

TESTIMONIES OF MIGRANT WOMEN COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS IN LEBANON



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PROMOTING MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

TESTIMONIES OF MIGRANT WOMEN COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS IN LEBANON

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PROMIG-FES (2021-2025) aims to promote the role of the social partners, including Trade Unions, in the concerted governance of migration and mobility based on rights and social dialogue. The project takes a multi-stakeholder approach in order to enhance cooperation and coordination. The multi-dimensional approach includes pilot activities that will explore alternatives to the conventional security approach.

This publication was put together in collaboration with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's regional project on Political Feminism and Gender (PolFem) in the MENA region and focuses on capturing and presenting the testimonies of migrant women community organizers in Lebanon.

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FOREWORD

Discussions around migration often focus on movements from the Global South to the Global North and neglect that most migration happens between countries of the Global South. Since the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of women workers from African and South Asian countries have migrated to Lebanon, primarily for employment as domestic workers in private households. Many of these women have found themselves in a precarious and challenging situation, excluded from protection under the Lebanese Labor Code and denied the right to unionize or collectively advocate for their rights

Migrant domestic workers have long been framed as passive victims of the Kafala system, a migration surveillance mechanism that legally binds incoming migrant workers to the employer who sponsors their visa. They are depicted as individuals trapped in an exploitative relationship with little recourse to legal protection, their voices muted by their circumstances. This publication, however, questions this image of helplessness and victimhood.

It shares the personal testimonies of ten incredible women who came to Lebanon as migrant domestic workers and chose to stand up against the oppression of the Kafala system. These stories offer a glimpse into the resilience and resourcefulness of migrant domestic workers that is often overlooked when they are framed simply as victims of exploitation. Instead, we acknowledge the courage of those who chose to organize others in pursuit of change.

Faced with the daunting task of navigating Lebanon's complex legal landscape – riddled with corruption and nepotism – these leaders nonetheless mobilized a formidable force. Their activism often came at considerable cost, as those who challenge the Kafala system face harassment, arrest, imprisonment, and deportation in their pursuit of justice.

By presenting these personal accounts, we hope to encourage a broader conversation about the realities faced by women migrant workers. Their narratives provide insights into not only the challenges they face but also the agency and collective action that can emerge within marginalized communities.

We invite readers to connect with these narratives on a personal level, empathize with the struggles and celebrate the victories of these women. We hope these stories will inspire to think critically about issues of labor rights, migration policies, and gender justice, not just in Lebanon but across the region.

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INTRODUCTION

Lebanon's Kafala or sponsorship system is notorious for subjecting migrant domestic workers (MDWs) to harsh working conditions and economic precarity. Under this system, foreign laborers' residency is tied to their employers/sponsors, making them highly susceptible to exploitation, forced labor, abuse, and trafficking. One restriction is that workers cannot change their employer unless they have their sponsor's permission. If a MDW decides to leave an abusive workplace and look for an alternative, she risks losing her residency, which could result in detention and deportation.

According to Amnesty,¹ there are over 250,000 MDWs in Lebanon. MDWs are excluded from labor law protections that apply to other workers. They are not entitled to benefits such as minimum wage, maximum working hours, or overtime pay, leaving them at risk of exploitation and poor living conditions. This legal exclusion can be attributed to a cultural distinction between private and public spheres, which sees domestic work as a private arrangement negotiated within the home rather than a formal job regulated by labor legislation. It is important to consider the economic incentives that reinforce this system: it allows employers and recruitment agencies to hire domestic workers at low wages and with little regard for work conditions.

Human rights organizations have documented physical and psychological abuse, sexual violence, and other forms of exploitation among MDWs working under the Kafala system. A study in 2022 found that a staggering 68% of MDWs in Lebanon have reported encountering sexual harassment, while 11.7% have experienced sexual assault.² In 70% of the cases where the abuse occurred within the workplace, the male employer was identified as the perpetrator. Outside the workplace, MDWs reported that perpetrators included taxi drivers and police officers. Such pervasive exposure to sexual abuse is enabled by

1 «Lebanon: Migrant Domestic Workers - Their House Is Our Prison.» Amnesty International, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/04/lebanon-migrant-domestic-workers-their-house-is-our-prison/#:~:text=Lebanon%20is%20home%20to%20over,and%20work%20in%20private%20households> (accessed September 6, 2023).

2 Egna Legna Besidet and the Lebanese American University, «Sexual Abuse and Harassment Among Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon.» Sigrid Rausing Trust, October 2022, <https://www.sigrid-rausing-trust.org/story/data-shows-68-of-migrant-domestic-workers-report-sexual-harassment-in-lebanon/> (accessed September 2023 ,6).

the restrictions imposed under the Kafala system, which leaves MDWs with limited recourse to report violations or seek help.

Labor laws also prevent unionization by foreign workers by blocking them from attaining equal membership status within syndicates, voting in syndicate elections, and standing for office. And because domestic work is seen as a private arrangement in Lebanon, migrant domestic workers are ineligible to establish or join labor unions and syndicates at all. Beyond involvement in unions, migrant workers in Lebanon encounter significant limitations on their freedom of assembly, impeding their ability to register non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or mobilize for protests and advocacy campaigns.

Despite these extensive restrictions, MDWs in Lebanon have been establishing internal networks of solidarity and mutual support since at the 1980s. These networks have evolved and connected with other civil society organizations (CSOs) and activists, allowing them to circumvent some of the barriers described above and to engage in advocacy. A significant turning point in the self-organizing efforts of MDWs in Lebanon occurred in 2015, when they attempted to establish a Domestic Workers Union. While these efforts did not come to fruition as hoped, the initiative became a landmark moment in MDWs' journey toward recognition within the country's labor rights landscape, highlighting their determination to secure rights and working conditions.

The period from 2019 to 2021 were particularly difficult years for MDWs in Lebanon. The economic crisis in Lebanon, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded existing hardships and introducing new challenges for MDWs. Many workers' payments were delayed or even cancelled as businesses and employers struggled to stay afloat. Despite some assistance from NGOs, housing became increasingly unaffordable for many as landlords raised rents. Purchasing power fell in relation to the cost of goods, leaving many MDWs food insecure.

