



Global Campus
Arab World

Chronicles of Displacement

POLICY BRIEF

Addressing the Effects of Lebanon's 2024 War on Migrant Workers, Women, and Minorities

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Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the disproportionate impact of the 2024 war on migrant workers, particularly women, in Lebanon, where the exploitative Kafala system worsened their vulnerability. Despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserting the right to freedom and security, migrant workers in Lebanon were denied these basic rights, with passports and identity papers often withheld, leaving them trapped in dangerous circumstances during the conflict.

By analyzing the intersection of Just War Theory and feminist critiques, the brief demonstrates how marginalized groups, especially migrant domestic workers, suffered disproportionately during the war. These workers were stranded without shelter, support, or the ability to flee, highlighting the failure of both Lebanon's legal system and international actors to protect them.

The brief calls for the abolition of the Kafala system, the establishment of labor laws protecting migrant workers, and increased responsibility from embassies and international organizations to provide effective support. It stresses the need for urgent reforms to address the systemic inequities that leave migrant workers and women at heightened risk in times of crisis.

South Lebanon, the Beqaa, and the southern suburbs of Beirut in shambles; buildings flattened; infrastructure demolished. The past year – 2024 – morphed into Lebanon's most critical time to date. With intensified airstrikes, tactical attacks, and carpet bombings across the country, Lebanon witnessed two months of severe killings, martyrdom, and encroachment on civil, human, social, economic, and political life at the hand of the southern-most occupier. As in most national topics of interest, digitization falls short in staying up to speed. As such, one finds

it rather difficult to receive adequate information regarding topics at hands, especially the chronicles of displacement from this recent war. For that, and with the minority groups' best interest in mind, this brief provides a digital proof to the trespassing of their right to dignified life as a consequence of the invasion of Lebanese soil. The following document proves how women and migrant workers were left stranded – be it on the streets or otherwise – after forced evacuation and displacement orders. The aftermath is critical, especially considering a large portion of this pool lost access to their official paperwork, identification cards, and passports. The research questions studied help prove the theory that minorities – especially migrant workers and women – suffer more because of war, than men.

Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights highlights thirty inalienable rights to every person (UNGA, 1948). One such example presides as Article 4 which reads “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” Herein, the backdrop for this brief evinces as one that fully condemns – of the law – the act of modern-day slavery, personified in Lebanon today under the Kafala system (Rak, 2020). On the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, of this past year, the United Nations defined the term “slavery” as a situation in which “abuse of power” encroaches on the right to leave (United Nations, 2024). In the following document, it becomes apparent that migrant workers in Lebanon found themselves unable to leave the exploitative situation they have found themselves in, due, in part, to a system of Kafala abusing the power by withholding passports and identity cards even in times of war.

This is further exacerbated by Article 13, 2, which says “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.” In the occasion of the War on

Lebanon in 2024, this document proves how the migrant workers residing in Lebanon's affected and war-torn areas were stripped from this right, as many were left stranded without the chance to access their official documents and flee to safety, as the occupant state reigned in with ballistic missiles, bombs, and airstrikes.

This policy brief studies the statement that says: the consequences of the aggression on Lebanon were unequally disadvantageous to minority groups – specifically women and migrant workers. This is reached once coupled with the fact that the war on Lebanon allowed for 1.2 million individuals to be displaced and left in dire need of humanitarian assistance (USA for UNCHR, 2024). Out of Lebanon's 200,000 female migrant workers coming from Ethiopia and Sierra Leon among others, a large number has been subjected to unsurmountable ripples of war. In this light, left stranded without any identification papers, left without a home to return to, and left without any money; migrant workers in Lebanon have suffered at the brink of the war. To add on this, Lebanese refugee sites have been made off limits to domestic workers, putting them at a higher disadvantage at war as a minority group (Rubin, 2024). To go about proving this statement, the document presents a relevant literature review of the theories discussed, a qualitative methodology in which a Key Informant Interview (KII) with the Projects Director at Egna Legna Besidet reveals unearthed recounts, as well as a measurable and accurate operationalization of the data at hand; before paving the way forward with a set of recommendations.

Context Analysis

In times of war, the rule of law seems to subside to give precedence to a harsher way of living: a regal lack of justice. For the sake of this policy brief, the main literature revolves around the Just War Theory, and its discussion against Feminism. Studying the dichotomy between both notions allows for a greater understanding of this context at hand.

