

# MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS' COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

WITHIN THE LEBANESE SOCIO-LEGAL CONTEXT



*A Feminist Participatory Action Research*

حركة مناهضة  
العنصرية



Anti-Racism  
Movement



FPAR  
FEMINIST PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women



*To Mesewat, who gave us their time and energy, and who shared their knowledge and spaces without hesitation and with endless kindness and patience.*

*To all the migrant women activists and workers whose strength and resilience is unmatched, and who continue to invite us into their lives with trust and love despite the injustices they face every day.*

# **This is a research publication by the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM), in collaboration with the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW).**

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## **Acknowledgments**

We thank the wonderful team members of ARM for their support and for the trust they put into us in conducting this project. ARM thanks GAATW for the opportunity they gave us to realize this project and for their continued support and encouragement.

Most importantly, we thank Mesewat for collaborating on this project, for sharing the knowledge that made this project possible, for their openness to sharing such an important part of their lives, and for the essential work that they do.

## **About Anti-Racism Movement (ARM)**

Anti-Racism Movement is an NGO established by a group of local activists who work together with migrant workers to secure social, economic, and gender justice for all migrant workers and racialized groups in Lebanon. ARM runs community centers dedicated to migrant domestic workers in Lebanon where they can meet, learn new skills, organize, and access information and assistance. We mobilize public support for the abolishment of the Kafala (sponsorship) system and the realization of migrant domestic workers' rights through advocacy and alliance-building. We also help migrant workers access services related to legal support, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, education, and shelter.

## **Authorship**

*Talah Hassan* conducted this research study, including coordination, desk research, data collection, and data analysis. Talah also wrote and finalized this research report.

*Ramy Shukr* coordinated and helped conceptualize this research project. Ramy provided continuous guidance and support in the research process and edited this report throughout its writing process.

How to cite this report:

Anti-Racism Movement, 'Migrant Domestic Workers' Community Organizing Within the Lebanese Socio-Legal Context: A Feminist Participatory Action Research Project', *Anti-Racism Movement*, 2019

Cover photo: Migrant domestic workers protest for their labor rights on Sunday June 24th, 2018 in Beirut, Lebanon on the occasion of International Domestic Workers Day. Photo credits: Patrick Abi Salloum.

## About GAATW's Feminist Participatory Action Research Project

In 2018 - 2019, the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW-IS), in collaboration with eleven organisations across nine countries in Asia carried out a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) focusing on 'Safe and Fair Migration: A feminist perspective on women's rights to mobility and work'.

In our study, FPAR is used as a framework and approach to capturing women migrants' complex realities and perspectives on labor and migration. What distinguishes FPAR from conventional research is that it is deliberately women-centered and participant driven, the knowledge comes from the women (community) and owned by them, and based on their lived experiences, the research participants propose solutions so the research results become a tool to collectively organize advocacy actions. Therefore, this is an outcome of deconstructing the dominant understanding of safe migration and fair migration and reshaping the concepts from a feminist perspective. We believe our approach of building knowledge from ground up and creating an evidence base will add value in addressing the structural causes of power disparities that affect women's migration and mobility.

Our research community ranges across South, Southeast, and West Asia offering views from both countries of origin and destination, as well as adding the perspective of internal migration from rural to urban areas. Three distinguished sectors of work are covered in this study including domestic work, garment industry, and entertainment work.

The lead researcher groups who facilitated discussions with women migrants include Anti-Racism Movement (Lebanon), Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (Cambodia), International Domestic Workers Federation (Lebanon), Karmojibi Nari (Bangladesh), Legal Resources Center for Gender Justice and Human Rights (Indonesia), MAP Foundation (Thailand), Sandigan (Kuwait), Self Employed Women's Association (India), Society for Labour and Development (India), Women Forum for Women in Nepal (Nepal), and an independent researcher based in Jordan.

*"Two people will shout as much as they can. But ten people are louder than two."*

Borrowing from one of our FPAR research participants' words, we hope each piece of our collective study will help amplify women migrant workers' voice to bring about structural change for a safe and fair migration that works for women.

GAATW-IS gratefully acknowledges the support of Women's Fund Asia in conducting this research project. A consolidated regional report and the country research briefs are available on the GAATW ([www.gaatw.org](http://www.gaatw.org)) website.

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## > INTRODUCTION

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At least 300,000 women migrant domestic workers (MDWs) from African, South Asian, and Southeast Asian countries live and work in unsafe and unjust conditions in Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> MDWs are excluded from the labor law, face discrimination and marginalization in society, and are governed by a legal framework that denies them basic labor and human rights. This legal framework is known as the Kafala (sponsorship) system, and it has consistently been characterized as violent. Under Kafala, individual sponsors have state-sanctioned control over an MDW's employment and residency status, as well as her movement, autonomy, and her social and personal life.<sup>2</sup> Despite MDWs in Lebanon constituting a significant part of Lebanese society and its population,<sup>3</sup> making up around 5% of the total population,<sup>4</sup> 10% of women in Lebanon,<sup>5</sup> and 11% of non-nationals in the country,<sup>6</sup> the Kafala system continues to deny them their individual, social, and political rights.

MDWs, along with other civil society actors, have long been resisting and opposing these conditions. Through building community groups, MDWs care for each other and try to ensure their own safety through mutual financial, medical, emotional, and social support. They also make demands for protection and justice from the state and society members who keep them categorically marginalized. In a context where minimal serious efforts to establish safe and fair migration (SFM) systems that prioritize workers' rights have been made by the Lebanese state, it is essential that we examine how some migrant workers (MWs) have taken this task upon themselves.

Considering this context, Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) took part in a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) project led by The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) under the title of ***Safe and Fair Migration from a Feminist Perspective***. This project allowed us to study and develop how 'safe and fair migration' can be conceptualized from a feminist perspective, based on the experiences of MDW activists and community organizers who have been navigating and challenging the Kafala system in Lebanon. To carry out this FPAR, we worked closely with Mesewat, an Ethiopian MDW-led activist community group. ARM and 9 of Mesewat's more active community organizers, referred to as *admins*, worked together in an effort to examine how the Kafala system exerts its power in the work and lives of MDWs, and to form a deeper understanding of how community organizers carve out spaces to resist the system. The project also looks at where MDW activism lies within safe and fair migration, and allows us as ARM - as well as other organizations and groups - to gain and provide insight into where we can direct our efforts in support for and allyship with Mesewat and MDW-led groups more broadly. These issues are framed within a structural understanding of the Kafala system that situates it within a broader understanding of migration, citizenship, labor, race, and gender.

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1. D Mansour-Ille and M Hendow, 'From exclusion to resistance: Migrant domestic workers and the evolution of agency in Lebanon', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, vol. 16, 2018, p. 449-469
  2. Gemma, Rose, Mala, Meriam, and Julia, 'Resisting borders: A conversation on the daily struggles of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon', *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, vol. 2, 2016, p. 141-153
  3. S Kassamali, 'Migrant Worker Lifeworlds of Beirut', PhD diss., Columbia University, 2017
  4. A L Millers, 'We are workers, not slaves', *Al Jazeera*, 12 June 2015, retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/workers-slaves-150601133232753.html>
  5. R De Stone and D L Suber, 'Migrant workers fighting for freedom under Lebanon's Kefala system', *openDemocracy*, 17 May 2018, retrieved from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/migrant-workers-fighting-for-freedom-under-leba/>
  6. This number was derived from research based on official data from the Lebanese government and security officials, World Bank, European Commission, and the UN. The research can be found here: <https://middleeasttransparent.com/en/lebanese-and-other-nationalities-in-lebanon-population-and-employment-2011-2016/>

## Research questions

Based on the goals of this project, the following research questions were collaboratively formulated:

- 1. How do Lebanese socio-legal systems affect the lives and work of activist MDWs in Lebanon?**
- 2. What are the specific challenges that these systems pose onto Mesewat community leaders?**
- 3. How does Mesewat conduct its community-building activities within these systems?**
- 4. How does Mesewat continue to create spaces and possibilities for community organizing?**
- 5. How can non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) working for MDWs rights better support the work of MDW-led groups (like Mesewat) in reaching their goals?**
- 6. How can MDW-led community organizing inform and develop the dominant understanding of 'safe and fair migration'?**

## Significance and objectives

While there has been increased attention and social awareness of the human rights violations MDWs face in Lebanon, as well as an increase in their visible activism, no major efforts have been made to study and document the relationship between the Kafala system, MDW-led activism, and SFM. This project uses ethnographic data alongside structural analysis to address current conditions, and to situate Lebanon in a more global conversation on these topics. More specifically, we want to examine the role that MDW-led activism plays in defining and achieving SFM. The project locates the Kafala system in a wider context of migration, citizenship, labor, gender relations, activism, and state control in order to better understand the roots of the current system in Lebanon and the patterns it reproduces.

In this report, we also adopt critical feminist analysis to examine the role political economy plays in shaping current migration systems and the dominant 'safe and fair migration' discourse. We adopt this framework alongside an examination of the experiences, positions, and needs of migrants moving, living, and working in precarious conditions in order to relate the structural to the personal. In this way, this project aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Kafala system, MDW-led activism, and SFM in Lebanon.

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7. S Molland, 'Safe migration as an emerging anti-trafficking agenda?', *openDemocracy*, 21 May 2015, retrieved from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/safe-migration-as-emerging-antitrafficking-agenda/>



## Safe and fair migration

In recent years, the term 'safe and fair migration' has emerged in international discussions and framings of migration, and the concept has been addressed through the UN's development of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM). It has risen in popularity following a gradual international distancing from anti-trafficking discourse, which is critiqued for reinforcing anti-immigration agendas through its treatment of irregular border crossing as a crime, and irregular migrants as its victims.

While there are plenty of academic and non-academic resources on gendered labor migration and the ways in which it is precarious, unjust, and exploitative, literature on SFM is not as well developed.<sup>8</sup> 'Safe and fair migration' as an individual concept is rarely employed. Instead, the concepts of 'safe migration' and 'fair migration' are mostly used by international bodies, such as the United Nations (UN), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), large NGOs, and human rights groups. 'Safe migration' tends to define safety through migrants' legal status, the absence of violence and trafficking in the migration process, and the provision of information and awareness-raising about the conditions they are migrating to, their rights, and the kinds of support networks that exist and are accessible to them.<sup>9</sup> 'Fair migration' refers to more policy-based interventions that create fairer systems of migration, recruitment, and employment, focusing on a decent work and rights-based policy agenda, including inter-state agreements that ensure the protection and rights of labor migrants.<sup>10</sup>

While both concepts point to important aspects of migration, some have noted that these agendas aim to maintain and work *within* the system that has created situations of exploitation and criminalized human movement and border-crossing, in addition to denying migrants access to their rights and protections. Here, there is a serious risk that these measures are increasingly being used to justify an unjust control and management of the movement of migrants by equating 'safe and fair migration' with 'legal' migration, and as such primarily focusing on migrants' legal status rather than their right to move, work, and reside safely. Without scrutinizing legal systems and accounting for the structural basis of unsafe and unfair migration - including notions of citizenship that define people's 'legality' - SFM will remain limited in its scope and effectiveness.<sup>11</sup> This project aims to properly account for the dynamics underlying current state systems in order to understand what specific aspects of the migration systems in Lebanon need to be addressed in the work towards SFM.

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8. A Naik, 'Concept of safe migration' [PowerPoint presentation], *IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre*, 21-22 June 2016, retrieved from: <https://gmdac.iom.int/sites/default/files/presentations/safe%20migration/Asmita%20Naik%20-%20Workshop.pdf>

9. Molland, *Safe migration as an emerging anti-trafficking agenda?*

10. International Labour Organization, 'Fair migration agenda', *International Labor Organization*, n/a, retrieved from: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/fair-migration-agenda/lang--en/index.htm>

11. Molland, *Safe migration as an emerging anti-trafficking agenda?*

## ➤ RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

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### Who is Mesewat?

