokerage, but also to make possible the cohabitation, or coexistence, of incompatible visions. “I’m not a *semsar*, I’m just there to help”, says Mo, aware that in Morocco the activity of the *tsemsir* also conveys a

²⁶ The former definition associated with a temporary status between childhood and adulthood was always linked, in Morocco, to socio-cultural criteria rather than age, which was considered as a rather secondary criterion. Emerging from childhood was associated with the ability to observe the fast, and with marital status. Hassan Rachik, in *Jeunesse et changement social, rapport du cinquantenaire* (Rabat: Centre national de documentation, 2006), draws attention to the definition given by Pascon and Bentahar: ‘the 269 young people we interviewed whose age falls between when they first fast and their marriage are between 12 and 30 years old’.

²⁷ I. Bono, ‘Une lecture d’économie politique de “la participation des jeunes” à l’heure du Printemps arabe’, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 20, 2013/4, pp. 145-166.

²⁸ Interview with L., Casablanca, May 2012.

²⁹ The term ‘norms’ is used in the same context by A. Gramain and F. Weber in the introduction to F. Weber, S. Gojard and A. Gramain (eds), *Charges de famille. Dépendance et parenté dans la France contemporaine* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003), p. 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³¹ M. Maruani and E. Reynaud, *Sociologie de l’emploi* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993).

pejorative image. In fact, one of the first senses associated with the terms *semsar* and *tsemsir* refers to the idea of stripping, robbing, denuding or plucking. Thus, the expression ‘semser al lhâm men la-3dem’ means ‘to pull away the meat that sticks to the bone’, and that of ‘semsrôh men la –hwajj’ means ‘to strip someone of their clothes’³²... This explains why most of the *semsar* I interviewed define themselves more as *wasita* or *faailkhayr*, that is to say initiators of good deeds. ‘I didn’t want to be *semsar* [...] I do this work reluctantly.’³³ Like D., the *semsar* most often present their job as an activity, which has been imposed on them and which they perform ‘reluctantly’,³⁴ and rarely as an activity ‘planned as such’.

Their discourse suggests that the *semsar* are not seeking clients, on the contrary, they are responding to people who ask for help. ‘As if recognizing one’s work tarnished the space of practices, devalued and even desecrated it. Here people do not work, or not “really”, they stress their values, talents, duties or feelings’.³⁵ The *semsar* is ultimately a broker who plays an active role in attracting clients but does all his best to believe he is not taking the initiative. This disguised nonchalance betrays a subtle ability to make oneself useful. During my discussions, lack of identification with the job of *semsar* was a constant feature: people rarely presented themselves as offering a service, but rather as managing, reluctantly, people’s requests. The profession (*harfa*) of *tsemsir* is never definitely fulfilled; performed as a succession of opportunities to be seized, it in fact undergoes constant negotiation. In addition, in light of the growing specialisation of domestic work demanded by employees, the profession is characterised by a versatility of tasks. This is also what explains the lack of identification with the profession.

Who, then, is this *semsar* that everyone calls by this name, apart from himself? “He’s the one who does everything”, replies one domestic worker. The *semsar* of domestic work usually performs other professions in parallel and operates through the chain of intermediation. By performing other activities, they acquire the reputation of ‘occasional *semsar*’, one to whom you turn for problems of every kind. The *tsemsir* thus refers to the use of the local grocer, the man who looks after cars,³⁶ and the concierge,³⁷ as well as to the ‘masseuse’ in the *hammam* – all these characters can, by virtue of their strategic position, seize on business opportunities that present themselves and require an interface. It is this indistinct versatility that is strategic.

Thus, the activity of presenting oneself appears as a complex undertaking, closely involving strategic power relations. While the *semsar* does not bind his profession to the pursuit of material interests but rather to the simple fact that he is ‘performing a service’, social relations allow the commercialisation of domestic work intermediation. The profession of *semsar* does not require any special professional skills apart from an undeniable social plasticity, and in particular that of being integrated into diverse social worlds and networks. The establishment of these social connections involves a multifaceted and diversified activity.

³² A.-L. de Prémare, *Dictionnaire arabe-français, langue et culture marocaines* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996).

³³ Interview with D., Casablanca, May 2012. D. is a *semsar* whose official place is a park in the district of Anfa.

³⁴ E. Sodeik, ‘Interfaces sans courtiers: conditions d’émergence du courtage et conséquences de son absence’, in Bierschenk, Chauveau and Olivier de Sardan (eds), *Courtiers en développement*.

³⁵ J. Krinsky and M. Simonet, ‘Déni de travail: l’invisibilisation du travail aujourd’hui’, *Sociétés contemporaines*, 87, 2012/3, p. 11.

³⁶ Two of the concierges interviewed look after cars and say they need to resort to the *tsemsir* in order to pay the rent for the car park. On this subject, see M. Salahdine, ‘Les petites activités urbaines: mode de survie’, *Lamalif*, 153, 1985, in which he works out the rough cost of operating a car park, which can be high, since the service of looking after cars is divided between the worker (the overseer), the operator of the car park (the tenant) and the owner of the car park (the municipal services).

³⁷ The fact that concierges play a mediating role is neither new nor specific to Morocco. This role is also highlighted in the article by G. Bronner and J.-M. Stébé, ‘Les gardiens concierges: d’un métier à une profession’, *Espaces et sociétés*, 105-106, 2001, pp. 211-227.

Most *semsar* began (and often continue to do so, in parallel) by performing a job enabling them to broaden their social base. A guard or a caretaker, through the strategic contacts made possible by his job, can easily become a *semsar*. This applies to one of the most famous *semsar* in Casablanca, M., known to all households in a posh neighbourhood because he picked up the loaves from the communal oven for delivery. The following interview extract suggests that the function of intermediation is a transitory step in a trajectory that contains diversified structures of brokerage, through an ever broader range of activities:

“So how does anyone start off in this job? I used to distribute the bread in the X district.³⁸ There were no pastries or ovens in the houses, so I distributed the bread in the villas. People made bread at home and put it in the oven and I picked it up for them [...] my *tsemsir* is ‘original’ [*assli*]. At the end of 1970, coming from Taounat, I must have been 20 years old. I gave the *wsali*³⁹ of bread. I went round knocking on people’s doors. People saw that I was in touch with the people in the villas and started asking me to see if they needed women to work for them. That’s how the man brought his daughter and came to see me. It was the beginning of the *tsemsir*.⁴⁰”

The law: a register of action for the *semsar*

The *semsar*’s role as broker and his position as intermediary situate him at the heart of the conflicts that steer social relations. Facing those who set employers against employees, the *semsar* is nevertheless not alone. From now on the legislator plays an active part in settling these tensions. Various struggles, and in particular the fight against the exploitation of ‘young maids’ (in other words, minors) have succeeded to highlight this issues in political debates, resulting in legal action.

