



# **Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Migrant Women in Greater Beirut, Lebanon**

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UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice & Security Hub  
Migration & Displacement Stream  
Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration

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## Abstract

The historical and turbulent migration processes of Lebanon are reflected in a dynamic and composite country demography, including gender and labour features of migration. Currently, the number of migrant workers and refugees are exceptionally high in the country. Most migrants and refugees are women who live and work in unprotected conditions, making them vulnerable to abuses and exploitation. Additionally, women migrants' situation worsened due to the conjunction of the three crises (the economic, the port blast, COVID-19) that hit the country between 2020 and 2022. Against this framework, this study set out to elaborate a gender-sensitive understanding of women migrant workers in Lebanon, within the framework of a larger multi-country research project 'Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration', also involving Pakistan, Turkey, and KRI. Twenty-one in-depth interviews with migrant women and three interviews with third sector practitioners in the greater Beirut urban area were conducted. Participants were for the most part low-skilled, aged between 21 and 41 years, migrated from Ethiopia and Syria, and spent in Beirut between 1 and 20 years. The interviews explored participants' drivers of migration, their living and working conditions, the public access and urban spatial mobility, their agency and coping strategies, and their experiences of the Lebanese triple crisis. Thematic analysis of the interviews indicated that women were willing to leave their country of origin and exhibited high levels of agency in pursuing their migration project. Leaving behind discriminating gender norms and/or gender-based violence, poverty and other conflict-related hardships was perceived as emancipatory and empowering by participants. Financial independence and being able to help their families were a source of pride for the migrant domestic workers under the *kafala* system and the undocumented sex workers, who all perceived their stay in Lebanon as temporary. The hope to return home, staying in regular contact with their families, and seeking support from local charities were some of the coping strategies identified. The five Syrian professional migrants were instead permanently integrated in the Lebanese society, but as second-tier citizens, suffering from structural discrimination. While they were well educated, had a good job, built a life full of activities and hobbies – that the triple crisis heavily impacted – these women described being victims of forms of institutional racism. Despite the fact that Lebanon continues to be an important destination in South-South migration circuits, its legal and societal unpreparedness to respect and protect the rights of female migrant workers and refugees, and to cater for their support needs, urgently calls for improved policies, legal tools, and international and local services of assistance.

## 1. Introduction

This report offers a critical overview of the interview-based study conducted with migrant women and with third sector practitioners in the greater Beirut urban area in Lebanon. The study on which this report is based is part of a larger multi-country research project ‘Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration’ involving three other large cities: Istanbul in Turkey, Islamabad in Pakistan and Erbil in Kurdistan Iraq (KRI). The project set out to elaborate a gender-sensitive understanding of the interaction between economic and socio-cultural drivers of labour migrations. In this study, the research team explored the living and working conditions of a diverse group of female migrant workers in greater Beirut. The investigation was guided by a number of themes, such as drivers of migration, living and working experiences and practices, migrant women spatial mobility in the city and their agency and coping strategies. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the employment and life of the female workers interviewed was also explored, and particularly poignant insights came from the voices of the third-sector participants.

Against the background of the broader research project, the Lebanese country case is key to expanding the current knowledge of South-South migration dynamics and patterns, for which there are relatively few studies. This report contributes to enrich the existing literature on the South-South migration from a gender lens. In addition to the broad themes guiding the investigation, others emerged from the Lebanese study and include: less stereotypical profiles of migrants domestic workers (MDWs) under the sponsorship system; insights into the experience of the unexplored migrant group of Syro-Lebanese professional women; ‘push’ factors which inextricably combine regional conflicts and discriminating gender roles – within the family and in the broader society; insights into the overlooked marginal migrants’ spaces and community of LGBTQ+ and sex workers; and unique nuances of Global South migrant women’s agency from a feminist perspective.

The research team takes distance from a victimisation narrative that sees migrant women as only victims of the process of migration, whilst also highlighting their agency. It is acknowledged that women's subject positions are located within intersecting structural conditions of oppression (Smith 2000; Crenshaw 2017). These are often rooted in unequal power relations and discriminating social and gender norms (such as the labour market, national regulations on visas, work/residence permits, wars and conflicts, gendered drivers of migration that effect their decisions to leave their countries of origin, and so on). Nonetheless, their “tactics” (de Certeau 2011) to cope with both the conditions in their home countries, as well as the working and living conditions in the host country, are emphasised in this study. The emphasis on migrants’ everyday coping practices sits with the call for the necessity of dismantling the post-colonial, Western-centric and patriarchal ideology whereby Global South migrants are constructed as disempowered and vulnerable (Mahmood 2001; Mohanty 1984). Post-colonial Global North vs South stereotypes crystallise views of female migrants in the Global South as traumatised victims with little agency (Bankoff 2001). These reified victimising views hold particularly true in relation to Global South female migrants, including those involved in sex work (Kempadoo 2012). Reified

views are also instrumental to the construction of specific regimes of truths, practices and policies (e.g., the fight against undocumented migration and against women's exploitation, and both criminal and humanitarian approaches to migration in general).

This report is theoretically grounded in critical migration and feminist theories. It aims to re-centre the perspective closer to migrants' experiences and their own sense of agency, to move away from victimising stereotypical views (Mulinari and Sandell 1999). On the one hand, it is important to recognise the political and economic factors of structural violence which play a role in women's migration. On the other hand, it is also important to acknowledge the complexity of Global South migrations, including both macro- and micro-factors, so as to be able to fairly explore the nuances of experiences at the interplay between power and agency, away from prefabricated stereotypical understandings of South-South women's migration.

The report is structured along five sections, in addition to this introduction. Section two is based on a literature review (MOSAIC 2021) and offers an overview of the policy and legal tools, and the conditions and rights of women in the country, with reference to both international instruments and national legal provisions. In this second section, we first look at the migration landscape in the country, paying particular attention to women's labour migration; subsequently, we provide a sub-section on migrant domestic workers and the *kafala* system, and another sub-section on refugeedom, human trafficking and migrant sex workers. Section three covers the multiple crises which have affected Lebanon in recent years (i.e., the economic crisis, the Covid-19 major health disaster, and the Beirut blast, referred to as the triple crisis) and how their combined effect has been detrimental for MDWs, undocumented migrants and refugees, and professional migrants. In the following section four, on Methodology, study design, data collection and analysis, as well as recruitment, participants and research team, ethics and the limitations of the study are described. Section five presents the results of the study.

These are articulated according to the thematic areas included in the interview topic guide and comprise: drivers and processes of migration; experiences of gender-based discrimination in the country of origin; living and working conditions in the host country; public access and spatial mobility; women's agency and coping strategies; the impact of the triple crisis on migrants' employment and social life. The last part of the results section reports the results of the interviews with the three NGO practitioners, which considerably expanded on the impact of the triple crisis on migrant women in the country. Embedded in these themes, the presentation of the results is articulated along the three main sub-groups of the study participants. The sub-groups were established with the professional status as the main criterion which also appear to be differentiated according to nationality and legal status. The first of these groups is constituted by the domestic workers/cleaners, who are overwhelmingly Ethiopians, with the addition of a Nigerian and a Filipino woman. A second group is that of the Syrian sex workers and LGBTQ+ migrants, followed by the third group of Syrian skilled migrants, which also includes a de-skilled waitress. The concluding section discusses the results, identifies the strengths and limits of the study, and formulates recommendations for policies, practices, and further research avenues.



*Image 1. Damages after the 2020 Beirut Port Explosion. Credit: Mahdi Shojaeian*

## **2. Women and migrant women in Lebanon**

### **2.1. Women's rights and conditions**

In 1997, Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) pertaining to equal rights in marriage and family life (UN Women 2017). However, the country issued reservations to articles 9 and 16, covering equal rights in relation to citizenship and family issues, respectively (Civil Society Knowledge Centre 2019). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has developed the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), a cross-country measure of discrimination against women in social institutions (formal and informal laws, social norms, and practices) across 180 countries. According to the last SIGI for Lebanon in 2019, the country is affected by several forms of gender discrimination (OECD Development Centre. SIGI 2019). Lebanon follows a mixed legal system of civil law based on the French civil code, Ottoman legal traditions, and religious laws covering personal status, marriage, divorce, and other family relations of the Islamic and Christian communities (UN 2015). In this dual law system, policies on personal status are governed by religious entities. Each religion has its own personal status laws, covering the minimum age for marriage, children's custody, and divorce. This means that in the existing system, there is no clear unified code that is always fair for women. An example is the minimum age for marriage, which some religious personal status laws (Shiite and Sunni) set as early as nine years the age. According

to international human rights conventions, this would be classified as unlawful child marriage. Still in the field of family planning, abortion is illegal in the Lebanese Penal Code, except when a woman's life is threatened. Despite being criminalised, accessing safe abortions is possible. However, this access starkly depends on the resources, social connections as well as family relations of women. Research and data on the topic are scarce, and it appears that there have been no significant attempts to change the law towards a liberal application of abortions (Fathallah 2019). Birth control methods are used, but WHO and the Ministry of Health data suggest that Lebanon falls behind the global average (World Health Organization and Ministry of Public Health Lebanon 2017). When pregnancy occurs outside wedlock, women are stigmatised, and their children are deprived of their civil rights.