Just War is presented in the field of political science as a framework rather than a theory; one that calls for the complete justification of the use of violence and non-pacifist methods to lead a war (Sjoberg, 2006). Studying this validity of violent wars sparks up the debate with the feminist schools of thought that come in complete opposition. Sinem Hun (2014) detailed in her work *An Evaluation of Feminist Critiques of Just War Theory* a central criticism to Just War, being at its core: the legitimacy or lack thereof of the doctrine of declaring war. In that, Hun (2014) argues that it is inherently averse to human rights and feminist doctrines to call upon legitimizing war, for it goes against the “philosophical, religious and political conditions the use of force.” In that same light, the literature presents foundational faults in terms of institutionalizing, legitimizing, and legalizing the motivation behind wars as the end result never relays a “just” closure, thus negating the original name of the theory.

Bringing the literature closer to a national subtext, the reality of 176,000 migrant workers in Lebanon living in what Madeline Edwards and Joao Sousa (2024) called “exploitative conditions” only worsen the effects of the war on Lebanon, seeing as those of them who were not forcibly evacuated without their papers, were left to die in as a result of the airstrikes, at a steady rate of one worker per week. Only can a quantifiable result and a measurable repercussion, which proves that the women and the migrant community were disproportionately affected by the aggressions, highlight the validity of the feminist criticism to the Just War Theory. Following suit with this thinking, the literature helps prove that indeed the pool of minority in Lebanon within the targeted areas, whom generally do not constitute the direct target of our southern enemy, ended up being the collateral damage – all justified in the name of war. To that extent, we base off our brief on specific literature which condones the very idea of feminist reformations, negating non-pacifist methods of random targeting and carpet bombing.

Assessment

A widely estimated number is within the range of 176,000 and 200,000 foreign workers displaced on the streets of Lebanon – but even that is a “gross underestimation” (Salhani, 2024). Parallel to the violence, clashes, raids, and attacks that made up Lebanon’s reality for the latter part of 2024, foreign domestic workers in Lebanon from countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, Philippines, and Sierra Leone have been forcibly stranded on Lebanese soils, without access to their identification paperwork; thus, enabling them from calculating a solid evacuation plan or fleeing safely back to their countries (Walk Free Foundation, 2024).

Among the myriad human rights activists diligently working on not only bringing justice to foreign workers, but also advocating for the situations they were left in, remarks the disturbing figures relaying the countless migrant workers who have been forced to take to the streets, sleep on the pavement or grass throughout the war, and whom “had to find their way back to safe areas often without passports or papers” (Salhani, 2024). Another testimony comes from a leading organization in the field of minorities, women, and migrant workers – the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) - express that especially during this war, Lebanon faces a great lack of judgement without understanding that these women have rights and they are not to be reduced to an “accessory or commodity” (Salhani, 2024).

At this stage, a culture of impunity reigns vivid seeing as Labor Laws in Lebanon do not extend to domestic labor – much of which falls on the migrant community in Lebanon. This culture was made even more apparent with the recent war on Lebanon, which not only proved that the number of migrant domestic workers exceeds what has been thought, but also the onset of unregistered foreigners in the country has been on a stark rise (Ben Romdhane, Frouws, & Vallentine; 2024). With statements such as the following: “Since the escalation began, many

employers have fled the country or abandoned their migrant workers without pay, shelter, or food, leaving them stranded,” the thesis statement finds its validity in proving the extent of human rights encroachments endured by the migrant domestic workers community in Lebanon (Ben Romdhane, Frouws, & Vallentine; 2024). To that extent, it becomes less the task of advocating for a dignified life within which they can operate in Lebanon, and more of calling for the dissolution of the Kafala System according to which many have been stranded. The situation becomes all the more serious once blotted against the backdrop of basic necessities such as cleanliness, food, water, hygienic pads, and baby formula, among others.

