



SCOPING STUDY ON MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKER COLLECTIVE ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZATION IN THE ARAB REGION

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I Introduction



This document presents a scoping review of available resources that help illuminate the forms of collective organizing and mobilization by women migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in the Arab region. The review includes an annotation of relevant academic publications; a description of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), networks, and collectives; and a cursory sketch of graphic novels, films, and performances on and by MDWs. This is a draft prepared as a first step in an ongoing project intended to systematically document and analyze modes of collective action by this precarious group of migrant workers. The scoping review focused on breadth and sought to compile as many relevant resources as possible that exist in written or visual format, in hard copies or online. In this more refined draft, the authors have added an analysis of the content of the available resources. In the analysis, we present: 1) a critical review of how the resources and forms of collective organizing disrupt *kafala*, an unjust labor migration system; 2) some thoughts on the intended audience/stakeholders of organizing efforts; and 3) a glimpse into the rise of mutual aid efforts in the context of COVID-19 and economic downturns in different Arab countries. The review concludes with a few suggestions for future research.

Throughout the region, the work conditions and intimate lives of MDWs are heavily influenced by the *kafala* system. *Kafala* is defined as a set of customary practices and legal doctrine that defines the relationship between a foreign or migrant worker and their employer. In states where the *kafala* system operates, MDWs and other migrant workers are tied to their employer because it is the employer who is directly responsible for securing both the worker's residency permit and their worker's permit.¹ This setup is largely assumed to be the primary reason that workers regularly experience exploitative and abusive relationships with their employers. We return to *kafala* in the analysis section of this review, situating the findings in relationship to a long-standing focus on abolishing *kafala* through policy-level advocacy.

Before beginning our review, it is important to situate ourselves as researchers. All three of us have lived and worked in Lebanon, and invested much of our time and intellectual energy researching the conditions that impact MDWs' lives in the country. Lebanon has long been one of the most open contexts for scholars hoping to study MDWs in the Arab states. To a certain extent, researchers (even those from abroad) have been allowed to enter the country freely to study the lives of MDWs and to write about their heavy exploitation and abuse in the face of a stringent legal system. The country also has one of the most diverse workforces of MDWs, with workers from more than seven different nationalities represented. As a result, the country also has a long history of MDW organizing, both by workers themselves as well as citizen allies and advocates. For these reasons, among many others, many of our examples draw from the Lebanese context as this is the most active and the one we know best. With that said, we have made a pointed effort to ensure that organizing efforts and initiatives from around the Arab region have been included, to the best of our knowledge.

¹ Amnesty International, "End Kafala: Justice for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon."

II Theoretical Frameworks and Analysis of Worker Organizing and Resistance



Chee, L. (2023). Play and counter-conduct: Migrant domestic workers on TikTok. *Global Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2023.2217523>

Keywords: MDW; everyday resistance; TikTok; Arab States

This paper examines the growth in popularity of *TikTok* videos from women MDW during the COVID-19 pandemic and argues “that these videos instantiate counter-conduct—“the sense of struggle against processes implemented for conducting others (Foucault 2007, 201)” (p. 2). Using Foucault’s concept of counter-conduct, Chee explains the use of *TikTok* videos as part of a set of practices that “constitute ‘everyday resistance’” making it a “practice of freedom” (p. 2). Counter-conduct acknowledges the agency of the subject performing the act of resistance and emphasizes that MDWs view themselves as “capable (original emphasis) of ‘doing politics,’ albeit in this informal, everyday sense” (p. 3). This act of political engagement allows MDW to “transform themselves from objects of social domination to subjects capable of resistance through recuperation (original emphasis)—recouping self-dignity lost due to the low status accorded to domestic work, recouping bodily well-being through physical rest and bodily care, and recouping mental well-being through leisure, humor and play, either by themselves or with others” (p. 3). Chee also analyzes *TikTok* itself as a critical medium, “an in-between space [that] calls on the public to witness what would otherwise be hidden in the private domain of the household” (p. 3). Through *TikTok*, workers communicate not only with “us”—the wider audience—but with other workers; it is through this community that what Chee calls the “hidden transcript” emerges: “a repository of jokes, grips, moods, and practices that ‘only a *shagala* [maid] would know” (p. 3). Chee concludes by noting that “in their creation of *TikTok* videos, domestic workers co-produce a counterculture from which they may present and draw meanings about themselves, and practical know-how to survive the hard circumstances of living and working under *kafala*” (p. 3).

Fernandez, B. (2014). Degrees of (Un)Freedom. In: Fernandez, B., de Regt, M. (eds) *Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137482112_3

Keywords: MDW; Ethiopian women; Middle East; Kuwait; Lebanon; agency; resistance

In this chapter, Fernandez focuses on how women migrant workers exercise their agency considering the highly exploitative context that MDW frequently find themselves in. Fernandez builds from Nayla Moukarbel’s book on Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon, which explored workers’ “everyday forms of resistance”—a theoretical framework borrowed from Scott (1985)—through covert behaviors meant to challenge the uneven power dynamics and control that workers face. Fernandez’s chapter extends this analysis to include “confrontational exchanges with employers” that MDWs have and reads these as part of a diverse set of resistance strategies utilized by MDWs. The second addition

she makes to the framework of “everyday forms of resistance” is an analysis of “the forms of agency women are able to exercise outside of employment contract—through relationships with men and through religion” (p. 52). The chapter uses evidence from fieldwork conducted with women MDWs in Kuwait and Lebanon.

Johnson, M. (2018). From Victims of Trafficking to Freedom Fighters: Rethinking Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East. In Brace, L., and O'Connell Davidson, J. (eds) *Revisiting Slavery and Antislavery*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90623-2_7

Keywords: MDW; contract slavery; debt bondage; trafficking; freedom; Middle East

In this chapter, Johnson produces an analytical reading of “freelance” MDW in the Middle East as part of a complex landscape of restraint and resistance, agency and unfreedom, that migrant workers experience vis-à-vis the kafala system and the exploitative nature of their work under citizen employers. Johnson builds this argument through a historical discussion of the term “freelancer” and its connections to liberal concepts of “trafficking” and “modern-day slavery.” Johnson then goes on to argue that MDWs who “work as freelance migrant domestic workers challenge directly that state enforced control over their mobility, refiguring their ascribed status as either compliant workers or victims of trafficking by reorganizing social relations through an act of political prefiguration; that is through the defiant insistence on acting as if they were already free” (p. 182). Johnson goes on to argue that freelancers can be categorized “as a social movement despite the fact they rarely coalesce into formally organized collections.” “Freelancers are,” according to Johnson, “on the vanguard of those migrants who are seeking through their own actions to effect social change” (p. 182-183).