The economic crisis weakened an already fragile government, affecting its ability to address the needs of both the local and migrant populations. Access to healthcare was already a challenge before the economic crisis, but it was further strained by the pandemic, leaving many without adequate medical support. Lockdown restrictions limited MDWs' social interactions and access to support networks, and this isolation exacerbated their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

Many migrant workers found themselves without sufficient income to send money to their families, prompting many to return to their home countries where they might find alternative opportunities, less precarious living arrangements, and better access to healthcare and other services. Those who remained faced an increasingly dire situation at the confluence of economic collapse and political disintegration, thus necessitating urgent international attention, support, and humanitarian intervention.

However, in spite of these grim conditions, a constellation of dedicated individuals carried on the work of organizing and mobilizing migrant communities in Lebanon. These leaders, who are predominantly MDWs themselves, have taken it upon themselves to advocate for the rights and welfare of their fellow migrants, shedding light on the injustices perpetrated by the Kafala system.

Hailing from across various the African and Asian continents – from countries like Sierra Leone, Madagascar, Côte d'Ivoire, Nepal, the Philippines, Sudan, Kenya, and Ethiopia – these community organizers struggled to challenge the status quo and demand fair treatment, dignity, and justice for migrant workers in Lebanon.

This publication brings together the stories of these individuals who, despite the odds, persisted in their fight for a better future, not just for themselves but for the entire migrant worker community working under the kafala system.

Participant names have been altered to safeguard confidentiality and preserve anonymity.

OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this publication is to share the stories of migrant women community organizers and activists in Lebanon who have dedicated themselves to advocating for the rights and well-being of migrant workers. Their stories testify to the oppressive nature of the Kafala system, while also demonstrating the possibilities for migrant workers themselves to challenge that system from their position within it.

To achieve the stated objectives, the following methodology was adopted:

1. Mapping and Identification

As a first step, we reached out to migrant workers and community organizers in Lebanon. Snowballing from this initial cohort, we were then directed to other migrant women organizers and activists who could share their stories.

2. In-depth semi-structured Interviews

Participants were interviewed about their experiences as migrant women organizers and the challenges they face in practicing their activism. Individual interviews were conducted in a safe environment with attention to both the privacy and security of participants. Interpretation was provided for respondents who were not comfortable conversing in English and Arabic.

3. Testimony Documentation

Interviews were recorded in order to ensure that participants' narratives and perspectives were captured accurately. In accordance with their preferences, participants were anonymized to safeguard their identities.

4. Narrative Development

From these rich testimonies emerged compelling narratives that showcased the struggles as well as the resilience and agency of migrant women community organizers in Lebanon. These narratives convey their strength and determination in the face of adversity, spotlighting their remarkable contributions to their communities and society at large.

TESTIMONIES

Elizabeth

Côte d'Ivoire

“

*I'm not an activist, I'm a community leader.
The word **activist** is too strong for what we can
possibly do here in Lebanon.*

”



Hailing from Côte d'Ivoire, Elizabeth's involvement in community organizing began with support roles in already established Lebanese NGOs. Eventually, she and fellow migrant workers decided to establish their own independent group, where they collectively steer the decision-making process, enabling them to better advocate for their rights. One of her roles now is to help MDWs make informed decisions and avoid actions that could cause irreversible harm to their employment contracts, such as running away. Elizabeth's approach is to mediate and find common ground between MDWs and their sponsors so that they can avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.

Through her community organizing, Elizabeth emphasizes the bond of moral support and solidarity among women in her community. They reach out via phone to those who are unable to leave the confines of their employers' homes. For those fortunate enough to be able to leave their homes for a break in the afternoon or on Sundays, they provide training in a range of practical skills, including preparing soaps, crafting candles, making tomato paste and jams, and even honing makeup techniques. Elizabeth and her fellow community organizers view it as an opportunity to impart MDWs with valuable skills that they can put to use when they return to their home countries.

Speaking about her small cohort of women migrant workers, Elizabeth explains, "Women provide a lot of moral support and solidarity to one another. It's not that we do not want to assist men or consider their opinions - we do! But we do not want any man to be a decision-maker within our group." While Elizabeth's organization doesn't exclude men from assistance, because women are the majority of MDWs in Lebanon, they also serve as the sole decision-makers for their support group.

Of the many challenges Elizabeth has encountered throughout the years, one stands out. Years ago, Annie, a fellow community organizer, was deported after being "on the radar" of the Lebanese General Security due to her activism.³ Elizabeth and other organizers became fearful that their work could lead them to a similar fate. Following her deportation, Annie continued to express her solidarity from afar. In response to her support and as a creative outlet for

3 The Lebanese General Security holds the primary responsibility for migrant workers and immigration-related matters. They regulate entry, residency, and work permits, ensuring compliance with immigration laws.

their shared experiences, Elizabeth and fellow organizers decided to write a theater performance. With guidance and training provided by members of renowned theater groups, they crafted a compelling narrative that explored the complex relationships between migrant domestic workers and their female sponsors, often referred to as «madams.» The play poignantly portrayed the frustrating and at times agonizing experiences of MDWs, including the harrowing ordeal of being stranded at airports. However, the General Security took note of their plans and attempted to identify all those involved. Regrettably, they were compelled by security concerns to cancel the planned performance despite six months of dedicated training.

Elizabeth's group found renewed purpose during the COVID-19 pandemic, which left many MDWs without work and struggling to survive. Elizabeth and her group organized relief efforts, even in remote areas, to provide much-needed support. But it came at a personal cost, as one of their dedicated members had an accident in the course of providing support to MDWs, ultimately forcing her to move back home.

Despite these challenges, Elizabeth finds deep satisfaction in community work. Educating MDWs about their rights and helping them navigate the complexities of life in Lebanon is a calling that gives her purpose. While she anticipates eventually leaving due to her age and lack of insurance, she knows that the work is far from over.

Elizabeth's message to those who read this is simple: recognize the humanity of migrant domestic workers. "Each of us is different, with unique personalities and stories. Let's coexist and learn to communicate."

TINA

Sierra Leone

“

We must speak up and fight for our rights.