Shifting the object of the law

In recent years, recourse to the law has been the main way of compromising different demands and visions of domestic employment. Some topics, particularly the question of the labour of minors, long overdetermined the legislative framework of domestic employment, as if this dimension alone made it possible to regulate the entire sector.

In March 2009, a collective for the eradication of the labour of ‘young maids’ was constituted by the INSAF (Institution nationale de solidarité avec les femmes en détresse, or National Industry of Solidarity for Women in Distress), Amnesty International-Morocco, The Fondation Orient-Occident and the AMDH (Association marocaine des droits humains or Moroccan Association for Human Rights), with the main objective of improving the legal framework for suppressing domestic work for girls under the age of 15, and the introduction of a specific law punishing the employment of young girls. The death in July 2011 of

³⁸ The name given to this trade (which is dying out) is *t’arrâh*, which means ‘baker’s boy who takes the bread to the oven’. André Adam defines it as ‘the kid who, in return for a few coppers, comes to your home for the bread and brings it back to you when it’s baked’. See A. Adam, *Casablanca. Essai sur la transformation de la société marocaine au contact de l’Occident* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1968), p. 349.

³⁹ Large trays on which bread is transported to the oven.

⁴⁰ Interview with K., April 2012, Casablanca; K. is a *semsar* who is well-known in the well-heeled districts of Casablanca and whose commission is quite high. He has no assigned place and gets around by car.

Khadija, an 11-year-old girl who succumbed to the bodily harm inflicted by her employer in El Jadida, then, in March 2013, the death of Fatym, a 14-year-old domestic worker who died in Agadir of severe burns to her hands and face, put this debate back on the political agenda and strengthened the legitimacy of the demands voiced by the civil society. Following the December 2005 report of the American human rights organisation Human Rights Watch, pointing out that Morocco had one of the highest levels of child labour (11%), the organisation had asked the government to apply the law prohibiting child labour and to punish those who violated it. The same report stressed the urgency of enacting a law regulating domestic work.

In response to the debate that followed the publication of this report, two bills on women's domestic work, one proposed by the Ministry of Employment in 2007, the other by the Ministry of Social Action in 2009, were presented, but were not submitted to parliamentarians. In 2011, a new bill on domestic service was drawn up by the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training and submitted to the Secretary-General of the government of Abbas El Fassi, and then adopted by the government council on 12 October 2011. It was finally removed from the Parliamentary voting schedule after the new government of Abdellilah Benkirane came to power, on the basis of its non-compatibility with the standards laid down by the Convention on Domestic Workers of the ILO. The delay on the part of the Commission on Justice, Legislation and Human Rights to complete the scrutiny of the text, and the various disagreements in Parliament over certain articles of the bill, in particular over the minimum working age set at 16⁴¹ are the reason why it doesn't meet international standards. A new version of this bill was adopted on 3 May 2013, including, after seven years of waiting, a promise laid down in Article 4 of the 2004 legislation on labour.⁴² This bill on domestic service provides sanctions against employers and intermediaries who recruit children below 15 years old, with suspended sentences of up to three months in gaol in case of repeated offence.⁴³

Certain articles, in particular that of making the labour of persons aged between 15 and 18 dependent on the formal authorisation of their parents or guardians, provoked protests and controversy. Associations asking for the minimum working age to be fixed at 18 did not hesitate to state that this law might encourage 'the enslaving of young maids'⁴⁴ by allowing children to work from the age of 15 years with parental authorisation. To explain the resistance behind these exemptions, Nezha Skalli, ex-Minister of Social Development, Solidarity and the Family, points the finger at arguments that are based on culture and class:

"Some people brandish the argument of culture by saying that, in our country, children have to join in [...] Some people said to me, when I was defending the law, 'we're not living in Sweden!' [...] You know, women workers came to tell me they were against this bill because if wealthy women can do without 'young maids', they can't live without the help of young girls they bring back from the countryside and pay at a cheaper rate. It's true that it's a new adaptation even in terms of

⁴¹ telquel.ma/2015/01/22/unicef-lage-minimum-travailleurs-domestiques-etre-18-ans_1431180.

⁴² This article stipulates that 'the conditions of employment and labour of employees who are related to the householder by a relationship of labour are determined by a special law. A special law determines the relations between employers and employees and working conditions in sectors of a purely traditional character'.

⁴³ The minimum age for access to domestic work has been the subject of many debates. Bill 19.12 relating to domestic work, passed by the Social Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives on 9 May 2016, led to a controversy over Article 6 which sets the minimum age of access to domestic work at 16. As a result of demands voiced by civil society, the Minister for Employment and Social Affairs asked Parliament to adjourn the vote on the draft to a plenary session.

⁴⁴ Interview with Fouzia Assouli, *SoirÉcho*, 6 May 2013.

infrastructure, and crèches, but the law may prompt a revolution in social relations and mark the beginning of a change.⁴⁵”

The debate on the work of minors, which followed a whole series of measures to protect them,⁴⁶ breathed new life into the bill on domestic work. Yet, while the main phenomenon remains that of domestic workers (*kheddama*), the law seeks to regulate residual situations of slavery (*‘abd*), which could hide the political situation that permits it, and conceal the other relationships of domination that characterise domestic work.

In this shift in the focus of the law from domestic work to child labour, the *semsar* assumes an active regulatory role. I have often seen employees giving him a copy of their *carte nationale* whereas, “previously, it was unthinkable to ask an “employee” to show her *carte nationale*”.⁴⁷ Thus, on the basis of legislative norms punishing the employment of minors, the *semsar* takes up prerogatives of control that were not necessarily provided for by law.

Between personal responsibility and paternalism

The regulation of domestic child labour is split between bills aligned on international law and national laws, which are not applied. This is true of the law on compulsory school attendance, and the law included in the Labour Code of 2003 criminalising child labour. Moroccan legislation contains ‘promises’ of laws that have been slow to be adopted. In this context, media coverage of the bill on domestic labour had the effect of stimulating further reflection on the conditions of effectiveness and production of the norms of the ‘regulation’.⁴⁸ According to Nezha Skalli, such a law falls under labour law:

“It’s a criminal matter, and there is an urgent need to lay down very severe punishments for all intermediate persons in the recruitment of young girls. Indeed, I had proposed punishing not just the *semsar* but even ‘the parents’”.⁴⁹”

Some associations continue to demand that parents be penalised, thus shifting responsibility from the state to parents and intermediaries, considered as ‘responsible’ and ‘rational’ individuals. This liberal paternalism, justified in the name of the ideal of the values of humanism,⁵⁰ is evident in Skalli’s words:

“Some people say that by bringing small girls from the countryside, they are giving them the opportunity to lead a more decent life [*ghandir fih khir*].⁵¹”

⁴⁵ Interview with Nezha Skalli, Casablanca, 23 October 2012.