“ **Mesewat means if you have something small, you share with others** ”

Mesewat introduces itself as a non-political, non-religious, non-governmental, and non-profit Ethiopian activist community group that was formed and named 4 years ago. Several activists, both migrant and Lebanese, began working together to fight the injustices of the Kafala system, initially through a volunteer-based, grassroots group called the Migrant Workers Task Force (MWTF) in 2011. MWTF, which merged with ARM and its Migrant Community Center (MCC)<sup>12</sup> initiative in 2015, supported anti-racist work in Beirut and provided a community hub, in addition to educational classes and activities, to around 100 migrant workers on a weekly basis. Many MDW activists who wanted to engage in community building, advocacy, and casework met through MWTF. This includes 3 of Mesewat’s founders, Rahel, Leyla, and Dani, who are participants in this research project.<sup>13</sup>

Rahel’s own activist history goes back to around 14 years ago, and she was the first between the three Mesewat founders mentioned to work with MWTF. In addition to being an MDW and an activist, Rahel is also a filmmaker. Through MWTF, Rahel proposed to make a film with other MWs, which is how she met Leyla and Dani. Together, they began shooting her film *Shouting Without A Listener* around 2011.<sup>14</sup> Dani describes how this project eventually brought the group together as Mesewat:

Before, we were 12 to 15 people, a film crew, called Shouting Without A Listener. Then we began talking, because of the problems with MDWs when they come, and when they go back to Ethiopia. [...] We talked about this and we agreed to be a group [...]. We gathered, created bylaws [informal rules], and chose our name. Mesewat won by vote.

Formalizing their work in the shape of a structured, membership-based community group allowed these activists to continue their efforts in a more organized manner.

As founders, Rahel, Dani, and Leyla (among others whom we did not get the chance to work with) were voted as admins - Mesewat members in coordinating positions. We also worked with 6 other admins - Aisha, Maryam, TG, Rita, Sara, and Addis. They all joined Mesewat after it was founded - most of them through meeting Rahel, seeing her speak about Mesewat’s work, or hearing about Mesewat through a friend. Their flexible time, as well as their motivation, led to them being voted as admins. Mesewat has grown to have over 200 members, and has put in place a specific organizational structure under which they carry out their work.

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12. See more about ARM and MCC here: <https://www.armlebanon.org/about-us>

13. Names have been changed to maintain the safety and anonymity of the individuals who participated in this project to the best of our ability.

14. *Shouting Without A Listener* came out as a play in 2013 and as a film in 2015.

Mesewat's work varies widely in its scope. They work on case support, which includes financial support (for medication, hospital fees, clothes, food, amongst others), as well as various forms of advocacy and lobbying. However, there is a large focus on nurturing community through organizing activities and events, creating space for sharing knowledge, and building strong networks of support, solidarity, friendship, and kinship. It is important to note that all the admins we worked with expressed wanting to, ideally, expand the group to work with MDWs across nationalities, but that for now this has proved difficult due to language barriers, as well as differences in the specific contexts that many other nationals navigate in Lebanon.<sup>15</sup>

Mesewat also has a branch in Ethiopia, made up of MDW returnees. Currently, its work mostly targets injustices that are not specifically related to Ethiopian-Lebanese migration, such as poverty and children's lack of access to education. However, the admins there are beginning to work with returnees on reintegration, and aim to expand this aspect of their work. They also hope to begin lobbying members of their state for better protection mechanisms.

While Mesewat is very active and the group carries out plenty of work, they also have ideas for activities and initiatives that are, quite simply, near impossible to carry out under Lebanon's Kafala system. In addition, they are unable to access legal recognition due to the legal and institutional restrictions imposed by the Lebanese state, as we will see throughout this research.

Mesewat works closely with ARM and MCC, who provide similar activities to MWTF's, in addition to supporting MDW-led community building initiatives. The admins expressed the support that MCC has given them over the years, both on professional and personal levels. They continue to use MCC as a space to meet, build their capacities, seek assistance or advice, and connect with other MDWs.

It is important to note that Mesewat is not the only MDW-led group organizing and working against the Kafala system, nor the only group that ARM supports. We took the decision to conduct this FPAR project with them specifically because of how long they've been in contact with ARM, and because we felt that the relatively long amount of time they have been able to maintain their organizing can give us in-depth insight into how the Kafala system intersects with activism. This will not only allow us to support them through the specific action plans that resulted from this project, but will also allow us to better support other community groups using the knowledge we have gained.

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15. These differences can include having the ability to collaborate more closely with their embassies and consulates, having to navigate possible deployment bans to Lebanon, and some unique forms of racism and discrimination that MDWs face depending on where they are from.

## *Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR)*

FPAR prioritizes a feminist approach to research in both theory and methodology. It encourages the research to be both collaborative and conducted in a way that leads to specific advocacy or action that would benefit research participants. In practice, this method involves cooperation between researchers and participants in planning the research design, discussing and analyzing the theoretical framework of the research, as well as in deciding on and organizing the resulting advocacy action plans. Throughout an FPAR project, researchers are encouraged to maintain a gender-centered approach to theory, analysis, and action.

While FPAR in general provides a useful framework for more engaging, ethical, and impactful research, we at ARM felt that this particular project would benefit from an FPAR approach for three reasons. Firstly, it takes gender and its intersections seriously, which is necessary for this project considering that gender is at the core of MDWs' experiences in Lebanon. Secondly, FPAR is in line with our research standards and ethics, which value a critical and reflective approach achieved through continuous informed consent, the engagement of participants in creating knowledge based on their narratives, and an action-based approach to qualitative research that challenges its often inaccessible place in academia. The action aspect is particularly important, as it would help us develop our work with MDWs to be able to more effectively contribute to strengthening and supporting their initiatives and communities. Finally, the content of this report, and the knowledge that stems from this project more broadly, could not be constructed without active participation of activist MDWs. Their experience living under and fighting against the Kafala system is essential for understanding how the system at large interacts with domestic work, as well as workers' community organizing, in ways that deny safety and justice in their migration journeys.<sup>16</sup>

### *FPAR methods*

This research project is based on a series of qualitative and semi-structured interviews, semi-structured focus group discussions, and the researcher's participation in various meetings and events. We mostly met at MCC, but we also used Dammeh Cooperative<sup>17</sup> when MCC was not available. Aisha - one of the research participants - also hosted us in her house several times.

#### *Interviews*

Interviews were conducted with 7 of the 9 admins we worked with - Rahel, Maryam, Leyla, Aisha, TG, Rita, and Dani. We conducted between one and three interviews with each of the 7 admins depending on their time, availability, and interest. Through these interviews, we discussed:

- The admins' personal experiences as MDWs in Lebanon, including what they perceive to be the most urgent issues that need to be addressed
- The importance and meaning they assign to creating and being a part of a community group
- Their personal experiences with, and reflections about, organizing with Mesewat, including their goals, visions, and perceived needs, as well as the personal and emotional aspects of being a part of Mesewat
- The outcomes they would like to see stem from this research project

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16. B Ackerly and J True, *Doing Feminist Research in Political and Social Science*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2010, p. 1-20

E Tuck, 'Re-visioning Action: Participatory Action Research and Indigenous Theories of Change', *Urban Review*, vol. 41, 2009, p. 47-65

17. Dammeh is feminist cooperative for women and trans persons built on intersectional feminist social and political values. Dammeh aims to work towards social, economic, environmental, and gender justice through practicing its values in its structure and activities.

## *Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)*

We conducted five FGDs, with different admins attending each discussion. Some admins attended all of them, while Addis could only attend two, and Sara could only attend one. Below, we will highlight what discussions occurred in each focus group. Following the publication of this report, we will be holding another FGD to discuss and build on the research outcomes, evaluation, and action points.

**FGD 1: The research design and project.** We identified the admins' needs from the project, took into account their feedback, and constructed the methodology accordingly. We also discussed how and why this is a feminist research project, and engaged in a short conversation around gender and domestic work.

**FGD 2: Early evaluation of the project.** We discussed how the admins felt the research was going so far and what the outcome could be. In this FGD we also collaboratively drafted a survey for the admins to distribute to 80 Mesewat members. The survey aimed to get feedback from members in order for admins to continuously develop the group to the benefit of all members involved. This was also our first joint action point.

**FGD 3: Feminism, migration, and the Kafala system.** We discussed how the Kafala system is gendered and the ways in which discriminative policy relates to the exploitation, abuse, and exclusion MDWs face in Lebanon.

**FGD 4: Safe and fair migration.** We discussed what SFM means to the admins, and the policy demands they have in order for their vision of it to be achieved.

**FGD 5: Reflection on Mesewat.** This FGD took place with 2 admins, which led to an intimate discussion on Mesewat's work and its changes over time, as well as the personal effects of community.

## *Research participation*

The researcher took part in several meetings between Rahel and ARM staff where we discussed Mesewat's projects, as well as one meeting facilitated by ARM that brought together several community groups in an effort to encourage collaboration. She also attended meetings between Mesewat admins and KAFA where Mesewat received advice for a project idea. Attending these meetings helped us better understand Mesewat's relationship with other migrant and Lebanese actors working on MDWs' rights.

The researcher also attended two large and important community events: an Ethiopian New Year's party and an Ethiopian Christmas party. These events demonstrated the importance of community, friendship, culture, and kinship in Mesewat's organizing.

## *Limitations, reflection, and ethical considerations*

One key limitation during the project was language. The research was conducted in English and in Arabic, while all the admins' mother tongue is Amharic. We considered the possibility of direct translation, but we did not have the capacity for this. However, during FGDs, the admins made efforts to translate for each other when needed, and Dani translated the survey drafted in the second FGD from English to Amharic.

Another limitation was time. All the participants we worked with had different degrees of involvement in this project because they spend most of the (limited) free time they have, outside of their formal work, working for Mesewat. This created challenges for us in maintaining the participatory and collaborative nature of FPAR, especially since many FPAR advocates encourage participants to ideally be 'co-researchers' in the process. In this project, this level of participation was simply unfeasible, which prompted us to spend more time reflecting on what it means for a project to be participatory and ethical, and whether there really is one specific method that can be applied as is across all research contexts and with any group. We personally tackled this challenge by catering to the specific needs and desires the participants expressed they want from this project. For them, what was essential was sharing their experiences working as a community group so that they can then collaboratively develop action plans with ARM after the project's completion. They also felt the research was a very important tool to document their work, highlight their needs and challenges, and voice their demands to the state and other actors.

Moreover, at several points during the research, when the researcher asked questions regarding the methodology or the report to collaboratively discuss certain issues with Mesewat admins, the admins often said "you tell us, you are the researcher!" From this, the question of positionality, power, and responsibility in this FPAR project also emerged. Both ourselves and Mesewat felt that as researchers and NGO employees, we hold a certain positionality and an amount of responsibility that cannot simply be shared through the term 'collaboration', as this would ignore the power dynamics that exist between researcher and participant no matter how participatory a project claims to be. As such, we found ourselves in a position where we need to be responsible for conducting the project in a manner that ensures that the priorities and desires of Mesewat admins as participants are upheld, that their narratives are properly represented to the best of our abilities, and that the forms of participation they are able to provide are respected by not demanding more time, energy, and resources from them than they can provide, especially considering the amount of work that they do day-to-day. For us, their comments indicated that rather than push for a form of collaboration that only seems equal at face value, we should acknowledge and address our role/position as researchers and NGO employees, and the responsibility that comes with that. As such, we respected the time and labor Mesewat members requested and needed from us as researchers in carrying out this project while taking specific steps that, to the best of our abilities, helped maintain the position of Mesewat admins as collaborators and decision-makers in this project as opposed to being 'research subjects'.



