

MIGRANTS AT WORK: PERCEPTIONS OF DOMESTIC WOMEN & COPING  
WITH RACISM IN LEBANON

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MA of Anthropology at George Mason University

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **MIGRANTS AT WORK: PERCEPTIONS OF DOMESTIC WOMEN & COPING WITH RACISM IN LEBANON**

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This project takes an activist approach to the mistreatment of domestic workers who migrate into Lebanon from other countries with a focus on the women moving from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. It discusses the xenophobic tendencies of the Lebanese government and its people and how this impacts the import and export of human labor, and why migrant women come to Lebanon to work as domestic workers, and why they stay after hearing “horror stories” of rampant abuse. Suggestions of reform and further study are analyzed by looking at the activity of Lebanon-based NGOs and the effects of news media versus social media groups run by NGOs and the fight for progress fueled by community members.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **DOMESTIC WORKERS IN LEBANON**

Throughout my life, the treatment of domestic workers by their employing families and the Lebanese public in general has always been a behavior that has caught my attention. I come from a Lebanese family and have always gone to Lebanon for a month or so every summer to visit my relatives who still live there. It was apparent that it was very common for families with varying incomes to employ a domestic worker, and my grandparents, aunts, and uncles would have a woman from abroad living with them or coming in regularly to tend to the home and their children. When I was younger, all domestic workers, regardless of what country they were from, were referred to as “*Serelankiyi*,” or Sri Lankan, because the women were predominantly migrating from Sri Lanka at the time; this was done with ease and said in front of the domestic workers in most instances. Women told me to wash my hands after touching something the domestic workers had touched. The domestic workers did not go out with their employing families at every occasion because some establishments did not allow them to enter. I once witnessed the woman who worked for my uncle for eight years get yelled at by a lifeguard to get her feet out of a pool, despite the fact that she was watching my then two year-old cousin as he played in the water. These instances, amongst countless others, made me wonder why these women are viewed in such a negative light and treated as they are in Lebanese society, and it made me question why so many of them stay for

prolonged periods of time and continue to come to a country that is infamous for mistreating domestic workers. Once these issues started gaining greater attention in the media several years ago, human rights organizations and protestors within Lebanon have taken a stance against the Lebanese people who perform these atrocities, and the government that allows them to happen.

### **The Movement**

Many women migrate from their home countries, primarily within Asia and Africa, to find jobs as domestic workers for middle and upper class families in the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the numbers are as high as “150,000 and 220,000 in an overall workforce of 1.4 million...this number excludes [those] who entered the country illegally, those whose permits have expired and have not been renewed, those who are working with tourist visas, and those who are unemployed.” Young women from the Philippines and other countries that export human labor are often raised in impoverished households knowing that they may need to one day go abroad to support their families (Chant 1992:53). They are drawn to domestic work abroad because they often find migration to be “empowering,” a positive attribute to their “social status” because they are able to travel, and they are provided with a “sense of adventure” (Varia 2011). Their job usually entails the work of a housekeeper and a nanny, and the women performing this work range from about eighteen years of age to their mid-thirties. Unfortunately, they often get caught in situations of abuse, labor rights violations, and situations bordering on indentured

servitude or falling under slavery. In many instances, “withholding wages has come to be known as a custom among employers,” and the women work exhausting long hours with little to no breaks (Lahad 2009, Chang 2000:45). This is a growing issue in Lebanon, where the deaths and suicides of these women is disturbingly steady on a weekly basis (*The Guardian* 2012). About a year ago, sources such as *Al Jazeera* and *BBC News* told the story of an Ethiopian maid who committed suicide days after a video of her employer beating her and dragging her through the streets of Beirut was uploaded to YouTube. The reactions to this incident will later be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. In 2011, *The Huffington Post* reported that the Madagascan government flew home over eighty Madagascan women who were working as domestic workers in Lebanon “amid concerns over the deaths of 17 Madagascan maids in the past year.” “Abuse has been so rampant that Ethiopia, the Philippines, Madagascar and Nepal have banned their citizens from travelling [to Lebanon] for employment” (*Arab Times Online* 2014), yet the use of illegal labor agencies may often leave them unprotected by both their own government and the Lebanese government when they may need that protection the most. Especially for those whose countries have a ban on working in Lebanon, they come through illegal agencies that claim to be handling their documents and transportation soundly. They end up overpaying these “agents” who solely want to create a profit off of their inexperience and desire to work abroad. This “creation of debt is one of the main mechanisms used by traffickers to maintain control over victims” (Aronowitz 2009:57).

In a desperate attempt to make conditions better for themselves, South Asian migrants rioted against their terrible working conditions and pathetic wages in the 1980s,

hoping to draw attention to their situation. Out of fear that migrants would turn against their employers and that they would lose control over the migrant worker situation, these riots ultimately backfired, and conditions worsened and became much harsher in countries such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai (Huan-Ming Ling 1984).

### **Problem Statement**

The mistreatment of migrant female domestic workers by the Lebanese government and its people has become normalized and accepted by many, making it all too easy for the population to turn a blind eye to this violation of basic human rights. While it is not by any means a universal truth that all Lebanese families mistreat their hired help, it is a sad reality that this phenomenon is widespread throughout the nation. The research conducted for this project takes an activist approach to address the political, economic, and social factors that lead to the import and export of human labor, why women migrate to Lebanon to work as domestic workers and why they stay, and what human rights organizations are doing to make a difference with the ups and downs of the power of the media.

### **Research Methods**

The basis of this project is built off of the notion of migrating for work being accepted as a part of life for many women, despite the fact that there is the conception of “immigrants as disease (social & physical), varmints, or invaders” (Huang et al. 2005) in many receiving countries. They are placed in a situation where they cannot avoid the

xenophobia and discrimination that may await them because of the social stigma in these receiving countries. When women report that their employers or the labor agencies have abused them, they are often deported for being illegal workers within their country of employment (Chang 2000:2, 9-10). That is why many women find themselves falling silent. Chang uses the “push-pull argument” as an explanation for why women may put up with unjust treatment, stating that the lack of employment opportunities in a domestic worker’s home country pushes them to take opportunities elsewhere and pulls migrants from the third world. The demand for women as domestic workers globally rather than men is, in part, due to the “feminization” of labor. The cleaning of the house, watching over the children, and cooking is considered to be the work of a woman due to the perception in many Arab countries that women have natural “motherly” instincts; there is also the unwanted threat of another male figure within the home (Huang et al. 2005).

Shellee Colen writes that “hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, place in a global economy, and migration status” (1995:78) affect how people are perceived in society and includes that this can affect how their employers treat them. She discusses how the mere fact of a person being female contributes to the concept of “stratified reproduction” (1995:78). Colen writes, “Stratified reproduction, particularly with the increasing commodification of reproductive labor, itself reproduces stratification by reflecting, reinforcing, and intensifying the inequalities on which it is based” (1995:78). Already existing ideas of inequality within Lebanese society perpetuate the mistreatment of many migrant domestic working women. The issue of race comes up in conversations with employers and labor agencies in regards to domestic workers from Asia and Africa

being considered inferior to the Lebanese people. This dynamic shows that the mistreatment of domestic workers occurs because of race and ethnic structures in Lebanon where the Lebanese are at the top. This reflects back to early discussions in the anthropology of colonialism and racial inequality where some races were not considered to be as “human” as others (Cooper et. al. 2003).

Asian domestic workers have been highly sought after because they are “depict[ed] as politically passive and sexually exotic and submissive” (Goodman-Draper 2010:231), which is a seductive factor to the male head of the household. The concept of the female employer being inferior to her husband by general means of status in Lebanon, and that the domestic serves as “an extension of, a surrogate for, the woman of the house” by doing the wife’s work, which is ultimately considered woman’s work (Rollins 1985:183) is a common one. By being able to employ a domestic worker, the Arab woman is able to follow through with society’s expectations of what it means for her to be a feminine housewife. Domestic workers of different nationalities have varying “domestic worth”, with the preferences including aspects regarding educational background, skin color, and religion. The “use of ‘either racial stereotypes or signals which might be more informative about some racial groups as compared to others’” (Siddique 2011) play out in the interactions between employer and employee.

Many migrants also take this domestic work abroad as an opportunity to learn about other parts of the world and to challenge gender roles, and some even make a new life and find greater opportunities for themselves by actually settling in the receiving country for the duration of their lives (Vora 2013).