⁴⁶ Morocco set up a National Observatory for Children’s Rights in 1995 after the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1993. We also quote the conventions ratified by Morocco, particularly, in 2000, the International Labour Convention No. 138 on the minimum age for admission to employment, and that of 2001 for the worst forms of labour. In July 2003, the Kingdom also adopted the law amending the Penal Code, which takes into account the principles of the international conventions on justice for minors adopted in July 2003.

⁴⁷ Interview with M., Casablanca, May 2012.

⁴⁸ I. Georges and D. Vidal, ‘La formalisation de l’emploi à l’épreuve du travail invisible. Deux cas de figure de travailleuses de service au Brésil’, *Sociétés contemporaines*, 87, 2012/3, pp. 25-47.

⁴⁹ Interview with Nezha Skalli, ex-Minister for Social Development, Solidarity and the Family, Casablanca, 23 October 2012.

⁵⁰ J.-M. Donegani, ‘Le paternalisme, maladie sénile du libéralisme?’, *Raisons politiques*, 44, 2011/4, pp. 5-13.

⁵¹ Interview with Nezha Skalli, Casablanca, 23 October 2012.

There was also criticism of the lack of any monitoring authority to oversee the application of the law or combat any intrusion into the private sphere. This is clearly emphasized in the comments of one official of the Ministry of Employment who was questioned about resistances to the application of the law:

“You know, the Delegation of Employment will be flooded with problems that it will not be able to manage. While we have difficulty in the management of temporary employment [...] How could we control a law that governs the private sphere?⁵²”

The use of intermediation in domestic employment by temping agencies is one of the answers to this desire to inculcate personal responsibility into the intermediaries. I had the opportunity, throughout this research, to speak with two temping agency managers who arranged intermediation for private individuals. The main difference with the *semsar* is that temping agencies directly hire the employee and sign a contract with him or her, renewable after a fixed period. We are here in the presence of a hierarchical structure, since the domestic remains the employee of the agency put at the service of a private individual.

N. L., who runs a temping agency, for a while incorporated ‘domestic service for individuals’ into her activities, but then quickly abandoned it. She describes the difficulties relating to this type of services, marked by the instability of supply and demand.⁵³ Other agency managers highlight the mistrust of ‘employers’, and the difficulty of meeting their criteria if the domestic service entrusted to individuals does not have the characteristics of a trade (training, status, seniority), and ‘even less of a profession in the noble sense of the term’.⁵⁴ Employees who approach agencies often seek to carry out work in the framework of a contractual and professional relationship considered to be more ‘rewarding’, but requiring less ‘emotional commitment’ from both sides.⁵⁵ Thus, when an employee, complaining about poor working conditions, told me ‘but they got me from the office’,⁵⁶ she is suggesting that using a temping agency confers – or ought to confer – a ‘contractual’ dimension on the relationship between employer and the employee, and that the ‘contract’ is a guarantee against all clandestine abuse.

In the context of a contractual relationship, employers consider that employees are part of the ‘mass of wage-earners’ and can be replaced overnight. But the position of employees is ambiguous. They would like domestic work to be ‘a job like any other’, but regret that they can no longer benefit from the ‘charitable benefits’ of their bosses, who should ‘treat them like members of their own families’.⁵⁷ The formalisation of the relationship is sometimes perceived as a threat to benefits and additional remuneration in kind, in particular when the personal relationship is considered to be ‘more profitable than the protections afforded by purely commercial logic’, and more profitable than a logic of legality.⁵⁸ Ania Tizziani shows that, in the case of Argentina, where domestic work has been the subject of regularisation laws, formalisation of labour is not what is sought first and foremost; it is conflicts over the

⁵² Interview with a senior official from the Ministry of Employment, Casablanca, January 2013.

⁵³ Interview with N.L., temping agency manager, Casablanca, September 2012.

⁵⁴ A. Gramain and F. Weber, ‘Introduction’, in Weber, Gojard and Gramain (eds), *Charges de famille*, p. 18.

⁵⁵ A. R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁵⁶ Interview with H., a cleaner whom I met at the office of the *semsar* A., Casablanca, April 2012.

⁵⁷ D. Vidal, *Les Bonnes de Rio, emploi domestique et société démocratique* (Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2007).

⁵⁸ L. Bernardo, ‘La place des sentiments dans l’aide professionnelle de gré à gré’, in Weber, Gojard and Gramain (eds), *Charges de famille*, p. 375.

nature and management of the relationship between employers and employees that repeatedly crop up in conversation, with employees expecting consideration and recognition more than anything.⁵⁹

Contractualisation and its limits

The bill on domestic work tends to formalise the contract between employee and employer, symbolised by the emergence of new words reflecting the desire to professionalise these trades. Here, the term ‘domestic employee’ (*camilmanzili*) is replaced by that of ‘domestic servant’ (*khadim bouyouf*). *Khâdim/khâdem* or *khoudam* were also used in the past to designate slaves and are distinguished from *khaddam* and *khaddama*, which designate manual workers of free status. In the latter sense, the term refers to the word *khidma*, which means work, employment or service,⁶⁰ even though in common practice the term still retains connotations of slavery. According to André Adam,⁶¹ the *kheddama* is the person who enjoys stable employment as opposed to the *zoufri*, the worker without fixed work. The pejorative connotation associated with the feminisation of this word, *kheddama*, is probably due to the fact that for a woman, social status is associated with the image of the traditional bourgeois woman who stays at home, and the servile dimension of the term derives its origins from this ‘profound and permanent hostility to women working outside the home’. In fact, the term *khadim* was never used in legal compendia, or in transactions, to designate a slave, even if it remained present in everyday language.⁶² Nineteenth-century state correspondence referred to servants of servile origin with the words *kheddama* and *wasif*, irrespective of their hierarchical status. Even the agents of authority of free status ‘assumed the descriptions of *wasif*, ‘*abdand mamlouk* instead of *khadim*,⁶³ which the sultan used for them’.⁶⁴

In any case, the desire for professionalisation is not confined to the bill. It is the reflection of a development, which can be observed on a daily basis. As a *semsar* explains to me:

“Just doing the cleaning costs 500 dirhams a week. Some work for 600, others for 700. Cooking is 800 or 1000 dirhams per week. Child minders are very expensive, with or without a qualification, and those with experience can get up to 4500 dirhams a month.⁶⁵”

This salary scale suggests that the logic of specialisation has resulted in a new division of labour and created a new hierarchy of tasks, and with it the appearance of ‘dirty work’.⁶⁶ Wages are a good indicator of this hierarchical categorisation: cleaning, linked to dirtiness and the performance of dirty jobs, lies at the bottom of the scale of ‘domestic services’, revealing the invention of new, less qualified jobs within this category. The *semsar*

⁵⁹ A. Tizziani, ‘Entre travail “formel” et “informel”: la législation du travail et sa mise en pratique dans le secteur de l’emploi domestique à la ville de Buenos aires’, *Le Monde du travail*, 9/19, spring 2011, pp. 93-109.

