



Migrant
Workers'
Action

EXPLOITATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN LEBANON:

THE KAFALA SYSTEM'S ROLE AND IMPACT

Migrant Domestic Workers And Trafficking In Persons:
Prevention, Rights Protection And Access To Justice

Input To UN Special Rapporteur On Trafficking In
Persons, Especially Women And Children

INTRODUCTION

The Kafala system is a sponsorship-based system which regulates the immigration, employment, residency, and personal status for migrant workers in Lebanon, as well as in several other Arab countries. Under this system, the Lebanese government generally remains minimally involved in all matters relating to MDWs' rights, well-being, and status. It does not provide any monitoring or governance over the lives of the migrant domestic workers' (MDWs) once they arrive. Instead, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Interior impose limited regulations on recruitment agencies and the procedures for MDWs' entry permits. The Kafala system in Lebanon and its incomplete legal framework have enabled the systemic exploitation and abuse of MDWs, with many of its practices fulfilling the definition of human trafficking and forced labour.

Once they arrive in Lebanon, MDWs experience various human rights violations. The limited rights protection available to MDWs are administered through their work contract and the Labour Arbitration Councils.¹ The sponsors/employers have unchecked powers over the MDWs' lives regarding their legal status, employment, health care, and accommodation. This essentially gives employers the ability to confiscate their passports, overwork them, deny their wages, deprive them of food and reasonable sleeping conditions, as well as inflict physical and sexual abuse with impunity. In addition, the Kafala system does not allow the workers to change jobs or leave the country without the employers' consent, leaving many of them in situations of forced labour. In short, the Kafala system is an exploitative system that gives employers tremendous and often abused power over migrant women who work, sleep, and eat in the homes of these same employers, fulfilling the definition of human trafficking and amounting to a contemporary form of slavery.

MWA believes that the majority of MDWs in Lebanon have been recruited with some of the above-mentioned deceptive tactics and should be considered victims of human trafficking as defined in Art. 3(a) of UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.² While Lebanon has anti-trafficking laws, enforcement remains weak, and MDWs have limited access to justice due to legal and structural barriers.³

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK: GAPS & OVERSIGHTS

Lebanon has yet to ratify the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)⁴, despite ongoing advocacy from civil society organisations and international

¹ ILO, [Regulatory Framework Governing Migrant Workers, Updated 2023](#), p. 4

² OHCHR, [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#)

³ Amnesty International, ['Their House Is My Prison' - Exploitation Of Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 25

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⁴ ILO Normlex, [Up-to-date Conventions and Protocols not ratified by Lebanon](#)

bodies.⁵ However, it has ratified the Convention Concerning the Abolition of Forced Labour, 1957 (No. 105) and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which include obligations towards the protection of MDWs residing and working in Lebanon.⁶

To this day, Lebanese Labour Law explicitly excludes domestic workers, depriving both Lebanese and migrant domestic workers of essential labour protections granted to other workers, including minimum wage, overtime pay, compensation for unfair dismissal, social security, and parental leave.⁷ This exclusion contradicts Article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which Lebanon has ratified.⁸ The article affirms that all workers are entitled to just and favourable working conditions without discrimination. Additionally, the Labour Law bars "foreigners" from voting or running for union representation. On December 29, 2014, six Lebanese workers petitioned the Ministry of Labour to establish a union for domestic workers. A month later, approximately 350 domestic workers of various nationalities convened for the union's inaugural congress. However, the Ministry of Labour refused to recognise the union.⁹

While the government has made some efforts to align national policies with international labour standards, progress has been slow and limited. In 2020, Lebanon's Ministry of Labor introduced a revised Standard Unified Contract (SUC) granting migrant domestic workers (MDWs) the right to terminate contracts without employer consent, a step toward improving working conditions. However, legal and structural barriers, including opposition from recruitment agencies and a lack of enforcement mechanisms, have hindered its implementation.¹⁰

The contract prohibits employers from forcing workers to perform duties outside the home, limits working hours to a maximum of 10 per day with at least eight continuous hours of rest at night, and grants workers a 24-hour weekly rest period, paid sick leave, and six days of annual leave. It also requires employers to pay the full salary at the end of each month with signed receipts, purchase health insurance for the worker, and allow her to receive calls, covering the cost of one call per month to her parents.¹¹

Despite these provisions, the contract contains significant gaps that leave workers vulnerable to exploitation. It states that a worker's right to leave the home depends on the employer's consent. Additionally, it allows employers to terminate the contract if the worker commits a "deliberate mistake, act of negligence, assault, or threat" or causes harm to the employer or their family. However, it fails to define these terms or require supporting evidence. In contrast, a domestic

⁵ Amnesty International, [Lebanon: Recognize Domestic Workers Union](#)

⁶ MWA, [A Search For Livelihood Turned Into Forced Labour: Experiences Of Kenyan Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 4.