The core of my interviews with domestic workers in Lebanon and the way that the news media presents the mistreatment of domestic workers is built off of “horror stories”. Gamburd (2000) introduces the concept of “horror stories,” which are the stories of migrant workers as they are expressed by the media or other popular sources of information. I have used “horror stories” to help me compare the personal experiences of women who have worked in Lebanon as domestic workers to better understand why they may still migrate to Lebanon even though they have been forewarned of the “horror” that may await them. The methods of these interviews will be discussed in Chapter Two. Gamburd writes that, “like any culturally constructed set of stereotypes and categories, the images and representations common in the migration horror story genre embody a socially situated system of knowledge and power” (2000:210, 214). These “horror stories,” whether through the news or popular word of mouth of migrants returning home, can affect the domestic worker’s decisions and attitudes about going abroad. “Horror stories” can also influence the opinions and reactions of readers who read news articles put out by the media discussing the mistreatments of domestic workers in Lebanon. This can be affected by media literacy; what is “included in the message [being presented by the media] and what’s left out” can greatly affect how people perceive a situation (Kamerer 2013:6). People who do not look further into what they are reading in the news can have a skewed perspective on the reality of a situation and put blame in the wrong place, which calls for the practice of “social responsibility and ethical principles to our own identity, communication behavior, and conduct” in order to avoid complicating an issue rather than resolving it. I use the communities developed by NGOs in Lebanon via

Facebook to show how “working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace, and the community, and participating as a member of a community at local, regional, national, and international levels” can actually perpetuate the progress of addressing and resolving the mistreatment of domestic workers, even if it is only done little by little (Kamerer 2013:11). Thousands of women still take the opportunity to go to Lebanon despite what is generally perceived as a bleak means of making a living in the hope that they will end up with or be employed by kind employers and make decent pay for themselves and their families.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE IMPORT & EXPORT OF FEMINIZED HUMAN LABOR**

#### **Controlling Commodified Labor**

Jureidini (2003) expresses that many Arabs are uncomfortable employing Arabs as servants for reasons of nationalism, or because they demand too high a wage. Therefore, it can be said that economic reasons play a large role in why there is a pull to Asian and African domestic workers. The passing of the Arab Labour Agreement which gave “priority to Arab Workers,” and the Arab Declaration of Principles on the Movement of Manpower “call[ing] for interregional co-operation” (Jureidini 2003) amongst Arabs were passed in an attempt to cut off reliance on importing human labor, and to benefit the economies of Arab countries by allowing Arabs the opportunity to find more jobs. Despite this, a “gradual reintroduction of cheap foreign labor into most Arab countries” (Jureidini 2003) became prevalent in the 1990s.

Workers often migrate to a country because a family member has already done the same and is in a similar line of work; many women receive recommendations or are directed towards jobs from other women in their family or through the help of a female friend. The employer of one woman may have a relative who is looking for a domestic worker, and she will suggest someone back home for two possible reasons: to have a familiar person close by, and to keep the money earned within the family when both or all women return back to the home country. This is part of the “wait and see” phase—

migrant workers may not stick to their first job once they make their move abroad. They may not make enough pay with their first employing family, and they will bounce from employer to employer until they find one that suits them, and in the time being, there is a familiar face close by if help is necessary (Alkobaisi and Khalaf 1999).

Given that “most domestic workers, especially women, have little formal education” (Neetha and Palriwala 2011), methods of control against the worker are used to show their inferiority to the employer. In the Gulf, it is more often the case that the female employer is the aggressor towards the domestic worker, traumatizing her with both verbal and physical abuse. When a domestic worker goes to the police to report her employer, the female employer may say that they were being promiscuous “or that they practiced sorcery-a charge that could carry the death penalty” (Gee 2008).

### **Gender, Status, & Household amongst Lebanese Women**

It is important to understand the pull for Arab families to employ domestic working women from overseas. Khoury and Moghadam (1995) discussed the “gender ideology” and “defiance of cultural norms” that comes with educated women “who actively pursue employment and political participation” in the Arab world. The “defiance” by Arab women creates tension and disagreements in many families and relationships because it goes against “the traditional, hierarchical cultural pattern” (Khoury and Moghadam 1995) of what the Arab family should be. Khoury and Moghadam highlighted points from Steel and Campbell that affect female employment in the Arab world: religion, norms, attitudes, and discrimination (1995:12, 8, 133). These

norms limit the capabilities and opportunities of an Arab woman who may want to work but feels constrained by her societal and cultural expectations. A middle or upper class Arab housewife has to put an enormous amount of effort into maintaining face with neighbors, friends, and family; they are expected to pay attention to their appearance and to be hospitable and provide for guests on visits. Unable to keep up with these societal demands as well as the maintenance of their homes and families, Arab women employ domestic workers to assist them in their day-to-day parenting and household responsibilities (De Regt 2009:565-566).

There is a higher preference and a greater willingness to hire Muslim domestic workers in Arab countries (Huang et al. 2005:5, 98), though there are occasional instances of employers preferring to hire women who are not practicing Muslims. This preference is because they do not want to have to deal with their employees using the Islamic ideals of human equality against them, and as a result end up losing their hierarchical control of their employees (De Regt 2009:575-576).

Examining status and gender within Lebanese homes and society provides better understanding of what it means to be a “woman” in Lebanon. Cultural norms in a patriarchal structure may lead to viewing being female as a “weakness,” and can even give the female employers their own opportunity to have power by being able to assert themselves and take their frustrations out on the domestic workers. This is how notions of gender in Lebanese society may facilitate the mistreatment of domestic workers from both men and women. I have seen Lebanese women who do not interact with the women that they employ unless they are telling them to do something, and have heard of

Lebanese women mocking or hitting the domestic workers in their homes. There are then women like my uncle's wife, who would happily interact as a friend with the migrant woman that they employed, push her to eat more, ask her if she needed anything, and stayed in touch long after she chose to leave my uncle's family and go out on her own. Many migrant women hope that the woman of the house will be a "good employer" when they go abroad; not even necessarily an employer who becomes a friend, just an employer who is not abusive (Parreñas 2001:170).

### **The Backgrounds of Exporting Countries**

#### *Ethiopia*

In approximately 1989, Ethiopia began exporting their workers to Arab countries "for the 'dirty work' that [Arab] nationals did not want" (Fernandez 2010). This was originally intended as a method of power play by the Ethiopian government in an attempt to provide a major service to wealthier countries; "however, the Ethiopian government lacks negotiating power with the governments of destination countries, and also lacks the ability to control illegal brokers" (Fernandez 2010).

Two of the women working as domestic workers in Lebanon that I interviewed are from Ethiopia, and they told me of the grave poverty that has affected their families. They said it is their country's own fault that they have to migrate for work. The government of exporting countries "fundamentally turns a knowing, but blind eye," to the "exploit[ation of their] citizenry" (Beydoun 2006:1022). Bina Fernandez (2010) writes that "migration has become an important strategy to cope with the multiplecrises of

recurrent famines, conflicts with neighbouring states, political repression, and high unemployment that many Ethiopians have experienced over the past few decades” while trying to find work and thrive in their own country. Fernandez argues that these women who migrate to work as domestic workers are a sort of “unspoken bargain” to the countries that are importing them.

For those who follow a scale of preference for nationalities of domestic workers, it is an unfortunate opinion that Ethiopian women are not the first choice, because they are considered less clean and less intelligent than women from other nationalities (De Regt 2009). “Lebanon's divided racial and sectarian landscape, combined with its political instability, makes it a most troubling destination for Ethiopian domestic workers...these workers exist at an extremely dangerous sociopolitical intersection in Lebanese society, as black, female, foreign and illegal” (Beydoun 2006:1017). These factors play a major contributing role in the cases of some of the Ethiopian women who encounter negative situations when being employed as domestic workers in Lebanon. The Ethiopian government has begun to take greater efforts to stop the mistreatment of their women after the media and human rights organizations brought these issues to global attention, despite staying silent for so long due to the economic gain exporting human labor brings (Beydoun 2006:1019).

### *Sri Lanka*

Sri Lankan women were once the most “popular” choice for hiring domestic workers in Lebanon. Older Lebanese people will still say the term “*Serelankiyi*” when

referring to domestic workers, even though this reference is now long outdated. The roots of Sri Lankan domestic workers were planted in Lebanon as a result of the civil war in the 1970s; “the deterioration of the economy and a crisis in security encouraged Arab domestic workers (mostly from Syria and Egypt) to leave Lebanon, thus creating a gap which was rapidly filled by cheaper Asian migrant labour, particularly from Sri Lanka” (Abu-Habib 1998:53).

The Sri Lankan government has struggled with very high debt, which is why they support migration and the export of human labor. By working abroad as domestic workers and sending their income home, they are able to “get out of debt, support families, and send children to school” (Huang et al. 2005:93) The natural disasters that have afflicted Sri Lanka are another push for women to find work outside of their country. Fatima, the only domestic worker that I interviewed from Sri Lanka, explained to me how necessary her decision was for the wellbeing of her family for these very reasons. Though they are not as sought after as they once were, there is still a great willingness to hire Sri Lankan women as domestic workers in the Middle East, because approximately 22% of those migrating are Muslim, and this can play an important role in a Muslim employer’s decision on who to hire (Huang et al. 2005: 98).

### *The Philippines*

It was always so strange to me how the stereotypes surrounding Filipina domestic workers in Lebanon were accepted as simple facts by many of the people whose conversations I have overheard over the years. One of my aunts only employs domestic

workers from the Philippines because she believes them to be cleaner and more intelligent, as has even been discussed in studies by De Regt (2009) and Huang and her associates regarding the “domestic worth” of migrant women varying by nationality (2005). Migration is accepted as a part of life for women from the Philippines (Huang et al. 2005: 27); they have their own “culture of migration... with a significant proportion of the adult population seeking to emigrate and join the nine million Filipinos already living overseas” (Paul 2013:721).

