



# **Left Behind: Systemic Discrimination Against Migrant Workers During the Israeli War on Lebanon**



Civil Society Facility for  
the Mediterranean  
فَرْقِ المَجْتَمَعِ المَدْنِي  
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## Introduction

As Lebanon reels from over two months of Israel's new invasion and relentless bombardment that started on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026, one population in particular faced an additional layer of adversity. Although exposed to the same perils as many Lebanese citizens—mass displacement, controlled demolitions, and indiscriminate strikes—migrants are frequently excluded from government social services, creating a multifaceted crisis driven by the absence of social safety nets and a system that inhibits the exercise of basic human rights.

Lebanon's longstanding kafala system, a combination of draconian laws and customary practices that tie migrant workers' legal residency and status to their employers, has significantly exacerbated the marginalization of migrants during wartime. This exploitative system, widely considered a form of modern slavery, individual liberties, denies civil rights, and precludes access to essential social services<sup>1</sup> Although all foreigners<sup>2</sup> regardless of nationality or profession, are subjected to this system, nearly half of all migrants in Lebanon are domestic workers, many hailing from economically<sup>3</sup> disadvantaged communities in Africa and South Asia. In Fact, the kafala system is primarily applied to migrant domestic workers. Unlike other migrant workers, who generally have greater freedom to change sponsors, move independently, and leave their employment, migrant domestic workers remain directly dependent on their sponsor. This is because domestic workers fall under the fourth category of foreign workers in Lebanon, where their legal residency status and rights are directly tied to the sponsor, creating a relationship of dependency that often amounts to conditions of exploitation and forced labor. Other foreign nationals usually fall under different categories and are therefore not subjected to the same level of control. This demographic is particularly vulnerable, as the employer's home functions as the workplace—and, in many cases, a de facto a place of deprivation of liberty. It is common for employers to confine domestic employees in the home, sometimes confiscating passports, assets, and personal belongings. In times of war, the ramifications of these abusive practices are only augmented, with migrants unable to seek humanitarian assistance, flee the country, or escape the home in response

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/04/lebanons-abusive-kafala-sponsorship-system>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.msf.org/lebanon-migrant-workers-are-abused-and-ignored-under-kafala-system>

<sup>3</sup><https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/trapped-and-abused-migrant-workers-experiences-lebanon>



to evacuation orders. Many migrants report being abandoned by employers yet forced to maintain the household amid active<sup>4</sup> airstrikes while their employing family evacuates.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, many domestic workers also lack residency or work permits, rendering them effectively invisible under Lebanese law when seeking protection yet a conspicuous outsider if attempting to flee their predicaments, exposing themselves to imprisonment or deportation.<sup>6</sup> Because social services are exclusive to citizens and those with official refugee status, migrant workers remain excluded from the state welfare system, with the hardships of war compounding the effects of this systemic neglect. In practice, this legal and institutional marginalization is reinforced by procedural shortcomings within the judicial system, which often relies primarily on sponsors' allegations without requiring supporting evidence.

These practices constitute violations of Lebanon's obligations under international human rights law, including the principles of non-discrimination, dignity, and equal protection under the law.

### **Methodology:**

This report draws on CLDH's online monitoring of violations affecting migrant workers, complemented by information gathered by CLDH's social workers and legal team who are in direct contact with beneficiaries from this population. All testimonies were collected with informed consent, anonymized where necessary, and verified through CLDH's legal and case management systems.

### **Systemic Discrimination**

According to CLDH legal case files, multiple workers reported passport confiscation and confinement, amounting to arbitrary deprivation of liberty. It was also observed that the judicial system often relies primarily on the sponsor's allegations without requiring supporting evidence. For example, during the war, several sponsors accused domestic workers of theft without any proof, in many cases to avoid paying outstanding salaries or

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<sup>5</sup> <https://al-rawiya.com/unprepared-and-unsupported-lebanons-migrant-workers-amid-surg-ing-israeli-attacks/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.goethe.de/prj/ruy/en/dos/mig/21504593.html>



to disengage from their obligations after fleeing or changing addresses due to the war and the evacuation.

## **Government Shelters**

A primary manifestation of discrimination occurs through the persistence of Lebanese-only shelters. While the government operates hundreds of collective shelters to provide temporary lodging for the displaced, many prioritize citizens, and some explicitly deny entry to foreigners.