To prove the viability of this discussion, a Key Informant Interview (KII) was set in place with the Projects Director at Lebanon’s Egna Legna Besidet, Tsigereda Brihanu. In her response to the lack of a contingency plan in Lebanon readily available to cater to the displaced migrants, Brihanu (2024) made it obvious that the crisis is twofold. On one hand, a national legislation protecting the rights of the migrant domestic workers should be put in place, giving way to the dismissal of the Kafala System according to which the workers found themselves stranded without access to basic life necessities. On another hand, Brihanu (2024) explains that the situation requires a shift in the culture, in the sense that the embassies and consulates operating in Lebanon, and relevant to the migrant domestic workers, are sworn to the protection of their nationals in foreign land. However, when it came to the escalations in Lebanon’s war, foreign diplomacy found itself at a dearth. To that extent, falling remiss to protect their nationals in terms of providing shelters at the very least, creates a questionable aura surrounding the stakeholders who supposedly matter. So, from a duty of care standpoint, this policy brief has tabulated some of the responses taken from our informant, as a feat to show some of the embassies’ reactions to the concurrent events which placed their nationals at a disadvantage. The table can be analyzed below.

| Embassies Operating in Lebanon Relative to the Migrant Domestic Workers | Areas of Support Provided | Additional Information |
|---|---|--|
| Ethiopia | Emergency repatriation registration. | The embassy collaborated with the IOM which funded the repatriation tickets. |
| Philippines | Holistic response in providing sheltering and necessities, as well as repatriation. | Cash donations in Lebanon for the people who were repatriated at a budget of 2,000 USD per person. |
| Bangladesh | Repatriation. | N/A |
| Sierra Leone | No support provided. | N/A |
| Cameroon | No support provided. | N/A |
| Kenya | Repatriation registration. | The repatriation fell through. |

Table 1: Tabulated results of the work done by embassies in Lebanon in response to the displacement; Eгна Legna Besidet Key Informant Interview.

In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that the embassies did not intersect every national displaced on the streets in their repatriations; only those lucky enough to access the embassies were put in contact and supported. This came at an inopportune time where the makeshift shelters in Lebanon readily banned migrant workers from taking up house, in favor of the Lebanese nationals to take shelter priority. Nonetheless, donations were sent out; however, this was done on the individual level, not through a unified framework of support Brihanu (2024). To this extent, one draws the conclusion that several thousand more migrants are still stranded on the streets, without proper sheltering nor basic life necessities within reach. Seeing this reality, one concedes to the thesis statement putting migrant domestic workers and women at an unequal disadvantage as result of the war on Lebanon.

Conclusion

The displacement of migrant workers and women in Lebanon's war-affected areas highlights severe human rights violations exacerbated by systemic issues like the Kafala System and inadequate labor laws. With thousands stranded without basic necessities or access to

embassies for repatriation, the crisis underscores the lack of coordinated support from both national and international actors, including embassies and human rights organizations. Key stakeholders emphasize the need for abolishing the Kafala System, holding embassies accountable, and establishing crisis response mechanisms to provide shelter and aid through ministries such as the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Recommendations

Short Term

Governments and Embassies

- **Emergency Shelter and Aid:** Establish emergency shelters and provide immediate humanitarian aid for displaced migrant workers, prioritizing women and those stranded in conflict zones.
- **Repatriation Support:** Expedite repatriation processes, ensuring safe passage back to home countries for migrant workers.

NGOs and International Organizations

- **Emergency Shelter and Aid:** Coordinate the delivery of humanitarian aid and temporary housing for affected migrant workers

Medium Term

Governments

- **Crisis Response Framework:** Institutionalize a crisis response mechanism within the Ministry of Social Affairs, coordinating efforts with NGOs, embassies, and international organizations to handle future emergencies.
- **Strengthening Labor Laws:** Implement reforms to labor laws, ensuring protections such as access to healthcare, legal recourse, and safeguards against exploitation.

NGOs and International Organizations

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch targeted campaigns to educate the public and policymakers about migrant worker rights and the harms caused by systems like Kafala.
- **Crisis Response Framework:** Provide technical support and capacity-building to help governments develop and manage coordinated crisis mechanisms.

Long Term

Governments

- **Sustained Legislative Reform:** Develop and enforce comprehensive labor reforms to protect migrant workers and penalize exploitation.
- **Cultural and Diplomatic Shift:** Collaborate with educational institutions and media to promote the dignity and rights of migrant workers.

International Organizations

- **International Accountability:** Advocate for global reforms to hold embassies and employers accountable, ensuring proactive measures to safeguard migrant workers during crises.

NGOs

- **Cultural and Diplomatic Shift:** Partner with community groups to integrate migrant workers into broader socio-political conversations, fostering inclusion and respect.

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