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Domestic work in Lebanon post-2019: Reflections on Emerging Trends

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This document was authored by ARM, and published in collaboration with Asfari Institute.

ARM was launched in 2010 as a grassroots collective by Lebanese feminist activists in collaboration with women migrant domestic workers (MDWs). In 2012, ARM became a registered and staffed NGO, with the vision of a just society where all migrants enjoy decent living and working conditions. ARM's mission is to achieve social, economic, and gender justice for all migrant workers (MWs) and racialized groups (with a special focus on MDWs) in Lebanon. Our theory of change is rooted in working with women, MDWs, and other racialized groups to build a movement in Lebanon against the systems that exploit them.

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Acronyms

ARM	Anti-Racism Movement
DW	Domestic Worker
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GOL	Government of Lebanon
GSO	General Security Office
ILO	International Labor Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LBP	Lebanese Pounds
MDW	Migrant Domestic Worker
MOL	Ministry of Labor
MW	Migrant Worker
Non-MDW	Non-migrant domestic worker
SEDW	Self-employed Domestic Worker
SORAL	Syndicate of Owners of Recruitment Agencies in Lebanon
USD	United States Dollars

A Note on Terminology

Self-employed domestic workers (SEDWs)¹ are independent domestic workers who usually do not live in the same house as their employer and who work for several employers to make ends meet. They are commonly referred to as “freelancers” or “live-out” workers. We chose the term “self-employed” as the most accurate and autonomy-affirming term.

Non-migrant domestic workers (non-MDWs) are workers who happen to be residents of Lebanon and did not migrate here for the specific purpose of finding employment. They are either Lebanese nationals, or refugees and permanent residents of Lebanon from predominantly Arabic-speaking countries, including Palestine, Syria, and Iraq.

¹ This term was inspired by the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), an Indian trade union with a membership base of over 1.5 million (2018) poor, self-employed women workers from the informal economy across 16 states in India.

PREFACE

This report is the result of collective work and cumulative thinking that happened over the course of two years among staff of the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) and with members of the extremely diverse migrant communities in Lebanon, at a time when the country is witnessing an unprecedented decline from bad to worse.

The information presented here was primarily collected to inform an advocacy campaign to improve working conditions for SEDWs. The idea behind the campaign was to accompany the trend of self-employment among domestic workers which emerged organically, and to ensure that workers actualize the potential for self-advocacy and organizing in this new mode of employment.

We offer here our observations and preliminary conclusions to caution against future threats to domestic workers' rights, and to help identify opportunities for change.

This is an invitation to all practitioners in the interconnected fields of migrant rights, workers' rights, and women's rights, to reactivate our roles as listeners and exercise some flexibility to adapt our strategies and tactics to new realities.

Migrant workers (MWs) in Lebanon allegedly number 207,696 individuals today,¹ a decrease by almost half from the 400,000 estimates that pre-dated 2019. This sharp decrease is the direct result of a series of intertwined political, financial, and economic crises that culminated into the loss of value of the Lebanese pound (LBP). Lebanon is in a state of flux, and so are all of its markets. The domestic labor market is no exception.

How has the domestic labor market changed post-2019 and what future changes can we expect to see in the next few years? This analytical report aims to present the emerging trends in the domestic labor market, at the levels of policy (government), public discourse (government and media), and on the ground (workers, employers, and brokers).

At the policy level, the government failed to create an enabling environment for the growth of its productive economy, leading to mass unemployment and a trade deficit which caused the country to hemorrhage US dollars. Rather than implement systemic change through economic policies, the government reframed its systemic failure as the result of non-Lebanese workers occupying Lebanese jobs. The government then sought to drive out the migrant workforce and replace it with a new Lebanese workforce, with the promise of improved working conditions. The government backed these policies with the introduction and perpetuation of misleading narratives that scapegoat migrant workers for the shortage of US dollars in the country's reserves, as well as the rampant and increasing unemployment. In parallel, the media fueled the competition between Lebanese and migrant workers and called on Lebanese women to reclaim paid domestic work.

On the ground, domestic workers and their employers are favoring live-out independent domestic work over the previously pervasive live-in domestic work model. Recruitment agencies and cleaning companies are strategically situating themselves as intermediaries between self-employed domestic workers (SEDWs) and employers. Non-migrant domestic workers (Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian nationals), driven by necessity, are entering the domestic labor market, though in very limited numbers.

Contrary to migrant workers who need access to US dollars to sustain their families abroad, non-MDWs are content with being paid in LBP. As a result, their entry into the market, though timid, anchors the hourly wages of all domestic workers in the lower values. Self-employed domestic workers are setting their rates based on a number of variables which are resulting in highly diversified wages that range from 7,000 LBP to \$10 USD per hour (equivalent to 150,000 LBP at the time of input).

¹ International Organization for Migration, Migrant Presence Monitoring, Baseline Assessment – Round 1, August 2021, Lebanon https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MPM_Baseline_Report_R1.pdf

For the past three decades, Lebanon has been heavily reliant on MWs as the primary providers of highly valuable but severely undervalued labor, such as domestic work and care work. Without a social safety net which could offer residents affordable care services, people have long depended on live-in domestic workers, where a MW lives in her employer's house and provides services ranging from cleaning, to cooking to caring for children, elderly, and people with illness or disability, to pet care and other household services.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), over 400,000 MWs resided and worked in Lebanon prior to 2020 ²; 250,000 of those migrant workers were domestic workers. ³ DWs' lives, work, and residency in Lebanon are governed by the Kafala (sponsorship) system. Domestic work is explicitly excluded from the Labor Law, ⁴ which means that domestic workers are denied basic labor rights such as minimum wage, the right to form unions, and protection from abuse and exploitation, set working hours, holidays and sick leave, etc.

After the end of the Lebanese civil war (early 1990s), the domestic work industry was booming, as it generated large profits for different parties at the expense of DWs. Different parties, both in the public and private sectors, made big financial gains through the different fees they charged in this process, from recruitment agencies (both in Lebanon and in countries of origin), to the General

Security Office (GSO), the Ministry of Labor (MOL), public notaries, medical laboratories and insurance firms. The Kafala system generates more than US\$100million in expenditure annually. ⁵ The figure is likely much higher than this if we account for sponsors who charge money for "transferring" their sponsorship of MDW to another employer, and other actors who indirectly benefit from this context.

The collapse of the Lebanese economy, along with the pandemic, has negatively affected the job market for most people residing in Lebanon, causing a wave of unemployment and social and economic destitution. At least 350,000 private sector jobs were lost between October 2019 and June 2020. ⁶ Only 30% of Lebanese workers, 20% of Palestinian workers, and 12% of Syrian workers reported that their job security remained unaffected by the crisis. ⁷ The rest either lost their jobs or faced salary reductions.

The crisis had alarming effects on MWs in general. Hundreds of MWs were laid off, often in degrading ways such as their employers abandoning them in front of their embassies with no money (most had unpaid wages) nor a way back to their home countries.⁸ ARM has always received complaints of underpaid and unpaid wages prior to 2020. However, 2020 marked a significant increase in the number of MDW callers who mentioned nonpayment of wages, reaching 228 callers for that year while the number was 47 callers in

² "Well-Being and Security of Migrant Workers in Lebanon Deteriorate Since Beirut Blast"
<https://www.iom.int/news/well-being-and-security-migrant-workers-lebanon-deteriorate-beirut-blast>

³ "Hardships for Lebanon's Migrant Domestic Workers Rise"
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/14/hardships-lebanons-migrant-domestic-workers-rise>

⁴ Article 7 of the Labor Law of 23 September 1946.

