

International Women's Day 2026

NO SAFE DIRECTION: WHEN DISPLACEMENT MEETS KAFALA

As Lebanon faces its most severe escalation in years with airstrikes, mass displacement, and a deepening humanitarian crisis layered on top of an already collapsed economy, hundreds of thousands of people have been forced from their homes. Among them, largely invisible in the coverage and in the response, are migrant domestic workers: women from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and beyond, who were already living under one of the most restrictive labour regimes in the world before the bombs started falling.

This International Women's Day, we focus on what [displacement](#) means for migrant women who were never free to move in the first place. What protection means when the law itself is the source of their vulnerability. And what these women are doing: for themselves and for each other, in the middle of a war that most of the world does not know they are in.

The Global Conversation On Women And Displacement (And What It Misses)

Every International Women's Day, displaced women are invoked. The harms are well documented: gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods, exclusion from decision-making, collapsed access to healthcare ([OHCHR; Women's Refugee Commission, 2022](#)).

But these frameworks tend to assume a particular kind of displaced woman: a refugee, an internally displaced person, someone who had a home and lost it. They rarely account for women whose vulnerability was built into their conditions of work and residence long before any conflict. Most often, these are women whose legal status, housing, income, and bodily autonomy all depend on a single employer, under a system designed to keep it that way.

Under the kafala (sponsorship) system in Lebanon, migrant domestic workers' residency permits are tied to their employer. They cannot change jobs without the sponsor's consent. They cannot leave the country without permission. They have no right to organise, no access to collective bargaining, no legal route to challenge abuse ([Amnesty International, 2019; UN Women, 2021](#)).

This does not make kafala the same thing as displacement. But it means that when displacement occurs, migrant domestic workers encounter it from a position of structural immobility. Their legal status, housing, income, and freedom of movement are already constrained by the sponsorship system itself. When conflict forces movement, they face it stripped of the protections that displacement frameworks assume people have lost : documents, autonomy, resources, and somewhere safe to go.

Gender-Based Violence: Confined, Not Protected

Gender-based violence escalates across every stage of displacement: before flight, during transit, in camps and host communities, and long into resettlement.

For migrant domestic workers under kafala, the dynamics are specific. The site of violence is the employer's home, the same place the worker is legally bound to live. Physical abuse, sexual harassment and assault, forced confinement, deprivation of food and sleep, and psychological violence are routine features of employment for many domestic workers, not exceptional events ([Migrant Workers' Action, 2023](#); [Diab et al., 2022](#); [Amnesty International, 2019](#)). The kafala system does not just fail to protect against this. It enables it, by making a migrant worker's legal presence contingent on the person most likely to be their abuser.

When conflict escalates, this worsens. Workers abandoned by fleeing employers may escape an abusive household only to find themselves undocumented, homeless, and exposed to new forms of violence either on the streets, in overcrowded informal shelters, from people offering "help" in exchange for unpaid labour or worse ([The New Humanitarian, 2024](#); [CNN, 2024](#)). Workers who remain with employers may find that the stress and fear of war intensifies existing abuse. There is no safe direction.

Reporting mechanisms, already nearly non-existent for domestic workers in Lebanon, collapse entirely in crisis.

Discrimination: Racism As A Structure, Not An Incident

Women are not affected equally by displacement. Ethnicity, class, disability, age, and nationality shape who is most exposed and who is most ignored. Under kafala in Lebanon, this is the organising logic of the system.

Migrant domestic workers face racialised discrimination that shapes every dimension of their experience: which workers are paid least, which are most

confined, which face the most physical violence, which are treated as less than human. Anti-Black racism is pervasive and particular ([Kassamali, MERIP, 2021](#)).

Nationality determines access to what limited support exists. Some embassies respond; others are absent entirely. Some governments impose recruitment bans framed as protection, which, in practice, force migration underground into more dangerous channels. In a crisis, nationality determines who gets evacuated and who gets left behind.

This hierarchy does not soften during war. When resources are scarce, when shelters are full, when evacuations are organised: migrant domestic workers, and particularly Black African workers, are last. Not because of individual prejudice alone, but because the system is built to place them at the bottom ([Anti-Racism Movement, 2024](#)).

Health, Bodies, And What Gets Ignored

When women are displaced, access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health services, is the first thing to collapse and the last to be restored.

For migrant domestic workers under kafala, many of these dimensions are already in crisis before conflict begins. Workers frequently have no access to healthcare beyond what an employer chooses to provide ([MSF, 2025](#)). Menstrual health is a daily struggle: workers report being denied sanitary products, denied privacy, denied rest, and shamed for basic bodily needs ([Migrant Workers' Action, 2025](#)). That threat shapes every aspect of a migrant worker's reproductive life, including her ability to say no.

When conflict displaces these women, they enter it without a healthcare relationship, often without knowledge of the local system, without the language to navigate it, and without the documentation required to access it. Reproductive healthcare, mental health support, and basic medical attention become functionally out of reach.

The Gap In The Response And What Fills It

Lebanon's humanitarian community has mobilised under extraordinarily difficult conditions: a collapsed state, constrained resources, and active conflict. That work matters and saves lives.

But the frameworks within which humanitarian response operates were not always designed with migrant domestic workers in mind. These women fall between categories: not refugees under UNHCR's mandate, not nationals

entitled to state protection, not workers covered by labour law, and often not visible in the data that drives planning.

What fills this gap is the organising of migrant women themselves. Community leaders coordinate information, share resources, check on isolated workers, and provide the mutual aid that no formal system is delivering ([MWA & Walk Free, 2024](#)). This happens without legal recognition, without institutional support, and at personal risk.

As you read this, community leaders are responding to the full range of crisis needs: supporting workers facing eviction and sleeping on the streets, unable to access a fair rental market; accompanying migrants with urgent medical needs, including women giving birth in shelters without medical coverage, or recovering from surgery, or surviving violence; and ensuring food security for displaced families, often receiving them into their own homes when flats and emergency shelters are inaccessible.

It should not have to work this way. But any honest account of women and displacement in Lebanon must start here: **the most consistent source of protection for migrant domestic workers is each other.**

What We Demand

Abolish the Kafala system: A system that ties a person's legal existence to their employer is incompatible with their rights as a worker and as a human being.

Immediate protection for stranded and abandoned workers, regardless of documentation status: Access to emergency shelter, food, medical care, and safe passage including in evacuations that currently exclude migrant workers.

Consular accountability: Sending-country governments must meet their obligations to their nationals in crisis.

Healthcare access that includes migrant domestic workers: reproductive health, mental health, basic medical care, without documentation barriers, without cost barriers.

Direct funding for grassroots migrant-led organisations: Flexible, accessible funding that does not require the infrastructure of a large INGO to access.

Recognition of migrant women as organisers, not only as victims: The women we work alongside are not waiting to be saved. They are leading. Policy, funding, and solidarity must follow their lead.