⁶⁰ M. Ennaji, *Soldats, domestiques et concubines*, p. 215.

⁶¹ A. Adam, *Casablanca. Essai sur la transformation*.

⁶² Ennaji, *Soldats, domestiques et concubines*, p. 150.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁶⁴ According to Ennaji, the word *wasif* designated a particular category of servitude to the state, distinguished by its servile origin, and having no tribal attachments.

⁶⁵ Interview with L., Casablanca, May 2012.

⁶⁶ B. Fourcade and M. Ourtau, ‘Les emplois non qualifiés: entre rationalisation et professionnalisation?’, in D. Méda and F. Vennat (eds), *Le Travail qualifié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), pp. 320-322.

are part of this movement. They increasingly ask employers ‘what exactly do you want her to do?’, which reflects the demands of domestics to ‘specialise’ (*ikhtissass*), and their increasing refusal to do several things at the same time. Tasks are tending to become increasingly differentiated, and employees often aim to redefine the services they offer by delimiting their responsibilities clearly. Associated with qualifications, domestic work seems to be less and less perceived as a ‘natural’ job requiring no training. The *semsar* promotes this process of specialisation and qualification while striving to accommodate employers’ susceptibilities, which generally resist the idea of recruiting an employee on the basis of the specialized tasks she can carry out. ‘I feel like I’m running an SMB at home’, as one employer who had experienced this told me.⁶⁷

The bill provides for a number of social rights, promises one day off per week, an annual paid holiday with the equivalent of one and a half days’ work off per month after six months of work ... but does not offer any solution to those who complain about long working days (no reference is made to hours worked per day or per week),⁶⁸ and states that the nature of household chores will be specified in a subsequent decree! As for the ‘unrealistic wages’ of the employees referred to by the *semsar*, they do not seem to establish any rights, as they are so low: the minimum wage is only 50% of the official national minimum wage. The argument that this low level will encourage employers to officially declare their staff is challenged by a number of observers.⁶⁹

The question of wages concerns the *semsar* as well. Most of them are reluctant to speak about their commission, either because they do not fix it formally, or because it is not always paid in cash. As K puts it:

“Even with employers, I say ‘*layekhlef*’.⁷⁰ Lately, four girls I had working, I refused to be paid by the employers I’ve known for a long time. Because we’re never sure if these girls will be any good [*yssedkou*] or not but anyway, these people compensate you in one way or another. People call me for no reason, to give me money at Eid for example. I never tell anyone to give me anything.”⁷¹”

Expressions such as *koula Wejhou*⁷² or *likassem Allah*⁷³ frequently come up in the remarks of brokers when this topic is discussed, suggesting that commissions are usually established by mutual agreement between the two parties. But brokers refuse to set their rates for another and even more important reason: in order not to seal a negotiation which, while remaining open, ‘deals with the expectations, anticipations and hopes of others’, in other words it leads to hopes for ‘possible future services’;⁷⁴ not ‘receiving a commission’ in fact makes it possible to keep ‘the channels of communication’ open by maintaining a debt towards the other party.⁷⁵ Increasingly homogeneous, the services provided in the context of domestic employment require different ‘skills’ to which differing wages correspond. It is also

⁶⁷ Interview with S., an employer, Casablanca, February 2012.

⁶⁸ www.leconomiste.com/article/906411-travail-domestiqueles-mesurettes-du-projet-de-loi#sthash.D6s94sr4.dpuf.

⁶⁹ www.jeunefrique.com/actu/20140213t141029Z20140213t141000Z/.

⁷⁰ This expression is used to thank a host or someone who gives you something; it literally means ‘may God compensate you’ (for what you have just given).

⁷¹ Interview with K., Casablanca, April 2012.

⁷² Literally, this expression means ‘each according to his face’, but insinuates that people who want to ‘save face’ will pay well.

⁷³ Literally, ‘I earn only what I am meant to earn’.

⁷⁴ Bierschenk, Chauveau and Olivier de Sardan, *Courtiers en développement*, p. 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

in the light of these differences that some *semsar* modulate their remuneration, adapting their commissions to the profile recruited: ‘when I give work to a cleaner, I’m paid about 200 dirhams, for cooking or child-minding, it’s around 300 dirhams.’⁷⁶

These transformations, which aim to create a greater contractualisation, professionalisation and bureaucratisation, reflect an attempt to better integrate domestic work into the market economy, even into a certain mode of neo-liberal capitalism, with its norms and rationalisations. However, these transformations are only partial, for at least two reasons. The first is that some of these developments are still understood in the terms of previous paternalistic relations. An employee told me that this was the first and last time she was using a temping agency, because she by far preferred to visit the ‘street *semsar*’ (*dialzenqa*):

“Here, they are asking us to pay fees of up to 200 dirhams that they won’t refund if it doesn’t work... you know, paying this amount every time you’re not satisfied isn’t something you can take for granted.”⁷⁷

In addition to the cost of mediation, which moreover, does not guarantee results, the ‘office *semsar*’ does not provide the flexibility sought by clients, and sometimes even by employees. While neoliberal time, being flexible and extensible, can be made responsible for new forms of servility linked to the expansion of an ‘informalised sub-wage-earning class’⁷⁸, the introduction of contractualisation is perceived as depriving employees and intermediaries of the benefits of a flexibility that is ‘desired’ and advantageous in several respects, including in order to maintain some ‘leeway’ in the regulation of daily tasks.⁷⁹ Some employees, especially when they have very young children, wish to continue to benefit from flexible working hours. Others want to be able to modulate their workload in relation to that of their husbands or the varying needs of family life and prefer to work ‘as needed’ rather than to engage in a stable job. Not formalising a job and not being able to sign a contract can also be seen as an opportunity to work simultaneously with several employers at the same time, or to feel free to drop one’s responsibilities as soon as one wishes. Working relationships that are paid but not ‘contractualised’ on paper and signed by both parties have the advantage of giving employees autonomy in the management of the number of hours they work and their workload; they also give employers an opportunity to use the services of the employee outside working hours and exercise over her a ‘paternalistic’ relationship which replaces that of her father in the control of her movements.