”



Back in Sierra Leone, Tina had dreamed of becoming a journalist or a lawyer, jobs in which she could fight for women's rights while also proving that women are capable of holding these jobs. But economic hardship pushed Tina down a different trajectory. In 2014, she migrated to Lebanon to work as a domestic worker, where her pursuit of a modest income for herself and remittance for her family at home exposed her to abuse, harassment, and sexual violence.

Unlike the majority of live-in migrant domestic workers, Tina was of the "lucky ones" who were allowed to go out on Sunday and talk to other migrant women. It was through her entry into this newfound community that Tina's journey as an activist began. This journey was fueled by a commitment to advocating for fellow MDWs as well as a frustration with the unresponsiveness from entities that are meant to protect them, such as consulates and other local and international organizations.

"After 2019 [the situation] got really bad... well, it was already bad. But at that time, many migrant workers were put out on the street by their employers. Many were forced to sleep rough near embassies. Their mental health deteriorated. It affected all of us [whether] live-in or live-out, as the cost of living [skyrocketed]... that's why many wanted to go back home in 2019/2020."

With infectious anger, Tina talks about how embassies and consulates would stand by idly as if there was nothing that they could do. Even in cases where domestic workers had died, the consul did nothing. Consuls of many sending countries, who are appointed to protect and support the community of expats from their respective countries, remained unresponsive throughout the crisis. Witnessing such neglect was utterly demoralizing to Tina and her fellow organizers.

In the face of this system of stagnant bureaucracy, Tina and her fellow organizers mobilized to create their own support structure to fill some of the gaps left by the institutions that were supposed to help. MDWs who are in need are brought together to form networks of support that can help them to find and connect with the services and resources they require. As a direct form of assistance, Tina offers moral support to survivors of sexual harassment. She also undertakes advocacy where possible, for example by contributing to research projects on the Kafala system. Tina's motivation for this work is "to be a voice for the voiceless", to advocate for women who face abuse

and sexual harassment, and to empower migrant workers. Despite the challenges and opposition, Tina presses on because, in her words, “the work is too important”.

Tina has been organizing in Lebanon for more than 6 years now. She feels frustrated with the system and urges for prompt responses from organizations working on migrant workers’ issues. “[If you want to have a] hotline [then] it must be functional. Delays [in answering or responding] could have serious consequences” notes Tina. But she sees the impact of their efforts in the growing awareness among MDWs of their own rights, as well as their responsibilities to one another. Tina believes that their activism has shifted the public mindset, and that their negotiations with the general public and with NGOs are making a difference.

Over the years, collaboration with organizations both in Lebanon and in her home country has enabled Tina to gain knowledge, experiences, and confidence. Speaking in public and giving interviews no longer intimidates her. Tina says she has learned to manage her time better, differentiating between her personal life and work life. Her fellow activists help her to maintain a work-life balance by sharing the burden of her organizing responsibilities and delegating tasks.

Tina remains committed to fighting the Kafala system in Lebanon as long as it persists. She will only leave when she believes there are others who can continue the work. She urges policymakers to consider women as human beings with potential beyond domestic work. To her fellow MDWs, she says, «We must speak up and fight for our rights.»

Support and resources are essential. Tina expresses the need for centers to teach and empower women. She recognizes that funding is limited, but she considers this a critical need, both in Lebanon and back home.

SARAH

Madagascar

“

*My activism started from within the house
of my employer.*

”



Sarah hailed from Madagascar and has spent 27 years in Lebanon. Her advocacy journey started within her workplace, where she was employed by an elderly woman. She held a strong sense of respect for the elderly, causing hesitation before she dared to assert herself. It was a gradual process, as she built up the courage to stand up for what she deserved.

Sarah's advanced literacy grants her a privilege that eludes many; reading her own contract. She recalls the day when she finally decided to speak up to her employer. Having read her contract, she was aware that it explicitly stipulated her exclusive employment in one household. However, like many other employers who have never actually read their contract themselves or regard it simply as a formality, Sarah's employer has been making her work in her son's house. Nervous, but with conviction in her voice, Sarah confronted her employer and demanded fair monetary compensation if she were to carry out additional work at a second household. She also demanded to be dropped off and picked up from the new workplace, rather than absorbing the cost of transportation herself. To Sarah's surprise, the employer agreed, and her demands were fulfilled.

Another confrontation pertained to the fact that Sarah was not permitted to take breaks. When she decided to challenge this rule, she approached her employer with a calm demeanor, initiating a conversation. She drew a parallel between her situation and that of the old lady's factory workers, questioning whether they were allowed breaks or not. The employer's response affirmed Sarah's stance – a one hour break. So, Sarah requested the same.

One memory vividly etched in Sarah's mind is the time her employer began issuing orders just as Sarah had sat down to eat. "Make me some tea." "Make us Nescafe." On this occasion, Sarah chose a different strategy. Instead of complying, she withheld her response until her meal was done. She was thereby able to preserve her break despite the attempts to interrupt it – a small victory.

Then came the ordeal of getting paid. The employer proposed a staggeringly delayed payment plan: Sarah would only be paid for all her work years after completing her three-year contract. Because who wouldn't want to work three years without seeing a single payment for their labor? Perhaps an employer who can evade the law – but not Sarah. Drawing again on her ability to read the contract, Sarah insisted

on monthly and complete payments. It wasn't a battle to her; it was a matter of principle, of reclaiming what was rightfully hers.

That was the birthplace of Sarah's activism. Fortunately for her, hers happened to be one of the more understanding employers. She remains her boss to this day. Sarah believes that the seed of activism took root and began to grow from this seemingly ordinary story. Activism started at home but extended to the community.

In addition to her literacy, Sarah speaks both English and French eloquently, and her friends encouraged her to use her language skills to amplify the voices of MDWs. By reaching out to other MDWs to help them read and understand their contracts – and thereby to know their rights – she gradually became more active within her community. As time went by, Sarah started witnessing the positive outcomes of the advocacy in which she and other migrant women activists were engaged. She notices a heightened awareness of the injustices of the Kafala system among the general public, and she observes MDWs moving more confidently and comfortably on the streets.