In relation to household gender role, men bear the official lead, whereas women are registered within their husband's records. However, women carry the burden of household responsibilities, which, in most cases, also restrains their ability to join the labour market or pursue basic or further education. This share of responsibility carried by women is not valued by courts, especially when it comes to divorce. Furthermore, Lebanese women are not eligible to pass their citizenship and assets to their children, especially in the cases of non-Lebanese fathers or fathers of a different religion than the women's. Children who, due to these laws, cannot obtain citizenship have to endure bureaucratic burdens to renew their residence permits and are prevented from accessing education, as well as jobs in public services (OECD Development Centre. SIGI 2019).

Statistics are missing on the prevalence of domestic and gender-based violence, as well as on violence against women (VAW) more broadly. However, a study conducted by the American University of Beirut in 2014 revealed that out of 91 interviewed women, 65 per cent had experienced verbal abuse, 41 per cent physical violence, 33 per cent sexual violence, and 19 per cent emotional violence (Kaddour et al. 2022). Domestic violence was targeted by the Lebanese Law No. 293, which was adopted in 2014 and contains protective orders for victims of violence (Zalzal 2014). However, it does not include a clear definition of types of violence to separate the legal response to each type. For example, with the 2014 law, the concept of "marital rights to intercourse" was introduced into the penal code, thereby legitimating marital rape (Zalzal 2014). Only in December 2020, Lebanon passed the Law for "the criminalisation of sexual harassment and the rehabilitation of its victims" (Human Rights Watch 2021). The law was welcomed by some organisations, while others pointed out its shortcomings, such as lacking protection for those filing complaints, the economic burden for the case, and lack of gender-sensitivity among front-line staff (Azhari 2020).

If the condition and the rights of women in Lebanon present worrisome aspects, the protection against violence, abuse and exploitation for migrant and refugee women is even more limited, with little legal basis for refugee women and a discriminatory set of provisions in the case of migrant women, in particular migrant domestic workers (MDWs), but also sex workers.

## 2.2. Migration, labour and gender

Both emigrations out of the country and immigration into the country are deep rooted phenomena in the history of Lebanon. The Levantine diaspora commenced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the migration fluxes to the other side of the Atlantic affecting several countries in the Mediterranean area. Emigration intensified with the two World Wars, the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 and the civil war (1975 – 1989): closer countries of the Gulf Region, as well as distant ones, such as Australia, saw the arrival of many Lebanese citizens (Tabar 2010). Simultaneously, and for the same reason of being at the centre of a region affected by continuous political instability, Lebanon never ceased receiving migrants and refugees, who were fleeing conflict and persecution, such as Armenians, Palestinians, and, more recently, Syrians (Tabar 2010). The latter started increasingly entering Lebanon after the outbreak of the Syrian civil-war in 2011 (De Bel-Air 2017). Notwithstanding, after the countries became two independent nations in the 1940s, migration fluxes across the Lebanon-Syria border long preceded the most recent conflict in Syria, and Syrian groups were, for example, involved in the Lebanese civil war. This is to underline that the two countries have long-standing and not always peaceful relations, as well as intense cross-border mobility, mixing and exchanges of people, with the resulting formation of Syro-Lebanese intermarriages, families and communities – which have been overlooked in research (Al Ayoubi 2019). Recent estimates calculated that Syrian refugees in Lebanon, being approximately 1.5 million, are more than one-quarter of the Lebanese population (International Crisis Group 2020).



Image 2. COVID Lockdown in a Refugee Camp. Author: MOSAIC-Mena

The historical and turbulent migration processes of Lebanon are reflected in a dynamic and composite country demography, including gender and labour features of migration. Figures should be received with caution, as estimates of a fast-changing landscape are mostly unable to capture the important reality of undocumented migration. However, they are still indicative of some important trends and aspects of women's immigration to the Levantine country. For example, in 2020, the IOM estimated the number of migrant workers in Lebanon to exceed 400,000 (International Organisation for Migration 2020). These workers come from countries like Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka and work in Lebanon to support their families through remittances. The World Bank estimated an increase in labour in the Lebanese market up to one third with the huge influx of refugees in the past years (Fakhri 2016). However, it is difficult to determine the actual numbers of refugees involved in the Lebanese labour market, since the government stopped their registration in 2015 (Fakhri 2016). The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 239,700 refugees are among the labour force. The service sector includes up to 36 per cent of Syrian refugee labour, the agriculture sector up to 28 per cent, 12 per cent in construction, 15 per cent in the trade sector, 4 per cent in industry, and 6 per cent in unspecified sectors (Fakhri 2016).

In relation to gender, statistics suggest that about two-thirds of the employees in the service sector are migrant women of different nationalities; 75 per cent of those legally registered are listed as domestic workers (Longuenesse and Tabar 2014). In relation to refugees, about 92 per cent of Syrian workers are engaged in informal work relations with no work contract and more than 50 per cent of the refugees residing in Lebanon are adult women (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016). Twenty-four per cent of this female refugee population is within the legal age of working. ILO statistics have revealed a gap in wages between Lebanese workers and refugee workers, reaching 38 per cent among men and 68 per cent among women (Fakhri 2016). Gender differences are also present in education levels where few employed women attain better education levels and work in sectors with improved working conditions, such as health or education (European Training Foundation 2017). Finally, there are no clear statistics on the number of migrants involved in sex work. Reports have shown that thousands of women from Russia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus are involved in this industry in Lebanon. Syrian refugees, including children, men, and women, are also exploited in this sector in high numbers (Sala 2020; Poggi 2017).

### **2.3. *The kafala system and the exploitation of migrant domestic workers***

Many migrant workers in Lebanon are women working in households as live-in domestic workers under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. It has been calculated that up to 76 per cent of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) coming to Lebanon (those legally registered) are women (International Labour Organisation 2021b). The UN estimated 250,000-300,000 MDWs are currently residing in Lebanon (UN Women 2021). However, as mentioned, exact figures cannot

exist because, for example, they cannot account for the growing phenomenon of undocumented, freelancer MDWs. While previously Syrian, Palestinian and Egyptian women had often been employed in Lebanese households as domestic workers, during and after the Lebanese Civil War growing numbers of women from Ethiopia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka were recruited via agencies (Jureidini 2009).

In relation to MDWs, it is not the absence of legal provisions (as for refugees, see section below), but is the very presence of an unfair legal framework to be deemed at the root of exceptional discrimination. As just mentioned, over 250,000 women domestic workers in Lebanon appear to be covered by the *kafala* system that binds their immigration status to an individual employer (or sponsor, *kafeel*) for their contract period<sup>1</sup>. As we will explore further below in Sections 5.6 (on the results relative to the interviews with the NGOs practitioners) and 6 (with the report discussion and conclusion), the *kafala* system is not a codified, coherent legal document. It consists instead of a number of administrative regulations, customary practices and legal requirements whereby workers have no protection under the host country's labour law (Robinson 2021). The General Directorate of General Security (GDGS), together with the Ministry of Labour and other public departments, set up 'the system' by issuing several provisions without legal backing (International Labour Organisation 2021a). In Lebanon, MDWs – together with other categories of workers – are in fact excluded by the county labour legislation. This leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and denies them basic rights, such as the ability to enter a labour dispute process or join a union. The worker's position is very precarious, as it totally depends on the sponsor. The terms of this contractual bond do not allow the workers' involvement in defining their contract terms or working conditions, making them even more susceptible to abuse (OECD Development Centre. SIGI 2019). As mentioned, the residence permit is also directly linked to the contract of an MDW with her employer. This makes it practically impossible for the worker to negotiate for better working conditions or to take legal action against the employer in case of non-payment of wages, exploitation, and abuse. If a MDW wants to change employer, she has to rely on the current employer to end the contract. If she leaves her work without permission (and therefore accommodation, since customarily MDWs are live-in-workers), she becomes 'illegal' and is prone to detention, prosecution and deportation (see more below). In most situations,

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<sup>1</sup> The *kafala* system defines the relationship between foreign workers and their local sponsor, or *kafeel*, which is usually their employer. Under this system, the state gives local individuals or companies sponsorship permits to employ foreign labourers. The sponsor usually covers travel expenses and provides housing, which, in the case of MDWs, is the sponsor's home. Rather than hiring an individual directly, sponsors sometimes use private recruitment agencies in the countries of origin to find workers and facilitate their entry to the host country. The *kafala* system is found in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—as well as Jordan and Lebanon (see Kassamali 2021).

workers need their sponsor's permission to enter or exit the host country. In sum, under the *kafala* system, the power imbalance between employer and employee is enhanced and the exclusion of MDWs from the Labour Law turns the legal apparatus around the *kafala* system into a tool for employers to "exploit their power", instead of it being a tool to protect the rights of the workers (International Labour Organisation 2021a).

