

# HISTORICIZING MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS' COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND CLASS STRUGGLE IN LEBANON



The Anti-Racism Movement is an Non-Governmental Organization (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.

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*We dedicate this research to the brave migrant women in Lebanon who are forging beautiful resilient communities in a deeply unjust world. We hope that this inspires further community-building work and greater recognition for the immense labor put into creating resourceful migrant-led community groups and organizations.*

## ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, migrant domestic workers have been coming to Lebanon and organizing themselves into community networks with the help of local activists and support organizations. Despite their social invisibility and poor treatment by much of Lebanese society, these workers created their own spaces of belonging. Recognizing that their work is undervalued and excluded from protections under the Lebanese labor law, they began advocating for better living and working conditions. However, they faced challenges, including state resistance to unionization and an overly nationalistic labor movement. From 2010, some Feminist NGOs in Lebanon offered greater support, but their approaches often focused narrowly on human rights violations and cases of abuse, such that they failed to recognize the issue as a wider working-class labor rights issue. These women workers achieved some successes, especially in regard to advocating for better consulate support and sustainable community-building, but they face stubborn obstacles like group disintegration, deportation risks, and challenges in organizing with people from diverse nationalities and backgrounds. This paper historicizes and analyzes the informal community organizing of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon in addition to providing recommendations and ways forward to support and strengthen their work.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>Methodology and Data Collection</b> .....	5
<b>The Emergence of Migrant Domestic Work in Lebanon</b> .....	6
History of Kafala in Lebanon and the Middle East .....	7
<b>Documenting the History of Migrant Domestic Workers’ Community Organizing in Lebanon (1980-2022)</b> .....	9
1980 to 1989 .....	9
1990 to 1999 .....	10
2000 to 2009 .....	11
2010 to 2019 .....	12
2020 to 2022 .....	15
<b>Reflections on Migrant Domestic Workers’ Community Organizing in Lebanon</b> .....	17
1. Overcoming the isolation of domestic work.....	17
2. Informality is a challenge to sustainability; formality is a challenge to group cohesion.....	17
3. Unionizing without a union: alternative tools for labor organizing.....	18
4. Honorary consulates generally work against the interests of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon .....	19
5. Finding a way to care for long-term community organizers as they age or get deported.....	19
6. “Harming the interests of Lebanese citizens” as the main reason to get deported .....	19
<b>Recommendations and Ways Forward</b> .....	21
<b>Looking Ahead</b> .....	23
<b>References</b> .....	24



*“For someone whose job is the hard work of caring for others, the misrecognition of her labor struck her as absurd.”*

-Kobaissy 2017

## INTRODUCTION

The work and lives of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon are governed by a legal framework called the Kafala (or sponsorship) system which links each worker to a specific sponsor/employer who is responsible for her labor conditions and residency status in the country. This system has been characterized by several organizations as ‘modern day slavery’. However, aside from such humanitarian and abuse-focused perspectives, there has not been much analysis of this system focusing on class relations and labor rights, which spotlight workers’ struggles against systemic exploitation. Caught between the practical challenges of community organizing on the one hand and overly romanticized representations of activism on the other hand, migrant domestic workers were nonetheless able to assemble small informal organizations. Aside from one historical account of migrant domestic workers attempting to form their own labor union (Kobaissy 2017), the broader history of their organizing efforts has not been significantly documented.

This project aims to present the first historical overview of community organizations and groups formed by migrant domestic workers from 1980 to 2022. Moreover, it analyzes the challenges and opportunities faced by these groups in order to help us understand the current situation and contribute to a stronger labor movement for migrant domestic workers’ rights.

At the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM), we have conducted a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) in 2019 on safe and fair migration with Mesewat, one of the largest Ethiopian community organizations in Lebanon. Building on the conclusions of that study, we expanded our scope to include informal groups led by other migrant women in Lebanon, in the hopes that this would help us and other interested individuals and groups better support their labor and feminist organizing efforts.

Moving beyond victimization, we engage with migrant domestic workers as community organizers and agents of change in Lebanon. We also move away from the individualization of abuse, instead recognizing it as a collective struggle against the systematic institutionalized abuses of the Kafala system. As such, we are wary of using the traditional human rights discourse, which has often failed to capture that migrant workers are in a collective struggle against the upper echelons of the Lebanese class structure. Amidst the racialization and internationalization of

domestic work in Lebanon, it is necessary to recognize the common struggles of different migrant-led groups, and to build linkages between migrant groups and the wider Lebanese working class. This is especially crucial given the spiraling socioeconomic conditions faced by many since the start of Lebanon’s economic crisis in late 2019.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This paper is based on research conducted in August and September 2023 with activist migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. The research team conducted literature reviews on the history of migrant domestic work in Lebanon, labor organizing and unions in the country, migrant-led groups, in addition to the links between migrant workers and the Lebanese economy and society.

Based on preliminary mapping of migrant domestic worker-led community groups that have previously or are currently operating in Lebanon, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 migrant domestic workers, including two who had been deported from the country. Interviews also included four allied activists who had been involved in leading and supporting different community organizing efforts in their communities in the country. Each interview lasted between 2 and 3 hours and explored the respondent’s community organizing work, motivations, and challenges, as well as opportunities that they see for the future. This material was used to create a timeline for the inception and development of the Kafala system in Lebanon and the Arab world to place these organizing efforts against the system they were created to fight, or survive.



## THE EMERGENCE OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORK IN LEBANON

Since the Lebanese civil war, Lebanon has relied on migrant workers to provide cheap labor under a *laissez-faire* economic model consisting of low taxation and minimal control on capital flows. Instead of a productive economic model based on supporting agriculture or industry, the Lebanese economy relied on developing its financial sector alongside trade, domestic consumption, and a limited service sector. In order to maximize profits under that model, commodities needed to be highly-priced with low production costs, which requires cheap and unpaid labor. In addition, hiring Syrian and other non-Lebanese workers would help employers avoid regulations imposed by the labor rights to which Lebanese workers are entitled, such as higher wages or social security subscriptions (Chalcraft 2006).

As for domestic work, Lebanese middle and upper-class families have traditionally recruited Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian women and young girls outside their patronage. This is best understood in the context of the devaluation of domestic and care work; the capitalist system does not consider “care labor” to be “productive labor”, despite the fact that it is required in order to reproduce the working class. Domestic work under capitalism is considered “indirectly market-mediated labor” (Endnotes 2013) which means that it needs to be done as cheaply as possible since it is not directly market-mediated like some other kinds of labor. This labor is thus relegated to people who might do it for free or for as cheaply as possible, thus feminizing domestic work and treating it as a gendered responsibility designated to women. With globalization, the phenomenon of “global care chains” emerged, as middle- and upper-class women who were empowered to enter the formal labor market in more developed nations relegated domestic work to other women from lower social classes (often migrant women). These migrant women, in turn, relegate the domestic work expected of them in their own households to yet other women from lower social classes, who are expected to do this work for free or for even cheaper wages (Parreñas 2000). In this way, domestic work was not only feminized but also “racialized”, as migrant women from Africa and south-Asia were expected to do this labor for low wages in countries with higher incomes or stronger currencies.

The domestic work undertaken by young working-class Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian girls would be in exchange for food, education, shelter, and socialization

into the Lebanese elite in Mount Lebanon. But after 1975, the division wrought by the Lebanese Civil War created tension and mistrust between Lebanese sects, as well as with Syrians and Palestinians. Lebanese households therefore began hiring domestic workers from further abroad in Africa and other parts of Asia, who were not involved in the conflict and would not be seen as a risk to the safety of the household (Jureidini 2009). Economic crises in southeast Asia also acted as push factors for the first wave of Sri Lankan migrant workers, who arrived in Lebanon in the 1970s (Jureidini 2005). In 1978, the first recruitment agencies to employ Sri Lankan domestic workers opened in Lebanon. In the decades to come, Lebanon became a destination for many women from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and other south Asian as well as African countries, who hoped to earn money to send back to their families as remittance (Dahdah 2014).