International Labour Organization, Regional Office for Arab States. (2015). *Cooperating out of isolation: The case of migrant domestic workers in Kuwait, Lebanon and Jordan*. ILO. https://doi.org/10.1163/2210-7975_HRD-4022-2015006

Keywords: Jordan; Kuwait; Lebanon; social and solidarity economy; review

Uses the framework of “social and solidarity economy” to analyze examples of migrant domestic worker organizing. “Social and solidarity economy as a concept refers to enterprises and organizations, in particular cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations, and social enterprises, which specifically produce goods, services, and knowledge while pursuing economic and social aims and fostering solidarity” (p. 6). The article highlights several enabling factors to creating social and solidarity economies among migrant domestic workers, including geographic proximity, ethnic and linguistic similarities, strong activist presence, and the involvement of civil society actors (trade unions, NGOs, international NGOs).

Mansour-Ille, D., & Hendow, M. (2018). From Exclusion to Resistance: Migrant Domestic Workers and the Evolution of Agency in Lebanon. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16(4), 449–469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1400631>

Keywords: Lebanon; MDW; organizing; agency; resistance

This study discusses the evolution of migrant worker organizing in Lebanon (specifically MDW) and argues “that migrant domestic workers have evolved from a state of spatial, legal, and social exclusion to one of individual resistance characterized by dyadic or sporadic forms of resistance into a semi-organized collective publicly and actively calling for change and resistance” (p. 450). This change, they argue, is linked to the “wake-up call” served to migrant workers by the 2006 Israeli war, which exposed MDWs’ “shared vulnerability and common causes,” and spurred workers to organize (p. 459). The article’s theoretical framework starts with Amrita Pande’s (2012) article on “meso-level resistance” among migrant domestic workers, defined as the “strategic acts that cannot be classified as either private and individual or as organized collective action” (2012, p. 5). Pande here highlights initial contact between domestic workers “across balconies”—in other words, the ways that domestic workers confined to their employer’s house “connect” with other workers without leaving the house—creates the “first step for domestic workers in the formation of a community and [the] identification of support structures, especially in cases of extreme confinement” (p. 454). The article goes on to explore “informal” organizing that occurs in community spaces that are accessible to MDWs, including churches and other religious institutions, as well as “phone kiosks and international calling stores, which were understood by [workers’] employers as venues used to call their families” and, therefore, were allowed to access without surveillance (p. 455). The authors also discuss the Beirut neighborhood of Dora, which is widely known as a suburb dominated by non-Arab communities, including but not limited to Asian and African workers. In the suburb, informal gatherings between workers are part of “organizing the unorganized.” The authors argue that “self-organization beyond

the confines of balconies in churches, phone centers/kiosks, and in the Dora neighborhood represent a clear evolution in the level of agency of domestic workers” from Pande’s original analysis of “balcony talks” (p. 456). The authors also discuss the active role of NGOs in organizing MDWs and their importance as “mediating” agents between MDWs and the government, employers, and recruitment agents.

Pande, A. (2017). Intimate counter-spaces of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. *International Migration Review*, 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12325>

Keywords: MDW; Lebanon; resistance;

In this article, Pande employs the concept of “counter-spaces” to “understand the wider politics of resistance mobilized by MDWs in their everyday lives.” She notes that “intimate counter-spaces complicate debates around public/private, sacred/sexual, and confront state restrictions on migrant workers’ sexuality” and, therefore, “disrupt the heteronormative focus on married mothers in the literature on migration and gender and the reification of normative notions of both gender and sexuality” (p. 1). Counter-spaces “describe the spaces, often public, that domestic workers use and appropriate in counter-hegemonic ways, especially for conjugal, intimate, and sexual purposes” (p. 2). MDWs use these spaces to “challenge various levels of exclusions by the state, their employers, and society at large.” Workers, Pande notes, “use strategic public spaces, socially marginalized but centrally located in the city, for ostensibly ‘private’ purposes—forging intimate, romantic, and/or conjugal unions and maintaining their families” (p. 3). In this way, “the counter-spaces created by MDWs in Lebanon are clear manifestations” of the (re)negotiations of public space occurring across the Middle East as women in particular challenge the “contours of [the] public [space]” as they are “marked by a gendered, ‘sacred-sexual’ boundary, which is not fixed but constantly subject to renegotiation” (p. 3). Pande explores the framework of “counter-spaces” in two distinct locations in her research with MDWs in Lebanon: an underground cyber-café near a mall in Tripoli deemed a “Filipina” café, given the amount of MDWs that frequented the location on Sundays (the legal day off for MDWs) and churches and other religious spaces where MDWs and other non-Arab migrants were able to meet and socialize on Sundays.

III Citizen-led and Civil Society-led Initiatives



A: Visual Arts

1. Graphic Novels

Traumatized for Life: Breaking the Silence on Violence in Migrant Domestic Work

This graphic novel is a collaborative project between Eгна Legna Besidet and MDWs who shared stories of sexual violence they experienced in Lebanon. It is sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung with funding from the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany. It includes 6 stories based on the real-life experiences of MDWs who live and work in Lebanon. The stories generally present the workers as weak and helpless and the employers, recruitment agents, and taxi drivers as predators. They also touch on the impact of working as an MDW in Lebanon on mental health. The graphic novel is illustrated by Aude Aboul Nasr @ahlan.my.darlings.

Thank you Dodo

Thank you Dodo is a graphic novel built around the experiences of MDWs who visited the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) clinic in Beirut seeking mental health support. During mental health consultations, MDWs described their difficult living and working conditions under Kafala; these negative experiences were heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The graphic novel is composed of 4 stories that are based on the testimonies of MDWs and MSF staff.

Cardboard Camp: Stories of Sudanese Refugees in Lebanon

This is a graphic novel that depicts the lives of three Sudanese refugees in Lebanon whose situation is determined by the intersection of displacement and racism. The stories are authored by Maja Janmyr and Yazan Al-Saadi based on real life experiences. The publication is sponsored by the University of Oslo and funded by the Research Council of Norway.

B: Film

Maid in Lebanon. Mansour, C. (Director). (2006).

This is one of the earliest films produced in Lebanon that portrays the lives of MDWs and their relationships with their employers. It can be watched online at this link:

<https://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/3579/Maid-in-Lebanon>

Thank you, Soma. Mansour, C. (Director). (2019).

This is a documentary film about a MDW named Soma, and her contributions to the family she works for and their household.

Beirut. Zegeye, R. (Director).

In 2012, Rahel Zegeye, a former domestic worker, directed a film that chronicled the lives of several Ethiopian MDWs in Beirut. The film was supported by several civil society organizations in Lebanon.

Shouting Without a Listener. Zegeye, R., & Berbary, E. (Director). (2019).

Originally written by Rahel Zegeye as a play and performed at the American University of Beirut in 2013, *Shouting Without a Listener* documents the life of a MDW, Lily, and her experiences of exploitation in Beirut.