### *Ethiopian migration to Lebanon*

Since the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia, the migration of Ethiopian women for domestic work has significantly increased. The primary driver is the economy, considering the lack of adequate employment opportunities and the number of people living in poverty. Other drivers for migration include a desire for independence, resisting certain unwanted gender expectations, and fleeing political oppression given the various conflicts that have occurred in Ethiopia during the past 45 years.<sup>18</sup> While these are push factors that impact individuals and families, the state also has an interest in an emigrant workforce that “eases unemployment pressures and contributes to development through remittances, knowledge transfer, and the creation of business and trade networks.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the state’s own interests in emigration, a partial deployment ban<sup>20</sup> on women travelling to Lebanon for domestic work was implemented in 2008, following reports and testimonies of frequent and harsh human rights abuses and violations against MDWs in Lebanon. Although the ban intended to halt migration, it did not address the needs of women who want to migrate, and as such, it caused a rise in irregular migration, both in the recruitment stages (migrating through irregular routes) and during residency (residing and/or working without valid permits).<sup>21</sup> This was reinforced by the Ethiopian state’s leniency in imposing the ban, its idleness in providing protection for MDWs experiencing abuse and ill-treatment, and its minimal effort in ensuring that migrants were not travelling in irregular and precarious ways.

In February 2018, the ban was lifted with the promise of providing workers protection and safety, as well as training to prepare them for work in Lebanon.<sup>22</sup> However, with the election of a new government, the ban was reinstated and more strictly implemented in November 2018. Ethiopian officials say that the ban will not be lifted until an agreement between Ethiopia and Lebanon that ensures the rights of Ethiopian MDWs, is signed<sup>23</sup> - something that, until now, Lebanon has failed to do. Apart from recognizing the inherent limits in what bilateral agreements can achieve compared to changes in national legislation, it is important to also note the Ethiopian state’s responsibility in ensuring SFM for its citizens abroad. While a large part of the responsibility lies on the Lebanese state, the way that the Ethiopian state benefits from emigration, and its failure to ensure the protection of its emigrant workforce, must be considered.

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18. G A Zewdu, ‘Ethiopian female domestic labor migration to the middle east: Patterns, trends, and drivers’, *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 11, 2018, p. 6-19

19. N B Ketema, ‘Female Ethiopian migrant domestic workers: An analysis of migration, return-migration and reintegration experiences’, Master’s thesis, University of Oregon, 2014, p. 31

20. A partial ban stops people from migrating, but allows migrants already in destination countries with valid permits to travel back and forth between Ethiopia and their country of residence.

21. Zewdu, *Ethiopian female domestic labor migration to the Middle East: Patterns, trends, and drivers*

22. AFP, ‘Ethiopia lifts ban on domestic workers moving overseas’, *Arab News*, 2 February 2018, retrieved from: <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1237981>

23. وزارة العمل تسوّف في توقيع اتفاق لتحسين ظروفهن، هديل فرفور، *Al Akhbar*, 8 December 2018, retrieved from: [https://www.al-akhbar.com/Home\\_Page/262851/](https://www.al-akhbar.com/Home_Page/262851/)

## *The Kafala system: Gendered and racialized migrant domestic work*

From the beginning of the recruitment process, MDWs in Lebanon are governed by the Kafala - sponsorship - system through private recruitment agencies (PRAs) or brokers in countries of origin and in Lebanon which currently constitute a booming profit-generating industry. Recruiters find MDWs individual Lebanese sponsors for their work and residency permits so that they can begin the migration process. An MDW's sponsor also acts as her employer. Throughout their time in Lebanon, MDWs must remain under sponsorship in both their work and their residency status. MDWs most often live in their employers' homes while under their sponsorship, making their workplace also their home. This is the basis of the Kafala system.

In Lebanon, all domestic workers (DWs) - almost all of whom are women - are explicitly excluded from the labor law, meaning that the Kafala system is the only 'legal' system governing the work and stay of MDWs in the country. However, the Kafala system itself is nowhere to be found in the law.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it is a regulatory procedural mechanism governed by The General Directorate of General Security (General Security, or GS), the state security entity that regulates immigration in Lebanon. GS is responsible for regulating the entry, exit, residence, and employment status of MDWs, meaning it also oversees their work permit renewals, employment changes, and travel related affairs. GS also has the executive power to detain and deport MWs if they are deemed to have violated any Kafala system policy, almost always without the need for any court hearing.

Because of their exclusion from the labor law, MDWs are not legally considered workers and are therefore not entitled to labor rights and protections, including minimum wage. As such, the Ministry of Labor (MoL) assigns MDWs to the lowest of its four wage categories for foreign workers - the category for "nationals of Srilanka [sic], the Philippines, India and African countries [who] provide household services and similar functions in business establishments."<sup>25</sup> While these categories are wage-based, in reality they also segregate foreign workers by nationality, gender, and profession - i.e. a person's profession determines their wages, and people of different nationalities and genders work in different professions, not necessarily by choice, but rather by institutionalized ideas of who should or can work in which sectors. In Lebanon, foreigners from the west ('expats') tend to work in higher waged professions, while foreigners from the global south ('migrants') tend to work in lower waged ones. Thus, in the eyes of the state, MDWs are categorically isolated from all other workers, and are essentially classified by gender and nationality (and by association, race).<sup>26</sup>

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24. One of the main reasons for why the Kafala system is not, and/or cannot become, a law in Lebanon is the fact that recognizing domestic workers as workers in a legal text would come at odds with excluding them from the labor law which must legally cover all workers in the country.

25. UNDP, 'Foreign Labor', Chp. 3 in *A Profile of Sustainable Human Development in Lebanon*, 1997, p. 2, retrieved from: <http://www.undp.org.lb/programme/governance/advocacy/nhdr/nhdr97/chpt3d.pdf>

26. Ibid.

Being tied to a sponsor for their residency permits means that MDWs rely on their employers to renew their residency status. This is easily exploited by employers, who essentially hold the power to criminalize a worker by rendering her residency status 'illegal'. Moreover, if MDWs wish to change employment, they can officially only do so twice, due to a three-sponsor limit in the Kafala system where MDWs are only legally allowed to work for a maximum of three employers in Lebanon during their stay in the country. For each change, MDWs need their sponsors' permission through an official 'release' each time.<sup>27</sup> If an MDW leaves her employer without their permission, the employer can report her as a 'run-away', relieving themselves of sponsorship and automatically making her residency status irregular. These conditions easily and frequently coerce women either into being undocumented, or into forced labor. In addition to this, employers and agencies can easily decide to 'return' a worker to her country.<sup>28</sup>

PRAs in countries of origin and in Lebanon recruit MDWs for employer clientele. PRAs advertise women to employers by categorizing them by nationality, race, religion, age, and looks (among other criteria) to best suit the employers' demands. PRAs profit from employers' immense recruitment fees, part of which are often deducted from MDWs' salaries, either by the agency or the employer.<sup>29</sup> PRAs supposedly provide protection for MDWs, who should be able to return to or contact their agencies in case any issue arises within the first three probation months of employment. In reality, PRAs prioritize protecting employers, partly in order not to jeopardize their customers and business profits.

In the absence of the labor law, workers' contracts, provided by PRAs, are the only concrete documents that lay out what the employment relationship between employers and MDWs should look like. In 2009, MoL and the ILO drafted a standard unified contract, to be used by all agencies in Lebanon.<sup>30</sup> However, research has consistently shown that workers continue to face frequent and harsh human rights violations and very precarious labor migration conditions in the country,<sup>31</sup> and have very little - if any - access to complaint mechanisms and justice despite these contracts.<sup>32</sup> Living with their employers makes MDWs evermore vulnerable to abuse, particularly considering the fact that the state rarely conducts labor investigations in employers' homes because they are considered 'private', despite the fact that they are also an MDW's official workplace.<sup>33</sup>

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27. It is a common practice for employers to demand significant sums of money from workers, or from the employers whom a worker is being 'transferred' to, in exchange for them signing the sponsorship release form.

28. N Moukarbel, *Sri Lankan Housemaids in Lebanon: A Case of 'Symbolic Violence' and 'Everyday Forms of Resistance'*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2009, p. 87

29. S Abdulrahim and Z Cherri, *Intertwined: A Study of Employers of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon*, Switzerland: International Labour Organization, 2016

30. There is no concrete evidence that this contract is in fact the one in use - recruitment agencies in Lebanon and in countries of origin are known to draft their own.

31. MDWs regularly report being subject to overtime work, poor salaries, no weekly or annual days off, subpar accommodation, performing non-contractual tasks, having no access to their identity or legal documents, having no access to contacting their families, being locked in the house, being denied food and/or sleep, and experiencing a range of verbal, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse.

32. N Houry, *Without Protection: How the Lebanese Justice System Fails Migrant Domestic Workers*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010

33. J M Ramirez-Machado, Domestic work, conditions of work and employment: A legal perspective, *International Labour Organization*, 2003

Exclusion from the labor law is used to deny MDWs their freedom of assembly, their right to form a trade union, and their right to collective bargaining. Under Lebanese law, foreigners are also limited in their ability to establish and register an organization.<sup>34</sup> This means that they face huge barriers in their attempts to make demands for safer and more just labor conditions. Additionally, in the limited situations where they are able to make demands, they can still be easily detained and deported for having irregular (or 'illegal') residency status or for being deemed to have violated Kafala system policy. It is this policy in particular that makes organizing difficult for activist MDWs and puts them at a high risk.

It is important to note the very gendered and racialized nature of the policies that govern MDWs and the ways these policies intersect with notions of citizenship and belonging. Not being legally recognized as work implies that domestic work - which is seen as 'women's work'<sup>35</sup> - is also not valued as a form of labor by the state. This devaluation manifests through: the ways MDWs are treated as consumer goods by PRAs and employers who value economic gain over MDWs' rights; how the state and employers regulate and control MDWs' employment and movement across borders, projecting ideas of (non-)belonging that are based on citizenship, race, and gender; how workers are denied the right to demand better working conditions; and how migrant women are confined to the 'private' sphere of the household, with little, if any, acknowledgment of their personhood beyond their roles as DWs. This normalized, systemic discrimination also spills over to wider social settings and spaces in which MDWs face immense social exclusion and discrimination.

## *Lebanon's framework of 'safe and fair migration'*

The Lebanese state has made some efforts to address the Kafala system's violations, as well as 'safe and fair migration', particularly in response to pressure from local and international groups. The state has signed various binding and non-binding conventions and covenants related to migrant and women's rights. However, it has been significantly unsuccessful in implementing many of them, and has yet to ratify ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189), which it voted for at its time of inception.<sup>36</sup> Lebanese state actors have also participated in several international meetings on migration policy, perhaps most significantly the recent UN Intergovernmental Conference in Marrakesh on adopting the GCM. At this conference, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Emigrants, Gebran Bassil, formally expressed that migration needs to be "managed well" if it is to "lead to diversity, wealth and peace" rather than "chaos and strife."<sup>37</sup> However, what "managed well" means is unclear, and Bassil expressed having reservations about the GCM, urging for it to be non-binding. Another Lebanese representative specified that the country's reservations are particularly on "sections of the text that refer to the integration of migrants in host communities."<sup>38</sup>

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34. Foreigners cannot register as a group, association, or organization alone; they must have at least 5 Lebanese people who carry the legal responsibility of the organization. However, even if MDWs, for example, found 5 people to register with, it would be impossible for members to legally work at the organization since their visas are explicitly domestic work visas.

