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JUSTICE FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS



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Female Domestic Labor in Beirut: Reflections on Race and Gender

Sumayya Kassamali & Nadjé Al-Ali

Sumayya Kassamali is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. Her research examines the intersections of migration, neoliberalism, and racialization in the Middle East, and the transformation of social relations that accompanied the arrival of African and Asian migrant domestic workers to postwar Lebanon. Her current project, entitled “Black Beirut,” focuses on the urban afterlife of precarious labor migration as it has created new forms of language, intimacy, and belonging in the city of Beirut.

Nadjé Al-Ali is Robert Family Professor of International Studies and Professor of Anthropology and Middle East Studies. Her main research interests revolve around feminist activism and gendered mobilization, with a focus on Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey and the Kurdish political movement. Her publications include *What kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (2009, University of California Press, co-authored with Nicola Pratt); *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives* (Zed Books, 2009, co-edited with Nicola Pratt); *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (2007, Zed Books), and *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press 2000). Her co-edited book with Deborah al-Najjar entitled *We are Iraqis: Aesthetics & Politics in a Time of War* (Syracuse University Press) won the 2014 Arab-American book prize for non-fiction. Professor Al-Ali is on the advisory board of *kohl: a journal of body and gender research* and has been involved in several feminist organizations and campaigns transnationally.

Watson Institute / International & Public Affairs / Brown University
Webinar on Monday, November 22, 2021 / 12:00 - 1:00 p.m. EST
Here is the link of the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMkMaWnYlIs>

[00:00:03.460] - Nadjé Al-Ali

Hello and welcome everyone, to today's event. My name is Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali. I'm the Director of the Center for Middle East Studies here at Brown University, where I'm Professor of Anthropology and Middle East Studies. It's my great pleasure to host today's event. I've invited Professor Sumayya Kassamali, and we'll be speaking about her work on *Female domestic labor in Beirut: Reflections on Race and Gender*. And this talk is part of a series on exploring the questions of race and racialisation in the context of the Middle East and its diaspora, which started last year. But it also, of course, addresses issues of gender, which has been central to the kind of work we do at the center. Welcome, Sumayya. It's wonderful to be with you today. I actually read one of your articles in my new course on gender and migration and diaspora this semester and I enjoyed it very much. And so that the students and I thought, I need to be in conversation with you. So I'm so glad it worked out.

Let me introduce Professor Sumayya Kassamali, assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Center for diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto.

Her research examines the intersections of migration, neoliberalism, and racialisation in the Middle East, and the transformation of social relations that accompanied the arrival of African and Asian migrant domestic workers to post-war Lebanon. Her current project entitled *Black Beirut*, focuses on the urban afterlife of precarious labor migration as it has created new forms of language, intimacy, and belonging in the city of Beirut. The structure of the event will be that Sumayya and myself will be in conversation for about 40 minutes or so. I encourage you to put your comments and questions in the Q&A function and we'll have some time, 20 minutes or so, or even longer if you have many questions

towards the end. So Sumayya, I think it is important for those in the audience who are not familiar with some of the legal political framework of migration to give an introduction into the Kafala system, because that is the key of actually circumscribing relations between domestic labor and their employees in Lebanon as in the Gulf countries and other countries in the region. So can you introduce the Kafala system to us, please?

[00:03:12.040] - Sumayya Kassamali

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, everyone, for attending to be able to present my research. And I'm actually really glad to start with this question because one of the things that I've been trying to do in my work is to redefine the Kafala system away from its common translation, which is using the word sponsorship. The standard definition of the Kafala system is as a regional or a Middle East specific sponsorship system that governs migrant labor, which is to say determines the institutional regulation and management of temporary foreign labor in most of the Arabic speaking countries surrounding the Persian Gulf, so usually the GCC countries, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. But Iraq and Yemen have aspects of the Kafala system, they're not usually included in that list, as well as Jordan and Lebanon. In all of these countries, a foreign worker's residence and work permit is directly tied to a sponsor or a *kafeel*, and there is no parallel mechanism for immigration in the way we might be familiar with in the North American context. So even elite foreigners are subject to the requirement of having either an individual citizen or a proxy, such as a business, serve as their sponsor.

Now, another way this has been described is as the privatization of immigration or the outsourcing of labor migration from the state to the citizenry. The first thing I want to say is

that this is the biggest difference between the Kafala system and some of the other many guest worker programs around the world. Now, although a lot of the news coverage makes the Kafala system seem singularly exploitative, I want to point out that almost all of these global guest worker programs, including those in Canada where I live, include a mixture of prior screening, temporary work visas with limited or no access to naturalization, strict restrictions on employment, mobility, and political organizing, as well as precarious working conditions and racialized targeting and discrimination. But what distinguishes the Kafala system is that it places almost all responsibility for these foreign workers in the hands of the sponsors, meaning individual citizens or businesses, and not the state. And sometimes you can have elite non-citizens, let's say professors visiting, working in a country, they can also sponsor a migrant worker. So in my work as an anthropologist, I draw upon the insights of theorists who show us how privatization is not only a set of economic policies or legal regulations, but also a social logic.

And I think that it's not quite accurate to define the Kafala system as just a sponsorship system because this assumes that everything we need to know about Kafala is contained in the dynamics of sponsor and sponsored, i.e. Employer and Employee, or even Citizen and Foreigner. In fact, the Kafala system is a large scale social institution that can be found in every aspect of the society where it operates. For example, in the Lebanese context, I look at how construction regulations have changed to accommodate the architecture of what is called the *Maid's Room*, *ghourfat el khadimé*. I look at the proliferation of domestic workers as characters in TV and film and literature, the rise of new social categories such as the "Madame", the proliferation of stereotypes about how Sri Lankan women smell, or if Ethiopian women speak Arabic, or Bangladesh women are obsessed with gold.

I also look at patterns of behavior specifically tied to the experience of domestic work, such as consistent ways in which women are abused by depriving them of food or forcibly cutting off their hair, as well as strategies of resistance and communication among domestic workers incarcerated in private homes. Even things like this genre of salon talk where Lebanese women frequently compare their domestic workers to each other while they're getting their hair and nails done. So I think it's essential that we understand all of this as part of the Kafala system, which constitutes an enormous multifaceted social institution with both formal and informal elements that is far more than just sponsorship.

[00:07:40.330] - Nadjé Al-Ali

Thank you very much. I mean, that's a much more comprehensive and holistic approach to the system because as you say, it is often defined in this very simplistic way of the sponsorship system. Most of the literature that I'm familiar with looks at it in the context of Gulf countries. So you've already hinted at it a bit, but can you tell us a bit more about the specificities and the specific history of the Lebanese context and how Kafala has emerged in Lebanon from previous arrangements? And what is, if anything, unique to the Lebanese Kafala system?