⁷ Lebanese Labor Code, Art. 7

⁸ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Art. 7

⁹ Amnesty International, ['Their House Is My Prison' - Exploitation Of Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 13

¹⁰ Legal Agenda, [To the Minister of Labor... We Urge you to End this Mistake](#)

¹¹ MWA, [A Search For Livelihood Turned Into Forced Labour: Experiences Of Kenyan Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 9

worker can only terminate the contract under limited circumstances: if the employer fails to pay wages for three consecutive months, forces her to perform work outside her agreed duties, or subjects her to violence. In cases of violence, the burden of proof falls on the worker, requiring forensic medical reports and official police or Ministry of Labour records to confirm the abuse. Other contractual violations by the employer, such as denying the worker adequate accommodation, communication with her family, or rest periods, do not provide grounds for contract termination.¹²

Another long-standing issue is that the unified standard contract was initially available only in Arabic, a language that most migrant domestic workers cannot read. In December 2018, the Ministry of Labour announced that it had translated the contract into multiple languages and urged public notaries to provide translated copies before workers signed the Arabic version. Amnesty International contacted five public notaries in Beirut to verify the implementation of this initiative. Two confirmed they were using translated contracts, while the other three said they had not received such documents.¹³

RECRUITMENT AGENCIES: THEIR ROLE IN FACILITATING TRAFFICKING

The recruitment process is central to the migration of domestic workers to Lebanon, often involving multiple intermediaries and various illicit practices. For MDWs to be able to work in Lebanon, recruitment agencies must secure preliminary authorisation for employment and residency. After the Lebanese Ministry of Labor approves the work permit, the agencies facilitate the MDW's entry visa application to General Security.

However, recruiters - both in sending and receiving countries - often mislead workers about job conditions, failing to inform them of common abuses such as passport confiscation, confinement, and excessive work hours. Some workers arrive expecting jobs in hotels or hospitals, only to be forced into domestic work. Contracts typically state a two-year term, but the legal standard in Lebanon is three years, catching many by surprise.¹⁴ In a research conducted by MWA with Kenyan migrant returnees, the majority of Kenyan MDWs interviewed reported that they signed two contracts, one in Kenya and another one in Lebanon, with different terms and conditions. Furthermore, several of the interviewed MDWs stated that their contracts were in Arabic with no translation provided, forcing them to sign an agreement without full knowledge of its implications.¹⁵

¹² [HRW Lebanon: New Safeguards for Migrant Domestic Workers](#).

¹³ Amnesty International, ['Their House Is My Prison' - Exploitation Of Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 13

¹⁴ MWA, [A Search For Livelihood Turned Into Forced Labour: Experiences Of Kenyan Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 14

¹⁵ MWA, *Ibid*, p. 14 - 15

“I was told on Friday that my visa was ready, and that I was travelling on Monday. I came to pick up my visa on Friday, and when I read it I saw my destination. I asked [about it], and she [the agent] told me I had no option. I didn’t know anything about Lebanon. That evening I went on Google and looked up Lebanon. Deep inside I was afraid. But I have a twin sister who is sick and needs money and I have four kids to support, so I had no option. The agent told me I would be paid 35,000 KES (350 USD). But when I arrived in Lebanon, I signed a contract in Arabic with a 250 USD pay.”¹⁶

In other cases, such as Sierra Leone, MDWs were never provided with a work contract. MWA interviewed 41 Sierra Leonean MDWs, with none of them having signed a contract either in Sierra Leone or in Lebanon.¹⁷

Recruitment agencies often request recruitment fees from both the prospective employers as well as the MDWs. In Sierra Leone, MWA documented MDWs paying recruitment fees to brokers ranging between 350\$ to 650\$ on average.¹⁸ In Kenya on the other hand, recruitment agencies rarely ask MDWs for a fee. Kenyan recruitment agencies received payment from the employers or recruitment agencies in Lebanon. The Lebanese agencies, however, would deduct up to three months of salaries from the MDWs for incurred costs.¹⁹

