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GIPS Project

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Navigating (Im)Mobility and Precarious Lives:

Strategies of Migrant Women and Organizations in Lebanon

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Disclaimer:

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Introduction

Migrant women in Lebanon face persistent precarity due to a combination of structural, legal, and social challenges. Their vulnerabilities stem from intersecting factors such as legal status, gender, labor conditions, socio-economic marginalization, and racial discrimination. This intersectionality exacerbates their struggles, limiting their access to fundamental rights, social protections, and economic opportunities.

Refugee women, particularly those from Syria and Palestine, often reside in overcrowded and under-resourced camps where they lack adequate healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Due to restrictive labor laws and legal barriers, many are forced into informal and exploitative jobs with little to no protection. Migrant domestic workers, the majority of whom come from countries such as Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, live under the Kafala system—a sponsorship-based employment structure that ties their residency to their employer. This system has been widely criticized for enabling exploitation, wage theft, long working hours, and even cases of physical and psychological abuse. Many domestic workers experience social isolation, as they are often confined to their employers' households with limited mobility and no recourse to justice in cases of mistreatment.

In addition to these structural challenges, migrant women in Lebanon are subjected to racial and gender-based discrimination, which further marginalizes them within Lebanese society. Negative stereotypes and xenophobic attitudes frequently shape their interactions with local communities and institutions, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and inequality. Moreover, in times of economic and political crisis—such as Lebanon's ongoing financial collapse and governance failures—migrant women are among the first to bear the consequences, facing layoffs, homelessness, and heightened vulnerabilities.

The present study aims to examine the strategies adopted by migrant women and organizations to navigate these precarious conditions, as part of a research project in collaboration with the University of Montreal, titled "GIPS Project: Women, gender, (im)mobility and precarious lives: Partnership development project from a transnational and decolonial feminist perspective". This project is an action-research initiative that examines the intersection of gender inequalities and the realities of migrant women experiencing extended precarious life situations in Canada (Québec) and Lebanon. The project addresses ethical challenges in crisis research and intervention by building a feminist, transnational, and decolonial partnership. It brings together researchers, students, social workers, and migrants to support those in (hyper)precarious conditions.

The project aims to expand feminist research to address the intersection of gender inequalities, migrant experiences in protracted and precarious situations, and the denial of citizenship rights in both contexts. By focusing on the realities shared by migrant women and individuals identifying with gender and sexual diversity, the project acknowledges the vast material, cultural, social, and historical differences shaping their experiences. The project's objectives include documenting the migration experiences of women in precarious life situations in Lebanon and Canada (Québec), exploring the strategies employed by partner organizations and migrant women to navigate (im)mobilities and precarious conditions, examining ethical research and intervention practices in multiple crisis contexts.

This study focuses on the Lebanese context, examining the lived experiences of migrant women within the framework of gendered migration patterns, social exclusion, and the denial of citizenship rights. More specifically, it explores how migrant women navigate daily life, access resources, and challenge oppressive structures. Additionally, the study analyzes the role of non-profit organizations and grassroots initiatives in supporting migrant women, while also addressing the challenges these organizations face in an unstable environment. Lastly, the research seeks to identify and document best practices and interventions that can inform policies and advocacy efforts to improve the conditions of migrant women in Lebanon.

The findings indicate that migrant women adopt various strategies to navigate displacement, discrimination, and economic hardship. Seeking support from family, friends, and NGOs is a key coping mechanism, providing emotional relief and community connection. Many engage in education and skill-building to enhance their confidence and future opportunities, while self-care practices, such as religious rituals and physical activities, contribute to emotional well-being. Family, particularly children, serves as a source of motivation and stability. Organizations play a critical role in offering legal awareness, empowerment programs, and vocational training, yet challenges remain in ensuring access to stable employment and long-term protection. While these interventions offer essential short-term support, addressing systemic barriers requires more comprehensive and sustainable policy solutions.

In the following chapters, we will present the detailed findings of the study, starting with the context in Lebanon and an overview of the methodology employed, followed by an in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by migrant women in Lebanon, the strategies they employ for coping, and the role of non-profit organizations in supporting these efforts. Finally, the report will conclude with a set of recommendations aimed at enhancing policy responses and advocacy for migrant women in Lebanon and similar contexts.

Background

Lebanon has been grappling with overlapping crises that have deepened socio-economic inequalities and increased vulnerabilities for marginalized groups[1]. Refugees and migrant domestic workers face systemic discrimination, legal restrictions, and a deteriorating economic situation that limits their access to employment, healthcare, and social services[2]. The compounded impacts of the economic crisis, political deadlock, COVID-19 pandemic, Beirut Blast, and the 2024 Israeli war on Lebanon have made it increasingly difficult for these communities to secure basic rights and protection[3].

Lebanon continues to host one of the largest refugee populations per capita in the world. While official estimates place the number of Syrian refugees at 1.5 million and Palestinian refugees at 174,000, the actual number is likely higher due to unregistered individuals[4]. Recent government measures have led to an increase in deportations and forced returns of Syrian refugees. In 2023, the Lebanese authorities intensified crackdowns, with mass arrests and deportations of Syrians, often without due process[5]. Human rights organizations have documented previous cases of refugees being sent back to Syria despite facing potential persecution or forced conscription into military service[6].

Economic Hardship and Limited Livelihoods

Since 2019, Lebanon has faced one of the most severe economic collapses in modern history, with hyperinflation, currency devaluation, and widespread unemployment exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. The World Bank has classified Lebanon's economic crisis among the worst three globally since the mid-19th century[7]. The prolonged crisis has resulted in massive job losses, business closures, and an unstable economic environment that disproportionately affects marginalized populations[8].

The Lebanese lira has lost over 95% of its value, making basic necessities unaffordable for most people[9]. As of early 2024, more than 80% of the population lives in poverty, and approximately 36% experience extreme poverty[10]. For refugees and migrant workers, the crisis has been particularly devastating, as they have even fewer legal protections and access to financial resources compared to Lebanese citizens[11].

Refugees' Employment Opportunities

Refugees in Lebanon face significant barriers to formal employment due to restrictive labor laws that limit them to a few low-paying and physically demanding sectors, such as agriculture, construction, and sanitation[12]. Syrian refugees, in particular, experience severe wage disparities, earning significantly less than their Lebanese counterparts, with wages often falling below the survival threshold[13]. Due to these legal restrictions, the majority of working Syrian refugees are employed in the informal sector, where they are vulnerable to wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and job insecurity[14]. The economic hardship has also led to an increase in child labor, with a reportedly high number of Syrian refugee children engaged in hazardous work, such as agriculture and street vending, as families struggle to survive[15].

1 *Médecins Sans Frontières. (2021). Overlapping crises in Lebanon increase needs and worsen access to care.*
2 *Khodeir, P. (2023). The impact of the economic and monetary crisis on human rights in Lebanon. Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor.*
3 *Ben Romdhane, W., Vallentine, J., & Frouws, B. (2024). Lebanon's escalating conflict: What are the displacement and migration consequences?. Mixed Migration Centre.*
4 *Human Rights Watch. (2023). "I can't go home, stay here, or leave": Pushbacks and pullbacks of Syrian refugees from Cyprus and Lebanon.*
5 *Human Rights Watch. (2023). Lebanon: Armed Forces summarily deporting Syrians: Donors should ensure funding doesn't contribute to rights violations.*
6 *Human Rights Watch. (2021). "Our Lives Are Like Death": Syrian refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan.*
7 *The World Bank. (2021). Lebanon sinking into one of the most severe global crises episodes, amidst deliberate inaction.*
8 *Khodeir, P. (2023). The impact of the economic and monetary crisis on human rights in Lebanon. Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor.*
9 *Human Rights Watch. (2023). "Cut off from life itself": Lebanon's failure on the right to electricity.*
10 *Ipsos. (2023). Socioeconomic and political landscape of Lebanon.*
11 *Diab, J. L. (2024). Selective and strategic indifference: Lebanon's migration and refugee landscapes. Mixed Migration Centre.*
12 *Sánchez, D. G. (2021). Wasted potential: Mismatching Syrian refugee skills in the Lebanese labor market. The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.*
13 *LEADERS for Sustainable Livelihoods. (2019). Dignity at stake: Challenges to accessing decent work in Lebanon.*
14 *Saghir, C. (2023). The Lebanese labor market: Where informality, exploitation, and unemployment run rampant. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy.*
15 *The Freedom Fund. (2024). Lebanon child labour scoping study: Summary report.*

Palestinian refugees, despite having lived in Lebanon for generations, face even more restrictive labor policies. They are still barred from working in over 20 professions, including law, medicine, and engineering[16], and remain stateless, preventing them from accessing formal social security systems or employment protections.

Impact on Migrant Domestic Workers

Lebanon is home to over 175,000 migrant domestic workers, predominantly from African and Asian countries[17]. These workers are employed under the Kafala system, which legally binds them to their employer, restricting their freedom of movement and legal protections[18]. The Kafala system has been widely condemned for enabling human rights abuses, including wage theft, physical and verbal abuse, forced confinement, and passport confiscation[19]. Because the Kafala system legally binds them to their employers, migrant domestic workers are unable to switch jobs or leave abusive situations without facing legal repercussions[20].

Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, who are primarily from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, have been disproportionately affected by the country's economic downturn. The economic crisis left employers unable to pay migrant domestic workers, resulting in months of unpaid wages. Many were then abandoned at their embassies or forced onto the streets without financial means to return to their home countries[21]. This was also the case amid the Israeli war on Lebanon, as many were stranded, sleeping rough, and abandoned by their employers without residency documents or financial resources[22].

The abuse and lack of labor protections have prompted some countries, including Ethiopia and the Philippines, to ban their citizens from traveling to Lebanon for domestic work[23], reducing legal migration pathways and increasing the risks associated with unregulated and undocumented labor recruitment.

Rising Food and Rent Prices: Increased Cost of Living

The rapid devaluation of the Lebanese lira has led to an unprecedented rise in the cost of essential goods, further worsening the economic struggles of refugees and migrant workers[24]. In 2024, food prices surged by 23.19%, making it one of the highest inflationary categories alongside health expenses[25], affecting the food insecurity of refugees who were already not able to afford basic meals[26]. As of 2023, 42% of Syrian refugee households experienced food insecurity, with female-headed households facing higher rates of moderate (44%) and severe (5%) food insecurity compared to male-headed households (38% and 2%, respectively)[27]. Similarly, Palestinian refugees have been affected, with reports indicating that nearly two-thirds of Palestinian refugee households in Lebanon were food insecure, and 20% of these households were severely food insecure[28].

Housing costs have also become unaffordable, with rent prices doubling in many areas, particularly in overcrowded informal settlements where refugees reside[29]. Many families face forced evictions, as they are unable to pay for even the most basic accommodation, increasing their vulnerability to homelessness[30]. Reports indicate that Palestinian and Syrian refugees experience the highest levels of eviction threats, with 45% and 40% respectively, compared to 24% among Lebanese residents[31]. The lack of formal refugee camps in Lebanon forces many refugees to seek housing in informal settlements or substandard buildings, often at inflated rental prices, exacerbating their economic hardships.

16 *Al-Arian, L. (2019). In Lebanon, Palestinians protest new employment restrictions. NPR.*
17 *Musvanhiri, P. (2024). Stranded African migrants in Lebanon feel abandoned. Deutsche Welle.*
18 *Robinson, K. (2022). What is the Kafala System?. Council on Foreign Relations.*
19 *Amnesty International. (2019). End Kafala: Justice for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon.*
20 *KAFA. (2012). Policy paper on reforming the "Sponsorship System" for migrant domestic workers: Towards an alternative governance scheme in Lebanon.*
21 *Makooi, B. (2020). Abandoned by employers, Ethiopian domestic workers are dumped on Lebanon's streets. France 24.*
22 *Walk Free. (2024). Displacement of migrant workers in Lebanon increases risk of modern slavery.*
23 *Abou-Diwan, A. (2019). Migration under the Kafala System – When human beings become commodities. Goethe-Institut.*
24 *OCHA. (2023). Escalating needs in Lebanon | A 2023 overview.*
25 *L'Orient Today. (2024). Prices increased in November for the second consecutive month in Lebanon.*
26 *UNHCR. (2023). Twelve years on, Syrian refugees face deepening debt and hunger.*
27 *UNHCR. (2023). The vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon – Food security.*
28 *Ghattas, H., Sassine, A. J., Seyfert, K., Nord, M., & Sahyoun, N. R. (2015). Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon: Data from a household survey. PloS one, 10(6), e0130724.*
29 *Salti, N., Chaaban, J., Moussa, W., Srour, I., Al Mokdad, R., Turkmani, N., Romero-Ardoy, P., Saghir, C., & Assadourian, L. (2022). Assessing shelter and WASH conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in relation to cash assistance and services.*
30 *Public Works Studio. (2023). The plight of housing in Lebanon: Annual report submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing.*
31 *Norwegian Refugee Council. (2022). Low-income rental housing market: Market assessment.*

Gender-Based Violence

Marginalized women in Lebanon—including refugees, migrant domestic workers, and those engaged in informal labor—face widespread gender-based violence (GBV), exacerbated by legal gaps, weak enforcement of protections, and societal discrimination. Lebanon's prolonged political and economic instability has intensified violence against women, with many unable to access justice, protection, or support services[32]. The intersection of poverty, displacement, and legal exclusion leaves such groups highly vulnerable to domestic violence, workplace abuse, sexual exploitation, and multiple forms of discrimination in daily life.

Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence

Refugee women in Lebanon face heightened risks of domestic violence and intimate partner violence[33], yet many cases go unreported due to many reasons, including social norms, legal barriers, and fear of retaliation[34]. Many refugee women, particularly Syrian and Palestinian women, reside in overcrowded settlements or shared housing, where domestic violence often goes unchecked. The absence of protective laws for refugees, coupled with their economic dependence on male partners, makes it difficult for them to leave abusive relationships[35]. Indeed, Lebanon does not have comprehensive laws protecting refugee women from domestic violence, leaving many survivors without access to legal recourse. While Law No. 293 (2014) on domestic violence provides some protections, it does not extend to non-citizens, limiting its application to refugee and migrant women[36].

Lebanon has only a handful of shelters dedicated to domestic violence survivors, and most of them do not accommodate migrant women. Many Syrian women who seek to escape abuse are turned away from shelters due to lack of documentation or space limitations. Additionally, migrant domestic workers do not qualify for most protective services, and those who attempt to escape abusive employers risk detention, deportation, or homelessness.

Sexual Exploitation and Violence

Sexual violence against refugee and migrant women has been widely documented, particularly in humanitarian aid settings and informal labor sectors. Survival sex—where women engage in transactional sex to obtain food, shelter, or assistance—has been reported among Syrian refugee women[37] and Palestinian women[38]. Moreover, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon are frequently solicited for transactional sex, often in exploitative or coercive contexts[39].

Humanitarian agencies and NGOs have reported cases of sexual exploitation, where some refugee women have been coerced into sex in exchange for services. Sexual exploitation and abuse were most commonly reported in connection with accessing shelter and cash assistance, particularly during interactions at distribution points, while traveling to and from distributions, or when seeking information about aid collection, registering for assistance, or storing aid[40]. The lack of oversight and accountability within certain aid distribution programs has left many female-headed refugee households vulnerable to abuse[41]. Many of these women do not report sexual exploitation due to fear of losing access to assistance.

32 *Aataa, M. D. (2024). Crisis in Lebanon: The voices of women-led organizations.*

33 *Usta, J., Masterson, A. R., & Farver, J. M. (2019). Violence against displaced Syrian women in Lebanon. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 34(18), 3767-3779.*

34 *Barada, R., Potts, A., Bourassa, A., Contreras-Urbina, M., & Nasr, K. (2021). "I go up to the edge of the valley, and i talk to God": Using mixed methods to understand the relationship between gender-based violence and mental health among Lebanese and Syrian refugee women engaged in psychosocial programming. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(9), 4500.*

35 *Norwegian Refugee Council. (2016). Women refugees in Lebanon and the consequences of limited legal status on their housing, land and property rights.*

36 *Moussawi, F., & Yassin, N. (2017). Dissecting Lebanese law 293 on domestic violence: Are women protected?. Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.*

37 *Fahme, S. A., Chehab, S., Logie, C. H., Mumtaz, G., Fitzgerald, D., Downs, J. A., DeJong, J., & Sieverding, M. (2024). Intersecting social-ecological vulnerabilities to and lived experiences of sexually transmitted infections among Syrian refugee women in Lebanon: A qualitative study. PLOS global public health, 4(8), e0003507.*

38 *Aaraj, E., Haddad, P., Khalife, S. et al. (2023). Understanding and responding to substance use and abuse in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon prior to and during COVID-19 times. Int J Ment Health Addiction 21, 2175–2191.*

39 *Diab, J. L., Yimer, B., Birhanu, T., Kitoko, A., Gidey, A., and Ankrah, F. (2022). Acknowledged but forgotten: The gender dimensions of sexual violence against migrant domestic workers in post-crisis Lebanon. IMS Policy and Working Paper Series 2.*

40 *Potts, A., Fattal, L., Hedge, E., Hallak, F., & Reese, A.. (2020). Empowered aid: Participatory action research with refugee women & girls to better prevent sexual exploitation and abuse—Lebanon results report. Washington, DC: The George Washington University and Lebanon: CARE International.*

41 *Ibid.*

Migrant domestic workers face high rates of sexual violence from their employers. A recent study with migrant domestic workers in Lebanon reveals that 68% of respondents experienced at least one incident of sexual harassment in Lebanon, with 56% confirming specific forms of harassment and 12% acknowledging assault[42]. The most frequently reported type of sexual harassment was unwelcome physical contact, such as touching, hugging, or kissing, while other common forms included inappropriate staring, sexually suggestive comments, offensive questions, indecent exposure, explicit messages, unwanted advances, and attempted or actual rape[43].

Barriers to Healthcare

Access to healthcare in Lebanon is deeply inequitable, particularly for refugees and migrant domestic workers[44]. The privatization of the healthcare system, coupled with the economic collapse and lack of government-funded social welfare, has made even basic medical services unaffordable for low-income populations[45].

Maternal Healthcare

In refugee areas, less privileged pregnant women reportedly receive insufficient antenatal care, and poor living conditions, low socioeconomic status, and psychosocial distress contribute to neonatal complications and low birth weight[46]. Moreover, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon who become pregnant while employed under the Kafala system face severe challenges in accessing maternity care[47]. Many are fired upon their employer's discovery of their pregnancy, leaving them without medical assistance or financial support[48].

Mental Health

In addition, the mental health crisis in Lebanon has escalated due to economic hardship, displacement, and exposure to violence[49]. The cost of psychiatric care and counseling services in Lebanon is prohibitively expensive[50], making mental health support inaccessible for most refugees and migrant workers. Many Syrian refugees in Lebanon suffer from PTSD, depression, and anxiety, stemming from their experiences of war, displacement, and ongoing economic hardship[51]. However, even when mental health services are available, the stigma surrounding mental health within refugee communities discourages many from seeking professional help[52], leaving psychological conditions untreated and worsening over time.

Reports also indicate a rise in suicide rates among migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, largely due to forced isolation, financial distress, and abuse under the Kafala system[53]. Many workers face extreme psychological stress, exacerbated by exploitative working conditions, unpaid wages, and confinement within their employers' homes. Migrant workers under the Kafala system face significant barriers to mental healthcare due to legal insecurity, financial constraints, employer restrictions, language barriers, stigma, and racism[54]. Local and international NGOs provide mental health and psychosocial support, including counseling, advocacy, medical referrals, and basic needs assistance. However, awareness of these services is low—84% of surveyed migrant workers were unaware of available support, with female migrants particularly disconnected due to live-in employment[55].

42 *Diab, J. L., Yimer, B., Birhanu, T., Kitoko, A., Gidey, A., and Ankrah, F. (2022). Acknowledged but forgotten: The gender dimensions of sexual violence against migrant domestic workers in post-crisis Lebanon. IMS Policy and Working Paper Series 2.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Baroud, M. (2023). Right to health in times of crisis: A review of barriers and challenges to achieving the right to health in Lebanon. Arab NGO Network for Development.*

45 *ILO. (2024). Privatizing coverage: Emerging threats to universal healthcare in Lebanon.*

46 *Elshal, H., Chour, M., Abdel Halim, S., Kharpoutli, S., Raad, H., Abou Alfa, S., Maaliki, R., & Makki, Z. (2021). Factors affecting pregnancy outcome in refugee mothers in Lebanon. BAU Journal - Health and Wellbeing, 3(2), Article 4.*

47 *Mezher, Z., Nassif, G., & Wilson, C. (2021). Women migrant domestic workers in Lebanon: A gender perspective.*

48 *Block, K., Fernandez, B., McGee, T., Al-Barazi, Z., & Brennan, D. (2023). Immobilisation of migrant domestic worker women and their children born in Lebanon. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 50(8), 1923–1940.*

49 *Farran N. (2021). Mental health in Lebanon: Tomorrow's silent epidemic. Mental health & prevention, 24, 200218.*

50 *Yammine, L. (2024). The struggle for mental health in Lebanon's multiple crises. Assafir Arabi.*

51 *Kazour, F., Zahreddine, N. R., Maragel, M. G., Almustafa, M. A., Soufia, M., Haddad, R., & Richa, S. (2017). Post-traumatic stress disorder in a sample of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Comprehensive psychiatry, 72, 41–47.*

52 *Lebanon: Inter-Agency Coordination. (2022). In Focus: Mental health & psychosocial wellbeing of vulnerable populations.*

53 *Wallis, E. (2020). Slavery and suicide: Plight of migrant maids in Lebanon made more stark by pandemic. InfoMigrants.*

54 *Howland, D., Mehlau, A., & Noun, P. (2022). The mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of migrant workers under the kafala system. GIZ.*

55 *International Organization for Migration (2020). DTM Lebanon— migrant worker vulnerability baseline assessment report (May-July 2020).*

Legal Exclusion and Statelessness

Lebanon's restrictive legal framework leaves refugees, migrant workers, and stateless individuals in a permanent state of legal and social exclusion, preventing them from accessing basic rights, legal residency, employment, healthcare, and education[56]. The lack of a national asylum law, coupled with strict residency renewal policies, has placed hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals in legal limbo, forcing them to navigate daily life without legal protection[57]. Syrian and Palestinian refugees, migrant domestic workers, and stateless individuals born in Lebanon face immense barriers to securing legal status[58], limiting their ability to access essential services and increasing their risk of exploitation, detention, and deportation.

Lebanon does not grant permanent legal status to refugees, leaving most Syrians without legal residency, which exposes them to arbitrary arrests, forced deportations, and severe movement restrictions[59]. In 2015, the Lebanese government suspended UNHCR's ability to register Syrian refugees, leaving tens of thousands undocumented and unable to access essential services[60]. As a result, those without valid residency face daily risks of detention at checkpoints, which prevents them from moving freely, seeking employment, or accessing healthcare and education, further deepening their economic insecurity and social exclusion[61].

Syrian refugees face forcible return to Syria, despite the ongoing violence, persecution, and human rights violations in their home country. In 2023, Lebanon's General Security Agency has forcibly deported thousands of Syrian refugees, violating international non-refoulement laws, which prohibit the forced return of individuals to life-threatening situations[62]. Human rights organizations have documented previous cases of refugees being sent back to Syria despite facing potential persecution or forced conscription into military service[63]. Palestinian refugees from Syria face even more extreme legal exclusion, as they are denied residency permits altogether, rendering them invisible under the law, unable to seek protection or assistance, and at constant risk of detention and deportation[64]. The absence of legal protections for these displaced populations leaves them trapped in cycles of fear, insecurity, and statelessness, unable to access basic rights, employment, or essential services.

In addition, children born to Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees, and migrant domestic workers in Lebanon often inherit statelessness, as Lebanon's nationality law does not allow women to pass citizenship to their children, regardless of their birthplace[65]. Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon face significant challenges in obtaining birth certificates for their newborns, leading to statelessness and restricted access to essential services[66]. Many lose their legal status during pregnancy and avoid authorities due to fear of detention or deportation. High hospital fees result in birth notices being withheld, while undocumented mothers struggle with identity verification, sometimes using false documents, causing further complications. Patriarchal legal constraints prevent mothers from registering children without the father's cooperation, and embassy support is often inaccessible due to employer restrictions on movement[67]. Without a birth certificate, these children are at risk of statelessness, making it difficult to access healthcare, education, and other essential services. As a result, stateless children face significant barriers to education, healthcare, and social services, trapping them in a cycle of marginalization and exclusion that persists into adulthood. This legal exclusion not only limits their opportunities for the future but also reinforces intergenerational statelessness, perpetuating systemic inequality and social invisibility.

56 *International Commission of Jurists. (2020). Unrecognized and unprotected: The treatment of refugees and migrants in Lebanon.*
57 *Diab, J. L. (2024). Selective and strategic indifference: Lebanon's migration and refugee landscapes. Mixed Migration Centre.*
58 *Asylos. (2023). Lebanon: Stateless Palestinians.*
59 *Amnesty International. (2024). Lebanon: Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees at imminent risk of deportation.*
60 *Kikano, F., Fauveaud, G., & Lizarralde, G. (2021). Policies of exclusion: The case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Journal of Refugee Studies, Volume 34, Issue 1, Pages 422–452.*
61 *El Daoi, F. (2017). Syrian refugees deprived of basic human rights. Norwegian Refugee Council.*
62 *Human Rights Watch. (2023). Lebanon: Armed Forces summarily deporting Syrians: Donors should ensure funding doesn't contribute to rights violations.*
63 *Human Rights Watch. (2021). "Our lives are like death": Syrian refugee returns from Lebanon and Jordan.*
64 *Amnesty International. (2014). Families ripped apart as Palestinian refugees from Syria denied entry to Lebanon.*
65 *National Commission for Lebanese Women. (2021). Nationality not naturalization: The rights of Lebanese women to full citizenship and to confer their nationality to their children.*
66 *Block, K., Fernandez, B., McGee, T., Al-Barazi, Z., & Brennan, D. (2023). Immobilisation of migrant domestic worker women and their children born in Lebanon. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 50(8), 1923–1940.*
67 *Ibid.*

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the strategies adopted by migrant women and partner organizations in response to precarious living conditions. The methodology includes a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted in collaboration with three partner organizations that work closely with migrant women in Lebanon.

Research Questions

The main research questions are: (1) How do migrant women in extended precarious life situations in Lebanon navigate challenges related to (im)mobility, gender inequalities, and the denial of citizenship rights?; and (2) What strategies do migrant women and partner organizations develop to cope with and address the challenges of (im) mobility and precarious living conditions?