The second reason for the partial nature of these developments stems from the interests that all parties derive from flexible work. Previous examples have suggested as much. If the flexibility of employees reflects the adaptation of domestic work to a constantly renewed, precarious and unstable market demand, and therefore a submission to the requirements of employers, employees can seize the opportunity to put into action strategies to maximise their labour force. In other words, escaping contractualisation may free them from a form of ‘restricted wage labour’ proper to neoliberalism,⁸⁰ while employers seem to view flexibility as the freedom to hire or fire, to determine the number of hours and define the tasks to be done.

⁷⁶ Interview with L., Casablanca, May 2012.

⁷⁷ Interview with J., a cleaner I met leaving a temping agency, Casablanca, June 2012.

⁷⁸ J. Falquet, ‘Penser la mondialisation dans une perspective féministe’, *Travail, genre et sociétés*, 25, 2011, pp. 81-98.

⁷⁹ A. Tizziani, ‘Entre le travail “formel” et “informel”: la législation du travail et sa mise en pratique dans le secteur de l’emploi domestique à la ville de Buenos aires’, *Le monde du travail*, 9/19, Spring 2011, pp. 93-109.

⁸⁰ Y. Moulier-Boutang, *De l’Esclavage au salariat, économie historique du salariat bridé* (Paris: PUF, 1998).

In response to the different conflicts between employers and employees, the *semsar* remain ‘torn between the desire to align themselves with the dominant standard of employment and the impossibility of doing so’.⁸¹ This is less an impossibility than a choice, because this alignment does not ultimately prove to be advantageous. In fact, the *semsar* takes advantage of the gaps to regulate conflicts and become a mediator. Growing contractualisation therefore does not render his activity superfluous, but contributes to transforming its contours. The *semsar* becomes a government actor who lists the tasks and makes them measurable and remunerative. When employers entrust him with the task of putting them in contact with a domestic, ‘we explain to him what we want... what the employee must be capable of, while specifying our budget’, as one female employer tells us.⁸² Thus, each *semsar* holds a stock of empirical evidence on the wages of domestic employment, following a negotiable grid that helps to delimit the employee’s skills, which remain invisible and not ‘standardisable’. This, indeed, is one of the sources of his gratitude. As an intermediary, he discusses the qualification of the employee from one family to another, in terms of ‘transfer of skills’, basing his arguments on the experience built up by employees. The experienced employee is therefore in a position to claim higher wages. Thus, the domestic labour market no longer looks like an unskilled and casual labour market, nor does it seem fundamentally different from the qualified labour market based on transferable skills.⁸³

The *semsar* as a producer of standards

Even if their profession lies outside any legislation, *semsar* maintain a ‘professional rhetoric’⁸⁴ which involves several normative practices. Often, under cover of brokerage in the field of real estate, *semsar* seek to extend their services to domestic brokering. When I asked some of them why they had created an employment office, they were unanimous in saying, in different ways, that by doing so they hoped ‘to organise the “tsemsir” in a less “anarchic” framework’ (*lherfaketnedem*⁸⁵, *makatebkachlfouda*⁸⁶ or *kankenoulmassa’il*⁸⁷). Through the creation of offices, and while continuing to intervene in an unregulated framework, the *semsar* becomes the producer of norms. Paradoxically, it is in the terms of ‘anarchy’ that an official of the Ministry of Employment described the proliferation of employment offices.⁸⁸ In the absence of laws governing domestic work and the opening up of employment offices, the *semsar* self-institutionalises his activity by seeking to regulate and organise his profession himself. How can we explain this apparent contradiction, in which the attempt to organise against ‘anarchy’ is itself interpreted as ‘anarchy’?

⁸¹ T. Angeloff, ‘Employées de maison, aides à domicile: un secteur paradoxal’, in Gojard, *Charges de famille* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003), pp. 165-186 (p. 185).

⁸² Interview with S., Casablanca, February 2012.

⁸³ A. Gassama, ‘Les marchés du travail domestique au Sénégal’, *Innovations*, 22, 2005, pp. 171-184.

⁸⁴ C. Paradeise, ‘Rhétorique professionnelle et expertise’, *Sociologie du travail*, 1/85, pp. 17-31.

⁸⁵ ‘The profession is getting organised. The term *ketneddem* means ‘to get organised’.

⁸⁶ ‘Anarchy is avoided.’ *Lfouda* can be translated as ‘anarchy’.

⁸⁷ ‘Things are regulated.’ The verb *kankenou* comes from *kanoun*, which means the law.

⁸⁸ Interview with a senior official of the Ministry of Employment, Casablanca, February 2013.

The semsar, social mediator

One answer to this question may lie in the very status of the *semsar*. As a mediator, the *semsar* traffics between two worlds, between different logics and interests. But this positioning is not merely a *fait accompli*, but a construction that requires the deployment of various actions. The current desire on the part of the *semsar* to create an office is part and parcel of this strategy, and more broadly of the regulation and bureaucratisation of the practice of this profession, which they themselves undertake, in particular to expand their social networks, and, sometimes, to try to overcome the conflicts that have emerged over the issue of domestic labour. But this institutionalisation is not self-evident and may be perceived as anarchic by the officials of the administration, as a closer examination of this sector shows.

In a narrow street in the Hay Hassani district, a curtain serves as a door. Above, a discreet sign indicates ‘office of domestic and real estate services’ (*maktab al khadamat al manziliya wal cakariya*). Inside, behind his desk, the *semsar* calls in, one by one, the ‘girls’ seated on chairs, as in a waiting room, for an interview, while others wait in a small garden next door. He is an ‘office *semsar*’, or a ‘*semsar* with premises’ (*candoumahal*). However, these offices are not numerous. It is difficult to move on from being an ‘arbitrary’ *semsar* (*cachwa’i*) or ‘street’ *semsar* (*dezenqa*), as it is called by many domestic workers,⁸⁹ to that of an office *semsar*, since it’s not easy⁴ to create an agency. You need a licence, you have to be commercially registered, to have sufficient means to pay the office rent, bank statements ... and not everyone has the means to do so.’⁹⁰

The norms produced concern not only the profession itself, but also people’s behaviour, be they employers or employees. The same applies also to the recruitment process:

“When it’s a man who comes to pick up the domestic worker, I’m very careful. I note his car registration number, and I always make sure I call the girl after to check she is okay.”⁹¹

Similarly, the *semsar* also plays a part in the apprenticeship of urban patterns of life and in the ‘tactics’ of resourcefulness. He is a key player in women’s migration networks, since he acts when the girls arrive, putting them in touch with other female newcomers who seek both a job and a roommate to share the costs of renting.⁹² When a migrant is in search of a flat share, the *semsar* asks her questions about her lifestyle and suggests ways for her to behave. Here, for example, is a dialogue heard by one *semsar*:

“Do you really work or not? – ‘Why are you asking me?’ – ‘Because if you wake up early to go to work and if you get home early, I’ll put you in touch with girls who have the same rhythm of work as you.’ – Yes, yes, I work normally.”⁹³

⁸⁹ In this article, I use both the name ‘traditional *semsar*’ and ‘street *semsar*’ to differentiate him from the *semsar* with an office.