Though the Philippines is wealthier than Ethiopia and Sri Lanka, they have still accumulated their own debt that pushes women to migrate, such as the threat of losing their homes and their land to banks (Parreñas 2001:63). Women will migrate to return money home to their families, for their husbands often do not make enough, or find themselves unemployed. The strain on Filipino men to find good jobs pushes many of them towards alcoholism, and often results in abusive behaviors. The “rampancy of domestic violence in the Philippines” is a widespread reason for women to pursue domestic work abroad (Parreñas 2001:67) because divorce is not a legal option, and many women use the method of migration to “leave unhappy marriages” (Huang et al. 2005:37). The last woman that I interviewed in Lebanon, from the Philippines, explained to me that she used migrating for domestic work to escape her adulterous husband. As long as she was outside of her country for domestic work, she would have no problems with him again.

### **“Horror Stories” & Gendered Migration**

While some women attempt to brave the hardships that may come with domestic work to become well-traveled and experience other countries and cultures, they may be perceived differently by their own societies once they return home. Migrants may be met with a mixture of jealousy and a perception of being “impure”<sup>1</sup> and “tainted” due to the conservative ideologies of their small towns and villages. Many of these women are often accused of having been sexually involved with their employers and working as prostitutes, in addition to performing their duties as domestic workers. Few entertain the possibility that returning domestics may have endured traumatic sexual abuse. Even in these instances, the blame is put on the domestic worker for potentially making herself seem willing to the employer (Eelens and Speckmann 1990). Many women fall into the hands of employers who treat them poorly, yet labor agencies in their native countries continue to send them because “the State consciously downplays the human side of migration and renders the experiences of its overseas contract workers as having lesser importance than their roles as generators of foreign currency” (Parreñas 2001:54).

Moreover, Chant (1992) explains that many victims of trafficking become traffickers themselves. She describes a “human pyramid scheme” that allows women to be trafficked to families through labor agencies, or even other domestic working women. In order to buy their freedom from their own employer, or simply because they have gotten caught up in the business as a means of income, many of these women persuade their friends and family into migrating abroad. This was referred to as “happy

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<sup>1</sup> This notion of impurity is comparable to the guard telling the young woman who worked for my uncle to get her feet out of the pool, as well as countless discussions that I have personally heard of not wanting the domestic worker to handle food or join her employing family for a sit down meal.

trafficking,” (Chant 1992) because the women make it seem that they “have had a wonderful experience in a legitimate job abroad” in order to convince others to join them. There is then the hope for an economic gain through currency exchange, which is so strong that “immigrants [are willing to] face various forms of social and racial tensions in their temporary homes overseas...this provides an added incentive to return and invest in their own country” (Raman 2010).

Even when interviewing active members of NGOs in Lebanon in the 1990s, Lina Abu-Habib (1998) found that many of the members—who were mostly women—believed that the domestics deserved poor treatment from their employers because they were ungrateful to the Lebanese people and to the opportunity they were receiving from their country. She received nonchalant responses across the board in regards to issues of their mistreatment, such as, “They came here of their own free will” (1998). She also recalled hearing Lebanese workers at a rally, crying out that they were being treated like the migrant workers who served them, and imploring that they deserved better treatment. On the opposite spectrum, there have been more recent signs of human rights activism in Lebanon, where passersby witnessed a group of “Lebanese women dressed in ‘maids’ uniforms’ ...while holding placards posing questions such as, ‘What if you were slapped for breaking a glass?’” (Gee 2008). Though it is a small effort, protests such as these are not well received by Arab societies.

With more public protests regarding the treatment of migrants and domestic workers, I wanted to understand what the idea of Lebanon was for these women before they migrated and what they had heard about it from others, and how it then compared to

their vision after they have arrived and settled in to the country. I wanted to hear what domestic workers think of how their own countries handle the export of human labor, because many countries are hesitant to “enact meaningful immigration reform” (Varia 2011) because they are scared of giving “migrant workers more freedom and citing concerns over national sovereignty” (Varia 2011). The women that I interviewed gave me deep, personal and insightful interviews of their home life and their experiences as domestic workers in Lebanon.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THEIR OWN STORIES: INTERVIEWS WITH DOMESTIC WORKERS**

Various studies show that women leave their home countries to lift themselves and their families out of poverty and end up in another form of entrapment with abusive employers (Huang et. al. 2005, Parreñas 2001). I wanted to speak with domestic workers in Lebanon to hear beyond that, to get a different account of just what has been relayed to me through the texts that I have read. I was incredibly nervous about conducting interviews while I was in Lebanon. Some of my family and friends were having difficulty understanding what it was that I was trying to accomplish or why I would be interested in interviewing the domestic workers in the first place. I explained to them, as politely as I could, that I wanted to ask these women what brought them to Lebanon from their home countries and how they have adjusted to living here. I received many nonchalant, right-off-the-bat responses, such as, “They are here to work,” and, “It’s better than where they were living before.” While I tried not to hold this against them, it was irritating - these women are often being spoken for by someone else; it could range from why on earth I was spending time talking to them when I could just ask the employer, to when one

employer would ask another, “Is your *khadama*<sup>2</sup> hungry?” and the other would respond with, “No, she’s fine.”

I realized that this was going to be more difficult than I thought when my aunts started excitedly telling me that they talked to their friends, and that their friends told their domestic workers that I wanted to talk to them. I started to feel sick, like I was going to be coercing these women into speaking with me through the power of their employers when they may not have wanted to. I thanked my aunts and told them that I appreciated the gesture, though I would prefer to approach the women on my own to ask them if I may interview them rather than have their employers tell them that they have to speak to me. Against my aggressively whispered protests, my aunts would take it upon themselves to approach women and ask them if I could talk to them for a moment. They did not understand the sensitivity of this situation, especially because I was preparing to speak with women who might be in Lebanon illegally, who did not need the stress or fear of wondering if I was going to report them.

While I was in the elevator of an apartment building with my aunt one day, a domestic worker who is employed by her neighbor upstairs came into the elevator with us. My aunt asked her if I could talk to her, and the woman, bewildered, stuttered that, yes, I could. As we left the elevator and were opening the door to my aunt’s apartment, the woman approached us and shook her head. “No, no,” she said, waving her arms furiously. “No, I cannot. Do not tell. They will not like it.” She ran back inside the elevator before I could apologize. Especially after this particular incident, I decided

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<sup>2</sup> Arabic word for “maid”

against talking to the employees of people that I did not know, and made the decision to interview women who worked for members of my family.

I gained IRB approval for this research in July of 2014 and conducted the interviews between July and August of 2014 in Rayak and Beirut, Lebanon. I interviewed four women for approximately thirty minutes each. I consciously chose to interview women from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. I spoke with two interviewees from Ethiopia, one interviewee from Sri Lanka, and the last interviewee was from the Philippines. The ratio of nationalities of the domestic workers interviewed was unintentional and served no greater purpose towards this research. Interviews were used solely for firsthand accounts to gain insight into the lives of domestic workers.

The women I spoke with were all asked the same questions regarding their lives back home versus their lives in Lebanon, and what they have heard about the treatment of domestic workers before they made the decision to migrate. The women from Ethiopia and Sri Lanka spoke their native languages and no English, but have picked up Arabic since they have come to Lebanon. I was able to speak with these three women in Arabic comfortably. The interviewee from the Philippines spoke her native language, no Arabic, but was fluent in English, which allowed me to conduct the interview in English.

I informed the women that their confidentiality would be protected and that any identifying factors would be removed from their interviews. I assigned pseudonyms to all of the women, except for Fatima, who leaned towards me and rested her hand on my leg and said, “You can put my name. You write whatever you want. I don’t care!” I took

Fatima's willingness to include her real name as an indication that she did care, very much, and I honored her decision.

## **Helina**

The first woman that I approached, Helina, looked like she wanted to laugh when I asked her if I could interview her for my Master's thesis. When she realized I was serious, she furrowed her eyebrows, shrugged, and said that she would not mind at all. We went into the kitchen of her employer's apartment and I shut the door behind us in hopes that everyone would remember this was a private interview. Helina warned me that her Arabic is not great and that she only knew a few English words, but she was willing to tell me what she could answer. She told me about her life back in Ethiopia. She did not really look at me when she talked unless she needed a question rephrased or elaborated, her hands clasped above the table, her posture miles better than my own. She could not have been older than twenty-five. She would make eye contact with me whenever school or her family would come up, sometimes happy, sometimes sad.

I inquired a little further into her personal life, and asked her what her home was like. I was taken aback when she told me that they do not have a house, only a small plot of land with a tent to shelter them. I felt as if I had said something wrong, though Helina seemed unfazed. She was only telling me her reality. I switched the subject and asked her about her experience in Lebanon. She laughed a little bit as she said that Lebanon seems to be very "angry." She told me that, in Ethiopia, they refer to Lebanon as "Arab", which is an insult - it means the people are not good, and that they are aggressive and violent.

She told me that she was originally scared to come, but that her current employers are “very good.” I delicately told her that she does not have to tell me that just because they are my family, but she jumped in her seat in alarm and insisted she is well treated (which, I must admit, is always good to hear). She keeps in touch with her mother and siblings in Ethiopia and tells them that Lebanon is not as bad as they have heard, regardless of her sister in Beirut having had poor experiences. “Half of Lebanon is not good,” she told me.