This exclusion has only intensified as displacement levels surge to over 20% of the total population<sup>7</sup> and shelter capacity becomes rapidly exhausted, with 622 collective shelters operating at or near full capacity<sup>8</sup> Michael Petro, the Emergency Shelter Director with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), explained to Radio France Internationale that authorities initially indicated that government shelters would be open to migrants if tensions escalated. However, as displacement reached unprecedented levels, the shelters' diminishing space was ultimately reserved for Lebanese nationals. Petro noted hearing from "hotlines up to government officials and ministries that migrants are not welcome," and by Thursday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, the government officially declared shelters at full capacity.

For many migrants, this exclusion is a lived reality: two families, Sudanese migrants fleeing war, reported that government shelters were "never an option" for them, instead seeking refuge alongside the JRS at Saint Joseph Tabaris Parish in <sup>9,10</sup>

Similar accounts emerged from Saint Joseph Church of the Jesuit Fathers in Ashrafieh. One anonymous woman shared how, when approaching a school repurposed as a government shelter, she and her family were told the schools were not for foreigners, but Lebanese only. Another young woman detailed carpooling with her neighbors when evacuation orders were announced, who drove her from the south before leaving her in

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/4/20/to-stay-or-to-go-no-good-options-for-lebanon-displaced#:~:text=Soon%2C%201.2%20million%20people%2C%20or,expel%20people%20from%20their%20land%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>8</sup>file:///Users/erikachagin/Downloads/Protection%20Sector%20Monitoring%20Snapshot\_Emergency%202-15%20March.pdf

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20260307-refugees-migrants-in-lebanon-find-rare-sanctuary-from-israeli-strikes-in-beirut-church>



the middle of the street, explaining that they could not bring her with them to the shelter as they do not accept foreigners.<sup>11</sup>

This discrimination forces migrants into homelessness, with many resorting to sleeping in unsafe conditions on the streets - especially considering that women, who face additional risks, comprise 76% of all migrant workers and 99% of all migrant domestic workers.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, exclusion from shelters isolates migrants from aid, as official government-run shelters are often the sole source of humanitarian assistance such as hygiene supplies, food, and health care.<sup>13</sup> Without basic sustenance or existential resources, migrants face food insecurity and a wide range of health risks, ranging from an inability to receive life-sustaining medication for chronic illnesses to prenatal and obstetrical care. With the lack of governmental oversight, nonprofits have stepped in to fill the humanitarian gap; Médecins sans Frontières, for instance, treated over 300 migrant patients towards the beginning of hostilities on March 29th, and found the great majority of patients to have been displaced or without access to healthcare for months.<sup>14</sup>

Concretely, the refusal to allow migrant workers access to shelters constitutes a direct violation of the right to adequate housing guaranteed under Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This right extends beyond the mere provision of a physical space and includes access to safe, secure, and dignified shelter without discrimination. Denying migrant workers entry to shelters, particularly in situations of displacement, crisis, or heightened vulnerability, exposes them to unsafe living conditions and undermines their dignity, security, and overall well-being. Such exclusion also reflects discriminatory practices that disproportionately affect already marginalized groups, contrary to the Covenant's principles of equality and non-discrimination.

## **Economic security**

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DVxunQSArc4/?igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D>

<sup>12</sup> <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/06/women-migrant-domestic-workers-in-lebanon-a-gender-perspective#:~:text=Women%20make%20up%20an%20estimated,come%20to%20Lebanon%20for%20em-employment.>

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/DVqaBK3Dh1H/?img\\_index=3&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D](https://www.instagram.com/p/DVqaBK3Dh1H/?img_index=3&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/migrants-are-among-most-vulnerable-amid-lebanon-escalation>



War and displacement impose a distinct economic pressure on migrant workers due to their lack of financial and legal autonomy under the Kafala system and their explicit exclusion from Lebanese labor law. Workers are prohibited to change jobs or quit without their employer's permission, and while laborers are technically allowed to leave the country without permission, it is a common practice for employers to confiscate workers' assets and identifying documents.<sup>15</sup> These exploitative practices manifest to the extreme during times of war, when financial resources, and freedom of movement can ultimately determine life or death.