⁵ The shady industry that exploit Lebanon's Kafala Workers <https://www.thinktriangle.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Cleaning-Up-The-Shady-Industries-That-Exploit-Lebanons-Kafala-Workers-1.pdf>

⁶ "Rapid Diagnostic Assessment of Employment Impacts under COVID19 in Lebanon"
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_754666.pdf

⁷ "Assessing the Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 Crises in Lebanon"
<https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116784/download/>

⁸ <https://armlebanon.org/content/prosecute-employers-who-abandon-domestic-workers-now>

2019.⁹ As such, the crises have exacerbated an already rampant practice. This was mostly due to business closures, households' inability to pay salaries, and explicit xenophobia expressed by the landlords towards migrant tenants. This triggered a wave of massive voluntary repatriation - or evacuation - of MWs with the media reporting 170,000 migrants leaving the country in 2020.¹⁰

According to the ILO, before the Lebanese economic crisis, women constituted 92.7% of workers involved in domestic work. 88.2% of them were non-Lebanese and 97.2% were informally employed.¹¹

With the depreciation of the Lebanese pound by more than 90%, the vast majority of households can no longer afford the wages of a live-in MDW, yet the need for care work remains high and entirely relegated to the private sphere of the household. Indeed, the significant gaps in social protection have left notable care gaps in households which most often are - and are expected to be - filled by women. Care work in Lebanon is not seen as the responsibility of the state, but rather as a natural occurrence within households at allegedly no cost. Lebanese women's upward social mobility came at the expense of migrant women whose provision of care work was equally undervalued and exploited to ensure the social reproduction of the Lebanese workforce.

The current number of migrant workers in Lebanon is estimated at around 207,696.¹² Given the decrease in the number of MDWs, and the projected increasing need for care workers, we can project two parallel trends that have already emerged and will continue to manifest on a larger scale: 1- the shift from household reliance on live-in domestic workers to their hiring of independent, self-employed domestic workers by the hour; and 2- an increased willingness to engage non-migrant domestic workers (non-MDWs), of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian origins.

The changes in the job market brought forward questions regarding how this will impact self-employed DWs, recruitment agencies, and cleaning companies. Thus, this practical research was conducted by the Anti Racism Movement in Lebanon to help us and our allies understand the emerging context and strategize accordingly by presenting a sample of the current practices of domestic work recruitment and wages at this moment in time, as the Lebanese economic crisis continues to intensify. These findings would feed into our advocacy for dignified domestic work for all.

⁹ "LEBANON CIVIL SOCIETY SUBMISSION TO THE 104TH SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION," Anti-Racism Movement, July 2021

<https://armlebanon.org/content/lebanon-civil-society-submission-104th-session-committee-elimination-racial-discrimination>

¹⁰ "Foreign Laborers leave Lebanon" <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/watch/chapter/57104/136664/foreign-laborers-leave-lebanon/en>

¹¹ "Rapid Diagnostic Assessment of Employment Impacts under COVID19 in Lebanon"

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_754666.pdf

¹² Migrant Presence Monitoring (MPM) Baseline assessment - Round 1 August 2021 Lebanon

<https://displacement.iom.int/reports/lebanon-baseline-assessment-round-1>

The 2019 crises have had a noticeable impact on domestic labor in Lebanon. Though the patterns emerging from these crises are still in flux, some trends can already be observed which can have a profound impact on the sector.

This report aims to answer the following questions: how has the market for domestic work changed in Lebanon since 2019? What trends can we observe in relation to public opinion towards domestic work, supply and demand, working conditions, and demographic shifts among the workers?

Data Collection

This paper is a compilation of data that the ARM advocacy team collected for the purpose of planning an advocacy campaign to raise the wages and improve the working conditions of SED'Ws. Our primary objective was to gather input from the different stakeholders that would inform our campaign strategy, objectives, and tactics. The decision to write up our observations and disseminate the findings in the form of a paper only followed our realization that this information is not yet accessible anywhere else. Most of the existing literature on MDWs in Lebanon is either outdated (pre-2019 crises) or descriptive rather than analytical. The writing exercise was only secondary to that of advocacy, which explains why our methodology is not an academic one. Our observations stem from our experience as advocates for migrant workers' rights and are very much grounded in the practical. In other words, we are less concerned with theory and more geared towards the useful and actionable.

Our research relied on data from five sources in order to provide different vantage points for analysis. We then triangulated all the information to expose emerging patterns in the domestic labor market and offered our own analysis and projections.

1. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and workshops with MDWs

ARM conducted five FGDs in April 2021 with a total of 75 self-employed MDWs from different countries, including Ethiopia, Cameroon, Togo, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Senegal, Benin, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Philippines and Sierra Leone. The focus groups were conducted in five languages according to the workers' preference (Arabic, Amharic, English, French, and Sinhala). In addition, ARM organized two weekend workshops in August and September 2021 with a total of 51 participants while ensuring a diverse representation of nationalities and providing simultaneous interpretation in Arabic, English and French.

Through our conversations with migrant workers, we sought to understand their current working conditions, the challenges they are facing, and the degree of uniformity or divergence of working conditions across the migrant communities. The FGDs and parts of the workshops posed the following questions to the participants:

- Since when have you been working as a freelance / independent / self-employed domestic worker?
- Why did you shift from live-in work to self-employment?
- How do you find work? How do new employers reach you?
- How much are you getting paid per hour?
- How many jobs do you have per week / month? Is it enough for you to live on?
- How did freelance work change after the crises?
 - Is it easier or harder for you to find work?
 - Are you getting paid more or less than before?

2. Survey with non-migrant domestic workers

ARM conducted 15 individual phone interviews with self-employed non-migrant DWs. "Non-migrant" here refers to people who reside in Lebanon as a result of factors unrelated to seeking job opportunities. In this context, "non-migrant" refers to people who have a Lebanese nationality, people born in Lebanon, and people

seeking asylum in Lebanon. Our sample included eight domestic workers of Syrian nationality, four of Lebanese nationality, two of Palestinian nationality and one of Sudanese nationality. Out of the eleven non-Lebanese who participated, five reported residing illegally in the country, three resided legally, and the rest did not respond. All the interviews were conducted between May and June 2021.

The phone interviews tackle self-employed non-migrant domestic workers residing and working in Lebanon to understand their current work conditions, expectations, and their perception of the market and bargaining power.

The questions were the following:

- Since when have you been working as a freelance / independent / self-employed domestic worker?
- How often do you work as a domestic worker? (Part time / full time / occasional...)
- What type of jobs do you specifically do?
- How much are you getting paid per hour?
- How many jobs do you have per week/month?
- What do you think would be a reasonable wage for someone in your position?
- How do you find work? / How do new employers reach you?
- What conditions would you ideally like to impose on your employer?
- What similarities and differences in work conditions do you think you have with migrant domestic workers?
- [If she was working as a DW before the crisis]
- Is it easier or harder to find jobs?
- Are you getting paid more or less than before?
- Did anything else change in your work conditions? If so, what?
[If she's not Lebanese]
- Do you have a valid residency document?
- Are you registered with the UNHCR as a refugee?

3. Survey with local cleaning companies

ARM conducted phone interviews with representatives from ten local cleaning companies. We used pseudonyms when contacting cleaning companies since many would not speak to us otherwise, potentially out of fear that their abusive labor practices would be exposed.

In addition to cleaning services, two of the companies offer cooking services, and three of them offer “deep

cleaning services”which includes cleaning furniture, moving furniture, and pest control. One company offers babysitting and elderly care in addition to cleaning and deep cleaning. All the interviews were conducted between May and June 2021.

The interview aimed to identify the most recurrent client demands, expectations, and willingness to pay for domestic work and other at-home care following the crisis.

The questions were the following:

- Since when have you been employing freelance domestic workers?
- What are the services you provide?
- From which nationalities are your workers? Has this shifted in the past couple of years?
- How do you find and reach out to workers?
- How do you find and reach out to clients?
- How much do your clients pay per hour?
- How much are your workers paid per hour?
- Do you pay workers daily / weekly / monthly?
- Do you pay or ensure your workers' transportation?
- Following the crisis, is it easier or harder to find clients?
- Following the crisis, is it easier or harder to find workers?
- Are the clients paying less or more than before?
- Do your clients show preference / different wages for any nationalities?