Last year, she had the opportunity to travel to Barcelona to speak about the experiences of domestic workers. She hopes that sharing the true stories of the women in her community with the world will bring change to the system under which they work.

Sarah emphasizes the profound sense of solidarity shared among MDWs. Within this tight-knit community, they have forged not just friendships but a sense of family, often referring to one another as sisters. This remarkable bond goes beyond nationalities, as they find common ground in the shared experiences and aspirations that unite them as a family of domestic workers. National borders fade into the background, as their shared identity takes precedence. She explains, "We are domestic workers... we have to come together".

Sarah plans to remain in Lebanon and to continue her work as an activist for as long as she can. She describes herself as a human rights defender. She wants people to see MDWs' humanity beyond their roles as cleaners. She reminds us that care work encompasses all work, and it is time that MDWs' rights are recognized.

NANCY

Nepal

“

*We are not statues.
We are also not your children.*

”



Nancy's journey in Lebanon began in 2009 when she left Nepal in search of opportunities to improve her life. She had previously worked in other countries like Cyprus, where there are strict rules and regulations to protect migrant workers. However, what awaited her in Lebanon was a far cry from what she had hoped for.

Nancy found herself in a household where the employer-employee relationship was far from harmonious. She wasn't treated as an equal; instead, she felt like a slave. One day, a heated argument escalated to a point of humiliation as her employer's hand struck her cheek. The sting was not limited to the physical pain of the blow – it was a wound of indignity, a wound that even her parents had never inflicted upon her. Worse yet, her employer hurled profane and derogatory language at her, words she couldn't comprehend at first (e.g., *sharmouta* [slut], cursing her father and mother, etc). When eventually she learned their meanings from another migrant worker, it was a bitter revelation that only strengthened her resolve to make a stand. She also learned that a previous MDW ran away from the same employer.

The next time her employer lashed out, something within Nancy snapped. She retaliated and hit her employer back. The confrontation led the employer's husband to enter the fray, and Nancy faced him with what she had recently learned. "If you're bad with your worker, there will be consequences." Nancy understood that she could no longer remain passive in the face of such maltreatment.

Nancy's defiance didn't come without its price. Sent back to the agency that had put her with that family, she was then relocated to Baalbeck – a city located in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, about 67 km from the capital. Yet, she remained steadfast. Within her new placement, she encountered a different set of challenges. Her new employer did not process her official papers, leaving her in limbo. Basic needs like adequate food were denied under the pretense of work efficiency – a twisted logic that she refused to accept. The house was vast, and her responsibilities extended beyond cleaning to gardening and washing the car. She was often kept on call for additional chores, even outside of normal working hours. Yet, her resilience was unyielding.

When her employer departed for a vacation, Nancy's hardships didn't subside. The employer's husband remained behind, and he resorted to teasing and tormenting her in the absence of his wife. The situation

escalated into heated arguments, with threats of violence hanging in the air, but Nancy remained focused on her goal: to earn money and assert her rights, and not to become a target for mistreatment.

Refusing to be confined any longer, Nancy decided to flee the oppressive environment. She sought refuge in another village about an hour away. While she initially experienced isolation in exile, a glimmer of hope emerged in the form of a fellow Nepalese worker. Through her, Nancy discovered an organization dedicated to social work and advocacy. She felt a deep sense of resonance with other victims of abuse who were served by this organization, as she recognized her own story in their stories. She was drawn to the promise of a collective journey, one that empowered individuals like her to reclaim their voices.

As an activist, Nancy has learned that deportation or detention is a constant possibility. Just months ago, she witnessed a fellow migrant worker being detained for reasons that remain unclear. The woman spent three to four months in detention, well beyond the expiration of her ticket home. “We need a specific law to protect the rights of domestic workers,” Nancy explains. “We need shelters instead of jails for those in vulnerable situations.”

The political and economic situation in Lebanon has been tumultuous, with many people leaving the country. Despite the hardships, Nancy plans to stay in Lebanon for as long as she can. “I feel responsible for the migrant workers here; we are like orphans who need to support each other.”

Nancy has noted that many MDWs have limited ability to secure employment outside of domestic work. She has therefore been exploring additional avenues for income generation: “We want to start businesses if we can access funding. We can make products like pickles, jam, and soap that we can sell, not just for our own profit but also to help others in our community.”

Nancy believes that Lebanon could become a better place for domestic workers if the Kafala system were abolished. In other countries, she had seen that it's possible to have better work conditions under a fair system. She believes that Lebanon has the potential to become a fair and just place for all and hopes to be part of that change.