[00:08:29.500] - Sumayya Kassamali

Yeah, my apologies in advance. My answer to this question is very long, but I'll do my best. So I think many people in the audience will know that recently there's been some really important research done to challenge the assumption that the Kafala system emerges only after the expansion of the arrival and the expansion of the oil industry in the Gulf. So I'm thinking of Omar AlShehabi, [lecturer in Global Political Economy at University of Leeds, UK] recent work connecting the Kafala system with British colonial practices that sought

to control labor migration in the pearl industry in Bahrain and then expanded elsewhere. So he's looked at Bahrain and Kuwait. But it's true that generally speaking, the Kafala system and what is referred to as the "Asianization" of the workforce in the Gulf countries starting from the 1970s was a joint product of the growth of the oil industry — so of course, in 1973 with the OPEC [Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries], you have the enormous inflation of oil profits in the region. As well as specific histories of labor mobilizations in the Gulf. It's important to remember that during the 1950s and the 1960s, Arab workers in the Gulf, you had Egyptians, Palestinians, you had workers from, in fact, all over the region. Yemenis were highly politicized and were making demands as organized labor and also seeking to settle their families in the area. Adam Hanieh, [a development studies academic] who's at SOAS [University of London], has done some essential research on how these labor mobilizations, the strikes, the demands that workers were making, and also the idea that Arab workers politicized by the general climate of Pan Arabism and Nasserism saw themselves as active, those who belong in the Gulf and those who could make claims on what it means to live in the region and work in the region. And this formed the backdrop for a shift to what we have today, which are both increasingly narrow definitions of citizenship throughout the Gulf. So you have the rise of new citizenship laws that have very strict definitions of who is a citizen and who is not, as well as a shift towards largely South Asian labor who were seen as less able to be politicized. There was less linguistic and cultural familiarity, they were less confident and organized in terms of making demands. So this is the backdrop, and it's important to keep this labor history together with the oil industry, which is expanding in the 70s at the same time.

Now, Lebanon is quite different for a number of reasons. First, it has historically been Syrians who filled the construction industry as well as certain other manual labor workforces, including the agricultural and industrial sectors. Then after 1948 [Nakba in Palestine] and 1967 [Six Day War], they were, of course, joined by large numbers of Palestinians.

Now, again, I'm sure many in the audience will know about how notoriously messy the institution that we call the Lebanese state is. The way the Kafala system works in Lebanon is often more blurry than in the Gulf, given the presence of what can be thought of as a weak state in Lebanon compared to the strong states of the Gulf. For example, not only did both male and female African and Asian migrant workers fall under the requirements of sponsorship that we said characterized the Kafala system, but recently, Syrian refugees have also been subject to certain aspects of the Kafala system, including the requirement of having a Lebanese sponsor in some situations. It depends if you're registered with the UN as a refugee, it depends if you're there as a student versus a worker. There's a series of qualifiers. Lebanon also has smaller but not insignificant communities of Egyptian workers as well as Sudanese and Iraqi refugees, all of whom exist in what I think of as a vague, tangential proximity to what gets called Kafala. But generally speaking, and again, I apologize for this overly complicated set of qualifiers, the Kafala system refers specifically to African and Asian women, self-identified as women, who work as migrant domestic labor and who make up the majority of the nonregional foreign workforce, i.e. non Palestinian or non Syrian.

And a note about terminology, I sometimes say non Arab, but of course, you have many Syrian Kurds as well, so it's a bit of a slippery game of identification. And that's also why I generally prefer African and Asian as an identifier, although that leaves the issue of North Africa and the presence of

Egyptians. But also in the sex work industry, there's historically been the presence of North African women in Lebanon. Also, it's mostly Eastern European now. So again, there's this conglomeration of identifiers. But nonetheless, the Kafala system, for the most part, quantitatively and discursively, refers to African and Asian migrant domestic workers.

In terms of the question about earlier patterns and how we get to this demographic shift, when it comes to domestic work, there is a long local history of upper class households in the region in *Bilad al-Sham* broadly speaking, relying on outside help to perform domestic labor that stretches back to Ottoman times. This was a relatively small and elite phenomenon, consisting mostly of young women sometimes even girls as young as seven or eight years old who would be adopted as daughters, sort of, who would also then work, from Palestinians, Syrians, Kurdish, and working class Lebanese backgrounds — and we have to remember that these distinctions between Lebanon and Syria are obviously a lot blurrier before the modern nation states — who would sometimes pass through the families of wealthier families, the homes of wealthy families for a brief period of time. They would get certain kinds of class training. Let's say they would learn to read and write Arabic, learn poetry, learn sewing, house domestic skills, and then they would go on to get married. And other times they would remain with families across multiple generations. So they would never marry, they would be incorporated into the family in some way. It's referred to as fictive kinship. Some of them will be and they'll inherit from these families, they'll be buried on family properties. There's a mixture of arrangements, but they don't take the form of traditional wage labor for the most part. We have stories in the early 1900s of village brokers who would recruit the daughters of poor families in the countryside to work in the homes of wealthy families. You have a lot of these mediating figures. Elizabeth Thompson in her history of the mandate

period, records over 20,000 peasant girls and young women working in the homes of wealthy families in Beirut and Damascus in the 1920s.

In fact, Leila Fawaz, [a Lebanese historian and academician], has this really interesting interview with a woman. She records the woman saying that as late as the 1960s, Druze and Christian women in Lebanon would refuse to work in factories or hospitals in Beirut, leaving such unrespectable jobs for the Kurds and the Shia, but they preferred the socially acceptable status of working as domestic help in the homes of wealthy Christian families. So again, it's also interlaid with these sectarian dynamics that we identify with the Lebanese social context. Now, the big shift, so again, the prehistory of the Kafala system is you have a majority of Arab and Kurdish, Syrian, Lebanese, Egyptian, mostly working class and peasant women and girls, young women and girls who are doing the work of domestic labor in the homes of wealthier families. Now, the big shift in Lebanon happens during the Civil War, which lasts from 1975 to 1990. During the war, these women, Egyptians, Palestinians, Syrians, and other workers, either fled the country or were expelled from certain regions and neighborhoods due to their affiliation with factions implicated in the war. So you have some really interesting work done on the mass expulsion of Syrians, for example, from Christian dominated neighborhoods, because the history of the Lebanese Civil War is also the history of the redrawing geographic boundaries of who lives in what neighborhood and what kind of militias end up having control over different neighborhoods.

