ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY & CITIZENSHIP
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

CARE WITHOUT RIGHTS

THE KAFALA SYSTEM, COMPOUNDING CRISES, AND THE POLITICAL AGENCY OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN LEBANON

August 2026



Note on Terminology

Where this paper refers to "the kafala system," it refers to the constellation of administrative regulations, General Security directives, Ministry of Labour decisions, and residency requirements that together govern migrant domestic worker (MDW) employment in Lebanon, rather than to any single codified statute. A "kafil" refers to the individual employer-sponsor; "MDW" is used throughout to denote migrant domestic workers. A fuller glossary appears as Appendix B.

TALA ABDULGHANI

Tala Abdulghani is a researcher at the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut, where she works on gender justice, migration, social protection, care work, and civil society in Lebanon and the wider WANA region. Her research interests include feminist politics, migrant and refugee rights, and social movements. She is also an activist involved in grassroots organizing and advocacy in Lebanon, with a particular interest in connecting research, political organizing, and social justice.

Author

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION **3**

1.1. Methodology 5

1.2. Why This Matters 5

2. DOMESTIC LABOR IN LEBANON'S TWENTIETH CENTURY **6**

2.1. The Pre-Civil War Household Economy 7

2.2. Reconstruction and the Institutionalization of Kafala 8

2.3. The Production of a Racialized and Gendered Category 9

3. A STRUCTURE OF COERCION: THE KAFALA SYSTEM'S LEGAL ARCHITECTURE AND RACIAL LOGIC **10**

3.1. The Architecture of Dependency: How the Kafala System Operates 11

3.2. Legal Exclusion: Article 7 and the Boundaries of Labor Law 11

3.3. The Recruitment Industry and the Architecture of Debt 12

3.4. Violence and the Limits of Legal Redress 13

4. WHO ARE LEBANON'S MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS? DEMOGRAPHY, GEOGRAPHY, AND LIVING CONDITIONS **14**

4.1. Estimating the MDW Population: Data, Gaps, and Methodological Challenges 15

4.2. National Origins and the Shifting Geography of Recruitment 15

4.3. Live-In Work and Its Consequences 16

4.4. Differential Vulnerability: National Origin, Documentation Status, and the Hierarchy of Precarity 17

5. THE ECONOMIC COLLAPSE, THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, AND THE BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSION **18**

5.1. The Financial Crisis and the Collapse of the Employer–Worker Relationship 19

5.2. COVID-19 and the Intensification of Household Confinement 19

5.3. The Beirut Port Explosion: Immediate Impact on the MDW Population 20

5.4. The Relief Operation and Its Exclusions 20

5.5. Migrant-Led Response: Egna Legna and the Politics of Mutual Aid 21

5.6. Civil Society Response and the Limits of Humanitarian Inclusion 21

6. LEFT BEHIND: MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE 2024–2026 WAR **22**
6.1. Escalation and the Pattern of Abandonment 23
6.2. Exclusion from Emergency Shelter 23
6.3. Repatriation Failures and the Limits of Consular Protection 24
6.4. Migrant Workers as First Responders 24
6.5. The War and the Entrenchment of Crisis Exclusion 25

7. A HISTORY OF MIGRANT-LED ORGANIZATIONS IN LEBANON **26**
7.1. Early Organizations: Welfare, Religion, and Informal Community (1980s–1990s) 27
7.2. Consolidation and Formalization (2000s–Early 2010s) 27
7.3. The 2015–2017 Push for Formal Recognition and Its Consequent Repression 27
7.4. Organizing Under Compounding Crisis (2019–Present) 28
7.5. Structural Obstacles and Organizational Adaptation 29

8. INTERLOCKING SYSTEMS: FEMINIST AND INTERSECTIONAL FRAMEWORKS **30**
8.1. The Intersections of Gender, Race, and Migrant Status 31
8.2. Gender: The Devaluation of Care and the Politics of the Household 31
8.3. Race: Servitude and the Production of Racial Hierarchy 32
8.4. Legal Status: The Compounding Function of Documentation 32
8.5. The Lebanese State's Structural Role: Care Privatization as Policy Choice 33
8.6. Donor and Humanitarian Blind Spots 33

9. DEMANDING REFORM: ADVOCACY, POLICY INTERVENTION, AND INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE **35**
9.1. National-Level Advocacy: Casework, Hotlines, and Public Documentation 36
9.2. Recruitment Reform: The 2013 Code of Conduct and Its Limits 36
9.3. The Standard Unified Contract Revision and the Limits of Administrative Reform 37
9.4. Sending-Country Leverage: Bans, Bilateral Agreements, and Their Contradictions 37
9.5. International Human Rights Mechanisms and the Documentation Gap 37

10. THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORK **39**
10.1. Global Care Chains and the Political Economy of Care Migration 40
10.2. Neoliberalism, Postwar Reconstruction, and the Kafala as Political Economy 40
10.3. Toward a Structural Reform Agenda 41

CONCLUSION: WHAT FOUR DECADES MAKE VISIBLE **42**

APPENDICES **44**
Appendix A. Chronology of Compounding Crises and Reform Attempts, 2019–2026 45
Appendix B. Glossary of Key Terms 46

1. INTRODUCTION

Migrant domestic workers have faced structural exclusion from Lebanon's legal and crisis-response systems for nearly four decades, and the 2024 war is only its most recent expression. In the autumn of 2024, as armed conflict escalated across Lebanon and more than a million people were displaced from their homes (OCHA 2024), emergency response mechanisms revealed a systematic pattern of exclusion spanning shelter, wages, documentation, and legal protection: denial of access to emergency shelters, abandonment by employers without wages or identity documents, and exclusion from state protection and humanitarian assistance. Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) limited school-based shelters to Lebanese citizens (Salhani 2024; Al Jazeera 2024; The New Humanitarian 2024). In Tripoli, a group of around seventy workers from Sierra Leone and Bangladesh were removed from one such shelter on that basis. Workers from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Sudan, and Bangladesh were reported sleeping in public parks and along the Beirut seafront, in some cases after being instructed by departing employers to remain behind and guard household property (Salhani 2024; Walk Free 2024). These events were not an aberration, but the most recent expression of a much longer history.

Estimates of Lebanon's migrant domestic worker (MDW) population vary considerably by source and method: researchers and advocates commonly cite around 176,000 (IOM 2024). Most are women recruited from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and a growing number of other African and Asian countries (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2025; Salhani 2024). They provide childcare, eldercare, and household labor across Lebanese households at nearly every income level yet remain almost entirely excluded from the legal frameworks that govern labor in Lebanon. Article 7 of the Labour Law exempts domestic workers from its provisions, leaving MDWs without a minimum wage, regulated working hours, a weekly rest day, or freedom of association (Amnesty International 2019a). In their place, MDWs are governed by the kafala system, which binds a worker's legal residency to a single employer. The kafala system has been consistently identified by legal scholars and human rights organizations as a structure of coercion, one that ties migrant domestic workers' legal status and residency to their employment relationship and concentrates significant legal and economic power in the hands of employers.

Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon occupy a position of racialized, gendered, and legally constructed precarity that they have consistently challenged. Policy discourse, human rights documentation, and media coverage typically present MDWs as recipients of abuse, abandonment, and neglect, a framing that is accurate but incomplete. It overlooks a history of migrant-led organizing stretching from the Kerala Welfare Association, founded in 1986, to the mutual-aid networks that provided food, shelter, and evacuation support during the 2024–2026 war. Shukr and Kazma (2023), in the first systematic historical account of this organizing, document how migrant workers built and adapted organizational forms across four decades despite legal exclusion, state repression, and the isolation of live-in domestic work.

This report builds on Kassamali's (2021) account of the kafala system's origins within Lebanon's postwar political economy and Shukr and Kazma's (2023) history of MDW organizing, bringing the two into conversation with the compounding crises of 2019–2026 and with feminist, intersectional, and citizenship theory to develop an integrated account of structure, crisis, and agency. Three claims follow this synthesis. First, the kafala system is a racially and economically structured regime of labor control that is integral to Lebanon's postwar political economy, rather than a pre-political administrative arrangement. Second, Lebanon's crises since 2019 largely intensified vulnerabilities already built into the system, while some shocks, particularly the general financial collapse, also created new forms of vulnerability by destroying real wages. Third, migrant domestic workers are active political subjects whose organizing constitutes a form of class struggle conducted under considerable legal and social constraint, rather than passive objects of policy.

Migrant Workers' Action[1] put this argument plainly in its 2026 Labour Day bulletin, marking a war that had by then continued intermittently since 2024: "Migrant workers have never waited for systems to protect them; they have organized for and among each other" (Migrant Workers' Action 2026a). The analysis that follows proceeds in four parts: Part I on the kafala system's legal architecture and the demographic composition of Lebanon's MDW population, Part II on the effects of Lebanon's crises since 2019, Part III on the history of MDW organizing situated within feminist and intersectional theory, and Part IV on the theoretical stakes of that history and the report's reform agenda.

1.1. Methodology

This report scopes and analyses human rights investigations from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Walk Free, and humanitarian and intergovernmental data from IOM, the ILO, OCHA, and OHCHR, against Kassamali's (2021) political-economy account of the kafala system's origins and Shukr and Kazma's (2023) organizational history of MDW organizing, in conversation with Jureidini (2009), Block et al. (2023), Diab et al. (2023), and Diab and Al Riachi (2026), together with legal and policy materials and recent journalism and organizational reporting for developments from 2024–2026, to analyze the historical development of migrant domestic labour and the kafala system in Lebanon, the legal and political-economic structures governing domestic work, and the trajectory and limitations of reform.

1.2. Why This Matters

The kafala system is not a residual holdover from an earlier, less regulated era. Kassamali (2021) situates it as a constitutive feature of Lebanon's postwar political economy, tracing how the system entered Lebanon through specific circuits of Gulf labour migration and became embedded in the legal and economic arrangements governing migrant domestic labour. Its effects are also racialized. The Arabic term *Srilankiyye* has been detached from its national referent and reapplied as a generic racial category for non-Arab domestic workers, illustrating how the system organizes racial difference alongside labour relations. Understanding kafala in these terms matters because it shifts the question of reform beyond correcting outdated labour regulations or addressing individual instances of abuse. If kafala is embedded in the political-economic organization of migrant domestic labour, meaningful reform must also confront the arrangements that make migrant workers' labour available, controllable, and socially differentiated in the first place. This paper examines how Lebanon's system of migrant domestic labour was historically produced and sustained through the intersection of kafala, gendered and racialized labour relations, and the privatization of care. It asks why reforms have repeatedly failed to transform these arrangements, arguing that meaningful change requires confronting the political-economic structures that make migrant domestic workers' labour both necessary and exploitable.

1 Migrant Workers' Action is a non-governmental organization working to abolish the exploitative Kafala system and human trafficking of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon

2. DOMESTIC LABOR IN LEBANON'S TWENTIETH CENTURY

2.1. The Pre-Civil War Household Economy

Any account of migrant domestic labor in Lebanon that begins with the postwar period risks a false impression that the kafala system arrived from outside and imposed arrangements that were previously absent. The historical record suggests otherwise. Domestic work in Lebanese private households predates both the civil war and the kafala framework. The social logics that structured it, including the gendering of care work, its exclusion from legal protection, and hierarchies of class and geographic origin, were established well before either existed (Kassamali 2021; Jureidini 2009).

In the decades preceding the civil war, demand for domestic labor in Lebanese households was met primarily through young women and girls recruited from poor rural communities within Lebanon, as well as from Syria, Palestinian Refugee Camps and settlements, and Egypt (Kassamali 2021; Jureidini 2009; Shukr and Kazma 2023). These workers, frequently minors, typically lived in employer households under arrangements that bore little resemblance to formal wage labor: wages were often remitted annually to families in the worker's home village rather than paid to the worker themselves, and the worker remained in residential and economic dependency that could extend for years. Jureidini's (2009) oral history of Lebanese domestic service, based on interviews with Lebanese employer households, independently corroborates this pattern and traces the shift that followed: as the civil war disrupted the recruitment of Arab women mentioned above, Lebanese households turned to the Asian and African migrant labor that would come to define the kafala era. This exclusion from legal protection is therefore not a consequence of the kafala system or of migrant workers' arrival, but it is a foundational feature of how domestic work has been categorized in Lebanese law and social life throughout the modern period. Article 7 of the *Labour Law*, when drafted to exclude domestic workers, codified an existing social understanding rather than creating a new one.

The civil war, which began in April 1975, produced a rupture in Lebanon's labor market of lasting consequence. It precipitated large-scale emigration of Lebanese workers, including much of the educated professional class, to the Gulf states, Western Europe, and the Americas. By the late 1970s and through the 1980s, Lebanese emigrants in the Gulf were participating in a regional labor economy in which the kafala sponsorship system had already been institutionalized as the primary mechanism for governing migrant labor (Kassamali 2021). Lebanese workers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar encountered a system in which Asian migrant workers, recruited primarily from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, India, and Bangladesh, performed domestic and service labor under conditions of employer-sponsored residency and restricted mobility.