Makhdoumin. Abi Samra, M. (Director). (2016).

A documentary of a recruitment agency in Lebanon that highlights the racist discourse of employers during the process of browsing through catalogues to select and hire an MDW. A website, <https://makhdoum.in/en>, was developed as an extension to the film. The website includes stories about the plight of migrant domestic workers organized in chapters - the office, the room, the family, and black and white.

C: Photography and Art Exhibitions

Ahmed Mater's "Behind the Hajj" photographs of Meca Haj- (KSA, 2016)

Although not specifically about migrant worker issues, many photographs are taken of their working and living conditions, as well as other photos of the pilgrimage.²

"Mixed Feelings"- A Photography and Research Exhibition. (2014, Lebanon)

Curated by Nisreen Kaj, a Lebanese activist of mixed-race, and Marta Bogdanska, a Polish photographer, this exhibit is about mixed-race children in Lebanon. The exhibit toured all over Lebanon and now has a Part Two.³ It was supported by Hienrich Boll.

Lens on Life (2012, Lebanon)

This included two components: first, a visual arts exhibition that included photographic stories of MDWs' lives entitled "Lens on Life." This was accompanied by an infographic exhibit by several graphic artists entitled "Visualizing Migrant Rights" documenting the struggles for workers' rights. The exhibit was organized as part of a collaborative effort between Alt City and the Migrant Women's Task Force (which later merged with the Anti-Racism Movement). The exhibit was supported by Doreen Toutikian of the MENA Design Research Center.⁴

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2016/sep/14/behind-hajj-photographs-mecca-flux-ahmed-mater>

3 <https://hummusforthought.com/2014/10/18/mixed-feelings/>

4 <https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/altcity/press-releases/altcity-and-mwtf-celebrate-international-human-rights>

Online Curatorial Tour: Kafala- Migrant Labour in the Arabian Peninsula (2022, NYU)

This exhibit features the work of several different artists all documenting the realities of migrant workers in the Arabian Peninsula. The exhibit took place in the U.S. at NYU. The artists include non-Americans with lived experience in the Arab Gulf, including Khalid Albaih, a Sudanese political cartoonist who grew up in the Arab Gulf.⁵

"I am Not Your Animal" and ***"A Life After Kafala."*** Aline Deschamps.

Aline Deschamps is a well-known photographer whose work has focused on the lives of MDWs in Lebanon. Their work approaches MDWs through the lenses of empowerment and agency rather than victimization. This project shows workers during their time off, at community centers, and during community gatherings where workers appear to be happy.⁶

D: Participatory Community-Based Theatre Initiatives (with/by the community)

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) Study with Women Migrant Domestic Workers on Helping and Organizing in Lebanon: A Presentation-Performance; a Work in Progress (2023)

This is an offshoot of a community-based participatory action research study funded by the Centre of Excellence for Development Impact and Learning and led by Sawsan Abdulrahim at the American University of Beirut (AUB). As part of the study, nine WMDWs were trained in Participatory Action Research (PAR) by the AUB research team (Sawsan Abdulrahim and May Adra) to conduct and share research on collective organizing and strengthening social networks as strategies to mitigate exploitation and forced labor. This was carried out in collaboration with the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) and Migrant Community Center (MCC) in Beirut. One of the aims and outcomes of the study was to carry out a presentation-performance by the workers to celebrate their efforts. This was performed in the Beirut Art Center in March 2023 and engaged the audience in dialogue about future strategies. The PAR study resulted in the workers banding together to continue work as they apply for separate funding, as a movement titled: **Intersectional Migrant Workers Collaboration: Research and Theatre Makers.**⁷

Hanging Laundry/Nashir Ghasil (2022, Lebanon)

In this play produced with the support of Senaryo, an NGO that supports playmaking and drama therapy for marginalized communities in Lebanon, the audience looks on at the personal conversations that take place between migrant women workers as they sit together in an underground laundry room during their workdays. The play was developed in collaboration with migrant and other marginalized women from Syria, Lebanon, the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Nepal.⁸ Three migrant workers were a part of this performance, merging their stories told on stage and devised with the other women as well. This work was in collaboration between Senaryo and WomenNow for Development, which is a feminist, women-led rights-based civil society for Syrian women and girls in Bekaa, Lebanon.

Tilka (2021, Lebanon)

This play, produced with the support of Senaryo,⁹ focuses on the lives of marginalized women in Lebanon, including but not limited to MDWs. Although the performance does not specifically discuss issues of migrant workers, one of the actors had moved to Lebanon as an MDW before leaving that work space. The play was devised completely by the women and directed by Lama el Amine. It builds on the interactive theatre genre in that it includes scenes where the audience participates in making a decision after being given three options in order to get to the end result. The play culminates in a discussion between the actors and audience. The play is now turned into a documentary while also

5 <https://themedialine.org/mideast-streets/online-curatorial-tour-kafala-migrant-labor-in-the-arabian-peninsula/>

6 Squarci, "Slavery, at Home."

7 https://www.instagram.com/insijam_merge/

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z30Fd9Hw6h0>

9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IKxC2PX5Ro>

showing the interactive process of the audience. It won award for best documentary at the Independent Film Festival on September 24, 2023.

A House of Hope/Beyt el Amal (2021, Jordan)

A play produced with the support of Senaryo and Sawiyan (Jordan), this production features 22 non-professional actors, all women from various countries and from marginalized communities (both migrants and non-migrants) who share their real-life stories about their experiences in the country.¹⁰ The play is about a young women in despair arriving at an address she's been given to be offered assistance, where she finds comfort in the solidarity and support she receives from other women. This is a devised ensemble work by women of different backgrounds who share their stories of how they adapted to the limitations of the pandemic between using theatre meeting and film.

Catharsis: Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy (2014, Lebanon)

An NGO established by Zeina Daccache, a well-known Lebanese feminist performer, that organized and led in 2014 drama therapy sessions for MDWs in Beirut.¹¹ The performance was devised by MDWs and includes a mix of dance and telling stories of abuse.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvK4Jced5XE>

¹¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/11/lebanon-migrant-domestic-workers-situation.html>

IV Collective Organizing Efforts by Country

A: Bahrain



1. Union

General Domestic Workers Union

On International Domestic Workers Day, June 16, 2023, the first General Domestic Workers Union (GDWU) in Bahrain and across the Gulf was established, with support from the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) and ILO and under the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU).¹² A representative in the Bahrain Parliament criticized the GFBTU, claiming that establishing a GDWU is unnecessary as Bahrain is a leader in protecting the rights of MDWs.¹³ The Director General of GFBTU defended the establishment of the union as a right to organize for a specific labor sector.