As noted, MDWs make up the largest proportion of female labour migrants in Lebanon and are the most researched, both academically (e.g. Abu-Habib 1998; Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Smith 2006; 2010; Pande 2012; 2018; O'Regan 2017; Fernandez 2018) and in NGOs grey literature (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2020a). The working conditions of female MDWs are often harsh and exploitative, and the paternalistic *kafala* system, together with controlling practices of employers, have led to their situation being compared to "modern-day slavery" (Human Rights Watch 2020b) and "contract slavery" (Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004). However, other literature has departed from the sensationalistic modern slavery framework in order to highlight other aspects inherent to the *kafala* system, beyond the blatant exploitative working conditions of female MDWs (Nasri and Tannous 2014). These aspects include the racialised hierarchy of the system, the gendered stereotyping and abuses, policing their bodies and sexuality, and their lack of access to health care (Smith 2006; 2010; Pande 2012; 2018; Kassamali 2021; Fernandez 2018). Forms of slavery are obviously not new to the region, the *kafala* system also has roots in British colonial presence and was experienced by Lebanese working in the Gulf Region. Despite this legacy, the current system in the country originates in the post-civil war years. In those years, the Palestinian and Syrian domestic workers were not welcome anymore, and the arrival of African and Asian workers was received through a process of reformulation of the Lebanese society according to new racialised hierarchies (Kassamali 2021). These hierarchies intersect with the racialisation of Sri Lankan, Ethiopian and Filipina workers, and they see the combination of gender, language and culture to "inferiorise" MDWs along racializing, criminalising and sexualising axes (Ayoub 2020; Kassamali 2021). The *kafala* system has been analysed through the lenses of a more or less explicit racialised and gendered hierarchy of differences which is expressed in "institutional humiliation" and serves capitalist accumulation, while expropriating migrant labour (Fernandez 2021). However, attention has been given also to informal ways of resistance and carving out their own spaces, as limited as these may often be, and them seeking agency both vis-a-vis their employers and their families in their home countries (M. Smith 2006; 2010; Pande 2012; 2018; O'Regan 2017; Mansour-Ille and Hendow 2018).

While the majority of the literature on gender and migrant work in Lebanon focuses on female MDWs, there are also limited studies on male migrant workers, such as Indian male migrant workers' health care access (or lack thereof, Gaur and Saxena 2004) and socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by male Syrian refugees in Lebanon (International Rescue Committee 2016). There are only limited studies covering the experiences of LGBTQ+ migrant workers, except for studies on LGBTQ+ refugees ( Myrntinen, Khattab and Maydaa, 2017) and the occasional mention of non-heterosexual migrant workers' experiences (Pande 2018). They are either mentioned as part of broader studies (e.g. Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum 2021) or in some scattered news

articles (e.g. Hirschberg 2020). The only elaborate report on LGBTQ+ experiences covers their experiences in the face of the ongoing crises (MOSAIC 2020), as we discuss below.

#### **2.4. *Refugeedom, trafficking and the exploitation of migrant sex workers***

Lebanon was not a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and this causes several issues for refugees. Firstly, the fact that their protection is essentially in the hands of NGOs rather than official governmental entities. For example, the most pressing issue for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, in terms of a legal framework, is the lack of legal residency. Only 16 per cent of Syrian refugees above 15 years in Lebanon hold a legal residency permit, according to the findings of 2021 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon report VASyR, and compared to 20 per cent in 2020, 22 per cent in 2019, and 27 per cent in 2018 (UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP 2022). This rate is predicted to keep declining. This is due to two reasons. Firstly, in 2015, the Lebanese government forced UNHCR to stop registering further Syrian Refugees. Secondly, many cannot renew their residency permits due to renewal fees and regulations (UNHCR 2021). Not possessing a legal residence permit puts refugees at the risk of harassment, restrictions in movement and detention. It makes them prone to exploitation in the labour market, as well as in housing. Many are hesitant to report crimes out of fear of the authorities (Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum 2021). Moreover, their conditions significantly hamper their access to education, health care and other services (UNHCR 2021).



*Image 3. A Young Woman writes 'No homophobia' on the Wall of the Egg Theatre, October 21, 2019. Credit: Rita Kaban*

In the realm of exploitative migration, Lebanon is considered a destination country for human trafficking. Syrian women, in particular, are victims of trafficking for sexual abuse and prostitution (Sala 2020; Poggi 2017). Sufficient data and information, as well coordinated action to address the issue are missing, despite the fact that human trafficking is criminalised by the national law No. 164/2011, “Punishment for the Crime of Trafficking in Persons” (OECD Development Centre. SIGI 2019). Potential migrants in need of food, transit cost, or shelter are targets of human trafficking and sexual exploitation (Huda 2006). MDWs, as mentioned above, are also at risk of trafficking, since they are not protected by any law. Finally, those with no legal permits are at higher risk of getting involved in sex trafficking (Hamill 2011; US Department of State 2019).

### **3. The Lebanese triple crisis and its impact on migrant groups**

Starting in 2019 with what is called the ‘October 17 Revolution’, people joined protests against government corruption, the political elite and the sectarian system. This led to the resignation of the government, followed by over a year of political limbo, until September 2021, when Najib Mikati announced the formation of a government. In addition to this political instability, on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020, an enormous explosion caused by incorrectly stored ammonium nitrate destroyed the Beirut harbour and surrounding areas, killing up to 220 people, injuring 6,500 and destroying considerable housing. The explosion further exacerbated the already heavy economic crisis. The pegging of the Lebanese Lira to the Dollar and the favourability of a bloated financial sector at the cost of productive sectors led to a heavy reliance on Gulf states’ rentier economy – which relies on external rent in the form of the sale of oil, transit charges, or tourism – and expatriate remittances, as well as high state debt and international donors’ funds. Paired with the lack of a progressive tax system and corruption at the hands of government officials, this constitutes the unstable make-up of the Lebanese political economy (Baumann 2019). Together with rising prices for all kinds of goods, services and housing, electricity cuts, fuel shortages and gaps in water supply, the Lebanese economic crisis has caused difficulties for many households to meet basic needs (Salti and Mezher 2020). Covid-19 measures and lockdowns further exacerbated the livelihood difficulties of workers and small business owners to make a living. According to the World Bank, more than half of the Lebanese population by now lives under the national poverty line (World Bank 2021a).

The Covid-19 crisis has hit Lebanese society, and its migrants, at a time of economic collapse and political turmoil. The first cases of Covid-19 in Lebanon were detected in February 2020. Since then, the official numbers account for over 10,600 deaths at time of writing (Global Change Data Lab 2022). The Covid-19 response plan has been criticised for ignoring gender and specific vulnerabilities and the needs of the population (Abaad, Legal Action Worldwide, and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK 2021). Women, elderly women and widows, and especially those from marginalised groups, for example refugees and migrant workers, had a heightened risk of getting infected and often lacked access to health care (Abaad, Legal Action Worldwide, and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK 2021). The rising prices of all goods have made it

harder for women to access sanitary products, while the focus on the containment of Covid-19 has restricted their access to sexual and reproductive health services (SRHS) (Abaad, Legal Action Worldwide, and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK 2021; Phillimore et al. 2022), as we will see below. Furthermore, with the Covid-19 pandemic, a rise in domestic violence and violence against women has been witnessed around the world. This applies to Lebanon as well (Abaad 2020). In public, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community have been reported to feel unsafe due to the increased presence of security personnel because of protests and lockdown measures (Abaad, Legal Action Worldwide, and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK 2021).

### **3.1. MDWs in the crises**

The economic crisis has had a significant negative impact on MDWs, exacerbated by Covid-19 and lockdown measures. Job loss and currency devaluation have led to rising numbers of MDWs who cannot meet basic needs, like food and shelter (Anti-Racism Movement 2020c). It is estimated that high numbers of MDWs have lost their jobs due to Covid-19 and the economic downfall. For many, this means the loss of their residence permit, since this is linked to their work contract. With the explosion and the destruction of large parts of the city, even more MDWs lost their work and their housing. Employers abandoned their workers, who then often searched for support in front of the embassies of their respective countries of origin (Human Rights Watch 2020b, also below Section 5.3). The Lebanese government did not make any attempts to persecute the employers for abandoning their workers or to support the latter in an effective and sustainable way (Anti-Racism Movement 2020b). NGOs stepped in to support at least some workers in returning to their countries (Human Rights Watch 2020b). The situation was aggravated by prevailing travel restrictions and closed borders due to Covid-19. Furthermore, movement restrictions inside Lebanon impeded the life and work of those who either still worked as live-in-workers, in restaurants, hotel or entertainment business, or made a living working as 'freelancers' – about whom little research has been conducted (see Section 6 below). The pandemic hindered them from enjoying at least some time on their own and having social contacts while making it different for the latter to find and keep work.