This encounter is central to Kassamali's (2021) account of how domestic labor developed in Lebanon. Lebanese emigrants in the Gulf did not only observe the kafala system from the outside; many participated in it as employers of domestic workers in their own Gulf households. When these emigrants returned to Lebanon, particularly after the civil war, a substantial number brought migrant domestic workers with them, carrying both the workers and the arrangements under which they had been employed into the Lebanese context. This return migration is one of the primary routes through which the kafala system entered Lebanese social practice, and it explains why Sri Lankan women constituted the first, and for a period the dominant, group of migrant domestic workers in postwar Lebanon. Sri Lanka had been a major sending country to the Gulf since the mid-1970s, and it was Sri Lankan workers already employed by Lebanese families abroad who were most often brought to Lebanon upon their employers' return (Shukr and Kazma 2023; Kassamali 2021).

2.2. Reconstruction and the Institutionalization of Kafala

The civil war also destroyed many of the arrangements through which Lebanese rural women had previously been recruited into urban domestic employment, while the disposable income of a Lebanese bourgeoisie enriched by wartime accumulation or Gulf employment continued to rise. The result was a growing demand for domestic labor that the internal market could no longer supply, met increasingly through international recruitment networks developing across South and Southeast Asia and, somewhat later, sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Jureidini and Moukarbel (2004) note that during the civil war, the departure of Egyptian workers, the reduced availability of Palestinian workers, and the declining willingness of Lebanese women to enter domestic service contributed to a shortage of domestic labor that employers increasingly filled through foreign recruitment.

The reconstruction period that followed the Taif Agreement was defined, in political-economic terms, by consolidation of a neoliberal development model centered on financial services, real estate, and consumption, and by the deliberate reconstruction of Beirut as a regional trade and tourism hub (Kassamali 2021). This model had specific implications for domestic labor: the expansion of a Lebanese professional and business class with dual-income households and rising consumption expectations generated sustained demand for live-in domestic workers, while the state made no corresponding investment in public care infrastructure, whether childcare, eldercare, or other services that might have reduced household dependency on private labor.

It was within this context that the kafala system was institutionalized in Lebanon, not through a single legislative act but through the accumulation of administrative regulations, General Security directives, and Ministry of Labour decisions that together produced the framework still in operation (Human Rights Watch 2022; Amnesty International 2019a). The system was modeled loosely on Gulf practice but adapted to Lebanon's institutional context. Unlike the Gulf states, where kafala arrangements have at least been codified in national labor legislation, Lebanon's framework has remained almost entirely administrative and a matter of regulations that are less visible and harder to challenge than statutory law. Legal scholars and advocacy organizations identify this administrative character, rather than any single statute, as central to the system's resistance to reform, since there is no one law to amend or repeal (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Institutionalization in the 1990s coincided with a rapid diversification of the migrant domestic worker population. While Sri Lankan workers predominated in the immediate postwar years, the 1990s saw significant new flows from the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, and by the 2000s MDWs were arriving from an increasingly wide range of African and Asian countries. This diversification reflected not only shifting supply in sending countries but the active expansion of Lebanese recruitment networks into new regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, where Lebanese diaspora communities in West and East Africa provided social infrastructure for new recruitment channels (Shukr and Kazma 2023). By the early 2000s, Lebanon's MDW population had become demographically complex, even as it was governed by a legal framework that treated all MDWs as a single undifferentiated category.

2.3. The Production of a Racialized and Gendered Category

The demographic transformation of Lebanon's MDW population over the 1990s and 2000s was accompanied by a corresponding transformation in the social categories through which MDWs were perceived and described. As Kassamali (2021) documents in detail, the Arabic term *Srilankiyye* underwent a process of semantic detachment from its original national referent during this period. What had been a descriptor identifying women from Sri Lanka became, through everyday usage, a generic category applied to any non-Arab woman employed in domestic service, regardless of their country of origin. A worker from Ethiopia, the Philippines, or Ghana might be addressed as *Srilankiyye* not through any confusion about their nationality but through a process of racialization in which the category had been emptied of its geographic content and refilled with racial and occupational content.

This linguistic shift shows that the racialization of domestic labor in Lebanon was not simply imported with the kafala system from the Gulf; it took shape within Lebanese social life, through the everyday practices of households, neighborhoods, and public discourse. Kassamali (2021) treats this racialization not as cultural residue but as a constitutive feature of the kafala system itself, one that allows severe exploitation to be represented as ordinary.

Domestic work's exclusion from legal protection in Lebanon predates the kafala system and cannot be attributed to it alone. The system itself entered Lebanon through the specific circuits of Lebanon's own labor migration to the Gulf, making it a product of Lebanese economic history rather than an external import. And its racialization developed inside Lebanese society, not alongside the system but as part of how it functions.

The kafala system did not create every dimension of exploitation. Rather, it consolidated and institutionalized patterns of gendered, racialized, and legally unprotected domestic labor that already existed in Lebanon, giving them a durable administrative and legal architecture they had not previously had.

3. A STRUCTURE OF COERCION: THE KAFALA SYSTEM'S LEGAL ARCHITECTURE AND RACIAL LOGIC

3.1. The Architecture of Dependency: How the Kafala System Operates

The kafala system is frequently described, in both popular and policy discourse, as a sponsorship arrangement: an administrative mechanism through which an employer assumes legal responsibility for a migrant worker's residency. This description is accurate as far as it goes, but it understates the system's reach. The kafala framework does not merely regulate an MDW's entry into Lebanon; it governs every significant legal dimension of their existence in the country, binding their residency status, right to work, freedom of movement, and ability to exit the country to the consent and continued goodwill of a single private individual. The employer, or *kafil*, is the legal guarantor of the worker's entire presence in Lebanon, a role with no real parallel in the regulation of other categories of labor.

Under this framework, an MDW's legal residency is inseparable from their employment relationship with their *kafil*. Their work permit is issued specifically for employment in the *kafil's* household and cannot be transferred without the *kafil's* written consent and a formal release from the Directorate General of General Security, Lebanon's internal security and immigration authority.

If a worker leaves their employer's household without this consent, whether in response to abuse, non-payment of wages, or simply a wish to change employer, they immediately lose their legal residency status. They become undocumented and are subject to arrest, detention, and deportation, typically at their own expense or that of their sending country's embassy (Human Rights Watch 2022; Amnesty International 2019b). The legal consequence of leaving an abusive employer without permission is, in formal terms, identical to the consequence of any other unauthorized residency: the worker becomes a deportable irregular migrant.

This architecture of dependency is reinforced by passport confiscation practices that are widespread, though formally prohibited, among Lebanese employers. Human Rights Watch (2022) found confiscation so normalized that it is practiced not only by employers seeking to prevent a worker from leaving but by those who regard it as a routine precaution. Without their passport, a worker cannot approach the authorities, access consular services in a timely manner, or exit the country even with the resources to do so. The combination of residency dependency and physical document confiscation produces a condition of immobility that scholarship on the kafala system treats as a feature of the system rather than an abuse of it (Block et al. 2023). That immobility is also what makes MDW labor available to Lebanese employers on the terms they have come to expect.

3.2. Legal Exclusion: Article 7 and the Boundaries of Labor Law

The kafala system's power over MDWs is amplified by its relationship to Lebanon's formal labor law, and specifically by the exclusion of domestic workers from the protections that law provides. Article 7 of the Labour Law exempts domestic workers categorically, regardless of nationality. The exemption predates the large-scale recruitment of migrant domestic workers and reflects the longer history of domestic labor's exclusion from legal recognition in Lebanon. The practical consequences are extensive. MDWs in Lebanon have no statutory right to a minimum wage, no legally mandated limit on working hours, and no guaranteed weekly rest day. They have no entitlement to overtime pay, no access to the National Social Security Fund, no right to form or join a trade union, and no recourse to the Labor Arbitration Councils that adjudicate disputes in other sectors (Amnesty International 2019b; Human Rights Watch 2022).

In the absence of labor-law protection, the primary instrument governing the MDW employment relationship is the Standard Unified Contract (SUC)[2], a model contract developed in 2009 through a process involving the International Labour Organization, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Ministry of Labour. The SUC establishes minimum terms, including a rest day, limits on working hours, and a basic wage, and is formally required to be signed by the employer and worker at recruitment. In practice, Human Rights Watch's (2022) review of court decisions and complaint records found its terms routinely disregarded without legal consequence. Workers seeking to enforce the SUC face linguistic barriers, fear of deportation, and the disincentive that pursuing a complaint means remaining in Lebanon, often undocumented, while proceedings run for months or years.

In September 2020, amid the overlapping financial and pandemic crises, Lebanon's caretaker Minister of Labour adopted a revised SUC intended, as per the government's framing, as a first step toward dismantling the kafala system. It would have granted a 48-hour work week, a weekly rest day, overtime pay, sick leave, and the national minimum wage. Most importantly, it would have allowed workers to terminate their contract without their employer's consent (Human Rights Watch 2020a).

As a response, the Syndicate of the Owners of Recruitment Agencies filed a complaint with the State Shura Council, Lebanon's highest administrative court, arguing that domestic workers' exclusion from the Labour Law meant their employment could be governed only by ordinary contract law, and that the new SUC violated employers' freedom to contract (Sewell 2020). The Shura Council suspended the reform six weeks after it was adopted (Amnesty International 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020a). It has not been reinstated in a form that has produced documented, systematic change in MDW working conditions.

3.3. The Recruitment Industry and the Architecture of Debt

The vulnerability MDWs encounter in Lebanon does not begin upon arrival but is constructed beforehand through a transnational recruitment industry that extracts financial value from workers at the point of greatest desperation and generates debt that compounds the coercive power of the kafala framework once workers are in Lebanon (Amnesty International 2019b). Recruitment involves a chain of intermediaries across sending and receiving countries, with licensed Lebanese agencies linked to recruiting agents and sub-agents in countries of origin through networks that are variably regulated and often opaque (Amnesty International 2020)

Lebanon's recruitment sector is formally licensed by the Ministry of Labour and represented by its own trade association, *the Syndicate of Owners of Recruitment Agencies in Lebanon (SORAL)*, which lobbies the Ministry directly and has campaigned publicly against measures affecting the sector's operating conditions (Anti-Racism Movement 2024b). The number of agencies actively operating has fluctuated with the economic crisis and the sending-country bans (Human Rights Watch 2022). The barrier to entry is low, with a financial guarantee requirement that commentators have noted is insufficient to cover unpaid wages and repatriation costs in the event of agency misconduct (Goethe-Institut 2022). Ministry of Labour oversight of agency conduct has been characterized by human rights organizations as inadequate and inconsistent, with violations rarely resulting in license revocation.

2 The Standard Unified Contract (SUC) is a regulatory framework established by Decree No. 19/1 in 2009 by the Ministry of Labor to govern the employment relationship for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon

Workers in countries of origin typically pay substantial recruitment fees to local agents, often borrowing from family members, moneylenders, or the agents themselves (Anti-Slavery International 2014). These fees, which can amount to several months of anticipated wages, create debt bondage that shapes a worker's calculus upon arrival. Leaving an abusive employer means not only losing legal status but potentially forfeiting the investment they and their family made in their migration. Human rights documentation has repeatedly identified these pre-departure debt structures as significantly elevating the risk of forced labor and debt bondage among MDWs in Lebanon (Anti-Slavery International 2014; Amnesty International 2019a; Human Rights Watch 2022). The recruitment industry thus functions not only as a logistical mechanism for labor supply but as a financial instrument that extends the coercive reach of the kafala framework backward into the pre-migration period, and across borders, into the economies of sending communities.

3.4. Violence and the Limits of Legal Redress

The human consequences of this architecture of coercion are documented consistently across independent sources, and they are severe. A landmark 2008 Human Rights Watch investigation, drawing on mortality data and consular records, found that a migrant domestic worker died in Lebanon at a rate of roughly one per week, due to suicide, falls from residential buildings during attempted escapes, and employer violence. Human Rights Watch has since acknowledged that a lack of accurate statistics has made this research impossible to replicate, though media reporting continues to document deaths in similar circumstances (Human Rights Watch 2008, 2022). Amnesty International (2019b), through interviews with current and former MDWs and legal advocates, documented patterns of physical abuse, sexual violence, psychological coercion, food deprivation, and confinement that in numerous cases met the legal definitions of torture, trafficking, or slavery under international law. The title of Amnesty's report, *Their House Is My Prison*, was drawn directly from worker testimony. It captures the spatial logic of a system in which the household functions simultaneously as workplace, residence, and site of confinement.

