



WHAT WE NEED WHEN WE ARE IN TROUBLE

The international NGO Voices International (VI) produced a set of five Info Notes together with migrant domestic workers (MDWs) and their community leaders over the course of a six-month research project in 2010/2011 funded by the Government of Ireland. The Info Notes highlight obstacles faced by foreign domestic workers during their travel to and employment in Lebanon.

VI is working closely with the MDW community to have their rights as workers recognised and their recommendations for changes to immigration and employment systems implemented. The five Info Notes have been developed for the migrant domestic community to assist in highlighting needs and asking for change.



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WHAT MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS SAID

“So I left, no she hadn't locked the door behind me. And then I left, I took the two, three clothes I had and I left. So all my suitcase that I came with, I left it all there. With no more than two, three clothes I left (...). That's how it is here, even if you leave, they will go and lie, 'she has stolen this, she has stolen that'. As soon as you leave the house, they will go to press charges, because I am their responsibility and I am not with them anymore.”

Cameroonian woman describing how she escaped her abusive employer's house

“The consulate is like our country here. So the girl will run her problem there. But what will the consulate, the man do? He will call the employer! (...) This is very bad. Some consulates, they do like that. They don't help. They just call employer and say, 'She's here, come take her.' And when they come take her, they will beat you or they will send without money.”

African woman explaining about the lack of support from Honorary Consulates

“Our job is to help all Filipina women in times of need since the embassy is far from us women in the north (...) Say a problem like this arises, the woman calls me and I call the embassy. But the embassy cannot take any actions immediately. Usually in the first one or two attempts [of assault or harassment] the only option is to help the woman run away from her employer. We keep her in a shelter with us till the embassy people arrive.”

Filipina woman on the role of the informal communities

WHAT MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS HIGHLIGHTED

Background: Lack of protection under Lebanese labour law

Domestic workers are excluded from the 1946 Lebanese Labour Law. The general Lebanese law relating to contract (the General Contractual Obligations Law of 1932) currently provides the only legal framework on employment for MDWs.

In 2009 the Lebanese Ministry of Labour introduced a much needed Unified Contract for MDWs that outlines employers' and workers' rights and obligations. While the contract guarantees certain basic rights, it provides inadequate protection against a number of common workers' rights violations.

To date there is also no effective mechanism in place to monitor use and compliance with the contract and none of the MDWs that participated in this research knew of the contract more than one year after its introduction.

Escaping the employer's house - VI found that MDWs regularly try to escape their employer's house because of severe abuse and exploitation. The majority leave the house, without their passport, most of their possessions or any money. Many runaways have no information on how to contact their agency, embassy or consulate. Within the kafala system MDWs are considered illegal as soon as they leave their sponsor, despite the fact that the reasons for leaving are often abuse and exploitation.

No help from formal support systems - Participants told VI that the recruitment agency often adds to the problems that MDW face rather than supports them. They reported that the agency rarely mediates between workers and employers and often physically abuse workers who are "returned" to the agency by employers. VI found that hardly any MDWs rely on the police for any kind of assistance when their rights are violated. They believed that the police cannot and will not help them. MDWs also struggle to get help from their embassies or honorary consulates. Many sending countries do not have an embassy but an honorary consulate, whose representative is often Lebanese and not always willing to represent them properly. Finally, often the only official solution from formal support systems is to send the worker home, which is not always desirable.

Support from informal communities - The lack of support from official channels causes workers to seek help from other workers from the same community. In some cases, communities have formed groups that can offer emotional support, mediation, information and material assistance such as a shelter for people who have run away or have no place to stay. Because the groups are not legally registered with the Lebanese government, their potential role in the community as mediators and outlets for information becomes limited/restricted. Also, a lack of resources make outreach to workers outside Beirut difficult.

WHAT MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS CALLED FOR

Sending country representative in Lebanon should:

- Support the MDWs in Lebanon in times of trouble, monitoring arrivals and keeping track of nationals, offering legal aid and shelter
- Find alternative solutions for the worker other than returning home
- Meet with and support community groups

Lebanese Government should:

- Revise the labour system that makes a worker illegal once they leave their sponsor
- Speed up the process of repatriation of workers who would like to go home or who are in detention
- Maintain a "black list" of agencies which have previously violated workers' rights.
- Recognize MDW unions so that workers "have a voice"; there should be equality for Lebanese and Non-Lebanese before the law

Police should:

- Act fairly towards MDWs and not just take the side of employers

Lebanese recruitment agents should:

- Offer mediation for employees and employers
- Provide a place for workers to take shelter in case there is a dispute
- Not send MDWs to known abusive households

Civil society should:

- Provide information about domestic workers' rights
- Provide venues where mediation could occur between employers and employees
- Operate hotlines for MDWs to call and seek advice/support
- Provide a safe house that MDWs can seek shelter and support from
- Support informal community groups

Informal community groups should be able to:

- Offer mediation for employees and employers
- Provide a place for workers to take shelter in case there is a dispute

“eVeryone deserves to be heard”

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