Towards the end of the Lebanese civil war, the Lebanese government decided to peg its local currency to the US dollar, which made Lebanon an attractive country to many migrant workers who could benefit from a favorable currency exchange rate. While the wages were relatively low in Lebanon, women lived frugally while working so that they could send a portion of their earnings back to their home countries, where it would have higher purchasing power. In the 1990s, the average/common salary for a Sri Lankan domestic worker was 100 USD per month (Faiz 1993), a rate that allowed a large proportion of Lebanese households to hire someone.

After the end of the Lebanese civil war (1990), the number of migrant workers in the country increased drastically, as the departure of many Lebanese nationals during the war had a demand for “low-skilled labor” (Bret 2007). Asian migrant workers constituted the majority of migrant workers in the country (as opposed to Arabic-speaking migrant workers). According to Baldwin-Edwards (2005), over 90% of Sri Lankan migrant workers were working as domestic workers in Lebanon by the year 2000. Later, due to connections between Lebanese expatriates living in Africa, more migrant domestic workers were sourced from African countries such as Madagascar, Nigeria, and Senegal (Bret 2007). According to the record of work permits issued by the Ministry of Labor, domestic workers currently constitute the majority of migrant workers in Lebanon.



By 2016, at least one quarter of Lebanese households employed a migrant domestic worker (International Labour Organisation [ILO] 2016). Many migrants in Lebanon are undocumented due to the difficulties they face with processing their paperwork at the Lebanese General Security (GS) – the internal security agency responsible for border control, visa issuance, and counter-terrorism. Many migrants also struggle to secure the return of their passports from abusive employers after they arrive in Lebanon. For these reasons, it is unclear just how many migrant domestic workers are residing in the country, although recent estimates place the figure at more than 250,000 workers (UN 2021). The majority of migrant domestic workers currently in Lebanon are from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines (ILO 2016). Triangle (2016) estimates that the migrant domestic work sector in Lebanon generates more than 100 million dollars in revenue annually, with the actual figure likely much higher.

## History of Kafala in Lebanon and the Middle East

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The Arab world<sup>1</sup> contains the highest proportion of migrant workers relative to the local population out of any of the designated work regions of the ILO (UN 2015). The reasons for this take us back to the 1950s. The rise in pan-Arabism in Egypt and the Arab world, coupled with generally welcoming attitudes towards Palestinian workers and refugees displaced by the Israeli invasion, resulted in a slow rise of pan-Arab leftist and labor movements. This constituted a threat to the power and interests of local capitalists and ruling parties. Many Shi'a workers who emigrated following the 1979 Iranian Revolution settled in the Gulf countries<sup>2</sup> with their families and demanded fair treatment and equal rights as other workers (Hanieh 2011). Since these Asian workers fell outside the pan-Arab political movement, they were not included in labor organizing alongside Arab workers. The rift between Asian and non-Arab migrant labor became an effective tool for the ruling class, who could exploit the ethnic exclusionism of pan-Arabism to hire temporary Asian labor who did not enjoy the same rights protections (Chalcraft 2011). For those in power, the Kafala system is the ideal legal framework since it denies migrant workers any form of belonging or long-term residency in the country while exploiting their work as cheap labor. The social exclusion of these workers stands in contrast to their economic hyper-inclusion, since they perform

the majority of work in the Gulf countries. This is one of many historical examples where nationalist and identitarian claims are exploited by the ruling class to the detriment of both citizen and non-citizen workers.

The Kafala system in the Gulf provides citizenship rights to a minority of people while treating the majority of residents as a cheap source of temporary disposable labor. It is a unique legal framework that governs the employment and residency of migrant workers in the Arab world by linking each migrant worker to a local 'sponsor' who is responsible for managing their work and life in the country. It is extremely difficult for the worker to terminate one's sponsorship or change one's employer, as leaving one's sponsor can make the migrant worker 'illegal' and at risk of deportation.

Lebanon is no exception to the exploitation of migrant labor, where the total number of non-Arab migrant workers<sup>3</sup> (including domestic workers) is estimated to be at least 500,000 (Kassamali 2017). This has been facilitated by connections between Lebanon and the Gulf countries, especially after the end of the Lebanese civil war, when Lebanon adopted its own version of the Gulf's Kafala system. In contrast to other Gulf countries, Lebanon's Kafala system is not a codified law but a set of procedures based on the law governing the entry and exit of migrant workers in Lebanon. The Lebanese GS manages the legal residency and employment arrangements of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Insofar as the GS is tasked with the protection of "public order", it is implied that the government views migrant workers as potential threats to public order.

In addition, Article 7 of the Lebanese Labor Law excludes domestic workers from the provisions of the law, thus denying them the right to minimum wage, collective bargaining, social security, and freedom of assembly. Instead, each migrant domestic worker signs a contract that stipulates her labor conditions (e.g. salary and days off) with her employer at the recruitment agency after she arrives in Lebanon. Their right to unionize is not explicitly secured. Furthermore, the Lebanese regulations regarding the formation of unions and associations prohibit the formation of associations that have non-Lebanese migrant workers as leadership board members (they can only join some associations as members, as long as they do not constitute the majority of such groups).

But how did we get here? Before the start of the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s, the Lebanese economy consisted mostly of mercantiles in addition to a limited yet noteworthy industrial class consisting of Lebanese

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1. The Arab world here refers to countries in the Middle East and North Africa where Arabic is the official language.

2. In this paper, "Gulf countries" stands for members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

3. This includes workers from all countries excluding the Arab world.



and Arab workers in the silk industry, railways, and tramways (Coulard 1970). However, according to Makdisi (2004), Lebanese industry broke down during the civil war, as these small factories closed down and many workers either left the country or took up arms against one another. Later, in the post-war period, industry declined further under national development plans that deprioritized local production in favor of the financial and service sectors in the post-war. The weakening of Lebanese industry led to the solidification of a consumer economy that also relied on the real estate sector. This model required highly priced commodities made with minimal production costs. The large number of domestic workers in Lebanon is one indicator of the solidification of the Lebanese economy as a consumer-rentier economy (Jureidini & Moukarbel 2004) since they provide cheap domestic labor capitalist production relies on.

The reliance on non-Arab<sup>4</sup> migrant workers for cheap labor highlights the entanglement of the Lebanese labor market in wider processes of globalization and labor migration. However, because these dynamics remain mystified to the Lebanese working class, they tend not to coordinate their organizing efforts with workers of different nationalities, thereby preserving the status quo.

In the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war, labor organizing in Lebanon has remained weak and limited to the public sector, teachers, and the middle class (Longuenesse & Tabar 2014). Labor unions in the country were systemically weakened by the Lebanese ruling parties in favor of clientelist and sectarian social relations (Slaibi 1999). For example, sectarian political parties created trade union federations controlled by the political parties and then sought the incorporation of these federations within the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL), thus weakening its ability to represent workers' interests, leading workers to lose faith in the organization.

Unions have also remained male dominated, with very little (if any) women representation. For example, there have been no women on the executive council of the CGTL. Despite being excluded from traditional labor unions, women workers in Lebanon organized for better working conditions in few yet significant activities. One of those movements that included both women and male was the workers' action against the Lebanese tobacco company "Regie". While they

managed to prompt greater attention to workers rights, the result was the problematic Lebanese Labor Law described above, which excludes domestic workers from its provisions.

The hostile discourse that trade unions have historically adopted against migrant workers is based on the premise that migrant workers compete unfairly with Lebanese workers. It is also a related tendency of Lebanese trade unions and the CGTL to turn a blind eye to workers in informal sectors. Migrant domestic workers are not seen as "real workers" in the collective imagination of the traditional labor movement, which is linked to the devaluation of care labor in capitalism. A stark example of this is one president of the CGTL reported saying: 'Do you really want me to equate my servant with the Lebanese worker regarding wages and rights?!' (Kobaissy 2017). Together, these factors pushed migrant women working in the informal sector out of the Lebanese trade unions. Over the last decade, attempts to protect their rights have largely been left to a handful of local NGOs and activist groups. As described in the next section, these groups have made important efforts to support migrant domestic workers against the rampant abuses they face. However, such approaches were limited in terms of building a wider class-based solidarity between migrant and Lebanese workers.