Data Collection Methods

The study partnered with three organizations working with different groups of migrant women. For refugee women, we worked with a Palestinian women's rights organization in Burj El Barajneh camp and an organization in Chatila camp were selected due to their long-standing involvement in supporting Palestinian and Syrian refugee women through advocacy, skills training, and community engagement. For migrant domestic workers, the study partnered with an alliance of migrant domestic workers based in Lebanon, a grassroots network established by and for domestic workers to advocate for labor rights, provide peer support, and promote collective organizing.

Data collection was conducted using two primary methods:

Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of twelve individual interviews were conducted with migrant women to document their personal migration experiences, the challenges they encountered at different stages of migration, and the strategies they employed to cope with precarious conditions. The interviews followed a qualitative interview guide designed to maintain consistency across participants while allowing for flexibility so that women could share their lived experiences in their own words.

Focus Group Discussions

Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, involving a total of thirty participants. Two FGDs were held with migrant women—one with refugee women and one with domestic workers—exploring their coping mechanisms, community-organizing efforts, and interactions with support organizations. The discussions centered on migration trajectories, individual and collective strategies, and the effectiveness of interventions. Additionally, two FGDs were conducted with staff members from the partner organizations to assess the impact of their programs and to identify key interventions that have been effective in addressing the needs of migrant women. These discussions also provided insight into the limitations of existing programs and potential areas for improvement.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research guidelines approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the American University of Beirut. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality measures were strictly maintained. No identifying information was recorded, and sensitive topics were approached with care to minimize distress.

Code	Reference
PI1	Interview with refugee women in Bourj El Barajneh
PI2	
PI3	
PI4	
PI5	
PI6	
PI7	
PI8	
PI9	
PI10	
AI1	Interview with migrant domestic worker
AI2	
FGA 1	Focus group discussion with migrant domestic workers
FGPS 1	Focus group discussion with staff members in Bourj El Barajneh
FGNS 1	Focus group discussion with staff members in Chatila camp
FGNMW 1	Focus group discussion with refugee women in Chatila camp

Themes

The research explored several key themes, including the challenges migrant women faced during different stages of migration (pre-departure, transit, and settlement), the strategies they used to navigate their precarious conditions, and the effectiveness of the initiatives put in place by partner organizations. Participants were asked to reflect on the strategies they had deployed individually and collectively, the resources they accessed, and the barriers they encountered. Organizational staff were asked to discuss their most significant programs, the rationale behind their strategies, and the challenges they faced in implementation.

Limitations

This study was conducted during the summer of 2023, prior to the escalation of the Gaza 2023 war and the subsequent Lebanon war in 2024. Given the rapidly changing political and security landscape in the region, these events have likely had significant impacts on the lives of migrant women and the operations of partner organizations. However, since the fieldwork was completed before these events, the study does not account for their direct consequences on migration patterns, living conditions, or organizational responses.

Furthermore, due to the deteriorating security situation, the research team was unable to conduct follow-up validation sessions with participants. Validation sessions are a key component of participatory qualitative research, allowing researchers to share preliminary findings with participants for feedback and to ensure that interpretations accurately reflect their experiences. The inability to carry out these sessions means that some perspectives may not have been further refined through participant review.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to systematically identify key themes and patterns emerging from the data. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of the various challenges and coping mechanisms described by migrant women and staff from organizations. The coding framework involved categorizing transcripts based on recurrent themes, including forced migration, discrimination, mental health struggles, gender-based violence, and coping strategies. These categories helped structure the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how different aspects of migration and social marginalization intersect in the lives of migrant women.

To ensure data reliability and consistency, a triangulation process was implemented. Data collected from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations were cross-checked and compared. This method helped validate the findings by identifying similarities and differences across various sources and minimizing potential biases that could arise from relying on a single data collection method.

Main Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from participants' narratives, highlighting their experiences with displacement, violence, discrimination, as well as the strategies they adopt to cope with precarity. Their testimonies illustrate how war, instability, and systemic inequalities shape their daily lives and long-term prospects. The findings also reveal gaps in institutional support, the role of community networks in helping individuals navigate their struggles, and the strategies implemented by organizations to address these challenges and support migrant and refugee communities in Lebanon.

Migration Journey

This section explores the participants' migration journeys to highlight the precarity they face, from the sudden need to flee to the dangers of travel and challenges of resettlement. Migration journeys encompass the decision to migrate, travel conditions, risks encountered en route, as well as reception in the host country. Whether forced or voluntary, these journeys often involve multiple displacements and systemic barriers, shaping the experiences and vulnerabilities of migrant persons.

Refugees' Migration and Forced Displacement

Many participants, particularly Syrian refugees, reported experiencing multiple forced displacements due to war. They were recently forced to flee their home countries due to war, often undergoing multiple relocations before reaching Lebanon. Many initially believed their stay in Lebanon would be temporary but found themselves unable to return due to ongoing instability. For some participants, namely Palestinian refugees, displacement was a generational experience, as their families had been uprooted decades ago and continued to live in precarious conditions. The migration journeys described by participants often involved life-threatening conditions, uncertainty, and repeated displacements.

Conflict-Induced Displacement

Participants, mainly Syrian refugees, reported that war and armed conflict were the primary reasons they were forced to leave their homes. Many were directly affected by violence, bombings, or persecution, making their hometowns unsafe. Their movements were dictated by immediate threats to their lives, forcing them to relocate with little time for planning.

PL1 shared the urgency of her decision to flee Syria:

> *"We used to live in Syria, in Homs specifically. I needed to leave Homs or they would kill my husband. I found a home in like 10 days and moved to Aleppo. We stayed in Aleppo for approximately a year and a month, but then the war started in Aleppo, and we had to deal with the constant shelling, so I left again.*

PL2 explained how her escape from war did not necessarily lead to better conditions:

> *"I used to live in Aleppo. The situation was so bad, we ran away from the bad to the worse.*

PL10, who had invested years into building a home in Syria, was forced to abandon everything due to war:

> *I used to live with my in-laws, but I was trying to build my own house with my kids. My husband used to live in Lebanon. I saved my money for 10 years to build a house that I lived in for six months. When the conflict started, I was pregnant with twins, and they bombed Aleppo. We had to leave.*

Multiple and Repeated Displacements

Participants reported that their displacement was not a linear journey from their home country to Lebanon but involved multiple moves within and outside their countries. Some lived in different cities, moving between temporary homes due to shifting conflict zones or legal barriers.

PL1 described her repeated movements in Syria before finally leaving:

> *We moved to many houses in different cities in Syria, like Al Raqqa, then back to Aleppo. I had to move under constant shelling and bombardment.*

PL6 also recounted how she was forced to relocate multiple times, including within refugee camps:

> *I used to be in Tyr, Burj Al Shamele, and because of war, I came here. Before coming here, we were in Al Rachidiye Camp.*

PL10 described how her family's journey involved escaping ISIS-controlled areas, adding another layer of difficulty:

> *When my husband came back to Lebanon, we were not able to talk for six months because of ISIS's restrictions. Until one day, he called me and told me an encrypted way to run away. I contacted a man who used to help people pass the borders. He brought the car—we were like 200 people in the car. All my kids were on my lap, we walked for two days until we arrived at the Kurdish checkpoint.*

Physical Hardships and Dangerous Journeys

Participants reported that their journeys were physically exhausting and, in some cases, life-threatening. Many fled with little to no resources, walking long distances, carrying their children, and traveling under dangerous conditions.

PL10 described the physical toll of displacement:

> *We walked barefoot in the woods. We were living in one house then the other each day. I used to get insulted all the time. I suffered a lot until we were able to find a tent, shared it with another family, and we lived there for two years.*

For pregnant women, fleeing war presented even greater risks. PL10 shared the fear she experienced when seeking medical care in a conflict zone:

> *When I wanted to give birth, we had to go in the car at night without putting the lights on so we would not get killed."*

Generational and Prolonged Displacement

Participants reported that displacement was not always a single event but a continuous struggle spanning generations. Palestinian refugees, in particular, described how their families had been forced to migrate from one place to another for decades, never finding permanent stability. Even those born in Lebanon still experienced the consequences of displacement, facing legal restrictions, economic hardship, and social exclusion.

PL6, who was born in Lebanon but comes from a Palestinian refugee family, described a lifetime of instability:

> *"I was born here, in Lebanon, but my parents migrated from Palestine, and they had to go from one camp to the other, so it was agonizing/tiring. And our childhood was basically us being deported, constantly moving from one place to the other.*

Similarly, PL5 spoke about how displacement shaped her life even though she had spent most of it in Lebanon:

> *"We are Palestinian refugees since 1964. We were born here, we grew up here, we studied here. I traveled to the UAE when I got married, and then we came back here.*

Participants, namely Syrian refugees, reported that they initially expected their stay in Lebanon to be temporary, but as conditions in their home countries worsened, they were unable to return. What was meant to be a short-term relocation turned into a prolonged, often indefinite, displacement.

PL1 described how her family's four-month plan turned into a decade-long stay:

> *"We came to Lebanon, and we were originally staying for four months because my husband doesn't usually like to come to Lebanon—he came here once when he was younger and now, he doesn't like to come here. We have been here for 10 years.*

Domestic Workers' Migration and Exploitation

This section presents participants' experiences in their migration journey, highlighting economic hardship, recruitment deception, bureaucratic corruption, and the psychological toll of exploitative working conditions. It examines the challenges migrants face in securing employment, the false promises made by recruiters, and the systemic barriers that leave them vulnerable to financial and emotional distress.

Economic Hardship and the Search for Opportunities

Participants reported that migration was driven by financial difficulties and the lack of employment opportunities in their home countries. Many sought work abroad as a means to support their families, believing that migration would provide them with stable and fair employment.

One participant described the difficulty of securing a job in Nigeria:

> *"In Nigeria, finding a job after school is very difficult. A friend introduced us to a man who promised work in Europe or Jordan but never mentioned it was for cleaning. He told us the costs, that we'd stay in a hotel until we found housing and work five days a week. After a few months, he said our papers were ready. We were supposed to go to Jordan, then Kuwait—but I ended up in Beirut without knowing. – AL2*

Another participant explained how misleading promises shaped her migration decision:

> *When we wanted to leave our country, the agency changed everything. They told us we will be working in a hospital or hotel. But when we reached the airport, they took us to a household. – FGA1*

These testimonies illustrate how many migrant domestic workers embark on their journeys with a false sense of security, only to encounter exploitative working conditions.

Misleading Information and Recruitment Deception

Participants reported receiving misleading information about the nature of their employment, their working conditions, and even their destination. Recruitment agencies often provided false assurances about job stability, salary, and working hours, leaving workers unprepared for the reality they would face.

One worker described how she was misled about her working hours and conditions:

> *I was working with kids in my country, and they told me they are going to send me here, there is not a lot of work. But when you come here, you discover you must work non-stop, have no family, and do not understand that you left your country behind. It gets harder and harder. – AL1*

These deceptive practices expose domestic workers to financial exploitation even before they arrive, increasing their vulnerability to labor abuses.

Bureaucratic Barriers and Corruption in Migration Processes

Some workers also reported facing significant bureaucratic and financial obstacles in obtaining the necessary legal documentation for migration. Corruption played a major role in these difficulties, as some were forced to pay bribes to enter Lebanon.

FGA1 described being denied entry despite having all necessary documents:

> *In my country, there is a lot of corruption. I had all my papers ready, and when I went to the airport, they told me that by a 2019 law, I am no longer allowed to go to Lebanon. I tried so many times until they told me I must pay $100–200 to let me come to Lebanon.*

This reflects how systemic corruption creates additional vulnerabilities for migrant workers, forcing them into debt before they even reach their destination. Many arrive with financial burdens that make them even more susceptible to abuse, as they must work under exploitative conditions to repay these costs.

Precarious Situations

This section outlines the impact of precarious living conditions, insecurity, discrimination, and migration on participants' well-being. It highlights unsafe housing, exposure to violence, and parenting challenges, which contribute to fear, stress, and vulnerability. Participants also reported discrimination and racism, limiting their access to education, jobs, and rights.

The section also explores the psychological toll of migration, especially for women facing gender-based restrictions and dehumanization as domestic workers. Many experienced depression, anxiety, and emotional distress, worsened by financial hardship and social exclusion. While some relied on community support and mental health resources, systemic barriers persist, underscoring the need for stronger protections and policy changes.

Unsafe Housing and Infrastructure

Participants reported that their housing conditions were unsafe and inadequate, with many living in overcrowded spaces that lacked proper infrastructure. The risk of roof collapses, poor ventilation, and high humidity made daily life difficult and increased concerns for their physical safety.

PL10 described how displacement did not lead to security but instead exposed her to new dangers:

> *I ran away from danger, but I was in danger here as well. The roof fell on me, and people helped me and got me another house.*

FGNMW1 echoed this fear, explaining the lack of structural safety in their homes:

> *The fear we feel in our home is high because it is not safe. A friend of us was cooking, and the roof of her kitchen fell.*

Another participant highlighted how their current living situation still lacks adequate infrastructure and security:

> *Our homes are not safe because of the earthquakes and everything, and they don't help or provide temporary housing. Look, see my home, how the roof might collapse at any minute (it is the kitchen of my neighbor). – FGNMW1*

Participants also described the long-term effects of poor housing conditions on their daily lives:

> *The life at the camp is really difficult in terms of the quality of the water we have access to—it is very salty. In addition to the houses, it is humid, you can barely breathe, very small house, you cannot walk or even take fresh air. – FGNMW1*

Another participant shared how the physical structure of her home did not provide a safe or stable environment:

> *The fear we feel in our home is really high, because it is not safe. – FGNMW1*

Exposure to Armed Violence and Insecurity

Participants reported that they frequently experienced gun violence in their communities. The widespread presence of illegal weapons created an ongoing sense of fear, even within homes and schools.