Another practice encouraged by agencies and widely practiced is the confiscation of passports. Upon arrival in Beirut, sponsors are required to pick up domestic workers at the airport. General Security officers confiscate the workers’ passports and hand them directly to the agents or employers, reinforcing their control. It is estimated that over 90% of MDWs have their passports confiscated upon arrival.²⁰ MWA documented the retention of passports for all the 93 interviewed MDWs in both Sierra Leone and Kenya.²¹ This practice has also been widely documented.²² Lebanese agencies also advise sponsors to retain these documents throughout the employment period.²³

This deceptive recruitment process, combined with Lebanon’s failure to adhere to international law, exposes migrant domestic workers to human trafficking risks. Misrepresentation, lack of oversight, and exploitation at every stage create a cycle of abuse that leaves workers unprotected. Travel bans by countries like the Philippines²⁴, Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Nepal, as a way to curb trafficking and other forms of exploitation, have made recruitment more complex but have not

¹⁶ Testimony from Maureen, a 33-year-old single mother of four, thought she was going to Qatar. MWA, [A Search For Livelihood Turned Into Forced Labour: Experiences Of Kenyan Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 15

¹⁷ MWA, [From False Promises to Forced Labour: The Journey of Migrant Domestic Workers from Sierra Leone to Lebanon](#), p. 9 and p. 15

¹⁸ MWA, *Ibid* p. 9 and p. 11 - 14

¹⁹ MWA, [A Search For Livelihood Turned Into Forced Labour: Experiences Of Kenyan Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 13

²⁰ Legal Agenda [Lebanese Judge: Passport Retention of Domestic Workers Violates International Law](#)

²¹ MWA, [A Search For Livelihood Turned Into Forced Labour: Experiences Of Kenyan Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 31; MWA, [From False Promises to Forced Labour: The Journey of Migrant Domestic Workers from Sierra Leone to Lebanon](#), p. 15

²² Legal Agenda, [Lebanese Judge: Passport Retention of Domestic Workers Violates International Law](#)

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ Embassy of the Philippines in Beirut, [Advisory On Deployment Ban Of Filipino Household Workers In Lebanon](#)

stopped migration. Many workers resort to illegal brokers who use fake itineraries, bribes, and deceptive routes to evade authorities.²⁵

HONORARY CONSULATES AND EMBASSIES: RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS AND ALLEGATIONS OF EXPLOITATION

Consular services and embassies can play a significant role in curbing the exploitation and abuse faced by MDWs. However, MWA has documented instances in Lebanon where some consular services have hindered the process of repatriation or, even worse, contributed to the exploitation of MDWs.

Some sending countries operate through honorary consulates in Lebanon, which are responsible for providing consular services to the respective citizens. Honorary consulates are usually represented by Lebanese citizens with special relations to the sending countries. The honorary consuls are unpaid and usually have alternative careers as a source of income.²⁶ Honorary consulates oftentimes lack resources as well as access to provide efficient assistance and protection. The honorary consuls' unique circumstances, as well as the sending countries' limited monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, have allowed honorary consulates to neglect their responsibilities or even abuse their position of power. MWA, among several local NGOs, have documented cases of refusal for support and abuse of power by honorary consulates, including Kenya and Sierra Leone.

For example, MWA interviewed several Kenyan women who reported that consular officials in Lebanon provided little to no assistance when they sought help returning home or reported abuse. Many were told to return to their employers, and in some cases, officials even informed employers of their whereabouts. The failure of the Kenyan consulate to support MDWs became widely known after protests by stranded Kenyan women in Beirut. A 2020 CNN exposé detailed abuses by consular staff, including physical and verbal mistreatment, pressure to engage in sex work to fund their return, and excessive charges for consular services—ranging from \$500 to \$3,000.²⁷ These accusations were further confirmed by Kenyan MDWs interviewed by MWA, with some sharing their experience of contacting the assistant consul for repatriation assistance and his response:

“He told me to go into prostitution to bring dollars for him.”²⁸

During the Beirut port explosion crisis, the consulate reportedly shut its doors to MDWs, refusing to assist with paperwork for repatriation²⁹.