Those MDWs who had not lost their jobs have been vulnerable to exploitation, health risks and abuse. With lockdown measurements, closed schools and workplaces, families have spent much more time at home, leading to a heightened workload for MDWs (ILO 2020b). There had already been the practice of not allowing MDWs to take a day off or to take a sufficient number of hours of rest per day, this increased even more since the first Covid-19 measures were introduced, at the beginning of 2020 (ILO 2020b). With employers and their families being at home, MDWs had less time on their own, their accommodation often being cramped, without a room for their own and therefore without any privacy (ILO 2020b). Moreover, the increased proximity of families paired with the heightened stress due to Covid-19 and the economic collapse, has caused a rise in violence against women in general, as mentioned above, and against MDWs in particular. Little is known about the prevalence of abuse of MDWs in Lebanon. But reports of cases of abuse as well as of MDWs committing suicide increased (Anti-Racism Movement 2020c; 2020a). The IOM

reported that 73 per cent of the MDWs supported by the organisation during the ongoing crises have been denied their salaries (International Labour Organisation 2021b). MDWs sending remittances to their families abroad rely on payments in Dollars, but with the deterioration of the currency, employers have refused to pay in Dollars and have instead paid the workers in Lebanese Lira, thereby making it impossible for many to keep up the support for their families abroad (GBV AoR 2020). Yet another problem experienced by MDWs is the threat of the Covid-19 virus itself and the insufficient protection against it. There are reports showing that MDWs were not provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (GBV AoR 2020). Movement restrictions, costs, the practice of locking in MDWs, as well as lack of legal documents, prevent MDW from getting tested for Covid-19. Finally, as mentioned, criticisms were raised against the Lebanese vaccination campaign for disregarding marginalised groups, such as migrant workers.



*Image 4. The Lebanon Triple Crisis gave rise to discontent and protests. Credit: MOSAIC-MENA*

All the aforementioned points in regard to the crises, adding to the exploitative conditions of the *kafala* system per se, caused an enormous psychological burden on MDWs. However, most of them have been without psychological support. *Medecins Sans Frontiers* (MSF) set up a health care helpline for migrants in 2020. They note that from April to June 2020, the majority of the mental health patients who accessed MSF's services through their helpline or field visits were young women. Most of them had experienced various forms of exploitation, abuse and trafficking. MSF state that, although all migrant workers in Lebanon have been struck by the ongoing crises, MDWs from Ethiopia who contacted their helpline were among the migrant groups who were severely hit by the crisis (Médecins Sans Frontières 2020).

### **3.2. *Refugees in the crises***

Syrian refugees, but Palestinian too, have also been disproportionately hit by the multiple crises since autumn 2019. The unemployment rate among the refugees had been high even before the deteriorating economy and the Covid-19 pandemic, as mentioned. Many had already been employed in the informal sector, lacking steady income, insurance, and social security. Due to the crises, many have lost their jobs. A survey conducted by the ILO in 2020 accounted for 60 per cent of Syrian workers who had temporarily been laid off (International Labour Organisation 2020a). The UNHCR estimates that in 2020, 89 per cent of Syrian refugees were living in extreme poverty, compared to 55 per cent in the year before (UNHCR 2021). Unemployment and poverty together with high inflation, have led to extreme difficulties for Syrian and Palestinian Refugees to meet basic needs. Many rely on humanitarian services for survival (UNHCR 2021). The 2020 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) in Lebanon showed that half of Syrian refugees in Lebanon suffered from severe or moderate food insecurity (WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF 2020). The VASyR accounted for 19 per cent female-headed households and reported that those are more prone to food insecurity (WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF 2020). Moreover, child labour has increased, boys being at higher risk than girls. Unsurprisingly, numbers showed that refugee populations in Lebanon are affected by the virus the most severely. According to UNRWA, Palestinian refugees are three times more likely to die from Covid-19 than Lebanese citizens (Azhari 2021).

Meanwhile, as mentioned above, levels of gender-based violence have been rising due to the pandemic, in general, and the triple crises in Lebanon, specifically. Syrian and Palestinian women and girls have been particularly prone to harassment, violence and abuse. Women in camp settings have reported a lack of safety in their homes, as well as in public (UNFPA and UN Women 2020). Due to their legal status and the movement restrictions, access to service and legal support is constrained (Care 2020). Additionally, costs and the fear of getting infected with Covid-19 prevented refugee women from accessing SRHS and sanitary products (Care 2020). LGBTQ+ refugees face various forms of discrimination and violence and increasingly struggle to make a living (MOSAIC 2020). While the family amongst Lebanese citizens, as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees, usually serves as a safety net, LGBTQ+ people often have to rely on themselves and their social networks (Care 2020; MOSAIC 2020). Refugee transgender people often resort to sex work and drug misuse, thereby hardly making a living (Hirschberg 2020). Due to lockdowns and high inflation, increasing numbers of transgender sex workers have also become homeless.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. *Sample and data collection*

This study has a descriptive, qualitative participatory design, based on individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

MOSAIC is a project partner of the UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, including the Migration and Displacement Stream, and, within it, the Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration project of which this study is part. MOSAIC played a key role in reviewing the literature (MOSAIC 2021) recruiting study participants and collecting the data<sup>2</sup>.

A purposeful sampling method was used, based on convenience, emergent and snowball sampling strategies (Palinkas et al. 2015). Helena Berchtold and Caroline Chaya recruited participants both from within the network of its own service users, as well as from the network of service users of other partner frontline organisations working with migrants in Beirut. The migrant women approached were given full information about the project, and MOSAIC researchers organised a preliminary meeting to provide further information on the study and ethical information, and organised the interview meeting, if the migrant woman were willing to proceed. Trust was key to accessing and recruiting study participants. The main inclusion criterion was being a migrant woman of over 18 years of age living in any area of Greater Beirut. Twenty-one (N. 21) migrant women were interviewed. They included:

- Sub-group 1: 12 **MDWs**, comprising nine Ethiopians and one Nigerian – two migrant women in this group, an Ethiopian and a Filipino woman worked as cleaners in a beauty salon and at the salon manager’s house,
- Sub-group 2: Five **Syrian professionals**, comprising one homosexual waitress, one translator, one frontline NGO officer and two teachers.
- Sub-group 3: Four **undocumented Syrian sex workers**, comprising two women and two transwomen.

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<sup>2</sup> Founded by legal and health experts, as well as activists, the MENA Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration & Capacity Development (MOSAIC) is a “holistic program committed to improving the health and well-being of marginalised and vulnerablised groups in Lebanon and beyond” (<https://mosaic-mena.org>). MOSAIC conducts research and advocacy activities for policy reform, develop knowledge and capacities on the area of LGBTQ+, migrants and other marginalised groups’ conditions and rights.

The majority of migrant workers involved in this study are lower-skilled, aged between 21 and 41 years, who mostly migrated from Ethiopia (10) and Syria (9), and have stayed in Beirut between 1 to 20 years. While most of them had a residence permit, work permit and visa, four of them were undocumented and four were Lebanese-Syrian (with a Lebanese mother/husband and a Syrian father). The main socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants are presented in Table 1 and snapshot summary is offered below.

- Migrant women are mostly from Ethiopia (48%) and from Syria. If, in the Syrian sub-sample, we include those with the Syrian father and the Lebanese mother who migrated from Abu-Dhabi, Syrian migrants account for 43% of the whole cohort.
- Except for one woman who was 41 years of age, 52 per cent are in their twenties, and the rest in their thirties. The mean age is 28 years old.
- One migrant was illiterate, three of them did not complete the six grades of primary school, while four have a qualification from a higher education institution – including the Nigerian MDW.
- The occupational status in their country of origin very often did not apply (76%), due to their young age or doing unpaid household and childcare work.
- Sixty-seven per cent of the participants had a mix of residence, work permit and VISA, whereas three of them were without legal residency (14%).
- There were eight married women (38%) and for the rest the information was ‘single’, or not provided.
- The majority did not have children (81%).
- The duration of their stay in Lebanon varies considerably, spanning from one to 20 years. The mean duration is six years.
- Only two Lebanese-Syrian migrants had a previous family migration experience to Abu-Dhabi, from where they migrated to Lebanon.