The only people Helina knows in the small town she works in are her employers and some of the other domestic workers from households in the neighborhood. She told me that she calls her employers *Mama* and *Baba* - mom and dad. She cares for them, though she would never stay living in Lebanon. I asked her if she’s ever heard of how some domestic workers are mistreated when they come to Lebanon, and her eyes widened and she threw her hands in the air. “Yes, of course I’ve heard!” she said, and she said that someone her employer knows actually beats his maid. “I’ve asked her why, and she tells me that he does it because she does not listen. If that’s the case, take her back to the agency!” She shook her head and dropped her hands down onto the table. “This is wrong,” she said, “She is from my country, and she does not speak Arabic.” I asked her what brought her to Lebanon and has kept her there after hearing and experiencing some of these things.

Helina told me that she used to work in a shoe factory back home, and that Ethiopia actually has a great deal of work opportunities - but the pay is low, and the worker’s rights are nearly nonexistent. She said that she managed to come here through a legal agency by traveling from Ethiopia to another country, but she knows a lot of women

end up coming through illegal agencies within Ethiopia, and then find themselves in trouble. The United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrants, Workers, and Members of their families is the “only [convention] that does not exclude temporary contract migrants” and “extends to irregular migrants” (Jureidini 2003). With this protective convention passed, there was actually an increase in the efforts of illegal labor agencies to manipulate and take advantage of the more desperate and inexperienced women looking for domestic work in Lebanon because people wanted to take a more “inexpensive” route in finding their employees.

She told me that all of the girls leave the country for work. She left two years ago, but has found that there is not money in Ethiopia, or in Lebanon. Everything in Ethiopia is expensive, “even a tablecloth,” she told me. She blames it on the bad presidents, the dictators, and said that the Ethiopian people are not happy. She expressed that the Chinese and Italian immigrants get all the jobs. “It’s tiring to be in Ethiopia, and it makes you nervous to work for Chinese and Italian bosses.” Helina made the decision to come to Lebanon after her father died. Her mother fell ill and could not work, and her brother and sister were unsuccessful in finding jobs. Her mother was adamantly against her going to Lebanon to work, but she had another sister already working in Beirut, so she went behind her mother’s back and filled out all of her paperwork with the labor agency without telling her. “She was very, very sad,” she told me, but “if we do not send them money, they do not eat.”

Though I have been around domestic workers my entire life every time I go to Lebanon, I have never talked to them about these very personal yet international issues. I

wanted to be able to reach out to her as a friend and react as openly as I wanted to, but I was scared to over complicate things. Most of my reactions were nodding, shaking my head, saying “mhm,” or “oh, no,” and scribbling down things that she said while the interview as a whole was being recorded. I was not sure how personally involved I should or should not be in the conversations, so I maintained a safe distance. Much of the discussion had already depressed me, and I think I began to feel weak because of that.

I wanted to ask Helina something even more personal that was definitive of her, so I asked her what she sees herself doing if she were able to stop doing domestic work. She sadly she told me, “I loved factory work. If they paid more, I would have never left. Everything we made was exported.” Because of lesser opportunity for decent pay in the home countries of many domestic workers, going abroad seems the better option. She emphasized the fact that none of the money made within Ethiopia came back to the Ethiopian people, but that she and her siblings do what they need to do for each other- and for their mother. “She is *ktir*<sup>3</sup> good, *ktir*. We do this for our mother, *wa bas*<sup>4</sup>.”

## **Rediet**

One afternoon when I was visiting family, Helina walked into the living room and told me that her friend was over in the kitchen. She told her what I was studying, and that she was interested in talking to me. This was a relief, and I was grateful for Helina’s help in making finding interviewees that much less uncomfortable. I went into the kitchen to meet Rediet - she was a bright-eyed young woman and looked younger than Helina . She

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<sup>3</sup> Arabic word for “very”

<sup>4</sup> Arabic term similar to “and that’s it”

smiled a great deal and spoke impressive Arabic, probably better than my own. She was also from Ethiopia, and had similar things to say about her image of back home as Helina. She dropped out of school when she was just starting high school; the education was not free, and became more and more expensive the higher the grade level.

She said her life there was normal and that she was happy in Ethiopia. “Of course you’re going to be happy when you’re sitting with your family.” But she made the decision to come to Lebanon for work because “the situation in Ethiopia is not good.” She has been in Lebanon for seven years, and has only had the opportunity to go back to Ethiopia to see her family once, though she keeps in contact with her parents and siblings. She is the youngest and the only one who left the country for work.

When I asked Rediet what she does on her day off, she raised her eyebrows and told me that she does not have one. I insisted that she must have some time to herself, which I instantly regretted. I was finding myself increasingly more emotionally invested in what these women were telling me. She shook her head and said, “No, *Madame*<sup>5</sup> and her husband want me working all the time. I wake up at around five in the morning and then I am working until after ten, when they go to sleep.”

Rediet told me that she had heard a great deal about the mistreatment of her own people and women from other countries who come to work in Lebanon as domestic workers, but that her family needed the money, and that she had to take the opportunity. She said that she is lucky for her situation compared to other women, who are not even allowed to leave the house for errands without being assisted by their employer, or are

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<sup>5</sup> French word for “lady,” refers to the woman of the house in this instance.

beaten for doing something wrong. “We leave our country for this. No one loves this job, but it’s what we have to do. It is illegal in Ethiopia for us to come do this work in Lebanon, so we fly to other countries first so that they cannot stop or arrest us.” She backtracked to my original question of what she does in her free time, or if there is anything she does before going to bed, and she said she does not want to waste any time she has that late at night, so she goes right to sleep. She could not even imagine for me what she would do if she had any free time. She finally said, “I guess I wish I had more time to read the Bible. I cannot think of anything else.”

### **Fatima**

Fatima worked for my aunt in Beirut, though she did not live with her like most domestic workers do in Lebanon. Fatima had several different employers that she went to at different times and on different days, and was able to go back to her own apartment at the end of the day. She was an older woman, who exclaimed that I could ask her whatever I wanted. She had a great deal to say and a sharpness to go with it. When I asked her why she decided to leave her home country of Sri Lanka to work in Lebanon, she said that she wanted to bring in extra money to support her children because her husband was not making enough as a construction worker. “I love Sri Lanka, but there is just no money. How can I be there with my children?” She felt guilty staying in Sri Lanka not helping her family, so she made the decision to become a domestic worker.

“I came here a long, long time ago, after the tsunami in Sri Lanka.” Fatima nodded solemnly. She expressed that she is not comfortable living in Beirut, but she is

here for her children. “I wish I could be with them,” she told me, but the extra income is a necessity. She told me that when she first came to Lebanon, she had many different bad experiences when she lived with her employers. They would yell at her for various things that were irrelevant to her work. That is when she made the decision to live on her own in Beirut and only do “house calls,” just to complete the work she is hired to do, and then return to her own home. “I’m more comfortable like this, I do not want to live with *Madame.*”

When I asked her what she does in her free time, she shook her finger at me and said, “No! I need to work.” I insisted that she could not possibly be working twenty-four/seven, and then she added on that she will occasionally watch television in the evenings before going to bed. When we started discussing the mistreatment of domestic workers, she said that it had actually once happened to her. It was the first home that she worked in, and she ultimately ended up running away from the family. “I’ve heard about this a lot,” she said.

Migrating for work is accepted as a part of life for many women (Huang et al. 2005). They are placed in a situation where they cannot avoid the xenophobia and discrimination that may await them because of the social stigma in these receiving countries. Fatima said that she’s had employers that she lived with treat her like “trash” and that she has met a lot of Lebanese people who think they are better than her simply because they are Lebanese. When many Arabs search for domestic workers through agencies, they often pick them based on race.

Marina De Regt writes that women from the Philippines are the most preferable, because they are generally more educated and considered to be “cleaner.” Women from Ethiopia and Sri Lanka are considered to be dirty, rude, and generally less helpful (2009:575-576). I asked Fatima if she could see herself doing anything else, something that might involve fewer of these negative experiences. “I would not work anything else, *habibti*<sup>6</sup>. In houses only.” I asked her why she says that, and she shrugged and replied with, “There is no other work besides this.” Before Fatima and I finished our conversation, she told me that, when she made her decision to leave Sri Lanka, no one tried to talk her out of it. “We need to help the tired to live,” she said.

I thanked her for her time and she wished me luck in school. Once we had closed the door and I returned to my notes, my aunt leaned over and whispered, “Did you ask her about her not being legal?” It made more sense to me now why Fatima ran away instead of facing the problem with her past employers head on.

### **Maria**

Maria was in her thirties and spoke fluent English. I was caught off guard, because I had never heard her speak conversationally before; only small words in broken sentences when she would talk to the children that she cared for. I have had dozens of conversations in English in front of her, and she had never partaken or reacted, unlike Helina, who always enjoyed joining in on my conversations in Arabic. I was glad to be able to do an interview in English because I am not as fluent in Arabic. Even on days

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<sup>6</sup> Arabic term for “my darling” or “my love” in the feminine tense

when she was not working, I noticed that Maria was always wearing her uniform: a blue button up short sleeve shirt with white trim and matching pants, sneakers, and hair always pulled back in a tight ponytail. She never wore makeup and seemed to be ready to work even when she was not expected to.