2. Formal Organizations

Migrant Workers' Protection Society

A registered NGO established in 2005 that supports migrant workers (all sectors) in Bahrain. While not much information exists on their work specifically targeting domestic workers, it appears from their website that non-Bahrainis are on the staff of the organization.¹⁴

Sandigan Bahrain

A non-profit organization that raises the awareness of workers about their labor rights (working hours, wages) and the labor laws in Bahrain. They are particularly focused on raising the awareness of abuses facing women. The goal is to help abused workers and to link them to the proper organizations/channels to seek further help and support, for example, the embassy.

B: Egypt



1. Union

Domestic Workers Union - the 2012 attempt

In 2012, there was an attempt to form a formal union for domestic workers. Although this was not widely covered by news media outlets at the time, evidence highlights the difficulties workers and their allies faced while trying to establish the union. First, the Ministry of Manpower overtly blocked the attempts to form a union and second, provided several reasons as to why the union could not be legalized including, among other things, that the name and/or title of the union was "problematic."¹⁵ However, the lack of information available on the unionization attempt makes it difficult to pinpoint when or why the attempt ultimately failed (e.g., it is unclear what happened after the arguments over the name of the union took place).

2. Civil Society Organizations

Gozour Foundation for Development

¹² IDWF, "GDWU Is Born."

¹³ IDWF.

¹⁴ <https://www.mwpsbahrain.com/>

¹⁵ Alternative Policy Solutions, "Improving the Conditions of Domestic Workers in Egypt."

Founded in 2010, the Gozour Foundation for Development is a registered non-profit in Egypt that focuses on improving the integration of non-citizen and marginalized populations into the country's formal labor force. The organization should not be classified as an "organizer" but plays a critical role in developing and promoting research and policy documents that support non-citizens in Egypt. Gozour has also been included in high-level regional meetings held by the UN on issues of migration and is participating in the IOM's Global Compact on Migration.

C: Jordan

1. Formal Organizations

Al Hassan Workers Center in Jordan's Al Hassan Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ)

Al Hassan Workers Center (henceforth Al Hassan) was established with ILO funding in 2013 near the Al Hassan QIZ in Jordan. Al Hassan caters to the 17,000 male and female migrant workers in the garment factories who are primarily nationals of Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India. Migrants come to the center on Friday, their only day off from work, to socialize, cook, dance, or exercise in a gym. Although Jordanian and Syrian refugee women also work in the garment factories, they rarely visit Al Hassan and therefore the center caters primarily to migrants. The activities in the center are overseen by one Jordanian and two migrant staff persons who are ILO employees. The staff (semi-clandestinely) provide legal and case management support to workers who experience injuries, unpaid wages, or mental health problems. However, the Center is perceived to be primarily a location where workers engage in social and cultural activities only. Otherwise, the workers do not organize collectively around labor issues and there is clearly a sense of distrust. Al Hassan hosts representatives from the General Trade Union for Garment and Textile Industries who provide sessions about the workers' rights. The union deducts 1-2 Jordanian Dinars from each worker and, based on visits by two of the authors undertaking this review, workers have limited if any knowledge of the union. In collaboration with the Adalah Center for Human Rights, they streamline cases of workers who experience labor violations or who wish to break their work contract due to health or social reasons. However, the staff try to maintain a balance between supporting the workers but without raising the ire of Jordanian officials out of fear of reprisal which could potentially lead to closing the center.



Adalah Center for Human Rights

The Adalah Center for Human Rights, founded in 2003, is an NGO operating in Amman, Jordan, that has supported several initiatives on behalf of migrant domestic workers in the country.¹⁶

Solidarity Center

Together with the Adalah Center for Human Rights, the Solidarity Center established a legal clinic in 2014 catering to the legal needs of migrant workers in Jordan.

¹⁶ Khatib, "Sisters in Solidarity"; Quran, "To Be a Domestic Worker in Jordan."

2. Informal Organizing and/or Organizations

Domestic Workers Solidarity Network

In 2015, domestic workers in Jordan established a [Domestic Workers Solidarity Network](#) that included migrant workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.¹⁷ The network was built with the support of the IDWF and its allies, including the Solidarity Center in Jordan, which supported a series of discussions with migrant worker activists and community leaders that initiated the network. A MDW from Sri Lanka who has been living and working in Jordan for 20 years helped build the network by reaching out to other MDWs from Sri Lanka. Following, a core group of MDWs from diverse national backgrounds began meeting on a regular basis and taking part in trainings. “The new network has “united domestic workers under one umbrella, says Sara Khatib, Solidarity Center anti-trafficking in persons program officer in Jordan. The network is designed to provide a collective voice for migrant domestic workers in Jordan to ensure that they have access to full workers’ rights.” Their motto is “Sisters in Solidarity.”¹⁸ The Domestic Workers Solidarity Network is led solely by domestic workers who organize meetings to discuss the structure of the network, bylaws, and how to include more MDWs.¹⁹

Sawiyān

[Sawiyān](#) was established in 2015 by a group of Jordanian activists, aid workers, and journalists as a grassroots community-led volunteer group in Jordan to support and advocate on behalf of refugees, especially Sudanese refugees. Two years later, this initiative grew into a non-profit organization to support all marginalized refugees and all underserved communities. They work on advocacy, community development, inclusion, and anti-discrimination, and conduct trainings and emergency assistance. Their English language program “by the community, for the community” utilizes critical pedagogy and racial empowerment and is informed by Freire’s consciousness raising methodology.

D: Kuwait



1. Union

In 2021, the ILO started a program to “re-energize” the Migrant Workers Office at the Kuwait Trade Union Federation, which was originally established in 1997. This program includes bi-monthly meetings to discuss issues related to migrant domestic work in the country.²⁰

According to the ILO, the office “offers occasional legal aid

and advice, as well as periodic meetings and awareness raising activities” for migrant workers. It is unclear if a specific contingent focuses on issues facing MDW.

2. Workers’ Groups and/or Collectives

Sandigan Kuwait Domestic Workers Association (SKDWA)

Sandigan Kuwait was founded in 2010 by a group of migrant domestic workers as a volunteer association to support the well-being of other domestic workers in the country. The organization, with the help of their parent organization Sandigan Kuwait, supports individual cases (financially, legally, etc.) and actively engages in activism in support of MDWs’ rights in Kuwait.²¹

17 Connell, “Migrant Domestic Workers Network a First in Jordan - Solidarity Center.”

18 Khatib, “Sisters in Solidarity.”

19 Quran, “To Be a Domestic Worker in Jordan.”

20 ILO, “The ILO Helps Re-Energize the Migrant Workers Office at the Kuwait Trade Union Federation.”

21 “How Domestic Workers Got Organized in Kuwait.”