4. Media content related to domestic work

ARM compiled 20 online articles about domestic work posted on different online platforms, in English or Arabic, between December 2019 and July 2021. This online content complemented our research to provide insight into media and state narratives around domestic work following the crisis, and better understand the governmental response to emerging trends in the domestic labor market in order to foresee future challenges and opportunities.

5. Online job posts requesting domestic work

ARM compiled two samples of online advertisements by individuals and institutions looking to hire domestic workers. The first sample consists of 46 job advertisements posted between 27 May and 25 June 2021. The second sample consists of 40 job advertisements posted between 5 August and 5 September 2021. Both

samples were collected from OLX, a popular online platform where people offer services and goods for sale as individual sellers or request services and goods as buyers, and from “Liban Troc,” and another public Facebook group that advertises vacancies and services. Both samples include posts by cleaning companies, private institutions (restaurants, hotels, offices and private businesses) and individual employers.

From each job post, we extracted the proposed salary, working hours, type of job (cleaning, elderly care, babysitting, etc.), job location, and proposed benefits, if any (transportation, insurance, etc.). This online sample allowed us to assess the employers’ willingness to pay for domestic labor and care work, and the work conditions on offer, without risking any bias or intentional concealment which may result from interviewing employers directly.

Challenges and Limitations

1. Small Sample of non-MDWs

Finding a significant sample of non-migrant domestic workers proved difficult, despite our diversified outreach methods outlined below:

- An open call circulated on WhatsApp and posted on social media, seeking contacts through cleaning companies and organizations working with Syrian and Palestinian refugees;
- A call broadcast both on social media and within other NGOs and activists groups working on the ground on different labor or social issues, inviting workers to participate in the survey to help improve working conditions for domestic workers;
- Cold-calling cleaning companies in an attempt to reach domestic workers. Companies refused to share the contact of their workers, even after suggesting they take their consent. This makes us question the conditions the workers are subjected to, and raises questions about why their employers would refuse to let them talk to researchers;
- The most successful outreach method was that of word of mouth. Almost all the respondents were reached through a common acquaintance who put us in touch with them.

Some workers who received the announcement did not express interest in participating, which could suggest that they do not necessarily believe in the possibility of improving working conditions. Some workers expected to be paid or receive services for their participation. One worker expressed concerns regarding her employer knowing about her participation and holding it against her. Another expressed similar concerns regarding her husband.

The size of the sample of non-migrant domestic workers (15 participants) limits our ability to draw definitive conclusions concerning this particular cohort. Nevertheless, the information we gathered constitutes a good starting point and allows for a preliminary understanding of non-migrant domestic workers’ conditions and situation, and the effects of the changes in the job market on their wages, opportunities and day-to-day lives.

2. Discordant Data

The understanding of key terms such as “full-time” and “part-time” differs greatly among workers, employers, and companies, as well as within each of these categories. These terms do not refer to the same number of daily or weekly working hours across data sources. As a result, we could not always infer hourly rates from monthly wages and could not always present a comparative analysis across samples.

3. Fluctuation of the currency

Since the beginning of our research in May 2021, the value of the Lebanese pound has repeatedly fallen and risen by a significant margin. This means that the numbers we are presenting here will have already become obsolete by the time of publication. Our data is still valuable, however, as the significance of the figures does not only lie in their actual value but also in their relationship to one another.

Government Discourse

Scapegoating “Foreigners” for Rising Unemployment

The Government of Lebanon (GoL) systematically absolves itself from any responsibility for the exponential rise in unemployment among the Lebanese population, by blaming foreigners for the lack of job opportunities. With no real strategy to counter unemployment, Lebanese officials, municipalities, syndicates, and the media have often proposed taking back jobs from foreigners as one of the main solutions (the other being driving the Lebanese people out of the country).

This pattern is not new, and has been observed since the beginning of the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon. In 2013, an Al Jazeera poll showed that 80% of Lebanese nationals believed that Syrians were stealing their jobs.¹³

Since June 2019 when former minister of labor Camille Abousleiman announced his strategy to “combat illegal foreign workers”, the government discourse on unemployment became systematically coupled with the need to curb the illegal employment of migrant workers and refugees. MOL’s 2019 strategy clearly states that “illegal labour leaves many negative fallouts on the social and economic security for the Lebanese citizen such as criminal activities, as well as sending money outside Lebanon in addition to severe unemployment among the Lebanese youth.”¹⁴ Abousleiman’s strategy relied on a nationwide crackdown targeting foreign workers and the businesses employing them.

The direct link between foreign workers and unemployment was propagated by the media and politicians alike, and gradually started targeting all MWs, a narrative previously targeted towards Syrians and Palestinians exclusively. At the beginning of 2020, former minister of Labor Camille Abousleiman considered that one of the biggest accomplishments during his mandate was the plan for “regularization of foreign workers” in Lebanon, stating that it succeeded in creating thousands of job opportunities for Lebanese people by replacing foreigners.¹⁵

In January 2020, former minister of labor Lamia Douaihy openly stated that “It’s difficult to create job opportunities in this economy” and admitted the lack of a comprehensive government plan to address the unemployment crisis.¹⁶ Instead she suggested campaigning to encourage Lebanese to take “low-skilled” jobs they would not usually work in, in order to replace MWs stating that “Priority must be given to the Lebanese”.¹⁷

Scapegoating Foreigners for the Dollar Shortage

With the start of the freefall of the Lebanese Lira, government officials and media outlets resorted to blaming migrants for causing the country’s shortage in US dollars by sending money to their home countries. Politicians and journalists used fearmongering figures when referring to these remittances, without citing any methodology or source: figures like 400 million USD¹⁸, 1 billion USD¹⁹, 4 billion USD²⁰, and “three quarters of our money”²¹ became widespread in the media.

¹³ “Syrians accused of stealing Lebanese jobs” <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/8/12/syrians-accused-of-stealing-lebanese-jobs>

¹⁴ Action against Illegal Foreign Employment on the Lebanese Territory”, MOL, June 2019

¹⁵ <https://www.arabwindow.net/lebanon/news174406.html>

¹⁶ “Minister of Labor urges unemployed: take low-skill jobs” <https://bit.ly/2Us9NVm>

¹⁷ “Minister of Labor urges unemployed: take low-skill jobs”

<https://bit.ly/2Us9NVm>

¹⁸ <https://bit.ly/2ViulKV>

¹⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/11/lebanons-economic-crisis-and-its-domestic-workers>

²⁰ <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/433942/>

²¹ <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-52699317>

Member of parliament Gebran Bassil accused MWs of sending 3 to 4 billion USD in remittances to their countries of origin every year, while former minister of labor Camille Abousleiman cited a figure of 2 billion USD. Nuwar Mawlawi, the wife of former prime minister Hassan Diab, claimed that “three quarters of our money is being sent abroad”.

The only publicly available estimate which followed an actual methodology was the one prepared by Information International. The researcher Mohammed Chamseddine estimated that there are 400,000 MWs in Lebanon, of which 247,000 are domestic workers whom he deemed “unnecessary” - and who were allegedly responsible for sending 660 million USD abroad annually.²² Yet the methodology was flawed as it did not account for the pervasive wage theft from which MDWs suffered, nor the underpayment of wages that has drastically reduced MDWs’ ability to buy USD and transfer it abroad.

Despite the evident fabrication of the numbers, the media kept reporting on these remittances throughout the crisis as one of the central contributors to the country’s financial collapse. These numbers were then used to encourage Lebanese workers to play their part in avoiding this dollar drainage by replacing the migrant workers in the positions that they occupy.

Government Policy Towards MWs

Reduce the Number of Migrants in the Country

The systematic scapegoating of MWs was accompanied by calls for policies to remedy the negative effects of the migrant workforce on the country’s economy. Among others, Gebran Bassil, proposed a tax on sponsors of

DWs, with the flawed objective of reducing the number of MDWs in Lebanon: \$ 50 USD per month for the first domestic worker sponsored, \$ 100 USD for the second and \$ 150 for the third.²³ Similarly, Information International researcher Mohammed Chamseddine suggested that the government should impose a tax of \$10,000 annually when recruiting any domestic worker, which will lead to a reduction in their number by half.²⁴

Although such arbitrary proposals never materialized, the MOL and the GSO did enact a number of policies that resulted in the reduction of the number of migrant workers in the country. These policies may have well coincided with the desire of many MWs to escape the deteriorating conditions in Lebanon. However, the government’s motive, as evidenced by the accompanying discourse, was to vacate job positions for Lebanese workers rather than grant migrant workers their wish to leave.