FGPS1 highlighted how dangerous weapons have become normalized in their surroundings:

> *We also talk about possession of illegal weapons and its penalty as well.*

FGNMW1 emphasized that gun violence was not limited to criminal disputes but affected everyday life:

> *There is no law. You can sit on your own balcony or in your kitchen and be surprised by a bullet. Even when you send your children to school, we feel terrified—fear from inside schools and outside schools (their way to and back from school). Even our homes are not safe. One time a bullet came into her house (one of the participants).*

This sense of insecurity extended to daily activities, as described by another participant:

> *You never know when a bullet will be shot. Here in the camp, it doesn't need to be a big problem or something profoundly serious to shoot. In fact, two people arguing can turn into a shooting. We always wait for our children to come back home. – FGNMW1*

The constant exposure to gun violence has led to tragic consequences:

> *One time, a woman holding her child was a victim of a bullet. They took her and buried her, and no one asked about the incident. – FGNMW1*

Others noted how gun violence disrupted even basic routines:

> *You know, we wake up sometimes at 2 am because of gun shooting. Two guys attacked each other at 2 am. – FGNMW1*

> *Me and her live next to each other. Our children had exams in the morning, but we stayed awake until 3 am because the screaming in the streets was very loud. Even our children stayed awake. Two people were arguing over drugs, and the 'big bosses' also intervened. Guns are free here and in the hands of everyone. – FGNMW1*

Challenges of Parenting in an Unsafe Environment

Participants reported that raising children in Lebanon is especially difficult due to the presence of drugs, violence, and an overall lack of safety in their communities. Many mothers expressed concerns about how their children were growing up in an environment that exposed them to harm.

PL1 described how the easy access to drugs made parenting even more challenging:

> *Here you can find everything in Lebanon—from pills to other types of drugs—everything is accepted, and everything is available, which made things more challenging. Your role as a mother is harder and more crucial.*

FGNSMW1 pointed out that the problem is not just parenting methods but the environment in which children are raised:

> *We try as much as possible to make it better, but it is hard. It is not about how we raise our children but where our children are being raised.*

Another participant described a specific incident that underscored the unsafe environment for children:

> *Our children are not raised in a healthy environment. A child standing behind the window, seeing what was happening down the street, came and asked me, 'Mom, what are they doing?' Either drugging or fighting. – FGNSMW1*

One participant raised concerns about the safety of her children at school and how lack of oversight led to their mistreatment:

> *My husband's friend told him once that he has been seeing our children on the streets. We asked them why, and they told me, 'We told you three times that the teacher was physically abusing us, and you didn't do anything about it!' – PL4*

Discrimination and Racism

Participants reported facing constant discrimination, particularly as refugees. Many described how they felt excluded, marginalized, and mistreated in various aspects of their daily lives.

PL2 expressed feeling like an outsider despite having lived in Lebanon for years:

> *I always feel like a stranger, not only in Beirut but also in the camp itself.*

PL1 shared how refugees face verbal harassment and xenophobia:

> *So, we faced a lot of discrimination, and we had to deal with the insults and the xenophobia—'You deserve to be burned by the Assad Regime' or 'To hell with you and your regime.'*

PL9 described how discrimination limited their ability to work and integrate into society:

> *We cannot find a job, and we do not have the right to work in the first place. There are many things someone would like to do, but we are not allowed to do them.*

PL2 highlighted how being labeled as a Syrian refugee contributed to feelings of isolation:

> *I fear when people label me and say: 'You are Syrian.' That is something I always hear. So, I prefer to stay at home than to listen to such comments.*

The long-term experience of discrimination took a toll on some participants:

> *I am suffering from this racism for the past 13 years. I am not afraid to talk about it. [...] What bothers me the most is the word 'Syrian.' – PL2*

> *I do not want to generalize, some people here are so racist and hard to deal with. – PL2*

Participants reported that discrimination not only affected them but also their children, who faced similar exclusion and mistreatment in schools and social settings.

PL1 shared an example of how authority figures reinforced discriminatory attitudes:

> *A teacher asked my daughter to bow to her every time she enters the classroom.*

PL2 expressed deep concern about the psychological impact of discrimination on her child:

> *I am hearing a lot of bad comments, and I am worried about my son. He is 7 years old in second grade. I do not want him to get exposed to this negativity.*

FGPS1 noted that some parents struggle to provide stability due to financial and social hardships:

> *We are seeing that married couples are unable to raise their children or take care of their families.*

Others pointed out that children were suffering from abuse without their parents being aware:

> *Children are getting sexually abused without the mother even being able to identify that this is actually sexual abuse.– FGPS1*

PL4 shared her frustration about school mistreatment and bureaucratic barriers:

> *My husband's friend told him once that he has been seeing our children on the streets. We asked our children why, and they told me, 'We told you three times that the teacher was physically abusing us, and you didn't do anything about it!' I contacted UNICEF to raise a complaint. They promised to do something about it, but now my kids are not going to school, and you cannot transfer them from one public school to the other anymore.*

Another participant described the physical abuse her child endured at school:

> *They were subjected to harassment and abuse in public schools, and there was a lot of bullying—to a point where my kid came back home once showing me his arm and telling me that he was beaten. Another time he also told me that the teacher hit him too. – PL4*

Impact of Migration on Mental Health

Participants reported that migration, displacement, and discrimination had a significant impact on their mental health, compounding the challenges they already faced due to war, instability, and precarious living conditions. Women in refugee camps and private households experienced psychological distress resulting from gender-based discrimination, dehumanization, and systemic exclusion. The psychological toll was further exacerbated by the lack of agency over their own lives, economic hardship, and the societal treatment they endured in Lebanon.

Gender-Based Discrimination and Psychological Impact

Participants reported that patriarchy was deeply embedded in their communities, both within refugee camps and inside homes. Women spoke about their husbands' control over their movements, decisions, and even their participation in community support programs. Many felt restricted, silenced, or forced to comply with social norms that limited their ability to heal, grow, or become more independent.

PL1 described how her desire for self-improvement caused tension in her marriage:

> *My husband felt that I wanted to learn and grow and that was scary for him like most men in the region. My husband tells me that a few years ago in Syria you were different, and you changed here. So, I tell him that it is none of his business and that I am happy that I grew and learned.*

Other participants recounted the restrictive attitudes of their husbands:

> *My husband is not really comfortable with the idea of me going out with my sister and our children.– PL3*

For some, gender-based discrimination manifested in extreme forms, including forced marriage:

> *"And what hurt me the most—what killed me—was them forcing me to get married to a man who is 13–14 years older than me, and I had to live with him for approximately 17 years against my will just because it was deemed shameful to look at anyone else. – PL6*

Others noted the stark gender disparities in daily responsibilities:

> *"When men get sick, they have the right to stay in bed and rest, but not us—we have to stay active. – PL2*

Even within their relationships, women faced additional emotional burdens:

> *"I got cheated on; she helped me get over it and solve the issue without ending things with my husband. – PL7*

These experiences reflect how patriarchal norms and control contribute to women's psychological struggles, reinforcing feelings of helplessness, frustration, and emotional exhaustion.

Dehumanization and Psychological Impact on Migrant Workers

Participants reported that both refugee women and migrant domestic workers faced dehumanization in their daily lives, leading to profound emotional distress. Refugee women spoke about feeling excluded and undervalued by society, while domestic workers described direct mistreatment by their employers.

PL7 expressed frustration over her lack of opportunities:

> *"This is unfair; I had to work so early on so I could afford a living. This still bothers me till today. I get bothered when I see people who can read and write, especially now that I cannot help my kids learn.*

> *"I want to be like any other human being, educated, going out shopping. – PL7*

Migrant domestic workers recounted even more extreme forms of mistreatment:

> *"When you put the animal in the cage, they become aggressive, and that is what they did to us. It is hard. [...] You are not allowed to go out of your boss's shadow, you are not allowed to say hi to the neighbor. [...] They can hit you in the house because they know that you have no one to defend you. – AI1*

AI2 described being treated as subhuman:

> *"She told me it is forbidden to eat from their forks and spoons. I said, 'Madame, why?' She told me because I am a housekeeper and a Black woman. [...] She told me she will bring me chicken; she only brought me the bones. [...] She cooks and forgets to give me.*

The emotional and physical toll of being overworked and underappreciated was severe:

> *They do not let me sleep; I must carry their child at night, so I cannot sleep. I sleep when they are having lunch after I finish all my work. – FGA1*

> *I asked madame why she brought me a plate and a cup. She said because I am Black and a maid.– FGAD1*

These testimonies highlight the profound emotional distress caused by discrimination, exclusion, and mistreatment, which further contributed to migrant women's psychological struggles.

Psychological Awareness and the Struggle for Mental Well-Being

Participants reported being aware of the emotional toll their experiences had on their mental health. Many spoke about suffering from depression, anxiety, and a general sense of despair. Some sought professional help, while others relied on community support or personal coping mechanisms.

PL1 described her struggle with feeling marginalized:

> *I was depressed when I first came here. […] I don't like to be kept on the margins.*

PL5 echoed this:

> *We are depressed and desperate.*

PL4 also spoke about how her emotional well-being had been affected:

> *My mental state hasn't been okay overall.*

PL10 shared how professional therapy helped her but was not enough:

> *I was in therapy for three years, but then I felt like it was not enough, so I went to a psychiatrist and started taking medication. I stayed on it for six months.*

For some, the emotional burden of displacement was just as heavy as the physical dangers they had escaped:

> *We escaped war and killing, but now we are suffering from emotional pressure. […] I am currently looking for a psychiatrist because I feel the need to talk to someone. – PL2*

AI1 described how exploitative labor conditions increased psychological distress:

> *They use us and do not think that we are humans too. We work on Sundays, we are always working, and that makes us aggressive for sure.*

Some described how even small interactions or insults could deeply affect their emotional well-being:

> *I fear any insulting comment, where I get bothered emotionally and I go back home to cry for hours." – PL2*

PL7 noted how financial stress worsened her mental health:

> *I am currently suffering mentally because of financial circumstances.*

Mental health challenges also extended to extreme cases, including suicidal thoughts:

> *I worked with women who considered suicide as a solution. We worked on accepting traumas and after that dealing with them to love themselves and accept what happened. – FGPS1*

Others described how self-esteem issues were deeply ingrained due to prolonged suffering:

> *I dealt with a case where the woman told me that she cannot stand looking at herself in the mirror. – FGPS1*

Coping Strategies

Coping strategies help individuals manage stress and adapt to challenges and maintain their well-being in difficult circumstances. For migrant women, these include seeking social support, self-care, education, and community networks. This section explores how they navigate precarious circumstances. It also examines organizational strategies, such as social programs, legal aid, and vocational training, highlighting the interplay between individual agency and institutional assistance in overcoming systemic barriers.

Strategies Adopted by Migrant Women

Despite the challenges of displacement, economic hardship, and discrimination, migrant women have developed various strategies to cope with their precarious circumstances. These strategies include seeking support, engaging in personal and educational development, practicing self-care, and maintaining connections with family. Some women rely on community networks and NGO support, while others adopt personal coping mechanisms to maintain their mental and emotional well-being. This section explores the strategies migrant women use to navigate their daily struggles.

Seeking Support and Building Social Networks

One of the most common strategies migrant women adopt is seeking support from others, whether through family, friends, or organizations. While many initially struggled to ask for help, over time, they found that building social connections played a critical role in their ability to cope.

Some women turned to psychosocial support services offered by NGOs:

> *Psychosocial support. I usually seek the therapist when I am going through a depressive episode or when I am worried about my children not getting along, and we sit together and talk. It helps a lot because she encourages me and gives me tips to cope. – PL6*

For others, support came from community networks and friendships formed through organizations:

> *I used to come here often because it felt nice and safer. I felt like I had family and friends here. It brings me comfort. – PL4*

> *We don't have any strategies; we are just depending on each other because we know each other, and we can help.– FGA1*

By engaging in group activities and discussions, migrant women built strong social ties that helped them process their experiences and support one another. This was especially important for refugee women in camps, where daily hardships were shared experiences:

> *We [women attending the activities of the organization] do sit together outside of the organization. It is entertaining and a way to have fun. It is also an opportunity to vent and share. – PL6*

Even for those who struggled to integrate, building friendships was an important step in overcoming isolation:

> *I have a few Lebanese friends from Beirut. They are not racist. It has been only one month, and I try as much to connect with them. – PL2*

For some, the encouragement of NGO staff helped them break out of isolation and engage with their communities:

> *The team also encouraged me to build friendships with my neighbors, to go out, to express myself.– PL10*

Similarly, domestic workers relied on peer support from fellow migrants to navigate difficult working conditions:

> *I cry and tell my friends what happened with me. – FGA1*

Through these support networks, women found a sense of belonging and solidarity in environments that were otherwise hostile or isolating.

Engaging in Personal and Educational Development

Another strategy migrant women used was self-improvement through education and skill-building. Many took courses, attended awareness sessions, or participated in training programs to enhance their knowledge and empower themselves.