In relation to the practitioners from frontline organisations, these were employed in a service active in the field of migration and/or gender in the city of Beirut. For this sub-sample, a convenience, purposeful strategy was adopted, and participants were approached by MOSAIC officers from within the network of colleagues. Three Lebanese NGO practitioners were recruited and interviewed. Their professional profiles are:

1. **NGO Participant #1.** An advocacy and communications officer at *Anti-Racism Movement (ARM)*, a local organisation active since 2011, tackling migrants’ rights, self-advocacy and community-building, particularly against the *kafala* system.
2. **NGO Participant #2.** A strategic programme coordinator for *International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)*, a federation representing a body of over 580,000 domestic workers around the world. Active in Lebanon since 2015.
3. **NGO Participant #3.** A gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health information (SRHI) programme manager at *Plan International (PI)*, a child rights organisation which opened in Lebanon in 2017 and which has a focus on adolescent girls and young woman.

**Table 1. Demographic information of migrant women participating in the study**

| <b>No</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Nationality</b> | <b>Level of Education</b>       | <b>Previous Occupation</b> | <b>Current Occupation</b> | <b>Marital Status / Children</b> | <b>Years in Lebanon</b> | <b>Legal Status</b>             |
|-----------|------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1         | 26         | Ethiopia           | Grade 8                         | N/A                        | MDW                       | Single / N/A                     | 3                       | Residence and Work Permit       |
| 2         | 22         | Ethiopia           | Grade 12                        | Farmer                     | MDW                       | Married / no Children            | 3                       | Residence and Work Permit       |
| 3         | 24         | Ethiopia           | Grade 3                         | N/A                        | MDW                       | Engaged / no Children            | 4                       | Residence and Work Permit       |
| 4         | 24         | Nigeria            | University Degree               | N/A                        | MDW                       | Married / 2 Children             | 1                       | Work Permit                     |
| 5         | 41         | Philippines        | High School Graduate            | N/A                        | Beauty Salon + Household  | Married / 2 Children             | 1                       | Work Permit                     |
| 6         | 34         | Ethiopia           | Grade 8                         | Housework                  | Beauty Salon + Household  | not Married / N/A                | 4                       | Work Permit and Visa            |
| 7         | 21         | Ethiopia           | Grade 8                         | None                       | MDW                       | not Married / N/A                | 5                       | Residence and Work Permit, Visa |
| 8         | 34         | Abu Dhabi          | English Language and Literature | N/A                        | Online Tutor              | Married / 2 children             | 19                      | N/A                             |
| 9         | 20         | Ethiopia           | Grade 6                         | N/A                        | MDW                       | Single / N/A                     | 3                       | Residence and Work Permit, Visa |
| 10        | 27         | Ethiopia           | Grade 2                         | None                       | MDW                       | not Married / N/A                | 5                       | Residence and Work Permit, Visa |
| 11        | 26         | Ethiopia           | Grade 5                         | None                       | MDW                       | not Married / N/A                | 5                       | Residence and Work Permit, Visa |

|           |    |           |                                  |            |  |                       |               |                                 |
|-----------|----|-----------|----------------------------------|------------|--|-----------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>12</b> | 38 | Ethiopia  | Grade 8                          | None       | MDW                                    | Married / 1 Child     | 3             | Residence and Work Permit, Visa |
| <b>13</b> | 23 | Ethiopia  | Grade 4                          | Shop Owner | MDW                                    | Married / no Children | 2 and 1 month | Residence and Work Permit, Visa |
| <b>14</b> | 25 | Abu Dhabi | Institute of Social Sciences Leb | N/A        | Frontline NGO Officer                  | not Married / N/A     | 20            | N/A                             |
| <b>15</b> | 30 | Syria     | Accounting                       | Accounting | Waitress                               | Single / N/A          | 6             | Has a Sponsor                   |
| <b>16</b> | 21 | Syria     | Middle School Certificate        | N/A        | Unconfirmed Sex Worker                 | Single / N/A          | 4             | Illegal                         |
| <b>17</b> | 23 | Syria     | Illiterate                       | N/A        | Support by Organisation, Sex for Money | Single / N/A          | 2             | Illegal                         |
| <b>18</b> | 33 | Syria     | Arabic Literature                | Teacher    | Teacher                                | Married / no Children | 10            | Residence and Work Permit       |
| <b>19</b> | 30 | Syria     | English Translation              | Translator | Translator                             | Single / N/A          | 8             | Legal, Courtesy Residence       |
| <b>20</b> | 25 | Syria     | Primary School                   | N/A        | Sex Worker                             | Single / N/A          | 6             | Illegal                         |
| <b>21</b> | 33 | Syria     | Primary School                   | N/A        | Sex Worker                             | Single / N/A          | 10            | Fake Sponsor                    |

Data collection occurred between October 2020 and concluded in July 2021. Interviews were conducted in Beirut in person at a place and time most suitable to the interviewee. After introducing the purposes and scope of this research and ensuring voluntariness and anonymity, interviewees gave their verbal consent to participate. Probing and follow-up questions, such as “could you elaborate more on this” or “would you mind giving an example” were used to encourage participants to expand their answers, when needed. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviewees were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewee and verbatim anonymised transcription was conducted.

#### **4.2. *Data analysis***

A directed hybrid approach of deductive and inductive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interviews’ transcripts (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For this study, the thematic guide was developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework. Five broad categories formed the code manual (drivers and processes of migration, experiences of gender discrimination in the countries of origin, living and working conditions in the host countries, public access and spatial mobility, women’s agency and coping strategies, impact of the Lebanese triple crisis). The interviews’ responses were examined line-by-line by a member of the research team at Middlesex University, and assigned to the code categories. Where new, data-driven themes outside of those categories emerged, new codes were created. The whole coding and analysis process was discussed and agreed upon, during regular team meetings with the principal investigators.

#### **4.3. *Limitations of the Study***

The convenience sampling strategy, based on the field of intervention of the project partner MOSAIC, as well as on its network of partner organisations, contributed to determine the inclusion of certain migrant categories (e.g., sex workers and LGBTQ+ migrants) and the exclusion of others (e.g., migrants who lost their job due the Lebanese triple crisis, those who even became homeless, and the freelancers). Another limitation on participants recruitment was the pandemic, which, as noted above, in Lebanon was accompanied by the economic breakdown and the disaster of the blast. While we were able to acquire good insights about the sub-categories of migrants involved in this study, such as Ethiopian MDWs, sex workers from Syria, and skilled half-Syrian migrants, we cannot maintain that our sample is representative of any these groups. Additionally, as noted, we could not explore the experiences of several other important groups of women migrants in the country.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Drivers and Processes of Migration

The mainstream reason behind the decision to migrate **among the sub-cohort of MDWs and the beauty salon employees** – overwhelmingly Ethiopians, with the addition of a Nigerian woman and a Filipino woman – was described in terms of finding employment and earning a better income. All the participants declared that they wanted to find either their first employment (for those previously in education or working within the household), or find a new, better paid employment (for those already employed in their country of origin). The aim of making a higher income is often directed towards helping the family members in the home country – several participants declared.

*“I want to earn money to help my family. My life in my country of origin was okay, I used to go to school.” (Participant #7)*

*“After getting married, I decided that I needed to come here in order to save money. I first migrated to the KSA [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia], then travelled back to Ethiopia for 2 years, then I settled in Lebanon” (Participant #13)*

Most migrant women interviewed stated that the decision to migrate was a personal one, but that the choice was made in agreement with their parents or husbands. One participant declared that she<sup>3</sup> had to obtain the permission of her husband and parents, two participants that they received pressure to emigrate, and one that she left Ethiopia despite the disapproval of her husband.

*“I left Ethiopia because my parents didn’t want me to continue my education, only work. After going to school, I used to help my mom with the house.”  
(Participant #11)*

*“I left Ethiopia because we needed more money after we got our child, although we were living a good life. I also decided to come here after my child stopped breastfeeding.” (Participant #12)*

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<sup>3</sup> We are using the pronouns she/her throughout the report. We acknowledge that participants may identify with different pronouns.

The choice of the destination country, Lebanon, was often depicted as based on word-of-mouth influence and as a widespread practice that “people advised” (Participant #5), or that parents decided (Participant #9). For this reason, several migrant women had other family members and friends in Lebanon, whereas only two knew nobody. Some participants also reported that the employment agency was promoting Lebanon as a good and easy destination for employment.

*“Everyone in Ethiopia prefers Lebanon since it is better.” (Participant #3)*

*“Because it is easy.” (Participant #6)*

*“I chose Lebanon because the agent told me that it is the best option and the conditions here are very good.” (Participant #9)*

*“Lebanon was a good decision because it provides more opportunities for domestic workers.” (Participant #10)*

With the exception of one migrant woman, for this group of participants Lebanon was the first and only country of migration where they indeed arrived through an employment agency. This means that, besides the Filipino woman who only had a visa and had to search for a job at arrival, all the others entered the country with the work and residence permit and the visa, and obviously a job placement.