On the one hand, in December 2019, the MOL announced that in light of the high unemployment among the Lebanese, the MOL will not approve applications for the recruitment of foreign workers, except in urgent cases.²⁵ This resulted in a dramatic decrease of 74% in these figures from 43,825 work permits issued in 2019 to 11,453 permits issued in 2020.²⁶

On the other hand, the GSO facilitated the voluntary repatriation of 170,000 migrant workers²⁷ by expediting its exit clearance process and granting amnesty to undocumented workers. In January 2020, the General Security Office (GSO) reduced penalty fees from 300,000 LBP per year overstayed to a flat rate of 300,000 LBP, regardless of the number of years since the expiration of the worker’s residency permit. Furthermore, though they did not publicize this, in practice, the GSO granted

²² <https://www.almarkazia.com/ar/news/show/186620/400-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B5%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D8%B3%D9%86>

²³ <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/433942/>

²⁴ <https://www.almarkazia.com/ar/news/show/186620/400-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B5%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D8%B3%D9%86>

²⁵ https://www.mtv.com.lb/News/%D9%85%D9%80%D9%80%D8%AD%D9%80%D9%80%D9%84%D9%80%D9%80%D9%8A%D9%80%D9%80%D8%A7%D8%AA/993852/%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84_%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%91%D8%AF_%D9%81%D9%85%D9%91%D9%86_%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%84_%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%9F

<https://www.labor.gov.lb/Temp/Files/0ecedc36-849c-4bea-902c-8e3c3104a14b.pdf>

https://monthlymagazine.com/ar-article-desc_4991_

²⁶ جدول مقارنة اجازات العمل للأجانب 2019-2020

²⁷ 170 ألف عاملة وعامل أجانب غادروا لبنان

full exemptions from fees to every person whose name was submitted by a consulate or embassy for voluntary return to their country of origin. This included people from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, Sri Lanka, Gambia, and others. The GSO also granted exit clearance to domestic workers reported as “runaways” by their employers. This was an exceptional measure as normally domestic workers who broke their contracts prior to February 2021 would be investigated before leaving the country.

These unofficial and exceptional policies are all the more significant when one considers the amount of revenue from fines foregone by the GSO by implementing them. This indicates that the government’s perceived benefits from reducing the number of MWs in the country far outweighed the losses incurred in the short term.

Replace “Foreigners” with Lebanese

In parallel to reducing the number of MWs in the country, the MOL pushed for employing Lebanese workers in jobs previously occupied by migrant workers. In December 2019, the MOL called on institutions and companies to “assume their national responsibility and rely on the Lebanese labor force to the maximum extent possible.”²⁸

In July 2020, the then minister of labor Lamia Douaihy called on companies to employ Lebanese workers instead of MWs and talked about initiatives taken by the ministry to create job opportunities for Lebanese workers by replacing migrants through, for instance, learning to cook Asian dishes²⁹. In reality, the employment prospects for Asian cuisine chefs in a crumbling economy with a struggling restaurant industry is very limited. Municipalities and private companies, such as Ramco and City Blue, heeded MOL’s call to replace migrant labor with Lebanese labor and encouraged Lebanese workers to apply for positions in their institutions.³⁰

Prior to 2020, these public statements and initiatives to replace migrant workers with Lebanese workers explicitly excluded domestic workers. This started to shift very noticeably in 2020 with the worsening of the crisis. In May 2020, Nuwar Mawlawi, the wife of former prime minister Hassan Diab, publicly encouraged employers to fire all MDWs and employ Lebanese to avoid additional losses of USD reserves in the country.

Despite the deliberate policy to vacate certain positions for the Lebanese workforce, Lebanese workers did not flock towards these vacancies as expected. The president of SORAL considered that Lebanese workers entering the domestic labor market can not be seen as a generalized trend, and confirms that most employers would prefer foreign workers who come from different cultural backgrounds and therefore can better maintain the privacy and secrets of their households.³¹ According to companies like Ramco, very few Lebanese people effectively applied for these positions and fewer still remained in the positions for longer than a month. The media reported that around two thirds of the Lebanese who had applied for these jobs ended up quitting.³² The reasons cited included the tiring nature of the job, long working hours, low salaries, and social stigma.

Statements made by public figures confirm that working conditions in these occupations are sub-standard and need to be improved to protect Lebanese workers. When Mawlawi called on Lebanese women to become DWs, she promised Lebanese workers better working conditions stating that “domestic work for Lebanese won’t be like working under kafala”.³³ Former minister of the displaced, Ghada Chreim Ata, advocated for the regularization of domestic work for Lebanese women, stating that this would include social security, limited working hours, and an office that maintains the rights and duties as in any other job³⁴; rights that were never enjoyed by MDWs due to the exclusion of domestic work from the Labor Law. Similarly, former minister of labor

²⁸ “وزارة العمل تتشدد... فمَن يشمل قرارها؟”
<https://bit.ly/3hjv1Oj>

²⁹ وزيرة العمل تتحدث عن الرواتب.. هذا ما قالته عن الحد الأدنى للأجور”
<https://bit.ly/2UvlpGk>

³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GhobeiryLB/posts/313499556722606>

³¹ “رئيس نقابة أصحاب مكاتب الاستقدام: إقبال بعض اللبنانيات على العمل المنزلي ليس “ظاهرة” قابلة للتعميم”
<https://bit.ly/3hSKXGc>

³² “عقال النظافة اللبنانيون: «بدنا وقت لتعود»”
<https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/305221>

³³ “نوار المولوي: جدل واسع حول دعوة زوجة رئيس الوزراء اللبنانيات للخدمة في المنازل”
<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-52699317>

³⁴ Tweet <https://bit.ly/3Ax3qkj>

Camille Abousleiman admitted that these jobs need to be dignified in order for Lebanese workers to take them on.³⁵ Former minister of labor Lamia Douaihy also repeatedly declared her intention to include domestic work in the Labor Law, specifically to provide protection for Lebanese women who might have to become domestic workers themselves in light of the crises.

These statements unveil the harsh reality of blatant racism. While MDWs have been campaigning for years to improve their working conditions to no avail, the mere prospect of Lebanese workers potentially occupying these newly vacated positions suddenly makes them deserving of government attention and protection. These attitudes also echo and reinforce the Lebanese perception of MWs as a disposable and replaceable workforce, existing in the country solely to fill the labor gaps where needed.

Media Discourse

Depoliticizing Labor

Media coverage supported and reinforced the government's agenda to replace MWs with Lebanese workers. Many outlets flagged the change in the job market and the gap created between the supply and the demand. The changes include closure of recruitment agencies, increased demand for Lebanese workers in industrial sectors to replace migrants who left, and Lebanese women "filling the gaps" as self-employed DWs.³⁶ Others suggested replacing what used to be cheap labor offered by MDWs, with that of Syrians.³⁷

Despite some awareness among public officials that working conditions are at the root of the Lebanese workers' reluctance to take on "low-skilled jobs", most media coverage fails to portray the issue as a labor rights issue. Only one article addressed the exploitative working conditions as the cause for Lebanese workers

to avoid these jobs. They suggested reforms such as amending the Labor Law and strengthening the mechanisms of accountability to avoid exploitation.³⁸

The other articles mainly cite two reasons for the reluctance of Lebanese women to take on domestic work: social stigma and the archetype of the Lebanese worker portrayed as spoiled, lazy, and unserious. Most articles blame Lebanese nationals for being lazy and spoiled because they're unwilling to take on "low-skilled jobs." An article stated that "the country's financial crisis turned out to be a blessing in disguise for some, an opportunity to "change the mentality" and reform the Lebanese labor market."³⁹ That same article considered that "deep-rooted cultural and social stigmas surround domestic work" and considered the hourly wage of 10,000 LBP, (0.8 cents at the time the article was written) to be a "reasonable" wage.