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4. The preference for non-Arabs was for many reasons, but mainly that migrant workers were considered less likely to politically organize for their labor rights or for political change (since they are socially considered foreigners and not part of the region due to linguistic and racial divides).

# DOCUMENTING THE HISTORY OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS' COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN LEBANON (1980-2022)

The above challenges make any form of community organizing extremely difficult. Nonetheless, migrant domestic workers have been creating spaces of belonging and building community in Lebanon since the 1970s. This preliminary research project constitutes the first effort to document the history of migrant domestic workers' feminist community organizing in Lebanon from the 1980s up to today. What are the forms of feminist community organizing that migrant domestic workers in Lebanon managed to create and how? What are the main challenges faced by these efforts, and what do we need to pay more attention to if we want to support their existence and growth?

In 2012, ILO produced a mapping of NGO services in Lebanon from 1980 to 2012. The report presented an in-depth examination of the inception and activities of all local activist groups, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), NGOs, church groups, and other entities involved in providing services for and working to advance the rights of migrant domestic workers in the country. Since there is no similar effort done to document and archive self-led migrant community organizing groups for Asian and African migrant workers in Lebanon, we produced a preliminary list based on information from reports and interviews with migrant community organizers. The goal of this list is both to recognize the efforts invested by organizers in Lebanon and to help us devise stronger tools that build on the successes and failures of past groups moving forward. As advised by migrant community organizers, we removed sensitive information and changed names in order to maintain anonymity and minimize potential risk on community groups and members. The exact dates of the inception of groups were included when available.

## 1980 to 1989

### **Kerala Welfare Association (1986)**

Kerala was created by the migrant domestic workers that first arrived in Lebanon. It was established with the help of the Syrian archbishop, as many of the migrant

domestic workers coming to Lebanon at the time were Malayalees, a Christian minority from southern Asia who are similar to the Syriacs. The Kerala Association offered services such as medical aid, financial assistance and legal follow up. Kerala Association is still active to a certain degree but mostly for social events, as their last event was organized at the end of 2022.

At its inception, it consisted mostly of male migrant workers from India, but these men support women migrant domestic workers of different nationalities – mainly Sri Lankan and Filipino women – in contacting sponsors, finding part time jobs, and gathering money for transfers of sponsorships and the facilitation of labor disputes. According to members of Kerala, having a sponsor in the 1980s was not as big of an issue as it is today. “Before we used to get our wives under someone’s name, but she did not live or work there”, one worker says.

### **Afro-Asian Migrant Center (1987)**

The Afro-Asian Migrant Center (AAMC) was established by American Jesuit Rev Martin McDermott and Dutch Jesuit Rev Theo Vlught. It was managed by a Filipino nun, Sister Amelia. Most of the people assisted by AAMC were Filipino workers, but it also served other Afro Asian migrants. The center was used as a hub for religious services and recreational activities, but it also offered a safe-house for women who had escaped from their employers. These women could then be connected to more reputable employers through the center’s networks.

According to ILO (2012), AAMC activities have included helping detained women obtain valid documents; retrieving withheld passports from employers; fundraising to support with the renewal of expired work/residency permits or repatriation; providing legal aid, medical treatment, shelter, and social counseling; contacting diplomatic representation and family of prisoners; running a radio program intended for listeners in the migrant domestic worker community, and providing informal free education for children of migrant domestic workers. They have also hosted other groups, who hold their meetings at the AAMC.



### Laksehta (1988)

This center was run by a Sri Lankan nun from the Bon Pasteur order. Supporting Sri Lankan women almost exclusively, it offered a number of welfare and religious services, and was also sometimes used as a shelter. One of their activities was to organize a monthly visit to prisons where Sri Lankans were being detained in places like Zahle, Tripoli, and Baabda. It also offered services similar to AAMC, such as assisting migrant domestic workers to retrieve their passports from employers and to secure medical care, aftercare, and repatriation support.

## 1990 to 1999

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### Seela Samadhi Ekamuthuwa Sangam - Mahindasri and Malkanthi

This Sri Lankan Buddhist group was founded in the early 1990s for Buddhist activities to help promote the sense of belonging among Sri Lankans in Lebanon. The group was self-funded and sometimes brought Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka to conduct religious rituals. The monks would then take back with them letters they collected from the migrant women in Lebanon. According to friends of members of this association, these letters included wishes and dreams that would be given to the monk in the hopes that solutions for their problems in Lebanon can be found and their prayers answered. They also carried with them tuition fees sent by working parents to their children back home, or medical expenses for the sick elderly in Sri Lanka.

The group included both men and women and stressed the importance of care work and community organizing to deal with the tragic losses that were taking place during the civil war in Sri Lanka at the time. Community organizing produced a space where information could be shared between those in Lebanon and their families and larger communities in Sri Lanka. This community group was eventually able to raise the issues facing Sri Lankan domestic workers at their embassy in Lebanon and played an active role in lobbying for the rights of women facing abuse. It is at this time that the alarming rates of suicide among domestic workers started became known, and the community group used their status as a religious organization to gather support from other Church groups in Lebanon. They stressed the importance of the repatriation of bodies of dead migrant workers and raised the question of justice for those who passed away.

Members of the group believed in the value of community support done under the umbrella of religious

work, which emphasizes people's higher purpose in life beyond their present-day limitations, as well as their ability to create change. The group frequently conducted Buddhist prayer events in the Sri Lankan embassy, but also frequented a church in Beirut where a supportive priest offered them a space to congregate and build a small temple.

Although this group is far less active today when it comes to political work and direct support, and is almost exclusively focused on prayer, they have maintained connections with local church groups that can be utilized when needed.

### Tamil People Association (1996)

The Tamil People Association beginnings are tied to a well-known figure in the Sri Lankan and Indian community who helped Sri Lankan migrants arriving in Lebanon during the civil war. He had connections with a lawyer in the migrant community back in the late 1980s and early 1990s which allowed him to provide legal assistance to those who needed it. This lawyer motivated the Tamil community to create the Tamil People Association in order to tackle threats to the community's safety. Trafficking and smuggling had become major problems due to the civil war in Sri Lanka, which had left many Sri Lankan refugees without proper documentation. According to migrant organizers who were active at the time, there were many efforts to smuggle people into Cyprus and Greece and then into Italy and other countries in Europe via containers and small ships moving out of Lebanon.

The influx of Sri Lankan domestic workers into Lebanon was coupled with a sharp rise in suicide rates of Sri Lankan migrant women, due to violent and abusive work conditions. At the time, there was no embassy present in the country to support its nationals, only an honorary consulate run by a Lebanese lawyer. The honorary consulate had very long processing times for passports and did not provide any support to the local community, and the association felt that the consul was exploiting his powers for personal gain. In the late 1990s, the Tamil People Association joined efforts with other Sri Lankan community groups and submitted a complaint and a petition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Colombo requesting the opening of an embassy. This effort eventually led to the creation of the embassy of Sri Lanka for Lebanon and Syria in 1998.

### Pastoral Committee of Asian African Migrants (PCAAM) (1997)

In 1997, PCAAM was formally established under the leadership of Lebanese bishop Paul Bassim of the Apostolic Vicariate of Beirut, and under the daily

guidance of Father Martin McDermott. PCAAM administered comprehensive social, legal, and religious aid to migrant workers. PCAAM, operating under the umbrella of the Lebanese Bar Association's Legal Aid Program and with the support of several human rights lawyers, offered free legal assistance to migrant workers. They also supervised four Catholic centers serving the needs of African and Asian migrant domestic workers, among others. These centers include the AAMC and Laksehta as well as two distinct initiatives led by Father Vlugt and Father Mati. The PCAAM is an exemplar of the catholic faith-based organizations that were providing legal aid, pastoral care, shelter and counseling to migrant domestic workers in the 90s.

### **Filipino Basketball League - FILBALL (1990s)**

The Filipino Basketball League is a community sports group made up of Filipino workers in Lebanon and supported by the embassy of the Philippines. They organize basketball and volleyball games for Filipino men and women every Sunday, creating a social space where migrant men and women can meet and connect.