35. R S Parrenas, 'Migrant Filipina domestic workers and the international division of reproductive labor', *Gender & Society*, vol. 14, 2000, p. 560-580

36. Y D Belay, 'Migration and state responsibility: Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon', *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, vol. 4, 2014, p.1-8

37. United Nations Meeting Coverage, 'World leaders adopt first-ever global compact on migration, outlining framework to protect millions of migrants, support countries accommodating them', *Intergovernmental Conference on the Global Compact for Migration 1st-4th Plenary Meetings*, United Nations, 10 December 2018, para. 93, retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/dev3375.doc.htm>

38. United Nations Meeting Coverage 'General assembly endorses first-ever global compact on migration, urging cooperation among member states in protecting migrants', *General Assembly, Plenary, Seventy-Third Session, 60<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup> Meetings*, United Nations, 19 December 2018, para. 40, retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ga12113.doc.htm>

So far, the state has opted to address some individual violations, but time and time again leaves the systematic and structural roots of these violations untouched. We have seen the state shutting down some abusive or unlicensed PRAs, retracting some inhumane policies,<sup>39</sup> and supporting some NGO initiatives such as the shelters of KAFA and Caritas Lebanon.<sup>40</sup> The state is also part of a national steering committee on the situation of MDWs in Lebanon, along with SORAL,<sup>41</sup> MoL, KAFA, and Caritas Lebanon. However, we are still to witness any concrete improvements emerge from such efforts. An MoL hotline was introduced in 2017, but our experience with this hotline has shown that it has not improved protection or accountability. From the above examples, we can see how the Lebanese government has been committed to, at most, tackling some individual ‘abusers’ rather than addressing the systemic roots behind this abuse. The fact that we continue to witness labor and human rights violations against MDWs on a daily basis indicates that the state’s current approach to the issue remains lacking. This begs the question of what the state can potentially learn from activists and other human rights defenders who are advocating for more systemic changes for SFM, and how these parties can potentially work together to propel SFM forward.

## *Resistance against the Kafala system*

Considering the state’s limited efforts to address the violations caused by the Kafala system, many MDWs have been taking this task upon themselves for more than 20 years now, despite the legal hindrance that denies them the ability to demand their rights.<sup>42</sup> A study by Dina Mansour-Ille and Meagan Hendow shows that the 2006 July War in Lebanon was a turning point in MDWs’ organizing efforts. During the war, many MDWs were left locked inside their employers’ houses while employers fled for their own safety. MDWs who had the means during this period came together in an attempt to help these ‘forgotten’ workers. The study argues that after this period, there was a collective recognition among MDWs that they should continue gathering and organizing beyond this particular crisis.<sup>43</sup>

However, women have been forming internal solidarity and support networks from at least the 1990s. Efforts have also been made to support MDWs over the years, from religious associations to, more recently, CSOs and NGOs. Women from certain nationalities have also been able to gain support from their embassies or consulates. These different actors assist through various initiatives and programs, including the provision of safe houses and shelters, legal and medical support, helping with repatriation, mediating conflict between employers and employees, and organizing social and recreational activities.

More recently, MDW groups have been engaging in more direct forms of advocacy with support from CSOs, NGOs, and activists. One example is the Group of Nepalese Feminists in Lebanon (NARI), formed in 2012 and largely supported by KAFA. Like Mesewat, NARI took on case support, supported

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39. Human Rights Watch, ‘Lebanon: Migrant domestic workers with children deported’, *Human Rights Watch*, 25 April 2017, retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/25/lebanon-migrant-domestic-workers-children-deported>

40. KAFA Violence & Exploitation is an NGO fighting violence against women. Caritas Lebanon is the Lebanese section of the international organization Caritas, which works to end poverty in society.

41. The Syndicate of Owners of Recruitment Agencies in Lebanon

42. R Jureidini, ‘Women migrant domestic workers in Lebanon’, *International Labour Office Geneva*, 2002

43. D Mansour-Ille & M Hendow, Lebanon case study: *Migrant domestic workers and the 2006 crisis*, Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2017

Nepalese women in knowing and claiming their rights, engaged in self-advocacy, and demanded the state to abolish the Kafala system.<sup>44</sup> Over the years, many MDW ‘community leaders’ have formed groups with women from their countries, aiming to support each other and demand policy reform in both their states and in Lebanon.

One turning point for MDW self-organizing in Lebanon was the attempt to form a Domestic Workers Union in 2015. The union initiative was mobilized by MDWs under FENASOL,<sup>45</sup> with support from ARM, KAFA, and the ILO.<sup>46</sup> The union’s request for recognition was rejected by the minister of labor at that time, who cited that DWs’ exclusion from the labor law does not grant them the right to unionize. Some argue that advocacy efforts should have primarily focused on labor law inclusion so that a DWs’ union would have been legally backed; nevertheless, the union was a major step in visible and state-targeted MDW-led activism at the time of its formation. As a result of the Ministry of Labor’s decision not to recognize the union, in addition to various growing internal tensions around the union’s internal management and supervision under the FENASOL administration a year after its inception, some key union members slowly exited the union and went on to form the Alliance of Domestic Workers. The Alliance is a community group led by MDWs of various nationalities and is still active in organizing some activities, classes, and workshops.

Other notable state-targeted advocacy efforts from many of these groups include MDWs’ participation in organizing Workers Day, Women’s Day, and International Domestic Workers Day protests, their efforts in lobbying their embassies and consulates,<sup>47</sup> and their participation in various NGO and activist-led advocacy, initiatives, and campaigns.

MDWs’ activism has been gaining more visibility and encouragement, and has been largely successful in its grassroots, community-based, and case-based work. However, the ability of MDWs to target the systematic violations of the Kafala system continues to be largely restricted, and it remains difficult to hold abusive employers, sponsors, or agencies accountable.<sup>48</sup>

In the findings section below, we will shift our focus to Mesewat’s particular experience in organizing, starting from a brief look at the admins’ personal experiences in Lebanon that led to the formation of Mesewat, before moving to an in-depth examination of the group’s activism and its intersection with state institutions. Throughout, we pay close attention to how the Kafala system tangibly manifests in MDWs’ social lives, work, and activism. Through Mesewat’s experiences, we will gain a better understanding of the underlying structures that need to be addressed in conceptualizing SFM, leading us to argue that MDWs should play a key role in defining and implementing safer and fairer migration systems.

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44. International Labour Organization, ‘Group of Nepalese Feminists in Lebanon (NARI)’, *International Labour Organization*, 26 August 2015, retrieved from: [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmmain.showPractice?p\\_lang=en&p\\_practice\\_id=185](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmmain.showPractice?p_lang=en&p_practice_id=185)

45. The National Federation of Workers and Employee Trade Unions in Lebanon

46. D Mansour-Ille & M Hendow, *Migrant domestic workers and the 2006 crisis*

47. Such as the Filipina worker’s demonstration in front of their embassy in 2010 (Lebanon Support, ‘Timeline of events affecting migrant domestic workers in Lebanon’, *forthcoming*)

48. Jureidini, *Women migrant domestic workers in Lebanon*



# COMING TOGETHER: A SHARED POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT THE KAFALA SYSTEM

To better understand the need for a group like Mesewat, and to contextualize the specific work that they focus their time and energy on, it is essential to understand the experiences that the admins as MWs go through in Lebanon, how this led them to a common understanding of Kafala as an oppressive system, and how their shared desire to challenge the Kafala system resulted in Mesewat as a group that can provide a space and a strategy for this.

## I. Unsafe and unjust migration

### Experiences that led to the need for community

As MWs, the admins experience many of the oppressive and marginalizing aspects of the Kafala system. According to them, it was these experiences that largely drove each of them to join Mesewat. More specifically, it is the intimidation, exploitation, and workplace abuse, in addition to the dehumanization and exclusion they face in Lebanese society, that made the need for a community like Mesewat in their lives necessary.

With [my first employers], I wasn't able to ask a question about something that I needed, I couldn't ask directly. If I asked them, or if I made a mistake or something, immediately they [tell everybody]... at home, outside... everyone. [...] I would really get bothered and upset when they did this to me. [...] In the end, when I decided to leave, I struggled a lot, how could I tell them? [...] They didn't want me to leave. Also they said a lot of things, like "No, you won't find anyone who pays you like we do." There was a lot of talk, and there were things that hurt a lot. (Leyla)

Leyla's struggle to talk to her employers due to intimidation and disrespect, and her struggle to leave her employment amplified by the fact that her legal status is in their hands, speaks to the power dynamics of the workplace. This is enabled by how the Kafala system gives employers state-sanctioned control over MDWs. These dynamics can be - and often are - abused to violent extents. One instance of this is Rahel's first work experience in Lebanon, where she was physically abused and "made to work like a donkey" by her employer. Rahel later learnt that this employer should have been 'blacklisted' because a former MDW had died in her house. While it is difficult for us to know just how often this happens due to agencies, employers, and the state being able to hide such information, it is clear from the stories that do get publicized that these occurrences are not rare.<sup>49</sup>

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49. See the following for examples of recent cases:

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Sep-27/464562-community-decries-imbibos-death.ashx>

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/06/lebanon-migrant-workers-abuse-account>

<https://thisislebanon.org/general-abuse/halima-10-years-in-slavery-to-ibtissam-saade/>

These forms of abuse and exploitation stem from the fact that from the beginning of the employment process, migrant women are considered to be nothing more than women who perform domestic chores. They are denied the most basic of respectful treatment, and as Rahel put it, are pushed to work like donkeys. This dehumanization is made evermore clear by the frequent violations to their basic rights:

In 2006, because of the war, I spent 13 days in Intercontinental Hotel.<sup>50</sup> I had no food, no room, and no bed. I found another woman in [a] back side chalet, she gave me tea and food. Then I told my sponsor that I want to leave. She was shouting at me, but she gave me the papers. Her son and his wife took me to Beirut, to the embassy. I had no money. I stayed there for one week, I was very afraid. Then a friend found me work with my current sponsor, I have been with him for 13 years. (Rahel)

In a context where Rahel was, temporarily, not working as an MDW, she was disregarded and denied basic necessities such as food and sleep. While Rahel met people who assisted her, for many women this is impossible; for example, TG explained how she was locked in her employer's home, did not see another Ethiopian woman for two years, and could not meet anybody. Leyla, locked in the house during her first three years, says that it was when she eventually met people, after she left her first employer, that she began to muster up more strength to speak up against abusive conditions. Being denied the right to leave the house dehumanizes MDWs, assigning them to this role 24 hours a day, often without defined working hours or breaks that allow them to be outside of their workplaces. These systemic and workplace violations that MDWs experience put women in precarious and isolating conditions that frequently lead them to need urgent financial, medical, or legal support.

The violations and injustices that derive from exploitative policies do not only manifest in the work lives of MDWs; they also seep into social spaces and are behind many of the experiences of exclusion MDWs face in Lebanon. The 'domestic worker' role and identity that is assigned to migrant women relates to them being perceived as outsiders to society and the subsequent implication that they should be treated as second-class citizens. As Aisha puts it, "Even if you are here for fifty years, you feel like a foreigner."

All the admins reported experiencing this. For example, Sara told us a story about how she was shopping and found a dress for her daughter. A Lebanese customer walked into the shop and told her that she needs that dress for her own daughter, expressing that it was only logical that she get priority over Sara, because Sara is an "*ajnabiyeh* [foreigner/migrant]." Sara bought the dress in the end, with intervention from the manager, but it is important to note that such endings are the exception rather than the rule.

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50. The 2006 July War in Lebanon led many Lebanese people to flee their houses, seeking safer shelter.

Similarly, Maryam spoke of how she is consistently treated as inferior, particularly in public taxis, where drivers always drop off Lebanese passengers first, even if she was first to get in. Likewise, Rahel spoke of how when she goes to restaurants with her employer, she is ignored. Dani once was met with surprise when picking up a package from the post office, with the cashier saying “Oh! You as well!” as if it is a wonder that he can be receiving mail. TG and Maryam brought up the fact that in many pools and beaches around Lebanon, MWs are forbidden from swimming in the same waters as Lebanese. As Rahel puts it, “[Why don’t they swim with me?] I am a migrant domestic worker, I am not clean? *It is because of me that they are clean!*” Throughout the research, Leyla, Aisha, and Rahel made analogies to being treated “worse than animals,” by both authorities and society. Aisha says, “I can’t tell you they treat us like dogs, because dogs are treated with respect.”