Some took a different direction and praised the adaptability of Lebanese workers, going as far as covering stories of university graduates taking on domestic work (for lack of better options) and framing them as a good example to stress that there is no shame in domestic work. One article title reads "Lebanese workers take on domestic work and outperform migrants"⁴⁰ without any basis for comparison. The intention here is to destigmatize domestic work but the actual outcome is placing the blame on Lebanese women who refuse domestic work, rather than placing the blame on the government for failing to protect domestic workers.

This pervasive rhetoric becomes, in practice, a call to widen the net of exploitation, rather than eliminate it. When journalists recognized the difficult working conditions for domestic work, they suggested replacing what used to be cheap care labor from Africa and Asia by that of Syrian workers. An article considered that Syrian workers will remain the only breather for Lebanese families who need assistance with care work.

³⁵ "No one cares": Lebanon's financial crisis and domestic workers" <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/11/lebanons-economic-crisis-and-its-domestic-workers>

³⁶ "Migrant workers leave en masse, changing life for Lebanese" <https://bit.ly/3Axy6lv>

³⁷ "العاملات الأجنبية يهجرن لبنان: هل بدأ عهد العاملات السوريات؟" <https://bit.ly/3wpdkRz>

³⁸ "عاملات المنازل: لبنانيات محلّ الأجنبيات... والاستغلال مستمر" <https://al-akhbar.com/Community/310009>

³⁹ "Migrant workers leave en masse, changing life for Lebanese" <https://bit.ly/3Axy6lv>

⁴⁰ "لبنانيات يعملن في الخدمة المنزلية ويتفوقن على الأجنبيات" <https://bit.ly/3hCrw4p>

Rather than calling for improved working conditions and protection mechanisms for domestic workers of all nationalities, their suggestion is to transfer the bad working conditions from one marginalized group to another. This raises the concerns about replicating the exploitation that live-in MDWs were subjected to under the Kafala system onto workers from other marginalized groups.⁴¹

Pervasive Sexism

Nuwar Mawlawi's invitation to Lebanese women to become DWs sparked controversy. While some argued that the statement of Mawlawi empowers Lebanese women by giving them financial stability, others accused her of setting back women's rights. Ghada Eid, the secretary of opposition political party "Sabaa", attacked the suggestion, stating that Lebanese mothers need migrant domestic work to be available to allow them to pursue careers outside the household, dismissing the career or working conditions of these migrants.

Both views further prove that MDWs are often excluded from the rights discourse and are not always seen as women worthy of rights. Rather, they are considered as an intermediary that takes charge of the household, so that other women, Lebanese women in this case, are able to pursue better work opportunities and greater financial freedoms. In this view, domestic work is a last resort for struggling women rather than a dignified job or a valid choice, which puts it in direct opposition with women's rights. They also disregarded the other obstacles which make these jobs unattractive and only practiced out of despair.⁴²

The same stigma that is used against MDWs is perpetuated and extended to Lebanese workers as well. A representative from a recruitment agency that employs Lebanese DWs admitted exclusively hiring married women because they are "less of a hassle" than women without husbands. This attitude mirrors the misogynistic belief that MDWs would get their employers into trouble if they were able to love freely, or have a dating life, or a sexual life. Although not illegal, having a sexual partner is customarily prohibited for live-in MDWs and "Live-in women migrant domestic workers who get pregnant during their contract period are often forced to terminate their employment and leave Lebanon. If they stay, they are often pushed into irregularity, which can result in living without legal residency or protection."⁴³ In this instance, instead of counting on the employer to monitor their worker's personal life, employers of Lebanese DWs would count on husbands to exert the same control over their wives' lives and sexuality.

⁴¹ محمد زبيب يقرأ نظام الكفالة في ظل الانهيار: أخصى تعميم ممارسة استغلال الأجنبيات على المقيمين
<https://bit.ly/3hDwf67>

⁴² لبنانيات يكسرن الحاجز النفسي للعمل خادمت في البيوت"
<https://bit.ly/3wf3lJe>

⁴³ <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2021/06/migrant-workers-rights-are-womens-rights-june16-2021-final2.pdf?la=en&vs=1249>

Demand for Live-out Domestic Work on the Rise

With the freefall of the local currency between 2019 and 2021, the majority of Lebanese households were no longer able to pay the salaries of live-in domestic workers, which previously ranged between 100 USD and 500 USD per month.⁴⁴ This resulted in mass dismissals of live-in domestic workers in May and June 2020, as Lebanese employers had increasingly limited access to US dollars.

Yet domestic workers remain indispensable for most Lebanese households, given the complete absence of public or subsidized care services such as nurseries and at-home care for people who require assistance in their daily lives. Therefore, the need and demand for domestic work has not decreased. In fact, the need for at-home care may well have increased in the past two years, given the increasing difficulty of finding hospital beds when needed, as well as the exorbitant prices charged at the hospitals. Interestingly, the state openly recognizes the indispensability of at-home care. In fact, in its plans to support the poorest households through a ration card, the government set a number of criteria for eligibility to the program which excluded any household that employs a domestic worker, except where the worker is assisting an elderly person or a person with a disability or illness.⁴⁵

This persistent demand for domestic workers resulted in a noticeable change in the market. The drastic shift in the employers' ability to pay led to a shift from demand for live-in domestic work to demand for live-out domestic work (although a minority of people with means continue to employ live-in domestic workers). Our research confirms that the demand remains high.

Out of 46 online advertisements requesting caretakers and domestic workers, 25 were posted by individuals requesting an hourly worker for a private household.

In parallel, the continuation of new recruitments of live-in domestic workers also unveils the persistence of the need for domestic workers in private households. Though the number of newly recruited domestic workers who entered the country decreased considerably from 2018 to 2020, new recruitments did not stop completely. In fact, in fact 18,214 new work permits were given to MDW in the first nine months of 2021. This is also a reflection of the inequality within the Lebanese population, as the majority of residents suffer the dire consequences of the crises, while a select few remain completely shielded from their impact.⁴⁶

Overlap between Recruitment Agencies and Cleaning Companies

The decrease in the demand for live-in domestic workers resulted in the bankruptcy of hundreds of recruitment agencies. Recruitment agencies are the primary brokers and protectors of the kafala system. They imposed themselves as the only legal intermediaries between workers and employers and systematically opposed any policy that would decrease their power or threaten the system that they profit from. The circumstantial closure of these private offices makes the end of kafala a more achievable goal.

However, our research revealed a concerning overlap between cleaning companies and recruitment agencies. In fact, many companies that advertise their services as cleaning companies turned out to be in fact recruitment agencies. This overlap is significant for two reasons:

⁴⁴ ILO report

⁴⁵ <https://www.nidaalwatan.com/article/56905-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%85%D9%86-55-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-82-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A6%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AB%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3>

⁴⁶ https://monthlymagazine.com/ar-article-desc_5093_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B9-%D9%83%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1

Firstly, the legal status and obligations of these two types of companies are different and may have an impact on the legal mechanisms through which they can be held accountable. For example, MOL decision 168 of 2015 concerns recruitment agencies that are registered as such at MOL and does not include cleaning companies. This decision governs the practices of recruitment agencies, such as placing a cap on the number of MDWs that each agency can bring into Lebanon per year (capped at 300 MDWs per year as per Article 13). Secondly, this overlap indicates that recruitment agencies are adjusting to the changes in the domestic labor market and reinventing themselves. Rather than going bankrupt and exiting the domestic work business, they are attempting to find a new role for themselves as brokers for live-out domestic work, after they have effectively done that for years for live-in domestic work.