The drivers and processes of migration of the **sub-cohort of skilled migrants** were more varied, as this group is more internally heterogeneous. Two women declared that they left Syria to flee the horrors of the civil war, in the case of the other two women, who migrated from Abu-Dhabi nearly two decades before, this was a family decision, whereas the fifth migrant, an accountant employed as a waitress in Lebanon, stated that:

*“The circumstances of my life there in Lattakia [region of Syria], the pressure of the family, and my desire to live in freedom and peace made me take this decision on my own. Without consulting anyone, and with the encouragement of a friend of mine here in Beirut [...] the economic situation was very bad, in addition to the absence of freedoms, for a teenage girl who wants to live in peace as a homosexual.” (Participant #15)*

Participant #15 chose Lebanon because of the idea that it was a country of freedom, as expressed in the above reported direct quote, and she left Syria lying to her parents, by finding a friend/sponsor who guaranteed her an employment. The remittances that she was able to send to her family silenced the disagreement of her family. For another migrant women fleeing the Syrian conflict, the process of migration was characterised as a difficult journey motivated by a difficult choice, taken in tragic circumstances, where the family business had been bombed:

*“All the way between Syria and Lebanon, thoughts and memories were passing quickly in my memory, in addition to many questions, what will happen after now, will we ever return to our city, to our home and work, to our friends?.” (Participant #19)*

Participant (#19) had a Lebanese mother, as also did the two other participants who migrated several years back from Abu Dhabi (#8 and #14). These circumstances made Lebanon a reasonable destination. Another professional (#18) chose Lebanon due to her engagement to a Lebanese man.

The four migrant women in the **sub-cohort of Syrian sex-workers** expressed that they decided to leave Syria because of the unbearable familial and social gender discrimination that they were suffering in the form of harassment, bullying, and severe restriction of life prospects and choices.

*“Living in a Syrian village and being a girl, this means that I have no hope for a happy life or even possible dreams. The woman in my village is treated as though they were an animal. She only has to work in the house and the land and satisfy her husband’s desires and give birth to children.” (Participant #21)*

The process of migration of this sub-cohort is reported as having occurred informally, thanks to the invitation and support of partners, relatives, friends, or a smuggler.

*“I knew a young man who was always courting me, and he used to tell me about Lebanon and its beauty and that work in Lebanon is excellent and I could get a lot of money, so I asked him to convince my father about it, and my father loved this young man and he was convinced quickly that I would come to Beirut to work and to get married this young man later.” (Participant #21)*

*“Some time before leaving the house, I used to communicate with trans friends of mine in Lebanon and ask them about the situation here, and they encouraged me to come to Beirut. They even gave me the contact of smugglers because I have only my Syrian ID and I have no passport.” (Participant #16)*

For this group of participants, the choice of Lebanon was dictated by the combination of two factors. First, the easiness with which the border could be crossed, in terms of documents, permits, and means of transport, as Participants #20 and #21 expressed:

*“As for me, a relative of mine who lived in Damascus helped me come to Lebanon. I will never forget how she was able to persuade my father, during one of her visits to us, to allow me to accompany her to Beirut, because she knows who will secure a job for me and this can help the family, so my father*

*agreed, and it happened. In 2015, we left Syria and entered Lebanon using a hotel reservation as if we were on a tourist visit, and since Lebanon is a tourist country and does not require visas from the Syrians, we were able to enter it by taxi, using only our personal ID.” (Participant #20)*

*“We entered Lebanon easily by booking a hotel, and we only needed our IDs, and when we arrived to Beirut, he took me to the place of a young Syrian man married and residing in Khaldeh area, where he received us in his very small apartment and where there was no privacy at all.” (Participant #21).*

Secondly, because of an apparently widespread belief that in Lebanon they could be free from gender oppression, as woman and transgender, and also gain financial independence.

*“Why Lebanon? Because it is the dream for all of us as Syrians.” (Participant #16)*

To summarise the sub-themes that emerged from the overarching theme ‘Drivers and Processes of migration’, for the MDWs the desire to get a job/or a better paid one was the main driver. Their agency in the choice of migrating, and where to, was limited by the influence or pressure of their family, and by the wider politico-economic system connecting some countries in Africa and Asia (i.e., Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Nigeria) to Lebanon via the *kafala* system, and by the interests and profits of recruitment agencies and governments inherent in this system (see above and discussion below). Accepted gender norms, as well as the economic condition in their country, appear to limit freedom to education, employment and the life opportunities of the Ethiopian women, leading them toward the pre-established migrant labour route within the *kafala* system. For the group of Syrian women, the main drivers were the desire to flee conflict and gender-based oppression. Despite structural factors co-determining their choices, this group showed considerable levels of agency in the choice and process of migration, particularly for those women going against their family wishes and unfair gender norm. This remains true also for the women sitting along the spectrum of smuggling and human trafficking, where their agency lent itself to a larger plan of exploitation. Their migration process by land was more informal than the MDWs and, for some, illegal, due to the laxer intra-border regulations between Syria and Lebanon. For the half-Lebanese professional migrants, the choice of Lebanon appeared as the most obvious for familial reasons too.

## **5.2. Experiences of Gender Discrimination in the Country of Origin**

In relation to the experience of gender discrimination in the country of origin, the study results are more effectively summarised through a focus on the two main sub-cohorts by source country: Ethiopia and Syria. The **Syrian study participants**, comprising the four undocumented sex-workers and the five skilled migrants, depict a scenario of severe gender discrimination in their country of origin, as some of the quotes reported above suggest. Some participants describe a situation whereby women in Syria are subject to daily harassment and abuse, and that women

are considered “a commodity of trade” (Participant #21) for marriage and procreation in the hands of men – fathers first and then husbands.

*“I have often been subjected to verbal, physical and moral abuse at home in Syria, as I did not marry early like anyone else, and this was a reason for the violence, and this applies to many women in my area, how many women get beaten every moment, even while she is sometimes pregnant, it is a tragic situation, we live in a patriarchal society that is violent and disgusting to be honest.” (Participant #21)*

Between the Syrian participants those expressing discrimination with the most severity are the **undocumented women working in the sex industry**, often coming from agriculture and strictly religious contexts:

*“I was born in Syria, in the city of Qamishli, which is a strictly religious area. I was born in a poor family that works in agriculture and lives in a small house close to the land that my father used to cultivate [...] My sister and I were unable to continue studying, so my father took us out of school after the elementary stage in order to help him with work because my mother was sick and could only help with housework. [...] Working with many young men and being subjected to harassment and bullying made me and my sister vulnerable to dangers. My sister was even forced to marry a worker twenty years older than her [...] Women have to be beaten and silent, she has no right to complain, and sometimes she is a real victim or killed as well under the cover of honour crime.” (Participant #20)*

As Participant #20 expressed, other Syrian migrants also declared that child, forced, and arranged marriage are widespread practices, along with other forms of discrimination against women, such as polygamy, honour killing, marital rape and rape-marriage. This excerpt from the conversation with Participant #21 poignantly illustrates the multi-factorial context where women have very little rights, in relation to education, inheritance, marital law and economic independence:

*“If I reach the age of fifteen and I do not marry, then this is a shame, and therefore early marriage is the master of the situation and that is why there are many girls who died while giving birth to their first child and they are at a very young age. In addition, the woman is deprived of the rights to inheritance and custody of the children in the event of divorce, and only the man has the right to ask for divorce if he wants, and the woman has no right to do that, she may be killed if she does. [...] Women should always remain in long clothes, not to put any make up on, and to hide her hair with a handkerchief, and if she has to move by public transport, she is subject to harassment and sometimes rape, and the worse thing is forcing her to marry her rapist*

*sometimes, and that means being subjected to rape every day. [...] Sex, procreation and doing housework only, nothing else. There are no financial or educational rights.” (Participant #21)*

The discrimination reported by the two migrants who identify as transgender, as well as the homosexual migrant, is also radical. The group of LGBTQ+ participants reported experiences of intra-familial violence, perpetrated especially by the father.

*“I have suffered a lot since my childhood because of my softness and have been subjected to many insults and beating from my father in Syria [...] In my country, women are subjected to discrimination, humiliation and violence daily, so what about us trans women, there is a total rejection of us, I stopped studying because of bullying, and I was being beaten by my father. The situation of trans women is very tragic in Syria, and there are many of us who were kidnapped and raped and sometimes murdered by Daesh [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria - ISIS]. I was subjected to verbal and physical violence at home, so I was staying in my room and cry because I had no hope to complain or tell someone what was happening with me, only my mother was comforting me.” (Participant #16)*

*“I have been suffering because of my external appearance and because of my feelings, since my childhood I have felt that I am a woman, and this caused me problems with my family, especially with my father [...] I was always subject to verbal and physical violence from my father. In his opinion, my abuse makes me a real man. As for the status of women in Syria, it varies from one region to another and from one cultural level to another. My mother, for example, is not educated, so she was always vulnerable to marital violence, and in my region, there are no rights for women at all. As for educated women in the capital, for example, they are respectful and impose their respect on others.” (Participant #17)*

As suggested by Participant #17, **the sub-cohort of professionals** provided a more nuanced picture of gender discrimination in Syria. They highlighted that there are differences across Syrian regions, social classes, more and less religious areas, as well as different religious sects. In this sense, some draw comparisons with the Lebanese situation and others express a development reading of change of these norms and practices, whereby they are getting progressively abandoned. In urban and better educated families, discriminating gender norms are less widespread and accepted.