As typical civilian work ceases, families evacuate, and normal life pauses, displacement can mean job insecurity. For migrants, this also means legal status insecurity, as their legal right to live in Lebanon is directly tied to their employment. And in cases where war has not forced work to cease, as is the case for many domestic workers whose employers expect them to continue maintaining housework amidst bombings, many migrants are faced with the impossible decision of continuing work and risking their lives, or ceasing work to relocate to a safe place and risk deportation, many to countries to which they have never been before. Michael Petro of MSF told PBS News that, "when migrants are displaced, they lose their job, which means they lose their residency, they lose their legal status, they lose their home. The minute your contract breaks, you lose your residency, which just makes it very difficult to flee war if your employer would like you to stay put."<sup>16</sup>

Take, for instance, a Bangladeshi construction worker, who sent his entire \$200/month salary home in early February, oblivious of the disruption to come. His employer ceased contact with him, including withholding funds, leaving the construction worker in disarray, without income or certainty of what's to come. He has been depending upon NGOs for food, medicine, and shelter, yet expresses the insufficiency of nonprofit aid alone. Moreover, without employment, he loses his residency and could face deportation.<sup>17</sup>

## Stories from the Field

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/what-kafala-system>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/video/wider-war-1773866730/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/migrants-woes-mount-war-hit-lebanon-4126791>



## **A Sudanese Migrant Worker in need of support**

Amelia\* is a migrant worker from Sudan who sought the assistance of CLDH. Alongside her disabled husband and children, she fled her home in search of shelter following evacuation orders. Like many others, official government shelters refused to accept her and her family. Although she is registered with the UNHCR, she was informed upon contacting them that they could not provide any assistance. She additionally reached out to the Sudanese embassy, which reiterated this response and offered her a potential opportunity to return to Sudan—an option she cannot consider due to lingering safety risks facing her and her family. CLDH’s social workers were supporting her through this ordeal, trying to find a place for her and her family to stay.

In a short interview with CLDH’s social workers, they explained how Amelia’s experience mirrors the harsh reality confronting most other migrants, reflecting a broader systemic trend of exploitation and abuse. They recount numerous stories of beneficiaries facing severe challenges in attempting to access shelter due to the unexpectedly high number of Lebanese internally displaced people who take priority over foreigners. They also explained how NGOs fill in the gaps left by the government but that despite their efforts, many individuals and families remain on the streets with nowhere to go. Life on the streets is especially difficult for those fleeing “red zone” areas that require immediate evacuation, often without time to collect essential items such as food or clothing. This leaves many struggling to meet their most basic needs, including access to food, which has become increasingly unaffordable.

Sleeping on the street also entails a serious lack of hygiene facilities, and CLDH's social workers explained how many are unable to bathe or access toilets, conditions that heighten the spread of disease and exacerbate existing health conditions. The difficulty of receiving healthcare is another major concern for displaced migrants; and displaced families, such as Amelia's, cannot afford necessary medical care, including medications for chronic illnesses, emergency treatments, or maternal healthcare.

Because of the difficult dilemmas many migrants are in, forced to choose between income and residency or life and instability, some migrant workers are forced to remain in unsafe or high-risk areas; they simply do not have the financial means nor available options to relocate. CLDH’s social workers stressed that these issues leave migrant workers highly vulnerable, especially compared to their Lebanese counterparts, and without adequate protection or support.



During the interview, they explained how displaced migrant workers face compounded vulnerabilities, and that in addition to lacking shelter, many have lost their livelihoods, especially those who worked in heavily affected areas. The struggles they face will not disappear when the conflict ends, either: the long-term ramifications of living through conflict are exacerbated as members of a marginalized community. The team stressed how difficult recovery will be in the aftermath of the war, as many have relinquished both income and housing, now left with nothing.

The circumstances described in this case point to multiple protection failures and potential human rights violations, including discriminatory exclusion from emergency shelter, barriers to accessing healthcare, and inadequate protection for vulnerable displaced populations. The disproportionate impact on migrant workers further illustrates the structural vulnerabilities created by exclusionary policies and insufficient protection mechanisms.

### **A Migrant worker in dire need of help**

During the 2026 war in Beirut, a Bangladeshi migrant worker and her family were forced to flee their home in the Kafaat area of Dahye due to escalating insecurity. The 42-year-old woman is living with her husband and two daughters in a temporary tent in the Hadath area following their displacement.

