

The case of women migrant domestic workers in Lebanon: between the uprising and the Covid-19 crisis

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In documenting and analyzing civil activism in Lebanon, the case of migrant women domestic workers merits careful attention and long-term research. Whilst we do have compelling documentation, testimonials and research on the various forms of abuses that migrant women domestic workers are subjected to, we know very little of the early and current processes of organizing for change and how these processes evolved. We are also rather oblivious to the intricate dynamics and tensions amongst the various forms of migrant women organizing and the factors and causes behind these tensions as well as their impact. The October 17 uprising provided a unique moment in history where all demands for all people came together and gave a case in point in how rights are indivisible and inalienable and how justice can only be all-inclusive rather than selective. How did the various movements and activism of migrant domestic women mutate and mature? What was the impact of building alliance with and reaching out to local feminist organizations? In which way has the October uprising provided an opportunity and a space for migrant women? What is the future of such activism? How will it increase its outreach whilst at the same time battling different fronts?

Migrant workers in Lebanon are estimated at about 300,000 of whom the majority are women working within the confines of the private sphere essentially as domestic workers. The situation and position of migrant women domestic workers in Lebanon is complex and carries multiple layers of oppression and discrimination. The first such form of oppression is living and working in somebody else's household, a situation reminiscent of slavery where the person is essentially a servant who is required to work at all hours of the day and undertake all kinds of care work including housework, child care, and is often coerced into sexual acts. It is unfortunate that the "acquisition" of a foreign domestic work seems to be the only solution found and adopted to address the issue of life-work balance as well as the well-being of employers in Lebanon. This is further exacerbated by the several factors which render women migrant domestic workers vulnerable to all forms of discrimination, exploitation and violence. Migrant women domestic workers are bound by the provisions of the infamous "kafala" (sponsorship) system. As such, they are excluded from the provisions and protection of the local labor laws and their legal residency and even presence in Lebanon is tied to and dependent on their contractual agreement and relationship with their employers. This system has encouraged and facilitated all forms of human rights abuses including constraints on mobility, ability to leave and/or change employers, arbitrary detention and deportation.

Despite blatant evidence on the impact of the Kafala system on the rights and lives of many a migrant domestic worker, the Ministry of Labor, the party essentially responsible

for regulating this sector, has taken very limited steps to redress and address the situation. For many years now, international and local human rights organizations as well as UN

agencies have attempted several forms of dialogue and engagement with the Lebanese state via the Ministry of Labor in an effort to bring in some level of reform to the Kafala system. Demands have included an end of the concept and practice of the Kafala system (believed to be itself inhumane and in violation of the basic foundations of human rights and human dignity), as well as expanding the provisions and purview of local labor laws to include migrant women domestic workers. The latter measure would pave the way for putting in place conditions of decent work for migrant women domestic workers which would include protection, complaint and grievance mechanisms, the right to organize and choose work as well as regulating and monitoring the role played by recruitment agencies who are all too often complicit in the ill treatment and abuse of domestic workers.

Meanwhile, Lebanon remains a case in point of the ill treatment of migrant women domestic workers. Dubious cases of “suicide” remain frequent in addition to numerous cases of migrant women fleeing from captivity in an attempt to escape violence, harsh treatment, inhumane working conditions coupled with the confiscation of passports, failure to pay fees, enforcement of forced labor, physical, sexual and other forms of violence as well as denial of appropriate food and health care and contact with friends and family.

In the midst of these serious violation in their human rights and the absence of any form of legal protection and given the uneven and often ineffectual intervention of their embassies when these exist, migrant women domestic workers have engaged in various forms of informal solidarity organizing in an effort to provide each other with both solace and support. Despite the importance of such form of solidarity organizing, very little is documented, archived, studied and available for public access. However, and according to a study entitled “*Migrant Domestic Workers Organising in Lebanon*”, published by the Anti-Racism Movement in 2020, such forms of organizing can be traced back to 2011 when small groups of Ethiopian migrant women got together to form a membership group where members offer each other safety and support in addition to money, medicine and food. Since then, several groups of migrant women workers were formed, often convening over shared identity or nationality, while stepping up various forms of what can be described as cultural as well as humanitarian activities and sometimes attempting to establish various links with home countries as well as feminist organizations in Lebanon.

In early 2015, and with the increased and gross violations against women migrant domestic workers, an interesting initiative took place namely the nascent formation of a union of migrant women domestic workers. Whilst the initiative received strong support from local

feminist and human rights activists, its request to receive legal recognition and registration was denied and confronted with heightened racism and denigration.