Maria is from the Philippines and loved her life there. She said that she had a great life in the Philippines and that she finished school, and continued on to complete her Master's degree. "I had a job in a nurse's office, and I was doing very well. I was able to pay off my house!" she told me happily, and I have to admit that I was shocked. This situation was completely different from the lives of the other women that I had spoken with. The other women were struggling to provide enough money to their families to feed them, and did not have the option of continuing their education. In the Philippines, the course of "female outmigration" paints the women who leave to work as domestic workers as "heroes" by supporting the economy through the export of human labor, though there is a minimum age for the women who may travel to Lebanon (Parreñas 2001:53). Maria was very composed, and said that she had loved her life back home. I asked her, if things were going so well, why she felt the need to leave.

She discovered over time that her husband had been seeing another woman. He was depressed and an alcoholic and had found solace in a close friend. He told Maria that he had been with this other woman for over five years. This is when she got her own house and stayed separated from him, despite his begging her to return. "Divorce is not possible in the Philippines," she told me, "But I no longer wanted to be with him. And if I

left, he has the right to follow me, unless I leave for work.” It is actually quite common for women in the Philippines to pursue domestic work to leave their husbands.

There is a “rampancy of domestic violence in the Philippines” that is fueled by male alcoholism; one woman, who attempted suicide twice after her husband had numerous affairs and would get intoxicated and then beat her regularly, was finally told by her mother that she should look into migrating for domestic work to escape him (Parreñas 2001:66, 67). Maria made the decision to apply to be a domestic worker after having her own issues with her husband. “I like this work, it is simple, and I love the children,” she said, never having had any children of her own. Rollins speaks of earlier domestic working women feeling the “sense of accomplishment [that] physical labor yields” and “the immediate gratification of the payment system,” (1985:79) though domestic workers in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf today are lucky if the payment system actually serves them as it is intended to. I did not ask Maria what her salary was, though she seemed content with it. “I will do this for a few more years and then I will go to live with my boyfriend in Australia,” she told me. As badly as I wanted to gossip and ask her for more details on how she has been managing this, I tried to focus on the point of the interview and moved past this since she never volunteered any more information. Her situation continued to be drastically different than the other women’s.

Overall, it seemed that Maria has had a very positive experience as a domestic worker and has used it to help her move forward in her personal life. I asked her if she had heard any “horror stories” back home in the Philippines before she made the decision to leave. “I heard a lot,” she said, “But I would not let it influence me. I prayed that I

would get lucky, and I did. I have not had a bad experience and all of the Arab families I have met are very nice.”

While migration is often thought of as being financially motivated with the hopes of a better outcome for the migrants and their families, it may also be conceptualized as an open-ended process and can approach other reasons that these women may migrate, such as family, status, and personal gain, that lead to them traveling to Lebanon for work.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS**

The role of non-profit and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in helping to raise awareness of just how serious the issues of gendered migrant labor can be is a dire necessity. As I have mentioned previously, many people did not understand why I would bother showing interest in how domestic workers in Lebanon are treated. People in Lebanon accept the employment of a domestic worker as a basic necessity for their families and a means of making life comfortable for themselves. As long as people feel that domestic workers are a necessity, it makes it easier for society to overlook the mistreatment of domestic workers as long as it is not personally affecting them and their home life.

After having spoken with several women who have migrated for domestic work in Lebanon, I wanted to delve into how the Lebanese people who are aware of the racism and xenophobia towards migrant workers attempt to raise awareness or provide services for these women who are so far from their homes and loved ones. The International Labour Organization's (ILO) website provided me with an overwhelming number of NGOs that do such work. I wanted to interview a member of at least one NGO based in Beirut to discuss its different approaches to the issues surrounding the mistreatment of

domestic workers, and to hear if there were problems beyond what I was reading about in literature or gathering from news sources.

### **Inside Beirut's NGOs: Perspective from Wadih Al-Asmar**

The domestic working women who find themselves in trouble while in Lebanon often end up facing a greater dilemma if they try to handle the situation themselves. As Rediet told me, free time and a day off were out of the question when it came to her employers' expectations of how she was to conduct herself while working and living in their home. Lina Abu-Habib (1998) is one of many scholars who writes that women often find their pay being withheld, and that some of these women will never see their pay at all. It makes it difficult for domestic workers to do anything in these circumstances; chances are that their employers are also withholding their passports and the women themselves are in Lebanon illegally (1998:54).

When domestic workers find themselves unable to leave Lebanon for different reasons, they often run away and decide to work freelance in various households as a maid. This reminded me of Fatima, who has been doing this for years, and much preferred it to the stress, discomfort, and worry of living-in with employers who may mistreat her. Fatima has been successful in pursuing working this way despite being in Lebanon illegally, though other women are not as lucky. Regardless of the possibilities of being caught in an unfortunate situation, the women who migrate to Lebanon to work as domestic workers need to stay employed overseas to send money back to their families and to make a living for themselves. When women decide to do domestic work freelance,

they are at greater risk of being caught working illegally and can be arrested or deported, resulting in both being unable to return to Lebanon and the penalties they will have to face upon returning to their home country for working in a country that it is illegal to migrate to for employment by some countries, or has specific requirements from others. Other women find themselves working as prostitutes so as to not return to the employers that they ran away from or their home country (Abu-Habib 1998:54).

When I reached out to Wadih Al-Asmar, a member of the *Centre Libanais des Droits Humains* (CLDH, French for “The Lebanese Center for Human Rights”), he responded quickly and was eager to contribute to my research in whatever way that he could. While the CLDH focuses on all migrants and refugees experiencing torture and injustice within Lebanon, Wadih was recommended to me as someone that would know a great deal about the mistreatment of domestic workers. Wadih and the CLDH assist migrant workers who are struggling in the judiciary system at the risk of deportation, provide them with social and legal aid to stay in Lebanon, or, if they so desire, to return to their home country. We spoke via Skype though the connection was shoddy and I would have much preferred an in-person interview, but I was happy to be speaking to someone volunteering for an NGO in Lebanon at all. I started off by asking Wadih what he has heard about the situations of domestic workers in Lebanon, and he started right off by telling me that about two domestic workers commit suicide a week in Lebanon. They jump from buildings as a desperate escape from what they are experiencing working in Lebanon. These suicide attempts often happen in the very buildings where their employers live, generally only one room over. Wadih said, in these cases, no one gets

arrested or questioned. “Okay. I understand if someone jump [sic] from the sixth floor and the employer---and he was alone, you can say ‘okay,’” Wadih said in frustration, “But when there’s people in, uh, in the, uh, in the apartment---I mean, people did not even get arrested.”

He discussed that he has seen small attempts at legal reform via a contract between the employee and employer to set boundaries for the domestic workers, but that it is not enough because there is no involvement through the Ministry of Labor to uphold these contracts. Wadih claims that the kafala sponsoring is what is detrimental to the system for migrant workers. The kafala system keeps the law outside of the relationship between the people employing domestic workers. “Lebanon cannot provide real legal protection for migrant workers here,” Wadih said, and there has been an attempt to implement no more than nine to ten hours per work day and two days off per week for these women, but “domestic workers are working like sixteen to eighteen hours a day.”

Wadih informed me that “because of activist groups, more and more people are starting to accept the idea that domestic workers should have one day off out of the house and they are free to do whatever they want.” While this is a step in the right direction, these women are still denied some of their basic freedoms. There are even issues against allowing migrant workers to go into pools in Lebanon. I was surprised that Wadih brought this up, because witnessing this very issue years ago is what brought my attention to the mistreatment of domestic workers in the first place. I had hoped that it was something that only occurred at a few places, but apparently, it is common, widespread knowledge, and a sort of social law. He mentioned that now, some of the

resorts in Lebanon are starting to let domestic workers access the pools like “a regular person,” and he sees this as a drastic improvement.

CLDH tries to find the best way to give domestic workers who get into trouble immunity and to keep them out of jail. They are also lobbying for the shutting down of an underground retention center that is apparently concealed beneath a major bridge in Beirut going from Hazmieh to Achrafieh. He said that domestic workers who have been charged with a crime will be tried and serve their time for the months or years that they have been condemned, and then prison management will hand them over to General Security to investigate them again. This review can take one to six weeks during which time it will be decided if the domestic worker can be freed to return to their “normal life.” If it is determined that the domestic worker is unfit to be released, they will be sent to the retention center. “This is outside of any legal procedure,” Wadih told me. “No judge puts you here.” As a proud Lebanese citizen, it was upsetting when Wadih told me that many of the Lebanese people know about this retention center and respond nonchalantly to the CLDH protests that occur outside of the center.

The capacity of the parking garage is about 250 people and they keep approximately 800 people underground. Wadih and the other volunteers in CLDH often do demonstrations calling for the center to be shut down and for the government to create a legal framework following international conventions; he told me that Lebanon does not adhere to anything passed by international convention regarding migrant workers. “Even when we do a demonstration, there are not a lot of people, because people [sic] they are somehow used to that it is a retention center, so what?”

While my research focuses on migrant women who are employed as domestic workers and not those who have been arrested or detained, what Wadih explained to me is a large piece of the puzzle in grasping the seriousness of racism and xenophobia in Lebanon towards non-Lebanese people. I looked further into what I learned to be called the Adlieh retention center to get more of an understanding of how these women might end up there. Rana Harbi explains that “upon the arrival of each domestic worker at the Beirut International Airport, General Security takes the passports of migrant domestic workers and hands it to the employer or the labor agency” (*Al-Akhbar* 2014).