Ethiopian Domestic Workers Association (EDWA)

With support from Sandigan Kuwait, the IDWF, and the ILO, the Ethiopian Domestic Workers Association in Kuwait was formed in late 2020/early 2021. Prior to its formation, capacity building sessions were held for 15 Ethiopian domestic workers, who later became the original founding members of EDWA.²²

3. Informal Organizing: MDW Networks and Social Media

According to the ILO, in Kuwait, migrant worker networks operate as semi-formal structures, acknowledged by certain embassies and with some registered formally in their countries of origin, that support migrant workers in need of aid. However, the ILO notes that mobility issues, especially for live-in domestic workers, can make the use of these networks improbably for most domestic workers. As well, that these networks are informal serves as a barrier to recognition by the Kuwaiti government and trade unions.²³

Domestic Workers Kuwait

This website features the stories of MDW who are currently working or worked in Kuwait at one point in time, to raise awareness about the plight of MDW in the country. Based on the information displayed on the group's homepage, the group employs a religious (Muslim) framework to address the exploitation of workers, stating that "domestic workers are not treated equally in Kuwait, and we should be more merciful on them as it was stated by Prophet Mohammed." The group identifies as a non-profit.²⁴

E: Lebanon

1. General Mapping

Tayah, M.J. (2012). *Working with migrant domestic workers in Lebanon (1980-2012): A mapping of NGO services*. ILO-ROAS.

Keywords: *migrant domestic workers; Lebanon; service provision; civil society*



A review of organizations providing services and support to migrant domestic workers, including worker-led groups. Includes religious groups, civil society groups, women's rights groups, etc.

2. Union

The Domestic Workers Union in Lebanon was the first union for domestic workers established in the Middle East region in 2015. It was established under the umbrella of the National Federation of Employees' and Workers' Unions (FENASOL) but remained unrecognized by the Lebanese Ministry of Labor. The Union was formed through a process led by a coalition of actors and organizations, including the ILO, several NGOs (ARM, Insan Association, Frontiers Ruwad, and KAFA), and the IDWF.²⁵

3. Civil Society Groups

The [Anti-Racism Movement \(ARM\)](#) is a grassroots movement launched in 2010 by Lebanese feminist activists and migrant domestic workers following a racist incident at a private beach in Beirut. ARM works to eliminate racism in all forms in Lebanon and its three main functions are advocacy,

22 ICC Kuwait, "The Formation of the Ethiopian Domestic Workers Association."

23 Pozzan and Oulie, "Cooperating Out of Isolation: The Case of Migrant Domestic Workers in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon."

24 <https://kuwaitdomesticworkers.weebly.com/about.html>

25 Kobaissy, Organizing the Unorganized.

casework, and media. Advocacy has primarily focused on abolishing Kafala, reversing anti-immigrant and anti-refugee racist policies, and changing the racist discourse on migrants and refugees. ARM has struggled with balancing their advocacy and casework efforts as they are faced with many cases of labor violations, abuse, and forced labor. Although ARM works with pro-bono lawyers and other organizations to resolve these cases, some take weeks, even months, to resolve. During COVID-19, ARM grew tremendously in terms of funding and number of staff. Given the context of the pandemic and economic collapse in Lebanon, ARM received funding to support in repatriation efforts of migrant domestic workers who became abandoned by their employers and to provide relief to those who could not leave. These relief efforts came in the form of providing food and hygiene packages, temporary housing, and mental health support services.

In 2011, ARM established the [Migrant Community Center \(MCC\)](#). MCC now operates as the primary hub for migrant domestic workers and other migrant workers, where they can seek support (legal, financial, etc.), participate in group activities (classes or field trips for workers), and liaise with other workers for political activities (International Workers Day celebrations, etc.) as well as leisure activities.²⁶ Whilst the staff who run MCC programs as paid staff are not migrant domestic workers, ARM leadership and Advisory Board have on multiple occasions discussed necessary steps to transform MCC into a migrant worker led and operated center. In early 2023, ARM and MCC moved into one large space in Beirut that accommodates staff from both organizations and provides ample space for community activities.

KAFA (Enough!) Violence and Exploitation

KAFA is a Lebanese feminist-run NGO that has been a long-term advocate for MDWs in Lebanon. KAFA was an active member of the 2006 National Task Force on MDWs and was an active leader in the creation of the MDW union. KAFA also played a leading role in the creation of the Nepali MDW group NARI and produced some of the first reports on the status of MDWs in Lebanon and the extreme exploitation many workers face. Finally, KAFA runs a 24-hour hotline for gender-based violence and abuse victims, which provides callers with access to legal help and safe shelters if necessary.

4. Workers' Groups

Egna Legna Besidet

[Egna Legna Besidet](#) (ELB) is a community-based, feminist, activist network of Ethiopian women working on MDW issues and general women's issues in Lebanon and Ethiopia. They seek to support women who are already in Lebanon and to raise awareness in Ethiopia to dissuade women from traveling to Lebanon as MDWs. ELB became very actively engaged in relief and aid distribution during the COVID-19 crisis but continues to have a noticeable presence on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). The members participate in International Workers' Day, provide legal and shelter assistance, and hold workshops that range from raising awareness about labor issues to dancing and soap-making. ELB has created a bus map in Amharic to help Ethiopian women in Beirut and other cities and villages travel safely. The network has also raised awareness around issues of sexual harassment and violence that MDWs face in Lebanon. Their efforts culminated in the publication of a research article and the graphic novel titled "Traumatized for Life," which was listed earlier in this document.

Alliance for Migrant Domestic Workers

The Alliance for Migrant Domestic Workers²⁷ was formed in 2016 following the establishment of the Domestic Workers' Union. The Alliance was formed as an alternative to the union, according to its founding members, who were turned off from the union because of its transparency issues and the lack of agency that MDWs had relative to the union's activities, even though the union was formed to support them.²⁸ Starting with the networks of its five founders, the Alliance has grown to function as an umbrella structure that includes other worker-led initiatives and organizations. As one of its current leaders has noted, the goal of the Alliance is, as its name suggests, to bring workers from different backgrounds, as well as different community-level initiatives and networks, together to strengthen the public presence and power of MDW in Lebanon.

26 Marie-José Tayah, "Organizing Domestic Workers through Research: The Story of a Participatory Action Research with Women Migrant Domestic Workers, NGOs, and Union Members in Lebanon."