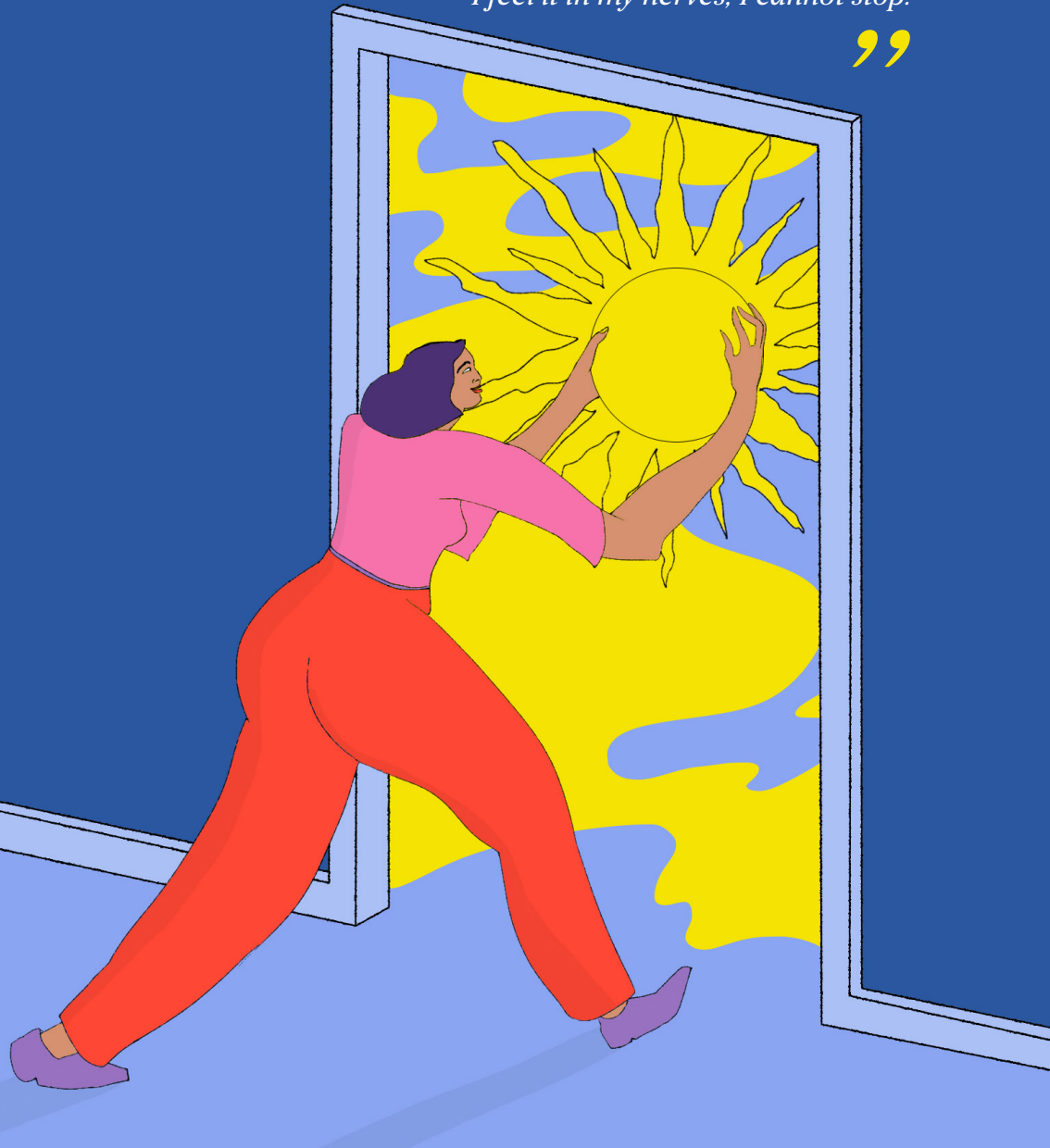
LISA

Philippines

“

I feel it in my nerves, I cannot stop.

”



Lisa finds herself grappling with the persistent specter of racism. It's a call that resonates with urgency – educate the people. Even amidst challenging circumstances, the reality of racism in Lebanon persists, a fact she acknowledges with a mix of frustration and hope.

Lisa's story in Lebanon began 15 years ago. As a mother of two boys and a widow, she left the Philippines in search of better opportunities to support her family. Over the years, she has experienced firsthand the many challenges that MDWs face in Lebanon.

Lisa eventually became involved within a Filipino women's support group, whose activities ranged from organizing trips to liaising with embassies. It was here that Lisa began to see the possibilities for advocacy and began her transformation into an advocate.

Annie, mentioned earlier, a prominent figure who had been involved with various groups and unions, emerged as a crucial influence in Lisa's journey. Annie extended an invitation that would change Lisa's life – the opportunity to attend advocacy workshops offered by NGOs working on migrant workers' issues. Each session increased her awareness and understanding of the power of collective action and the potential for change.

As the workshops unfolded, Lisa's interest evolved into a passionate drive. Sunday meetings with other communities became a regular ritual, each gathering fueling her determination to create meaningful impact. Whenever there was a protest, a movement, she was there on the front lines. The spirit of the 2019 uprising in Lebanon resonated with her deeply. She recounted a moment when she participated in the human chain as part of a protest. The sight stirred something within her, a call to be part of something greater, to stand shoulder to shoulder with those demanding change. "I feel it in my nerves, I cannot stop", Lisa explains, describing the feeling of the cause as a force that propels her forward.

Lisa's group focuses their advocacy efforts on raising awareness about fair wages, especially for domestic workers from Bangladesh who often tend to accept lower salaries. By imparting negotiation techniques and encouraging women to assert themselves, they hope that more MDWs can avoid exploitative arrangements in which they are pressured to perform labor for unfair compensation.

Numerous challenges have arisen. There have been misunderstandings among the members of the group, which can result in internal disputes. The women have also faced pervasive racism, from service providers such as taxi drivers and from the families for whom they work.

Aside from the day-to-day experiences of racism, Lisa's personal experience of racism extends to her love life. Her boyfriend's family, who comes from another nationality, still discriminates against her despite the fact that they have known her for over 10 years. "They see us [migrant workers] as slaves", says Lisa about her boyfriend's family. Yet, Lisa's boyfriend prefers to avoid confrontation.

Despite these obstacles, Lisa remains steadfast in her commitment to her community and her cause. Her activism isn't just about raising her voice; it's also about being cautious about what ears are listening. She treads carefully, aware that not everyone shares her values and ideals. Her circle includes many allies – individuals who share her commitment – but she must remain vigilant against those who may disagree with her or wish to undermine her cause. The price of advocacy has been paid by some of the fellow organizers, who were deported due to their activism.

Looking ahead, Lisa wishes to remain in Lebanon. The ongoing financial crisis has made domestic work in Lebanon less economically attractive, and while some have suggested that Lisa move on to another country, she values the connections that she has made here.

MARY

Philippines

“

*Two migrant domestic workers die
every week in Lebanon.*

”



In 2010, during a demonstration in Beirut, Mary stumbled upon a cardboard sign that read, «two migrant domestic workers die per week.” The sign made her wonder, “is this really true?... What is pushing them to commit suicide?”

Motivated by both curiosity and concern, she began investigating the issues plaguing MDWs and their alarming struggles. As she explains, “I thought maybe I could be a bridge... for other migrant workers, to help them.” Mary hence embarked on a path to provide support and raise awareness.

Yet, her journey has been anything but easy. Having arrived in Lebanon from the Philippines as a migrant domestic worker, Mary understands the immense fear that shackles many MDWs, making it difficult for them to join advocacy efforts due to threats from employers. This fear makes it hard even to approach MDWs about the possibility of participating in such work.