### **Sri Lankan Welfare Association (1999)**

Established in 1999, this association started as a fundraising organization to assist those in need of material support for healthcare services, medications, repatriation and so on. They also provided support in the form of legal aid, shelter, and social counseling.

### **Sri Lankan Women's Association (1990s)**

The Sri Lankan Women's Association was founded in the late 1990s. Malani Kandaarachchige, known as Mala, was the group's president for several decades and worked hard to keep the group active and alive. The group is one of the oldest in Lebanon, with ties to the Sri Lankan Embassy as well as the later-established Migrant Domestic Workers' Union. They began with just five people but have expanded their membership to 70 people.

The group required a monthly membership fee of 4 USD, and the funds were used to support any member facing a medical, legal, or emergency issue. They organized numerous social activities each year including musical events and Sri Lankan national holiday celebrations.

After spending almost 40 years in Lebanon, Mala was forced to leave the country in 2022 due to medical complications that her Lebanese insurance company refused to cover. After Mala's departure, tensions arose regarding the leadership of the group and a few long-term members separated from the group and formed

another group called Rhantnadip Migrant Society Center.

## **2000 to 2009**

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### **Samaham Mangagawa (SMB Group) (2000-2018)**

SMB Group was founded by a group of Filipina women including Marie Bek. At its peak, the group had around 500 members including Miriam who later became the president of the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon (mentioned below). Every Sunday, the group gathered in the parking lot of the Saint Patrick's Catholic Church in Hamra. The Church's clerk used to rent them tables and chairs for around 14 USD/day. This space served as their organizing "base". Through their work in this group, Miriam and her fellow group members encountered many Filipina women trying to escape abusive employers and looking for legal or medical support. They would refer these women to their embassy. The group also organized trips and gatherings for people to spend time together and connect.

The group was active for almost two decades and disbanded in 2018 when one of its founders, Marie Bek, left the country. One reason for its dissolution was tension amongst some members of the group. Moreover, ex-members explained that most women were unable to assume leadership in the group because they did not have enough time to take on the responsibilities that were required.

### **African United Communities in Lebanon (AUCL)**

AUCL is a migrant-led group that aims to support African migrant workers in Lebanon. It primarily consists of migrant workers from Nigeria, Ghana, Sudan, and Sierra Leone but also includes some members from other countries. They have been holding their meetings at the venue of the AAMC.

Although the group's leadership roles have mostly been occupied by men, the group has long included a large number of women who wanted to work under the group's umbrella to provide support to victims of abuse. Many of the group's members were from the Dawra area. There have been tensions due to the lack of formal governance structures, with disputes arising over decision-making procedures, transparency, and financial management. Some members criticized AUCL's early chairperson for having a paternalistic approach, excluding many from decision-making processes and diminishing faith in the group's ability



to help. In 2014, there was a split within the group, leading to the formation of a second group that kept the same name (AUCL). According to former members who were active in both groups, the “new group” had similar problems to the first, as they failed to formalize their governance structures. Eventually, the old group died out and the newer one took its place. We were unable to gather information about the present state of the AUCL group, but it is worth mentioning that it also includes members of PCAAM. One of the leaders of AUCL was Rose Mahi who then left to later join the Migrant Domestic Workers’ Union and the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon, before getting deported in 2018.

Today, some migrant domestic workers are simultaneously members of the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon and the AUCL. This allows people to contribute in various ways with several groups and exchange knowledge across groups. Such positions can also support the formation of larger and more efficient migrant domestic worker community networks.

## 2010 to 2019

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### Migrant Community Center (2011)

The Migrant Community Center (MCC) was founded by ARM in Beirut in 2011. This center provides a cost-free and secure gathering place where migrant laborers can come together, acquire new skills, collaborate, access information, and receive assistance. The primary aim of the MCC is to enhance the living conditions of migrant workers in Beirut, particularly domestic workers, by engaging, supporting, and collaborating with migrant communities. From its inception to 2019, the MCC delivered complimentary language and computer courses that were volunteer-run and attracted a large number of migrant domestic workers of different nationalities and levels of familiarity with the local context. The MCC’s mission is to support the self-advocacy of migrant workers by offering workshops, information sessions, and access to advocacy resources and tools. By supporting migrants to advocate for themselves, they hope to raise awareness of the challenges they face in Lebanon and transform societal attitudes towards migrant workers. Most migrant workers interviewed describe MCC as an important contributor to community organizing, bringing together migrant workers based on their class position (as domestic workers) rather than their culture, language or nationality. MCC continues to be one of the very few spaces committed to this approach. MCC currently includes more than 700 members representing 17

different nationalities. MCC has also served as an incubator for the formation of new migrant support groups, as they sought support from local activists, volunteers, and other more established groups.

### NARI (2012 - 2016)

NARI was an autonomous group of feminist migrant domestic workers in Beirut, founded with the support of Lebanese NGO Kafa.<sup>5</sup> The group was formed to improve the situation of Nepalese migrant domestic workers by giving them advice, information and support. The initiative aimed to inform migrant domestic workers of their rights and help them participate in advocacy efforts that could change the sponsorship system and ensure legal protection for domestic workers. Their activities included organizing protests, running as a migrant domestic worker group at the Beirut Marathon, in addition to coordinating with other Nepalese groups in Lebanon such as the Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) to organize events and support women in need. NARI also played an intermediary role between abused workers and Kafa by referring workers in need of assistance to the appropriate service.

Nari was active for 4 years and reached a size of 100 members, until the deportation of founders Sujana Rana and Roja Limbu in 2016. According to Sujana, the two activists were targeted because of their outspoken attitudes. She was attempting to raise an investigation into the death of one Nepalese migrant worker, a case that was related to a Lebanese businessman and recruitment agent. These individuals submitted a complaint against her to the GS, which ultimately resulted in her deportation. The recruitment agent even went so far as to contact a Nepalese recruitment agent to spread rumors about Sujana in her home country, and the group NARI was smeared in some media outlets in Nepal.

It is important to note that the deportation of Sujana happened while her status in Lebanon was legal. They arrested her while she was at her employer’s house. The exact grounds for her arrest remain unclear but Sujana said they told her it was because “she was helping the victim girls”. It is possible that the GS interpreted the support she provided to runaway migrant domestic workers as a form of ‘human trafficking’, an accusation that could ultimately become grounds for deportation.

Other migrant domestic worker activists also praised the NARI group, calling it a “very powerful group, with strong ladies, who were very active”. Unfortunately, after the removal of its two leaders, the group dissolved

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5. Kafa is a local non-governmental organization that aims to eliminate all forms of gender-based violence and exploitation.

due to the leadership vacuum and fear in the wake of the deportations.

### Mesewat (2014)

Mesewat is a community group of migrant domestic workers that emerged in 2014 in response to the perceived failure of formal institutions to address violations of migrant domestic workers' rights. The group was founded by Dani and Rita, who were involved in supporting migrant domestic women from different nationalities. They were approached to participate in a documentary about migrant workers, and this inspired them to create their own movie in order to gain global attention and support. Their movie led to a collaboration with a local volunteer-based organization called Migrant Workers' Task Force (MWTF), which was organizing language classes and social gatherings for migrant workers in Lebanon. With a crew of over a dozen members, Dani and Rita pooled resources and began visiting Ethiopians in hospitals and prisons, providing social and financial support. These outreach efforts further revealed the dire conditions faced by migrants in Lebanon such as those in Azounieh tuberculosis hospital.

Recognizing the extent of unmet needs, in 2014 the group organized a trip to the mountains to enjoy the snow trip, which was ultimately a way to meet and recruit more members. The group initially adopted the name of the movie that they had filmed to raise support - "Shouting without a Listener" - but after the trip, the expanded group put the name of the group to a vote. Over 200 women submitted their preferences, and they settled on the name Mesewat. The group later decentralized by creating 8 subgroups operating in different regions of the country: this included one group in Antelias, two groups in Beirut, and groups in Jbeil, Saida, and Dora. Every subgroup had its own leader and held meetings once per month. The activities of all groups were coordinated by two main "admins" - Dani and Rita, who make informal decisions while guaranteeing trust within the group. The group values democratic decision-making and seeks consensus through discussions among all administrators and relevant sub-groups before any major decisions are taken. In cases of major disagreement, decisions are put to a vote. Contrary to most if not all other migrant groups, Mesewat was able to develop a strong governance structure to ensure democratic decision-making, despite its large membership base. Despite disagreements, Mesewat's commitment to democratic processes allowed them to deal with tensions and maintain a harmonious atmosphere within the group.