27 <https://www.facebook.com/TheAllianceOfMDWsLeb/about>

28 O'Regan, "A Day out and a Union: Lebanon's Domestic Workers Organize."

Sri Lankan Women Society

The Sri Lankan Women Society (SLWS) was founded in 2005 by Malina (Mala) Kandaarachchige. The organization provides various types of welfare support (e.g., food assistance) to Sri Lankan migrants in Lebanon.²⁹ SLWS also organizes with other migrant worker-led collectives and organizations to celebrate important cultural events (e.g., religious holidays) as well as for international worker holidays, including International Domestic Workers Day. According to an IDWF report, SLWS is the oldest domestic workers' organization in Lebanon, if not the entire Middle East.³⁰ An in-depth oral history project documents the longer history of Sri Lankan MDW organizing in Lebanon, which began with household meetings held by a longtime activist in the community. These meetings later turned into several mutual aid projects and networks, all loosely organized by the same founding members, to support Sri Lankan workers in need. The first of these groups, Solemar Young Club, was formed in response to the death of a young Lebanese soldier at the hands of the Syrian army towards the end of the civil war (1989). Sri Lankan workers offered their help to anyone –Lebanese and non-Lebanese alike–needing support in the face of the ongoing war.³¹ Eventually, disagreements within the group over priorities led to a number of Sri Lankan women forming a new group called Women Power.

NARI

NARI was initially created in 2012 by Nepali MDWs in Lebanon with the support of KAFA, a local Lebanese feminist organization. NARI was also supported during its early years by the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) and Anti-Slavery International.³² However, the organization disbanded after the deportation of a key Nepali activist several years after it was founded. Today, many MDW in the Nepali community have remained active through other organizations, like the Alliance for Migrant Domestic Workers.

Mesewat

Mesewat is an Ethiopian domestic worker-led organization that was formed in 2016 by several Ethiopian activists and community leaders who had been working with a grassroots campaign known as the Migrant Workers Task Force (MWTF), which later merged with ARM and MCC in 2015.³³ One of the founders of Mesewat (Rahel Zegeye) has also produced a film, *Shouting without a Listener* (2015), as part of her activist work in the country. The filmmaker notes that part of the reason Mesewat formed is because of this film, which brought to light the desire to establish an Ethiopian community-based organization. This eventually led to the creation of Mesewat, which included a set of bylaws to guide their work. The group's work includes but is not limited to case-by-case support for workers in need (which can include financial, legal, and food/shelter support), as well as participating in advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns. Mesewat also has a branch in Ethiopia.

5. Online Activism: Campaigns, Actors, Groups

THIS IS LEBANON (TIL)

TIL began as a Facebook group, formed by former migrant workers in Lebanon, with the aim of exposing the many abuses endured by migrant workers in Lebanon. Today, TIL is registered as a Canadian non-profit. Using its social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook, TIL employs a "name and shame" strategy to hold employers accountable for their often-horrific treatment of migrant workers. Most recently, the group posted pictures and video-recorded testimony from a MDW who is owed nearly \$30,000 in salary who had been repatriated after 15 years of work as a live-in without a single salary payment. Most recently, after the effects of COVID-19 and the explosion at the port of Beirut destroyed the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of migrant workers, TIL began a social media campaign #sendushome to collect donations to support the repatriation of workers.³⁴

29 Issa, *Surviving Displacement, Alienation, and Kafala in the Nineties: An Oral History of Grassroots Organizing*.

30 Hamdan, "Permanently Temporary: Ageing Sri Lankan Migrant Domestic Workers (SDMWS) and Exclusionary Social Policies in Lebanon."

31 Issa, *Surviving Displacement, Alienation, and Kafala in the Nineties: An Oral History of Grassroots Organizing*.

32 ILO, "Good Practice - Group of Nepalese Feminists in Lebanon (NARI)"; Anti-Slavery International, "Into the Unknown: Exploitation of Nepalese Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon."

33 Hassan and Shukr, "Migrant Domestic Workers' Community Organizing with the Lebanese Socio-Legal Context."

34 Hassan and Shukr.

6. Informal Organizing: Social Networking

ILO Case Study: The Use of Social Networking Among Women Malagasy Domestic Workers in Lebanon

In a study with 20 Malagasy MDW in Lebanon, evidence revealed the importance of social networking platforms and sites, as well as Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) applications—such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Viber—to connect with each other and with their families and communities back home.³⁵ In this report, however, the use of social media is classified as somewhat misleading: MDW who had experienced abuse did not post about their abuse online. Rather, they social media to “portray a reality that ha[s] very little to do with their everyday existence.” This, the study notes, “could be an important factor in explaining the ongoing flow of low-skilled workers into [Lebanon]” in light of the highly exploitative conditions that migrants face once they arrive.³⁶

F: Morocco



1. Formal Organizations

Coalition of Migrant Workers in Morocco

A partner of the Solidarity Center, the Coalition of Migrant Workers in Morocco (CTMM), founded in 2013, aims to raise awareness about migrant workers and their rights in Morocco.^{37, 38} The Coalition (*Collectif des Travailleurs Migrants au Maroc*) frequently presents at UN

level meetings and committees related to the Domestic Workers Convention (189).

G: Qatar

1. Formal Organizations

Bayanihang Domestic Worker Qatar (BDWQ)

BDWQ is a Qatari affiliate of the IDWF and is a federation of approximately 20+ organizations and networks of Filipinx workers in Qatar.³⁹ News sources in Qatar report that BDWQ has run fundraisers to support workers as well as various other outreach programs that provide immediate support (in the form of food and personal hygiene items) to workers in need.



H: Tunisia



1. Informal Organizations

Association Camerounaise des Migrants et Travailleurs en Tunisie (ACMITT)

While the group has a Facebook page, there is very limited information (based on French and English searches) on the organization.⁴⁰

35 Tayah, “Working with Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon (1980-2012): A Mapping of NGO Services.”

36 Tayah, “Decent Work for Migrant Domestic Workers: Moving the Agenda Forward.”

37 Connell, “Forum Opens on Promoting Women Workers’ Rights.”

38 “Collectif Des Travailleurs Migrants Au Maroc.”

39 Qatar Tribune, “Filipino Household Service Workers’ Group Launched.”

40 “Association Camerounaise Des Migrants et Travailleurs En Tunisie (ACMITT).”

V Transnational Organizing



At Home Sa Abroad: Stories of Overseas Filipinos

A podcast that highlights the stories of migrant Filipinx workers, including migrant domestic workers, and the organizations that support these workers. In one episode, the podcast features Ivy Ancheta, a Filipinx worker who is the communications and marketing lead for Sandigan Bahrain.⁴¹

Domestic Workers Advocacy Network (DoWAN)

Founded by Lucy Turay, a former MDW in Lebanon, DoWAN is an awareness-raising initiative targeting workers in the host country as well as returnees and women hoping to travel to the Middle East for work. DoWAN focuses on the *kafala* system and the abuses facing MDW as a result of, or related to the *kafala* system. The organization also provides vocational skills training for workers as well as a reintegration program for returnee migrants. The organization is now based out of Sierra Leone.