You have these incredible stories of families where Palestinians women would be working as domestic workers, and if they were mistreated, they would say, I'm going to call the *fedayeen* on you, or I'm going to call the guerrilla factions to back me up. And so there are stories of Lebanese families

saying that «we got really scared of the Palestinians during the war, and so that's why we didn't want them in our homes anymore». Now, at the same time, approximately 40 % of the Lebanese population left the country during the war, over this 15 year period of the war. And outside of Lebanon, global economic crises in the 1970s led to a number of Asian countries, particularly the Philippines and Sri Lanka, introducing policies aimed at exporting their female labor force in order to reduce unemployment and increase national remittances. So economists and sociologists refer to this as *the push and pull factor*. You have a series of factors that are specific to Lebanon, and the Middle East scholarship tends to focus on only regional issues. But we have to also think about what's happening in the countries that are referred to as the exporting countries or the sending countries. And at that time, you have the rise of the idea of the woman who sacrifices herself for her country. So especially in the Philippines, there is a whole national discourse that rises about women who leave their families behind and the husband's care for the children and they travel abroad, care for other families to send remittance back to be the financial support of the country.

Okay, so it's during the Civil War in Lebanon that enterprising recruitment agencies, basically entrepreneurial business figures, took advantage of an absence of government regulation and this breakdown in pre-existing patterns of social trust in order to bring migrant women, African and Asian women, into the country as domestic workers. Now, the last piece of this puzzle is that there is also an extremely important connection with the Gulf because you have a large number of Lebanese workers who leave during the war and go to the Gulf. Then after they return to Lebanon, and many return either with domestic workers who they themselves had hired while in, especially Saudi Arabia, but these are wealthier Lebanese families who go to the Gulf, they enter these Kafala system arrangements. And others don't

return with domestic workers, but they return with certain ideas about gendered and racialized labor, the desirability and prestige of having a domestic worker, the idea that it's not good to do this kind of demeaning work of cleaning and cooking and raising children and taking care of old people. You should outsource that. And then the infrastructure of the Kafala system.

I just want to mention that it's really essential historical work to be done about the connections between Lebanon and the Gulf, specifically Saudi Arabia, in the early development of the Kafala system during the Civil War that I would love for someone to do in case there's anyone out there looking for a project. It would be amazing for this work to happen.

[00:20:24.900] - Nadjé Al-Ali

Gosh, I have to admit that I hadn't realized when I would pose this question there is such a comprehensive answer, but I understand there are so many different layers and pieces to the puzzle and you beautifully laid them out to us. So thanks. I have a much better understanding now about the complexities and the history. Now, you stress that it is really female African and Asian migrant domestic workers that are associated with the Kafala system. However, I also understand, and I understand that from having read your work, but also having been to Beirut many times, that when people speak about their female domestic labor, they tend to use the term *SriLankiyye*, which literally means Sri Lankan, and they use the term to refer to all migrant domestic workers. One of the things that I found so interesting in your work is that you attempt to illustrate the racialisation of the migrant domestic worker that underlines the contemporary Kafala system. Can you elaborate on the meaning of race in the Kafala system in Lebanon?

[00:21:46.380] - Sumayya Kassamali

Yeah, I can do my best. I wish there was an easy answer to this question, but one of the things that I have learned and that I'm trying to think through and write through is that there is no simple framework by which we can isolate the category of race from the way it's situated in this intersectional category of the migrant domestic worker. So a category that is, of course, gendered, racialized, and classed to use that classic feminist framework of intersectionality, gender, race, and class, but also further tied up with the legal infrastructure of foreignness. And this category of foreignness, I think, is really central to also understanding what is happening when it comes to the experiences of migrant workers. Foreignness in the Lebanese context, like this term, *ajaneb*, the Arabic term for foreign workers is *ommal el ajaneb*, but then there's, of course, the term domestic workers *aamilat el manazel*, which is a gender term. But foreignness is a word, some of the legal infrastructure of dispossessing Palestinians from the right to work certain jobs, for example, is also under this legal category of foreigner. So it has both legal and political relevance in that context.

So you have gender, race and class, you have foreignness, you have the precarity and exploitability of being a worker inside the home specifically. And you also have a category that is internally differentiated by a set of national stereotypes about different countries of origin. So what it means to be Ethiopian versus Filipino versus Sri Lankan. Now, as you know, the question of race is a really current topic in Middle East studies. And as part of this conversation, I've seen many people point to the Kafala system as a key example, a paradigmatic instance of anti-blackness in the region, one that is often further linked to the regional histories of slavery and conquest. There's often a connection made between the contemporary Kafala system and the history of what's called the Islamic or the Arab slave trade. But of course, blackness

and racial categories more broadly are not stable signifiers. We know that they shift over time and within contexts, both in terms of what words are used to create new racial hierarchies and categories, but also what possibilities of life are entailed or foreclosed within these categories. So for example, one of the things that I found really striking is that in some of the literature on the earlier presence of female Ethiopian domestic workers in 18th and 19th century Ottoman context, both enslaved and free, they are often described as prized for their remarkable beauty. So this is a way in which the historiography of the late Ottoman slave trade, these are one of the ways in which Ethiopia women are identified. And this really struck me because a lot of the contemporary discourse in Lebanon is permeated with a disgust at the bodies of Ethiopian and other women, African and Asian women, for whom beauty is an almost unfathomable description, unless it's part of an objectifying fetishisation. So you have this famous incident in Lebanon of a feminist NGO named *Kafa*, making a fake soap allegedly to clean domestic workers bodies. They had a whole campaign around this fake soap, and they intended to draw attention to problematic racial stereotypes about uncleanliness or dirt or hygiene through this campaign and this fake invention. But it was so so socially believable that the Lebanese Ministry of Labor actually thought it was real and issued a statement calling on people not to buy this soap. This is just a contrast. Now, when we read in the historically that Ethiopian women were prized for their beauty, of course, there is a difference between that blanket statement and the experiences of these women. But even at the level of discourse, there's such a significant difference between what these bodies mean and how they're apprehended and discussed.

To take another very straightforward example, friends with certain shades of brown or black skin but with American or European passports in Beirut might simultaneously be sub-

ject to certain kinds of racial insults walking on the streets of Lebanon but also deeply protected from the violence of the state when it comes to things like processing visas. So if you go to the ministry where you have to do paperwork, there's a very different experience for them or for us even versus people who are migrant domestic workers who don't have their passports, who have a whole form of racialized legal discrimination that they're subject to. So for me, the most important thing to understand in relation to this question about race in the Kafala system is that in only three decades, really, we're talking about a system that proliferates in the 1990s. That's when it really becomes a wide scale social phenomenon after the war with all the money coming into Lebanon for reconstruction and what's referred to as a postwar neoliberalism. In only three plus decades, the Kafala system has introduced this new social category of the migrant domestic workers, or what we could say using Cedric Robinson's term [an American professor], are new hierarchies of human worth.