²⁵ Triangle, [Cleaning Up: The Shady Industries That Exploit Lebanon's Kafala Workers](#), p. 7

²⁶ ARM, [The Case Of Abolishing All Honorary Consulates In Lebanon](#), p. 24

²⁷ CNN, [How the Kenyan consulate in Lebanon became feared by the women it was meant to help](#)

²⁸ MWA, [A Search For Livelihood Turned Into Forced Labour: Experiences Of Kenyan Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#), p. 35

²⁹ MWA, *Ibid*, p. 34

Sierra Leone, similar to Kenya, is only represented by an honorary consulate led by a Lebanese official with a reputation for inaction and false promises. Over the years, MDWs, community leaders, and partner organisations have reported the consulate's failure to protect workers, even in cases of abuse, exploitation, or death. In March 2023, after a fire in Sid El-Bouchrieh killed seven Sierra Leonean MDWs, the consulate was responsible for repatriation but failed to act, leading to community protests. Despite promises, the deceased were buried in unmarked graves in Tripoli.³⁰

A committee of seven Sierra Leonean men with ties to the honorary consulate claims to support MDWs, including by facilitating returns through the IOM. Many women believe the committee operates as part of an informal agreement with the honorary consulate, providing temporary shelter before repatriation. However, civil society groups, community leaders, and MDWs have reported that some committee members engaged in financial and sexual exploitation and falsely claimed partnerships with the IOM.³¹

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that other sending countries, such as the Philippines, have embassies which offer adequate protection and assistance to their citizens in Lebanon. The Philippine government has established and allocated funding for agencies such as the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA).³² The Philippine embassy has been operating a shelter for Filipino MDWs in distress and has introduced timely procedures for the repatriation of their citizens. This became particularly evident during the Israeli war on Lebanon from September to December 2024, during which the Philippine embassy facilitated the mass evacuation of displaced and stranded MDWs.³³

THE KAFALA SYSTEM AND GENDER: SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND TRAFFICKING OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

The vulnerability of 'live-in' MDWs suffering in abusive households as well as 'live-out' MDWs in destitutions can lead to an increase in sex trafficking, sexual exploitation and other forms of SGBV.³⁴ MWA has documented several cases of MDWs escaping abusive employers and ending up destitute without access to services and protection, forcing them to resort to sex work as a means of survival.³⁵

³⁰ MWA [From False Promises to Forced Labour: The Journey of Migrant Domestic Workers from Sierra Leone to Lebanon](#), p. 29

³¹ MWA, [The Kafala System, the Lebanese Crisis and the IOM](#), p. 9;

MWA, [From False Promises to Forced Labour: The Journey of Migrant Domestic Workers from Sierra Leone to Lebanon](#) p. 29

³² [The Kafala System: A Replica of Lebanon's Violent Sectarian System?](#), p. 28

³³ JapanTimes, [Foreign workers trapped and terrified amid conflict in Lebanon](#)

GMA News, [PH Embassy in Lebanon to charter flights for repatriation](#)

³⁴ MWA, [Homelessness as a Consequence of the Kafala System, Input to the UN SR on Contemporary Forms of Slavery](#), p. 3

³⁵ MWA, [The Kafala System and Sex Trafficking, Input to the UN SR on VAWG](#) p. 3

The vulnerabilities of MDWs escaping abusive employers are further exacerbated by their undocumented status following the loss of their residency after breaking their contracts, increasing the risk of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking.³⁶ Another worrisome pattern documented by MWA is an increase in the trafficking of MDWs facilitated by members of their own communities. An African community leader has reported that a group of migrant women connected to a Lebanese recruitment agency has been encouraging young MDWs to escape their employers' households with the promise of better jobs. Many of the women who followed that advice ended up being trafficked into sex work and were forced to pay fees to the community members who facilitated the escape.³⁷

In other cases, destitute circumstances have led MDW to unknowingly stay in shared accommodation controlled by sex trafficking rings or by members of their community who are involved in sex trafficking.³⁸

For example, a Kenyan MDW, disclosed to MWA that she was raped in her employer's house. She was not paid, and following several instances of rape where her employers did nothing to help, she ran away. With nowhere to go, she went to a neighborhood where some migrants live, where she met individuals from her community who proposed sex work as an option to make money and in return for accommodation. Undocumented and at risk of arrest, she felt like she had no choice.

"I stayed with them. I couldn't find any other work, so I did prostitution. Deep inside of me, I was not feeling well".