The legal system's capacity to address these violations has been found, consistently, to be inadequate. Human Rights Watch's (2022) review of judicial decisions involving MDW complaints found that Lebanese courts rarely applied international human rights standards, frequently reduced employer liability on grounds reflecting racial and class bias, and in numerous cases dismissed complaints on procedural grounds tied to the worker's documentation status. The position of MDWs within the kafala framework effectively protects many employers from meaningful accountability; for example, a worker who files a complaint risks deportation before proceedings conclude, and their employer's control over their residency documentation gives the employer significant leverage in any dispute. General Security operates under a mandate that positions it as an immigration-enforcement body rather than a protective one, and its institutional incentives do not systematically favor workers filing complaints against sponsors.

The picture that emerges is of a legal system in which the formal instruments of protection available to MDWs are, in practice, largely inaccessible, while the instruments of coercion available to employers are, in practice, routinely deployed.

4. WHO ARE LEBANON'S MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS?
DEMOGRAPHY, GEOGRAPHY, AND LIVING CONDITIONS

4.1. Estimating the MDW Population: Data, Gaps, and Methodological Challenges

Any attempt to characterize Lebanon's MDW population with precision encounters methodological obstacles rooted in the kafala system itself. Because MDW residency and employment are governed through private sponsorship rather than centralized labor registration (Human Rights Watch 2020b), and because significant numbers of workers enter undocumented status at various points in their employment (Amnesty International 2025; Parreñas and Silvey 2021), no single data source provides a comprehensive count (International Organization for Migration 2024; Human Rights Watch 2020b). Estimates from different institutional sources vary considerably, and the succession of crises since 2019 has accelerated the rate at which population figures become outdated (Migrant Workers' Action 2026b).

Prior to Lebanon's economic crisis, estimates of the total MDW population typically ranged between 250,000 and 310,000 (Amnesty International 2019a; Human Rights Watch 2022). By 2021, in the wake of the financial collapse, the pandemic, and the Beirut port explosion, no reliable MDW-specific count had been published; IOM's assessment of migrant vulnerability that year, based on 1,061 interviews, found half of respondents unemployed and more than half unable to meet their food needs (IOM 2021). Reporting from October 2024 put the International Organization for Migration's estimate of the broader migrant population, most of whom work as domestic or care labor, at approximately 176,500, a figure experts and migrant-rights activists described to journalists as a "gross underestimation," with a commonly cited working figure closer to 200,000 (Salhani 2024). IOM's most recent Migrant Presence Monitoring assessment, conducted in mid-2025, recorded approximately 163,000 migrants nationally, 70 percent of them women, with just under half (48 percent) living in their employer's household and just over half (52 percent) living independently (IOM 2025). A further caveat applies to these figures: IOM's Migrant Presence Monitoring tracks the broader migrant population in Lebanon rather than migrant domestic workers as a distinct administrative category, so the 163,000 figure describes a population that includes migrant workers in other sectors, such as construction, agriculture, and security, alongside domestic workers. It should therefore be read as an approximation of the MDW population's outer bound rather than a precise count, and the accompanying gender breakdown (70 percent women) characterizes that broader migrant population rather than domestic workers specifically. Read together, and with the caveat that they do not measure the same category, these counts are consistent with substantial contraction since the pre-crisis period, in a population that remains, by the consistent judgment of researchers and advocates, undercounted. That gap matters since it is the undocumented and least visible workers who are also the most vulnerable to the harms this report documents.

Period	Estimate	Source
Pre-2019 (pre-crisis)	250,000–310,000	Amnesty International 2019; Human Rights Watch 2022
Oct. 2024	~176,500 (undercount; ~200,000 often cited)	IOM, via Salhani 2024
Mid-2025	~163,000 (all migrants, not MDW-specific)	IOM, 2025

4.2. National Origins and the Shifting Geography of Recruitment

The national composition of Lebanon's MDW population has shifted substantially since the early postwar period, moving from relative concentration among Sri Lankan workers toward significant diversity across South and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Sri Lankan workers constituted the first substantial wave of migrant domestic labor in postwar Lebanon and remained numerically

dominant through much of the 1990s (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004). The Philippines represents a more structured and formally regulated sending country. That regulation has not eliminated documented abuse of Filipina workers, but it represents the most developed bilateral framework among Lebanon's sending countries.

Ethiopia has emerged as the largest single sending country for MDWs in Lebanon in recent years, reflecting both the scale of Ethiopian labor migration generally and recruitment networks that Lebanese and Ethiopian agents have developed since the 1990s. Ethiopia imposed a ban on sending domestic workers to Lebanon in 2008, citing documented abuse, but the ban was variably enforced, and Ethiopian workers continued to arrive through formal and irregular channels throughout the period it was nominally in force (Human Rights Watch 2022; Shukr and Kazma 2023). Subsequent recruitment from other East African countries, including Kenya, Uganda, and Madagascar, and from West African countries including Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria, reflects both the saturation of established channels and the extension of Lebanese diaspora networks into new regions of the continent.

Sending Country / Region	Notes on Recruitment and Policy
Ethiopia	Largest current sending country; 2008 government ban inconsistently enforced; workers continue to arrive via formal and irregular channels.
Philippines	Long-standing sending country.
Sri Lanka	Dominant in the early postwar period; workers continue to arrive via irregular channels.
Bangladesh	Significant and growing sending country; limited bilateral protections.
Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria	Growing presence since the 2000s; recruitment via Lebanese diaspora networks in West Africa.
Kenya, Uganda, Madagascar	Expanding recruitment since the 2010s, part of broader East African diversification.
Nepal	Active sending country; government-imposed ban variably enforced; deportation of union organizer Sujana Rana (2016) drew international attention.
Sudan, Burkina Faso	Smaller but documented sending countries; workers from both were among those reported stranded in conflict zones during the 2024–2026 war.

4.3. Live-In Work and Its Consequences

A significant proportion of domestic workers in Lebanon are employed on a live-in basis, residing in the households of their employers rather than in independent accommodation. IOM's 2025 monitoring found 48 percent of migrants nationally living within their employer's household (IOM 2025). This arrangement, normative within the kafala framework and typically stipulated as the default mode of employment under the Standard Unified Contract, has consequences for vulnerability that extend well beyond housing. The live-in requirement collapses the distinction between workplace and residence that provides a basis for labor-rights claims in other employment

contexts, making it practically impossible to define working hours or to create conditions of physical privacy and personal autonomy. A live-in domestic worker is, in a meaningful sense, always at work.

The physical conditions of live-in accommodation range from inadequate to severely abusive. Human Rights Watch (2022) and Amnesty International (2019b) documented cases in which workers were housed in kitchens, on balconies, or in storage rooms neither designed nor equipped for residential use. More fundamentally, the live-in arrangement places workers in continuous physical proximity to their employers, making it difficult to enforce any boundary around working hours, personal time, or physical integrity. Research on the mental health consequences of this arrangement has found elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress among MDWs in live-in employment, with isolation from peer networks a significant contributing factor (Diab and Al Riachi 2026). Advocacy organizations argue that this isolation is itself a feature of the kafala framework, since workers who are socially isolated are less likely to access support networks, learn their legal rights, or organize collectively, with direct implications for the organizing history.

4.4. Differential Vulnerability: National Origin, Documentation Status, and the Hierarchy of Precarity

While all MDWs in Lebanon are subject to the conditions discussed above, the degree of vulnerability experienced by individual workers varies according to factors that intersect with and compound those baseline conditions. National origin, documentation status, the presence or absence of consular support, language capacity, and access to migrant community networks all differentiate the experiences of workers who share a common structural position; an analysis that treats MDWs as a homogeneous category risks obscuring this differential distribution of risk and resilience.

Documentation status is perhaps the most consequential axis of differentiation. Workers who maintain valid residency documentation, even within the constraints of the kafala framework, retain formal access to consular services and, in principle, legal representation. Workers who have entered undocumented status, whether through employer abandonment, permit expiration, an employer's death or emigration, or overstaying after an employment relationship ends, are categorically more precarious. As Block et al. (2023) document in their analysis of MDW immobilization in Lebanon, undocumented workers face a compounding dynamic in which fines for irregular residency accumulate over time, making the prospect of approaching the authorities progressively more costly and the worker progressively more dependent on informal support networks. Workers who have remained undocumented for years may face accumulated penalties running to thousands of dollars, trapping them in a legal limbo from which exit is financially impossible without outside support.

The quality of consular representation also varies significantly across sending countries and constitutes an important differentiating factor during both ordinary periods and crises. The Philippine Overseas Labor Office maintains a comparatively active presence in Beirut, providing legal assistance, emergency shelter, and repatriation support (Human Rights Watch 2022), while responses from embassies with more limited resources or more complex bilateral relationships have been documented as less consistent. Workers from countries with limited or no consular representation in Lebanon are effectively without institutional recourse when crises occur and rely almost entirely on migrant community networks and civil society organizations, a differential that was acutely visible during the 2024–2026 war.

5. THE ECONOMIC COLLAPSE, THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, AND THE BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSION

5.1. The Financial Crisis and the Collapse of the Employer–Worker Relationship

The Lebanese financial crisis, which reached a critical threshold in October 2019 with mass street protests and the subsequent freezing of bank accounts, was the most severe economic shock to Lebanon's postwar political economy since the end of the civil war. For migrant domestic workers, the financial crisis produced consequences that were both immediate and lasting. The most acute immediate consequence was the collapse of wage payment in real terms. MDW wages in Lebanon had historically been denominated in Lebanese pounds, typically equivalent to between 150 and 300 United States dollars monthly at the pre-crisis exchange rate. As the pound depreciated catastrophically, wages that remained nominally unchanged in pound terms became worth a fraction of their previous dollar value, effectively a massive unilateral wage cut, with no legal mechanism for adjustment or recourse (Human Rights Watch 2022). Workers whose families depended on remittances found those remittances reduced to near worthlessness, while their own costs of subsistence within Lebanon remained tied to dollar-denominated prices for basic goods.

The crisis also produced, with increasing frequency from 2020 onward, the practice that advocacy organizations and media outlets came to describe as the "dumping" of migrant domestic workers (Kelly and Michaelson 2024). Employers facing their own financial distress abandoned MDWs at the embassies of their sending countries, often without passports, accumulated unpaid wages, personal belongings, or the formal residency release the kafala framework required to make their departure legal (Human Rights Watch 2022). Photographs circulated widely in 2020 and 2021 of workers gathered outside embassy buildings in Beirut, sleeping on pavements in conditions of acute material destitution. These images, while generating international attention, reflected a practice that had been occurring with less visibility for years in which employers terminated MDW employment relationships unilaterally, without fulfilling their legal obligations, and facing no legal consequences.

The kafala system's legal structure rendered workers in this situation doubly vulnerable. Abandoned by their *kafil* without a formal residency release, they were simultaneously without employment, legal status, documentation, shelter, and a mechanism for holding their former employer accountable. The Ministry of Labour's complaint mechanisms, already poorly accessible to MDWs under ordinary circumstances, were paralyzed by the scale of abandonment cases and the broader institutional dysfunction accompanying the financial crisis.

5.2. COVID-19 and the Intensification of Household Confinement

The COVID-19 pandemic, which reached Lebanon in February 2020 and prompted a national lockdown from mid-March, intersected with the ongoing financial crisis to compound the vulnerabilities already accumulating. The pandemic's effect on MDW working conditions was paradoxical: the public health emergency that confined Lebanese families to their homes simultaneously maximized demand for domestic labor and eliminated whatever limited respite from that labor workers had previously had.

Under lockdown, with household members present throughout the day and schools closed, MDWs in live-in employment found themselves subject to demands for labor extending across all waking hours, with no demarcation between working time and personal time. Accounts documented by the International Labour Organization (2020), the Anti-Racism Movement (2020), and African Feminism (2020) described workers required to perform more tasks over longer hours, and live-in workers who had previously enjoyed a weekly day off being told to remain inside the employer's residence for the duration of the lockdown. Workers were required to provide round-the-clock childcare and were subjected to intensified surveillance by employers who were themselves under significant psychological stress. The pandemic also accelerated the wave of employer abandonment that had begun with the

financial crisis. The Ethiopian embassy in Beirut was, by multiple accounts, the most severely affected, with hundreds of workers gathered in and around the embassy compound in conditions public health authorities identified as dangerous from a transmission standpoint (African Feminism 2020).