And that's where you get this term *SriLankiyye*. So it's not the only word used for domestic workers. The term, again, it's the Arabic adjective for female Sri Lankan. It's a national adjunctive, the way American, et cetera, would be, but it's gendered as feminine. But it's become possible because Sri Lanka was the first major country of origin for domestic workers. That term came to signify this entire category of migrant domestic worker. That term co-exists with a lot of other terms, such as the English word that in English they would be made helper, domestic worker, servant. These are all words that can be used, but this is a specific one. You can even say and you hear sentences such as «my *SriLankiyye* is from the Philippines». I should note that this term is further objectified by using the possessive so that you can say yours or mine about this person. To me, this term is the closest thing in the Lebanese context to how people use black in the

North American context, or at least how we think of black as a racial category. Not that they are synonyms, but that they are distinctive social categories that contain within them the complex histories marked by a distinctive form of vulnerability to death. This is using the Ruth Wilson Gilmore's [an American prison abolitionist and prison scholar] definition of racism. She says racism is marked by a distinctive or a particular vulnerability and proximity to the experience of death. But the last thing I want to say is that it's important to point out that all the deep histories of slavery in the North American context and the relationship of blackness to freedom and struggle that so many people are writing about these days has an extremely different trajectory in Lebanon. I wonder if whether in 100 years we might see a very different meaning to the term *SriLankiyye*. But as it currently stands, it's a very fixed category with very specific structural constraints tied to the Kafala system — although as always, there is immense creativity within these constraints. But compared to how we think about blackness, it's far more narrow in terms of its ties to the Kafala system.

[In a text entitled «The Kafala System as Racialized Servitude» wrote for POMEPS, Kassamali notes: «More than simply a shift in popular language usage or a new racist slur, *SriLankiyye* indicates a new subject, and a new form of subjectification, in the social landscape. Moreover, taking a cue from the framework of racial capitalism, it also reminds us that the economic developments of the last century are inextricable from their reliance on various racial logics.»]

[00:29:40.910] - Nadjé Al-Ali

Yeah, thank you. I'm listening to you. I'm wondering, so what does it say about Lebanese self understandings in terms of race? One of the things that has struck me a lot when in conversation with some, not all, of course, Lebanese, I mean, there's lots of diversity, of course, and not only in sectarian

terms in class and gender, but I guess also in terms of politics and ideas. But one of the things that has struck me is often the insistence of not being Arab and pointing to the specific Venetian past. You're speaking about some parallel in terms of *SriLankiyye* and the concept of blackness in the US, what about concepts of whiteness and white supremacy? How do they play out, especially in the context of also this construction of, again, amongst some Lebanese of not wanting to be Arab as well?

[00:30:48.960] - Sumayya Kassamali

Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up because I think it's one important part of the puzzle. Again, like the question about the history of the Kafala system in Lebanon, I think that there are multiple genealogies through which we can begin to form answers to this question. But again, there isn't enough adequate historical work to give us a strong enough picture. So for example, there is this connection between fascist and Aryan and white supremacist ideology from Europe, specifically Italy, Spain, and Nazi Germany in the mid 20th century in the context of the *Kataeb Party*, which is a political religious armed, well, formerly, a political party that was a major presence in the Civil War and still exists. That's one line through which we can draw a local thread, a local history. There are sets of ideas about what it means to be Lebanese that come from people like Michel Chiha and the founding ideologues of Lebanese Nationalism, often, as you just pointed out for us, formulated in opposition to being Syrian or Muslim or Arab. So the idea that Lebanon and *Lebaneseness* or Lebanese identity is constituted against the Syrian Muslim Arab identity or broader regional context.

There is also the important history of European and American influence in the so-called golden years of Beirut, this whole the Paris of the Middle East image that Beirut had attained at that time, around the 1950s, as well as the equally,

if not more important history of anti-colonial sentiments in the region, particularly through the Palestinian Revolution and the importance of Beirut as a node of African and Asian solidarity and third world internationalism. One of the anecdotes I like to say is that there used to be an Ethiopian students association in Lebanon around the 1960s, and there was a very large presence of African students and political ideologues, anti-colonial intellectuals, poets, writers who were passing through Beirut, which is, again, an unfathomable reality in the contemporary, even pre-2019 demographic and social landscape of Lebanon. But this is a very recent history. I think all of these things are part of those threads through which we think about what whiteness and blackness look like in this specific context. Of course, there is a basic level of racial thinking present in Lebanese society, one that apprehends a relationship between skin color and value. Again, this concept of hierarchies of human worth.

But I would not go so far as to simply say that Lebanon is anti-black or white supremacist. I think that these terms, the English terms, anti-black and white supremacist are deeply laden with the particular history of the transatlantic slave trade. And we first need to do this careful historic work of teasing out the various strands of how local and regionally specific categories come into being and are also contested. So I know you had Eve Troutt Powell, [professor of History at University of Pennsylvania], speak as part of this series, and I think her work is such an important example of the work that needs to be done in Lebanon and throughout the region. One last example that, again, I find interesting is the word *asmar* or *samra*, which is, of course, the word for the color brown, but it's also used to describe a great tan. It's a word associated with feminine beauty and a lot of Arabic music that I would hear while living in Beirut. Lebanon, in the summers, is full of billboards advertising tanning and people wanting to spend time at the beach to bronze their

skin. At the same time, most private beaches forbid domestic workers from entering the water or wearing bathing suits because of these violently racist assumptions, associations with their bodies and their skin color. So, I wonder how we talk about brownness and blackness and whiteness trying to keep at play all of these local and specific experiences. I find the best way to do it, obviously, as an anthropologist, I think is that we start from stories of actual life as opposed to from the, somewhat not abstract, but the historically specific terms such as white supremacy that I worry carry too much connotations of of the transatlantic slave trade.

[00:35:19.230] - Nadjie Al-Ali

Yeah, thank you. So Sumayya, before I ask the next question, which I'm going to shift gear a bit, I would like to encourage the audience again to put in their questions and comments in the Q&A function. So my next question revolves around the specific work that female domestic workers do. They don't do just any type of work, they do care work. What are, if any, what are specific implications of care work here?