### Cheap labor and dehumanization in Lebanon

The dehumanizing experiences that the admins go through largely result from the way in which the local economy relies on domestic work as cheap labor in a way that exploits MDWs and reduces them to the work role they perform, in a context where their work is not legally recognized. A significant aspect of why MDWs are not seen as workers is because their work takes place in what is considered the personal/private ‘domestic sphere’, while ‘work’ is usually assigned to what is seen as the directly profit-generating public sphere.<sup>51</sup> These notions have been historically reinforced by gendered norms, which tend to assign women to the domestic sphere (to domestic/care work) and men to the public sphere. As such, domestic work is devalued and seen as women’s work<sup>52</sup> - and in Lebanon, as migrant women’s work,<sup>53</sup> making it racialized, gendered, and cheap labor.

This is reinforced by a system that prioritizes profit-generation over the rights of MDWs, which is rooted in the way the Lebanese economy was being shaped at the time MDWs began migrating to Lebanon. Throughout and following the Lebanese civil war, the recruitment of foreign non-Arab DWs became a booming business. To a large extent, this was part of the larger trend of Lebanon’s post-war reconstruction economy, where the consumer economy was prioritized over the production industry.<sup>54</sup> As a result, cheap labor became evermore necessary for the middle class (who largely make up the MDW employer demographic) to maintain their capacity to consume, and for the state to economically sustain itself.

The state’s ability to exploit MDWs for cheap labor is reinforced by their exclusion from the labor law, as well as existing sponsorship policies in Lebanon that (attempt to) fix MDWs to a position of perpetual temporariness through their ‘three-sponsor limit’. These policies are made to ensure that, legally, an MDW’s time in Lebanon is limited, and is only linked to the labor she performs. Normalizing these ideas in policy reinforces gendered racism in society, and contributes to the perception of MDWs as foreigners who will and must eventually ‘go home.’ These many dynamics maintain a strict segregation between citizens and non-citizens, and reinforce the notion of migrant domestic labor as temporary, cheap, and easily exploitable.

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51. ‘The logic of gender: On the separation of spheres and the process of abjection, *Endnotes*, issue 3, 2013, retrieved from: <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender>

52. Parrenas, *Migrant Filipina domestic workers and the international division of reproductive labor*

53. Kassamali, *Migrant Worker Lifeworlds of Beirut*

54. J Chaaban, ‘Our small, dependent economy’, *Executive Magazine*, 20 February 2015, retrieved from: <http://www.executive-magazine.com/author/jad-chaaban>

## II. The formation of Mesewat: “No option but to support each other”

It has become clear throughout this report that the state does not provide the kind of social protection and access to justice that MDWs have the right to. As Rita says, “Foreigners are not valued. [...] I can’t file a complaint because I’m foreign. [...] They are treating us unjustly. If [they knew I could file a complaint], they wouldn’t do this.”

Considering the known limits to accessing justice from the Lebanese state, the admins expressed that it was also the church, Ethiopian state, and Ethiopian consulate’s responsibility to address violations and amend their policies to prevent them. However, these institutions also neglect this responsibility, which ultimately led to Mesewat admins feeling that they should take it upon themselves:

The church is obliged to help these people. The church is obliged, and the embassy is obliged. You know? But they don’t work. [So] we didn’t tie our hands and sit down. *Khalas* [enough], since they didn’t work, we will work.” (Leyla)

Dani describes that MDWs are left with little options for support. This drove the admins, all in a position where their more difficult experiences and obstacles working in Lebanon had been overcome, to feel like they should provide help if they could. Dani says, “There is no one to support or advise us. We have to support each other.” Leyla brings this back to her own experience, saying, “If there was a group like [Mesewat], it would have made it easier for me.” Aisha adds that Mesewat as a space of mutual support is important, because in her experience, MDWs sometimes find it difficult to approach each other, because there is an assumption that “they are approaching with problems.” This points to two things - the extent to which MDWs having “problems” is normalized to the point where it becomes a fear and a barrier for women to meet each other, and the need for a community to create a space where MDWs feel comfortable approaching each other, for “problems” or otherwise. For Leyla and the other admins, the lack of support during their most difficult experiences played a big role in them feeling the urge to create a group that acts as a structure providing an alternative form of support where state and religious institutes are failing to do so.

In fact, the admins expressed that it was their ethical, religious, and cultural duty to take on this care. This is reflected in the meaning of the word ‘Mesewat’ itself: as Rahel explains, “Mesewat means if you have something small, you share with others.” This definition is enacted as a key value within the group. Aisha says, “I’m healthy, I can work. If I don’t help, I’m not a person.” She adds to this the affective element of empathy, saying “If you hurt, I hurt. This is [what it means to be] a person.” Dani also describes how the kind of support Mesewat provides is custom in Ethiopia. He speaks of two practices that involve communal financial support - one similar to a loan without interest, and the other comparable to an insurance-like system. In both cases, it is the people themselves who contribute financially to provide for those who need it. For Mesewat, it is important to work through a community structure rather than individually because - as Dani puts it - “Two people will shout as much as they can. But ten people is louder than two.”

Mesewat members formed their community not only as a response to the lack of institutional protection, but also because of the need for a space of mutual emotional support and cultural belonging in a context where MDWs are often isolated. Rahel says, “Especially the holiday, nobody has a place to go [...]. Mesewat brings for all happiness [during the] holidays.” Recognizing the cultural significance of being together, Dani adds, “In Ethiopia, there is a culture of living with the people. So that social life, if we can create it here [...] it is good in my opinion.”

Building friendship and kinship through community is also key; as Maryam says, “[For] me in my life, I found people in Mesewat until the end. Until the end, until I die, I wouldn’t leave.” Dani reiterates the importance of this kinship, saying that he feels that Mesewat members are his own family, “because even when [...] sometimes in your own life you feel sad, when [Mesewat members see me] they are feeling just like me, asking me [how I am]... nobody asks me except them.”

Aisha expands on these ideas to bring in the aspect of community as a space of feeling whole: “[Community] is very important. Imagine people [in Lebanese society] look at you like you’re a snake. The society here really needs to change. [They don’t accept me] because I’m here ‘just to work.’” As such, Mesewat was also formed to create an alternate social environment where MDWs are recognized beyond their role as workers, and are perceived as people rather than “snakes,” “donkeys,” or “dogs,” as the admins referred to several times.

## MESEWAT

### I. Mesewat’s work scope

#### “Ethiopian women are helping each other”

The objectives of Mesewat are wide in scope. As a group, they advocate for change through direct action and awareness-raising; they develop their knowledge through information sharing and education; they provide a space of social and cultural belonging through building friendships and organizing activities, trips, get-togethers, and celebrations; and they support each other in adapting to migration and life in Lebanon.

One of the most important aspects of their work, as expressed by the admins, is the financial and medical support they provide to women who have been abused in their workplace, especially to women who are undocumented and/or have no other support systems. This includes visiting hospitals to check on women and ensure they are being taken care of, paying hospital or medical fees if need be, paying for tickets for women to return to Ethiopia, and visiting prisons where women have been detained to check on their conditions. They also sometimes do conflict mediation between employers and employees.

To protest the Lebanese and Ethiopian state policies that enable these conditions, Mesewat engages in direct and more long-term political activism. They lobby their own state and consulate to address the Lebanese state’s violations, they do advocacy and awareness-raising around the Kafala system, and they organize protests and actions. They also build their internal knowledge and capacities by educating each other about the Kafala system and their rights, as well as methods of doing case support, outreach, and direct action. Circulating this information internally strengthens the group’s strategy of working and mobilizing - as Dani says, “[Information] has a big power, better than money.” They also want to provide information to women in Ethiopia considering migration to Lebanon. They primarily do this through their branch in Ethiopia, and through their wide-reaching Facebook page.

Finally, Mesewat has allowed for strong bonds of friendship to arise. These bonds make Mesewat a community that is not only a direct response to the abuses of the Kafala system, but one that creates relationships that are meaningful and necessary in the admins' lives. The care they have for each other is also reflected in shared discussions they have around culture, migration, and reintegration. Dani explains how important it is to preserve Ethiopian culture within the group, because the life in Lebanon affects workers' habits and norms in ways that pose a problem for reintegration when they go back to Ethiopia. This was understood not as an attack on cultural hybridity, but rather as a concern that stems from the implicit assumption that workers will return - if not by choice, then by force. While of course many women stay without the intention of returning, the admins saw it part of their care duty to encourage women to think about this aspect of migration. Their branch in Ethiopia plays a role in this, with the admins there being returnees themselves.

Dani says that the different kinds of work they do cannot be ranked in order of priority, because the issues that MDWs face all stem from the same governing system. However, many of the admins said that their cases were the most urgent, because it often involves saving lives. A lot of their most memorable moments were when they worked with women who had been physically and medically in very poor health, whom they were either able to support, or sadly lost. This indicates the ways that Mesewat values MDWs' individual lives in the face of a system that sees them as worthless.

However, this did not necessarily reflect an explicit prioritization of case support. In fact, when asked, each admin had a different answer for why a community like theirs should exist: for Rahel, it was awareness-raising for Lebanese and Ethiopian people alike; for Maryam, it was mutual knowledge sharing; for Rita, it was the urgent need for support of all kinds; for TG, it was the ways in which "[community] lessens the bad things"; for Aisha, it was the need for belonging; and for Dani, it was cultural preservation. In order to understand how Mesewat carries out this work, the structure of the community group will be described below.

## II. Mesewat's structure

Because me and Rahel created this group, they made us ['main' admins]. We realized that we can create different [hubs in different areas in Lebanon], so we needed an admin of the admins [a coordinator], because it needs to be centralized. [...] They selected me by vote. (Dani)

Having sub-groups around the country is important for the work they do - they do not want to centralize their work in one place, and as Maryam says, it is not always accessible or affordable to commute. This structure takes into account the needs and logistics of their activist work under their working conditions.

The process of becoming a Mesewat member requires attending meetings, participating in the work, and following the bylaws for 6 months. Once a potential member does this, they can 'register' with Mesewat by filling in a form with some basic information, gaining the same responsibilities and decision-making power as everybody else. Membership entails a monthly donation of \$10, but only if the member feels they have the means. This contributes to their work, such as buying food, clothes, plane tickets, or medical costs, or funding their events and activities. Members also contribute to Mesewat by participating in decision-making, proposing new ideas, supporting or carrying out case



support, helping out in events and activities, providing valuable contacts and information through their networks, or donating food or clothes if they can. The active work that members contribute is, in the admins' opinions, more important than the financial contribution. As Rahel says, "Only a good heart. I don't want anything [more]. You come, [if] you have money, you pay 10\$. [If] you don't, [then we just need] your mind."

While there is structure in coordination and membership, the admins all stressed that this does not imply the presence of a simple hierarchy in power. Rahel and Dani, as 'main' admins, take care of coordinating all of Mesewat, are responsible for managing money, and oversee Mesewat's work to ensure it is running smoothly. According to them they do not have greater decision-making power than other admins, although Leyla explains that part of their role is to 'approve' the actions that the other admins decide to take in their work. However, she goes on to describe this more as a habit than a rule, due to Rahel and Dani's long-term experience with and knowledge about community organizing. This implies that they have informal decision-making power through the trust that the other admins have in their leadership. Mesewat values democratic and consensus-based decision making, and all ideas are proposed to all admins, as well as to each relevant sub-group. As such, all admins and members have a say in the decision-making process, where they aim to reach consensus. If there are disagreements or strong objections to a particular decision, the admins vote on the matter. Their dedication to democratic voting means that, in general, tensions do not arise from these disagreements - and if they do, the admins asserted that they discuss the issue openly and honestly until it is resolved.