5.3. The Beirut Port Explosion: Immediate Impact on the MDW Population

The August 4, 2020 Beirut port explosion compounded the vulnerabilities already experienced by migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Within this broader catastrophe, IOM's post-blast needs assessment of foreign nationals in Beirut, covering 2,954 households in the affected areas, documented widespread loss of employment and housing among migrant workers; by September 2020, IOM reported that 91 percent of the migrant workers it surveyed were in financial difficulty and that 70 percent wanted to return home within three months (IOM 2020a, 2020b). This pattern reflects the concentration of MDW employment in the residential neighborhoods most severely affected, which include some of Beirut's wealthiest districts, where demand for live-in domestic labor has historically been highest. Workers employed in these neighborhoods were, in many cases, physically present in their employer households at the time of the explosion, and a number were killed or injured. Many more lost their housing when the buildings in which they worked and lived were rendered uninhabitable, and a substantial proportion lost their employment when Lebanese employers, facing their own displacement, terminated MDW contracts in the aftermath.

The explosion thus struck the MDW population at a moment when it was already severely weakened by the compounding effects of the financial crisis and the pandemic. Workers who had already experienced wage reduction or non-payment due to the currency collapse, and who had already navigated the intensified labor demands of lockdown, now faced physical displacement and employment termination in a city whose civil infrastructure had been severely damaged. IOM's own follow-up assessments in the months after the blast found migrant worker well-being and security continuing to deteriorate, with the large majority of surveyed workers reporting acute financial difficulty (IOM 2020b).

5.4. The Relief Operation and Its Exclusions

The humanitarian relief operation that mobilized in Beirut in the days and weeks following the explosion was, by the standards of Lebanese crisis response, substantial, in which international donors committed significant resources, Lebanese civil society organized large-scale volunteer efforts, and foreign governments dispatched emergency response teams. For migrant domestic workers, however, the relief operation reproduced the same exclusions that define their position under the kafala framework in ordinary times. In a retrospective assessment of MDW access to post-explosion relief, a pattern of exclusion was found reflecting the institutionalized neglect that characterizes MDW experience under normal conditions (Anti-Racism Movement 2024a).

In the days following the explosion, a network of shelters was established across Beirut to accommodate those rendered homeless. Migrant domestic workers were, in numerous documented cases, denied access. In some instances, because a shelter's mandate did not formally include non-Lebanese populations; in others, because volunteers or managers prioritized Lebanese nationals amid resource scarcity. Workers who had lost housing in the explosion and lacked resources for alternative accommodation were left without shelter in a city where accommodation costs were denominated in dollars and where destruction of residential stock had tightened the housing market further. Access to donor-funded cash transfer and material assistance programs was similarly constrained, and many required documentation of residency or Lebanese nationality for eligibility, criteria that automatically excluded the majority of undocumented MDWs and created significant barriers even for documented workers navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic processes in languages other than their own.

5.5. Migrant-Led Response: Egna Legna and the Politics of Mutual Aid

The organizational response to these overlapping crises has, until recently, been underexamined. In the absence of adequate state response, migrant-led organizations developed emergency mutual-aid operations within the first weeks of the crisis, providing material assistance, information, and solidarity to workers in acute distress. Their speed and scale challenge any account that casts MDWs purely as recipients of crisis impact.

Egna Legna Besidet, the Ethiopian migrant-led organization founded in Beirut in 2017 by Banchi Yimer, herself a former domestic worker, mounted a particularly significant response. From the imposition of lockdown in March 2020, Egna Legna launched an emergency response that included food distribution to abandoned workers gathered at the Ethiopian embassy, coordination with embassy officials on temporary shelter, provision of information in Amharic and other Ethiopian languages about workers' rights, and documentation of individual cases of abandonment and abuse for subsequent advocacy (African Feminism 2020; Shukr and Kazma 2023). The organization operated on minimal resources, relying on social-media fundraising and volunteer labor from members who were themselves navigating precarious conditions. Over its first several years of operation, it assisted in repatriating several hundred women to Ethiopia and, by its founder's account, fielded dozens of distress calls a day from across the country (Reasons to Be Cheerful 2022; Vice 2020).

The *Anti-Racism Movement's Migrant Community Center*s also served as critical coordination points, providing legal advice, psychosocial support, and material assistance, and connecting workers in distress to the broader civil society response. The organization's documented engagement with several thousand MDWs over the crisis period reflects a scale of community connection that positioned it as a first point of contact for many workers seeking assistance (Anti-Racism Movement 2024c).

The 2019–2020 crisis period is significant not only for the harm it produced but for what it revealed. Mass abandonment at embassies, wage losses amid currency collapse, and intensified household confinement were amplifications of existing patterns, not departures from them.

5.6. Civil Society Response and the Limits of Humanitarian Inclusion

The failures of the formal relief operation to adequately reach MDWs were partially, though not comprehensively, offset by civil society and migrant-led networks. The Anti-Racism Movement mobilized rapidly, deploying caseworkers to affected areas to document MDW needs, connecting workers with emergency legal assistance, and advocating publicly for the inclusion of MDWs in relief programming (Anti-Racism Movement 2024a; Shukr and Kazma 2023). Migrant community networks, building on the mutual-aid infrastructure developed during the financial crisis and pandemic, also provided emergency support. Workers connected to organizations such as Egna Legna or the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers were better positioned to access information and peer support than those without such connections, reinforcing the finding that organizational membership was itself a significant resilience resource for MDWs navigating crisis conditions.

Across the financial collapse, the pandemic, and the explosion, migrant-led organizations have supplied the most responsive support available despite minimal resources. The war is the most severe and sustained expression of that pattern. Workers abandoned by employers who fled without returning their passports gathered in Martyrs' Square with embassies unresponsive to their repatriation demands, and those who reached shelters in the north were evicted by the municipality of Tripoli on the stated grounds that they were not Lebanese (Al Bouery 2024). Migrant-led networks again supplied food, shelter, and medical assistance in the state's absence, but they could not return a passport or loosen the sponsorship tie that produced the abandonment.

6. LEFT BEHIND:
MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE 2024–2026 WAR

6.1. Escalation and the Pattern of Abandonment

From September 2024, the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, which had simmered at a contained level of intensity along Lebanon's southern border since October 2023, escalated dramatically into a sustained campaign of Israeli airstrikes across south Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the eastern Bekaa Valley, accompanied by a ground incursion into southern border areas. September 23, 2024 became the deadliest single day in Lebanon since the end of the civil war, with more than 550 people killed as Israeli strikes hit villages across the south and the Bekaa (Salhani 2024). The escalation produced the largest wave of internal displacement in Lebanon's recent history. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs put the displaced population at roughly one million people within weeks of the escalation's onset, up from about 102,000 earlier in the year (Salhani 2024).

A ceasefire agreement brokered by the United States and France took effect on November 27, 2024, built on the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and providing for a phased Israeli withdrawal alongside redeployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces. The ceasefire did not end the conflict's effects on migrant workers, nor, in the end, did it hold cleanly: violations were reported from the outset, and by early 2026 monitoring groups had recorded thousands of incidents and hundreds of further deaths inside Lebanon. The ceasefire held through February 2026 but broke down in early March 2026, with renewed Israeli airstrikes and a ground operation in southern Lebanon beginning 2–6 March, and a 10-day cessation of hostilities was announced on 10 April 2026 and subsequently extended; the security situation in Lebanon remains fragile and subject to rapid change (Al Jazeera 2026a).

Within this mass displacement, migrant domestic workers were subject to a pattern of abandonment that closely replicated, and in important respects intensified, the dynamics already documented during the financial crisis and the port explosion. As Lebanese families fled areas under bombardment, MDWs employed in those households were, in a substantial number of documented cases, left behind. Accounts collected by journalists and advocates describe employers instructing domestic workers to remain in the family home to guard property during the family's own displacement, leaving the worker alone in a building within an active or anticipated conflict zone, often without adequate food, means of communication, or a clear plan for their own evacuation (Salhani 2024; Walk Free 2024). IOM estimated in mid-2024, prior to the most intense phase of escalation, that some 176,500 migrants remained in Lebanon, concentrated in Beirut and the south, a figure researchers considered a substantial undercount (Salhani 2024). Workers from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, and Sierra Leone, among other sending countries, were among those reported stranded in or displaced from conflict-affected areas.

6.2. Exclusion from Emergency Shelter

The most institutionally explicit form of exclusion MDWs faced during the war concerned access to the emergency shelter system established by the Lebanese state and by humanitarian organizations. Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) opened shelters in schools for those displaced by Israeli bombardment but limited them, by policy, to displaced Lebanese citizens (Salhani 2024). As had occurred with less visibility after the Beirut explosion, the shelter system that emerged during the war prioritized Lebanese nationals in both formal policy and informal practice, leaving migrant domestic workers, including some displaced directly from conflict zones, without access to the basic protective infrastructure made available to the broader displaced population. In one widely reported case in Tripoli, a group of roughly seventy migrant workers, most of them Sierra Leonean along with several Bangladeshi nationals, were removed from a school shelter for not being Lebanese (Salhani 2024). As Salma Sakr of the Anti-Racism Movement told Al Jazeera:

> *There's no understanding that these women have rights. This situation goes back to kafala and how it operates, turning migrant domestic workers into an accessory or commodity. And when you don't need this commodity, you throw it away in the street. (Sakr, as quoted in Salhani 2024)*

The pattern documented in Tripoli was not isolated. Across multiple displacement-affected areas, migrant workers reported being turned away from shelters, denied access to distributed humanitarian supplies, and excluded from the registration systems that determined eligibility for assistance (Walk Free 2024; The New Humanitarian 2024). Workers who lacked valid residency documentation, a substantial share of the affected population given the patterns of undocumented status, faced an additional fear that approaching official emergency response infrastructure risked exposing them to arrest and deportation processing rather than humanitarian assistance. Walk Free (2024) identified this deterrent as significant even where formal exclusion policies were not explicitly in place. Lebanon's General Security continued, in a number of documented cases, to levy fines on workers with expired residency papers even as the war escalated around them (Salhani 2024).

6.3. Repatriation Failures and the Limits of Consular Protection

For MDWs seeking to leave Lebanon in response to the escalating conflict, the war exposed severe and, in many cases, insurmountable obstacles to repatriation. Commercial flight capacity out of Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport was severely constrained during periods of intense conflict, with several airlines suspending service and remaining flights subject to price increases that placed evacuation beyond the financial means of most MDWs, whose wages had already been eroded by the 2019–2021 currency collapse (Walk Free 2024).

The quality of consular support varied substantially across sending countries, reproducing the differential vulnerability. The Philippine embassy repatriated its nationals without charge while other governments required their nationals to cover their own evacuation costs, a burden many low-wage workers could not meet. Workers from countries served only by an honorary consulate, rather than a full embassy, had markedly less institutional support available to them (Salhani 2024). For undocumented workers, the requirement to obtain employer consent and a formal residency release before legal departure created a further obstacle, one that remained technically in force even amid a national security emergency. Workers whose employers had fled the country, become unreachable, or simply refused to cooperate were unable to satisfy the consent and exit-clearance requirements, and so could not complete a regular departure even where they had the financial means and willingness to do so. Walk Free's (2024) analysis of the war's impact situated these repatriation failures within a broader modern-slavery framework, arguing that displacement, loss of documentation, and desperate financial need substantially increased the population's vulnerability to re-trafficking and exploitative recruitment by actors offering false promises of evacuation or alternative employment.

6.4. Migrant Workers as First Responders

The response of Lebanon's migrant worker community during the 2024–2026 war provides the clearest and most extensively documented demonstration of the organizational capacity that has characterized MDW communities. Migrant-led networks and individual community leaders organized informal shelters, distributed food and water, and supported not only displaced migrant workers but, in numerous documented cases, displaced Lebanese and Syrian populations as well, extending solidarity across the national boundaries the formal humanitarian system had used to justify MDW exclusion (Al Jazeera 2026b; Waging Nonviolence 2026). Dara Foi'Elle of Migrant Workers' Action summarized the resulting policy gap for Al Jazeera in blunt terms:

A general amnesty is needed for all those undocumented workers who want to leave. (Foi'Elle, as quoted in Salhani 2024)

The case of Viany Nguemakoue Djouffa, a Cameroonian community organizer in Beirut, has been documented by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and illustrates this pattern. Djouffa arrived in Lebanon from Cameroon in 2015 within the kafala system and, drawing on her training as a tailor, built an independent sewing workshop and skills-training classes for migrant women outside the confines of domestic work. OHCHR's account describes her expanding this programming through the war period to reach a substantial number of displaced women of multiple nationalities, providing not only material assistance but psychosocial support and a structure of routine amid conditions of acute instability (OHCHR 2025).

Migrant Workers' Action, a network active throughout the war period, undertook systematic documentation of stranded and displaced migrant workers and coordinated emergency response efforts, publishing regular public statements connecting the immediate crisis to the longer organizing history (Migrant Workers' Action 2024, 2026a). By 2026, this pattern of self-organization had produced new institutional forms adapted to sustained conflict. Voices of the Unseen, an emergency response coalition formed around four community organizations (Tres Marias, REMAN, Syrian Eyes, and DoWAN), raised emergency funds and coordinated direct mutual aid across migrant, Syrian refugee, and Lebanese populations affected by the war. The coalition reactivated in March 2026 after the ceasefire's collapse, having already channeled direct community assistance during the 2024 escalation.