[00:35:56.280] - Sumayya Kassamali

Yeah, thanks for mentioning that because this category of care work is also something that I am wondering about and thinking through and have been for some time. And sometimes I worry that the category can risk exceptionalising this kind of labor as if all forms of labor are not laden with affect and care and permeated by gendered and racialised dynamics as we know about teaching in the academy, for example. So increasingly, I feel that the category of work is somewhat inadequate to encapsulate the dynamics of what it is like to be inside the Kafala system. Again, let me give you an example. There is this extremely common and horrifying practice in Lebanon where when a domestic worker runs away from the home of her sponsor, the sponsor being the employer, usually a family member, usually the woman, in fact. But

there are a fair number of men who serve as the legal sponsor, even though the woman, the wife, or the mother of the household tends to be the one who interacts most with the domestic worker. So the sponsor will not only report to the police that she has fled, and just to clarify, it's very common for a woman to run away just because of mistreatment and a series of other reasons. The sponsor will report to the police that she has fled, but also include a false allegation of theft. Commonly, they will say she stole a large amount of cash or valuables such as gold. And it is widely known that the police encourage this false accusation because running away is not a criminal offense, but theft is. And what that means is that eventually, so you have all these women running away and they're undocumented workers. The way we understand that category, again, in a city like New York, where undocumented labor does so much of the day to day operations of the city. So they are at risk for deportation, but it's often the case that women will intentionally give themselves up to police for deportation. They'll go to a checkpoint and basically ask to be taken to prison. It has a term, it's called, *btsallem halek*, to give yourself up. And it's because that's the easiest way to travel, to get back home. So you spend a chunk of time in the detention center, you pay a penalty, and you usually pay the cost of your ticket back home and you get yourself deported. So if there is a false theft accusation on the woman's file under her name, before she can leave the country, she has to resolve the theft complaint in court or more likely through bribes or backdoor channels. So basically it's a way to get money. And this practice is referred to an employer parlance as retrieving your investment. So employers usually spend between \$1500 to up to \$5,000 hiring a domestic worker, all the fees and a series of broker fees and ticket costs and medical insurance that you have to pay to bring someone to your home. This is considered an investment. And the idea is that when they run away, you've lost your investment. And so there should be a way to get it back. You're entitled to that

money. So it strikes me that conceiving of the domestic worker as an investment is not at all the same of conceiving of them as a form of labor or a relation of employment. There's some interesting scholarship that has been done about how «work» might not be the right category for domestic labor or domestic work because what is actually demanded is the entire person, a kind of complete subjection and subjugation. I refer to this as the attempt to strip someone of her socio-political being and remake her in servitude. And again, I look at these examples of how domestic workers, their names are often changed. So they'll just be referred to as a different name, either a short form of their name because their name is too complicated to say, or the name of the last domestic worker that they had because they had memorized that name. So it's like their entire person is demanded and they want to remake the domestic worker into a different subject, a subject that is a servant. I think through Judith Butler and Foucault and this notion of subjectivisation, which is a little bit different than the category of employment or affective labor or care work. And again, this is not the same as enslavement, but it is a resonant form of unfreedom that we can see in the way domestic work and the Kafala system operates.

[00:40:36.830] - Nadje Al-Ali

Yeah, I think that's a good point. And I also really like the point you make about the way the literature looks at care work is often very narrowly defined. And of course, there's, as you say, the care aspect and effective aspect that extends to lots of different works, forms of work.

I had a question about the working conditions and forms of exploitation, but I see there is a question here from the audience, so I'm going to take that first. It's from a friend, Georgina Manok. Hello, Georgina. So Georgina is asking, do you see any connection between Maronite [a confession] supremacy and the racialized hierarchy of migrant workers

from the Philippines in Lebanon? And do you think the current financial collapse might impact the racialized hierarchy when more Lebanese are engaged in domestic labor?

[00:41:46.460] - Sumayya Kassamali

Yeah, thank you. Two really interesting questions. In terms of the first question, maybe for audience members that aren't aware, there is this internal, again, racialized hierarchy where there's this phrase about Filipino women where they're referred to as the Mercedes Benz of servants. It's tied to shade of skin, but also things like language. It's very common that if you want a domestic worker who will be able to help your children with homework, for example, in wealthier families, especially if they're doing English language education, you might want a Filipino woman because she's understood to be fluent in English just because of the history of the US colonization of Philippines, etcetera. And it's true that there is, again, this complex hierarchy of who's at the top of the ladder of domestic work, but one of the things that I've realized is that when you look at stories of abuse, actually that hierarchy is not sustainable in that you have women from all contexts of origin who are subject to very similar practices. So, in terms of the point about forms of exploitation, deprivation of food, rest, mobility, a kind of incarceration in the home — Amnesty International calls it «the house as a prison», and they draw that phrase from women who they met. And I heard that phrase all the time, that «the house is a prison», «the house traps us». And there is no statistical majority where women from X country are treated vastly worse. You have many, many Filipino women, for example, who are subject to these practices. And on the reverse side, in terms of Maronite, you also don't have clear information about some sectarian communities in Lebanon treating their domestic workers worse than others. I actually think of the Kafala system as one of the most cross-sectarian institutions in Lebanese society. People participate in it across every sec-

tarian demographic and from the elite into the lower middle class context. You even have wealthier Palestinian families who live in refugee camps but have the capital to employ a migrant domestic worker. And often the wages they're paying are so, so minimal but it's not beyond their reach. And so I don't think there is a unique distinction between either the mistreatment or better treatment of Filipino women or a unique form of racism particular to Maronite or other demographics, sectarian demographics. Although, like I said, because of the history of the *Kataeb Party*, that is a place where white supremacist ideology has really found root in Lebanese ideology or ideologies present in Lebanon.

And in terms of the second question, it's really interesting. So yeah, you have suddenly, it's become common, or at least not entirely uncommon for Lebanese people to work as domestic workers in the context of the crisis. [*referring to the current economic and financial crisis in Lebanon, the worst that happened in generations, leading to the devaluation of the country's currency and to a hyperinflation. The purchasing power of people based in Lebanon collapsed, four out of every ten are out of work, and more than half of the population is under the poverty line.*]

And there have been some reports about how there's so much shame associated with it, and many people don't want to admit that they're doing this work that has been reserved, discursively, imaginatively reserved for foreigners. It's not that you had zero Lebanese domestic workers. You did have some who, again, are holdouts from an earlier era and who are still alive, but they're definitely towards the end of their service and their life. And so you now have this new phenomenon. Part of me does think that, yes, in the long scheme, in the long arc of history, the redrawing of what labor looks like in post-crisis Lebanon and these hierarchies of human worth being somewhat destabilized and made messier, that has the potential to change things. But the situation in Lebanon is so

devastating right now that I don't think I can be concretely hopeful. But I think maybe if we think in kind of a 50 year arc, there could be something that changes. But it depends a lot on what becomes possible in Lebanon in the context of this crisis. Right now it does feel quite bleak.

