

STATEMENT ON THE DISPLACEMENT CRISIS IN LEBANON AND ITS IMPACT ON MIGRANT WORKERS

MWA is extremely concerned about the ongoing displacement crisis in Lebanon. Following the series of bombardments and indiscriminate attacks carried out by Israel in various regions of the country, [one million people](#) are estimated to have been forcibly displaced. This number is believed to include several thousands migrant workers who have found themselves stranded in the South, Beqaa and Beirut. As the airstrikes persist across the South and Beirut and a ground invasion starts, the situation may become catastrophic.

Since the onset of the violence, MWA has received numerous reports of migrant workers from Sudan, Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, and other countries who find themselves stranded in various locations, often rough sleeping and in dire circumstances. Many have been abandoned by their employers, left without documentation or financial resources. It is crucial to highlight that migrant workers, particularly Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs), face compounded vulnerabilities due to their status under the [Kafala system](#). In the context of war and displacement, these vulnerabilities are likely to be exacerbated, leaving them even more exposed to exploitation and hardship.

We need help in this country. There is only disaster for us in this country. I don't know where my Madame is. When the war started, she travelled to another country and left me on the street. I stayed in Saida for a while and then I came to Beirut by myself. Since I am here I have been sleeping on the streets.¹

RELIEF EFFORTS: AN URGENT NEED FOR ADEQUATE SHELTERS

Despite many organisations mobilising to gather resources and coordinate relief efforts, there continues to be a significant gap in service provision. Relief organisations and community groups are struggling to find temporary accommodations for displaced migrants who contact them on a daily basis. Over the last few months, organisations which provide access to shelters for migrant domestic workers noted an increase in referrals since July 2024, with some receiving three times the number of requests for shelter.

This critical shortage of adequate shelters has been exacerbated by a government policy that prioritises access to collective sites for Lebanese citizens only. For example, MWA received reports that on 30 September 2024, around 60 migrants, including many children, from Sierra Leone and Bangladesh were evicted from a school in Tripoli, following an order from the municipality that schools can only be used for Lebanese citizens. As a consequence of the eviction, some of the Sierra Leonean migrant community ended up sleeping on the streets once they returned to Beirut.

¹ Displaced MDW interviewed by MWA.

Currently, some of the displaced migrants are sheltered in inadequate and unsafe housing. On the 2nd of October, MWA and its partner organisation DoWAN witnessed 130 Sierra Leonean women who had sought refuge in Jbeil. The women had all escaped following Israeli attacks in the South, the southern suburbs of Beirut including [the attack which occurred in Jnah on the 1st of October](#). Some live-in domestic workers reported being abandoned by their employers, whilst the freelancers reported leaving their own homes fleeing the attacks in their neighbourhoods, after which they ended up living in squalor.

One woman shared with MWA:

“We are facing a lot of things in Lebanon. We don't have a place to sleep or food to eat or accommodation. We are really suffering, the country is not safe for us presently. We want to go home. Some of us have kids. We really need help. We have been in the street for 5 days.”

Other groups of migrants are still displaced in Martyr's Square and Saifi village park in Central Beirut. Some are refusing to accept going to shelters fearing to be evicted whilst others hesitate due to the accumulated psychological impact of the violence.

The current issue of migrant workers rough sleeping in various areas of Beirut presents significant challenges. Access to clean toilets and sanitation facilities is severely restricted, exacerbating health risks and undermining dignity. Many are forced to endure unsafe living conditions, further contributing to their vulnerability and marginalisation. They are additionally exposed to increased traumatisation with the increase of airstrikes in areas closer to Central Beirut such as Zoukak el Blat and Kola intersection.

MWA has also received reports of live-out migrant workers being evicted from their place of residence to provide the space to the local displaced population. In addition, some groups reported being denied rent of private housing due to landlords prioritising rentals to Lebanese families or refusing to house beyond a limited number of tenants.

A large burden of relief efforts has been placed on community leaders representing the various migrant groups, with many struggling to access funding. MWA has been working with several community leaders from countries such as Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, The Philippines, Cameroon as well as Kenya, that all have been unable to access funding or create fundraising pages. Migrant workers in Lebanon are unable to open bank accounts due to government policies, making it hard to even receive donations by activists and supporters in the diaspora.

With winter approaching and Israeli airstrikes unabating, there is an urgent need for adequate shelters and essential services to support those affected by the conflict. In light of this dire situation, it is imperative that the Lebanese government and international organisations enhance their efforts to provide immediate assistance and sustainable solutions. Collaborative action is essential to address the escalating needs of displaced populations, ensuring their safety, dignity, and access to basic necessities in a challenging and rapidly evolving environment.