For each of Mesewat's sub-groups, there is a WhatsApp group where coordination and conversations take place. There is another group for all the admins, where most of the decision-making takes place. The admins highly encourage each other and the members to participate in discussions, especially where important decisions must be made. They emphasized that the communication in the group is transparent, honest, and clear. For example, all payments made by admins are shared over WhatsApp through images of receipts and statements about what the payment was for and why it was made. In the bylaws there are also communication rules to ensure that the WhatsApp groups remain primarily for work purposes, so conversations do not get lost, and the admins have established processes of conflict mediation and accountability that they have tried and tested successfully.

Mesewat members mobilize and outreach to MDWs through networks that they build with other MDWs, NGOs, and other community groups. The admins also rely on social media, where they share posts, updates, and 'go live.'<sup>55</sup> Their live videos largely consist of sharing information, and engaging in discussions around culture, behavior, and coping or adaptation strategies in the context of migration and marginalization. They also outreach through activities or open events, such as trips around Lebanon, where their visibility helps them reach both Ethiopian and Lebanese people. One example Dani gives that symbolizes the value of their visibility is that during one of their trips, members were picking up garbage on the coast while wearing t-shirts with their logo. This encouraged a representation of MDWs that is read as positive, challenging stereotypes held by the Lebanese public. Mesewat also mobilizes through their activism, during protests, and by making demands to the Ethiopian and Lebanese states.

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55. An option that allows users to share a live video on Facebook.

Although there is no active gender distinction in terms of membership, Dani is one of only three men in Mesewat. A couple of the admins joked that having him 'is more than enough,' and there were mixed feelings about the participation of men more broadly. On the one hand, some admins, including Dani, thought that men are not as invested, responsible, or hard-working enough, partly because the Kafala system does not affect them the same way it does women. The women admins also felt that women are generally stronger, more committed, more caring, and therefore more prepared to do this work. On the other hand, some admins would like to have more men participate, mostly saying that gender does not matter, and the more support the merrier. Maryam and Aisha's thoughts on men's participation was strategic: because men tend to have more free time, because they are generally safer from sexual and other forms of harassment, and because they are often taken more seriously than women, they would be able to carry out work that is difficult or unsafe for women to do, such as emergency cases, nighttime cases, or 'doing business' and creating connections with people who trust men more - notably, including the Ethiopian consulate. Although it seems the admins are contesting the idea that "Ethiopian women are helping each other," as quoted above, it can be argued that men's participation would not impact the core of the group's work and strategies, which center women's individual safety and well-being, as well as their collective belonging and care for each other.

### III. Mesewat's challenges

#### Internal challenges

Mesewat is in many ways organized, strategic, and effective; however, there remain internal challenges that are yet to be overcome. One key issue the admins are currently facing are the leadership dynamics in Mesewat. While Dani and Rahel were nominated to be the two 'main' admins of the group because of their activist history, their founding of Mesewat and its bylaws, their experience, and their more flexible time, both are now gradually more busy. The other admins we spoke to felt that the adopted structure, where Rahel and Dani oversee actions and decisions taken, was no longer efficient. As such, they felt that they should adjust to new ways of working - Leyla says:

There are very nice groups who wait for their own admins, not for Rahel and Dani. This is very nice, and we're learning from them. [...] For example, my group, if I say something, [members] listen. They got used to it, that instead of Rahel, I came.

While most admins did not suggest for new 'main' admins to be voted in, Dani did express that he would like somebody else to take over his place so that other members can gain more experience. However, his position was seen by some as complying with and making a good use of cultural gender roles; some members appreciated that as a man, his movement and time are more flexible under the gendered Kafala system, which can be useful in maintaining sustainable leadership for the group. However, this is beginning to clash with his increasingly busy schedule, and the admins expressed the need to engage in renewed conversations around leadership.

Dani himself brought up the idea of a new leadership structure altogether that would encourage all members to be leaders. It is important to note that while this is a challenge now, the leadership structure, at another point in time, was a strength. This points to the fact that people's own circumstances are reflected in the work, implying that the internal structures of community groups such as Mesewat must be regularly negotiated to ensure that it is benefiting, rather than limiting, the group and its work.

Another commonly-expressed challenge is Mesewat admins' and members' limited free time, energy, and movement as DWs in Lebanon. This means that they cannot always engage with Mesewat's work. For members this has resulted in a lack of participation, commitment, and communication that disrupts their capacity to carry out work, as well as their internal structure - for example, the democratic decision-making processes that rely on open communication, or the mutual contribution of ideas and information. Some admins felt that they were left in a position of needing to pull members along, almost "mothering" them (in their words), which they resented. They also spoke about how many members are now leaving the country, and they discussed how their own capacities can be affected by the emotional burden that comes with working on cases. Maryam and Leyla recognized that there are periods in time where energy will be low because of this, which they felt conflicts with the urgency of the work that they do. For these reasons, they expressed the need for new outreach and mobilization strategies to motivate current members and to recruit new ones.

Rahel and Dani's limited time due to their busy schedules was particularly challenging for some admins, not only because of the issues it poses on leadership and decision-making, but also for the effects it has on their ability to further share their knowledge and experience with the group. For example, they are often the ones able to attend trainings, meetings, and workshops, and they have even travelled for these things; Rahel attended an 8-month program in India, and Dani went to a conference in Berlin. However, some admins felt that they have not been updated enough about these trips, and feel frustrated because the experiences and networks Rahel and Dani gained could very much help the group's work.

### **Structural limitations and state-imposed challenges**

According to the admins, the external challenges they face stem primarily from the inability to legally register Mesewat as an organization or a group. Aside from Lebanon's limitations on migrant community organizing, the admins discuss how their own consulate is not agreeing to officially recognize them. They say that this is because many members criticize the consulate for not being supportive or protective of Ethiopian MDWs in Lebanon, and because the consulate knows that Mesewat is assuming a large part of its responsibility and somehow feels threatened by this. If they were to gain their consulate's recognition and support, their work as a group would be made much easier, as they would have diplomatic backing in the face of any challenges from the Lebanese state. Being unregistered and unrecognized makes the admins feel at constant risk of being targeted by the state. The admins, as any MDW, might be subject to spontaneous questioning by General Security officers on the street, who can exercise their authority by contacting a worker's sponsor to confirm her employment with them, her right to be out of the house, or the reasons for which she is out. Following an incident where somebody reported Dani to GS for trafficking after he was visibly following up on a case in a hospital, he was interrogated about his community organizing and whether he makes money from people. He explained to the authorities that Mesewat is a WhatsApp group, and that all money is donation-based fundraising to support individual MDWs in difficult situations - this is true, and not (supposedly) punishable by law. However, the state can easily misconstrue this if it so wishes.

The lack of registration also limits Mesewat's access to certain spaces. For example, not being backed by an organization means that admins can easily be barred from entering spaces necessary for their work - such as hospitals, prisons, or shelters. Maryam gives the example of an MDW who was in the hospital and whose employer was a GS officer. He refused to let Maryam in to check on her. In cases like this, admins are put in situations where they must negotiate with authorities, potentially putting themselves at risk.

Being unable to register significantly limits the work Mesewat is able to carry out. For instance, opening a shelter is one of Mesewat's goals; however, without registration, this is simply impossible. They are also unable to expand to become more financially self-sustaining, so as not to rely on personal donations, especially from MDWs; for example, several admins mentioned wanting to open a shop or a cafe to raise money for Mesewat, but this is not doable. Furthermore, despite their close work with ARM and other local organizations, the lack of registration also makes collaboration with international organizations more difficult. For example, the admins mentioned that working with Lawyers Without Borders as well as the Global Alliance for Ethiopia has not been possible because of this. Moreover, because they cannot easily receive grants, they cannot easily contribute financially to joint projects if and when they collaborate.

Being unregistered poses another financial limitation: it makes Mesewat ineligible for grants, which limits their funding opportunities, and thus their ability to carry out projects that require a larger budget. They have mitigated this before by organizing fundraisers with supporters and allies, which allows them to receive donations beyond those from their members, when they need it. The challenge with this, however, is finding the capacity to manage the money and the projects without having acquired all the technical skills needed for project implementation. This limits their ability to expand their work, and points to the problem of access to information and resources.

The challenges regarding access to information and resources is not limited to fundraising opportunities. Despite the efforts of some Mesewat admins, ARM/MCC coordinators, and other organizations, many of the admins and the members still have limited access to knowledge about the Kafala system and their rights. This is partly due to language barriers, as well as limitations to their ability to attend activities that could help build their knowledge, in part caused by employer-imposed restrictions on MDWs' time and movement, and in part by the too few accessible resources and trainings extended to MDWs. However, it is also a result of the almost intentional ambiguity of the Kafala system, which limits the ability of MDW activists to develop their own political discourse and analysis of the oppression they face. This sometimes creates weaknesses or gaps in the demands that MDWs make. Despite these factors, and with support from NGOs, Mesewat is one group that was able to develop a relatively comprehensive set of policy recommendations. However, even when activist MDWs are able to partially overcome these barriers, they still face challenges in being included in conversations about MDW rights. As it stands now, most civil society organizations continue to take the lead on these issues without enough meaningful collaboration with MDWs themselves. There are groups who do prioritize MDW self-advocacy,<sup>56</sup> but these groups remain as the exception rather than the rule.

This links to another challenge Mesewat faces: the lack in further collaboration with local organizations. They expressed that they want to see more efforts put to support their case services (which would improve their access to hospitals and legal support) as they feel that this cooperation could be stronger. They also expressed the need for more capacity building around community organizing and leadership in order to gain the knowledge and skills that would allow them to expand their reach and the scope of their work. Aisha brought up a training MCC once gave about how to deal with a conflict taking place in the street, which she found extremely useful. Dani mentioned that he feels that MDW activists are not always taken seriously by organizations, and that most organizations only provide specific case-based

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56. ARM and Dammeh Cooperative are some of the groups that actively support MDW-led initiatives and communities by providing them a space to meet for their various activities, from personal, to community-oriented, to political. IDWF (International Domestic Workers Federation) also actively supports MDW community groups. KAFA is one of the NGOs that makes an effort to include MDWs in their work by providing significant legal and social services, and supported MDW-led group NARI when they were active.

services rather than a holistic, strategic, and direct approach for MDW rights. The admins cited that while overall they do feel supported by local NGOs, they do not feel that NGOs have yet been able to effect significant changes in the country regarding their rights. However, Aisha notes that the Lebanese state might be playing a role in why NGO efforts have been limited in this scope.

### Analysis: Silencing of activism

With the Lebanese state's incentives to keep MDWs as cheap and temporary labor, it can be argued that it is in the state's interest to subdue any attempts that can effectively jeopardize this. Exclusion from the labor law means that there are limited legal ways for MDWs to contest their conditions. Because they are not able to form a union and are limited in other forms of organizing, the possibilities are extremely limited for MDWs to effectively demand their rights for a safe and fair migration system. The onus then lies on MDWs and their organizational and activist allies to find strategic methods that would work for and ensure safety, protection, and justice.

GS's reaction to MDW activists is unpredictable. In some rare cases, individual GS officers have been quite helpful; Rahel describes how the officers she meets at the prison she visits for case support have assisted her in gaining access. However, much more often, activists are either ignored and not taken seriously, or face very harsh reactions. These range from interrogation and physical beating, to detention, the denial of fair trial, and deportation,<sup>57</sup> making clear that migrants who dare speak up will be met with punishment and an exertion of control. Dani, who himself faced physical violence while in interrogation, put this idea into his words:

[In Lebanon], if you are a well-known activist, the government will see you as a threat for their citizens. Because we are talking about human rights. If you are talking every time about human rights, it means there is a problem [...]. Why we are shouting if there is nothing? We are asking [for] our freedom and our rights. [...] So they will not let me stay here, they will deport me.