Several women engaged in educational programs to improve their skills:

> *I really want to go back to school because I left in grade 9 for personal reasons, and now I am doing a literacy course so that I can teach my kids. – PL5*

Others sought practical skills to increase their independence:

> *I kept working on improving myself. I started taking English courses. I was helping some children do their homework, and this pushed me to learn more. – PL6*

NGOs also played a key role in offering psychological and social awareness sessions, helping women gain confidence and knowledge:

> *We attend sessions, they give us more confidence. – FGNMW1*

Beyond education, attending social and discussion-based activities was another coping mechanism. For example, one participant explained how she prioritized attending parenting and mental health sessions:

> *I usually come to lectures from experts on psychology, women's health [...] and any event that they organize, and they invite us to. It is a space where we feel comfortable and happy, where we can let things out and share so we feel relieved. – PL6*

Another participant used these sessions to improve her approach to parenting and relationships:

> *So, I wanted to develop this ability, and I try my best not to skip any lecture/ presentation/discussion in order for me to understand my children more, how to treat them, how to talk to them, how to talk to my husband, etc. – PL1*

Migrant women found ways to increase their confidence, autonomy, and future opportunities by engaging in education, discussions, and professional development.

Practicing Self-Care and Personal Coping Mechanisms

Alongside social and educational strategies, many migrant women adopted personal coping mechanisms to deal with stress. These included praying, cooking, gardening, physical activities, and self-care.

For some, gardening provided a therapeutic outlet:

> *Gardening, so I do this on my roof. – PL6*

Others found comfort in religious practices:

> *I feel a bit like I am comfortable at home. I pray, I read the Quran. – PL2*

Some engaged in cooking and self-care as a means to regain a sense of control over their daily lives:

> *Sometimes I cook something even if my kids do not like it, but I make it anyway. I am trying to make myself happy so I can give back to my family. – PL2*

> *I like to dress up, and I like to move on. – PL7*

> *I do wear makeup, I do not do it for anyone but myself. I also do some skincare to feel better about myself. The other day, I went and got a new haircut. – PL2*

Physical activities also played a role in stress relief:

> *I go for a walk. – FGNMW1*

> *I like to sit alone at night [...] I like to discover computer skills [...] I like to draw. – FGNMW1*

Through these small but meaningful routines, migrant women carved out moments of normalcy and well-being, helping them manage stress and uncertainty.

Spending Time with Family and Children

For many migrant women, spending time with family—particularly children—was a key coping mechanism. Some women expressed that their children gave them a sense of purpose and motivation, while others found comfort in staying close to their extended family.

> *I give all my energy to my kids. I like to do activities with them and to watch something together or play together, because I rarely go out [...] I am very attached to my family, my mother-in-law is also sick, and I like to be surrounded by my sisters. This is a relief even when I am stressed. – PL3*

For some, focusing on their children provided a distraction from their own struggles:

> *Nothing is helping, to be honest. I think my kids are keeping me a bit distracted. – PL4*

> *I stay at home all the time with my kids. – PL2*

For migrant domestic workers separated from their families, staying connected through phone calls was a crucial way to cope:

> *I vent to my mother, not with anger, but I tell her the things I like and what I don't like." – FGA1*

Strategies Adopted by Organizations

Organizations supporting migrant women, whether in refugee camps or private households, play an essential role in providing social, legal, and economic support. Focus group discussions with staff from various organizations revealed the strategies they adopt to help women in precarious situations. These strategies aim to address the vulnerabilities of refugee women and migrant domestic workers, focusing on social support, legal awareness, empowerment programs, and child and family-centered interventions. However, migrant women have varying perceptions of these efforts, with some expressing appreciation for the support provided, while others critique the gaps in services.

Social Support and Empowerment Programs

Organizations working with migrant women implement a range of activities aimed at awareness, empowerment, and skill-building. These programs focus on mental health support, self-confidence, literacy, vocational training, and advocacy. The goal is to equip women with knowledge and skills that enable them to navigate their difficult circumstances and gain a sense of independence.

FGPS1 described the broad scope of support provided:

> *Advocacy for women, from our awareness sessions, child protection, mental health. We are offering social, legal, cultural, and emotional support.*

One of the key components of these initiatives is education and skill-building, particularly for refugee women:

> *We also work on educating them: whether illiteracy and English language or in general. – FGPS1*

Beyond education, these programs also focus on empowering women as individuals:

> *We are not only working on their interference in their societies but also on them as individuals, to be comfortable with themselves, as most of them do not love themselves in the first place. – FGPS1*

To encourage participation in these sessions, some organizations introduce creative methods to accommodate women facing restrictions from their families:

> *The good thing is that we have cooking classes, so they lie to their husbands about our sessions. – FGPS1*

Vocational training programs help women develop skills that can be turned into economic opportunities:

> *We also have a Qualifying program, in which they learn a skill for five months, whether cooking or anything else. When they finish, we organize an exhibition for them to sell their products. – FGNS1*

For migrant women to successfully adapt to a new environment, they need to understand their rights:

> *We can first talk about the 'Women's Rights Program.' If we want women to adapt to a new community, they must know what their rights are. Rights are a universal thing, but sometimes they are limited depending on circumstances. – FGNS1*

These initiatives reflect the holistic approach organizations take in supporting migrant women, addressing not only economic needs but also self-confidence, social integration, and legal knowledge.

Child and Family-Centered Interventions

Recognizing that many migrant women prioritize their children over their own well-being, organizations have incorporated family-focused programs into their support strategies. Many mothers struggle to balance personal empowerment with caregiving responsibilities, and organizations have adapted their activities accordingly.

FGPS1 explained how social norms and parenting challenges were incorporated into awareness sessions:

> *We also tackle subjects like social norms that are often seen in Syrian refugee groups. Things related to violence; we have seen women assaulting their children in front of us.*

Some organizations target child protection directly, ensuring that children receive education on self-protection and rights:

> *We focus on raising awareness for women and children. We teach children techniques to protect themselves from any abuse or violence, and we educate them about their rights. We also work with their parents. We teach women to ask for what they want and need. – FGNS2*

These organizations also involve fathers in awareness sessions, particularly on sensitive issues such as early marriage:

> *We had sessions with 12–15 men about early marriage, done by the social worker and psychologist. – FGPS1*

By integrating children and families into their programming, organizations strengthen the support systems around migrant women and provide them with a sense of stability in precarious environments.

Community-Based Support for Migrant Domestic Workers

Unlike refugees, migrant domestic workers do not have access to formal organizations or unions due to legal restrictions. Instead, they rely on self-organized networks and informal alliances to provide basic support and raise awareness among their peers.

A domestic worker explained how an informal network was created by and for migrant women:

> *"The alliance is a small organization created by eight female workers; we do not have the right to create organizations. We used to gather after our work in groups. We thought of creating this because we wanted to help the most unfortunate of us. We are unfortunate as well, but we want to help others by educating them. – AI1*

These networks focus on providing advice and referrals rather than direct interventions:

> *"We always advise girls not to run away. We refer them to other organizations that will talk to their bosses, and they will change them. – AI1*

Additionally, migrant workers offer emergency assistance to each other in cases of illness and financial need:

> *"There are girls who are chronically ill, and we always give them Panadol and nothing else. Some of them need support, and if we have the capacity, we would help them. During COVID-19, we cooked and distributed food and medications, not just for women but for men as well. – AI1*

This demonstrates the critical role of informal support networks in the lives of migrant domestic workers, who often lack formal protections and resources.

Legal Awareness and Rights-Based Interventions

Participants reported that organizations provided legal awareness sessions to help women understand their fundamental rights, legal protections, and available support mechanisms. These sessions covered domestic violence, inheritance rights, refugee legal status, employment rights, and access to justice. Many migrant women were unaware of their legal rights before attending these sessions, making legal education an essential component of empowerment and protection.

FGPS1 emphasized the importance of legal education in fostering independence and self-advocacy:

> *"Legal support because women do not even know about their rights. These sessions will not only help women educate themselves about their realities, but will also make them active in their communities because they are now cultured and educated enough to talk about their issues.*

One of the key areas of legal education focused on women's right to inheritance, as misconceptions about property rights were prevalent:

> *"When it comes to heritage, for example, women think that they cannot inherit, although by religion and by law, they can. – FGPS1*

Participants also learned about family law and their rights in cases of marriage, divorce, and child custody, which were especially relevant for refugees facing unregistered marriages and legal obstacles in securing their children's rights.

> *They think that they cannot register their marriages because they are illegal immigrants and they do not have a legal residency. But if you want to register your marriage in court, you do not need a residency. They have cultural and social norms; they are used to getting married religiously and registering when it is convenient. – FGPS1*

Participants reported that organizations offered sessions on domestic violence, early marriage, and gender-based violence. Many migrant women, especially refugees, came from conservative backgrounds where discussions about women's rights were limited.

PL9 described how these sessions helped her understand child marriage and gender-based violence:

> *Awareness sessions with many specialists and lawyers. We benefit from these sessions because we know more about our rights as women. We learned about child marriage.*

Organizations also recognized that patriarchal norms and social expectations hindered women from seeking legal protection. Some women reported that their husbands did not allow them to attend awareness sessions, while others feared social backlash for speaking out.

To address these challenges, organizations engaged men in awareness programs, helping them understand the impact of violence and restrictive social norms:

> *We had sessions with 12–15 men about early marriage, done by the social worker and psychologist. – FGPS1*

Legal sessions also covered employment rights and residency laws, helping participants understand their work entitlements, contracts, and legal protections. Many migrant women—particularly domestic workers—were unaware of their right to a work contract, fair wages, and legal recourse in cases of exploitation.

> *We also work on their right to work and have a job, if they have a legal residency, and how it would help them to get a job and an affordable and registered rent since they are getting used by renters because they are not legal. – FGPS1*

However, participants reported that many employers exploited their lack of legal knowledge, withholding wages or threatening deportation. Migrant domestic workers, in particular, were vulnerable due to the Kafala (sponsorship) system, which tied their legal status to their employer. Recognizing these challenges, organizations advocated for policy changes and monitored cases of labor exploitation. Some workers were advised not to flee abusive households but instead to seek legal assistance through designated support networks:

> *We always advise girls not to run away; we refer them to other organizations that will talk to their bosses, and maybe they will change them." – AI1*

Participants reported that while legal awareness sessions were helpful, many women still struggled to access legal aid services due to financial constraints, fear of retaliation, and bureaucratic barriers. To address this, organizations provided direct legal consultations and referrals to legal aid NGOs.

> *We would refer them to a legal action NGO that will hire them a lawyer that would represent them in court from A to Z. – GPS1*

Some organizations focused on specific legal interventions, such as protecting women from forced marriage and unregistered unions:

> *We interfere in cases of child marriage and unregistered marriages, especially because it is resulting in unregistered kids. – FGPS1*

Legal challenges extended beyond gender-based issues to substance abuse laws, property disputes, and general criminal justice matters:

> *We also like to raise awareness about substance use in legal frameworks, what are the penalties.– FGPS1*

Despite these efforts, participants noted that not all women could access legal aid due to social and financial barriers. Some women hesitated to report abuse or exploitation, fearing retaliation from their employers or community members.

> *We did not have a case to represent in court, but we offer consultations. – FGPS1*

Perceptions of Migrant Women on Organizational Strategies

Participants had mixed perceptions of the effectiveness of organizational strategies. While many expressed gratitude for the resources provided, others pointed out gaps in financial support, job opportunities, and long-term solutions.

> *They do help us; I come here to talk and vent, and they really offer support. – PL5*

> *They also provide financial help and support, and both you and your child enjoy the activities and feel comfortable. – PL3*

> *It would be hard for one center to provide everything that we need as migrant women – and we do have a lot of needs. – PL1*

However, some women were critical of organizations, citing their failure to address deeper structural issues. Some participants felt that organizations prioritized awareness sessions over practical assistance:

> *They try to train us, but there is nothing concrete that can help us. – FGNMW1*

Others voiced frustration with international organizations:

> *UN is not related to anything; they do nothing. I reached out to them when my teacher's son beat him, and they didn't do anything. – FGNMW1*

However, some organizations acknowledged these challenges and the limitations imposed by external funding constraints:

> *Donors control the type of training we give, and vocational training would give them an income that would benefit them and their families. – FGPS1*

While many women benefited from organizational support, they still faced significant barriers to long-term financial stability and protection.

Analysis

Through first-hand narratives, migrant women in Lebanon described forced displacement, labor exploitation, racial and gendered discrimination, as well as economic dependency and systemic exclusion. Some of the migrant women, namely refugee women, have lived through generational displacement, repeated wars, and statelessness, while others have been coerced into exploitative labor conditions through deceptive recruitment practices. Many of the migrant women recount experiences of gender-based violence, patriarchal control, and daily struggles to secure safety and dignity for themselves and their families. An intersectional approach is essential to understanding how these overlapping inequalities shape their experiences.

As such, this chapter presents a feminist intersectional analysis of these migration experiences and coping strategies. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989)[68] intersectionality framework, this analysis explores how gender, race, class, migration status, and legal frameworks interact to produce overlapping systems of oppression. It aims to highlight the structural inequalities that shape not only their vulnerabilities but also their coping strategies by situating the testimonies of migrant women within broader feminist scholarship.