In addition, two cleaning companies we interviewed mentioned that they relied on bankrupt recruitment agencies to put them in touch with any unemployed domestic workers that were left under their responsibility. By transferring any remaining workers to cleaning companies, the recruitment agencies would be offloading this responsibility onto the cleaning companies. This raises serious concerns regarding the conditions of these transfers and the possibility of forced labor.

Cleaning Companies as New Intermediaries

With the market shifting towards live-out workers, cleaning companies may become the new primary brokers for domestic work in the country. Several MDWs who shifted from live-in work to live-out work after 2019 mentioned that they relied primarily on cleaning companies to find jobs. This is because, contrary to self-employed MDWs who have been working independently for years prior to 2019, the newly independent workers do not have a well-established network of employers. This reality forces cleaning companies into the mediating role between live-out worker and employer similar to the role of recruitment agencies in the case of live-in workers.

The presence of this intermediary between worker and employer threatens the workers' access to a fair wage. Predictably, most of the cleaning companies we interviewed were reluctant to give us the prices they charge their clients, and how much they pay the workers. This could be partly due to the variation of the prices and wages as a result of the instability of the local

currency. Another explanation is that they did not want to reveal the discrepancy between the price paid by the client and the wage earned by the worker.

Nationality Preferences

Most companies and individual employers still rely heavily on the labor of MDWs to ensure the continuity of their services. Several of the cleaning companies representatives that we interviewed noted that Lebanese workers are still a minority in the field, although their number has increased after the crisis. This suggests that the entry of Lebanese women to the domestic work sector is not yet a trend that can be generalized, contrary to what is often reported in the media. The difficulties we faced in reaching Lebanese domestic workers for the purpose of this study also confirms this finding.

When asked about the nationality of their employees, six of the ten cleaning companies we interviewed reported hiring Lebanese and migrant workers. One mentioned hiring migrants, Lebanese and Syrian workers. Two companies reported hiring migrants only, while another reported hiring Syrians and Lebanese workers only. Out of the ten companies, only two accepted Syrian workers.

When asked about the preferences of their clients with regards to the workers' nationalities, two companies confirmed that their clients prefer migrant workers, while one of them also noted that this trend is decreasing. Preference for migrant workers over non-migrants may be due to the fact that they are in a more vulnerable position, which compromises their bargaining power and their ability to defy exploitation. In other words, MDWs are perceived to be more likely to put up with conditions that other workers would not accept. Another factor might be related to the cultural aspect as many employers believe that having a worker from a different culture may protect their privacy. In their view, a migrant worker is less likely to share their secrets and threaten their privacy and reputation.

Only one out of ten companies reported that some clients request Lebanese workers specifically. Two companies reported that sometimes they get clients who refuse to hire Syrian workers but would accept any other nationality. The latter is the only nationality to be blatantly denied work according to our survey, which suggests that the current economic crisis might be fueling another wave of xenophobia towards Syrians.

Three companies said that their clients do not prefer any particular nationality over the others. One of these companies stressed that clients would usually prioritize the cheapest option available, regardless of the nationality.

In parallel, our analysis of online job advertisements shows that most advertisers did not specify the nationality of the worker they sought. Two of the advertisements even stated explicitly that the worker's nationality does not matter. The few individual online advertisers who did specify the nationality of the worker were as follows: six posts sought Lebanese workers exclusively, one sought Syrian workers exclusively, and two sought either Syrian or Lebanese workers. As for companies advertising online, only one out of six cleaning companies specified Lebanese and Syrian workers exclusively. This adds up to a total of ten posts which specify a nationality preference, out of a total of 46 online advertisements (22%).

Non-Migrant Domestic Workers

Despite our multiple outreach tactics, we only managed to interview a total of 15 non-migrant domestic workers (Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, and Sudanese). The majority of the non-migrant workers we surveyed (10 out of 15) have been doing domestic work for more than five years, some of them more than ten years. Only three out of the fifteen respondents started this work in the past two years as a direct result of the ongoing 2019 crisis which, again, calls into question this exaggerated "trend of Lebanese domestic workers" reported in the media.

To many non-migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, domestic work is an emergency plan and not a long-term job option. All of the respondents associated their jobs with negative connotations and felt the need to provide justifications for pursuing such jobs. In fact, many Lebanese domestic workers refused to talk to us for that reason. Many of the people who have been doing paid domestic work for several years mentioned that they did it intermittently, and only when their financial situation necessitated it. All workers mentioned that economic hardships or their family circumstances forced them into it. Some workers expressed the disapproval of their families or spouses towards paid domestic work. Some of them mentioned that they were only willing to work for specific families that they know well and would respect them.

Working conditions in the new market

Multiplicity of Tasks

Domestic workers in Lebanon are known to fulfil all the care needs of their employers, including cleaning, cooking, babysitting, caring for those who need daily company or assistance (the elderly, people with disabilities, people who are ill, etc.), pet care, grocery shopping, etc. Our conversations with MDWs revealed a common perception that employers openly favor non-MDWs over MDWs. They give them tasks that do not require as much physical effort as those entrusted to MDWs, and tend to request one type of task from non-MDWs, as opposed to the multiplicity of tasks expected from MDWs. The employers' attitude reveals a deep-rooted racism and denigration of black bodies seen as inherently built for heavy-lifting and rough labor.

One positive aspect of switching from live-in work to hourly work is that it forces employers to prioritize and specify the exact tasks required, due to the imposed time limit. This may open up the possibility to refuse certain tasks, or negotiate different rates for different types of jobs. The cleaning companies we interviewed already make a distinction between different types of jobs, labelled as: cleaning, deep cleaning, babysitting, etc. This suggests that there is already an understanding in the market of the different types of labor that go into the catch-all term "domestic work." In that light, one could argue that the conditions of freelance work seem to be more understanding of a worker's physical labor than in live-in domestic work, where these distinctions are expected to be completed by the workers, but are not accounted for in the labor contract.

Working Hours

Working hours vary greatly among self-employed domestic workers. The number of hours they work per week depends on the number of employers they are able to reach, the hourly wages that they are able to negotiate, and many circumstantial factors related to the instability of working in Lebanon at this time (including availability of public transportation, COVID-related lockdowns, etc.)

There are three modes of employment observed among self-employed migrant and non-migrant domestic workers:

Full-time employment refers to the agreement between the worker and one employer to provide services five or six days a week, between three and nine hours per day. In these cases, the worker has one main employer but could also take extra shifts with other employers in her remaining time. Most workers in such agreements live outside the employer's household. They are paid on a monthly basis, at a predetermined rate that does not vary unless renegotiated periodically with the employer. In some rare cases, the workers agree to live at the employer's house, while having the freedom to work for other employers. One such worker of Syrian nationality reported that her employer gives her a room in the house in exchange for her labor, and does not provide any financial income. Full-time employment provides stability for the worker but puts her at high risk of loss of income (or shelter, in exceptional cases) should her primary employer dismiss her for any reason.

Part-time employment refers to the agreement between the worker and one or several employers to provide services at regular pre-scheduled intervals. Payment is made on a monthly basis and the worker lives outside her employer's house. The majority of migrant and non-migrant workers we spoke to fit under this mode of employment.

Occasional employment refers to providing services to employers on a needs basis and getting paid by the hour. This mode of employment is the most precarious. For MDWs, it is usually a temporary situation until they build up their network of employers through building trust and getting referrals. For non-migrant workers, occasional domestic labor provides an income in times of need.

Full-time and part-time employment can also refer to informal and oral contracts agreed to with cleaning companies. In these cases, the company pays the worker on a monthly basis and extracts a profit from the client's payment. One of the workers we spoke to reported being approached by a company which pays the employees 1,000,000 LBP per month for a full-time job, while charging the customer 1,500,000 LBP per month. This means that the company is making a high

profit of 500,000 LBP per worker per month. This mode of employment provides job security but prevents the worker from receiving the full amount that a client is willing to pay for her services.

