

Open Letter on the Occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Beirut, 21 March 2024

To Editors of the Lebanese Media

Addressing the perpetuation of Racist Stereotypes against Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon

We, the members of the Reclaim Our Rights Collective, a coalition of Women Migrant Domestic Workers, community leaders, and activists, are expressing our concern over the perpetuation of racist stereotypes and lack of intersectionality in the Lebanese media's news coverage. We particularly stress the problem of biased news reporting on issues relating to the rights and lived experiences of MDWs under Lebanon's Kafala System. On the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, we speak out as a collective to raise awareness on the issue of discriminatory language in the Lebanese media sector.

The persistent racist, stigmatising, and discriminatory portrayal of MDWs in Lebanese news coverage continue to undermine our efforts to dismantle the Kafala system and achieve sustainable change in the perception of African and Asian women of colour by Lebanese institutions and society as a whole. The use of prejudiced and reductionist depictions of MDWs in the media diminishes our contribution to Lebanese society and perpetuates harmful stereotypes. We believe that this portrayal negatively influences attitudes towards MDWs, including by employers and service providers.

Discriminatory coverage has also been a contributing factor to the growing mental health struggles MDWs are facing due to living under the conditions of the Kafala system. Our dehumanisation in the news has added to our vulnerability and has led to distrust between us as a marginalised community and media representatives. Sensationalist news coverage of tragedies, such as the abandonment of many MDWs in 2020 or the several cases of deaths of MDWs with no regard for our dignity, have furthered the reluctance of MDWs to interact with Lebanese journalists.

In the past, many cases of violence and abuse have been reported on by Lebanese media without approaching the survivors in a trauma-informed manner and addressing the subject through an intersectional lens. On several occasions, we have noticed that news reports on cases of sexual and gender-based violence against MDWs have used language and framing of the facts in a manner that blames the survivors or questions their credibility. In particular, reporting using reductionist portrayal of MDWs working as sex workers and substance (alcohol/drug) users have had a significant impact on MDWs' credibility and, therefore, have affected any potential investigations by the justice system. Claims such as these, more often than not, are based on sources that can be considered hostile against MDWs, such as landlords, neighbours, and employers.

Finally, in several instances, Lebanese news have released articles without previously fact-checking the claims or reaching out to the migrant communities for comments, resulting in the dissemination of misinformation. We believe that a lack of thorough investigations and due diligence has led to the trivialisation of our struggles and suffering.

With the irrefutable increase of xenophobia, misogyny, and culture of impunity in Lebanon, it is a crucial moment for the Lebanese media to take action and adjust their reporting to be pro-actively anti-racist.

Therefore, we, the *Reclaim Our Rights Collective*, in our effort to dismantle Lebanon's Kafala system and as the affected communities experiencing daily normalised racism, call upon the Lebanese media to:

- Introduce mandatory training on anti-racism, intersectionality and trauma-informed approaches and interview skills to journalists and editors working for Lebanese media.
- Provide professional interpretation in the respective languages of MDWs during interviews.
- Develop anti-racist policies and guidelines for Lebanese journalists to adhere to whenever working on articles about MDWs.
- Provide consent forms to MDWs regarding any audio-visual materials, quotes, and being named in news articles.
- Prioritise Migrant voices as primary sources and fact-check claims with the migrant communities rather than solely relying on statements made by Lebanese parties with biased views.

In conclusion, we call upon the representatives of the Lebanese media to take the necessary steps to take a pro-active stand against racism in its news reporting relating to MDWs trapped under Lebanon's Kafala system.

Sincerely,

The Reclaim Our Rights Collective