Although migration is often analyzed through economic or geopolitical lenses, feminist scholars emphasize that it is also a gendered process[69]. Gendered migration studies reveal that women experience displacement and labor migration differently from men due to pre-existing inequalities in economic power, social roles, and legal protections[70] as well as gendered responsibilities and caregiving burdens[71]. Migrant women are disproportionately represented in precarious labor sectors[72], are more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence[73], and have limited access to legal protection[74].

Forced Displacement and Statelessness as Gendered Vulnerabilities

Forced displacement is not a gender-neutral experience; rather, it intensifies pre-existing gendered vulnerabilities, leaving women particularly exposed to legal, economic, and social marginalization. The testimonies of Palestinian and Syrian refugee women (PL6, PL5, PL1, PL10) underscore how displacement is not a singular event but an ongoing cycle of forced movement, precarity, and exclusion. As scholars such as Turner (2016)[75] argue, citizenship is a key axis of power that determines access to resources, rights, and political belonging. Women without legal status are doubly marginalized—not only by their statelessness but also by patriarchal structures that limit their ability to navigate survival in host countries.

Displacement as a Multi-Generational Experience of Marginalization

Palestinian women born in Lebanon (PL6, PL5) describe displacement as a multi-generational struggle, where legal precarity is inherited rather than resolved. Despite being born and raised in Lebanon, these women remain classified as stateless refugees, denied access to fundamental rights such as legal employment, property ownership, and full participation in society. This aligns with the argument that statelessness is a form of gendered

68 *Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of anti-discrimination doctrine, feminist theory and anti-racist politics, 1989 U. Chi. Legal F. 139.*

69 *Christou, A., Kofman, E. (2022). Gendered migrations and conceptual approaches: Theorising and researching mobilities. In: Gender and Migration. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham.*

70 *Carling, J. (2005). Gender dimensions of international migration (Report No. 35). Global Migration Perspectives, Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM).*

71 *Brück, T., Hanmer, L. C., Klugman, J., & Arango, D. J. (2024). Gender dimensions of forced displacement: A brief review and introduction to the special issue. The Journal of Development Studies, 60(12), 1839–1851.*

72 *Sedacca, N. (2024). Migrant work, gender and the hostile environment: A human rights analysis, Industrial Law Journal, Volume 53, Issue 1, Pages 63–93.*

73 *UN Women. (2021). From evidence to action: Tackling gender-based violence against migrant women and girls.*

74 *Kawar, M. (2004). "Gender and migration: Why are women more vulnerable?". Femmes En Mouvement, edited by Fenneke Reysoo and Christine Verschuur, Graduate Institute Publications.*

75 *Turner, J. (2016). (En)gendering the political: Citizenship from marginal spaces. Citizenship Studies, 20(2), 141–155.*

exclusion[76], as it restricts women's ability to provide a stable future for themselves and their children. Unlike men, who may have greater access to informal labor markets, displaced women often find themselves economically dependent on male family members or international aid, reinforcing patriarchal dependency structures.

The situation of Palestinian women in Lebanon mirrors broader feminist critiques of how state policies shape women's experiences of displacement. Some scholars highlight how refugee policies often fail to account for gendered needs, treating refugees as a homogenous group[77] without recognizing the specific vulnerabilities faced by women. This is evident in the testimonies of women who describe moving from one refugee camp to another, struggling with poor living conditions, lack of legal protections, and the inability to escape cycles of poverty (PL6). These women's experiences challenge the dominant security-focused narratives that frame refugees as a temporary crisis, rather than a long-term humanitarian and social issue[78].

The Gendered Nature of Forced Migration and Recurrent Displacement

For Syrian women (PL1, PL10), forced migration is marked by repeated cycles of displacement, each one worsening their socio-economic vulnerability. Many women describe having to flee multiple times before reaching Lebanon—first from one city to another in Syria, then across borders, often under life-threatening conditions. PL10, for example, recounts fleeing while pregnant, forced to walk barefoot for hours to reach safety. This reflects the argument that militarization disproportionately affects women, forcing them into survival economies where they must navigate war, displacement, and economic hardship without state support[79].

Syrian refugee women in Lebanon continue to experience instability and social exclusion. Unlike male refugees, who may have greater access to informal labor markets, women are often confined to precarious and exploitative work or unpaid domestic labor[80]. Many women (PL1, PL2) report feeling isolated and dependent on male family members, reinforcing the patriarchal structures that displacement should, in theory, dismantle. These findings align with the critique that displaced women's experiences are frequently erased in dominant policy frameworks, which prioritize security and border control over addressing the lived realities of refugees.

Housing Insecurity and the Struggle for Safe Shelter

Housing insecurity emerges as a significant gendered vulnerability for displaced women. Several testimonies (PL4, FGNMW1) describe the difficulties of finding stable, affordable, and safe housing, particularly for women-headed households. Women recount being evicted, forced to move frequently, or relying on informal networks to secure shelter. Some describe unsafe living conditions, including homes at risk of collapse, lack of access to clean water, and overcrowded spaces that increase exposure to violence and exploitation.

These accounts reinforce findings that access to housing is not just a logistical issue but a critical factor in women's safety, mental health, and ability to rebuild their lives[81]. Housing insecurity leaves women particularly vulnerable to exploitation, as landlords and employers may take advantage of their legal and financial precarity. Additionally, the testimonies of women forced to live in makeshift tents or shared spaces for extended periods (PL10) reflect the failure of refugee policies to provide long-term solutions, further entrenching cycles of displacement.

76 *Beninger, C., & Manjoo, R. (2022). The impact of gender discrimination on statelessness: Causes, consequences, and legal responses. African Human Mobility Review, 8(3), 17-40.*

77 *Diab, J. L., Samneh, B., Masoud, D., & Cravero, K. (2024). Gender identity as a barrier to accessing adequate and inclusive healthcare for Syrian refugees in Lebanon's northern regions. Frontiers in Human Dynamics, 5(2023).*

78 *Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.*

79 *Elveren, A. Y., & Moghadam, V. M. (2019). The impact of militarization on gender inequality and female labor force participation. The Economic Research Forum.*

80 *Culcasi, K. (2019). "We are women and men now": Intimate spaces and coping labour for Syrian women refugees in Jordan. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 44(3), 463-478.*

81 *Bermudez, S. M., Cunial, L., & Farmer, K. (2024). Life can change: Securing housing, land and property rights for displaced women. Norwegian Refugee Council.*

The Intersection of Legal Exclusion and Gendered Violence

Statelessness and forced migration intersect with gender-based violence in ways that limit women's agency and security. Several women describe how displacement forced them into exploitative relationships or situations where they had to rely on men for protection and survival (PL6, PL10). In the absence of legal protections, displaced women face higher risks of domestic violence, early marriage, and labor exploitation, reflecting Mohanty's (1988)[82] argument that refugee women's oppression is shaped by patriarchal control.

The legal exclusion of displaced women also prevents them from accessing justice. Without residency permits or legal work status, many refugee women are unable to report abuse, fearing deportation or retaliation. This aligns with Enloe's (2014)[83] critique that militarized borders and restrictive refugee policies disproportionately harm women, as they prioritize state security over gendered protections.

Gender-Based Violence as a Mechanism of Control

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive mechanism of patriarchal control that operates both in private and public spheres, shaping the lived experiences of displaced, stateless, and migrant women. The testimonies of women (PL6, PL10) reveal how forced marriage, domestic violence, and restrictions on mobility are central to sustaining patriarchal power. At the same time, migrant domestic workers (AI2, FGA1) highlight how racialized violence and labor exploitation under the Kafala system reinforce intersectional oppression. The prevalence of sexual harassment and child abuse further underscores how gendered violence is systematically embedded in social, economic, and legal structures.

Marriage as a Site of Gendered Oppression and Control

Several women (PL6, PL10) recount experiences of forced and coerced marriage, reinforcing feminist critiques of marriage as a patriarchal institution that subjugates women[84]. PL6 describes being forced into marriage with a man 14 years her senior and remaining in an abusive relationship for nearly two decades before gaining some form of autonomy. Her experience exemplifies Kandiyoti's (1988)[85] concept of the "patriarchal bargain," in which women are forced to navigate patriarchal structures by complying with gender norms in order to secure safety or social acceptance. Women in forced marriages are not only deprived of agency but also subjected to long-term cycles of control, violence, and emotional subjugation.

Beyond forced marriage, several women (PL1, PL3) highlight how their husbands actively restrict their movements, barring them from attending educational sessions or social gatherings. These accounts align with Bartky's (1990)[86] feminist critique of social control, which argues that patriarchal power extends beyond physical violence to include the regulation of women's behavior, autonomy, and public engagement. The restriction of women's mobility reflects broader patterns of control, ensuring that women remain dependent on male authority and lack access to resources that could empower them.

Domestic Violence and the Reinforcement of Patriarchal Power

Testimonies from women (PL10, PL7) indicate that domestic violence remains a key mechanism of patriarchal enforcement. Many women describe being physically and emotionally abused by their husbands, reinforcing Dobash & Dobash's (1979)[87] argument that violence against women is not merely an individual act but a structural mechanism used to sustain male dominance. One woman (PL10) recounts how her husband routinely yelled at her and prevented her from expressing herself. Over time, however, she was able to regain some self-worth through psychosocial support, illustrating how feminist interventions can help women reclaim their agency.

82 *Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. Feminist Review, 30(1), 61-88.*
83 *Enloe, C. (2014). Bananas, beaches and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics. University of California Press.*
84 *Pateman, C. (1988). The sexual contract. Stanford University Press.*
85 *Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. Gender & Society, 2(3), 274-290.*
86 *Bartky, S. L. (1990). Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression. Routledge.*
87 *Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1979). Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy. Free Press.*

This form of violence is not only about physical harm but also about psychological manipulation. Many women (PL7, PL2) describe how their mental health deteriorated due to persistent emotional abuse and economic dependence. These accounts reflect Ahmed's (2010)[88] argument that emotional labor is deeply gendered, with women expected to endure abuse while continuing to provide care and stability for their families. The testimonies also illustrate how economic constraints make it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships, further entrenching cycles of violence and dependency.

Racialized and Labor-Based Violence Under the Kafala System

Violence against women extends beyond domestic settings into labor exploitation, particularly for migrant domestic workers under the Kafala system (AI2, FGA1). Several testimonies highlight how employers subject migrant women to physical abuse, excessive work hours, and restrictions on basic human rights, such as food and rest. One woman (AI2) describes being forbidden from eating with the family she worked for, illustrating how racialized violence operates to dehumanize Black and Brown women.

These experiences align with Crenshaw's (1991)[89] theory of intersectionality, which highlights how race, gender, and labor oppression intersect to create unique forms of violence against marginalized women. Migrant domestic workers do not experience gendered violence in isolation—it is compounded by racial discrimination and legal precarity. Davis (1981)[90] similarly critiques how reproductive labor, particularly when performed by women of color, is undervalued and treated as servitude rather than employment. The testimonies of migrant domestic workers reinforce this analysis, showing how the Kafala system systematically subjugates women by denying them legal protections and enabling employers to exploit them without accountability.

Furthermore, the Kafala system functions as a form of social control, limiting migrant women's ability to escape abusive conditions. Some women (AI1, FGA1) describe how they are monitored, physically confined to their workplaces, and denied the right to organize or seek legal recourse. This reflects Mohanty's (1988)[91] critique of how global capitalism and neoliberal economies exploit Third World women by subjecting them to extreme forms of gendered and racialized labor control.

Sexual Harassment, Child Abuse, and the Cycle of Violence

Sexual violence and harassment emerge as recurring themes in the testimonies. Women (PL4, FGPS1) report that their children have faced abuse in public schools, and many mothers express concern about their inability to detect sexual abuse occurring within their households. This reflects feminist scholarship on GBV, particularly Dobash & Dobash's (1979)[92] argument that violence against women and children is deeply embedded in patriarchal structures.

The normalization of violence within communities further exacerbates the problem. Some women (FGNMW1) describe how gun violence and drug-related conflicts create unsafe environments for their children, exposing them to additional forms of psychological trauma. These accounts align with Puar's (2007)[93] concept of "biopolitics," where certain populations—particularly refugee and migrant communities—are systematically exposed to violence and deprivation, reinforcing their marginalization.

The testimonies also highlight how women's lack of legal and social protections makes it difficult to hold perpetrators accountable. Many women (PL2, FGA1) express frustration at the impunity surrounding GBV, as legal barriers and social stigma prevent them from reporting abuse. This aligns with feminist critiques of the legal system's failure to address violence against marginalized women[94], particularly those who lack formal citizenship or legal residency.

88 *Ahmed, S. (2010). The promise of happiness. Duke University Press.*
89 *Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-1299.*
90 *Davis, A. Y. (1981). Women, race & class. Random House.*
91 *Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. Feminist Review, 30(1), 61-88.*
92 *Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1979). Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy. Free Press.*
93 *Puar, J. K. (2007). Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times. Duke University Press.*
94 *Richie, B. E. (2012). Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation. NYU Press.*

Economic Oppression and Labor Exploitation

Economic oppression and labor exploitation emerge as defining aspects of the lived experiences of refugee women and migrant domestic workers. The testimonies illustrate how gendered economic precarity is shaped by legal restrictions, racialized labor systems, and the global capitalist economy's dependence on cheap, unprotected labor. Drawing from feminist political economy critiques, this section explores how displaced and migrant women's labor is systematically undervalued and exploited.