#WHATSUPport: Support Systems for Migrants

This Facebook group is a public group that raises awareness about existing services and support groups for migrant workers around the world.⁴² The group is run by Migrant Forum in Asia, which has also produced a number of infographics that similarly document existing support systems in some host countries (e.g., Singapore) and support systems for specific groups of migrant workers (e.g., Filipinx, Bangladeshi, Nepali workers, etc.).⁴³

41 <https://music.amazon.in/podcasts/106fd91c-fbad-47e5-a30b-8a8692978c09/at-home-sa-abroad>

42 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/whatsupport/>

43 http://mfasia.org/resources/infographics/?fbclid=IwAR35d-6-K6ucxCCU6lIRwgOwHoHoOmm0Wa6dtkWMsm_nul3wVfhwxmfjvg

VI Trends and Patterns



This section of the scoping study provides an analysis of our findings, including some patterns that emerged upon examining the myriad organizing strategies utilized by migrant domestic workers and their allies across the Arab region. We present: 1) a critical review of how the resources and forms of collective organizing address *kafala*; 2) some thoughts on the intended audience/stakeholders of organizing efforts; and 3) a glimpse into the rise of mutual aid efforts in the context of COVID-19 and economic downturns in different Arab countries.

To begin with, whilst early academic writings on MDWs in the Arab region focused on the victimization of this group, recent publications (most of which are based on in-depth ethnographic studies that utilize theoretical frameworks) present more nuance and complexity. Acknowledging that the lives of MDWs are governed by a global context of structural violence, the struggles of many to establish and join organizations, to extract themselves from bonded labor and work as freelancers, and to create physical and virtual counter spaces uncover an agency that was previously overshadowed. In the words of Johnson (2018), the lives of MDWs is “a complex landscape of restraint and resistance, agency and unfreedom.”⁴⁴ In sum, the select academic publications annotated in this scoping review make it clear that MDWs are not merely victims; they are active subjects who resist gendered and racialized forms of oppression and strive to improve their wellbeing and that of their families in an unequal global economic system.

Formal and informal organizing efforts by MDWs in the Arab region, which we described in this scoping review, demonstrate that there is a dynamic field of collective mobilization for labor rights and the rights of migrant workers to live in dignity. Although we were aware of MDW collective organizing efforts in Lebanon and Jordan before commencing this review, we were pleasantly surprised to learn through the review process of the many relatively recently established organizations in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Morocco, and Tunisia. Some of these organizing efforts link with local unions or have been established in collaboration with local activists and groups. This is promising as we think of the potential of strengthening these collectives and building alliances across national and class divisions. On the other hand, to learn lessons about the reasons for success and impact, it is important to evaluate why some organizations that were established more than a decade ago are still functioning whereas others have disbanded. Similarly, given the context in Gulf countries (Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain) and the difficulties of instituting policies to protect the rights of MDWs and migrant workers in general, it is critical to evaluate the reach and impact of these new efforts and their success in abolishing *kafala* or changing the harsh realities of labor migrants through collective organizing. A deep understanding of the dynamics and impact of collective organizing in the different contexts is crucial in light of very limited if any success in abolishing *kafala* through policy change.

44 Johnson, “From Victims of Trafficking to Freedom Fighters.”

A: Abolishing Kafala

One of the clearest patterns that emerges from a broad strokes analysis of organizing for the rights of MDWs is the call to abolish the *kafala* system. Historically, the call to abolish *kafala* has dominated publications and organizing efforts led by civil society organizations as well as some international NGOs and even academic work. Our scoping review revealed that this trend seems to be shifting—especially over the last few years and as a direct result of COVID-19, which has forced organizers to focus on bottom-up and other grassroots approaches, as well as different ways to approach migration policy—it is still worth analyzing how the call to abolish *kafala* has unfortunately resulted in some analytical obfuscations that have, at times, created a more ambiguous call to action rather than a sharp and pointed strategy for ensuring and protection MDWs' rights.

It is without question that the *kafala* system does not protect the rights of migrants and arguably, was never intended to do so. In our previous research, however, we have found that the focus on the *kafala* system as a primary barrier to securing better rights for migrants and MDWs in particular has led to several important issues. The first issue is that the frequent usage of the slogan “abolish *kafala*” has led to discussions of the *kafala* system that have lost sight of the fact that *kafala* is not simply a top-down structure enforced by the government. It is, rather, a system wherein employers themselves play an equally active role in determining what the *kafala* is, how it is practiced, and, more importantly, the types of abuses that can be carried out with impunity under the guise of being “allowed” by the *kafala*. In other words, the concern here is that the term *kafala* has come to signify a static entity rather than a set of dynamic processes and practices by different stakeholders that collectively have come to be known as the *kafala* system. With this in mind, calls to abolish *kafala* prove limited, especially with regards to changing social norms surrounding the *kafala* and the employer-employee practices that have been condoned resultantly.

Secondly, what is meant by the call to “abolish *kafala*” ultimately varies depending on the actors or organizations using the term. We have found that organizing efforts have not thoroughly examined what they hope will replace the *kafala* system or the types of reforms that might adequately restructure the *kafala* system enough to support migrant workers if this is even possible.

The third issue is that organizers' overwhelming focus on *kafala* has obfuscated some of the underlying structural issues that maintain the system, specifically the racialized and gendered history of reproductive labor in the Arab region. In Lebanon and much of the Levant, for example, today's MDWs were preceded by girls and women from poor, often rural Arab families who would work in the households of the wealthy to provide a source of income for their families.^{45, 46} Over time, political shifts precipitated a preference for non-Arab domestic workers which, coupled with changing migration patterns in the region and globally, eventually led to the “replacement” of Arab domestic workers with foreign domestic workers. This history is compounded by the global care crisis and the demand for cheapened reproductive labor.⁴⁷ In some Arab states, like Lebanon, the demand for MDWs is linked to states' weakened capacity for and lacking political will to provide adequate and affordable care. Whereas in wealthier Arab Gulf States, the demand for low-paid foreign workers to perform domestic work is part of a “social compact,” where MDWs are “viewed as part of an unspoken bargain between the state and the emerging civil society, by which the state provides a leisured life in exchange for complete political control.”⁴⁸ These systems are just as liable for the exploitation and abuses of MDWs as the *kafala* system, and arguably must be tackled simultaneously to achieve long-term results towards the rights of MDWs in the Arab States region.

B: Organizing for Whom? Critiquing the Intended Audience of Organizing Efforts

Across organizing efforts in the Arab States is the issue of intended audience: Who is a particular initiative targeting and why? Largely, worker-led organizing efforts are directed toward the state and other governing bodies that oversee migrant workers' legal status while they are in the destination country. Appeals to the state also include calls to enforce laws to protect migrant workers as well as calls to abolish or reform the *kafala*. Some initiatives led by local civil society organizations and international NGOs like the ILO might choose to target employers in the hopes of changing employers' attitudes and practices relative to MDW. In the case of some awareness raising initiatives or projects, including art presentations or installations and documentary films, the intended audience might vary, from citizens interested in the issue to local organizers and other migrant workers.

45 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*.