Mary’s activism also puts her own life at risk. Speaking out about workers’ rights and raising awareness about the challenges faced by migrant workers are activities that can put someone in a vulnerable position. Advocating for justice and equality has made her a target, and this unsettling reality hangs over her like a constant shadow. Mary’s concerns are not unfounded. She’s witnessed the harsh consequences endured by community organizers who shared her commitment to the cause. Five of her fellow activists have already been deported, a punitive measure employed to silence their voices and suppress their advocacy efforts.

Juggling full-time work with her organizing efforts requires immense commitment. Mary devotes her free time to supporting fellow workers and packing relief goods for MDWs in need. Her actions are driven by a sense of urgency, a belief that change is possible, and that collective efforts can make a difference. Crucially, Mary’s dedication isn’t fueled by financial gain. Instead, she and fellow organizers pool resources from their own pockets to keep their activism alive.

Despite her and her fellow organizers’ ongoing efforts, Mary admits that there have been no significant legal changes as a result of their advocacy. Nonetheless, they have succeeded in raising awareness about the plight of domestic workers and in educating MDWs about their rights. In the past, migrant women often remained silent and vulnerable. Now, they are more confident in approaching their employers and asserting their rights as outlined in their contracts. In

their meetings, discussions now reverberate with fervor – in words, in gestures, in the way women speak out against the injustices of the Kafala system. There's an undercurrent of strength that's both awe-inspiring and, at times, even intimidating. Witnessing their readiness to stand up, particularly within the safety of a group, Mary feels admiration for her community of women. Their intelligence, their courage, and their articulation all stand as a testament to the power of women uniting for change.

What Mary wants to convey to policymakers is that MDWs exist and should not be treated as invisible. "We are not modern-day slaves. We are essential to the economy, and our contributions should be recognized." Mary says that a law or policy is needed to protect the rights of MDWs, as they risk their lives, leave their families behind, and work tirelessly in a job that often goes unnoticed.

In terms of support, Mary emphasizes the need for consistent funding and resources to sustain advocacy efforts: "We should not have to rely on others; we need to be self-sufficient." She also highlights a need for training programs that provide practical skills in outreach and communication that can empower workers to advocate more effectively.

This journey has been challenging, but Mary remains hopeful for the future. She believes that the next generation of MDWs won't have to endure the same hardships, and this optimism keeps her motivated to continue fighting for the rights of domestic workers.

MAJEDA

Sudan

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The darker the worker, the greater the discrimination, the fewer the rights, the worse the conditions.

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In 2019, Majeda embarked on her journey from Sudan to Lebanon, armed with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Arabic language and literature. Her academic qualifications, however, would soon take a backseat to the harsh realities she encountered as an African migrant in Lebanon. The discrimination she faced transcended her educational achievements, leaving her feeling like a «second degree human» in the eyes of many.

Majeda's transformation into an activist began during her time as a domestic worker. She found herself in an environment where she had minimal agency, privacy, and respect. It took her ten months to muster the courage to confront her employer and demand to be treated with respect. When she did, Majeda's employer condescendingly questioned her confidence and asked if this was due to the fact that she holds a degree, a qualification that she did not expect from a MDW. It was during this period that Majeda founded a WhatsApp group for Sudanese domestic workers in Lebanon, a virtual sanctuary for them to connect and share experiences.

However, Majeda was not spared from adversity. Her activism led to her detention by the General Security for a staggering three months. This was during a period when raids on migrants had become commonplace. Every couple of days, another 7 to 8 migrant workers would be brought to join Majeda in detention. But despite the persecution, solidarity among workers only grew stronger: "When I was in jail, my friends from the community were all asking about me since it would endanger them to visit me. We cried from happiness when we reunited. We felt one another's pain." When Majeda was eventually released and returned home, she found her phone flooded with messages and calls from her friends and fellow organizers. To this day, Majeda has still not been able to catch up with all of those who lent support.

Fortunately, Majeda had already applied for asylum with the United Nations, which ultimately spared her from deportation to Sudan. The traumatic experience of detention only strengthened her resolve to continue her fight for justice and equality.

Engaging in community organizing came with its fair share of challenges. "The Sudanese community is very conservative. It's *ayb* [frowned upon] for women to be employed at all, not to mention being paid to do domestic work in someone else's house". Convincing young women to come together and organize faced resistance due to these

cultural norms. Many feared that if their employment became widely known, it might tarnish their family's reputation.

Another substantial challenge lay in the intra-community dynamics. "Sadly, in Sudan, we are categorized tribally... people look down upon each other based on their tribal identity". Instances of racism within the community were not uncommon, with individuals sometimes hesitating to collaborate with each other due to entrenched biases. Majeda worked a lot on encouraging her fellow migrant workers from the community to let go of their prejudices, "we are all Sudanese here [in the eyes of Lebanese people]". She stressed that the system they all face does not discriminate among Sudanese people based on their tribal affiliations; it discriminates against all Sudanese people without distinction. Convincing everyone that they were part of a larger Sudanese family, that unity should prevail, was an ongoing challenge. Majeda has observed that this issue is a pervasive problem extending beyond the Sudanese community.

One source of immense pride for Majeda is a workshop on psychosocial support which garnered media attention. During this workshop, Majeda delivered a speech addressing the challenges faced by migrant workers in Lebanon, all while in the presence of General Security—an intimidating audience, to say the least. Standing at the podium, facing what she once considered «the biggest fear,» Majeda felt a surge of confidence that followed this event. It was a pivotal moment that empowered her to continue her advocacy and fight for the rights of marginalized individuals like herself.

Majeda aspires to leave Lebanon in the future. She feels like she is stagnating because she is no longer undertaking activities for personal growth. Ideally, she wants to finish her masters and pursue further education. Unfortunately, she faces challenges related to her passport and residency status. "I feel like this country took everything from me... I am like a dying flower."

Despite her desire to leave, Majeda remains committed to continuing her advocacy efforts, just not from Lebanon. She believes that NGOs should intensify their work, focusing on practical skills building for leaders and community members alike. She emphasized the need for workshops that help release negative energy, such as drawing or painting, based on individuals' interests. Additionally, Majeda highlighted the importance of addressing the cultural norms and prejudices within migrant communities to promote unity and solidarity.