The Criminalization of Refugee Women's Labor and the Forced Informal Economy

Several refugee women (PL9, PL6) express frustration over their inability to work legally in Lebanon, which forces them into informal, unregulated, and underpaid labor. This reflects Federici's (2004)[95] critique that capitalism thrives on the exploitation of women's unpaid and underpaid labor, particularly in crisis contexts where legal protections are absent. Without legal work permits, refugee women remain economically dependent on humanitarian aid, male relatives, or precarious, exploitative jobs in the informal sector.

Many women attempt to gain economic independence through vocational training (PL6, FGNS1), yet they report that funding limitations restrict access to meaningful economic opportunities. This aligns with Fraser's (2013)[96] critique of neoliberal feminism, which promotes individual empowerment without addressing structural barriers such as restrictive labor laws, employer discrimination, and state-imposed economic exclusions. While vocational training may equip women with skills, it does not necessarily lead to employment unless labor policies are reformed to ensure fair work opportunities.

The lack of legal work options also leaves refugee women vulnerable to economic exploitation. Some (PL10, PL4) describe being underpaid or denied wages for informal work, reflecting Marxist feminist critiques of how labor markets exploit marginalized women by positioning them as "cheap labor" within capitalist economies. Their experiences mirror Kabeer's (1999)[97] argument that women's economic empowerment must be linked to structural changes rather than framed solely as an issue of individual resilience.

The Kafala System and the Hyper-Exploitation of Migrant Domestic Workers

Migrant domestic workers (FGA1, AI1) face even harsher labor conditions under the Kafala system, which legally binds them to their employers and denies them basic labor protections. Several women describe extreme forms of exploitation, including overwork, sleep deprivation, and physical abuse. One woman (FGA1) recounts being required to care for her employer's child at night, leaving her with little to no rest, reinforcing Mohanty's (1988)[98] critique of how Global South women's labor is commodified within neoliberal economies.

The testimonies highlight how the Kafala system functions as a modern form of indentured servitude. Migrant domestic workers are not considered employees under Lebanese labor law, meaning they lack the right to unionize, change employers, or seek legal recourse for abuses. These conditions echo Fanon's (1967)[99] analysis of colonial labor systems, where racialized bodies are treated as disposable labor. Just as colonial economies depended on the hyper-exploitation of colonized workers, contemporary neoliberal economies sustain themselves through the unregulated labor of migrant women, who are systematically denied rights and protections.

Moreover, racialized violence plays a significant role in the exploitation of migrant domestic workers. Some (AI2) report being forbidden from eating with their employer's family, reinforcing Crenshaw's (1991)[100] theory of intersectionality, where race, gender, and class oppression converge to create uniquely dehumanizing

95 *Federici, S. (2004). Caliban and the witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation. Autonomedia.*
96 *Fraser, N. (2013). Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis. Verso Books.*
97 *Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3), 435-464.*
98 *Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. Feminist Review, 30(1), 61-88.*
99 *Fanon, F. (1967). The wretched of the earth. Grove Press.*
100 *Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-1299.*

experiences for Black and Brown women in domestic labor. These accounts also align with Davis' (1981)[101] analysis of reproductive labor, where the work of racialized women is devalued and treated as an extension of servitude rather than as legitimate employment.

The Psychological Toll of Economic Oppression and Labor Exploitation

Economic precarity does not only impact women's financial stability—it also has severe mental health consequences. Several women (PL7, FGA1) describe how economic hardship contributes to depression, stress, and feelings of humiliation. Migrant domestic workers, in particular, report experiences of extreme isolation, overwork, and emotional distress (AI1, FGA1), reinforcing Hochschild's (1983)[102] argument that emotional labor is disproportionately carried by women in low-wage, service-based economies.

Many women (PL6, FGNMW1) seek psychosocial support or community-based assistance to cope with economic marginalization. However, these coping mechanisms remain limited by structural inequalities. While vocational training, psychosocial support, and informal women's networks provide temporary relief, they do not address the root causes of economic exploitation. This reflects Fraser's (2013)[103] argument that neoliberal solutions—such as entrepreneurship programs or microfinance—fail to dismantle systemic barriers and instead place the burden of survival on individual women rather than the state or employers.

Resistance and Economic Empowerment Strategies

Despite these challenges, women also engage in resistance and economic survival strategies. Some (PL6, AI1) describe forming alliances, learning marketable skills, and seeking ways to navigate restrictive labor conditions. Migrant domestic workers have created informal support networks (AI1), reflecting hooks' (1984)[104] argument that collective feminist consciousness can serve as a tool for resistance. These networks provide emotional support, legal guidance, and strategies for escaping exploitative work environments.

Additionally, some refugee women (PL6, FGNS1) advocate for more structured vocational training and financial independence programs. While these efforts demonstrate resilience, they also highlight the need for structural changes that grant refugee and migrant women the right to work in safe, dignified conditions. Kabeer (1999)[105] emphasizes that true economic empowerment must be linked to legal and policy reforms, ensuring that women's labor is protected and valued rather than exploited.

Mental Health, Trauma, and Emotional Labor

The testimonies from refugee women and migrant domestic workers reveal how mental health struggles are deeply intertwined with experiences of displacement, labor exploitation, and gender-based violence. Depression, PTSD, and emotional exhaustion are recurring themes, highlighting how trauma is not only a product of past violence but is continuously reinforced by socio-economic precarity, social alienation, and systemic exclusion. Feminist scholars provide critical frameworks to understand how emotional labor, racialized exclusion, and gendered mental health disparities shape the psychological well-being of marginalized women.

101 *Davis, A. Y. (1981). Women, race & class. Random House.*
102 *Hochschild, A. R. (1983). The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling. University of California Press.*
103 *Fraser, N. (2013). Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis. Verso Books.*
104 *hooks, b. (1984). Feminist theory: From margin to center. South End Press.*
105 *Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3), 435-464.*

Gendered Trauma and the Inadequacy of Mental Health Support

Several women (PL5, PL7, PL2) describe suffering from depression and PTSD due to the cumulative effects of forced displacement, economic hardship, and violence. Many sought psychological support (PL10), yet found that therapy alone was insufficient, reinforcing feminist critiques of mainstream mental health services. Some scholars argue that mental health interventions often fail to account for the structural causes of trauma, treating psychological distress as an individual problem rather than a symptom of systemic oppression[106].

For refugee women, accessing mental health care is often complicated by legal and financial barriers. Several (PL2, PL7) describe feelings of alienation and lack of belonging, noting that they feel like "strangers" both in Beirut and within refugee camps. This isolation exacerbates emotional distress, aligning with the critique that mainstream mental health frameworks often overlook the role of displacement and socio-political exclusion in shaping psychological suffering.

Furthermore, many women (PL6, PL10) describe how their mental health struggles are compounded by their caregiving responsibilities. Women are expected to manage their own trauma while also supporting their families, a form of gendered emotional labor[107]. Unlike men, who may have more space to express their distress, women are often forced to suppress their emotions in order to maintain familial stability. This expectation places additional pressure on women, deepening their emotional exhaustion and limiting their capacity for self-care.

Social Alienation and the Burden of Emotional Labor

Beyond access to mental health care, many women (PL2, PL7) describe the psychological toll of social alienation. They express feeling out of place in their host communities, struggling to integrate while facing discrimination, racism, and xenophobia. One woman (PL2) explicitly states that she avoids public spaces to escape anti-Syrian sentiment, illustrating how psychological distress is directly linked to social marginalization. These experiences align with Hochschild's (1983)[108] theory of emotional labor, which argues that women are expected to perform emotional work to maintain social harmony, even at the expense of their own well-being.

Women's roles as caregivers further intensify this burden. Several (PL3, PL5) describe prioritizing their children's needs over their own mental health, reinforcing the gendered expectation that women must sacrifice their emotional well-being for their families. For many, coping mechanisms are limited—some engage in community support networks, while others turn to religious or cultural practices for solace. However, these coping strategies are often inadequate given the scale of their trauma and the lack of systemic support.

Psychological Distress Among Migrant Domestic Workers: Racialized Mental Health Disparities

Migrant domestic workers (AI1, FGA1) report even more extreme forms of psychological distress, with some comparing their treatment to that of animals. Their testimonies illustrate how racialized labor exploitation produces not only physical suffering but also profound emotional and psychological harm. This is in line with Topinka's (2015) idea that citizenship functions as a mechanism of racial governance that extends beyond biological factors to include social and cultural dimensions, embedding race within the structures, practices, and methods of governance[109].

The testimonies highlight the extreme isolation experienced by migrant domestic workers, who are often confined to their employers' homes and denied social interaction. Some (AI1, FGA1) describe being forbidden from leaving their workplaces or speaking to their neighbors, reinforcing their psychological imprisonment. This aligns with feminist critiques of the Kafala system, which functions as a form of modern-day indentured servitude, stripping women of agency and subjecting them to continuous emotional and psychological abuse.

106 *Buchanan, N. T., & Wiklund, L. O. (2020). Why clinical science must change or die: Integrating intersectionality and social justice. Women & Therapy, 43(3–4), 309–329.*

107 *Gutierrez-Rodriguez, E. (2014). Domestic work–affective labor: On feminization and the Coloniality of labor. Women's Studies International Forum, 46, 45–53.*

108 *Hochschild, A. R. (1983). The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling. University of California Press.*

109 *Topinka, R. J. (2015). 'wandering and settled tribes': Biopolitics, Citizenship, and the racialized migrant. Citizenship Studies, 20(3–4), 444–456.*

Additionally, many migrant domestic workers report experiencing verbal abuse, humiliation, and racial discrimination, which contribute to their declining mental health. One woman (AI2) recounts being denied food or given only leftover bones to eat, a form of dehumanization that echoes historical practices of racialized servitude. These experiences reinforce Crenshaw's (1991)[110] theory of intersectionality, demonstrating how race, gender, and labor exploitation intersect to create distinct forms of psychological oppression.

The Long-Term Effects of Psychological Distress and the Need for Structural Interventions

The long-term effects of mental health struggles among refugee and migrant women extend beyond individual suffering—they shape intergenerational trauma and socio-political participation. Many women (PL7, PL5) describe feeling hopeless and disempowered, reinforcing feminist arguments that mental health disparities must be addressed as structural issues rather than personal failings.

While some women (PL6, FGA1) seek support through informal networks, these resources remain insufficient given the scale of their psychological distress. A lack of state-funded mental health services, combined with legal barriers that prevent migrant and refugee women from accessing professional care, leaves many without adequate support. This reinforces Puar's (2007) argument that biopolitical systems function not only through economic exclusion but also through the systematic neglect of marginalized populations' health and well-being.

Social Control and Restrictions on Women's Mobility

Women's mobility is systematically restricted through both patriarchal household norms and structural state policies that enforce gendered and racialized control. The testimonies highlight how these restrictions operate at multiple levels—within families, through state policies, and in public spaces—ultimately limiting women's access to education, employment, and community engagement. Feminist scholars have extensively analyzed how spatial control is used as a mechanism of gendered oppression, particularly for marginalized and racialized women.

Household-Level Patriarchal Control Over Women's Mobility

Several women (PL1, PL3) note that their husbands prohibit them from attending social events or educational workshops, demonstrating how patriarchal norms reinforce male authority over women's movements. This aligns with Abu-Lughod's (1998) analysis of how gendered spatial control is embedded in cultural expectations, where women's presence in public spaces is often perceived as transgressive or dangerous to family honor.

By restricting women's mobility, male family members maintain control over their social interactions and access to knowledge. This reflects Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain," where women are expected to comply with restrictions in exchange for social security and protection. However, some women (PL1) push back against these constraints, noting that their husbands became uncomfortable with their growing autonomy. This struggle reflects Pateman's (1988) argument that patriarchal systems resist women's empowerment, as increased knowledge and mobility threaten male dominance in both private and public spheres.

Spatial Control and the Kafala System: The Restriction of Migrant Domestic Workers

Migrant domestic workers (FGA1, AI2) face even more extreme forms of mobility restriction, with some describing being confined to their employers' homes and forbidden from leaving without permission. The Kafala system legally binds domestic workers to their employers, allowing them to impose near-total control over their movements, reinforcing feminist critiques of spatial control over women's bodies. This system aligns with Mohanty's (1988) critique of how Global South women's labor is commodified and controlled within neoliberal economies.

110 *Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-1299.*

Many migrant women describe feeling like prisoners in their workplaces, unable to access the outside world without employer approval. One woman (AI2) describes how she was denied access to social interactions, reflecting the broader dehumanization of migrant workers under the Kafala system. This level of control echoes Davis' (1981) analysis of reproductive labor, where women of color are subjected to heightened surveillance and discipline in domestic work settings, reinforcing racial hierarchies within labor markets.

Racist Policing of Refugee and Migrant Women in Public Spaces

Women (PL2, PL4) recount experiences of xenophobic harassment in public spaces, with some preferring to stay indoors to avoid verbal and physical attacks. This aligns with hooks' (1984)[111] analysis of how racialized gender oppression positions non-citizen women as "outsiders" within national discourses, making them more vulnerable to public discrimination.

Refugee women face heightened scrutiny, with some reporting being insulted in the streets and experiencing exclusion in workplaces and educational settings. The fear of violence and social rejection leads some women (PL2) to limit their own movements, mirroring Fanon's (1967) concept of internalized oppression, where marginalized groups adapt their behavior to avoid discrimination.