In one of her encounters where she did not consent to the sex work, she was gang-raped and ended up pregnant.³⁹

As noted previously, MWA documented cases of involvement of members of the migrant communities' committees in facilitating sex trafficking by working with organised crime groups and, in some cases, with their consulates. Additionally, various allegations have been raised against officials from the Sierra Leonean and Kenyan Honorary consulates accused of facilitating forced sex work in order to cover the costs of repatriation of MDWs from their respective countries.⁴⁰

THE INTERSECTION OF RACISM AND EXPLOITATION: EXPERIENCES OF AFRO-DESCENDENT MIGRANT WORKERS IN LEBANON

Migrant domestic workers of all nationalities face racist and sexist discrimination under the Kafala system. In Lebanon, skin colour often dictates a migrant's social

³⁶ MWA, [The Kafala System and Sex Trafficking, Input to the UN SR on VAWG](#), p. 2

³⁷ MWA, *Ibid*, p. 3

³⁸ MWA, [Homelessness as a Consequence of the Kafala System, Input to the UN SR on Contemporary Forms of Slavery](#), p. 3

³⁹ MWA, [The Kafala System and Sex Trafficking, Input to the UN SR on VAWG](#), p. 3

⁴⁰ MWA, [The Kafala System, the Lebanese Crisis and the IOM](#), p. 9; MWA [From False Promises to Forced Labour: The Journey of Migrant Domestic Workers from Sierra Leone to Lebanon](#), p. 29

standing, with those with the darkest skin—primarily workers from Africa—facing the most severe discrimination and holding the ‘lowest’ status. MWA and local NGOs have noticed a higher occurrence of violence and abuse against MDWs of African origin. Eгна Legna Besidet in its research on the ‘*Gender Dimensions of Sexual Violence against Migrant Domestic Workers*’, noted that compared to the experiences of non-Black MDWs, black African MDWs report experiencing more outright sexual harassment by Lebanese men who “exotify and objectify Black women.”⁴¹ This dehumanisation not only reinforces harmful stereotypes but also increases their exposure to physical violence. As one of their key informant observed, “[...] the rape and abduction of African MDWs seems limitless.”⁴²

MWA’s report on Kenyan MDWs documented verbal abuse, including racial slurs, experienced by 48 out of the 52 interviewed women.⁴³ Many of the women interviewed expressed a link between their race and the abuses they faced, particularly sexual violence.⁴⁴

MWA has also documented extreme cases of violence against women of African origin. These women reported that the perpetrators justified their abuse based on racial stereotypes, such as the sexual objectification of black women, including hypersexualisation. Community leaders confirmed to MWA that there are many instances where some women experienced verbal abuse, and humiliation, and were forced into acts they didn’t consent to, including role-playing as sex slaves.⁴⁵ A West African community leader informed MWA of various abuses and incidents of SGBV experienced by MDWs from her country. Among the most severe cases she encountered were migrant sex workers being stabbed, raped by multiple perpetrators, and violent assaults that led to their deaths.⁴⁶

Migrant women who become pregnant are also subjected to harmful gender stereotypes, often portrayed either as helpless victims of sexual violence or as hypersexualised seducers who threaten the moral integrity of the Lebanese families they work for.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

The Kafala system in Lebanon has entrenched conditions of modern-day slavery, subjecting migrant domestic workers to systemic exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. Deceptive recruitment practices, legal exclusion from labour protections, and structural barriers to justice leave MDWs vulnerable to forced labour and human rights violations. Despite international pressure and civil society efforts,

⁴¹ Eгна Legna, [Acknowledged but Forgotten: The Gender Dimensions of Sexual Violence Against Migrant Domestic Workers in Post-Crisis Lebanon](#), p. 8

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ MWA, [A Search For Livelihood Turned Into Forced Labour: Experiences Of Kenyan Migrant Domestic Workers In Lebanon](#) p. 28

⁴⁴ MWA, Ibid, p. 25

⁴⁵ MWA, [The Kafala System and Sex Trafficking, Input to the UN SR on VAWG](#), p. 4

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Karen Block et al., [Immobilisation of migrant domestic worker women and their children born in Lebanon](#), p. 1930

the Lebanese government has failed to implement meaningful reforms or ratify key international conventions that could protect MDWs.

While some progress has been made, such as the introduction of the revised Standard Unified Contract, enforcement remains weak, and resistance from recruitment agencies and employers continues to stall reform. The role of consular services varies, with some embassies providing critical support while others actively undermine MDWs' rights and safety. Additionally, the rise of sex trafficking and community-facilitated exploitation highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to protect MDWs from further harm.

To address these injustices, Lebanon must abolish the Kafala system, enact comprehensive legal protections for MDWs, and ensure access to justice and social protections. International bodies, civil society organisations, and MDWs themselves must continue to advocate for structural change, challenging the deeply entrenched exploitation that defines the Kafala system. Until then, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon will remain trapped in a cycle of abuse, denied the fundamental rights and dignity they deserve.