SANDY

Kenya

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I was accused of stealing a cat. It wasn't even true, but it shaped my entire journey.

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Originally from Kenya, Sandy's journey in Lebanon started as a fairly positive experience. She successfully completed her initial contract and had the opportunity to travel back to her home country. However, upon her return and the subsequent renewal of her papers, a series of unfortunate events unfolded. She found herself working for an employer who not only refused to pay her wages, but also accused her of stealing her pregnant cat. Sandy tried explaining that pregnant cats tend to hide, but her employer remained unconvinced and abruptly evicted her from her house at 2 AM. Stranded with nowhere to go and no one to turn to for help, she eventually managed to return to her employer's house. To date, Sandy's employer has continued to withhold the unpaid portion of her salary, and refuses the obligation to pay her return ticket home.

Sandy had moved to Lebanon so she could provide for her family. She says, "I came here to work and earn money to help my family, not to prostitute myself or fight and bring problems". Sandy found herself questioning the unjust treatment. "Is it because we are black that we are expected to work nonstop as if we are donkeys?"

Sandy traces the genesis of her activism to the moment when she became a mother. With the birth of her child, life grew considerably more challenging. The everyday tasks of feeding and parenting presented formidable obstacles for someone struggling to find and maintain an income. She therefore sought assistance from organizations that support new mothers.

Sandy's activism has to do with raising awareness among the MDW community about the available channels of support. It was during a very difficult period of her life that Sandy personally experienced the tremendous impact of receiving help and support. This assistance not only alleviated her own struggles, but also ignited within her the desire to advocate for others, driven by the conviction that everyone deserves access to the aid and resources they require, particularly during demanding phases of life such as early motherhood.

Sandy also sheds light on the obstacles that she usually encounters in her activism. She is frustrated by certain organizations that seem to exhibit favoritism toward specific nationalities, resulting in a sense of inequality and division within the MDW community. Sandy personally encountered this bias when she was denied access to relief supplies despite being on the recipient list. Conversely, her friend, who belonged to a different nationality, was granted access. In an act of solidarity,

Sandy's friend chose to share her portion of relief supplies with Sandy. Sandy emphasizes that not all organizations genuinely prioritize the welfare of workers; some seem to prioritize securing funding at the workers' expense.

Regarding the role of government officials, Sandy is critical, especially when it comes to her own country's consulate. She described the Kenyan consul as unhelpful and even neglectful of the cases of Kenyan migrant workers, leaving many in dire situations with little support. She also alleged that the consul has engaged in unethical practices such as requested bribes for services.

Sandy also provided insight into the current political and economic challenges faced by migrant workers in Lebanon. She highlighted issues such as landlords taking advantage of foreign workers by raising rent prices, the high cost of utilities, and the vulnerability of workers to exploitation and violence in various situations, including daily transportation.

Going forward, Sandy plans to stay in Lebanon to repay her loans, as she is financially obligated to do so. Despite the challenges she faces, she remains determined to provide for her family back home. She conveyed a message of strength to fellow domestic workers, urging them to stand strong in the face of adversity and to fight for their rights.

CARLA

Kenya

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*Beyond where they work, some MDWs
do not know anything about Beirut.*

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Carla's journey into activism began with her roots in a women's group in Kenya, where she witnessed the power of collective action. This early experience instilled in her an appreciation for the importance of organizing, learning from diverse experiences, and advocating for those in need. "It opens up your mind", she explains. Her arrival in Lebanon didn't diminish her commitment; instead, it suggested a new avenue by which should could work to make a difference.

Carla has come across individuals who remain blocked even from basic human interactions. These individuals are cloistered, secluded in a world without outside contact, communication, or even a phone. Their awareness of Beirut is confined to the space they occupy, oblivious to the economic downfall and the crisis that has been gripping the city since the end of 2019. Carla explains how a significant portion of the community remains hidden from the public eye, concealed behind closed doors. Their suffering simmers silently, visible only when their voices are raised in protest.

Carla's has a strong connection to the MDW community, for whom she serves as a bridge to assistance by providing referrals for medical and legal issues. Many of the women with whom Carla works are hidden from the world, making it difficult to make and maintain contact. Carla works closely with organizations, leveraging their resources and creating networks that provide mental health and psycho-social support to MDWs.

When it comes to seeking help, Carla describes how in the past years, she and other MDWs would seek recourse from the authorities: "Five years ago we would go to the police... but they wouldn't help... they don't even understand our language, and they are not really here to help migrants anyway". This contrasts with their experiences in Africa, where seeking help from the police was a more accessible option. "It's different here. That's what I came to realize," says Carla.

Still, Carla emphasizes the importance of women engaging in activities that foster knowledge and grow skills within the migrant workers community. "Knowledge is power. This is especially important to women because we are the soul of society. If we are not strong, society falls. When we are strong, society becomes strong", adds Carla.

Carla's work has not only empowered other MDWs but has expanded her own knowledge and strengthened her psychological resilience. She has witnessed individuals transform from the depths of depression to finding new jobs, becoming more outgoing, and forming friendships across diverse nationalities. Carla herself has embraced new passions, like crafting accessories.

Carla's reflections on government engagement unveil the harsh realities of the lack of support and bias many MDWs face. The complex web of diplomatic ties between country of origin and country of destination often leaves MDWs without proper representation or recourse. Despite these challenges, Carla remains in Lebanon, although she recognizes the lasting impact it can have when MDWs return to their home countries, bringing with them a sense of belonging and empowerment. Unwavering in her dedication to her cause, Carla is hoping to secure funding to continue her work.

NICOLE

Ethiopia

“

I break my life because of this [activism].

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Nicole was brought into the world of activism by a deep-seated desire to improve the lives of MDWs and to stand against the injustices they face daily. In order to create a support structure for her fellow Ethiopian domestic workers, she established a community in which members provide mutual support, empower one another, and fight together for a fairer future. Her own experiences grappling with language barriers, enduring abuse, and witnessing the tragic deaths of fellow workers have fueled her dedication to the cause.