Furthermore, racialized policing of migrant women intersects with class oppression. Domestic workers, for example, are often surveilled when in public, reinforcing Puar's (2007) concept of "biopolitics," where racialized populations are systematically excluded from full citizenship and reduced to disposable labor. The restriction of their mobility is not just an individual employer's decision but part of a broader system that denies migrant workers full personhood.

The Psychological Impact of Spatial Control on Women

The restriction of women's mobility has severe psychological consequences, contributing to social isolation, anxiety, and depression. Several women (PL7, AI1) describe feeling trapped—whether in their homes, workplaces, or refugee camps—leading to emotional distress. Ahmed (2010) argues that restricted mobility is not just about physical limitations but also about the psychological burden of being denied autonomy[112].

Women who are forced to limit their movements experience a diminished sense of agency, reinforcing their economic and social marginalization. The lack of access to public spaces, education, and work opportunities exacerbates feelings of alienation and prevents them from building networks of support. This reflects Fraser's (2013)[113] critique of neoliberal feminism, which promotes individual empowerment without addressing structural barriers such as legal restrictions on mobility.

Resistance and Strategies for Reclaiming Mobility

Despite these restrictions, some women (PL6, FGNMW1) engage in resistance strategies to reclaim their mobility. Attending workshops, forming social networks, and finding alternative ways to move freely are small but significant acts of defiance against patriarchal and racialized control. Migrant workers also create informal alliances (AI1), demonstrating how solidarity can serve as a tool for collective resistance.

Additionally, some women advocate for legal reforms and greater access to safe public spaces (PL6, FGNS1), reflecting Kabeer's (1999)[114] argument that empowerment must be linked to structural changes rather than framed solely as an issue of personal resilience. Expanding safe spaces for women—whether through community centers, advocacy groups, or educational programs—can provide critical support in challenging spatial restrictions.

111 *hooks, b. (1984). Feminist theory: From margin to center. South End Press.*

112 *Gupta, M., Madabushi, J. S., & Gupta, N. (2023). Critical overview of patriarchy, its interferences with psychological development, and risks for mental health. Cureus, 15(6), e40216.*

113 *Fraser, N. (2013). Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis. Verso Books.*

114 *Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3), 435-464.*

Resistance, Agency, and Collective Organizing

Despite the systemic oppression faced by refugee and migrant women, the testimonies reveal numerous strategies of resistance, agency, and collective organizing. Women are not passive victims of patriarchal, economic, and racial oppression; rather, they actively navigate and challenge these structures, often through grassroots organizing, legal literacy programs, and mutual support networks. Their efforts align with key feminist theories that emphasize the power of collective action in resisting gendered and racialized oppression[115].

Grassroots Organizing and Collective Resistance Among Refugee Women

Several refugee women (PL6, FGNMW1) describe forming support groups to provide one another with legal knowledge, economic strategies, and psychosocial support. These forms of mutual aid are particularly significant given the structural exclusions they face, such as barriers to employment, legal work restrictions, and social discrimination.

By engaging in vocational training, refugee women assert their right to economic independence, resisting the patriarchal norms that position them as economically dependent on male family members. However, many note that these opportunities are limited by funding constraints, illustrating Fraser's (2013)[116] critique of neoliberal feminism, which often promotes self-empowerment without addressing the systemic barriers that keep women in economic precarity.

The ability to access legal literacy programs (PL1, FGPS1) has also been instrumental in women's resistance. Through these sessions, women learn about their rights, enabling them to better advocate for themselves in both domestic and institutional settings. This aligns with Nussbaum's (2000)[117] capabilities approach, which argues that access to education and legal knowledge is central to expanding women's agency and enabling them to challenge oppressive structures.

Informal Alliances and Labor Organizing Among Migrant Domestic Workers

Migrant domestic workers (AI1, FGA1) face even greater structural barriers to organizing due to Lebanon's Kafala system, which restricts their legal right to unionize. However, despite these legal constraints, many have created informal alliances to support one another, share legal information, and collectively advocate for better working conditions.

Their resistance is particularly significant given the extreme conditions they face, including physical confinement, economic exploitation, and racialized violence. As Crenshaw (1991)[118] argues in her theory of intersectionality, migrant women's experiences of oppression cannot be understood through gender alone—they are also shaped by race, class, and citizenship status. The solidarity networks formed by migrant domestic workers reflect hooks' (1984)[119] argument that collective feminist consciousness is a key tool in resisting oppression.

By pooling resources and knowledge, these workers challenge the notion that they are powerless within the labor market. Their organizing efforts align with Kabeer's (1999)[120] definition of empowerment, which emphasizes that true agency emerges not from individual resilience alone but from collective efforts to challenge social and economic constraints.

115 *Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3), 435-464.*
116 *Fraser, N. (2013). Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis. Verso Books.*
117 *Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). Women and human development: The capabilities approach. Cambridge University Press.*
118 *Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-1299.*
119 *hooks, b. (1984). Feminist theory: From margin to center. South End Press.*
120 *Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3), 435-464.*

The Role of Education in Expanding Women's Agency

The testimonies (PL1, FGPS1) illustrate how attending feminist and legal literacy workshops has helped women develop strategies for navigating oppressive structures. Education emerges as a essential tool in their resistance, equipping them with the knowledge needed to advocate for their rights, challenge workplace abuses, and make informed decisions about their futures.

This reflects Nussbaum's (2000)[121] capabilities approach, which highlights the importance of providing women with the resources to expand their life choices. Legal literacy, vocational training, and awareness sessions are not just about individual self-improvement; they are tools that enable women to collectively resist systems of exclusion. By engaging in these programs, refugee and migrant women reject their imposed roles as passive recipients of aid and instead assert their right to economic and social participation.

The Gradual Shift in Gender Norms and Engaging Men in Feminist Advocacy

A notable development in the testimonies is that some men have begun attending awareness sessions on gender equality (FGPS1), signaling a slow but important shift in patriarchal norms. This aligns with Connell's (2005)[122] concept of "gender transformation," which argues that lasting social change requires engaging men in discussions about gender equality.

Traditionally, men in patriarchal societies resist feminist advocacy because they perceive it as a threat to their authority. However, some testimonies indicate that husbands who initially opposed their wives' participation in workshops have become more open to it over time. One example is a man who initially forbade his wife from attending awareness sessions but later inquired about whether similar sessions existed for men. These small shifts illustrate the potential for feminist education to reshape patriarchal attitudes when men are engaged in the conversation rather than positioned as adversaries.

Connell's (2005)[123] work on hegemonic masculinity suggests that such changes are necessary for broader gender justice. While women's resistance is powerful, sustainable change often requires shifting the attitudes of men as well. Programs that involve men in conversations about gender, labor rights, and family dynamics can play a crucial role in transforming patriarchal systems from within[124]. However, it is essential to preserve a safe space for women to participate in these programs while ensuring that the primary focus remains on the disproportionate impact of patriarchy on women.

Resistance Beyond Survival: Women as Agents of Social Change

While much of women's resistance is focused on survival—securing work, escaping violence, accessing legal support—some testimonies (PL6, FGNS1) suggest a broader desire for systemic change. Women are not just seeking individual empowerment; they want structural shifts that will allow them to build sustainable futures for themselves and their communities.

For example, some refugee women advocate for policies that would grant them legal work permits, while migrant domestic workers push for the abolition of the Kafala system. These efforts align with scholars that argue feminist movements must move beyond individual empowerment models and demand collective, systemic changes in economic and political structures[125].

121 *Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). Women and human development: The capabilities approach. Cambridge University Press.*
122 *Connell, R. W. (2005). Masculinities (2nd ed.). University of California Press.*
123 *Ibid.*
124 *UN Women. (2024). Transforming patriarchal masculinities: Learning from practice lessons from UN women DRILS initiative (Dialogue, Reflection, Insight, Learning & Sharing.*
125 *Nazneen, S., & Okech, A. (2021). Introduction: Feminist protests and politics in a world in crisis. Gender & Development, 29(2–3), 231–252.*

Policy Recommendations

The findings highlight how refugee women and migrant domestic workers in Lebanon navigate systemic challenges through various coping strategies. Policies should build on these strategies to create sustainable solutions that enhance resilience, reduce vulnerabilities, and provide long-term support.

1. Strengthening Social Support Networks

- Fund and expand community centers in refugee camps and urban areas where migrant and refugee women can access psychosocial support, peer networks, and legal aid.
- Support grassroots refugee-led initiatives by providing small grants and logistical assistance to strengthen self-organized community networks.

2. Expanding Access to Education and Vocational Training

- Enhance language and literacy programs tailored for refugee and migrant women to improve communication skills and access to better job opportunities.
- Increase funding for vocational training in fields where employment is more accessible (e.g., caregiving, tailoring, beauty services, and digital work).
- Facilitate employer partnerships to ensure that vocational training leads to real job placements, reducing exploitation risks.
- Support alternative learning methods such as evening and online courses to accommodate women with caregiving responsibilities.

3. Promoting Safe Work Environments and Economic Independence

- Promote cooperative business models for refugee and migrant women (e.g., food production, handicrafts) by simplifying legal registration.
- Encourage ethical hiring platforms that connect workers directly with employers, reducing reliance on exploitative recruitment agencies.

4. Improving Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being

- Integrate mental health services into community centers, offering free or low-cost therapy, group counseling, and peer support groups.
- Train community health workers to provide basic mental health support in refugee camps and migrant communities.
- Develop culturally sensitive mental health awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behavior.
- Advocate for workplaces to provide mental health support for domestic workers by ensuring employers allow regular rest days and access to social networks.

5. Ensuring Safer Housing and Living Conditions

- Implement rental assistance programs for low-income refugee families to secure better housing and prevent landlord exploitation.
- Enforce safety standards in refugee camps and informal settlements by conducting regular inspections and repairs.

6. Strengthening Child Protection and Parenting Support

- Expand informal education programs for refugee children who cannot access formal schooling, focusing on literacy, safety, and social integration.
- Provide parental support programs that offer workshops on positive parenting, navigating school systems, and child mental health.

- Enhance school monitoring mechanisms to address discrimination, bullying, and abuse against refugee children.
- Offer subsidized childcare options for working refugee and migrant women to reduce the burden of unpaid care work.

7. Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

- Expand safe spaces for women and girls where they can access counseling, legal advice, and emergency support.
- Provide free legal assistance for women experiencing domestic violence, workplace abuse, or forced marriage.
- Increase funding for emergency shelters that accept both refugee and migrant women fleeing violence.
- Implement employer accountability measures for domestic worker abuse cases, including blacklisting abusive employers.
- Engage men in activities related to social norms.

8. Strengthening Informal Support for Migrant Domestic Workers

- Recognize and support migrant worker alliances by allowing them to operate as legal community organizations.
- Develop digital platforms for domestic workers where they can safely share experiences, access legal support, and connect with advocacy groups.

9. Enhancing Personal Coping Mechanisms through Community Engagement

- Incorporate creative therapy programs such as art, gardening, and storytelling into NGO-led psychosocial support initiatives.
- Provide access to safe public spaces where women can engage in recreational activities, reducing isolation and improving mental well-being.
- Encourage community-driven self-care initiatives such as fitness classes, support groups, and cultural events for refugee and migrant women.

10. Advocating for Structural Reforms Through Grassroots Mobilization

- Support refugee and migrant-led advocacy campaigns that push for better legal protections, labor rights, and social inclusion.
- Encourage collaborative policymaking by including refugee and migrant women's voices in discussions on labor laws and migration policies.
- Increase media representation of migrant and refugee women's experiences to counter stereotypes and raise public awareness.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the compounded vulnerabilities faced by migrant women in Lebanon, shaped by the intersection of gender, race, and migration status. Their experiences align with feminist scholarship, which argues that migration is not merely a physical movement but a process that exacerbates existing inequalities and structures of oppression. As Kofman (2004)[126] and Yuval-Davis (2011) [127]emphasize, understanding the gendered dynamics of migration is crucial for developing inclusive and equitable policies that address the unique challenges faced by migrant women in both conflict and post-conflict settings.

The coping strategies identified in the research provide a critical perspective on how structural and gendered inequalities shape the lived experiences of migrant women. Feminist theory highlights the need to address power imbalances, social roles, and intersectional identities, which influence how migrant women respond to displacement, exploitation, and discrimination. Many migrant women navigate multiple layers of vulnerability in isolation due to systemic barriers that limit their access to resources, economic opportunities, and legal protections.

At the same time, the study highlights the importance of community-based support and empowerment programs, which serve as key mechanisms for resilience. Feminist frameworks emphasize that solidarity, legal awareness, and emotional support enable migrant women to challenge oppressive structures, assert their rights, and develop sustainable coping mechanisms. These findings reinforce the necessity of gender-sensitive, intersectional approaches to migrant support programs—approaches that not only address immediate needs but also work toward long-term systemic change.

To achieve meaningful progress, policies must move beyond temporary relief and focus on empowering migrant women as active agents of change. Strengthening social support networks, expanding legal protections, improving economic opportunities, and integrating gender-sensitive frameworks into migration policies are critical steps toward ensuring dignity, security, and equality for migrant women in Lebanon. By centering their voices and needs in policymaking, research, and humanitarian responses, stakeholders can contribute to a more just and inclusive approach to migration governance—one that challenges entrenched inequalities and promotes the full social and economic integration of migrant women.

126 *Kofman, E. (2018). Gender and Migration: An Intersectional Approach. In Gender and Migration (pp. 25-42). Palgrave Macmillan.*
127 *Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations. Sage Publications.*

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