Because these women are bound to their employers through the kafala system, they cannot make any moves without their consent or approval. Harbi quotes Saadeddine Shatila, a member of the al-Karama Foundation, who told her, “If a domestic worker leaves her sponsor – even under abusive conditions – she automatically loses her legal status and is at risk of being detained and deported...having broken her work contract, she not only loses her ticket to a flight home but also her passport and other forms of identification.” Saadeddine told Harbi that domestic workers get trapped in Adlieh after running away from their employers because their employers “do not want to give them their passport or pay for their ticket back home... The Lebanese state and the workers’ embassies claims that they do not have the money to send these detainees back to their countries and so they are stuck here until a solution is found” (*Al-Akhbar* 2014).

After hearing how much trouble many of these women go through even after trying to make an escape from their abusers, the list of organizations on the ILO’s website made much more sense to me. I was having difficulty understanding why so

many of the organizations seemed set on helping domestic workers who had been arrested and are now retained or in prison.

### **Efforts in the Right Direction**

I collected information from the ILO's report of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon to see more of what other organizations have been doing to try to change the way these women are treated. According to their data, in 2005, *Assemblée des Patriarches et de Evêques Catholiques au Liban* (APECL, French for "Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon") declared May 4th to be Migrants' Day in Lebanon. Over the years, this holiday has begun to draw mass rallies and is being celebrated in various well-known venues as a festival. While this is an incredible move and raises awareness for the Lebanese people, it is not enough for those who choose not to participate in Migrants' Day and the activities involved on this one day of the year.

Below, I have included a chart from the ILO's website of what specific NGOs are working to change for the better to help domestic workers work and live with greater equality when they migrate to Lebanon. In this study, the ILO refers to domestic workers as MDWs, or "migrant domestic workers."

**Table 1. Organizations & Their Approaches**

Intervention Level	Approaches	Organization
INDIVIDUAL	-Pastoral care -Psychosocial healing -Empowerment: Building the agency of MDWs -Empowerment: Building the knowledge base of MDWs Empowerment: Building the capacities of MDWs	-PCAAM; MECC; NEC -Insan -ARM; VI  FRA  NEC; MCC; Insan; MTWF; ARM; Spring of Life
CONDITIONS	Social, medical, humanitarian, and legal assistance to MDWs	PCAAM; IWSAW; CLMC; CLDH; KAFA; Spring of Life; ARCL
STRUCTURES	-Action research and/or policy advocacy -Building the capacity of MoL, ISF, GS, SORAL, judges, lawyers, the media, and NGOs to develop a rights based approach to labour migration management	IWSAW; KAFA; FRA  CLMC; MECC; FRA; IWSAW
CULTURE	-Raising the awareness of MDWs to their rights -Raising the awareness of employers to the rights of MDWs	PCAAM; MECC; Insan; ARM; MTWF; CLMC; KAFA

\* Organization key: PCAAM: Pastoral Care of Afro-Asian Migrants; MECC: Middle East Council of Churches; NEC: National Evangelical Church of Beirut; ARM: Anti-Racism Movement; VI: Title VI (Nondiscrimination); FRA: Frontiers Ruwad Association; MCC: Mennonite Central Committee; MTWF; IWSAW: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World; CLMC: Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center; ARCL: Armenian Relief Cross

This table shows only a selection of the many known NGOs in Lebanon fighting for the rights of migrant workers, including domestic workers. Many of the pamphlets, seminars, and events put together by these NGOs are targeted towards domestic workers, in hopes that they will become more aware of their rights and let them know that they are able to seek help, that someone out there is willing to listen and that they are not in this alone. Yet, there is a major issue at play that makes all of these resources unavailable to the women who may need it the most; how are domestic workers supposed to be able to reach these events and learn about their rights if they do not even have the right to leave the home of their employer?

In the beginning of Abu-Habib's article, she placed an excerpt from an interview with a Sri Lankan woman, Siani, who was discussing another domestic worker whom she was friends with in Lebanon. Siani told Abu-Habib that her friend's employers "only allow her to eat leftovers. When they used to go out and leave her alone at home, they used to lock the door and fridge and tie her hands. I do not understand- why tie her hands when the main door and everything else in the house are locked?" (1998:52). I have mentioned similar accounts in previous chapters of domestic workers whose employers are untrusting of what they might do if they were left alone, though cases like this are extreme. This entrapment and abuse keeps the women from leaving the homes of their employers, unable to even have the opportunity to better educate themselves or become better acquainted with the country that they have migrated to. Or, as Wadih explained, many women are expected to work long hours with no days off, and would likely be unable to access the resources provided to them regardless.

Of course - and I cannot stress this enough- not all Lebanese employers are abusive towards the women working for them as domestic workers; I have seen many women who appear to be quite comfortable and are even friends with their employers and their children. Even under these happier circumstances, the resources provided to migrant domestic working women can be inaccessible. Even if domestic workers are able to make it to the events and the seminars, they are not all fluent or even conversational in Arabic and/or English and speak a variety of their own native languages, which cuts down the amount of women who could benefit from the services the NGOs are providing and the NGO members who can adequately provide for them. Beyond this, according to John Gee (2008), “85 percent of all the migrant workers have been found to be illiterate.” This immediately cancels out posters, pamphlets, or any texts that have been printed for their benefit. Illiteracy is the main reason that migrant women sign contracts via employers or the illegal labor agencies who handle their papers and employment; they are told that they are signing for one thing, when in reality, they are signing to terms they would have never agreed to if they truly understood them (Gee 2008). With all of this against them, what can be done for these women so that they are at least aware of what they are getting themselves into? What more can be done by the NGOs that are pooling all their strengths together to accomplish what the government will not?

### **Calls for Reform**

Wadih blames the state. They tell employers to withhold the passports of domestic workers or else they will run away, and then the employer will be fined or

arrested. “It is a civil responsibility...we have a complete legal framework in Lebanon to make a domestic worker’s life like modern slavery.” He told me that “the system is bad” and that a “dependence” has been created on turning the employment of a domestic worker into a necessity. “If you get married,” he said, “You’ll get a washing machine, and then a domestic worker. Or, you’ll get a domestic worker and then a washing machine.” They are just another necessary piece of equipment to get things done within the home.

UNIFEM-Jordan (United Nations Development Fund for Women) has been running a campaign “to educate families who employ domestic workers on what hours they should ask them to work, the conditions they should have and generally on the human rights of the workers.” There is an effort to spread this campaign to Lebanon, and on making sure that this information is accessible to domestic workers in a variety of languages beyond just English and Arabic (Gee 2008). Because many of these women are illiterate when they migrate for work, it is also of importance to push that the countries exporting human labor make sure to give them further training before they go to work abroad (Chang 2000:13). The ILO has also been fighting to pass the new Domestic Workers Convention they have put into effect in as many countries as they can, in order to “offer legal protections to workers exposed to exploitation as temporary foreign contract labor who are disadvantaged by racial and gender hierarchies and who traditionally have been excluded from the protections of domestic labor laws” (Kawar 2014:484). With the pushing of conventions such as this and the resilience of NGOs, there is a chance for greater social and political reform within Lebanon. Everyone needs

to be educated on the importance and seriousness of the way that these women are being treated. “Some of the people,” Wadih said, “it is not their intention. When you talk to them, they will say, ‘Oh sorry, yes, I am talking about a human being.’”

By staying well informed of every angle of the situations of domestic working migrant women and forming communities to advocate for change or simply express ideas, these “unintentional” comments can become less of a social norm amongst Lebanese people.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE MEDIA WATERFALL: AGGRESSIVE NEWS & PROGRESSIVE INTERNET COMMUNITIES**

It is near impossible to keep issues of human rights quiet in this day and age with the Internet at our fingertips. People are able to reach out to one another and share events clear across the world to rally support and awareness of major issues that might otherwise receive less attention if an article or video had not been shared via social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. While I have read a great deal of the horror stories that women endure as domestic workers in the academic literature (Huang et. al. 2005, De Regt 2008, Parreñas 2001, Gee 2008, etc.), I find that the incidents covered by journalists and passersby are the most biting. They are lightning quick recounts of some of the worst known cases in the abuse and victories of domestic workers in Lebanon available to anyone with Internet access.

These sources provide grounds for instantaneous responses from readers who may respond directly to the article or via the form of social media through which they shared the article. By looking at literature, news sources, and the responses that the general public share online, I have been able to analyze what people do or do not find wrong with the mistreatment of domestic workers and occasionally what they believe needs to be done to make a change. Literature and scholarly sources are not accessible to everyone and may not be as regularly sought after as sources provided by the media. This makes

the media a powerhouse in sharing global issues that will still travel to those who do not partake in social media or are illiterate by word of mouth.

While these reports of abuse towards domestic workers may spark outrage and flared tempers, the increase in publicity still shows little to no report by the media in changes being made to better the treatment of these women. This chapter will highlight a case of abuse in Beirut, Lebanon, covered by various news sources to argue that the news fuels anger with no progress by failing to provide more coverage on the options and efforts for reform in the treatment of migrant domestic working women, and how social media is a vital platform to providing both sides of their stories.