While there is no standard treatment of activists by GS, the fact remains that they hold the authority to deport them whenever they see fit. The case of Sujana and Roja's deportations exemplifies this: both women were members of the DW's union and both had valid residency and work permits - but they were accused on several accounts, including their participation in the union and other activist groups such as NARI.<sup>58</sup> More notably, GS issues its own deportation orders, meaning it has the power to deport MDWs before an order is given by court.<sup>59</sup> The erratic reaction of GS to MDW activism is taken into consideration by activist MDWs and their allies, who must 'make-do' with the situation, meaning that they are continually taking risks throughout their work.

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57. Global Detention Project, 'Lebanon immigration detention profile', *Country Detention Reports*, Global Detention Project, 22 February 2018

58. International Domestic Workers Federation, 'Caught at the cross-roads: Nepalese domestic worker activists in Lebanon fight Kafala's ruthlessness, heartless human traffickers and a network of corrupt officials', *International Domestic Workers Federation*, 8 March 2017, retrieved from: <http://idwfed.org/en/updates/caught-at-the-cross-roads-nepalese-domestic-worker-activists-in-lebanon-fight-Kafalas-ruthlessness-heartless-human-traffickers-and-a-network-of-corrupt-officials>

59. Anti-Racism Movement, 'Assaulted, imprisoned, deported: Shamila's story - An all-too-familiar violent narrative facing migrant women in Lebanon', *Anti-Racism Movement*, 17 July 2018, retrieved from: <https://www.armlebanon.org/content/assaulted-imprisoned-deported-shamila%E2%80%99s-story-%E2%80%93-all-too-familiar-violent-narrative-facing>



When GS reacts harshly to activists, we notice how their activism can be taken out of the context of workers' rights and freedom of speech and placed within the framework of non-legal and foreign political dissent. Framed this way, MDWs' activism can easily be deemed a violation questioning the political power of the state as non-citizens. The state has framed efforts for labor rights under this light before, particularly in the context of Palestinian workers.<sup>60</sup> In the case of MDWs, migrant women are deemed as non-citizens, are not recognized as workers, and are not taken seriously in their political voice and demands. Being mostly governed by General Security, rather than by a labor institution like the Ministry of Labor, is another clear demonstration of how MDWs are currently systematically dealt with as subjects of state security rather than as labor migrants. Thus, MDWs' political dissent is often recognized by GS as a threat to its current jurisdictions rather than as a violation of a law.

## IV. Overcoming challenges

Leyla emphasized the need for constant awareness and self-reflection in organizing work, and encourages both admins and members to directly address any issue or challenge they face. She spoke in depth about the leadership issues Mesewat is currently facing, recognizing that this cannot be resolved without conversation and action. This refers back to Mesewat's value of transparency and clarity in their communication; to be able to carry out such conversations productively, the admins acknowledged that there is a level of trust and honesty that must be established. In fact, several admins noted that they have seen other community groups fall apart in their work and structures because they lacked these values. This dedication to establishing solid internal dynamics is one of the ways that Mesewat is able to navigate their working methods around and within the Kafala system.

Another strength they have is the connections they've built with organizations that support them. While it is not always accessible for MDWs who would like to organize to be in touch with helpful civil society organizations, the fact remains that maintaining these support networks gives Mesewat an advantage in accessing needed resources and experience. "This Is Lebanon" - a group of activists advocating for accountability and justice for MDWs through social media - was mentioned by Dani as a group that helped him understand how to better mobilize through social media tools. Furthermore, because of the close alliance relationships some Mesewat members have with members of ARM, they have been invited to attend workshops, conferences, and meetings that are relevant to their work. In addition, Mesewat received volunteer assistance that helped them draft applications for workshops which resulted in Rahel and Dani getting the chance to attend events related to community work outside of Lebanon. This kind of backing is a significant strength for Mesewat since it can provide them with access to needed space, protection, connections, experience, training, and ideas. Mesewat has also made itself known in various spaces, including their own consulate. Through this, they have met other community groups and have not been alone in criticizing the consulate's lack of responsibility, protection, and accountability. The media is another space where Mesewat - especially Rahel - has appeared several times, particularly to discuss the conditions that MDWs are living in Lebanon. Rahel acknowledges the risk that this puts her in, but her commitment to the work outweighs this:

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60. D Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2013



In a world [where] you are silent, you don't have any change. You die, you shout. You're angry, you shout. You feel something [is in a] bad way, you shout, so you come back better, or you die. Maybe I die, maybe I come back better. [...] If you are invisible, nobody knows anything.

While she was indeed lucky to find a very supportive sponsor and organizations that backed Mesewat, her and the other admins' dedication to speaking up and pursuing their work has strengthened the group enormously - if not externally, then at the very least in their internal dynamics, work ethic, and spirit.

Mesewat's visibility, connections, and hard work has also allowed them to be positively-regarded by some other communities in Lebanon. While Aisha and TG said that they have indeed faced some tensions with other MDWs who were skeptical of their group because they suspected it to be an exclusive or politically-affiliated group, they both emphasized that this is the exception rather than the rule. They said that most Ethiopian MDWs and community groups that know Mesewat believe that it does great work and know that Mesewat is not 'political'.<sup>61</sup> They also mentioned how their work received encouragement from their employers and for some Lebanese people they met. Addis brought up how she even receives calls from Lebanese people seeking help for an MDW they know. According to Rita, this is due to the manner in which they conduct their work: "I think [we are successful] because we are working 'right'. We are working to really help people." This reception of their group and work reinforces the strength of the community they have created and indicates that their work and the strategies they use are able to garner trust from different actors.

There is also an affective element to why they felt their group was strong. Their values of motivation, commitment, responsibility, and mutual respect were emphasized throughout the project. Aisha recommends for members of other groups pursuing a similar goal as Mesewat to get to know each other properly, to have a shared dream and a specific aim, and to care about their work and the people they work with. Rita elaborated on that by saying: "[group work] needs contentment [with the work], understanding, and love. And respect. And it all works itself out. Only money [for work] is necessary. But everything else [you have to do] voluntarily." Through these insights and many others, we recognized how Mesewat's shared values and strong personal relationships are part of what keeps their group and work cohesive and alive. This links back to the importance of the community aspect of their work, and to Dani's point that the issues they work on are deeply interlinked. While their cases might be urgent, they would not be able to carry it out in the exceptional survivor-centered way they do without the support system and trust that they have built through being a strong community.

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61. Being 'political' here is often invoked in reference to the possibility of them being affiliated with any local political party or group that is located in Ethiopia.

### *MDW activism and ‘safe and fair migration’ in Lebanon*

If Lebanon is to adopt SFM strategies and policies, working with groups like Mesewat and other human rights defenders is a crucial place to start. This point was, in fact, brought up at the GCM conference mentioned earlier in the report. According to the meeting coverage from one of the sessions,

Cynthia Chidiac [a human rights defender representing Lebanon] said human rights defenders are a powerful factor for change in Member States [of the GCM], helping to build strong, cohesive and democratic societies in which dissent enriches public discourse. However, they are challenged on their own human rights and in their ability to move freely, to assemble and to express their opinions in free and protected spaces. Reaffirming her country’s support to the Declaration, she underscored the role of civil society as an essential partner of her Government in promoting and enhancing human rights on every level.<sup>62</sup>

Chidiac’s point is in line with the findings of this report. She makes clear that the framework the state is currently engaging in, discussed in the context section of the report, is not comprehensive nor holistic enough. On the one hand, the state’s minimal engagement and reservations indicate that there remains a gap in its desire to expand its understanding of migration and the role of migrants in Lebanese society. On the other hand, the state’s individualistic approach to remedying the harms done by the Kafala system absolves itself of responsibility; it allocates the violations to individual employers or agencies that have ‘done wrong’ rather than to its own policies, which enable these harms.

Our research has not only shown what the unsafe and unjust aspects of migration are, but we have also seen how Mesewat, despite its challenges, has been successfully dealing with their consequences, and compiling the knowledge and the networks needed to understand how to advocate for SFM. This goes to show that migrant activists are in a position where they can collaborate with the state, NGOs, CSOs, activists, and key decision makers in a way that would strengthen the state’s implementation of SFM measures that can have long-term, systematic, beneficial effects.

It is important for these parties to work together because their diverse positions and perspectives can allow for a more comprehensive vision of SFM that goes beyond the minimal, individualized efforts the state is currently making. For instance, community groups can give insight into how migration systems affect MDWs on a daily basis, NGOs and CSOs can offer support in shaping state-targeted demands to take these factors into account, and the state can learn from this and use its power and its relationships to MDWs’ countries of origin to implement policy and system change.

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62. United Nations Meeting Coverage, ‘General assembly endorses first-ever global compact on migration, urging cooperation among member states in protecting migrants’, *General Assembly, Plenary, Seventy-Third Session, 60<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup> Meetings*, United Nations, 19 December 2018, para. 86, retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ga12113.doc.htm>

If the state did not penalize or incriminate activist organizing, groups like Mesewat could continue doing their work in a way that is more effective and efficient, which could occur alongside the state's own SFM protection mechanisms. Having both parties work in parallel would decrease the pressure on each, while also complementing each other. Community groups can continue working directly with MDWs, engaging in community building and advocacy, lobbying their own states and consulates or embassies, and doing working on cases with support from organizations and the state when needed. The state, meanwhile, can ensure that MDWs live and work in decent working conditions, are being protected by accountability mechanisms, are receiving care when need be, and have access to justice, and can pressure countries of origin to implement protective policies as well. With the right SFM mechanisms in place, the state's and employers' labor violations and human rights abuses could decrease significantly, and if they were to occur, there would be accountability and justice while prioritizing workers' safety.

We cannot begin to build a safe and fair migration system without acknowledging that migrant women are the ones who are most harshly targeted by the system. A significant aspect of why the migration system in Lebanon leads to frequent abuse and exploitation is because it is embedded in structures that reinforce gendered and racialized notions of domestic work, citizenship, and migration. DWs are, in essence, care workers who are performing tasks that social norms have deemed feminine, and through that association, have become devalued; we have seen this through how the state prioritizes DWs cheap labor over their human rights, and how DWs are excluded from the labor law, formally not recognizing domestic work as work. If systemic change towards SFM is to occur, it must take this into account. This requires accountability processes and protection mechanisms that actively acknowledge how certain violations are gendered, such as the frequent sexual abuse that MDWs are subject to without the accessible possibility of legal recourse, or the expectation that DWs should also provide care services such as looking after children and the elderly. This also applies on a social level: efforts need to be made to address the gendered racism that occurs in society through, for example, advocacy and education that acknowledges gender and racial power dynamics. Again, working with civil society actors and MDW activists can greatly benefit the state in this through their knowledge, experience, and advocacy skills. In essence, we need to put into practice the changes we want to see.

For this holistic vision of SFM to be achieved, the state needs to shift its perspective from seeing MDW activists as a potential threat to seeing them as workers whose collective demands help develop the domestic work sector for it to be better and more safely governed. It needs to recognize that by challenging, silencing, and threatening activists, it is only making conditions more precarious for MDWs because it is targeting those who are currently doing a large chunk of the work necessary to ensure safety and protection. The state and the Lebanese population must also reimagine MDWs' presence and the social spaces they have carved out in Lebanon, and must recognize their embeddedness in the social fabric of Lebanese society that they are important, valuable, and full members of.<sup>63</sup> While this may initially seem unrelated to SFM, we understand it to be at its very core. Unpacking the discrimination that MDWs face because of their gender, nationality, race, and work will allow us to see the extent to which unsafe and unjust migration systems are rooted in harmful social dynamics. This points to the fact that MDWs are a fundamental part of society who can help build safer and fairer migration on both systematic and social levels.