*“The key here was the origin of these people whether from villages or cities, this causes the difference in mentalities, and the same applies here in the Lebanese community, where if you visit village residents, you find them eager to get their girls married at thirteen and fourteen years of age, while in cities*

*things are different. I think Lebanon and Syria meet at this point, the difference is between regions. The position of the girl depends on whether the people being her parents are educated or from village mentalities who allow early marriage, then it becomes easier for a man to mistreat a girl if he was unjust for not all cases are such.” (Participant #8)*

*“There is probably a slow evolution in some regions, cities specifically so that the women are more engaged in work life, have a certain role in social life, and can start on their own. In Lebanon, it’s totally different, because in the community that I live in, work in, and was in in college, Beirut specifically, it’s more loose compared to Syria, it obtains more flexibility.” (Participant #14)*

*“In Syria, even if Aleppo was an advanced city, there are still traditions and ideas that are outdated in my view and limit the progress of Syrian woman... discrimination and this injustice towards women since adolescence, that I was seeing this inferior view of me since I am a girl... contempt for the girl was coming from the Muslims only, as for the Christian men, they had a view of respect and appreciation for the girl... Syrian women love life, joy, and to live in peace, but unfortunately this is not possible in Syria under the outdated traditions and a violent patriarchal society. All they want is to control women and prevent them from the most basic rights.” (Participant #19)*

Only one of the two participants of half-Lebanese origin who migrated from the UAE commented in relation to that country:

*“To talk frankly about UAE’s community and society, as I said I left when I was fifteen thus what I was exposed to wasn’t enough concerning marriage and marital states. But it was somehow obvious that the society there still approved of early marriage, women’s commitment to raising households only.” (Participant #8)*

What emerges from the **Ethiopian participants** echoes this last quote by Participant #8. It is a scenario where, instead of overt forms of daily violence and abuse, there appear rooted gender norms sanctioning a rigid gender division of labour in the household, with an unequal burden on women. According to the women’s narratives, gender division of labour in the households is expressed in the father/husband working outside the house and earning money to pay the bills, whereas the mother/daughter works inside the house, dealing with all the housework and raising the children. This arrangement can limit women’s education.

*“I had no chance to work outside home and needed to tell my husband before I do anything. Some limitations face women such that they are more responsible for housework in general. So, men and women are not the same and do not have equal responsibilities. I used to work only at the house, and*

*my husband, being the head of the household, worked outside.” (Participant #12)*

However, several women in this sub-cohort describe this situation as mitigated within some families and, as the Syrian migrants suggested, is not homogenous across all social strata.

*“My father used to help her when he comes home from work.” (Participant #3)*

*“Mother had an option to work outside the house, just like any other Ethiopian women, but she preferred to stay home.” (Participant #9)*

*“Woman in Ethiopia have no limitations to work if they are educated. [...] My marriage didn’t limit my education, but I had to come to Lebanon to work and save money for the future.” (Participant #13)*

Within this sub-group of Ethiopian participants, and the addition of the Nigerian and the Filipino domestic worker, some also described a dynamic situation, whereby in the past there used to be more violence against women, including domestic violence; others expressed that there is still some violence nowadays, whereas others that there is no violence or discrimination. Only one woman thinks that violence against women is still prevalent in Ethiopia (Participant #9). Most MDWs expressed that they were not aware of forms of child, arranged and force marriage, or polygamy – where only two mentioned arranged marriage, an Ethiopian and the Nigerian participant, and the Filipino participant stated that “it is not very common nowadays”, whereas an Ethiopian stated that polygamy was widespread. All declared that women could report violence and abuses to the authorities. Women can hold their own bank account, inherit land, have the same rights as men towards children and in the workplace, where they are generally treated similarly to men and are entitled of maternity leave. This suggest a very different condition from the Syria women, particularly in rural areas, where women do not even have bank accounts (Participant #20) as they are not employed. Men however are paid more in Ethiopia, can take more decisions and, as sons, inherit more assets than women. In relation to dress code and mobility, a few participants indicated that there are some limitations.

*“In Ethiopia, they pay equally and do not discriminate between women and men. [...] Unregistered marriages aren’t accepted, and polygamy is prevalent” (Participant #3)*

*“I go out with my friends or my brother. It is possible. If I used to go out at night, I should go with my brother. We use public places freely. No dress code. No restricted places. No bad experiences.” (Participant #7)*

*“It is not that difficult [to be a woman in country of origin].”(Participant #5)*

In sum, gender discrimination against women and the LGBTQ+ community in Syria appears very severe, based on the narrations of participants. Violence against women and queer people is expressed across the whole spectrum of violence, from structural and social, to domestic and interpersonal. Child marriages or marry-the-rapist practices have been reported, by some, to be widespread. Participants highlighted some variations, across rural and urban areas, religious and less religious areas, and between educated and less educated families. Signs of change are also identified, as by the sub-cohort of Ethiopian women too. The Ethiopian women depict a less violent and severe scenario of gender discrimination in their home countries, but this may also be attributed to the nature of the sample of this study, and differences in culture which mould perceptions and awareness in relation to women's condition and rights. In addition to tangible differences between the two countries in relation to gender, cultural values and other incorporated norms may mould their sense-making around the position and role of the woman, and how this is experienced and expressed by the Ethiopian women in a different way from the Syrian women (see Section 6 below). This observation is reflected onto how MDWs describe their living and working conditions.

### **5.3. Living and Working in the Host Country**

The women's migration stories cover their experience of building a new life as migrants and adjusting to the new conditions, culture and urban environment of Beirut. For the **sub-cohort of the MDWs**, the process of familiarising with the host country is filtered by the family they live with, and, to a certain extent, slowed down by their home-based work. The families the MDWs work for and live with necessarily constitutes the first impact with the new country, as well as probably the most important source of socialisation and means of integration. The fact that MDWs are live-in workers implies that the boundaries between private and work life are thinner. Sometimes, these migrant women (all of the Ethiopian women and the Nigerian women), work many hours a day and they do not always have a day off, or a private room. Most of them do not have many social connections in Beirut, but they feel that they like the neighbourhood and the family they work for. Only one participant described her social life within the Ethiopian community outside the household:

*"I have some friends here that I talk to on the phone. We do some birthdays where we cook and eat Ethiopian food. We do not find all the ingredients we need here especially bread and spices, but we know a store in Beirut that has them." (Participant #13)*

Most MDWs, as well as the two participants working in the beauty salon, describe their experiences in Lebanon as positive, particularly within the hosting household/workplace, and they express satisfaction about being able to send money to their families. Almost all women mention that they could change household or even job, and that they had health insurance and social assistance.

*“In Lebanon, my work experience is nice. I am responsible for housework especially cleaning. I work all day with no off days even on weekends. However, I earn enough to live and send money to my husband. All in all, I am pleased with my work and the city but there’s one con which is a lot of work hours, so I get tired.” (Participant #12)*

*“My experience in Lebanon is nice so far. I am responsible for cleaning, doing the dishes, laundry, and taking care of the children. I work about 12 hours or more even on weekends and I have no off days. I think my salary is enough as I transfer money to my family. However, I am not pleased with my job but I’m happy that I have one. Even though I work a lot, there is an advantage that I get money in return. I did not experience discrimination at work, but at times I get yelled at if I’m on the phone and not working. These moments make me believe that there are sometimes unequal attitudes towards me as a foreigner especially when I don’t get to go out with the family members. But they are very good; they get me clothes, and food since I live with them. I also have my own room and keep a good relationship with them since they treat me fairly.” (Participant #11)*

All MDWs involved in this study report that they have not suffered any discrimination in the workplace, beyond the terms conveyed by Participant #11. Discrimination is instead experienced outside the household. Lebanese society comes across as unfriendly and unwelcoming. Some of them also declared that they feel insecure to go out for this reason.

*“A lot of discrimination in Lebanon, especially at this time. Women work less than men outside. Lebanese people aren’t very friendly to foreigners. Sometimes I feel weird.” (Participant #5)*

*“As for being a foreigner, I hear that many workers like me get insulted and beaten up, but thankfully I haven’t experienced any of that.” (Participant #9)*

*“I didn’t experience any discriminatory practice in the work environment, but when we go out sometimes, I get weird looks. The children of the family ask why I have black skin, but it is okay they are just kids. The mother always tells them not to.” (Participant #10)*

*“People are very mean. I experienced verbal abuse for being a foreign woman.” (Participant #11)*

The word ‘racist’ is never used by these participants, who expressed that they suffered verbal abuses and other denigratory acts because they are foreigners and women. What they describe resonates, however, with what the literature describes as “racialised hierarchy” of the *kafala* system, manifesting itself in a pervasive, hence somehow imperceptible, way, in linguistic

expressions and attitudes (Ayoub 2020; Kassamali 2021; Fernandez 2021; see Introduction and Discussions sections). Interestingly, it is a half-Lebanese translator from the **cohort of the Syrian professionals** who openly talks instead of racial discrimination.