46 Jureidini, “In the Shadows of Family Life.”

47 Ehrenreich and Hochschild, *Global Woman*.

48 Fernandez, “Household Help?,” 451.

While conducting this scoping study, it becomes clear that the nuances embedded in each context are key to understanding how organizing efforts for better legal protections and the rights of MDWs “work” in different places. Questions such as, who raised these concerns? Who initiated a specific event or movement? Is the organizing effort being led by migrant workers themselves, citizen activists in the host country, or is it collaborative? How do collaborative efforts between citizens and non-citizens work? Answers to these questions illuminate who is the intended audience of these efforts and, importantly, what it means that certain audiences are targeted by various forms of organizing. For example, a few NGOs in Lebanon and Jordan are highly active and provide services (to MDWs and refugees) and conduct anti-racism advocacy to change public opinion. We noted that in the Arab Gulf, where organizing is heavily censored by government officials, MDWs have been working with local labor unions. We were pleasantly surprised, however, to discover that local labor unions have supported the formation of a new MDW unions or included MDWs in their labor organizing efforts. It would be crucial to follow up on these new developments and their impact on changing citizen attitudes and improving the work standards and living conditions of MDWs.

On the other hand, the rise of what might be called “anonymous” art—meaning, photo exhibitions that disguise the subjects of the photography or that hide the name of the photographer themselves—are more prevalent than in the Levant, where theatrical performances led and performed by MDWs themselves are produced.⁴⁹

In our review, questions about intended audience and the expected outcomes of certain organizing or awareness raising activities were particularly important relative to documentary films produced by non-MDWs on behalf of these workers. For example, in Lebanon, several documentary films have been produced by a Lebanese director with the intention of raising the awareness of other Lebanese about the plight of MDWs. How should audiences be expected to consume this type of media production? What should they “do” after seeing the film? Ultimately, the worry is that citizens will see such documentaries and somehow feel relieved, or that they have “done their duty” to support MDWs when simply watching the film does not translate into the type of activism or change that is needed to overturn the *kafala* system and the current abuses facing MDWs. While we recognize of course that there is value in such initiatives, in that simply starting the discussion about the rights of MDWs among citizens is an important first step, exploring such productions through a more critical lens can be beneficial as we move away from neoliberal approaches and work to develop more progressive but also effective organizing methods.

C: The (Re)Emergence of Mutual Aid and Grassroots Organizing

In our review, mutual aid efforts and other forms of grassroots organizing emerge as a key component of MDW activism around the Arab region. While mutual aid has historically been one of the primary methods of organizing for MDWs in other global contexts, the conceptualization of this work as “mutual aid” has emerged most clearly during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic’s worst stages. Not only in the Arab region but around the world, organizing efforts that included providing at-risk or high-risk communities with the materials and resources necessary to meet their daily needs, broadly classified as mutual aid efforts, emerged as a critical strategy for building solidarity and network within these communities. For migrant workers, and especially freelance MDWs, receiving mutual aid through a weekly food package or housing support has also been a key method for local community activists to assess MDW needs and to build community networks with new workers.

The rise of mutual aid work more recently and in relation to COVID-19 has contributed to stronger collaboration between local (citizen) activists and MDWs, a trend we witnessed during our scoping study. From ARM in Lebanon to Sawiyan in Jordan, workers and citizen activists have formed powerful alliances as part of these grassroots initiatives and is something we believe will continue to strengthen in the future.

⁴⁹ It is important to note however that the Levant is also heavily censored by government officials and police relative to MDW activism. In Lebanon, for example, several key MDW activists were arrested and deported following their participation in the development of a play documenting the abuses that face MDWs.

VII Future Avenues for Research on MDW Organizing



Based on the findings of our scoping studies, several key areas for further research emerge.

The first area for future research includes exploring how grassroots or meso-level organizing efforts are accomplishing change above and beyond advocacy to institute policy changes, such as abolishing the *kafala*. As governments across the region (and the world) become increasingly hostile to workers' rights, especially migrant workers' rights, it becomes critical to explore how organizers are strategizing and shifting their priorities to respond to increasingly oppressive governments, growing xenophobia, and the continued lack of political will to support workers. In practice, this means exploring the ways that grassroots organizing, including mutual aid efforts, can shed light on new ways to support workers in contexts where governments are unwilling to support policy changes. Theoretically, we want to emphasize that this future area of research must therefore explore expanding what might be considered "organizing," to continue to include both formal and informal methods of organizing. While feminists have historically used an expansive definition of organizing and relatedly, resistance, we believe these efforts are still not mainstreamed, and formal organizing efforts (e.g., building a union) are still valued more than informal organizing efforts.

A second area for future research should focus on the growing importance of social media and other forms of technology to MDW organizing efforts. While social media and technology were important to organizing prior to COVID-19, the government-enforced lockdowns and social distancing measures regulations instigated the use of social media to attract attention to the plight of MDW. Social media has also been used by MDWs' advocates and organizations looking to raise awareness and even financial resources to support MDWs. As mentioned in our review, several activist accounts use their social media platforms to raise funding for at-risk workers, including those who have returned to their home countries, as well as for workers who were unable to afford their repatriation fees during COVID-19.

A third area for future research must include an exploration of growing collective organizing efforts by MDWs and host country activists across national lines and transnationally (linking MDWs abroad and activists in the home country, as well as citizen-led activist efforts from the diaspora). Transnational organizing efforts can include more formal partnerships, for example, between migrant workers' home governments and communities of workers in the host country. NARI, a Nepali feminist group that was once active in Lebanon is a good example of this type of transnational collaboration, as they worked closely with a Nepali government bureau to focus on the wellbeing of MDWs in Lebanon. Transnational efforts might also include efforts of MDW groups to inform migrants about the working conditions in different Arab countries. For example, some migrant worker initiatives led by DoWAN include awareness raising sessions led by returnee MDWs to women hoping to travel abroad to work as domestic workers, to inform them about the realities of working in the Arab region. Lastly, an exploration of transnational advocacy efforts should include cross- or multi-

national organizing efforts. These efforts might look like the Alliance for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon, whose leadership includes MDWs of different nationalities.

However, in some of these efforts research noted the existence of tensions between workers of different nationalities or of different intersectional identities. Specifically, we have witnessed in our own research with migrant workers (e.g., AUB Participatory Action Research project) that issues of sexuality (e.g., issues facing trans*, gay, lesbian, or other gender non-conforming communities) are still not mainstreamed in efforts to support MDWs. To rephrase, that the overwhelming majority of MDWs are women makes issues facing MDWs a “women’s issue,” according to some citizen-led women’s rights organizations, whereas issues facing gender non-conforming or LGBTQIA MDWs are not considered to be mainstream issues. Other marginalized identities are often invisibilized in organizing efforts to support MDWs, such as workers with disabilities.