Mesewat advocates for change through direct action, while also sharing knowledge and skills within the

group. One of Mesewat's most important roles is to provide financial and medical support to abused migrant domestic workers, particularly those who lack documentation and support systems. They have also participated in yearly workers' day protests alongside Lebanese NGOs and other groups. Thus, the group engages in both immediate assistance and long-term political activism. They also convene social activities, events, and trips to create a space for emotional support and cultural belonging, thereby countering the isolation that many experience while living in Lebanon. This social support is a key pillar of their work because the sense of community that they share is the base upon which everything else stands.

One of the challenges Mesewat faces is dealing with a potential leadership vacuum in case its two main leaders, who have gathered immense experience due to their organizing efforts in Lebanon for more than a decade, are no longer able to assume their positions. Tragically, Dani was deported from Lebanon in 2023 due to issues with his employer. Nonetheless, he remains active in the group all the way from Ethiopia and hopes to find a way to return to Lebanon and continue his work in the group from Beirut.

### Migrant Domestic Workers' Union (2015)

The Migrant Domestic Workers' Union was established in January 2015, presenting itself as the first migrant domestic workers union in the Middle East. It was established in collaboration with The National Federation of Worker and Employee Trade Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL), the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), and led by ILO. Five NGOs were also closely involved in this process: Nasawiya<sup>6</sup>, ARM, Insan Association<sup>7</sup>, Frontiers Ruwad (FR)<sup>8</sup>, and KAFA. The organizing of domestic workers in the union was initiated by ILO, beginning with a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project that took place between 2012 and 2014. The research was coupled with training programs that informed participants about the purpose of trade unions, how to campaign and strategize, and the economic value of domestic labor. The union received the support and backing of FENASOL, although it was not officially recognized by the Ministry of labor. Nonetheless, it was a significant achievement for migrant domestic worker community organizations. In

6. Nasawiya is a feminist collective and organization based in Lebanon.

7. Insan Association organization primarily focuses on human rights and social justice issues, particularly those related to vulnerable and marginalized populations in Lebanon.

8. Frontiers Ruwad is a non-profit organization dedicated to human rights advocacy and has a particular emphasis on the rights of refugees, migrants, and stateless persons in Lebanon.



response to the formation of the union, the Minister of Labor at the time expressed that “protection takes place through procedures, not through the introduction of the domestic workers into political and class games” (Al-Akhbar 2015). What he meant was that the protection of migrant domestic workers should be through laws passed by the government, not through the political efforts of migrant workers’ organizations.

While the public launch of the Migrant Domestic Workers Union received media attention and seemed successful, internal concerns among workers grew. Many workers, especially those occupying leadership positions in the union, were dissatisfied with the organization’s structure and practices, including language barriers, a lack of transparency, and what they described as a “one-sided decision-making process”. There was also frustration about FENASOL’s inability or unwillingness to deal with cases of gender-based violence reported by migrant women (Kobaissy 2017). Some workers explained that they raised their concerns and sent a letter of demands to FENASOL about these issues, but they were met with threats and accusations of betrayal. Many community leaders subsequently resigned from the union. Two of the resigning unionists were deported from the country shortly after, and workers in the union felt that FENASOL should have fought harder to prevent these deportations. According to ex-unionists, the ILO’s response to these events was divided due to internal conflicts of interest within the organization’s administration. The response, or lack thereof, reflected migrant workers’ complaints about the Lebanese organizers, who had centered their own voices in debates and showed an unwillingness to work within systems of accountability and transparency (Interviews conducted by ARM with migrant activists and INGO staff, 2023).

Even though FENASOL’s organizing efforts with migrant domestic workers can be seen as a defying act to the hostile, exclusionary, and sexist politics of the wider Lebanese labor movement at the time, they still insisted on a narrative about the threat of illegal immigration. They therefore directed blame at migrants themselves rather than the Kafala system and the exploitative practices of employers who recruit people from abroad. This failed to address the “us vs them” divide within the labor movement, which undermines attempts at class solidarity (Kobaissy 2017).

Nevertheless, the establishment of the union was significant in that it provided a space for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon to forge a collective identity, to create networks of mutual support, and to begin to normalize collective bargaining for migrant domestic workers’ rights. The union still exists today, with several migrant domestic workers at the helm, but

their activity has substantially decreased after the mass resignation in 2016.

### **Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon (April 2016)**

According to its members, the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon was formed as a result of the failed attempt to unionize under the umbrella of FENASOL. This pushed core members of the “union-to-be” to resign and create the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers. This was envisioned as an alternative to the union that would ensure migrant domestic workers’ voices are not overridden by those of Lebanese nationals. Working with Arab (Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian) domestic workers remains a challenge when it comes to organizing for the rights of domestic workers in Lebanon, as nationalistic barriers continue to inhibit class-based solidarity.

The Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers has members from various nationalities and aims to serve all domestic workers in Lebanon. One of their goals is to become an affiliate member of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), an established international organization whose backing could support the alliance to address the problems faced by migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Some of the Alliance’s challenges include fundraising, implementing decision-making procedures and governance structures, and doing work as an informal group. The group seeks to formalize, but when approaching some international organizations for support, they have been urged to replicate the bureaucratic models of many INGOs, which do not reflect the culture and spirit of the members of the Alliance. Nevertheless, the group remains dedicated to their work and is exploring new and creative ways of operating without replicating INGO management systems.

### **Egna Legna (2017)**

Egna Legna, which means “from us to us” in Amharic, is a feminist mutual aid organization led by Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Its Ethiopian founder Bara wanted to address the social service needs of those in her community. This group has been instrumental in addressing various social, economic, cultural, and political issues over the past few years. They provide shelter, legal assistance, and training for income-generating activities like soap making, in addition to distributing food and medical supplies. Other forms of support include expediting repatriations and organizing community-building events like dance parties. Egna Legna advocates against the exploitative Kafala system through informal political organizing and consciousness-raising. Their support within the



migrant community has been particularly crucial amidst the intersecting challenges of the economic crisis that began in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut port blast, and the Lebanese economic crisis. They have distributed essential food items to people facing food insecurity in places such as Saida, Jbeil, Jounieh, Aley, and Beirut.

Given the unique challenges faced by their community, Enga Legna operates on a principle of shared vulnerability. They are financed by crowdfunding efforts, international donors, and collaboration with organizations. They coordinate with feminist groups across Lebanon and their outreach and service efforts are not limited to Ethiopians but extends to domestic workers of other nationalities and occasionally to Lebanese and Syrian people. At the time of writing this report, Enga Legna and Mesewat (mentioned above) are recognized as the largest community groups led by Ethiopians in Lebanon.

### Together Forever (2017)

Together Forever is a small Cameroonian community group that was founded in 2017 by core members Carole and Sandy. Carole was an activist involved with AUCL, but she and others felt that Cameroonians were not sufficiently included in its activities and programs. This motivated her to start Together Forever, a community group initially intended to include only Cameroonians but which later grew to serve and support migrant women from various nationalities. Together Forever's main goals were to help Cameroonians find better jobs, support those wanting to return home, assist single mothers, and provide access to medical services. They have been the focal points for trainings and workshops organized by various civil society organizations in Lebanon, and they have often coordinated with Doctors Beyond Borders (MSF) and the Karagheuzian health center to provide medical services.

However, some governance issues were raised by members, who complained that the founders made decisions on behalf of the entire group. The hierarchical decision-making structure led to a rise in tensions with other young active members, pushing some members to create sub groups that later split from the group. Nevertheless, Together Forever remains active today and continues to provide support to migrant domestic workers from any nationality.