Benefits

In the absence of any formal contracts, job benefits are generally lacking. In some cases, workers manage to negotiate an additional sum for transportation to be paid by the employer: out of 25 workshop participants in September 2021, six MDWs reported that they receive a sum for transportation in addition to their wages. The sum varied among these workers from 15,000 LBP to 30,000 LBP per shift. In addition, nine out of ten of the surveyed cleaning companies provide transportation for the workers in a company car or van. The remaining company includes financial compensation for transportation in the worker's monthly salary. None of the companies or employers provide any other benefit, such as healthcare or even financial compensation for work-related injuries.

When asked about the benefits that they would like to receive, MDWs responded with a long list of necessities that are completely overlooked by employers:

- Transportation fees that increase in proportion to the increase in transportation fares;
- Payment for overtime labor;
- Payment of a predetermined cancellation fee when the employer cancels an appointment;
- Offering food and water on the job;
- Paid break time at regular intervals;
- Setting a higher rate for night shifts than for day shifts;
- Setting a higher rate for more demanding tasks / compensating different types of tasks differently (for example, a higher rate for babysitting than for cleaning);
- Contribution towards the payment of their residency and work permits renewal fees;
- When a uniform is mandatory, the employer should provide it or pay for it;
- When the shift ends late in the evening or at night, pay for a private taxi or provide transportation to the worker to ensure her safety;
- Periodic renegotiation of the salary to account for the relentless increase in the cost of living.

Hourly Wages

The wages of self-employed domestic workers vary greatly, depending on a number of factors detailed in the next section. The most notable difference is the gap between the hourly wages of non-migrant domestic workers and those of MDWs, the latter being higher, on average. Between May and July 2021, the hourly wages

for non-migrant domestic workers ranged between 7,000 LBP per hour and 15,000 LBP. For the same period, the hourly wages of MDWs ranged between 10,000 LBP and 35,000 LBP per hour.

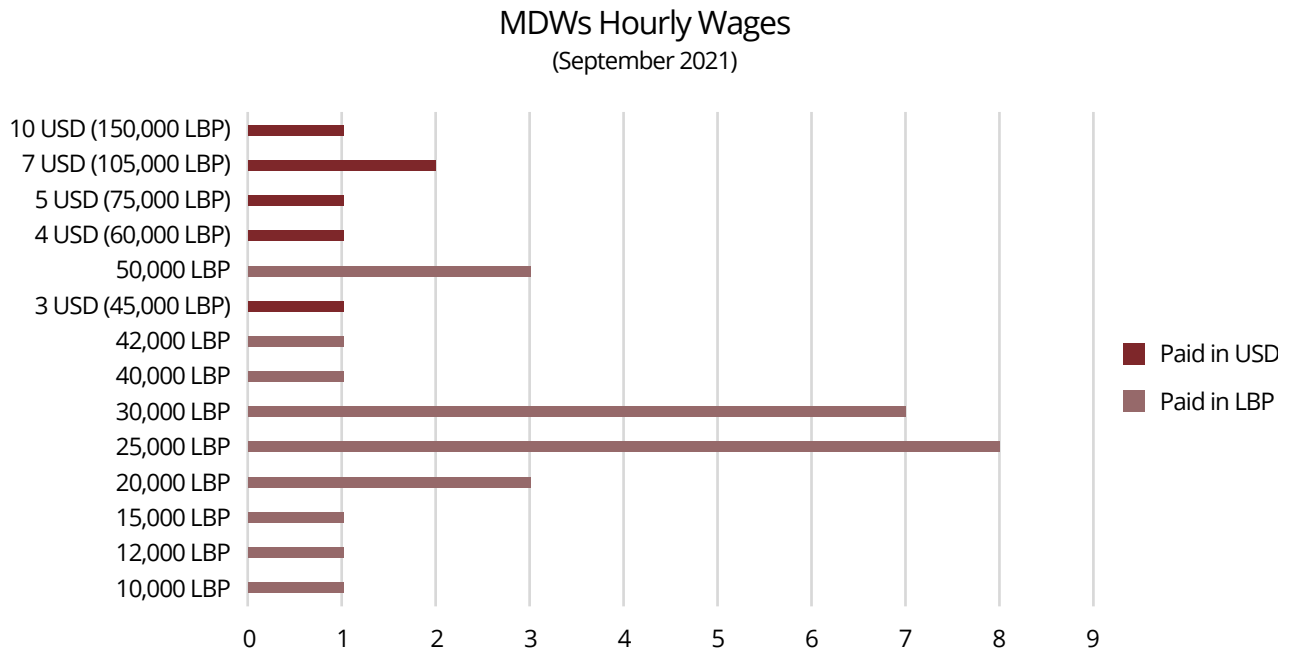
		Hourly Wages in LBP ⁴⁷ (occasional jobs)		
		Minimum	Maximum	Weighted Average
May - Jul 2021	Wages of MDWs	10,000	35,000	(Not available)
	Wages of non-migrant DWs	7,000	15,000	12,000
	Wages advertised online by individual employers	20,000	40,000	25,000
Aug - Sep 2021	Wages of MDWs	10,000	50,000	28,500
	Wages advertised online by individual employers	20,000	50,000	32,500

Our FGDs and workshops with self-employed MDWs also revealed a great variance in wages among MDWs themselves, with a minimum equal to 10,000 LBP per hour and a maximum of 10 USD per hour (equivalent to 150,000 LBP per hour at the time of input). Interestingly, workers from the same nationality seemed to be charging similar rates. For example, in May 2021,

we observed a cluster of workers from Madagascar charging around 15,000 LBP per hour, while in the same period, workers from Cameroon charged around 35,000 LBP per hour. As explained by the workers, this is due to the access of each community to the same or a similar pool of employers, and the variance in socio-economic status across different pools of employers.

⁴⁷ Some MDW reported getting paid in USD, up to 10 USD per hour. These were excluded from the calculations, as they represent a minority of MDW with specific factors (longer stay in Lebanon/with same employer, non-Lebanese employer, good connections...), yet skew the number given the high exchange rate. Their exclusion was done in the goal of having a more representative number of the actual wages received by the majority of SEDW.

The graph below represents the distribution of wages among participants in a workshop held in September 2021, at a time when the US dollar rate was 15,000 LBP for the dollar.



Interestingly, the hourly rates advertised online by individual employers are, on average, higher than the rates asked for by many of the workers, both migrant and non-migrant. If we consider these advertised rates as an indicator of employers' willingness to pay for domestic labor, we can observe that there is room for workers to increase the rates that they ask for.

Between May and September 2021, the hourly rates offered online by individual employers have doubled. The salary for these jobs varied between 14,500 LBP per hour and 30,000 LBP per hour with an average of around 21,000 LBP per hour. In May, all salaries were advertised in Lebanese Lira. In September, only one of the ten part-time jobs advertised online offered a salary in US dollars, which amounts to \$1 USD per hour (equivalent to 19,000 LBP on the black market rate on the day the job was posted).

Monthly Wages

At first glance, the monthly wages of MDWs are also considerably higher than those of non-migrant DWs. However, given the high variability in the total working hours per month, the data available does not provide any real basis for comparison. The table below aims to provide information on the willingness of employers to pay DWs and should not be construed as a comparative table.

		Monthly Wages in LBP (full-time jobs)		
		Minimum	Maximum	Weighted Average
May - Jul 2021	Wages of non-migrant DWs	1,200,000	4,200,000	2,700,000
	Wages advertised online by individuals	1,000,000	1,500,000	1,230,000
	Wages advertised online by companies such as restaurants, hotels, etc.	600,000	2,500,000	1,360,000
	Rate charged to the client by cleaning companies	1,100,000	1,500,000	1,300,000
Aug - Sep 2021	Wages advertised online by individuals	800,000	5,000,000	2,000,000
	Wages advertised online by companies such as restaurants, hotels, etc.	1,000,000	2,200,000	1,600,000

Between May and September 2021, the monthly rates offered online by individual employers increased by 62%. The salary for a full-time job suggested by private employers ranges between 800,000 LBP and 5,000,000 LBP with an average of 2,000,000 LBP per month. The number of hours required vary greatly between posts. Only one online job posting for a full-time job offered a salary in USD. The rate is \$150 USD (equivalent to 2,850,000 LBP on the day the job was posted).