6.5. The War and the Entrenchment of Crisis Exclusion

The 2024–2026 war differs from the financial collapse, the pandemic, and the port explosion in that each of those was a severe but temporally bounded shock to which Lebanese institutions, however inadequately, eventually adapted. The conflict has recurred across more than eighteen months, so that the exclusions have become a recurring feature of crisis governance rather than a transient response to a single event (UNDP 2025). The war has also made that exclusion harder to read as incidental.

At the same time, the war has produced the most extensively documented evidence to date of migrant worker self-organization and cross-community solidarity (Al Bouery 2024; National Human Rights Commission 2026). That documentation has drawn attention from United Nations human rights mechanisms, among others, and has begun to challenge the framing of MDWs as passive recipients of crisis impact.

7. A HISTORY OF MIGRANT-LED ORGANIZATIONS IN LEBANON

7.1. Early Organizations: Welfare, Religion, and Informal Community (1980s–1990s)

The history of migrant-led organizing among domestic workers in Lebanon begins not in the 2010s, the period of intensified human rights advocacy with which it is most commonly associated, but in the mid-1980s. Shukr and Kazma (2023), in the first systematic historical account of this organizing, document the emergence of migrant-led welfare and community associations from the mid-1980s onward, beginning with the Kerala Welfare Association (1986) and extending through nationally specific organizations among Sri Lankan, Filipino, and other migrant communities. These associations, including the Afro-Asian Migrant Center's early safe house for women fleeing abusive employers, provided spaces for information-sharing, mutual support, and protection despite operating without formal legal recognition, a legal grey zone that was simultaneously a vulnerability and a form of protective camouflage.

7.2. Consolidation and Formalization (2000s–Early 2010s)

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the gradual formalization of migrant worker organizing into more durable structures, including the Filipino solidarity network Samaham Mangagawa (2000–2018) and the cross-national African United Communities in Lebanon (Shukr and Kazma 2023).

The most consequential organizational development of this period, both for its direct impact and for the infrastructure it later provided to the broader movement, was the founding of the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM). Its origins lie in a 2010 incident at a Beirut beach resort, where ARM's founding activists, working with migrant domestic workers, documented racial discrimination using hidden-camera footage that circulated widely and drew public attention to the normalization of racist exclusion in Lebanese public space. Operating initially as an informal collective, ARM opened its first Migrant Community Center in Beirut in 2011, later expanding the model to Saida and Jounieh in 2016; the Centers created free and secure physical gathering space for MDWs, directly addressing social isolation as an obstacle to organizing among live-in domestic workers. ARM formalized its NGO registration in 2012, becoming the first organization in Lebanon explicitly oriented toward anti-racist advocacy centered on MDWs (Beirut Today 2024; Shukr and Kazma 2023). By the organization's own reporting, several thousand MDWs have engaged with the MCC network, with more than 200 capacity-building workshops conducted and dozens of migrant-led grassroots initiatives directly supported through the Center's infrastructure (Anti-Racism Movement 2024c).

7.3. The 2015–2017 Push for Formal Recognition and Its Consequent Repression

The years 2015 through 2017 constitute the most significant and best-documented period of direct confrontation between the migrant worker movement and the Lebanese state's legal architecture of exclusion, marked by an unprecedented attempt to establish a formal trade union for domestic workers and by the state repression that attempt provoked. In January 2015, migrant domestic worker organizers, supported by Lebanese labor activists and international trade union federations, held the founding congress of the Domestic Workers' Union, a direct challenge to the prohibition on MDW unionization that follows from the exclusion of domestic workers from Lebanese labor law. Because domestic workers' exclusion from the Labour Law places them outside the framework governing trade union formation, and because the roles non-citizens may hold in founding and leading registered associations and unions are restricted under Lebanese law, the union's founders appointed a Lebanese citizen, Mariam al-Masri, as its first president, a strategy several subsequent

migrant-led organizations would also adopt to navigate the legal barriers to formal registration (Beirut Today 2024). Lebanon's Ministry of Labour declined to formally recognize the union, but its establishment was nonetheless widely covered internationally as a landmark moment and as among the earliest attempts by domestic workers in the region to establish formal trade union representation. The union drive also received independent academic treatment as it unfolded. Kobaissy (2015) analyzes the campaign as an attempt to "unionize without a union" and situates its achievements and limits within the intersecting power relations of class, gender, race, and nationality that structure MDW organizing more broadly.

The Lebanese state's response to this organizing effort was direct and punitive. On November 30, 2016, Sujana Rana, a Nepalese migrant worker and founding member of the Domestic Workers' Union, was detained by General Security at her employer's home, denied access to a lawyer, and questioned about her organizing activity. On December 10, 2016, she was deported to Nepal (Human Rights Watch 2016). A fellow union member, Roja Limbu, was detained around the same period, facing similar consequences for her visibility within the union's organizing structure (Frontline Defenders 2016; International Domestic Workers Federation 2016). These actions, undertaken by General Security under its broad mandate over migrant worker residency and removal, show plainly how the kafala system's legal architecture functions not only as an economic and social control mechanism but as a direct instrument of political repression against migrant worker organizers.

The repression directed at the Domestic Workers' Union did not halt the broader movement toward organizational consolidation, though it shaped the risk calculus of subsequent organizing. The Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon and other cross-community coalitions followed in 2016 and 2017 (Shukr and Kazma 2023), including Egna Legna Besidet, which would become a central actor in the emergency-response work of 2019 onward.

7.4. Organizing Under Compounding Crisis (2019–Present)

The period from 2019 onward, encompassing the financial collapse, the pandemic, the port explosion, and the war examined, has also been a period of sustained and, in some respects, accelerated organizational development. The Domestic Workers Advocacy Network, known as DoWAN, was founded in 2019 by a Sierra Leonean activist who had personally experienced employer abuse in Lebanon. They subsequently dedicated their organizing work to raising awareness among prospective migrants in Sierra Leone about the realities of the kafala system, extending the organization's advocacy into the recruitment process itself rather than confining it to the post-arrival period (Beirut Today 2024).

Several further organizations were established between 2020 and 2022, including the Kenyan Hope Community[3] and the Rhantnadip Migrant Society Center[4], extending a broader pattern: rather than contracting under crisis, the migrant worker movement in Lebanon expanded its organizational infrastructure even as material conditions for individual workers deteriorated (Shukr and Kazma 2023). Migrant Workers' Action emerged as a particularly significant actor during the war period, undertaking systematic documentation of stranded and displaced workers and coordinating emergency response. By 2026, the formation of Voices of the Unseen, the emergency coalition

3 The Kenyan Hope Community brought together Kenyan migrant workers advocating for changes in consular practices and the removal of staff accused of exploitation. It also worked with the 271-member WhatsApp group "Kenyan Community Group," which included members of the Kenyan Hope Community (Shukr and Kazma 2024)

4 The Rhathandip Migrant Society Center, established in 2021 by Sri Lankan migrant worker Hanna, brought together around 75 members, many of whom had previously belonged to the Sri Lankan Women's Association. The center focuses on mutual support, income-generating activities, and financial assistance for members returning to Sri Lanka (Shukr and Kazma 2024).

uniting REMAN, Tres Marias, Syrian Eyes, and DoWAN, represented a further evolution: a coalition structure designed to operate under sustained crisis and to extend solidarity across migrant and refugee populations that the formal Lebanese state and humanitarian apparatus had treated as separate, and separately excludable, categories.

7.5. Structural Obstacles and Organizational Adaptation

The history traced unfolds within constraints that have remained remarkably consistent across four decades even as specific organizational forms and political contexts have changed. Lebanese labor law's exclusion of domestic workers, combined with restrictions on the founding and leadership roles non-citizens may hold, has in practice closed off formal registration of MDW-led associations and trade unions. Every organization has navigated that restriction through some combination of informal operation, the appointment of Lebanese citizens to nominal leadership, or registration under legal categories, such as cultural or welfare associations, that do not trigger the restrictions applicable to labor organizing. The state's demonstrated capacity to deport or detain migrant worker organizers is a continuing threat that shapes the risk calculus of organizing even absent active repression at any given moment. The residential isolation of live-in domestic work adds a further logistical obstacle. Workers whose free time is limited to occasional days off face genuine practical constraints on collective participation (Shukr and Kazma 2023).

These obstacles have shaped the specific forms collective action takes, rather than preventing it. The strategy of appointing Lebanese citizens to nominal leadership, exemplified by the Domestic Workers' Union, is one adaptive response to the legal prohibition on migrant-led registration. ARM's Migrant Community Center model answers the logistical challenge of organizing residentially dispersed and socially isolated workers. The proliferation of nationally specific welfare associations across the 1980s and 1990s, evolving into the cross-national coalitions of the 2000s and the explicitly multi-community coalitions of the war period, reflects both the practical logistics of organizing across linguistic difference and the recognition that cross-national solidarity carries more political weight than fragmented, nationally bounded organizing. Four decades of adaptation under these constraints support a different frame than passive victimhood: sustained and creative political agency, exercised continuously under severe legal and material constraint.

Engin Isin's concept of "acts of citizenship" (Isin and Nielsen 2008) treats citizenship not as a status a state confers but as something enacted when people claim standing, press rights-claims, or act as though they belonged to a political community that formally excludes them, regardless of their legal status at the time. On this account, founding the Domestic Workers' Union while lacking the legal capacity to lead it, installing a Lebanese citizen as nominal president to route around that restriction, and organizing mutual aid and evacuation support across national and religious lines during the 2024–2026 war are each acts of citizenship. They are claims to political standing performed by people the Lebanese state defines as permanently outside it. This vocabulary does not compete with the class-struggle framing developed above, but it names the same organizing history from a different angle, concerned with who gets to act as a political subject rather than with the material terms being contested. Bridget Anderson's (2013) related concept of the "community of value," the boundary separating those a polity treats as legitimate members from those it does not, describes the same boundary from the state's side: the boundary MDW organizing tests continually, and the one Lebanon's shelter and associational-law policies continually reassert.

8. INTERLOCKING SYSTEMS: FEMINIST AND INTERSECTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

8.1. The Intersections of Gender, Race, and Migrant Status

The kafala system's legal architecture, the demographic composition of Lebanon's MDW population, the compounding crises of 2019–2026, and the organizational history of migrant-led resistance are each treated as a distinct dimension of analysis. These dimensions, however, cannot be adequately understood in isolation. The condition of MDWs in Lebanon is best characterized through a framework of intersectionality, understood not as the simple addition of distinct forms of disadvantage but as the qualitatively distinct forms of oppression produced where multiple systems of power operate simultaneously.

Applied to the Lebanese context, an intersectional analysis insists that the position of a migrant domestic worker cannot be explained by reference to their status as a woman, as a racialized non-Arab subject, as a member of the working class, or as a non-citizen, considered in isolation. Each dimension of their social position interacts with and transforms the others, producing a condition qualitatively distinct from what any single axis would predict. A Lebanese woman performing domestic labor and an Ethiopian man working in construction each face forms of disadvantage rooted in gender or migrant status, respectively. But neither faces the specific condition created at the intersection of gender, race, migrant status, and the kafala system's legal architecture that an Ethiopian woman employed as a domestic worker in Lebanon encounters (Yimer et al. 2025).

8.2. Gender: The Devaluation of Care and the Politics of the Household

The gendered dimension of MDW precarity operates at multiple, mutually reinforcing levels. At the most immediate level, domestic work is itself a deeply gendered category of labor, historically and globally associated with women's unpaid or underpaid labor within the household and consistently devalued, in both compensation and social status, relative to labor coded as masculine or as occurring within the formal public economy. The historical material shows that this gendering of domestic labor in Lebanon predates the kafala system and reflects a broader and more durable pattern in which work culturally coded as an extension of women's caregiving capacities is excluded from the categories of labor warranting legal protection and fair compensation.

The status of domestic work, combined with the fact that it takes place inside private homes, creates particular vulnerabilities to gender-based violence. The live-in arrangement places MDWs in conditions of sustained physical proximity to male employers and other male household members, conditions that research on the gender dimensions of violence against MDWs in Lebanon identifies as significantly elevating the risk of sexual violence and harassment. That risk is further compounded by the worker's economic and legal dependency on the household in which the violence occurs (Diab et al. 2023). The post-2019 economic crisis has been documented as correlating with increased rates of gender-based violence against MDWs, as economic stress within Lebanese households has, in numerous documented cases, been displaced onto the household's most legally and economically vulnerable members (Diab et al. 2023).