### Domestic Workers Advocacy Network – DoWAN Unite (2019)

In 2019, Leane, a migrant domestic worker from Sierra Leone, helped to found the Domestic Workers Advocacy Network (DoWAN) in Sierra Leone. Before

that, she had been working within the Sierra Leone community in Lebanon to champion the repatriation of fellow migrant domestic workers who endured deplorable living and working conditions and wanted to leave. Her activism included combating recruitment agencies that facilitated the recruitment of women from Sierra Leone under abusive conditions. In an effort to raise awareness of these practices among potential targets of recruitment within her country of origin, she reached out to publicize her own experiences and those of her peers, thus catalyzing a collective effort for fairer and safer migration for Sierra Leonean women. While this organization is not active within Lebanon, it maintains links with migrant domestic workers in the country as it advocates for their rights.

## 2020 to 2022

### The Kenyan Hope Community (2020)

The origins of the establishment of this group are with the Kenyan women's protests in front of their consulate in 2020.<sup>9</sup> As economic conditions in Lebanon were deteriorating due to both the collapse of the Lebanese currency and the Covid-19 pandemic, many employers were dropping their domestic workers on the side of the road, a violent practice that was quickly becoming normalized. The Kenyan consulate in Beirut had no useful response, and so a group of Kenyan women organized protests in front of the building. In addition to highlighting the escalating violence and deteriorating living conditions faced by migrant domestic workers, these women were protesting against the consulate itself. They were fed up with the neglect, in addition to the exploitation, abuse, and scamming schemes they faced at the hands of consular staff who would ask women for immense sums of money in return for helping in their repatriation. This dispute continues until today, as many domestic workers allege that the consulate is involved in the trafficking of Kenyans in Lebanon.

The Kenyan Hope Community was composed of Kenyan migrant workers who wanted to see change in the practices of their consulate, as well as a turnover of staff to remove individuals accused of exploitation. They collaborate with a 271-member Whatsapp group called "Kenyan Community Group", which includes the members of the Kenyan Hope Community.

9. Tamara Qiblawi, How a consulate in Lebanon became feared by the women it was meant to help <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/28/middleeast/beirut-kenya-as-equals-intl/index.html>



### Rhantnadip Migrant Society Center (2021)

Founded in 2021 by Hanna, a Sri Lankan migrant worker who had been in Lebanon for almost 3 decades, the society center has 75 members, many of whom previously belonged to the Sri Lankan Women's Association. After the leader of the association Malani left the country – as described above – many of the members separated and joined the new society center. In contrast to the Sri Lankan Women's Association members, who are on average older, most members of the Rhantnadip Migrant Society Center are Sri Lankan women under the age of 40.

The group is divided into several subgroups. Decision-making begins with the 6 leaders of the group, who convene to discuss important matters and then relay preliminary decisions to the other members. Each subgroup implements its own income-generating activities such as cooking, sewing, or singing. Recently, given the severity of Lebanon's economic crisis, the group's leaders have considered teaching the members other monetizable skills such as pickling. They are also considering the creation of a financial support system for Sri Lankan women who travel back to Sri Lanka so that they do not return without savings, since many group members were concerned and saddened about how Malani ended up leaving the country with so little to show for her hard work. They have already begun saving some money collected through small membership fees. A portion of the membership fees goes toward logistical expenses such as renting the space where they gather on weekends, but they want to begin saving some in a bank account where it can be safeguarded until a person returns to Sri Lanka.

### Regroupement des Migrant.e.s de l'Afrique Noire – REMAN (2022)

REMAN was founded in 2022 by two young members of Together Forever, who took a leadership coaching class. Dissatisfied with the way Together Forever was operating – especially the hierarchical nature in which decisions were made – they decided to form their own group. Other members then joined their efforts to build and establish this new organization.

This newly formed group aims to raise awareness about the abuses and exploitation faced by migrant domestic workers in Lebanon on an international level by gathering members and followers from various African countries.

### VONWAIL (2022)

VONWAIL, established in 2022, is a collective of Nigerian women in Lebanon with a mission to support

and empower each other. Patience, one of the group's executives, initiated this group after attending training programs at MCC and collaborating with organizations like Egna Legna. The idea of creating a collective for Nigerian women emerged during discussions with fellow Nigerian women, including Fadekmi. They were especially inspired by the way that Egna Legna provided care for the members of their community. VONWAIL currently consists of 30 members who organize through WhatsApp and hold meetings on the last Sunday of each month, with additional meetings as needed. They receive support from MCC and are currently learning from other organizations how to build a strong and organized community. Language diversity is a challenge as they all come from different regions in Nigeria, but they have English as a common language. They face various obstacles, including shortfalls of both funding and time, but their solidarity drives them to support members like Gloria, a Nigerian worker who needed a wheelchair and special food due to her health issues. Currently, VONWAIL is designing a governance structure by which it could manage funding, acquire logistical support, and potentially provide assistance to members returning to Nigeria. The group is considering a program to provide farming opportunities for returnees in Nigeria (an idea with no set strategy or funds behind it yet). They are also engaged in skills-building workshops, such as making beaded jewelry. They also provide support to abused women through legal aid networks, and by scraping together whatever available resources they can muster as a community. Despite the challenges they face, VONWAIL is still active as they try to make a positive impact in the lives of Nigerian women in Lebanon.

# REFLECTIONS ON MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS' COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN LEBANON

As described above, the research for this publication involved interviews with a range of activists working on migrant domestic workers' rights, many of them migrant workers themselves. They shared insights on the importance of community organising for their well-being, the challenges of organising as a marginalised group, and lessons learned about how to do it successfully. Below are key observations and reflections shared during those interviews.

## 1. Overcoming the isolation of domestic work

Unlike workers in many other industries, migrant domestic workers do not share a common workplace and are therefore isolated from one another in their clients' homes. In order to organize, they require a space in which to gather and connect with one another. This is how they build the foundation of relationships upon which any kind of social or political organizing stands. With the exception of the Migrant Domestic Workers Union and the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon, all other migrant groups considered social activities to be their most important function. This includes organizing events such as birthdays, anniversaries, hangouts, trips, religious ceremonies, and parties, all of which bring people together to create a sense of community.

By participating in community activities, migrant workers build a sense of commitment to one another despite political or social differences, which is necessary for successful conflict resolution. According to Kassamali (2017), migrant workers in Lebanon must create a sense of belonging in order to change the public perspective that they are simply a source of cheap labor — performing physical work and sending back money. Their groups help them to challenge their social and legal exclusion, and to build recognition that they are active in the making of the Lebanese economy and society.

This means that community building is not only a means to the end of achieving legal or political change, but also an end in itself that is inherently valuable to those involved. The most important social activities

mentioned by most migrant workers were religious ceremonies at churches, as well as the language classes and social activities that take place through the MCC and MWTF.

Migrant groups usually progress from fundraising for collective support/survival into trying to do more advocacy work. But even if the advocacy work fails, the connections provided through the community group allow women to overcome isolation and enjoy the support of their fellow members. These relations can also encourage the group to “try again” after experiencing setbacks in advocacy. Relationships forged within one community group can provide the platform for women to start new initiatives or create yet other community groups that are more suited to everchanging contexts. Of course, groups often form along the lines of common language, nationality, and culture, which can hinder their ability to build wider solidarity in pursuit of shared class interests. Two notable attempts at challenging these divisions are the migrant domestic workers union (with the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers as its spin-off) and the MCC activities.

## 2. Informality is a challenge to sustainability; formality is a challenge to group cohesion

As unregistered and mostly self-funded groups, many of the migrant initiatives mentioned are informal. This means that they lack official status, documentation, and a clear system of organizational procedures. Although this informality leaves organisations with a useful degree of flexibility, it can also present problems as the group matures. For many groups that make it into their second year of operation, troubles emerge over the disputes about authority, leadership, decision making, and financial management. When authority structures are not clear or power is seen to be unfairly concentrated in the hands of some individuals, communication can break down and dispute resolution can become difficult. If left unaddressed, such problems frequently result in attrition or the dissolution of community groups.



For example, in most Sri Lankan groups, leaders tend to be older migrant women who have spent decades in Lebanon. Their experience is one reason that they are trusted and respected. But these leaders spend a lot of time and labor making sure conflicts are properly dealt with and that tensions are kept at bay. The immense amount of time and effort required for this can discourage others from wanting to assume such leadership positions, especially if they have full-time jobs. More importantly, if the leader(s) are deported or forced to leave the country, those left behind groups may not be able to fill the gap that they leave behind.