[00:46:09.360] - Nadjé Al-Ali

Yeah. I guess it's quite early to be able to tell also it's quite unsure where things are going in this really acute crisis. I've been wondering, so during my visits to Beirut, especially trying to be in conversation with young Lebanese feminists, particularly queer feminists, what struck me was the way that intersectionality played out in that context. I found that there were several queer feminist activists and also feminist activists and organizations that seem to be in solidarity and be involved in solidarity activism with domestic migrant workers organizations. I guess I have two questions here. One, going back a bit, you're describing the Kafala system, you're describing these horrendous working conditions, so I guess on one level, I'm interested, what do people say about it, or what are some of the different narratives around these working conditions amongst Lebanese society? And secondly, are you aware of these solidarity activities? And I don't know if you've had a chance to speak to female domestic labors, what they think about those Lebanese who are actually trying to challenge the existing system.

[00:48:02.050] - Sumayya Kassamali

Yeah, of course. I'll start with the second one. In the last decade, there's been an enormous increase in attention to this issue on the part of NGOs, news organizations, both local and international. And especially through these collaborations that you're mentioning among local activists. So the group that has been at the forefront of this is something called the *Anti-Racism Movement (ARM)*. It's a umbrella organization that brings together a number of different

people, but it really started as a collaboration between migrant community leaders — so people who had been in the country for a long time and were already either informally or through connections with embassies, service providers, they were providing all sorts of aid and help and shelter for migrant workers, both male and female, but especially domestic workers who have been mistreated — and many of those figures who had been in Lebanon for 10, 20, even more years were very fluent in how to navigate the confusing structures of Lebanese bureaucracy and aid provision. They joined forces with or gathered with a number of amazing Lebanese activists and built this movement that has multiple different projects. It has something called the *Migrant Community Center*. There's now three or four centers around the country. I think some of them may be struggling in the current context, but I did a lot of my research at one of these centers in Beirut where they offer classes. I taught English. It's kind of a safe space for migrant workers to go meet each other, have birthday parties. There's daycare. And a lot of the people, they're quite visible, generally speaking, in at least some parts of Lebanese society, specifically some neighborhoods of Beirut, but not only in the capital city, including in other cities. And many of the migrant workers I met were conscious of these efforts, would say things like, not all Lebanese. There is this horrible experience that we generally have of Lebanese society, but we are also grateful to meet certain Lebanese individuals or not just Lebanese, but you have foreigners, you have Syrians and Palestinians involved. I think there isn't a lack of awareness, and I would say even an immense generosity among migrant worker communities to this kind of activism.

And in terms of your point about queer feminist, yes. So a lot of the Lebanese activists were people who have an amazing history of being connected to feminist and queer organizing, working on domestic violence, reproductive health, gender,

inclusive social spaces. These were the people that really came together, and they're still doing that incredible work. And after the arrival of over 1 million Syrian refugees around 2015, there was a link made between kinds of racism and targeting directed at migrant workers and at Syrians. A lot of neighborhoods would have curfews for Syrians that were a form of targeting. So these connections are being made. The thing I would say is that unfortunately, as we know about activism in any context, they're not representative of Lebanese society as a whole. And they certainly haven't made the inroads to mass social transformation that we would need to see to really change the Kafala system. It's so structurally embedded. It's so pervasive that even in contexts where people feel that they're doing their best, they treat the domestic worker and their family very well, there is an inextricability between certain social relations, like the idea that to have a functional family in order to be a good husband who provides for your wife or be a good child who provides for your parents, you need to have a domestic worker. These are deeply embedded social truths. And so I think even the presence of consciousness raising around mistreatment, that doesn't come close to countering the structural significance of the Kafala system in Lebanese society. And there's actually an amazing recent film by the Lebanese filmmaker, Maher Abu Samra. It's called *Makhdoom*, in English, *A Maid for Each*. It came out a few years ago, I think, 2018. And it looks at exactly this. It looks at the role of the Kafala system as a public secret in Lebanese society «we can't live without it». And that's the idea. I think I missed your first question. Perhaps there was a solidarity part in the first part.

[00:52:47.150] - Nadjé Al-Ali

Well, about what wider Lebanese society? But that is an impossible question because there are so many different narratives. So yeah, I don't know if you have also comment question, so maybe get to that. So this is a comment or ques-

tion from a colleague here at Brown, Professor Andre Willis. Hello, Andre. «Thank you, Professor Kassamali. Given your acknowledgement that the genealogy of the black-white binary is intimately tied to the particular Barbarism and legalized brutality of the transatlantic slave trade, why attempt to deploy black as a modifier to Beirut? It seems like the racialized hierarchies in Beirut that you want to discuss might be better served and the American movement for black lives better preserved by deploying a term that addresses the complicated context in Lebanon in more robust, descriptive ways that avoid the problems that the black-white binary invokes.»

[00:54:00.600] - Sumayya Kassamali

Yeah. So the question is referring to something that I didn't have time to get into, but my work and most of my field work was done with undocumented workers who are referred to as freelance workers. And I look at this intersection that was happening in the time I was there between 2014 to 2016 among mostly Ethiopian, but generally migrant domestic workers who leave the home. So they flee these incarcerated spaces of domestic servitude and work in the city. They are undocumented workers who have transformed one specific neighborhood, but generally multiple parts of multiple neighborhoods in Beirut where you have things like hair salons, coffee shops, secret spaces where you can hang out, nightclubs. There's a whole informal, semi underground infrastructure, what I think of as a layer to the city of Beirut for migrant workers, and many of them with them have either Syrian boyfriends or Lebanese allies, in order to open a business, for example, you do need a Lebanese partner. You can't just do it yourself if you're a foreigner. And so it's a set of partnerships, intimate, financial, sexual, political that have created this layer to the city. And I refer to it as *Black Beirut*. And I don't think of it as premised on a binary of black or white, but I think of the category of blackness through a lot

of the conceptual work that has been done recently thinking about the relationship between blackness as both, as I said, a proximity to social vulnerability, a specific historically rooted vulnerability to death, to use that term, but also a form of fugitivity and escape and a creative engagement with the possibilities of freedom. And so a lot of this work, again, in the North American context, but not exclusively, has been asking us what would it mean to think conceptually, not abstractly, but conceptually about blackness? And what happens if we start from the black experience as opposed to starting from a white experience and then thinking about the mistreatment of black bodies or other minorities, etc. For me, the work of Fred Moten [American cultural theorist, poet, and scholar], for example, and the relationship between blackness and fugitivity became a very helpful way to think through what I was seeing in these spaces of Beirut. Just to clarify, it's not only an abstract application. These are dominated by Ethiopian and many other African, East West African countries, people from those countries of origin. Blackness is not a metaphor. It is a lived reality. It's a thing that people talk about. But I also think that it offers an opening to precisely talk about this. The category of *SriLankiyye* is so delimited by the constraints of the Kafala system, but in a night club playing Amharic music and the latest hits from Nigeria that everyone goes to dance to on Saturday nights, the life that's made possible in that space is not the life determined by the category of *SriLankiyye* for me. It's a very different kind of creativity. It's a different kind of possibility. And so Black Beirut has become the way that I'm trying to think through that which exists obviously in productive tension with whiteness as a form of proximity to social power. So not whiteness as Lebanese are racially white, but whiteness as something that, again, has this complex local manifestation that is not separate from shade of skin, but has, again, specificity. I know that's a somewhat convoluted answer, but that's my attempt to think through why I use that term.