⁹⁰ Interview with L., Casablanca, May 2012.

⁹¹ Interview with A., Casablanca, April 2012.

⁹² L. Bouasria and M. Cheikh, ‘Partir seules dans son propre pays: trajectoires et carrières migratoires des femmes seules vers Casablanca’, in *Migration féminine autonome à Casablanca: l’autonomie dans la précarité* (forthcoming).

⁹³ This scene is taken from the film *Bouhdi* (meaning, in Arabic dialect, ‘alone’ (fem.)) carried out as part of the MIM-AMERM research project. Most of the scenes were filmed in the Bernoussi district of Casablanca between June and November 2013.

Through this exchange, the *semsar* seeks to ensure that the woman in front of him does not work in prostitution, both to avoid putting her in contact with women with a way of life other than her own, and to guide her towards adequate housing. If she ‘has a “real” job’, he will recommend a home where the owners live, as they are more attentive to the hours of entry and exit and the good behaviour of the tenants. If the owners are not present on the spot, the *semsar* remains the person to whom flat sharers turn in case of conflicts with them. In the absence of a (shared) rental contract, the *semsar* also engages in strategies for the production of evidence, or even sources of revenue to reassure the owners. Some, by improvising agents of liaison between owners and tenants, even manage the living spaces, deciding how to divide them into several entities and who will share them.⁹⁴

Certain conditions are necessary to justify and create opportunities for social mediation. This is the case with remuneration, one of the elements of permanent negotiation that enable it to be perpetuated. Some brokers ask employees for money before they will find them jobs, while agreeing that remuneration for this service can be deferred: ‘I tell her to head off to work and come back to see me as soon as she gets her first wages,’ as M. told me.⁹⁵ Others, such as A., rebel against the idea of receiving money from employees in a precarious situation:

“I only take money from the affluent [*meysourin*], I don’t take money from the poor. That’s *hram*. All the *meysourin* give me is *halal*. Besides, I’m still living in this shanty town, otherwise you’d have seen me living in an apartment if I was ripping people off [*kendir nessb wallihtiyal*].⁹⁶”

When A. uses the expressions *nessb* and *ihtiyal*, he is associating payment for his services by employees to ‘ripping people off’, and views only the commission that comes from employers as legitimate. We can link this attitude to the extension of the field of ‘fictitious commodities’ to social relations themselves.⁹⁷ What we have here is the staging of a defence mechanism against the commodification of the social, or at least against the total commodification of social relations, and the development of negotiation strategies and specialisation in social intermediation.

The negotiation of such remuneration also depends on the choice of the place of mediation, which has strategic significance. The wages offered to employees by the ‘de luxe *semsar*’, those in the chic neighbourhoods of Casablanca, compete with the prices of temping agencies and far exceed those of the *semsar* in the poorer districts. Because if the norms that govern domestic work are obviously more common among certain more or less wealthy social groups, *tsemsir* is naturally exercised at all levels. The growth of the middle class and the entry of women into the category of wage earners have contributed to the increase in demand for domestic employment, which is no longer the prerogative of the rich but also a necessity even within modest households that are also ‘obliged to have “a maid”’.⁹⁸ While for an office *semsar*, paying rent in a bourgeois district of Casablanca can be expensive, traditional *semsar* can always choose a ‘strategic’ place without having to pay large sums, given the socially stratified organisation of the urban space and the elitist nature of residential practices in Casablanca.⁹⁹ Thus, employees rate more highly some of the *semsar* who operate

⁹⁴ Bouasria and Cheikh, ‘Partir seules’.

⁹⁵ Interview with M., Casablanca, May 2012.

⁹⁶ Interview with A., Casablanca, April 2012.

⁹⁷ K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944) and A. Buğra, ‘Karl Polanyi et la séparation institutionnelle entre politique et Économie’, *Raisons politiques*, 20 (4), 2005, pp. 37-56.

⁹⁸ Salahdine, ‘Les petites activités urbaines’, p. 113.

⁹⁹ F. N. Bouchanine, *Habiter la ville marocaine* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997).

on the edges of neighbourhoods where the wealthiest prospective clients live, with whom they are supposed to be in touch. It is in this sense that we can talk in terms of ‘spatial capital’,¹⁰⁰ this being fundamental to expanding the network of potential employers.

If the location of the *semsar* influences the diversity of domestic work conditions, the reason is that the recruitment process places him at the heart of the social stratification of the city. This situation is not unique to the *semsar* in Casablanca, but it concerns all functions of mediation in other fields and historical contexts. Thus, the figure of the *zettat* (people smuggler) cannot be reduced to that of an intermediary of power as in the old *bled siba* of Morocco, where the *makhzen*, the Sultan’s government, did not ensure the security of the roads.¹⁰¹ The ‘symbolic wealth’ of this practice resided in the fact that the effectiveness of a *zettat*, circumscribed to the territory to which he belonged, stemmed from ‘the manifestation of tribal rights over a certain space and the recognition of the rights of others’, despite the submission to a single allegiance on identical terms.¹⁰²

The semsar, mediating in conflicts

The *semsar* is central to the resolution of a certain number of conflicts; this is easy to understand, given his role as a mediator. In this framework, he seeks not only to respond to situations which are imposed on him, but is actively deploying a whole series of practices in order to assemble the necessary elements for an effective intervention that will reconcile the parties he has brought together. He may, for example, guarantee the stability of the employee when employers complain about her unpredictability:

“I’ve been here since 1970. I’m happy to do the office but you’ve no idea how difficult it is. The girls don’t stay long... They tell me ‘I only want to spend time *ncadi*’... They just want a bit of *ndipanni* money. They don’t want any papers. They just want to work weekly. They’re not mature [*taychin*].¹⁰³”

This mediation in case of conflict is not systematic but is the result of a deliberate effort by the *semsar*, who is also blamed for corrupting the employees. This reproach, indeed, always hovers over the head of the *semsar*, who is accused of provoking ‘dismissals so as to earn more money, offering employers, at the right time, ever more exceptional cleaners’.¹⁰⁴ This is one of the reasons for his reluctance to open an office and to formalise his activity by creating a recruitment agency. The flexibility of employment, like the unpredictability of placements, is indeed profitable for the *semsar*, and the least scrupulous of them do not hesitate to use the strategy of debauchery to maximise their gains. But this ability to be a go-between and engage in perpetual negotiation also has its positive side.