As for the cleaning companies we interviewed, four companies refused to disclose their employees' wages; four reported paying their workers in dollars, with wages varying between \$200 and \$350 USD; two companies reported paying between 1,000,000 and 1,200,000 LBP per worker per month. One of these pointed out that the monthly sum may reach 3,000,000 LBP when direct client tips to workers are included. This indicates that the payment of living wages relies on the "kindness" of employers rather than any real mechanisms of protection.

LBP vs. USD

The majority of SEDWs reported that their wages are paid in LBP. This applies to those working with individual employers, private institutions (restaurants, hotels, businesses, etc.), as well as cleaning companies. The few cases where employers continued to pay in USD

were all among MDWs. Non-MDWs do not negotiate for payment in USD. The main reason for this discrepancy is the necessity for MDWs to transfer money to their families abroad whereas non-MDWs are generally in Lebanon with their families and do not carry this added expense.

Interestingly, four cleaning companies reported paying their workers in dollars despite the crisis, with wages varying between \$200 and \$350 USD. This seems highly unlikely and contradicts the input received from the workers, as well as the data we collected from online job advertisements made by cleaning companies. Assuming that these reported figures are accurate, however, one explanation could be that longer-term employees in a company might still profit from wages in USD, while new recruits are paid in LBP. As for online job advertisements, only one out of 40 posts advertised a \$150 USD monthly wage (which amounted to 2,850,000 LBP as per the black market rate on the day the job was posted).

Explanation of the difference in wages

Our conversations with workers revealed a number of factors which come into play when deciding on a wage. Some of these factors relate to the worker and her personal circumstances. Others relate to the employers and the general context in which they operate.

Factors related to the worker:

Living expenses: the key factor influencing workers' decisions about their wages is evidently their living expenses. The sum of these expenses should, in theory, indicate the bare minimum income which the worker should raise every month. In practice, however, several workers fall short and

resort to cutting necessities at the expense of their physical and mental health. Unpaid rent also puts them under a significant threat of eviction. During one of our workshops with MDWs, we conducted an exercise to calculate the monthly expenses necessary for survival and noticed a high variability, which partly explains the variability in wages.

Expenses in LBP	Minimum	Maximum	Average
Rent	300,000	1,000,000	540,000
Food (including baby food)	300,000	2,000,000	860,000
Groceries other than food	100,000	500,000	380,000
Drinking water	50,000	500,000	198,000
Non-drinking water	0	400,000	88,000
Electricity	20,000	50,000	35,000
Generator	300,000	1,000,000	585,000
Telephone +internet	42,000	110,000	81,000
Medical expenses	0	300,000	205,000
Education/nursery	100,000	1,400,000	660,000
Total	2,177,000	3,220,000	

Number of dependents: another key factor is the number of dependents for each worker, both in Lebanon and in their country of origin. Dependents in Lebanon have a direct effect on the worker's living expenses, and dependents abroad carry an even more considerable financial weight as they necessitate the transfer of money in USD.

Documentation status: In some cases, the worker's documentation status influenced their decision about their wage. This is due to two reasons, the first is that the yearly renewal of these documents is costly, which means that documented workers have more fees to account for while setting their salary, and tend to consider it fair to ask for higher wages. The second reason is possibly the preference of some employers who might opt to employ workers who are legally residing in the country. It is important to note that even

when a MDW has legal residency and work permits, she would still be breaking her residency terms the moment she works for someone other than her original sponsor.

Type of job: the type of labor required by the employer can also influence the rate, as cleaning, babysitting, and caring for the elderly or the sick, require different skills and a different level of effort. In some cases, employers value some forms of care work more than others, and are therefore willing to pay more for the service.

Fear of unemployment: although all workers agree that the rates they charge significantly undervalue their labor and are often insufficient to cover their living expenses, the perceived scarcity of job opportunities and their fear of unemployment severely hinder their willingness and ability to demand higher wages.

Factors related to the employer or context:

Employer's ability to pay: Most workers charge a fixed rate for their labor, regardless of their employer. In some instances, however, workers assess their employer's ability to pay and adjust their rates accordingly, though within an admittedly limited margin. Their assessment is based on the employer's perceived access to USD (determined based on their nationality, occupation, and other criteria), and perceived socioeconomic class more generally (assessed based on the size of the house, number of cars, house location, etc.).

Perceived market rate: another determining factor is the amount charged by other SEDWs. As we have seen above, this perceived market rate varies greatly depending on the worker's social network. Workers in the same social circle tend to charge similar rates. As such, low rates anchor all workers' wages and prevent them from demanding a fair wage.

USD rate in Lebanon: the majority of migrant workers came to Lebanon to support their families in their home countries and cannot forgo this responsibility. This is a crucial factor which sets them apart from non-migrant workers such as Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian nationals in Lebanon, and justifies the gap which exists between the wages of self-employed MDWs and non-MDWs. As workers can only transfer money abroad in USD, the fluctuation of the USD rate in Lebanon has a direct impact on the worker's ability to send remittances.

USD rate in countries of origin: the discrepancies among countries of origin with regards to the purchasing power of the US dollar has direct implications on the wage that a MDW negotiates and accepts. For example, Cameroonian women pointed out that their rates tend to be higher than Malagasy and Ethiopian women for example, due to the difference in the value of the dollar among these countries.

Lebanon's collapse is altering the domestic labor market, in tandem with and sometimes due to the government's policies targeting MDWs, their accompanying discourse, supported by the media's narrative, and the consequences of the multifaceted crises.

In its public discourse, the GOL established a direct link between unemployment and migrant labor. The focus was primarily on irregular migrant labor among Syrian refugees, later expanding to the scapegoating of migrants of all nationalities, legal statuses, and occupations. The GOL also attributed the USD shortage to the remittances sent by migrant workers to their families abroad. These narratives were accompanied by policies that aimed to reduce the number of migrant workers in the country through raids on irregular workers, the facilitation of voluntary repatriation of migrants, and the reduction of the number of work permits for new MDWs. To complement this policy, the GOL called on the replacement of migrant labor with Lebanese labor, with the repeated promise to improve working conditions for "low skilled" jobs.

In parallel, the media sought to destigmatize domestic work by hailing cleaning companies employing Lebanese women and praising Lebanese women who take on paid domestic work. By portraying the Lebanese workforce's reluctance to take "low skilled" jobs as related to stigma and Lebanese workers' supposed laziness, the media effectively depoliticized the issue and masked the reality behind this reluctance: the dismal working conditions.

On the ground, the drastic decrease in the number of MDWs in the country, coupled with employers' inability to pay a live-in DW's salary, have led to a noticeable shift from preference for live-in MDWs to a preference for live-out DWs, often regardless of the worker's nationality. The economic downturn, the MOL policies, and this newly emerged preference for live-out workers, have caused recruitment agencies to operate as cleaning companies. By doing so, they reposition themselves as the primary brokers between employers and domestic workers and safeguard their role in the market.

These changes could present new opportunities for improvement in the working and living conditions of domestic workers. The push for non-MDWs to enter the domestic labor market can be capitalized on to push for the recognition of domestic work as work and the guarantee of labor protections for all domestic workers. On the other hand, failure to recognize the new trends and gearing advocacy efforts towards it might result in a missed opportunity and an expansion of exploitation from one population group - migrant domestic workers - to a larger one - all domestic workers.

While the ultimate goal remains to abolish the kafala system in all its institutional manifestations, practitioners in the field of migrant rights, labor rights, and women's rights, would benefit from catalyzing organic trends that are effectively challenging the very concept of kafala on the ground. The shift towards independent live-out domestic work threatens the very concept behind kafala where each worker is legally and practically tied to her legal sponsor. Joining efforts to ensure that this shift results in decent work for all domestic workers, rather than replicate the existing exploitation through new systems, may effectively bring an end to the kafala system as we know it.



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