### **The Story of Alem Dechasa-Desisa**

In 2012, the Internet exploded with the uploading of a YouTube video of an Ethiopian domestic worker being abused by her employer in Beirut, Lebanon. Her name was Alem Dechasa-Desisa, and her employer, Ali Mahfouz, was recorded dragging her across the ground in front of the Ethiopian Embassy. She moaned and weakly retaliated, while a man nearby can be heard saying, “Leave her alone! Leave her alone!” in Arabic. It seemed that Dechasa-Desisa spoke little to no Arabic. I was reminded of the woman that Helina had told me about, whose employer beat her for not understanding what he would tell her to do because she did not speak Arabic. The video cuts to Dechasa-Desisa being forced into a car by Mahfouz and another man, where she tries to fight them off and resist entry into the vehicle, yelling and protesting. Dechasa-Desisa is admitted into a mental hospital where she uses her bed sheets to hang herself days later.

This incident was covered by newspapers both in and outside of Lebanon, making headlines and causing an uproar due to the incident itself and no immediate arrest of Mahfouz. In several different sources, including an article by Nesrine Malik, Mahfouz is quoted as saying that he had taken Dechasa-Desisa to the Ethiopian Embassy to have her sent back to her country because she suffered from mental illness; Dechasa-Desisa fought and refused to return to Ethiopia, and refused to continue being his employee (*The Guardian* 2012).

Before Dechasa-Desisa committed suicide, she confided in the Ethiopian Consul, Asaminew Debelie Bonssa, why she could not return to the labor agency, or back home to Ethiopia. She told Bonssa that her husband had moved on and remarried back in Ethiopia, and “she was anxious...that she could not pay a debt to the recruitment agency that brought her to Lebanon” (*Arab Times Online* 2014). Many women who work as domestic workers end up even more impoverished than they were upon leaving their home country after having had to pay for the labor agency that sent them abroad in the first place (Huang et al. 2005). It can be concluded that Dechasa-Desisa was suffering and scared.

In their coverage of the same story, *Al Jazeera* briefly mentions “activists in Lebanon, outraged by the video, posted the man's [Mahfouz] contact information on Internet social media sites and called for action against him” (2012). They also quote a member of human rights group KAFA who said Dechasa-Desisa’s case “may indicate the larger issue of migrant domestic workers' vulnerability to abuse in Lebanon, which puts the whole system in question” (*Al Jazeera* 2012). Nothing further regarding KAFA and

what they do to fight for human rights in Lebanon, or the reaction to the actions of the activists, is discussed. Towards the end of her article for *The Guardian*, Malik flat out calls for a redefinition of the word “civilized” after previously discussing the notion that the people of Lebanon are seen as more liberal and politically advanced than other Arab countries, and calls it “ironic” that there are groups fighting for the rights of migrant workers within Lebanon despite rampant abuse in the country. She makes little mention of the organizations in Lebanon, and when she does, it sounds somewhat backhanded.

The comments left for this article by some of the readers are aggressive, some of which directly state to be influenced by Malik’s position in her article. They focus only on the abuse, and condemn the racism that can be found in Lebanon towards domestic workers with prejudices and racism of their own. Amidst the retaliations, one reader wrote, “I would imagine there are already a lot of poor people in Lebanon looking for work. I do not understand why they have to import poor women from Asia and Africa to be maids.” Another reader responded, “This type of work is beneath them and demeaning, no matter how poor they are. It’s simply not done. To be clear, I am not being critical - these are their countries and culture.” I was again reminded of Helina’s comment that the Ethiopian people call the Lebanese “Arab” as an insult regarding their aggressiveness and neglect towards the domestic workers that they employ.

Another comment read, “The Islamic tradition of slavery is not dying anytime soon. It is ingrained in the culture.” Readers eventually strayed further from the topic and began arguing with one another on what they believe to be the inherently racist nature of Arabs, and the varying degrees of mistreatment by Christian versus Muslim Arabs. This

spiraled into a debate about the Arab Spring, with some readers blaming Arabs, others blaming Westerners. Dechasa-Desisa's story was, more often than not, lost in the crossfire. Some of the comments were deleted because they did not adhere to *The Guardian's* standards. Even worse are the comments left on the original YouTube video, a collection of vicious and nasty remarks coming from every possible side, and some who are missing the point entirely:

“Arabs are a dirty stain on the body of humanity they should be punished for all the evil things they have done in history. The world is seeing them for the pigs they really are. They do not value human life because they are devils.”

“How about maybe she killed or tried to kill his child?? It's pretty a common thing to do for people who come from your shit hole of a country (Ethiopia). Last week a little Syrian girl was killed by an Ethiopian house maid. Only two days later, another Ethiopian maid tried to strangle a girl to death. Many children were killed by Ethiopian house maids in gulf countries this past year. One of them is a girl who were killed just before her wedding by an Ethiopian house maid. STAY IN UR COUNTRY”

“guys totally misunderstanding apparently she had mental issues and tried committing suicide several times according to the offenders”

The uploaded YouTube video did not have any correlating text and was put up by a bystander who filmed the incident on their cellphone. It is plain to see what is occurring regardless of the absence of a description; Ali Mahfouz and the man who helped him force her into his car are abusing Alem Dechasa-Desisa. What, then, pushed for the

reactions and understandings of hundreds of other viewers who left comments? Though outside of the scope of my thesis, is it possible that the public is taking reports of acts of terrorism and fusing them with Arabs even where this issue is not relevant? That the constant reaffirmation and blame of Lebanese society as abusers of domestic workers in the news is increasing racism towards Lebanon and its people as a whole rather than tackling the problem at hand? The locations of the commenters were not listed in their YouTube profiles, so I could not make any further research or speculation that could have influenced their comments based on their whereabouts.

There is also the exaggeration that anger causes, as is clearly shown in the comment regarding the killing of Arab children by the Ethiopian domestic workers who look after them. Anyone can do a Google search and see that this is not a “pretty common thing to do,” though there have been instances where it has happened. In Fall of 2014, an Ethiopian domestic worker reportedly strangled the four year-old daughter of her employers after the girl saw her stealing something from the household (*The Daily Star* 2014). Even this raised speculation, as can be seen in several comments left on the article, concerning whether or not the Lebanese government had any involvement in framing the woman for a crime she did not commit.

Readers claimed they would not be surprised, for it is a known fact that Lebanon’s government is corrupt and unstable, “the Parliament has now failed 19 consecutive times to elect a president,” and “less than one half of 1 percent of the population reportedly owns almost half the country’s wealth” (*Al Jazeera* 2015). While there is an obvious issue with reports of Lebanese employers with xenophobic and

abusive attitudes, a greater system allows this and makes it acceptable, as is seen by the one commenter who honestly believes the way Mahfouz dealt with Dechasa-Desisa was the only way to do so because she had a history of suicidal tendencies. The mistreatment of domestic workers and the minimal laws that protect them are relevant issues that need to be addressed.

### **Journalistic Norms & Public Perceptions**

When I read a news article regarding the abuse of domestic workers, I am familiar with the subject matter and can see where the author falls short, yet I know the background information and details that have been left out and I am not so easily swayed by new information without further research. However, not everyone who reads the news is accustomed to these habits, and will take away exactly what the author of the article presents to them.

Gulnara Shahinian, a member of the UN Human Rights Council, told the *BBC* that "states are under an obligation to ensure the realisation of the right to truth about violations in order to end impunity and promote and protect human rights and provide redress to victims and their families" (2012) after Dechasa-Desisa's suicide. She is calling for further efforts in Lebanon to make sure that something like this does not happen again, a demand that was made by many activists. This same article mentioned that the Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center had put in the request for Dechasa-Desisa to be transferred to the psychiatric hospital for assistance—and yet, there is no further discussion of how much human rights organizations do to promote the rights and safety

of domestic workers in Lebanon. Time and time again, these human rights organizations are mentioned, briefly, and then nothing further. While they are fewer in number, there are of course articles about activists in Lebanon and what their organizations do; yet it does not seem common to find this information in the same article discussing the abuse of these migrant women. And which is more likely, good news making the headlines, or bad news? By giving more attention to the negatives without discussion of the solutions at hand, these issues fireball into outrage, and the public wants someone to blame.

In their study on effects on public opinion, Boomgaarden and de Vreese (2006) discuss how “people are generally more willing to take a risk to avoid a loss than to achieve a gain” (2006:21). This study showed that, by putting two of the exact same situations side by side, but one being expressed in a positive light and the other in a negative light, people were more likely to be interested in the situation of loss. “Accordingly, the effects of exposure and attention to news media on political attitudes and policy support are contingent on the consistency of the tone of the news,” (Boomgaarden and de Vreese 2006:21) which tells us just how much power the author holds in how they decide to approach their subject matter. This explains why many readers piggybacked off of Malik’s findings that it is “ironic” Lebanon has any activists at all, which lead into the fight over Arab and Westerner politics, influences, and behaviors.

The table below shows the results of looking at articles from similar yet varying major online news sources, both in and outside of Lebanon which shows how much attention these issues have garnered, and the attention that they gathered demonstrated by

social media shares and “likes” through sites such as Twitter and Facebook. “Positive” articles refer to those covering domestic workers forming unions, gaining legal recognition, and the recognized efforts that organizations have been making to further the rights of these women in Lebanon. “Negative” articles refer to those covering the abuse, deaths, and general neglect and mistreatment of domestic workers in Lebanon.