An employer who had just made a written commitment to engage a cleaner showed me a kind of receipt which referred to the following clause: ‘Agency X is in no case responsible for any household scene, theft or other, between you and the employee on duty’.¹⁰⁵ Using an

¹⁰⁰ J. Lévy, *L’Espace légitime. Sur la dimension géographique de la fonction politique* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1994).

¹⁰¹ A. Sebti, *Entre le zettat et le coupeur de route, sécurité des routes au Maroc avant la colonisation* (Casablanca: Toubkal, 2009 (in Arabic)). The *zettat* is a people smuggler who puts his escort services at the disposal of foreign travellers visiting or crossing through a tribe.

¹⁰² A. Joumani, *L’Oasis d’Asrir, éléments d’histoire sociale de l’Oued Noun* (Casablanca: La Croisée des chemins, 2008).

¹⁰³ Interview with M., Casablanca, May 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Salahdine, ‘Les employées domestiques’.

¹⁰⁵ Copy of contract delivered by Z., office *semsar*, in the interview which took place in Casablanca, May 2012.

agency often gives the impression of a longer and more complicated circuit, one that nonetheless provides fewer guarantees. A.'s comments in this regard are clear: the 'girls' don't want to go to the agency because this delays them in their search for work.¹⁰⁶ Employers also use the traditional *semsar*, whose fetish phrase is 'everything you want is available' (*libghitimoujoud*). Indeed, one of the offices stipulates in its contracts that 'a replacement will be guaranteed according to availability. No client can claim an immediate replacement because everything depends on availability'.¹⁰⁷ For others, replacements are made after variable periods, between one and three months, on condition of presenting a commitment or receipt; the number of times that this can be done is sometimes specified (i.e. three times). While some agencies require replacement fees (often around 100 dirhams), others do it for free.

Relations with the police when employees commit acts of theft reveal another form of conflict management,¹⁰⁸ a mode that traditional *semsar* are happy to endorse but that temping agencies refuse to consider, leaving employers and employees to confront each other. The traditional *semsar* remains the person to whom employers turn in the event of problems, and especially 'thefts', the most frequent problem. He establishes himself (and is established as) the person who talks to the police when they are looking for an employee who has fled.

"In the seven years I've been in the business, I've only had three cases of theft. In this case, I work with the police, relying on something, either one of [the employee's] girlfriends to track her down, or someone who knows her."¹⁰⁹

"Last week, the *semsar* B. had a girl working who caused him the same problem (she stole from a family and fled), and as soon as he was contacted by the police, he came to our place and went all round the different *semsar* in Casa. He handed round photocopies of her ID card to us, and the police asked him to collaborate with them."¹¹⁰

Collaboration with the police is therefore an active strategy on the part of *semsar* to protect themselves and maintain the durability of their business. Yet, there may be even more constraining situations. Some speak of police threats, which oblige them to collaborate in the search for a wanted employee. In particular, policemen go round the known *semsar* in Casablanca with a copy of the wanted employee's *carte nationale* so that *semsar* will notify them should the employee contact them, or ask them to call certain persons, including other employees likely to be in contact with her.

The *semsar* also manages conflicts between employees and employers over working time. 'Employees who spend the night at work no longer walk the streets,' said M., explaining that this is a criterion, which he takes into consideration when negotiating prices.¹¹¹ Domestic workers who live with the household are no longer found in most Moroccan families:

"Those women who don't spend the night in their place of work are easier to find [...] Now, in Casablanca, it's more common for girls to get together to pay for shared rooms. There are three or four girls who rent together and cohabit."¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Interview with A., Casablanca, April 2012.

¹⁰⁷ Copy handed over by Z., Casablanca, May 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with L., Casablanca, May 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with L., Casablanca, May 2012.

¹¹⁰ Interview with M., Casablanca, April 2012.

¹¹¹ Interview with M., Casablanca, April 2012.

¹¹² Interview with A., Casablanca, April 2012.

Employers struggle to accept this development. They think that it is difficult, if not impossible, to control working time in a private space where the tasks performed are inherently invisible, flexible, dispersed and fragmented. The *semsar* lies between these two constraints, and attempts to get each side to accept the requirements of the other.

The semsar, 'defender of the throne'

The fact that the *semsar* requires the employee's *carte nationale* before offering her a placement, or that he collaborates with the police in case of theft, shows that by becoming an arbiter of the conflicts he is playing a part in the maintenance of public order, and thus becomes an intermediary of the authorities. The dispersal of *semsar* in the different neighbourhoods of the city, their fictitious assignment to particular places, indeed provide a deal of support for the authorities when it comes to following the traces of outlaws.¹¹³

But this role of 'defender of the throne'¹¹⁴ must be understood in a more subtle and diffuse sense. As a manufacturer of norms that allow for the mediation and management of conflicts, the *semsar* plays a part in the perpetuation and the coproduction of the social order. This is particularly evident in strategies for the recruitment of domestics.

Paradoxically, even if the *semsar* say they are dealing more and more with employees who are adult, responsible and entrepreneurial, the terms and conditions of hiring as well as their language show a form of conflict prevention by mastery of the recruitment channels and control of the territory. The family is also mentioned in the recruitment process: *semsar* seek to establish their legitimacy in mediation by going back to the family origins of the employee. His main capital lies in his ability to send employees who are trustworthy, stable and experienced. Some claim that they go out in person into rural areas to recruit girls, or that they favour migrant women in their choice of hiring. Migrant status is an important criterion for two reasons. First, as has been stressed by Robert Montagne for the 1940s and 1950s, 'long-term stability is all the greater the further away the original homeland';¹¹⁵ migrant workers, deemed to be more loyal, are therefore more highly sought by those seeking permanent employees. And second, stereotypes about regional characteristics persist: thus, when a *semsar* says to an employer 'she's a Chelha or she's a Sahraouia', his aim is to highlight the former's kindness and docility and the latter's capacity for hard work and endurance.¹¹⁶

Mastery of these different mechanisms allows the *semsar* to 'control' the employee and in some way guarantee her *macqoul* (honesty), for example by not limiting his contacts to just her, but by extending his knowledge network to those who are in contact with her. The

¹¹³ The second meaning given to the word *semsar* by the dictionary of Moroccan culture is related to brokerage in real estate or goods. Figuratively, it means to 'spy', 'act as an informant', and 'x *semserb y*' means 'to peddle someone's secrets everywhere'. The term *smâsre* means 'dishonest trader', 'scammer', 'scoundrel', 'an arrant rogue or cunning character.' *Tsemesira* in the figurative sense refers to a bribe. Vol. A.-L, in Premare, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*.