Prior to the conflict, the beneficiary worked in house cleaning, while her husband was serving as a building guard at a school in dahye without receiving a salary, in exchange for their daughters' enrollment. The escalation of violence disrupted these fragile livelihoods, leaving the family with severely limited financial resources and reduced access to basic needs, and forcing the children out of school.

The beneficiary has a medical history of uterine fibroids and has previously undergone surgery. She requires ongoing medication and is potentially in need of further medical intervention. However, financial constraints and displacement significantly limited her access to necessary care, which is where CLDH stepped in.

Access to healthcare and adequate shelter are fundamental human rights that should be guaranteed to everyone, regardless of nationality or legal status. Therefore, the fact that they were forced to remain in a tent on the streets, and were deprived of access to medical care until the intervention of CLDH constitutes a serious violation of their basic rights and highlights the significant barriers vulnerable individuals continue to face in accessing essential services and protection.



### **Mother as a sole caregiver: urgent need for cash assistance**

During the 2026 conflict in Beirut, an Ethiopian migrant worker and her children were forced to leave their home in the Bourj Al-Barajneh area of Dahye due to escalating insecurity. The 39-year-old woman, who is the sole caregiver of her four children following her husband's departure during the 2024 war, sought refuge in the Hamra area, where an acquaintance provided temporary shelter.

Prior to the conflict, the beneficiary worked in house cleaning to support her household. However, the escalation of violence and her displacement have prevented her from continuing her work, leaving the family without a source of income.

With no stable livelihood, ongoing housing insecurity, and full responsibility for four children, the beneficiary faced significant financial hardship and challenges in meeting basic needs.

Given her vulnerability and current living conditions, emergency cash assistance was provided to support her immediate needs and help ensure temporary stability for her and her children.

### **Left alone on the streets: The plight of migrant workers during war**

A migrant worker who sought support from CLDH shared with our legal team that she had been employed by a family in Beirut's southern suburbs. When the war broke out, the family fled out of fear for their safety without paying her monthly salary. In light of the situation, she did not feel in a position to request her unpaid wages.

The non-payment of wages constitutes an economic rights violation and reflects the heightened vulnerability of migrant domestic workers under the Kafala system, where dependency on employers often limits workers' ability to claim their rights or seek redress.

Shortly after, the family found shelter in a school that was only accepting Lebanese nationals, leaving her excluded from access to shelter and forced to fend for herself on the streets. She was later able to stay temporarily with friends.

Her exclusion from emergency shelter on the basis of nationality raises serious concerns regarding discrimination and unequal access to humanitarian assistance during armed conflict. Access to safe shelter, especially in times of war and displacement, is a fundamental protection need that should be guaranteed without discrimination.



Being left without accommodation also exposed her to heightened protection risks, including homelessness, insecurity, exploitation, violence, and further abuse, particularly as a migrant woman without family or institutional support.

CLDH's legal team is currently assisting her with the repatriation process.

This case highlights the broader structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers in Lebanon during times of crisis, including exclusion from emergency response mechanisms, barriers to accessing protection services, and the absence of adequate safeguards ensuring their dignity, safety, and fundamental rights.

### **Rights Violations Behind Bars**

The situation of migrant workers in detention is particularly concerning. CLDH identified approximately 15 migrant women (mainly Kenyan, Sierra Leonean, and Ethiopian) who remained in detention even though they had completed their prison sentences. CLDH had covered the required judicial fees and fines for their release. In principle, as foreign nationals, they should have been deported upon release and processed by the General Security Office (GSO). However, due to the ongoing situation and lack of available flights, they were all detained by the Lebanese General Security and held under administrative detention.

This raised serious legal and humanitarian concerns. While the GSO retains discretionary authority to consider alternatives, such measures were not systematically applied. CLDH referred these cases to the United Nations to facilitate expedited departures and advocate for alternative solutions. While these individuals were eventually assisted, others in similar situations remain at risk without access to such support.

### **Legal Analysis:**

During periods of armed conflict or heightened insecurity, the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Lebanon are significantly exacerbated, giving rise to increased risks of discrimination in both law and practice. The pre-existing exclusion of domestic workers from the scope of the Lebanese Labor Law, combined with the dependency inherent in the kafala system, results in a legal and protection gap that becomes more severe in times of crisis.