LACK OF SAFETY & SECURITY: THE DISTINCT VULNERABILITY OF DISPLACED MIGRANT WOMEN

Displaced migrant workers, and in particular women MDWs are facing various safety and security challenges. Many are facing precarious conditions with serious protection risks, including the risk of being re-trafficked. The majority of migrant workers, particularly migrant domestic workers are undocumented as their employers often confiscate their passports and do not facilitate the renewal of their residency papers (iqame), leaving them at risk of arrest and further exploitation.

For example, on 30 September MWA documented the case of 30 Ethiopian women who, while being transported from Sour to safety at their embassy in Beirut, were stopped and forced to return to their agency by armed men affiliated with the recruitment agency. Only six women made it to the Embassy.

With many migrant domestic workers still sleeping on the streets, the risk of abuse, exploitation or trafficking remains high. The increasing number of women sleeping on the streets furthermore increases the risk of sexual and gender-based violence. In previous days, MWA staff witnessed instances of violence against migrant domestic workers in Dawra whilst they were rough sleeping. MWA staff also witnessed instances of women being harassed by passers by including being photographed in a vulnerable state without any consideration for consent and dignity. In previous years, MWA documented many cases where MDWs on the streets of Lebanon are exploited into sex trafficking rings or into organised crimes against their will.

The absence of protective measures and the discriminatory nature of the Kafala system continue to limit their rights and options for safety. This institutional framework not only perpetuates exploitation but also heightens their exposure to gender-based violence, as many find themselves isolated and without support networks.

REPATRIATION: OBSTACLES DURING TIMES OF WAR

Repatriation efforts for migrant workers in Lebanon are currently at a halt due to the security situation. Many workers are eager to return home, while others prefer to wait, hoping for an improvement in the situation. Key obstacles complicating this situation include the cancellation of flights, which has disrupted travel logistics, and the fact that many migrant workers are undocumented, making it difficult for them to leave the country.

Furthermore, the sharp increase in airfare costs on the flights that are still operating has rendered returning home financially unfeasible for many. Responses from embassies and consulates vary: some have established plans to assist their citizens², while others

² MWA has reviewed communications issued by the Philippines, Kenya, and Ethiopian embassies. See for example Circular from the Kenyan Government:

<https://kiambu.tv/foreign-affairs-ministry-urges-kenyans-in-lebanon-to-evacuate-or-move-to-safer-areas/2024/>;

Circular from the Ethiopian government :

https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=927329569440586&id=100064906531757&mibextid=qi2Omq&rdid=fej0qcJQqheaQkVv

Circular from the Philippine Government:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdPT9Jn5ZO0rvxDIEhHHVrZkoQ2x-rZs7CiiJY-S6ACJcB1uO/viewform?fbclid=IwY2xjawFseZNIeHRuA2FibQIxMAABHYHzsUKHsbjaIthgHLXOEfdwWAY-rj2wooG_-AdJVz92-cq5OxAPD6R_w0w_aem_hug_SGK-le8L6VTfcmC_pw

remain silent, leaving many feeling abandoned. The lack of effective communication from certain embassies has only added to the uncertainty and frustration faced by these workers. For example, MWA spoke to a large number of Sierra Leonean women and the majority expressed a strong desire to be repatriated, but clear pathways or any communication for their return are still lacking. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure the safe return of migrant workers and to uphold their rights during this difficult time.

Another major obstacle is that the majority of displaced migrant workers are currently undocumented. It is common practice for employers to confiscate passports and not renew their workers' residency papers, making it difficult for migrant workers to leave the country. There has been no communication from General Security regarding the penalties or document procedures for expired residencies. MWA urges for the government to issue an amnesty for all undocumented migrant workers to facilitate their safe return home and to waive any penalty payment in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ The Lebanese government should include migrant domestic workers (as well as other non-Lebanese groups) in its emergency relief response including access to government-run shelters and other services essential to meet their right to an adequate standard of living.
- ❖ International organisations, including the IOM, should open and maintain emergency shelters for displaced migrant domestic workers to meet the immediate need for sheltering, access to basic necessities, and the provision of healthcare.
- ❖ International organisations, including the IOM, should advocate for MDWs to be repatriated through a time-sensitive procedure, which includes a general amnesty for expired residency papers as well as the waiving of penalty fees
- ❖ International and Lebanese organisations should provide focused relief to MDWs including access to PSS and protection support, taking into consideration their vulnerability for re-trafficking
- ❖ In line with international commitments, the donor community should support the government of Lebanon with adequate financial and technical assistance, in its efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the rising number of displaced in the country. International donors should also adjust granting/funding conditions to give front line community-led organisations access to funding for their crucial work.