Indeed, the Ministry of Labor used the existing and unfair labor law which does not allow migrant workers to organize officially. In addition, two of the most vocal migrant women activists and who were amongst the leaders of this initiative were arbitrarily detained and repatriated in an attempt to intimidate and deter their companions from continuing with their pursuit or from simply speaking out.

The unprecedented initiative to set up a union of women migrant domestic workers marked a turning point in the form and sophistication of organization efforts amongst migrant women workers as well as a clear rupture and break away from a long history of silence and of fear from repression and retaliation. Rather than finding ways to address immediate and practical problems, migrant women domestic workers were calling for a system change, for the right to be heard, the right to organize and the right to have rights same as in the case of other workers. At the essence, this was a call for “recognition” as Nancy Frasier would characterize it (add reference) as well as a powerful break from fear and isolation.

In 2010, and in conjunction with a number of progressive feminist and human rights organizations in Lebanon, regular demonstrations and public events by migrant women workers began to take place to mark various key occasions notably International Women’s Rights day on March 8th. This period undoubtedly heralds an important shift towards claiming the public space as a space for resistance. It is safe to say that the famous demonstration (add itinerary and approximate numbers) of migrant women domestic workers on the occasion of International Domestic Workers’ Day on June 24th 2018 was a remarkable date as it was a celebration of power, solidarity, voice and dignity.

The October 17 revolution: A different and all-inclusive discourse

The October 17 revolution brought with it a different discourse as well as different and diverse voices especially when compared to the uprising which took place earlier in 2015 as a protest to the deadlock reached with the garbage crisis. The demands of the October 17 revolution indicated a will and a maturity to engage in an all-out reform which seeks to transform the core of governance toward a pro rights system that favors people over profit. A main feature of the October 17 revolution was indeed the richness and multiplicity of voices and the strong and uncompromising feminist demands which included the voices of the LGBTQ community, refugees and migrant women workers, women with disabilities and other groups who would normally be characterized as “vulnerable”. This may have been the first historical moment of powerful public dissent and resistance which was inclusive and where many citizens of Lebanon denounced the violations of rights that refugees and migrant women were subjected to and framed their demands as all-

encompassing and including all individuals in the country. **Indeed, and for women domestic workers in Lebanon, this may well be a new level of activism where migrant women workers bonded as a group with national demands and**

with the demands of other groups and fighting collectively against oppression, corruption and the denial of rights and freedoms. The significance of this moment is quite complex and, again, multi-layered. On the one hand, migrant women domestic workers have stepped out of the shackles of the private domain where their lives, voices and even thoughts are controlled by their employers. They have formed their own groups and organizations thus defying a legal system that does not recognize their basic right to organize as women workers and they have claimed back their own voices.

Covid-19 and the economic crisis as a structure of political opportunity

With the escalating economic crisis in Lebanon and the constraints imposed by Covid-19, migrant women domestic workers were disproportionately affected. In best case scenarios, and with the enforcement of the lockdown, migrant women domestic workers saw their household chores increasing with the obligation to meet the often unreasonable demands of members of the household now staying at home full-time. In worst case scenarios, women migrant domestic workers were subjected to more abuse including the withholding of their wages as well as their basic needs under the guise of worsening economic conditions. In fact, many reports indicate that migrant women domestic workers have lost their jobs or even dropped in front of their embassies without their papers, travel document or any means of subsistence. This was the specific case endured by Ethiopian domestic workers whose embassy was totally uncooperative and who ended up in a shelter operated by a local NGO where reports of alleged abuses were made by the women after being released and prior to their repatriation. While this incident is a case in point of the cruelty and harsh treatment that migrant women domestic workers are subjected to, it does however showcase a powerful situation where the women staged a sit-ins, spoke out about what they are going through and demanded solutions from their employers, their embassies and the Lebanese state. In doing so, they also addressed the Lebanese public to bear witness and to react to this injustice that has become an ugly part of ordinary life in Lebanon.

How would the activism of migrant women domestic workers carve its own space independently from other forms of local activism? How can it expand to reach out to more invisible forms of resistance and activism by migrant domestic women in gulf countries as well as other parts of the MENA region? In researching this nascent movement, what would be the research ethics consideration? What are the implications of researching this movement using yet again the lenses and tools of “studying the other”? How can an agenda of transformative feminist research be built joint with the women themselves and how will we be able to capture and amplify their voices?

Whilst these are critical questions related to the future of researching activism amongst the migrant women community in Lebanon (and possibly beyond), the actual activism of these groups and the way it has evolved during the past decade indicates that it is definitely part of the unfolding contentious politics led by women in the MENA region.