MDW precarity also operates at the level of state and societal failure to value care work as a category warranting public investment. The Lebanese state's persistent failure to develop public childcare, eldercare, or disability-care infrastructure reflects a broader pattern in which care work, gendered as women's responsibility whether performed within the family or outsourced to migrant domestic workers, is treated as a private household matter rather than a public policy concern. This pattern is not unique to Lebanon, but the kafala system is an unusually stark and legally codified instance of what feminist political economists term the global care chain in which unmet care needs in wealthier or more economically developed households are met through the labor migration of women from less developed contexts, often at significant cost to the care needs of the migrant workers' own families and communities of origin.

8.3. Race: Servitude and the Production of Racial Hierarchy

Building on Kassamali's (2021) analysis of the kafala system as a structure of racialized servitude, the racialization of MDW labour in Lebanon is produced through the interaction of gender, race, class, and legal status rather than any one axis independently.

The specific form of racialization experienced by MDWs in Lebanon is inseparable from the gendered nature of the labour they perform. The racial category reproduced through Lebanese social practices around the figure of the migrant domestic worker is not simply applied to migrant workers irrespective of occupation, but its meaning is produced through the association of particular racialized migrant groups with feminized domestic labour. A male migrant worker employed in construction or agriculture may experience distinct forms of racialized exclusion within the kafala system but is racialized through a different set of associations than a woman whose racialization is closely tied to their association with feminized domestic labour within the private household.

Kassamali's (2021) broader argument that the kafala system must be situated within the political economy of Lebanon's postwar neoliberalization rather than treated as a vestige of pre-existing social hierarchy also has a class dimension that intersects directly with race and gender. Class operates intersectionally, not simply through differences in household income but through the economic valuation assigned to racialized feminized labour.

The capacity of Lebanese households across a wide range of income levels to employ MDWs depends on a wage structure for domestic labor sustained precisely by the racialized devaluation of that labor. MDW wages, even before the real-term erosion, were set at levels reflecting not the market value of skilled care labor but the racially structured assumption that such labor, performed by racialized migrant women, warranted minimal compensation.

8.4. Legal Status: The Compounding Function of Documentation

The fourth axis of the intersectional framework, legal status, unlike gender, race, and class, is not a social identity but an institutional position that mediates how the other axes are experienced. Treating legal status as a fourth axis alongside the canonical categories of intersectional analysis extends the framework as originally developed rather than applying it in standard form; the extension is warranted here because documentation status, as the analysis below shows, is not merely a background condition but actively determines how gender- and race-based vulnerabilities are experienced and expressed. The transition from documented to undocumented status (through employer abandonment, expiration of a sponsorship relationship, or flight from an abusive household) triggers a qualitative escalation in vulnerability that Block et al.'s (2023) analysis of MDW immobilization characterizes as compounding rather than merely additive.

This documentation-based precarity sits atop a more categorical exclusion that intersectional analysis risks treating as just another background condition. Kafala status is, in principle, revisable: an employer can change, a permit can be renewed, a contract can be regularized. Citizenship, under Lebanese nationality law, is not revisable in the same way; naturalization proceeds only through a rare, discretionary presidential decree, not through any accrual of rights via years of residence or birth in the country, and no MDW population, however long settled, has a realistic path toward it. Linda Bosniak's (2006) account of "the alien" as citizenship's structural outside, and Noora Lori's (2019) study of Gulf kafala systems more specifically, describe this second, harder exclusion directly: sponsorship regimes of the kind Lebanon adapted from the Gulf hold populations in a condition of "permanent temporary" status that citizenship, by design, never resolves. Lebanon's

MDWs occupy a version of that same condition: their exclusion is not a gap awaiting closure through kafala reform alone but a structural feature of how Lebanese nationality law defines membership in the first place.

This compounding dynamic is itself gendered and racialized in how it works. The conditions that most frequently produce undocumented status for MDWs (flight from sexual or physical violence, employer abandonment during economic crisis, the death or emigration of an employer without proper processing of a residency release) are themselves shaped by the gendered and racialized vulnerabilities already examined. A worker who flees gender-based violence within their employer's household, for instance, immediately transforms their legal status as a direct consequence of the gendered violence they have experienced, illustrating that legal precarity is not an additional burden layered onto gendered violence, but a distinct form of vulnerability produced through the interaction of gender, legal status, race, and class.

8.5. The Lebanese State's Structural Role: Care Privatization as Policy Choice

Intersectionality shifts attention beyond interpersonal discrimination toward the institutional arrangements that organize care, labour, and citizenship. Migrant-led organizations, including the Anti-Racism Movement, have argued in their own advocacy materials that the state absolves itself of responsibility for basic public services partly through the exploitation of migrant workers as a source of cheap labor. That exploitation is legitimized through racist and sexist discourse across Lebanese society, and reproduced, as shown above, across the axes of gender, race, class, and legal status (Anti-Racism Movement n.d.).

An intersectional reading of the state's role reorients analysis of MDW precarity away from an exclusive focus on individual employer behavior, important as that behavior is to the lived experience of abuse, and toward the structural policy choices of the Lebanese state. The persistence of limited public investment in care infrastructure has enabled care needs to be met largely through the kafala system, reducing political pressure for broader public provision. That system displaces the costs of the deficit onto a population, racialized migrant women, systematically excluded from the political process and from the legal protections that might otherwise generate pressure for public investment in care.

8.6. Donor and Humanitarian Blind Spots

The intersectional dynamics extend beyond the relationship between MDWs, their employers, and the Lebanese state to encompass the international humanitarian and donor architecture engaged with Lebanon's compounding crises since 2019. Research on the intersecting oppressions and mental distress experienced by MDWs under the kafala system documents a pattern in which international donor agendas, shaped by their own institutional priorities and funding cycles, have systematically underserved the MDW population, with undocumented workers facing particular neglect given the documentation requirements that frequently govern eligibility for donor-funded assistance (Diab and Al Riachi 2026). This pattern extends the dynamics of the Beirut explosion relief operation and the war-period shelter exclusion into a broader critique. Despite its formal commitments to need-based and rights-based assistance, the international humanitarian system has consistently reproduced the documentation-based exclusions the kafala system itself generates, treating legal status as a proxy for eligibility in ways that disadvantage the most vulnerable segment of the MDW population.

The intersectional framework developed across this section provides the analytical foundation for the discussion of advocacy and policy reform, and for the theoretical analysis of global care chains and racialized labor regimes. Any policy intervention adequate to the condition of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon must address gender, race, class, and legal status simultaneously and as interacting systems, rather than treating any single dimension, legal status reform alone, for instance, as sufficient to address a condition produced at their intersection.

Taken together, these dimensions demonstrate that MDWs' precarity cannot be understood as the sum of separate inequalities. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of gender, race, class, and legal status across households, labour markets, state institutions, and humanitarian governance, producing forms of exclusion that none of these structures could generate independently.

9. DEMANDING REFORM:
ADVOCACY, POLICY INTERVENTION, AND INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

9.1. National-Level Advocacy: Casework, Hotlines, and Public Documentation

The most sustained and operationally intensive advocacy for reform of Lebanon's MDW regime has been conducted at the national level by Lebanese and migrant-led civil society organizations, operating within a political environment that has consistently resisted structural change while tolerating incremental procedural adjustment. The Anti-Racism Movement has anchored this advocacy landscape since 2012, combining direct service provision through its Migrant Community Centers with systematic legal casework, public communications, and engagement with Lebanese parliamentary and executive institutions. ARM's casework team of legal officers and social workers provides legal, psychological, and reproductive-health support to MDWs across the full range of crises, and its Racism Monitor reports constitute a documentary record of individual abuse cases that feeds directly into the human rights documentation produced by international bodies, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (Anti-Racism Movement 2024c).

KAFA, a Lebanese feminist organization whose mandate spans gender-based violence more broadly, operates a hotline offering legal, emotional, and medical advice and shelter referrals, alongside a dedicated line for migrant domestic workers. The organization also runs "Amara," a shelter for women who are victims of trafficking or forced domestic labor (KAFA n.d.). KAFA's engagement situates MDW advocacy explicitly within a feminist framework that recognizes the continuity between the gender-based violence MDWs experience and the gender-based violence KAFA addresses more broadly in Lebanese society, while acknowledging the specific legal and racial dimensions that make MDW vulnerability distinct.

A different model of advocacy is exemplified by This Is Lebanon, which documents individual cases of employer abuse through public, social-media-based naming of implicated employers and recruitment agencies, a strategy of public exposure that operates alongside, rather than in place of, the casework and legal-advocacy models of organizations such as ARM and KAFA. The Ministry of Labour has, since 2015, also run a hotline (1740) in cooperation with Caritas Lebanon and the International Labour Organization, providing a formal point of contact for complaints.

9.2. Recruitment Reform: The 2013 Code of Conduct and Its Limits

In June 2013, a Code of Conduct for recruitment agencies operating in Lebanon was developed through a multi-stakeholder process involving the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ministry of Labour. The Code established minimum standards for agency conduct, including prohibitions on passport confiscation, requirements for transparency in contract terms, and obligations to provide workers access to their embassy and to legal assistance in the event of disputes.

The Code's practical impact has been limited by the same enforcement deficit that characterizes the Standard Unified Contract. With Lebanon's licensed recruitment sector numbering in the hundreds of agencies and Ministry of Labour oversight capacity characteristically insufficient for systematic compliance monitoring, adherence to the Code's provisions has been variable at best. Human Rights Watch's (2022) assessment found that conditions its research documented, including widespread passport confiscation and routine non-disclosure of contract terms, reflected practices the Code explicitly prohibited but that continued with no meaningful regulatory consequence. It is a recurring pattern in Lebanese MDW policy reform: formal standards that represent genuine normative progress at the level of principle produce minimal change in material conditions, because the mechanisms for their enforcement are absent or inadequate.

9.3. The Standard Unified Contract Revision and the Limits of Administrative Reform

The September 2020 revision of the Standard Unified Contract was the most significant formal reform attempt of the post-2019 period, and its defeat within six weeks by a legal challenge from the recruitment agency syndicate illustrates how the kafala system's administrative character makes it resistant to incremental regulatory reform. Migrant-led organizations offered a more skeptical assessment even before the reform's legal fate was decided. Their view was that the fundamental problem was not the content of the employment contract, but the continued exclusion of domestic workers from the Labour Law itself, an assessment the Shura Council's ruling would soon bear out.

9.4. Sending-Country Leverage: Bans, Bilateral Agreements, and Their Contradictions

In the absence of adequate reform from within Lebanon, several sending countries have deployed their own leverage over labor migration flows to pressure improvement in MDW conditions. Ethiopia imposed a ban on sending domestic workers to Lebanon in 2008, citing documentation of widespread abuse; Nepal and the Philippines have at various points imposed similar restrictions, creating a fragmented bilateral landscape in which Lebanon's access to labor from different sending countries is conditioned, with varying enforcement, on its treatment of workers already in the country.

The practical effectiveness of these bans has been limited by several factors. Demand for domestic labor in Lebanon has proven sufficiently elastic that restrictions from one sending country have historically been accommodated through expanded recruitment from other countries less willing or able to impose restrictions, a substitution dynamic that disperses harm rather than eliminating it. The economic significance of remittance flows to sending countries also creates domestic political pressure against strict enforcement, since the families of migrant workers and the government agencies that benefit from remittance tax revenues have strong incentives to favor continued migration even amid documented abuse.

Irregular migration channels compound the problem, allowing workers to travel to Lebanon through third countries even when official recruitment is restricted, producing flows invisible to bilateral enforcement mechanisms and placing workers in conditions of vulnerability given their undocumented status upon arrival. The Philippines represents the most developed model of bilateral protection, yet even its relatively robust framework has not eliminated documented abuse of Filipina MDWs in Lebanon. Bilateral protection mechanisms, however well designed, operate within structural limits set by the kafala system's legal architecture, which no bilateral agreement can unilaterally modify.

9.5. International Human Rights Mechanisms and the Documentation Gap

The international human rights architecture has engaged extensively with Lebanon's MDW regime, amassing a substantial body of documentation that is an important resource for advocacy and scholarship but has not produced structural reform. Human Rights Watch has published reports across the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s documenting conditions of MDW employment and the judicial system's failure to provide redress. Amnesty International's 2019 report provided landmark documentation of conditions meeting international legal definitions of trafficking and slavery in numerous individual cases, and Walk Free's engagement with Lebanon's MDW regime

during the 2024 war extended this documentation into the most recent crisis period. The ILO and IOM have both maintained active programming in Lebanon on MDW conditions, with the ILO engaged with the FENASOL trade union federation in an effort to develop a domestic workers' union structure that could work within Lebanon's legal constraints by appointing Lebanese worker representatives, a strategy that parallels the approach adopted by the Domestic Workers' Union in 2015.