For example, the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon is a relatively small group, but it includes several women who have a lot of experience in community work. They are the ones who have been able to secure the funds needed to operate in a context of economic crisis. Drawing on their networks of activists and allies, they were able to secure small grants from a couple of feminist donors to support their work. However, grant-management work requires specific skill sets (e.g. report writing, financial management systems etc.) that the personnel in small groups do not always possess, which affects their ability to successfully raise the money they need.

Nevertheless, we should not conclude that all community groups should rush toward formalization or that formal NGOs should push them toward this goal. The systems these groups employ need to be resourceful, responsive, and adapted to the circumstances of their members and their objectives. For example, some members of the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers mentioned that the capacity-building support they received from an international organization actually created trouble between members rather than solving organizational problems. The consultant tasked with providing this support tried to implement a bureaucratic model of financial management and decision-making best suited to larger NGOs, and this did not fit the group's priorities of collective decision-making and transparency. As such, there is no single institutional model that can be implemented in all cases, and many groups are best suited to an organic, bottom-up approach to capacity building that emphasizes internal democracy, conflict resolution, and transparency.

### 3. Unionizing without a union: alternative tools for labor organizing

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Before the formation of the domestic workers union in Lebanon, there was a widespread assumption that labor unions are the only way to organize for labor rights. This provided reason for pessimism, because labor unions

in Lebanon are generally weak due to sectarian and state interference. Some activists argued that the move towards a union in a country where migrants cannot be the actual leaders of this union (due to legal constraints) is dangerous, since the union could easily fall into the wrong hands. Others argued that all migrant groups (union or not) do "union work" by the mere fact that they are organizing as workers to improve their labor conditions. They proposed an alternative approach in which these groups would be linked together under a common framework, rather than pursuing their own objectives within a fragmented labor movement or competing with one another.

But creating a common framework is more easily said than done, as it requires various actors with different interests and established norms to collaborate. Labor unions and workers' groups are often expected by leftist activists or organizations to eschew patriarchy, racism, and the social inequalities that pervade wider society. But this is an incredibly ambitious set of conditions, since these groups are often entrenched in extant social norms and infused with the resulting forms of antagonism. Rather than simply ignoring these antagonisms, or declaring them invalid, it is necessary to work on reconciliation and conflict resolution processes that can be put in if/when divisions, differences and disagreements arise. Social antagonisms are social by definition, and require collective healing effort if we want to transform, as opposed to ignore or avoid, conflicts.

Moving forward, it is important to recognize how migrant domestic workers have been stuck between the failures of traditional union work (which excluded them primarily because they are foreigners in Lebanon) and the limitations of feminist movements that have often seen problems as humanitarian or identity-based, instead of recognizing the class-based nature of many problems and the need for labor organizing (Kobeissi 2017).

### 4. Honorary consulates generally work against the interests of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon

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Based on the interviews conducted with migrant activists, it was clear that some embassies do provide modest support to their citizens in Lebanon. The embassies of the Philippines and Sri Lanka tended to be seen positively by their respective nationals. Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon have a long history of trying to push their consulates and governments to provide them with more assistance. This was successful in the case of the Philippines, resulting in a bilateral

agreement between the two countries and the eventual provision of services to women seeking support in Lebanon. It was also successful in the case of Sri Lanka as mentioned above, where pressure from migrant groups resulted in the transformation of the Sri Lankan consulate into an embassy with more resources. After the Lebanese economic crisis, Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers were also able to pressure their embassy to cover the repatriation costs of a number of workers.

But consulates and honorary consulates were often seen as failing to support their nationals, or even actively harming them.

## 5. Finding a way to care for long-term community organizers as they age or get deported

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Many group leaders expressed anxieties about elderly workers being sent back to their countries of origin with little to no money, and often with health issues that are seen as a burden to the relatives who used to rely on their remittances. All deported migrant workers with whom we communicated expressed a desire to come back to Lebanon. After spending so long abroad, many no longer felt a sense of belonging in their home countries, where they also faced very limited economic opportunities. Many missed the lives they had built and the communities they had called home for decades in Lebanon. But in the end, they were often made to feel like disposable labor, as the Lebanese authorities sent them away without any option for permanent residence in the country they had come to call home for so long.

Some deported women described a sense of abandonment as their fellow group members could not support or work with them after their departure. Recognizing this, some groups are exploring ways to offer continued support to people in those situations. One Kenyan group discussed a plan to buy a plot of land in Kenya that would be farmed by returnees who have no other economic opportunities. Another Sri Lankan group discussed collecting monthly contributions in a jar that can be used to support departing women with some money they can take back to their families. However, due to lack of funds and strong local alliances, these ideas have not yet materialized significantly. The issue is often discussed in group meetings, since each woman knows that she could one day be in need of such support, given the unjust immigration laws and non-existent social security systems for migrant domestic workers in the country.

For example, one worker spent more than 30 years paying private insurance fees because she did not want to be left with no way to cover her medical expenses in her old age. However, in her later years, she got health complications that the insurance company only partially covered, then stopped covering altogether, leaving the worker with no access to the essential healthcare she needs. As this case shows, when workers try to find solutions within existing institutions in Lebanon, they are often left without support. The only reliable source of support is what fellow women can offer within their community groups.

## 6. “Harming the interests of Lebanese citizens” as the main reason to get deported

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Over the years, it has been increasingly difficult for migrant domestic workers to secure their legal stay in the country. For example, the GS recently imposed a rule where a migrant domestic worker is only entitled to two transfers of sponsorship during their stay in Lebanon (meaning that they can work for a maximum of three different employers). Migrant domestic workers are also not allowed to work as “freelancers”, or to live outside their employers’ house. If they are unable to renew their papers, they face the risk of deportation if caught by the GS. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon are considered ‘irregular’, or without legal paperwork, due to the practical difficulties of adhering to GS’s requirements.

Technically, all undocumented migrant workers are at risk of being arrested and deported by the GS. Cases of deportation are tragic and often cause long-term damage to both the deported person and to the communities they leave behind. However, the number of irregular migrant domestic workers is huge, and the GS has limited space in its detention centers. Thus, based on workers’ testimonies, GS tends to do more raids in periods when they have more free space in their migrant detention center. After the economic crisis, the process of deporting arrested workers became slower, because many migrants and employers could not afford the workers’ return ticket. Many migrant domestic workers who want to return to their countries of citizenship jokingly mention how they tried asking GS officers to detain them and deport them (in the period of 2020 to 2022) since they cannot afford to travel back themselves, only to be turned away and told that “the prison is full”.

Aside from tracking down migrant workers without valid documents, GS also investigates migrant domestic



workers who have legal complaints against them. When a Lebanese citizen (usually employer, but can be a recruitment agent or a random citizen) calls the GS to register a complaint against a domestic worker, GS starts an investigation process that often results in detention and deportation. Workers say that the submissions are random and include complaints about “running away”, “not working with her sponsor”, alleged theft, helping other workers “run away”, threatening public order, and more recently, smuggling and human trafficking. In recent years, recruitment agencies and some honorary consuls who felt that their interests were threatened by community organizers have begun framing their support to women migrants as “smuggling” and “human trafficking”. This includes their provision of shelter to women escaping abusive households. According to the GS, this is not something they are supposed to do, as it violates the terms of their sponsorship. Thus, we need to be very wary about the increasing misuse of the term “human trafficking” in recent years by government bodies, which are actually just trying to tighten border control and limit the mobility and labor rights of migrant domestic workers (Pearson 2001).

Does the Lebanese General Security actively target migrant community organizers for the mere fact that they are speaking against the Kafala System? The short answer is no. Thus far, GS has been detaining and deporting workers who have complaints submitted against them by employers/agencies/consuls. During the investigation phase, it usually becomes apparent that the worker in question does not have papers, is working as a freelancer, or is sheltering other migrant women, which usually become enough grounds for her deportation. Thus, it is technically possible for workers to speak against Kafala without being deported if they are on good terms with their employer, have papers, and can secure legal aid to defend themselves against false accusations when needed. But these conditions are almost impossible to meet for many workers, which means that migrant community organizers who carry out activism are often worried about upsetting the wrong Lebanese citizen.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

Based on the above analysis, we have drafted the following recommendations.