[00:57:54.730] - Nadjé Al-Ali

Yeah. Well, I feel like I'm probably also responsible for having used those terms. And I think it's good to think and reflect more while we are starting to finally think more critically and reflectively and actually analyze questions of race and racialization and anti-black racism in the Middle East. To do that while learning from the experience and the work that has been done in North America without any way, I guess, generalizing, taking away, diminishing, and also, of course, appreciating the specificities, both in terms of obviously the transatlantic slave trade and then I guess in relation to the Middle East. And as you said previously, that is still a very unexplored area, especially in terms of the history of racialisation, anti-black racism. Sumayya, we now have several questions, but we have run out of time. So my apologies to the audience. Thanks so much, Sumuyya, for making the time and for generously sharing your work. Very exciting and important work. Thank you to the audience who's joining us here on webinar but also on YouTube. Yes, my apologies that we didn't get to the questions. Yes, bye bye everyone and thank you again, Sumayya.

The Lebanese Revolution: A New Chapter of Kafala Misery

Banchi Yimer

Banchi Yimer is a former domestic worker who lived in Lebanon for nearly a decade. Alongside fellow Ethiopian migrant workers, she founded Eгна Legna («Us for Ourselves»), a community-based organization working on migrant domestic workers' issues and women's issues in Lebanon and Ethiopia. If you wish to support Eгна Legna, go to this link <https://shorturl.at/nzGQW>.

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Here is the link: <https://thepublicsource.org/lebanese-revolution-kafala-misery>

Day 72: Friday, December 27, 2019

The Lebanese revolution brought hundreds of thousands into the streets with aspirations for a new country free from the grip of a corrupt elite. Lebanese from every social group seem empowered by the sense that their country's destiny finally lies in their hands. But for foreign domestic workers, some of the more powerless members of society, taking part in shaping tomorrow's Lebanon is still not within reach. Many cannot imagine joining protesters in the streets as they are trapped in homes, barred access to the outside world, and living at the mercy of their employers — conditions made possible by the oppressive kafala system.

By legally binding a migrant worker's immigration status to a contractual relationship with the employer, the position of the employer as tyrant is enshrined in Kafala. They can withhold salaries and inflict horrific abuses with no consequence, turning the lives of domestic workers into a living hell. A former domestic worker myself, in 2017 I founded Engna Legna («Us for Ourselves»), an Ethiopian migrants group that advocates for domestic workers' rights in Lebanon. As protests took hold of the country, the women we work with and serve in the community wondered what lies ahead. Some feared that the peaceful protests might turn into conflict. Others harbored a faint hope that an overhaul of the political establishment might raise the status of domestic workers to humans worthy of basic rights and dignity.

At a time when the excess of the political and economic elites is pushing many Lebanese past the boiling point, horrendous abuses by home-owning employers remain largely ignored in Lebanese society. Although there are around 250,000 migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, they remain an after-

thought. Even in this revolution, mobilizations for equality and the abolition of kafala remain largely absent from the movement's discourse and actions, minus a handful of exceptions such as a public discussion led by *the Anti-Racism Movement* ^[1] last November.

The greater tragedy is when employers capitalize on the deteriorating economic conditions to further exploit migrant domestic workers, by withholding salaries for example, which is a common practice that is well documented. But with the financial crisis, we have come across dozens of cases of rich employers claiming they cannot pay the meager salaries of the domestic workers laboring in their homes. One of the workers we support is a single mother of two children who rely on her wages for food and schooling in Ethiopia. She has not been paid in six months, and so her children's situation has become desperate. When she begged her employers to pay her what she is owed, they savagely beat her for raising the issue and reiterated that there is no money circulating at the moment. She will have to be patient, they said, and wait until the crisis ends.

Some employers are doing all they can to avoid the probing questions of families back home, forbidding the workers from making their monthly phone call. We have come across countless stories in recent weeks of families in rural areas of Ethiopia unaware of the dire economic situation in Lebanon, caught off-guard by the sudden interruption to their cash flow. Discontinued remittances have produced severe material consequences like food insecurity and a lack of access to education. Unexpected cuts also distress the families, as they leave them hanging in limbo, wondering what could have happened to their daughters, mothers and sisters, especially that it is now common knowledge in Ethiopia that many domestic workers contracted in Lebanon return home in coffins.

Other employers, after much prodding and pressure, have finally started to pay wages in Lebanese pounds, rather than in dollars, without accounting for the devaluation of the local currency. Domestic workers who are getting paid in pounds suffer significant financial losses. The Lebanese lira, still officially pegged to the US dollar at 1,507, has soared over 2,000 on the black market [*soared over 95,000 in 2023*], the real exchange rate in the everyday economy. As of today, domestic workers incur no less than a 25 to 30 percent loss of value when they exchange currency to send remittances back home.

The financial crisis is also exacerbating other abusive practices like a forced undocumented status and captivity after the end of a contract. Under kafala, it is the employer's responsibility to file the necessary documentation to maintain the worker's legal status. It is also the employer's obligation to pay the return airfare when the contract ends. In the past, many employers feigned the financial inability to cover return travel costs. The emerging trend with the revolution is to take advantage of the perceived chaos and lie to the workers by claiming the airport is closed until further notice. In effect, employers are holding the workers hostage to avoid paying the required immigration fees and to escape the contractual obligation to release workers at the end of their two-years contracts. If workers have never had a process through which to hold abusive employers accountable, the latter are now emboldened by the uncertainty of the moment.

Legally registered Lebanese recruitment agencies have also contributed to the deteriorating conditions of domestic labor over the past few months. We have come across numerous incidents involving agency staff-turned-brokers who, rather than binding employers and employees through contracts, pursue under-the-table profits by selling and laying claim to

the workers' labor. These brokers enter in illicit agreements with homeowners and trap the worker in a cycle of slavery. Toiling away from one home to the next, the worker receives no wages while the broker reaps profits from multiple sources. Moreover, brokers do not pay to legalize the worker's status, which renders their presence in the country illegal. Resisting this trap could lead to an intervention by law enforcement and a hasty deportation.