¹¹⁴ This expression comes from Rémy Leveau's thesis on the alliance between the rural elites and the monarchy which, in his view, guarantees the stability of the latter's power: R. Leveau, *Le Fellah marocain, défenseur du trône* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1985), 2nd end.

¹¹⁵ R. Montagne, *Naissance du prolétariat marocain: enquête collective (1948-1950)* (Paris: Peyronnet, 1952), p. 214.

¹¹⁶ André Adam, in *Casablanca. Essai sur la transformation de la société marocaine au contact de l'Occident* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1968) links the characteristics of the workforce with ethnic origins in terms of stability and performance. Not from a racial point of view, but because of the material and social conditions of existence in their tribes of origin and the social bonds established in Casa between immigrants of the same origin.

semsar also explain that their recruitment procedures are not ‘arbitrary’ but based on the essential criterion of the ‘connection’. The potential employee must be able to draw on some acquaintance’s recommendation before the *semsar* will agree to try and find her a position:

“The first time she comes, she has to come on someone else’s behalf. She says ‘I’m coming on behalf of *flane*¹¹⁷’. If someone comes to see me, my first question is ‘who’s sent you to me?’ This applies to employees and to employers. I always want to know what the connection is. [...] She has to be presented by a chain of acquaintances [*silssila*].¹¹⁸”

The *semsar* also ask about the families of the employees, and refuse to place ‘girls’ who have broken off family connections:

“Now, we rely on her family [*netsendou cla alca’ila*] [...], we count on her family, her aunt, her uncle. [...] No, if she is *maqtouca* [if she has nobody], I prefer not to take her on. I need to know for example her parents’ phone number, to ask for their names and where they live.¹¹⁹”

Thus, he subjects the employees to a kind of interrogation, which places them in the networks of recruitment:

“In the recruitment process, I always ask someone to recommend a person [*rekezcala chi hed*], for example the family. I ask the girl where she’s from and if she has contacts in Casablanca. I also ask her to find out who gave her the information about employment in Casablanca [*chkoun li ctahalekhbar dial choughl fidarlbida*].¹²⁰”

This capacity to participate and co-produce social order is not specific to traditional *semsar*. Office *semsar* also proceed from the same logic, but in a different way. They circulate a business card with their names and their services, create adverts, distribute a brochure or set up a website¹²¹ where they give details of their services and seek to show in what way they are different from other agencies. The office *semsar* claim they have an advantage over traditional mediators with their ‘dossier’. The composition of the latter differs from one office to another: if the mandatory part is the copy of the employee’s *identity card*, others require an anthropometric file and take her fingerprints, or even have their ‘agents’ sign a document which commits them to respecting the clauses referring to the family’s physical and moral safety, as well as the confidentiality of the client’s life. The brokerage action of certain office *semsar* is limited to the negotiations leading to the initial contact. Often a contract is signed between the three parties concerned in such a way as to formally fix the conditions of work. But this contract, being neither legalised nor registered, has no legal weight and serves only to define in writing the responsibilities of the different parties concerned. These written commitments also stipulate, in addition to the employee’s salary, the fees payable by the employer to the *semsar*, the fee for the dossier to be deducted from the employee’s first salary and the conditions of replacement in the event of a dispute. The production of norms maintaining the social order is thus realised, in the case of the office *semsar*, by the ‘dossier’ and formalisation, and this situation contributes to the dissemination

¹¹⁷ Flane means someone

¹¹⁸ Interview with M., Casablanca, April 2012.

¹¹⁹ Interview with A., Casablanca, April 2012.

¹²⁰ Interview with L., Casablanca, May 2012.

¹²¹ For example www.baytihelp.com.

of bureaucratic practices in a profession that was largely exempt from it until now. These practices play a surreptitious part in the social order: the ‘dossier’ and the formalisation of the situation conceal the real conditions of work, while gaining acceptance and legitimacy for them by the very ‘modernity’ of the modes used.¹²²

This participation in the social order is obviously not synonymous with unconditional alignment with the authorities and other accepted intermediaries of power. Tensions and power relations are the *semsar*’s daily lot, who have to adapt to the constraints imposed on them to develop their own business. This is what explains the usefulness of the strategies of invisibility in the supervision of society and the promotion of social order. If, in certain cases of office brokering, the function of domestic mediation is a showcase that hides an array of informal activities, this is because bureaucratisation is one of the ways in which domestic work is rendered invisible, being diluted among other functions. D. has been practicing *tsemsir* for years in a park – in fact, I had some difficulty in distinguishing between his clients from the other women seated on the benches. Other *semsar*, operating in more visible locations, resort to strategies of invisibility to practice their profession on the quiet. This is often the case for those who deal with women who are ‘day workers’, and whose framework of activity is more akin to a *moukef*:¹²³

“The police come sometimes but all we do is tell the girls to scatter [*kenchetetouhoum*], they say they can’t let the girls stand here, but they now know that the girls are having a bad time, so they close their eyes... it happens especially at certain times, for example when the king is in Casa, or there’s a campaign [*lhamla*] going on. It’s fair, too, because I’m on the avenue ‘charie’ and I’m visible [*bayen*], it’s not like the ones who are in the gardens, they pass unnoticed. Sometimes the police are told that these girls are waiting for the bus. That’s all [*triqdiyaltobiss*] [Laughter]. They’re showing a bit of humanity [*inssaniya*], they know that these girls are trying to earn a living.¹²⁴”

These examples of protean forms of mediation show how the idea of professionalisation is perpetuated in the absence of any concrete features, suggesting that a difference in perception is interiorised without being justified by any objectified characteristics that clearly refer to a process of rationalisation.¹²⁵ The modes of conflict resolution to which the *semsar* resorts, reinforced by the dissemination of norms emptied of any substance, lead to obscuring the actual practices and the real stakes of domestic service. The role played by the *semsar* as mediator between two worlds makes him an actor of control and change. He becomes a responsible figure in the circuit of mediation: this is a form of control of private space and contributes to the deployment of new norms of work. By playing a part in the process of qualification and specialisation and the production of norms in the world of domestic employment, the *semsar* brings in a new hierarchical categorisation of tasks. Thereby, he contributes to a new division of labour, and reproduces in new shapes of the precariousness of employment for this category of the population.

¹²² B. Hibou, *The Bureaucratization of the World in the Neoliberal Era*, trans. Andrew Brown (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹²³ A place where domestics sometimes sit on the ground and wait for clients to ask them for a service, or themselves ask passers-by for work.

¹²⁴ Interview with A., Casablanca, April 2012.

¹²⁵ N. Elias and J. L. Scotson, *The established and the outsiders*, rev. edn (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2008).