Nicole's group boasts remarkable strength, thanks to the dedicated efforts of its members. Composed of 600 members, 450 of which are mothers, this vibrant community actively engages in initiatives to support MDWs. They've embarked on endeavors such as collecting donations to be distributed among economically vulnerable MDWs and providing leadership training to incoming organizers. One of the pivotal aspects of their work involves imparting financial skills to MDWs, thereby empowering them to take control of their economic situations. They also organize workshops that cover a diverse array of topics, including health conditions, often in collaboration with health organizations. These collective efforts are aimed at improving the overall conditions and prospects of MDWs within the community.

"But such commitments take a toll on your personal life", says Nicole. Even visiting her family comes with heaviness as they often complain about her absence and implore her to return home. However, her commitment to assisting and advocating for her fellow MDWs keeps her in Lebanon. It's a passion that's driven by a desire to spare the next generation of MDWs from the hardships she has faced.

Nicole's dedication to activism took a toll on her marriage, ultimately leading to divorce. The demands of her work – such as attending protests, visiting prisons, and being present at hospitals for various causes – left her with little time for her husband. His sense that he was being neglected grew, as her mind was continuously preoccupied with other pressing matters. "My mind is crowded [with] other things".

Nicole's employer/sponsor has played a pivotal role in supporting her community organizing efforts in Lebanon. By providing her with accommodation in his home, he has ensured that she has a stable and secure place to stay, allowing her to focus on her advocacy work without the additional burden of housing expenses. Furthermore, her sponsor has assisted in finding an office space within the same building at an affordable price. "Even though he is supportive, I am 41, and I don't

want to depend on anyone to be in this country”, Nicole expresses as she reflects on how little change in circumstances she has witnessed over the years. However, she sees change within her community. She sees how MDWs are becoming stronger and more outgoing, but notes that “even if they look happy and comfortable, they actually are not”.

Because funding is so limited, Nicole often refrains from claiming transportation compensations to ensure these scarce resources are available for others in more need.

In the midst of countless challenges and the heavy burden that comes with advocating for migrant domestic workers, Nicole finds solace in her self-care routines. She dedicates time to reading, going to the church, and ensuring she stays connected with her family. “My father gives me hope, he [reminds] me that I’m strong”. Nicole sees these practices as ways to recharge her spirit and keep her resilient in the face of adversity.

To conclude, Nicole sends a message to policymakers: educate yourselves, listen to the voices of MDWs, and work toward fairer and more just policies. To fellow MDWs, she urges them to come together and stand strong. She reminds them not to forget themselves while fighting for the rights of others. And to all readers, she asks you to remember that change is complex and requires systemic reform, but that it is high time to dismantle oppressive systems and build a world where every life is valued equally and protected.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

These valuable recommendations have been gathered through interviews with MDWs who are activists or community organizers in their community. They offer insights and suggestions for ways to foster empowerment and advocate for domestic workers' rights. Their perspectives and recommendations underscore the importance of advocacy, education, support, and addressing systemic issues to create a more inclusive and just society for all MDWs.

STAND UP FOR FAIR TREATMENT

MDWs are encouraged to assert their rights and advocate for fair treatment. Negotiating employment contracts to ensure just treatment is essential.

CONTINUOUS SUPPORT

Organizations should prioritize providing ongoing support, workshops, and training of trainers' programs for MDWs. Platforms should be established within communities to pool and preserve knowledge, including experiences in dealing with legal barriers or threats from authorities.

ASSISTANCE IN GRANTS AND PROPOSAL WRITING

Organizations should offer support in grants and proposal writing to ensure the sustainability of community organizers' activities and secure funding independently. Learning the language and techniques to persuade donors is essential for self-reliance.

EDUCATION TO COMBAT RACISM

It's crucial to educate people about racism, emphasizing that racism is rooted in ignorance. Community organizers recommend raising awareness and promoting understanding to help combat racial discrimination.

DIRECT RENT ASSISTANCE TO TENANTS

Initially, NGOs provided rent assistance directly to landlords, which implied to many landlords that MDWs could afford higher rents. To address this issue, community organizers recommend that NGOs give rent assistance directly to MDW tenants themselves.

PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE

MDWs and community organizers need to prioritize self-care and maintaining a work-life balance. Community organizers recommend setting boundaries and taking time off to avoid burnout.

YEAR-ROUND ADVOCACY

Advocacy for MDWs should be continuous throughout the year, not limited to specific periods (e.g., Labor Day).

ADDRESS NGO DISCRIMINATION

There are concerns about discrimination by NGOs when it comes to providing relief. One participant shared a personal experience of being denied assistance despite being on the list of recipients. It's essential to address and rectify any biases or discriminatory practices within these organizations.

CONCLUSION

The stories and experiences of these women shed light on the resilience, determination, and dedication required to challenge the injustices perpetuated by the Kafala system. Each organizer, hailing from her own national contexts, has undergone a journey through the experiences of abuse, discrimination, and exploitation that define life as an MDW in Lebanon. Their stories speak of immensely challenging circumstances, but also the possibilities to change those circumstances through activism.

These individuals have fought for their rights and become beacons of hope and change within their communities. They have shown that activism can start from within the home, within the workplace, and within the heart. They have organized themselves, provided support, and raised awareness about the challenges faced by migrant workers in Lebanon.

Despite facing numerous challenges, including racism, repressive cultural norms, and the threat of detention, these organizers have remained steadfast in their commitment to advocating for justice, equality, and dignity for all MDWs. They have forged connections, shared knowledge, and built networks to empower and uplift their fellow workers.

Their recommendations highlight the importance of standing up for fair treatment, providing continuous support and education to those enduring and opposing injustice, assisting with grants and proposal writing, combating racism, and prioritizing self-care. They emphasize the need for year-round advocacy to address discrimination within NGOs.

Their stories of resilience amidst the pursuit of justice illustrate the power of collective action. They remind us that change is possible, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, and that the fight for human rights knows no boundaries. It is through the efforts of individuals like these that progress can be made toward a more just and equitable society for migrant workers in Lebanon and beyond.