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63. Kassamali, *Migrant Worker Lifeworlds of Beirut*

## *The role of 'countries of origin'*

We saw throughout the findings that the Ethiopian state and its representatives also have a role to play in addressing and putting an end to the violations that Ethiopian MDWs experience in Lebanon. The Ethiopian state must ensure safety, justice, and protection for Ethiopian MDWs in Lebanon, beginning from the recruitment stages of migration that take place in Ethiopia. It too should work with Ethiopian MDW communities in Lebanon and returnees in Ethiopia to assess their needs and implement mechanisms to address them. It is difficult to say where Ethiopia stands in this moment with regards to this; its recently elected government seems to have taken a step towards such mechanisms through its strictly implemented deployment ban and its pressuring of the Lebanese state to sign the BLA. Considering this, Mesewat and other Ethiopian MDW activists were drafting a statement to their government at the time of writing.

## ► PROJECT OUTCOMES

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### *Mesewat's needs and the 'A' in FPAR*

Throughout our research, Mesewat admins expressed what they need and their expectations from this project. These included:

- Giving more visibility to their work
- Gaining support from ARM in a way that can address their challenges, which include financial support, legal and case support, and support in developing their organizing and leadership systems and strategies
- Voicing their needs to organizations, activists, and the state
- Voicing their recommendations to both the Ethiopian and the Lebanese states
- Collaborating more closely with ARM and other organizations in their work
- Having workshops and trainings on various political topics, including the intersection between feminism and the Kafala system
- Getting help in raising awareness around the injustices that MDWs face in their work and in their activism
- Developing knowledge around the Kafala system and activism

Considering this, we have developed action plans with Mesewat according to the various points they brought up. These action points will be implemented in the final stages of this FPAR, and will continue beyond the completion of the project.

### **Action points**

#### 1. Collaboratively developing an evaluation survey

This came early in the research project, during our second focus group discussion, where the researcher and participants collaboratively drafted a survey for Mesewat members. The survey is for Mesewat admins to better understand the needs and concerns of Mesewat members, in addition to their reflections on Mesewat's work and their involvement in the group. The admins expressed that this would help them improve their leadership, communication, and mobilization strategies to the benefit of their members and work. The researcher finalized the survey in English, Dani translated it to Amharic, and the survey was distributed to 80 Mesewat members.

## 2. Film screening: *Shouting Without a Listener*.

Our primary action plan is to host a film screening event of Rahel's film - which Leyla and Dani were also involved with - in a public theater hall. This will be an advocacy event aimed to raise awareness about the experiences that MDWs go through in Lebanon across a Lebanese audience, increase visibility for Mesewat and its work, and, in turn, provide an opportunity for organizations, activists, and the public to network and collaborate with them.

## 3. Knowledge building: Feminism and the Kafala system

ARM will organize training sessions that discuss the relationship between feminism and the Kafala system. This will work towards developing Mesewat's knowledge around how the Kafala system is gendered, and how they can incorporate feminism in their work, their demands, and their values.

## 4. Capacity building: Sustainable organizational development

ARM will work more closely with Mesewat to map and develop their organizing, leadership, outreach, and decision-making strategies in order to increase their structure, impact, and sustainability in a manner that is both person-centered and political.

## 5. Collaboration: Cross-movement activism and solidarity.

One action point that we would like to implement is to put Mesewat in touch with activists from other movements across Lebanon. This will allow for them to gain visibility across these groups, and raise awareness across a population that does not work closely on MDW rights, but that would like to support MDWs. This will also strengthen the cross-movement activism and solidarity in the country, which will in turn strengthen calls for justice across causes.

## 6. Mapping needs: Future action plans.

Based on this research, the researchers will map Mesewat's needs in order to develop sustainable and long-term collaboration and action plans between ARM and Mesewat. This will particularly include fundraising and capacity building for sustainable organizing, as these are the two points we feel are most urgent and least addressed. This mapping will result from an assessment based on the points raised throughout the report, as well as a final action-based focus group.

We also want to acknowledge all that we have learnt through Mesewat about community organizing. As such, part of the larger scale action-based takeaways of this research includes collaborating with Mesewat to support other groups who can learn from the experiences Mesewat has garnered over the years.



## *Supporting MDW-led groups in Lebanon*

Few unregistered groups or organizations working in such a restrictive context can be self-sustaining without backup and support, because the structural barriers are often too difficult for groups to overcome. As organizational and activist allies, there are many ways that we can put into practice the support that MDW activists need to propel their organizing and begin to overcome their challenges. Other actors, such as funding bodies, international organizations, and academics interested in supporting MDWs in their organizing can also learn from this in order to best serve the needs of MDW activists in their work. We must begin by listening first-hand to their needs.

Through this research, we have gained clearer insights regarding how NGOs, CSOs, and Lebanese activists can better work for MDWs' rights by supporting the self-organizing and self-advocacy of MDWs. The recommendations that we have developed from this research for individuals and groups looking to support MDW community organizers include:

- **Sharing knowledge with MDW community organizers in a sustainable way, such as through trainings and workshops that they can then give each other, including a thorough understanding of the Kafala system, relevant legal knowledge, and justice mechanisms**
- **Supporting in aspects of case support that MDW activists do not have the needed capacity or access to address, such as cases that require legal support, negotiation with authorities, or access to spaces that they are barred from**
- **Providing personalized context-based capacity and skills building for MDW activists to expand their mobilizing, such as trainings and strategies for social media, project implementation, outreach, event planning, public speaking, media appearances, fundraising events, and organizational management and strategies**
- **Collaborating with MDWs and listening to their needs in developing policy recommendations, statements, support programs and systems, case support strategies, lobbying efforts, or activities and workshops**
- **Providing practical support where time, money, or capacity may be a limitation for MDWs, such as materials for workshops; translation, editing, or writing where language is a barrier; or physical spaces for workshops or events**
- **Making efforts to bring community groups together, so that they can exchange their own resources and knowledge, and unite in their voices when making demands or lobbying the state**
- **Inviting MDW-led groups to relevant meetings, decision-making tables, conferences, workshops, and events, both as organizers and as participants**
- **Mediating between state actors or policy makers and MDWs by communicating MDWs' own perspectives and needs**
- **Connecting MDWs with international groups where possible, especially groups in their countries of origin, so that they can develop their cross-border mobilizing**

- Having registered organizations represent community organizers, where applicable, for example in cases where international organizations or funding bodies cannot work with unregistered groups
- Providing legal support for MDWs as well as legal action and litigation strategies to protect MDWs' freedom of speech and to guarantee their access to fair trial in case of deportation
- Supporting MDWs' advocacy and awareness raising efforts by collaborating where appropriate
- Mobilizing and raising awareness across networks and communities that MDWs do not have access to, such as NGOs' own allies and connections who do not necessarily work on or know about MDWs' rights

## *Looking 'in'*

In addition to the research findings, many of the points above stem from ARM's own experience working closely with MDW-led groups, including Mesewat. Through this research, we have gained insight into what action points we can continue to implement and what we should develop further. Part of the work we hope to continue doing, with both Mesewat and other groups, includes: giving trainings about different aspects of the Kafala system; providing a platform through which MDW community groups can meet each other; supporting MDW-led groups in cases and developing a joint case-support referral system; supporting MDW-led advocacy and awareness raising efforts; including MDWs in relevant meetings about their rights and advocacy; collaborating with MDWs to develop policy recommendations and demands; including activist MDWs in organizing protests and advocacy initiatives; and providing practical support where possible, such as physical space, volunteers, or materials for workshops. We hope to continue developing our abilities to support MDW-led groups, particularly in areas that relate to their organizational strength and sustainability. The outcomes of this research project are to be discussed and reflected upon by Mesewat, ARM staff, and hopefully other civil society organizations and MDW groups for their further development and implementation.

## ➤ CONCLUSION

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Through this FPAR project, we were able to work with Mesewat admins to understand the ways in which the Kafala system manifests in their daily life and how it affects their activist work. This brought together the structural and the personal aspects of migration systems and how they are experienced, which allowed us to develop an understanding of SFM that accounts for the centrality of MDW-led organizing. As such, the action points that were established as a result of this project will work towards benefiting Mesewat and other MDW-led groups' organizing and self-advocacy, in an effort to practice and encourage SFM as we understand it. Ultimately, we aim for this project to situate our local conceptualization of safer and more just migration systems that prioritize migrant women's right to organize within the broader, international discourse on SFM. Working as MDWs, dealing with cases of abuse on a daily basis, establishing wide community networks, being in contact with various NGOs, and lobbying their own state parties, the admins of Mesewat hold a lot of knowledge about migration systems in Lebanon. Their experiences reflect the system's workings in daily life, which manifest in ways that Mesewat, along with many human rights defenders, organizations, and activists, consider unsafe and unjust. The first-hand knowledge that Mesewat members - and so many other MDWs - have is invaluable for tackling the core of the abuse, exploitation, exclusion, and silencing of labor migrants because they understand aspects of the migration system that others cannot easily recognize. As such, experiences of MDWs as labor migrants can give us important insights regarding how to conceptualize and address SFM. This knowledge should be taken seriously and understood by the state as a call for safer and fairer labor conditions, social rights, and human rights. The state, as an entity that should protect all those living under its governance, should allow for activists to organize to understand how it can continuously improve its protection mechanisms.

Mesewat's work and strategies are politically symbolic; it is, in some sense, performing aspects of what it considers to be state responsibility. Firstly, Mesewat's work is somewhat of a statement as to what the state's mechanisms of protection could look like: Mesewat calls for health, safety, freedom of movement, and the right to belong where the Kafala system prioritizes cheap labor over human rights, endangering migrant women's lives and wellbeing. Moreover, the structure, decision-making, and communication strategies of Mesewat give members an emancipatory political power and voice that they are denied under the Kafala system. They are carving out their own spaces of political participation and actively defining and creating the systems and the methods that they believe should be in place. In the process, they, and so many other MDWs, are asserting their presence as valuable and legitimate residents of Lebanon who have a say in the structures that govern them. Finally, through its mobilizing, Mesewat is devising its own networks and communities under a system that does its best to keep people isolated. Through these networks, they are collectively making demands for policy change that can contribute to a framework for domestic labor migration that the state could adopt, if it were to take these demands seriously.

In essence, Mesewat can be understood to be providing a protective, deinstitutionalized system that exists alongside the institutionalized Kafala system under conditions that MDWs experience as unsafe and unjust. However, the challenges posed by the state keep Mesewat members exposed to the risks of criminalization, and this remains a constant underlying threat to their mobilizing and their work. The state's direct and indirect challenging and targeting of activist MDWs deters the achievement of safe and fair migration in Lebanon.

Mesewat has shown us that safety and justice for migrants needs to include information and transparency, protection, healthcare, decent labor conditions, access to justice including lawyers and fair trial, accountability mechanisms, freedom of movement, social inclusion, legal protection, a decoupling of residency from sponsorship, and the right to organize, among others. However, SFM must go beyond simple policy change to explore the social, political, and economic dynamics that have led to unsafe migration conditions for MDWs.

Our own adopted notion of SFM entails that states do not distinguish between citizens and non-citizens in guaranteeing their collective human rights, protection, and access to justice; do not exploit migrants based on race, gender, class, or nationality; take into account how policies affect migrants on a daily basis; and work alongside migrant communities and civil society actors to continuously assess and ameliorate their policies. We believe that this vision for SFM cannot be achieved without migrant voices and input, and that MW-led - particularly migrant women-led - activism has a key role in pushing SFM forward.

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