### Recommendations for those who support the community organizing of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon:

- ✳ **Community-building:** NGOs and INGOs need to value and support community-building activities (e.g. social events, parties, language classes, etc.) for migrant domestic workers. These communities provide the platform upon which mutual self-help and self-advocacy initiatives stand.
- ✳ **Labor rights instead of humanitarian struggle:** Activist groups and NGOs should treat the challenges facing migrant domestic workers as a labor rights struggle and integrate it within the class struggle of Lebanese/Arab workers against the ruling class, as opposed to seeing it as a humanitarian or identity-based struggle. This entails dealing with language and cultural barriers as well as working towards a movement that is not nationality-based. So far, attempts at supporting migrants in Lebanon have been very weak in terms of creating linkages across nationalities and with the broader Lebanese labor movement.
 

Treating the struggle as one of labor rights also avoids relying on narratives of victimization and individual cases of abuse, instead locating migrant domestic workers' struggles within larger efforts at protecting workers' rights in Lebanon and the region. The provisions of Convention 189 can be a useful tool in setting advocacy priorities and goals.
- ✳ **Migrant worker centered capacity-building:** INGOs and NGOs seeking to support migrant-led groups with capacity-building should tailor their support to the needs and preferences of these groups. Groups should be encouraged to develop their own systems and processes, instead of assuming that NGOs' governance systems are the right fit. Issues of internal democracy, decision-making processes, transparency, fundraising, and conflict resolution need to be prioritized to ensure that groups maintain legitimacy among members. Instead of NGO capacity-building frameworks based on abstract "theories of change" and log frame outcomes, there should be more focus on forms of support that address the particular needs of specific migrant groups, including the need for flexibility. More research on governance systems for grassroots communities could be useful.
- ✳ **Supporting fundraising efforts:** In the absence of effective social protection mechanisms in Lebanon, migrant-led groups need to continue developing their own tools to tackle emergencies such as hospitalization and the sudden repatriation of migrant community leaders. Mutual funds that can support older repatriated or deported workers could be an effective form of support.
- ✳ **Advocacy vis-à-vis governments of countries of origin:** Local activists and groups need to back migrant domestic workers in their advocacy to challenge abusive and neglectful consulates. Lebanese activists face fewer risks in engaging in this kind of advocacy than do migrant workers, who are at risk of being "investigated" and deported if they upset powerful individuals such as honorary consuls, recruitment agents, business owners, etc. INGOs can also support this effort.
- ✳ **Substantiated legal support:** Many migrant workers are afraid of engaging in political community organizing efforts for their labor rights because of the risk of being deported. If deported, most migrant domestic workers who have invested their time and energy in social support networks in Lebanon would face isolation and economic precarity in their countries of origin. In order to avoid stoking this fear, local NGOs and activist groups should take care not to spread inaccurate information regarding deportation risks. Deportations thus far have only been executed for migrant workers who have issues with their employers, are undocumented, or are accused of 'human trafficking' when they support other women workers who flee abusive households. This means that migrant workers are not targeted for the mere fact of speaking against Kafala, as many migrants assume. Nevertheless, ad-hoc legal support (such as signing Power of Attorney forms with human rights lawyers) should be made available for all migrant activists to use in the event that they are investigated by GS. This will not remove the deportation risk, but would provide the needed support for migrant activists



who decide to take the risk of self-organizing and fighting back against abusive conditions. Presenting activist migrant community organizers as always being “a deportation risk” does not help workers escape deportation but could end up contributing to the spread of panic and fear, thus reducing the morale of community organizers and community organizing work in conditions that are already tough enough. This culture of fear can be replaced by a system of support. The risks involved can be mitigated by building proper support systems for arrested workers, making sure migrant workers have accurate information about deportation risks, and developing means for supporting deported activists back in their home countries.

## Recommendations for migrant-led community organizations themselves:

- ✳ **Valuation:** It is clear that community-building activities are essential across all migrant-led groups included in this study. Investing in these activities is necessary for a group’s sustainability.
- ✳ **Formalization:** The process of formalization, or transitioning from an informal unstructured group to a group with clear systems and ways of working, is an important step for a group’s sustainability. Very few migrant-led organizations were able to do that well. Formalization requires determination of the mechanisms and processes for decision-making, conflict resolution, and leadership transitions. They should keep an organization prepared for leadership vacuums by ensuring that the knowledge and experience required for leadership is transferred to future leaders. An organization’s systems need to be developed in a way that is contextualized in accordance with its grassroots spirit (as opposed to NGO bureaucratic systems) and to allow for flexibility.
- ✳ **Formulating own needs:** Given local and international NGOs’ interest in supporting migrant-led groups, migrant workers could take a more assertive stance about the kinds of support that are offered. For example, if an NGO wants to offer capacity-building activities, migrant groups should ensure that the trainings respect the unique dynamics and grassroots spirit of each group, rather than mirroring institutional structures.
- ✳ **Fundraising:** Self-fundraising through small monthly membership fees can go a long way, especially with groups that have large membership bases (200+ members). Small funds can be established to support

elderly migrant workers in case they are deported or forced to go back home so that they do not return empty-handed. However, the long-term solution for this would be a just immigration system that grants permanent residency for long-term migrant workers in Lebanon (effectively abolishing Kafala). The latter can only be done in collaboration with Lebanese allies who may be able to exert more pressure on the Lebanese General Security.

- ✳ **Cross-nationalities organizing:** Most migrant-led groups organize on the basis of cultural familiarity, such as shared nationality or country of origin. Organizing across migrant nationalities remains a challenge, but the migrant domestic worker union and MCC are useful experiments showing that this is possible when there is will and sufficient support.
  - ✳ **Alliances with Lebanese/Arab domestic workers:** In order to fight against the exploitation of migrant work as ‘cheap labor’, the labor movement would be strengthened by collaborations across Lebanese/ Arab and other domestic workers, and with the local working class in general. This would challenge the widespread treatment of migrant workers as exceptional temporary labor and their exclusion from the organizing efforts of the rest of the working class.
- Nevertheless, it is also important to understand that migrant workers have carved out their own spaces of belonging in Lebanon through their community groups, social relations, families, and businesses despite being denied recognition as part of the Lebanese working class. Recognizing migrant domestic workers’ belonging and the ties they created in the country can help them build stronger solidarity ties with Lebanese and Arab workers, against their ‘othering’.
- ✳ **Legal support:** Migrant workers should try to obtain the contact information of human rights lawyers who may be able to support them in cases of arrest and deportation, especially if those lawyers can facilitate negotiations with the parties that are pushing for deportation.



## LOOKING AHEAD

This initial study is a first attempt at narrating the history of community mobilization of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon from the 1980s to the present. It examines the context in which migrant community workers organize support groups, and the context in which those groups operate, highlighting both internal and external obstacles they encounter while advocating for collective welfare and labor rights. While we have attempted to provide a concise overview of each organization, there is certainly room for a deeper examination. Our summaries of migrant organizations are based on limited interviews, and there is much more to learn by listening to more people and including more perspectives. Our hope is that the provided accounts provide a concise, preliminary historical overview of the organizing work that migrant domestic workers have undertaken.

Kobaissy (2017) discusses how migrant domestic workers tried to “unionize without a union”. We look forward to similar experiments in the future, hopefully with even more creative alliances that cross nationalities in fighting for better labor conditions despite the tough conditions in Lebanon today. It would be useful for future research to different models of governance through which migrant groups could enjoy some level of formalization without losing flexibility, as well as the grassroots spirit that is at the heart of their identity.

Lastly, we hope that this research will stir conversations about the future of collective organizing in Lebanon, particularly with and for women migrant domestic workers. The women responsible for building the organisations and associations described above should be proud of their contribution to the fight for labor rights in Lebanon, which will hopefully contribute to the long fight for the abolishment of the Kafala system and for decent working and living conditions for all.



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