Workers who escape abusive employers, live in rented homes and work in the day, often illegally. They, too, are not spared from the effects of the economic crisis. Many have been dismissed from their jobs or told that there is no money to pay them. Though they are free from the confines of the prisons they once lived in, these workers have additional costs like transportation, rent and food, and find themselves in increasing precariousness. We have come across the case of a mother who had no choice but to abandon her infant at an orphanage because she couldn't feed the child. There continues to be no prearranged alternatives or rescue mechanisms for the most vulnerable members of society.

I am well aware that many Lebanese workers are out of a job and gradually losing their life savings. We're following the news. Cuts in wages, funds withheld by the banks, and stories of men who kill themselves when unable to support their families also shock our conscience. But far too many financially stable Lebanese employers view the present economic instability as an opportunity to hold domestic workers hostage and secure free labor, jeopardizing the already precarious existence of migrant women from Africa and Asia. Months into the uprising, domestic workers don't think of the revolution as our business, unfortunately, and don't expect our needs to be included in any protester-initiated change. Activists affiliated with KAFA and the Anti-Racism Movement have expressed solidarity with us, but tangible

support remains far too little. My hope is that they may one day provoke a much needed societal debate on the place of domestic workers in Lebanese society and how to transform their conditions.

^[1] The Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) was launched in 2010 as a grassroots collective by young Lebanese feminist activists in collaboration with migrant workers and migrant domestic workers, following a racist incident at one of Beirut's most well-known private beach resorts (Sporting Club). ARM activists, using a hidden camera, filmed the administration's blatant acts of discrimination and segregation. The video quickly spread online, and ARM's efforts to bring this issue to light were lauded by many. Interest grew in this small volunteer-based movement, members increased, and our projects grew in scope and scale. In 2012, ARM became a registered NGO with full and part-time staff in order to increase its capacity to carry out more projects to fight racist discrimination and abuse in Lebanon.

Webinar statement

Tsigereda Brihanu

Tsigereda Brihanu is an activist based in Beirut and a former domestic worker. She is the co-founder and project manager of Eгна Legna («Us for Ourselves»). If you wish to support Eгна Legna, go to this link <https://shorturl.at/nzGQW>.

Extract from the video *Contemporary Slavery and Racial Discrimination: Civil Society Support to Survivors during the Global Pandemic*, organised by *United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery*, the *Geneva Human Rights Platform* and the *UK Permanent Mission in Geneva*, co-moderated by Rita French, a United Kingdom Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva and International Ambassador for Human Rights. The webinar occurred on Wednesday 2 December, 2020 / 12:00 - 13:30 CET on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery.

The link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4GuM1tH3vw&feature=youtu.be>

Rita French: From your experience, what is the role of racial discrimination and the impact of COVID-19 on migrant domestic workers in Lebanon? What strategies have you and others who have suffered from this practice adopted to respond?

Tsigereda Brihanu: Hello, my name is Tsigereda and I am Ethiopian migrant worker and activist and I have been working in Lebanon for almost 7 years. I am the co-founder and the Projects Manager at Eгна Legna, a community-based, feminist activist organization working on migrant domestic workers' issues and general women's issues in Lebanon and Ethiopia.

As a former domestic worker myself, I have seen what it is to be under the sponsorship system and I keep seeing it every day. Employers literally control our freedom. Many of them are abusive with no one holding them accountable. Many of them pay very little, not even minimum wage, they pay for example 150\$ for Ethiopian workers. They don't pay our salaries on time and sometimes they don't pay us at all. We do not have the freedom or choice to quit or change our jobs. So you can tell that the situation under the sponsorship system is already very bad to the extent that 2 domestic workers commit suicide every week in Lebanon.

Then the economic crisis hit, then the corona pandemic as well and things became so much worse. Many domestic workers lost their jobs. Many of those who did not live with employers, lost their houses because they cannot pay rent. They can't even afford food. Single mothers are no longer able to afford basic needs for their children. Live-in domestic workers were thrown by their employers in front of embassies. Those who are still in the houses are still abused with zero protection, they are overworked, and they are not getting paid.

So a lot of domestic workers want to go back home but they can't afford tickets. They can't afford PCR tests. They can't pay the penalty fees for the Lebanese government. The penalty fees are fees you pay when you have expired documents or have entered illegally to the country. Also many single mothers don't have the needed papers for their children. And many of the workers have months of unpaid wages.

In response to all of this, as Eгна Legna organization, we started fundraising to support these women, from all nationalities, to go back home. We also help them to get the medical support they need, here or in their home country. We were able to repatriate so far more than 300 women and we are still fundraising to support more. We also do food distribution and baby supplies for hundreds of women and single mothers, also from all nationalities. We follow up with the women to secure the needed travel papers for their children as well.

Eгна Legna started 3 years ago because we saw the need for us to organize, to support our sisters in Lebanon, to advocate for the abolition of the sponsorship system, which leads to this abuse, and to raise awareness in Ethiopia to stop women from coming here.

The roots of our group were at the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) – Migrant Community Center, a Lebanese civil society organization receiving support from the UN Slavery Fund. At the AntiRacism Movement (ARM) Center, I met several Ethiopian members in 2017 and we decided to do something, to offer support instead of just receiving it.

Initially we started with basic support for women in shelters and for single mothers. ARM offered us the space for meetings and activities and shared their experiences with

us. Later on, ARM organized an info session on a feminist funding opportunity, so we attended and decided to apply for funding to develop our work scope. We were selected among hundreds of applications and we were offered hence several intensive training and workshops. We were able to launch awareness videos targeting domestic workers in Lebanon and Ethiopia, on sexual health, legal rights, financing, transportation and others... We also organized skills learning workshops for tens of women around Lebanon to help them become financially independent when they go back home.

We continued to develop our casework as well and now we collaborate with different NGOs and legal firms for cases of abuse and labor violations. And with the Corona pandemic and economic crisis, we immediately started relief work and repatriation efforts.

Our organization, even though it started in Lebanon, is registered in Canada, because as domestic workers, we do not have the right to organize or unionize. But we are still working on the ground, we are visible in the media, we are doing our best every single day, and any support for our work and the work of other community groups and NGOs is much needed, now more than ever.

ABOLISH KAFALA
JUSTICE FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS

This image shows a section of a white protest banner held by several people. The banner features the text 'ABOLISH KAFALA' in large, bold, red capital letters, and 'JUSTICE FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS' in smaller, bold, black capital letters below it. In the background, a person is holding a sign that says 'WE ARE THE WORKING FORCE'.

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