**Table 2. Positives vs. Negatives**

	Positive	Negative
<b>Number of Articles</b>	10	10
<b>Number of Shares &amp; “Likes”</b>	1,624	5,096

The “negative” articles were shared and “liked” via Facebook and Twitter more than the “positive” articles by a landslide, even though both sides were covering the same core subject: domestic workers in Lebanon. As was mentioned earlier, articles of the triumphs of domestic workers and the organizations that fight for them run much scarcer than those regarding their victimization. And yet many women happily choose to migrate for this career and do not feel victimized, as can be seen in the next chapter, where one woman that I spoke with tells me how much being a domestic worker has given her a second chance in life. These women are rarely mentioned, and readers who mention them in comments receive no responses, or receive backlash, reminding the original commenter that these women are few too many. A study of how journalists approach situations of peace and positivity “claims that media coverage of peace processes is

usually destructive...there is an essential contradiction between the requirements of a peace process and journalistic norms that include the search for drama and sensation, immediacy and ethnocentrism” (Dvir-Gvirsman and Sheaffer 2010:207). In simpler terms, good news is bad for business. These “journalistic norms” have gotten readers and news junkies accustomed to a certain way of handling things that ultimately affects public opinion.

While I believe it would be beneficial for people to engage in media that covers both the positives and negatives all in one article, it has been proven that doing so via the news does not do much to sway the opinion of the readers, and that it only makes a difference in public opinion when “the news media reported [is] considerable in amount and in a consistent tone about a political event” (Boomgaarden and de Vreese 2006:30-31). There is then the issue of “whether a person has perceived the media or others correctly or not... perceptions individuals have of social reality can influence their behavior, regardless of whether they are accurate” (Hoffman 2013:464). While readers who comment on “positive” articles have room to share equally positive responses or pushes for encouragement with one another, this unfortunately leaves readers to still take what they have read in “negative” articles and blast each other through comments that ultimately lead to nowhere. It has been proven that the “interpersonal conversation and discussion” that occurs after what people read in the news has been “the most common grounding for opinion development and change” (Glynn et al 1999:409), and if readers continue feeling the need to blame someone and make attacks through comments rather than actually tackling the injustices domestic workers face, no adjustments can be made

to the “journalistic norms.” Despite this, there is still a rapidly growing common ground where both sides of the coin get equal attention, where it can be acknowledged that domestic working migrant women need to be treated equally and that they are also fighting hard for this equal treatment, with Lebanese organizations fighting by their sides.

### **Creating Communities & Raising Awareness through Facebook**

It is of dire importance to know every angle of a problem if a solution is going to be found. The one-sidedness of the media has been shown to stop people in their tracks, and the reactions of readers and their follow-up interactions can distract from the focus on the domestic workers, and lead somewhere else entirely. The use of Facebook groups by NGOs is the perfect gathering space for people who are looking to make an active effort in the ways that domestic working migrant women are treated in Lebanon, or for people who are just looking for a thorough source of information. Hsiao and associates write that “when the members of an organization share a common vision or aspiration, there is a similar level of cognition during moments of mutual exchange that allows many misunderstandings to be avoided, as well as leading to more opportunities for the free exchange of ideas and resources. Common goals and interests help members see the potential value of the exchange and combination of resources” (2014:352).

Social media has the “potential as new venues for...political engagement [and] social movement” (Hsiao et. al. 2014:350). The benefits of interacting in a Facebook group “allows for a more continuous look at opinion, attitudes, and behaviors, when shared and when reflecting the truth” in an effort to discover more of what needs to be

done to ultimately diminish mistreatment and xenophobia amongst the Lebanese government and its people (Callegaro et. al. 2014: 791). The table below shows the traffic of three different Lebanon-based NGOs’ Facebook groups: CLDH, whom Wadih is an active member of, Anti-Racism Movement (ARM), and KAFA<sup>7</sup>, a wildly popular NGO for its consistent coverage in French, Arabic, and English, allowing it to reach a vastly greater number of people.

**Table 3. NGOs & Facebook Traffic**

	<b>CLDH</b>	<b>ARM</b>	<b>KAFA</b>
People Talking	66	425	9, 631
Total Page Likes	934	9,634	63,700
% Increase in Page Likes in the Past Week	2.1%	0.5%	1.1%

*\*Stats as of April 5, 2015*

The table shows that these groups have decent followings and a general increase in traffic on a weekly basis. Members can make their own posts to the group pages and share them to their personal profiles or outside of the realm of Facebook, which leaves a high possibility that many people who have not made a point of “liking” the NGO groups can still visit and view their material. Looking through the “timeline” or main posting sector of ARM’s Facebook group, they have post after post sharing articles regarding the

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<sup>7</sup> “*Kafa*” is the Arabic term for “enough”

kafala system, the story of a domestic worker who came forward about her personal experiences, and a reminder that they are collecting money for a fundraiser to help the migrant community in Lebanon. Comments on their posts by group members are along the lines of “the way forward,” and “well done,” showing countless displays of support and gratitude for what ARM is sharing and trying to accomplish in Lebanon.

I have known many people who do not feel the need to join Facebook groups because they do not believe that they are a way to facilitate any actual progress, but they are a way for different individuals far and wide to gather together for a mutual goal. Through participating in the Facebook groups of these NGOs, “the act of sharing information [is] triggered by the needs of others, as a mutual interaction, as part of a problem-solving process, as having an underlying purpose behind it, and as bringing members closer together” (Hsiao et. al. 2014:353). Kafa’s Facebook posts have hundreds of likes, and some have received thousands. Members support each other by “liking” and responding to each other’s comments, forming conversations and offering solutions, and virtually applauding the posts about Kafa’s protests for women’s and migrant’s rights. I noticed a consistent theme amongst the comments of many members going across the different languages: the courage of women. There are no fights between members on these pages for membership calls for a mutual agreement on fighting for the rights of migrant women working as domestic workers, and there is a sufficient understanding by both the sender and receiver of the information” (Hsiao et. al. 2014:353).

Lastly, there is CLDH, who do not have as much Facebook traffic because they are not as well known outside of Beirut. This is still a place where activists and interested people can personally keep up with the accomplishments of CLDH (for they are still active updaters of their page), such as their efforts to lecture in schools and gain support from embassies outside of Lebanon. They bare the truths as well as the ugly truth - such as their invitation from a teacher to speak about the rights of domestic workers at an elementary school, and the revocation of said invite hours before their lecture because the principle of the school did not believe the students' parents would be happy. They also shared a screenshot of a text message offering discounts on Kenyan and Ethiopian domestic workers as a Mother's Day gift, telling receivers to "Indulge ur mom." Sharing the different ways that the mistreatments and xenophobia can reach the Lebanese people brings attention to what they should be aware of, and the sharing of a text message reaches out further to younger age groups, especially since "social-networking sites are currently being used by nine in ten 18–29-year-olds" (Callegaro et. al. 2014:790).

The communities established through the Facebook groups of NGOs can help to detract from the anger that news articles can perpetuate on their own, since the groups have a goal of seeing active change, and not just what is written out in front of them. "If community members share a similar vision, the motives and opportunities for the sharing of knowledge or resources are enhanced," and over time can produce actual results, as shown by the celebratory posts of the aforementioned groups on some of the progress that they make on a regular basis. Through goal-oriented communities, the "higher the level of trust is between members, the more willing members will be to share resources with

one another,” and this can produce colossal results when being done through the Internet (Hsiao et. al. 2014:352).

## **CONCLUSION BETTER RIGHTS FOR A BETTER LIFE**

It should be noted that the research conducted for this project is preliminary and that an abundance of other resources are available for pursuing further information and understanding other approaches for reform. This is a subject close to my heart, for I have witnessed the xenophobia and discrimination towards domestic workers first hand. I spent the better part of several of my summers in Lebanon as friends with the young woman who once worked for my uncle, who was the first woman to ever look at me and whisper, “*Haram*<sup>8</sup>,” after my aunt’s friend asked for used sheets for her employee to sleep on so that my aunt would not have to “dirty” some of her “nicer” sheets when they spent the weekend in her home.

The “socio-cultural constraints” that prevent the Lebanese people from hiring within their own country to fuel their own economy are supported by the government’s decisions to take little to no action as they continue to allow the mistreatment of domestic workers from abroad, and do not support the organizations that are taking all costs to make a difference (De Regt 2009:25). Because “trade is seen as synonymous with development, [and] it is also a mechanism of debt dependence, “the continuation of

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<sup>8</sup> An Arabic/Islamic term for something that is sinful; in some contexts, it can be used in dismay as to how a person can be capable of doing what they have done.

exporting labor to regions that are known to treat workers poorly ultimately leads to the “normalization’ of human rights violations” (Biyawila 2011). It is possible that spreading awareness and pushing for tighter laws and the diminishment of xenophobia until the Lebanese government and its people have no options but to comply could eradicate the abuse of domestic workers, many of whom are already struggling before their decision - or, in some cases, their only decision - to migrate.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Serena Abdallah received her Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from George Mason University in 2013. She completed her Master of Arts in Anthropology at George Mason University in 2015 as well, where she researched gendered labor in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf concentrating in Lebanon. It is her hope to be able to work with organizations that assist migrants and promote cultural understanding in the United States.