In situations of war, State institutions and protective mechanisms are often weakened or deprioritized, which disproportionately affects already marginalized groups. Migrant domestic workers frequently experience discriminatory treatment in access to humanitarian assistance, evacuation measures, and protection services. Unlike Lebanese nationals or other categories of workers, MDWs are often excluded, formally or informally, from emergency response frameworks, including shelter, financial aid, and safe evacuation corridors. When emergency measures fail to consider MDWs' specific vulnerability and result in unequal access to protection, this can engage Lebanon's obligations under ICCPR Articles 2 and 26, ICESCR Articles 2 and 7, CEDAW Article 11, and ICERD Article 5(e).

The legal dependency imposed by the kafala system, Lebanon is not governed by a single, comprehensive legislative instrument. Rather, it operates through a fragmented framework composed primarily of administrative circulars, standard contracts, and regulatory practices issued by public authorities, including relevant ministries and the General Security Office (GSO), further reinforces discriminatory outcomes during armed conflict. As the worker's legal residency remains tied to the sponsor, situations such as displacement, abandonment by the employer, or destruction of the workplace can render the worker immediately irregular in status. These forms of discrimination violate Lebanon's obligations under ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labor, which prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor.

Moreover, the intersection of racial, gender, and migration-based discrimination becomes more pronounced in war time contexts. Migrant domestic workers, the majority of whom are women, are exposed to compounded forms of discrimination that limit their access to justice and protection. Reports of employers abandoning workers, withholding wages, or subjecting them to heightened control and abuse during crises further illustrate how discriminatory practices are intensified during war times. The absence of a proper protection system for migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Lebanon may constitute a violation of Article 2 of CEDAW, which obliges States Parties to adopt all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women. This includes establishing legal protection of women's rights on an equal basis with men and ensuring, through competent national tribunals and other public institutions, the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination.

In this context, the core issue lies not in the absence of a codified framework governing the kafala system, but rather in the continued exclusion of migrant domestic workers



from comprehensive protections under Lebanese labor law, notably through Article 7. This structural gap reinforces a system of dependency on the employer/sponsor for legal residency and employment status, thereby significantly increasing the risk of exploitation, abuse, and discriminatory treatment. These vulnerabilities are further amplified in situations of conflict and instability, where access to protection mechanisms, humanitarian assistance, and freedom of movement may be further constrained. Accordingly, any meaningful reform should prioritize the extension of full labour protections to MDWs, rather than the codification or formalization of existing dependency-based arrangements.

In line with this approach, CLDH, together with other civil society organizations, has contributed to the development of a draft law aimed at amending Article 7 of the Lebanese Labour Law to explicitly include domestic work within its scope of protection.

Noting that the current crisis has not created new vulnerabilities but has exposed and intensified pre-existing structural and systematic discrimination embedded in Lebanon's legal and policy framework.

### **Recommendations:**

#### To the Lebanese Government

- Ensure non-discriminatory access to shelters and aid for all, regardless of nationality or status.
- Increase protection focus on migrant domestic workers in emergency response plans, including healthcare, shelter, and evacuation measures.
- Establish protection and reporting mechanisms for abuse, exploitation, and abandonment.
- Abolish the kafala system and extend labor law protections to all foreign workers in Lebanon by amending Article 7 in the labor law.
- Ensure that all laws, policies, and practices relating to migrant domestic workers are fully aligned with its international obligations, specifically under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), particularly the principles of equality and non-discrimination, and should take all necessary measures to prevent and address gender-based discrimination,



exploitation, abuse, and trafficking under the kafala system, while fulfilling its due diligence obligation to regulate and monitor private actors, including sponsors and recruitment agencies, and to guarantee access to protection and effective remedies for migrant domestic workers.

#### To International Donors and the EU

- Condition support on non-discriminatory humanitarian access.
- Increase funding to NGOs providing services to migrant workers, including legal aid and shelter.

#### To UN Agencies and International Organizations

- Ensure inclusive humanitarian programming targeting migrant workers.
- Strengthen outreach and coordination to reach undocumented and marginalized groups.

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