The consistent gap between the volume and quality of international documentation and the pace of structural reform in Lebanon reflects a fundamental feature of the international human rights architecture. Its mechanisms are oriented toward documentation, naming, and technical assistance, but lack direct coercive capacity over sovereign states that maintain legal frameworks violating international standards. Lebanon has ratified several international instruments relevant to MDW conditions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, but has not ratified ILO Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, despite having voted in favor of the Convention's adoption in 2011 (International Labour Organization n.d.). This contradiction, sustained across decades of documentation and advocacy, illustrates the political constraints within which all the reform efforts have operated.

10. THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORK

10.1. Global Care Chains and the Political Economy of Care Migration

The concept of the global care chain, developed most influentially by Arlie Hochschild and extended in the migration studies literature through Rhacel Salazar Parreñas's research on Filipina domestic workers, describes the transnational structures through which care labor is transferred from households and communities in the Global South to households in more economically developed contexts. These structures are mediated by systems of labor migration that render the transfer economically viable while externalizing its social and human costs onto sending communities (Parreñas 2001; Block et al. 2023). In the global care chain model, a woman from Ethiopia, the Philippines, or Sri Lanka leaves their own family, often including their own children, to provide care for the children and elderly relatives of a Lebanese household. The care deficit created by their departure in their community of origin is then addressed, if at all, through a further chain of informal care arrangements, often provided by other women in the community, reproducing at the local level the same pattern of gendered and undercompensated care labor that the international chain reflects at the global level.

Lebanon occupies a specific and analytically revealing position within these global care chains. Unlike the wealthier Gulf states with which the kafala system is most commonly associated in comparative labor migration scholarship, Lebanon is not a uniformly high-income economy. Its position as a receiving country for migrant domestic labor reflects not the absolute wealth of its population but a specific configuration of class inequality, care infrastructure deficit, and labor market structure that makes migrant domestic labor affordable to a significant proportion of Lebanese households across a relatively wide income range. The currency collapse exposed this configuration starkly. With MDW wages, denominated in Lebanese pounds, losing their dollar value, the real cost of employing a domestic worker fell to levels accessible even to households facing significant economic distress, while leaving workers in conditions of extreme poverty (ILO 2024).

The global care chain framework also brings out a dimension of MDW organizing that the predominantly national focus of organizational history risks obscuring. Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon maintain transnational social and political connections to their communities of origin that shape their organizing activity and their capacity for solidarity across national boundaries. DoWAN's extension of its advocacy into the recruitment process in Sierra Leone exemplifies this transnational dimension. An organization founded in Lebanon, reaching backward along the global care chain to intervene at the point where the chain begins, seeking to inform potential migrants about the conditions they will encounter before they make the irreversible commitment of migration.

10.2. Neoliberalism, Postwar Reconstruction, and the Kafala as Political Economy

Kassamali's (2021) foundational argument places the kafala system at the center of an account of Lebanon's postwar neoliberalization. This framing situates the kafala not as a cultural or administrative holdover, nor as a foreign import from the Gulf adopted without roots in Lebanese society, but as built into the specific model of economic development Lebanese political elites pursued during reconstruction. That model rested on privatization of previously public functions, withdrawal of the state from social provision, and concentration of economic activity in financial services, real estate, and consumption oriented toward a Lebanese professional and business class. Within it, the provision of care was treated as a private consumption good to be provided through market arrangements rather than a public good warranting state investment, and the kafala system was the labor market institution that made this privatization of care economically viable, supplying care labor at wages set by racial hierarchy and legal coercion rather than by the market value of the skills and labor provided.

This analysis has implications for how the reform agenda should be evaluated. If the kafala system is understood as an external imposition or an administrative legacy lacking roots in Lebanon's political economy, reform through regulatory amendment, revision of the Standard Unified Contract, a code of conduct for agencies, hotlines and complaint mechanisms, represents a plausible path toward meaningful change. If, on the other hand, the kafala system is understood, as Kassamali argues it should be, as a built-in feature of the economic model Lebanese political and business elites have invested in maintaining, then regulatory reform unaccompanied by structural change in the organization of Lebanon's care economy is likely to produce, at best, incremental improvement at the margins of an unchanged system. The record of reform attempts, and in particular the Shura Council's 2020 suspension of the revised Standard Unified Contract within six weeks of its adoption, is most parsimoniously explained by the latter analysis.

10.3. Toward a Structural Reform Agenda

Reform that operates at the level of contract terms, agency conduct codes, or hotline provision, without addressing the underlying legal exclusion of domestic workers from Lebanese labour law and without challenging the kafala system's residency architecture, is inadequate to the problem. The analysis demands a reform agenda organized around four interconnected imperatives.

The first imperative is legal inclusion and repeal of the Article 7 exemption that excludes domestic workers from the Lebanese Labour Law, extending to MDWs the full range of labor protections that Lebanese law provides to workers in other sectors, including minimum wage, regulated working hours, rest days, overtime entitlement, freedom of association, and the right to form and lead trade unions. The second is residency reform, decoupling MDW residency status from employment with a single employer-sponsor, replacing the kafala architecture with a residency framework tied to the worker rather than the employer, and enabling workers to change employment and seek legal redress without losing legal status.

The third is organizing rights by removing the legal barriers that currently prevent migrant domestic workers from founding and leading registered associations and trade unions, recognizing the organizing history as a form of civil and political participation that Lebanese law should protect rather than suppress. The fourth is care infrastructure investment, reorienting Lebanese social policy toward public investment in care provision, reducing the dependence on privatized migrant domestic labor that the kafala system sustains, and addressing at the level of political economy the care deficit the system currently resolves through the exploitation of racialized migrant women.

None of these imperatives is achievable in Lebanon's current political context without sustained pressure from a combination of forces including migrant-led organizations, Lebanese civil society, sending-country governments, and international labor and human rights bodies. Among these, the organizing tradition of the MDW communities themselves, developed continuously since the mid-1980s, represents the most consistent political pressure for structural change that Lebanon's MDW regime has faced.

CONCLUSION:
WHAT FOUR DECADES MAKE VISIBLE

This report has argued that the kafala system is a racially and economically structured regime of labor control built into Lebanon's postwar political economy; that Lebanon's crises since 2019 exposed and intensified vulnerabilities the system had already built in, rather than creating new ones; and that migrant domestic workers are active political subjects whose organizing amounts to class struggle under severe legal and social constraint.

These findings have implications that extend beyond the specific conditions of migrant domestic workers, into broader features of Lebanese political economy, racial order, and governance. The kafala system's persistence through four decades of documented abuse, repeated crisis, sustained advocacy, and significant international pressure is telling. It reads, on the evidence assembled here, less as a failure of state capacity to implement reform than as a durable feature of a political economy whose dominant interests have been served by the system's continuation, though institutional inertia and fragmented governance likely play some contributing role. Those who benefit from the current arrangement have had little incentive to organize for its removal, and that asymmetry of incentive is sufficient on its own to explain the system's durability without requiring a claim of design. The breadth of the households that benefit from the system and the narrowness of the interests organized to defend it are not the same thing. Households across the income distribution have a real stake in the availability of affordable domestic labor, but that stake is diffuse, and individually insufficient to generate the kind of collective political mobilization the recruitment agency syndicate was able to produce when the 2020 Standard Unified Contract revision threatened its more concentrated and direct economic interest. The persistence documented here owes less to a unified elite acting in concert than to this asymmetry between a broad, diffusely benefiting population and a narrow, organizationally capable one. The Lebanese state's failure to develop public care infrastructure, its exclusion of domestic workers from labor law, its administrative apparatus for controlling migrant worker residency and movement, and its judicial system's consistent failure to provide MDWs with meaningful legal redress are not isolated policy failures but mutually reinforcing components of a coherent, if unjust, set of arrangements.

The racial dimensions of Lebanese political life extend well beyond the MDW context in similar ways. This report reads the normalization of racial hierarchy within Lebanese households, through the racialized domestic labor arrangements the kafala enables, as socializing successive generations of Lebanese children into a racial common sense that represents non-Arab, non-Lebanese individuals as naturally suited to subordinate domestic roles. The political consequences of this socialization plausibly extend into Lebanon's public sphere, shaping the boundaries of civic inclusion well beyond the immediate question of domestic worker policy, a connection migrant-led organizations and the Anti-Racism Movement's founding insight in particular identified well before it became visible to a wider international audience during the crises of 2019–2026.

Lebanon's own nationality law already organizes citizenship around sect and gender rather than residence or birth: Lebanese women cannot confer nationality on their children or foreign spouses, and governments have repeatedly declined to change this, citing openly the risk that broader naturalization would shift the demographic balance among Lebanon's recognized sects (Human Rights Watch 2018; Joseph 2000; Mikdashi 2022). Kafala's exclusion of MDWs from citizenship does not import a foreign logic into an otherwise open polity. It extends, to a racialized population from outside the region, a boundary-drawing practice the Lebanese state already applies to its own citizens' families.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Chronology of Compounding Crises and Reform Attempts, 2019–2026

Date	Event
Oct. 2019	Mass protests and bank freezes mark the onset of Lebanon's financial collapse; the Lebanese pound begins its collapse against the US dollar.
Mar. 2020	National COVID-19 lockdown begins; live-in MDWs report loss of rest days and intensified household confinement.
2020 (throughout)	"Dumping" of abandoned MDWs at embassies accelerates; Egna Legna and the Anti-Racism Movement mount emergency mutual-aid response.
Aug. 4, 2020	Beirut port explosion kills at least 218 people; IOM assessments document widespread loss of employment and housing among migrant workers in the affected areas of Beirut.
Sep. 8, 2020	Ministry of Labour adopts a revised Standard Unified Contract, including the right to terminate employment without employer consent.
Sep. 21, 2020	Syndicate of the Owners of Recruitment Agencies files a legal challenge to the revised contract with the State Shura Council.
Oct. 22, 2020	Shura Council suspends the revised Standard Unified Contract.
2021	IOM's migrant vulnerability assessment finds half of respondents unemployed; no MDW-specific population count is published, against a pre-crisis range of 250,000–310,000.
Sep.–Nov. 2024	Israeli–Hezbollah conflict escalates sharply; roughly one million people are internally displaced; migrant workers are excluded from Lebanese-only emergency shelters, including in Tripoli.
Nov. 27, 2024	US- and France-brokered ceasefire takes effect, built on UN Security Council Resolution 1701.
2025	Ceasefire violations continue at scale even as the truce nominally holds; IOM's mid-2025 monitoring records an estimated 163,000 migrants nationally.
Mar. 2–6, 2026	Ceasefire collapses; Israeli airstrikes and a ground operation resume in southern Lebanon; Voices of the Unseen reactivates emergency fundraising.
Apr. 10, 2026	A 10-day cessation of hostilities is announced, later extended; the security situation remains fragile as of this writing.

Sources: Human Rights Watch 2020a, 2020b, 2022; Amnesty International 2020; IOM 2020a, 2021, 2025; Salhani 2024; Al Jazeera 2026a.

Appendix B. Glossary of Key Terms

Article 7. The provision of the Lebanese Labour Law that categorically exempts domestic workers from its protections, including minimum wage, working-hour limits, and the right to unionize.

General Security (Al-Amn al-Aam). Lebanon's internal security and immigration authority, responsible for processing MDW residency permits, work-permit transfers, and, in cases of undocumented status, detention and deportation.

Kafala. "Sponsorship." The administrative system, assembled through regulation rather than a single statute, that ties a migrant worker's legal residency and right to work in Lebanon to a single employer-sponsor.

Kafil. The individual employer-sponsor under the kafala system; legally responsible for a migrant worker's residency status in Lebanon.

Live-in / live-out. A live-in MDW resides in their employer's household; a live-out worker maintains independent accommodation. IOM's 2025 monitoring found the national migrant population roughly evenly split between the two arrangements.

MDW. Migrant domestic worker.

SUC (Standard Unified Contract). The model employment contract, first developed in 2009 and revised in 2020, that sets minimum terms for MDW employment in the absence of Labour Law coverage. The 2020 revision was adopted in September 2020 and suspended by Lebanon's State Shura Council six weeks later, before it took effect.

Srilankiyye. An Arabic term originally denoting Sri Lankan women that has, through everyday usage, become a generic and racialized descriptor applied to non-Arab migrant domestic workers regardless of national origin (Kassamali 2021).

ILO Convention 189. The International Labour Organization's 2011 Domestic Workers Convention, establishing global labor standards for domestic workers. Lebanon voted for its adoption but has not ratified it.

REFERENCES

African Feminism. 2020. "Abandoned in Lebanon: African Migrant Workers Survive on Grassroots Solidarity." September 24, 2020. *https://africanfeminism.com/abandoned-in-lebanon-african-migrant-workers-survive-on-grassroots-solidarity*.

Al Bouery, S. 2024. "Entangled in Crises: The Plight of Lebanon's Migrant Domestic Workers." *The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, American University of Beirut*, October 9, 2024. *https://asfariinstitute.org/2024/10/09/sbh-3/*

Al Jazeera. 2024. "'No Place to Go': As Israel Bombs Lebanon, African Migrants Feel Abandoned." October 5, 2024. *https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/10/5/no-place-to-go-as-israel-bombs-lebanon-african-migrants-feel-abandoned*

Al Jazeera. 2026a. "The Israel-Hezbollah Ceasefire Was Built to Fail." Opinion. March 11, 2026. *https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2026/3/11/the-israel-hezbollah-ceasefire-was-built-to-fail*

Al Jazeera. 2026b. "Food Is Unifying: How Lebanon's Migrants Are Feeding the War Displaced." April 15, 2026. *https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/4/15/food-is-unifying-how-lebanons-migrants-are-feeding-the-war-displaced*

Amnesty International. 2019a. "End Kafala: Justice for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon." April 24, 2019. *https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/04/lebanon-migrant-domestic-workers-their-house-is-our-prison/*

Amnesty International. 2019b. *"Their House Is My Prison": Exploitation of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon*. *https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/0022/2019/en/*

Amnesty International. 2020. "Lebanon: Blow to Migrant Domestic Worker Rights." Press release, October 30, 2020. *https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/10/lebanon-blow-to-migrant-domestic-worker-rights/*

Amnesty International. 2025. *Migrant Domestic Workers and Trafficking in Persons: Prevention, Rights Protection and Access to Justice*. Index No. IOR 40/9349/2025. February 2025. *https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/IOR4093492025ENGLISH.pdf*

Anderson, Bridget. 2013. *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Anti-Racism Movement. n.d. "Mission and Programmatic Statement." *https://armlebanon.org/about-us/*

Anti-Racism Movement. 2020. "The Impact of the Economic Crisis and Coronavirus Lockdown on Migrant Workers." April 26, 2020. *https://armlebanon.org/the-impact-of-the-economic-crisis-and-coronavirus-lockdown-on-migrant-workers/*

Anti-Racism Movement. 2024a. *Situation Brief and Forecasted Needs of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon*. January 17, 2024. *https://armlebanon.org/situation-brief-and-forecasted-needs-of-migrant-domestic-workers*

Anti-Racism Movement. 2024b. "More Incitement Against, and More Fees for Recruiting Migrant Workers." News Report: February 2024. March 21, 2024. *https://armlebanon.org/news-report-february-2024/*

Anti-Racism Movement. 2024c. *Our Struggles Are Forever Connected: Annual Report 2024*. *https://armlebanon.org/our-struggles-are-forever-connected-annual-report-2024/*

Anti-Slavery International. 2014. *Into the Unknown: Exploitation of Nepalese Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon*. By A. Guichon. https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/into_the_unknown_report.pdf

Beirut Today. 2024. "A History of Migrant Worker Organization in Lebanon: Report by ARM." February 1, 2024. https://beirut-today.com/2024/02/01/a-history-of-migrant-worker/

Block, Karen, Bina Fernandez, Tara McGee, Zahra Al-Barazi, and Deirdre Brennan. 2023. "Immobilisation of Migrant Domestic Worker Women and Their Children Born in Lebanon." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50 (8): 1923–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2245153

Bosniak, Linda. 2006. *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Diab, Jasmin Lilian, and Rawan Al Riachi. 2026. "Intersecting Oppressions and Mental Distress: Migrant Domestic Workers under the Kafala System in Lebanon." *Migration Studies* 14 (2): mnag020. https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnag020

Diab, Jasmin Lilian, Banchi Yimer, Tsion Birhanu, Amoin Kitoko, Adey Gidey, and Faustina Ankrah. 2023. "The Gender Dimensions of Sexual Violence against Migrant Domestic Workers in Post-2019 Lebanon." *Frontiers in Sociology* 7: 1091957. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.1091957

Front Line Defenders. 2016. "Lebanon: Detention and Threat of Deportation of Nepalese Domestic Workers and HRDs." December 2016. https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/detention-threat-deportation-nepalese-domestic-workers-and-hrds-0

Goethe-Institut. 2022. "Migration under the Kafala System: When Human Beings Become Commodities." *Ruya*. https://www.goethe.de/prj/ruy/en/dos/mig/21504593.html

Human Rights Watch. 2008. "Lebanon: Migrant Domestic Workers Dying Every Week." August 26, 2008. https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/08/26/lebanon-migrant-domestic-workers-dying-every-week

Human Rights Watch. 2016. "Lebanon Deports Domestic Worker Rights Organizer." December 13, 2016. https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/13/lebanon-deports-domestic-worker-rights-organizer

Human Rights Watch. 2018. "Lebanon: Discriminatory Nationality Law." October 3, 2018. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/03/lebanon-discriminatory-nationality-law

Human Rights Watch. 2020a. "Lebanon: Blow to Migrant Domestic Worker Rights." October 30, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/30/lebanon-blow-migrant-domestic-worker-rights

Human Rights Watch. 2020b. "Lebanon: Abolish Kafala (Sponsorship) System." July 27, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/27/lebanon-abolish-kafala-sponsorship-system

Human Rights Watch. 2022. "Lebanon's Abusive Kafala (Sponsorship) System." https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/04/lebanons-abusive-kafala-sponsorship-system

International Domestic Workers Federation. 2016. "Stop the Deportation of the Domestic Workers and Activists: Sujana and Rosa." https://idwfed.org/calls-to-action/mena-calls-to-action/stop-the-deportation-of-the-domestic-workers-activists-sujana-and-rosa/

International Labour Organization. n.d. "Ratifications of C189—Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)." *NORMLEX*. https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO::P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551460

International Labour Organization. 2020. ***Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Workers in Lebanon and What Employers Can Do about It***. ILO Regional Office for Arab States. April 6, 2020. *https://www.ilo.org/media/400916/download*

International Labour Organization. 2024. ***Providing Care through the Social and Solidarity Economy: Lebanon—An Assessment Summary***. June 2024. *https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Lebanon%20Brief%20Final.pdf*

International Organization for Migration. 2020a. ***Lebanon—Foreign Nationals Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Analysis: Report 2, Beirut***. Displacement Tracking Matrix. September 2020. *https://dtm.iom.int/node/9848*

International Organization for Migration. 2020b. "Well-Being and Security of Migrant Workers in Lebanon Deteriorate since Beirut Blast." September 2020. *https://www.iom.int/news/well-being-and-security-migrant-workers-lebanon-deteriorate-beirut-blast*

International Organization for Migration. 2021. "Economic Crisis, COVID-19 and Port Explosion Exacerbated Migrants' Vulnerability in Lebanon, New IOM Assessment Reveals." May 26, 2021. *https://mena.iom.int/news/economic-crisis-covid-19-and-port-explosion-exacerbated-migrants-vulnerability-lebanon-new-iom-assessment-reveals*

International Organization for Migration. 2024. ***Lebanon: Migrant Presence Monitoring (Round 4)***. Displacement Tracking Matrix. *https://dtm.iom.int/reports/lebanon-migrant-presence-monitoring-round-4*

International Organization for Migration. 2025. ***Migrant Presence Monitoring: Lebanon (June–July 2025 Round)***. August 2025. *https://dtm.iom.int/lebanon*

Isin, Engin F., and Greg M. Nielsen, eds. 2008. ***Acts of Citizenship***. London: Zed Books.

Joseph, Suad, ed. 2000. ***Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East***. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Jureidini, Ray. 2004. "Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon." In ***Gender and Migration in Arab States: The Case of Domestic Workers***, edited by Simel Esim and Monica Smith, 63–82. Beirut: International Labour Organization, Regional Office for Arab States. *https://www.ilo.org/media/314966/download*

Jureidini, Ray. 2009. "In the Shadows of Family Life: Toward a History of Domestic Service in Lebanon." ***Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*** 5 (3): 74–101. *https://doi.org/10.2979/MEW.2009.5.3.74*

Jureidini, Ray, and Nayla Moukarbel. 2004. "Female Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Case of 'Contract Slavery'?" ***Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*** 30 (4): 581–607. *https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183042000169947*8

KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation. n.d. "Support Center." *https://kafa.org.lb/en/node/92*

Kassamali, Sumayya. 2021. "The Kafala System as Racialized Servitude." In ***POMEPS Studies 44: Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East: A Transregional Approach***, 102–7. Project on Middle East Political Science. *https://pomeps.org/the-kafala-system-as-racialized-servitude*

Kelly, Annie, and Ruth Michaelson. 2024. "'Thrown Out Like Used Washing Machines': Lebanon's Migrant Workers Bear Brunt of Displacement Crisis." ***The Guardian***, October 11, 2024. *https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/oct/11/thrown-out-like-used-washing-machines-lebanons-migrant-workers-bear-brunt-of-displacement-crisis*

Kobaissy, Farah. 2015. *Organizing the Unorganized: Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon*. Cairo Papers in Social Science 34 (3). Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Lori, Noora. 2019. *Offshore Citizens: Permanent Temporary Status in the Gulf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Migrant Workers' Action. 2024. *Statement on the Displacement Crisis in Lebanon*. October 2024. https://mwaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Statement-on-the-displacement-crisis-in-Lebanon-1.pdf

Migrant Workers' Action. 2026a. "Recognising the Labour and Leadership of Migrant Communities amidst War." Labour Day 2026 Bulletin. May 1, 2026. https://mwaction.org/the-bulletin/labour-day-2026/

Migrant Workers' Action. 2026b. *Submission to the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Lebanon, 4th Cycle, 51st Session*. January 2026. https://mwaction.org/the-library/mwas-submission-to-upr-on-lebanon/

Mikdashi, Maya. 2022. *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

National Human Rights Commission of Lebanon. 2026. "Lebanon Sees Unprecedented Grassroots Mobilization as over 100 Initiatives Rally to Support the Displaced." March 22, 2026.

OCHA. 2024. *Flash Appeal: Lebanon, October–December 2024*. October 2024. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/lebanon/flash-appeal-lebanon-october-december-2024-october-2024

OHCHR. 2025. "A Domestic Worker's Journey to Becoming a Community Leader in Lebanon." April 2025. https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2025/04/domestic-workers-journey-becoming-community-leader-lebanon

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. 2001. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar, and Rachel Silvey. 2021. "The Governance of the Kafala System and the Punitive Control of Migrant Domestic Workers." *Population, Space and Place* 27 (5): e2487. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2487

Reasons to Be Cheerful. 2022. "Domestic Workers in Lebanon Are Making a Dramatic Escape." January 7, 2022. https://reasonstobecheerful.world/ethiopian-domestic-workers-lebanon-escape

Salhani, Justin. 2024. "No Place for Foreign Workers Being Displaced in Lebanon." *Al Jazeera*, October 4, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/10/4/no-place-for-foreign-workers-being-displaced-in-lebanon

Sewell, Abby. 2020. "A New Contract for Domestic Workers Has Been Temporarily Stopped from Going into Effect. Here's What's Going On." *L'Orient Today*, October 28, 2020. https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1238540/new-contract-for-migrant-domestic-workers-on-hold-pending-the-results-of-a-lawsuit-by-the-syndicate-of-the-owners-of-the-worker-recruitment-agencies.html

Shukr, Rayan, and Dounia Kazma. 2023. *Historicizing Migrant Domestic Workers' Community Organizing and Class Struggle in Lebanon*. Anti-Racism Movement and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/20875.pdf

The New Humanitarian. 2024. “Lebanon’s Migrant Workers Left Stranded and Homeless by Israeli Attacks.” September 26, 2024. *https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/09/26/lebanons-migrant-workers-left-stranded-homeless-israeli-attacks*

United Nations Development Programme. 2025. ***The Socioeconomic Impacts of the 2024 War on Lebanon***. UNDP.

Vice. 2020. “An Abusive System Left Ethiopian Domestic Workers Stranded in Lebanon for Years.” September 24, 2020. *https://www.vice.com/en/article/bv8qnq/an-abusive-system-left-ethiopian-domestic-workers-stranded-in-lebanon-for-years*

Waging Nonviolence. 2026. “Mutual Aid Is a Lifeline for the Million People Displaced by War in Lebanon.” April 2, 2026. *https://wagingnonviolence.org/2026/04/mutual-aid-lebanon-war/*

Walk Free. 2024. “Displacement of Migrant Workers in Lebanon Increases Risk of Modern Slavery.” Walk Free Foundation. *https://www.walkfree.org/news/2024/displacement-of-migrant-workers-in-lebanon-increases-risk-of-modern-slavery/*

Yimer, Banchi, Tsion Birhanu, Faustina Ankrah, Dawit Asfaw, Ola Taleb, and Jasmin Lilian Diab. 2025. “Access to Justice for Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers: Unveiling Legal, Structural, and Gendered Violence in Lebanon.” ***Frontiers in Sociology*** 9: 1486769. *https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1486769*



ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY & CITIZENSHIP
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