*“Although my mother was Lebanese and I mastered the Lebanese dialect, I was afraid because of the hatred by the Lebanese people against the Syrians and the racism.” (Participant #19)*

The other two half-Lebanese participants, those who migrated from Abu Dhabi and who had lived in the country for 20 years, complained about the structural discrimination, engrained within the system of citizenship rights – and that could be compared to a form of institutional racism – more than just being about an open attitudinal discrimination towards Syrians. Participant #14, for example, reports that Syrians cannot open bank accounts, “there is a great percent of banks about 70% who don’t open accounts for the Syrians”, and are not protected by the labour law “I personally know two ladies who couldn’t attain the legally granted maternity leave because they are Syrians”. Participant #8 depicted a situation where, due to her Syrian nationality, she was limited in her job career, “In many if not all institutions and companies, only the Lebanese are hired”, as well as being deprived of some basic rights:

*“I, as a Syrian, from a Lebanese mother, I didn’t have a very wide choice of careers I can pursue in Lebanon. I was lucky, by chance, I liked education, and entered school and studied. [...] I, unfortunately, have no compensations for all my career, I had no health insurance all those twelve years since I wasn’t Lebanese.” (Participant #8)*

The sense of injustice is strongly felt by all these three women precisely because their mother is Lebanese but could not pass any rights onto them. This fact leads to reflections about how Lebanon is a patriarchal and patrilineal society.

*“A great deal of injustice takes place in the case of personal statuses, where a woman can’t provide the most basic rights to her children which is the nationality. And I suffered from it myself [...] My mother, of my own flesh and blood, that I wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for her, cannot give me the nationality, while my husband, that I chose and he chose me, that we have no blood connection granted by God, can give me the nationality. So this proves the presence of masculinity in the applied laws, and this is definitely unjust, I cannot pass my name on to my kids...among others. [...] back when we were in the UAE, Lebanese and Syrians were treated equally as all immigrating from foreign countries and living there. When we came to Lebanon however, the Lebanese viewed Syrian people differently, in an inferior way.” (Participant #8)*

*“My personal experience as a foreigner in this country as I am unfortunately called, it was a fair one. As a Syrian, I have no civil rights, where I am*

*categorized everywhere, in the law, my job, in any official deed, even according to some people, I am a foreigner. According to my community experience, I didn't face any hardships for the environment in which I grew, learned, and worked in didn't give any chance for the classification of me being Syrian or not. The standards that were discriminating me were the legal ones." (Participant #14)*

In the case of the homosexual waitress, the perceived discrimination against Syrians led her to hide her Syrian identity. This adds to the homophobic bullying she is suffering from in Beirut. Due to this, the pre-departure expectations of freedom became unobtainable as the lived experiences in the host country are instead comparable to those suffered in Syria:

*"Despite my shock that Lebanon is not the country of freedoms as I previously thought, and as lesbians, we cannot live in peace, society is ruthless, and the media is ruthless [...] a few times I was subjected to verbal harassment in the street ... regardless my clothes [...] I suffered from the issue of harassment, especially in taxis and during shopping, and this matter made me feel disgusted and negatively affected my mental health, and in any case this is what I encounter in Beirut sometimes as well. [...] I never felt in this work that I was being insulted and no one diminished my respect. I also mastered the Lebanese dialect, and this helps me so that customers do not know my nationality. At the beginning, some looked at me as a freshness of inferiority as I was from Syria and I worked in this restaurant, but my colleagues at work always comforted me." (Participant #15)*

As for the sub-group of MDWs, professional migrants also report that they did not experience direct day-to-day discrimination in the workplace, but that, on the contrary, they enjoyed their job, and they were able to find support and make friends. In general, as mentioned, women in this sub-group appear integrated into Lebanese society, as well as into the Syrian communities in Beirut – in those cases where they belong to one. Despite a certain degree of legal discrimination, many of them think that gender unfairness in Lebanon is less than in Syria and that the condition of women, especially – again – among the better educated ones, is encouraging and improving, and not at all comparable to Syria.

*"A woman here in Lebanon is on her own and educated. There are no more uneducated or jobless girls, she is responsible for her own money spending. [...] Even in house roles, a man and woman are very cooperative here in Lebanon, especially in this youthful generation, from 20 to 30 years old. In Lebanon there is a different lifestyle, the woman here has the ability to do way more things than the Syrian women in her daily life and community. There are of course some exceptions and we can exclude some very developed Syrian cities, but compared to Lebanon, which is in its different regions, obtains the*

*minimum standards of gender equality, we don't face any of the old mentalities in villages that state that girls should not go to school and marry early. The girl then, in Lebanon, obtains the minimum rights as education and career, where no father today abhors his daughters from being employed, maybe there are some standards that a job must have for the father to approve, now it's different. So this case in Lebanon is well- developed, on the other hand, Syria is not, there are some villages that prevent the girl from education and get her married at fifteen to an anonymous person that she might not even know for she is now a burden on her family. In Lebanon, even in the most traditional villages, people now view these acts as rudimentary."*

*(Participant #14)*

This positive situation does not however apply to all sectors of society, and some forms of less visible discrimination are found to be prevalent, such as domestic violence. Despite this, women are more and more aware and active against gender discrimination, also thanks to social media, as some participants reported.

*"In Lebanon, domestic violence is very prominent, you hear of many cases of it, and what's worse, you hear women accepting it, concealing it, and scared of taking action, and unfortunately, you also hear of many women even killed, and were unable to survive. I think awareness is vital, and this is what different NGO's are doing, even women are being supportive to each other on Facebook groups, where women anonymously post and debate to support, and I'm into these groups to understand the structure of this society, and you find a lot of women rebelling and refusing, they stand up to their rights and refuse to be violated and humiliated in front of their kids so they'd leave."*

*(Participant #8)*

The two excerpts above are taken from interviews with two migrants who had spent many years in the country, are well educated and have good job-positions: this means that they are differently placed to offer more nuanced, but also, to a certain extent, privileged views regarding Lebanese society and the role of women in it. Their experiences and views are quite different from those of the **sub-group of the Syrian undocumented sex-workers**. Both the two women and the two transwomen left Syria via the intermediation of someone known to them, described as a friend, a partner, a relative, or a smuggler. Three out these four migrants were subsequently pressured to engage in sex work, as something unexpected and undesired. As described above, these participants all tell how eager they were to leave behind life conditions of discrimination, abuse, and violence. The people facilitating their journey exploited such willingness to flee, supposedly having a specific plan of exploitation – at least this seems to be the case of the two migrant women. Overall, all these study participants never talk of human trafficking, but their stories appear to fall at different points along the spectrum of trafficking for sexual exploitation (see above Introduction to this report and further discussion below). These migrants explain that

the plan of who we could call trafficker became apparent gradually, sometimes only after some initial pleasant days, and after collecting clue after clue.

*“Upon our arrival, I was shocked by the look of the woman who received us. Her clothes are sexy and her behaviour is strange. I have never seen anything like her in my area in Syria. Our first week started, visiting some areas and spending beautiful times with friends of that woman, who were all older men. Of course, I wasn't smart enough to understand what was waiting for me, what the reason for this kind relationship was, and why we have always been with these men. Of course, everything was new and strange. I ate food that I had never eaten before and wore clothes that I had never had before, and I used to call my mother and sister daily and tell them that I am happy and they were happy for me. Of course I have no one else in Syria, no friends, and whenever I talked to my mother, she would ask me when I would start sending them money.” (Participant #20)*

*“Upon my arrival in Beirut, a Lebanese transwoman friend hosted me in her small room in which she lives, and it was my first shock, because she always told me that she lived in a large house, and on this basis I did not bring anything with me except some clothes, and since the day after my arrival she started pressing me to do anything to bring money to her, her vile truth came out and she was always screaming in my face. The first week passed in a very bad way, and I felt that I could not bear staying in that room, and with the constant pressure that I had to have sex for money” (Participant #16)*

For obvious different reasons and circumstances, the social and working life of this sub-cohort in Lebanon tended to overlap, as in the case of the MDWs. Occasions to socialise and establish friendships outside of the network of people and places related to their jobs as sex workers are limited. Such a limitation is exacerbated by their undocumented status, as workers and citizens, as well as by the perception of the stigma attached to sex work and the discrimination perceived against the Syrian woman.

*“As for my life in Lebanon, what to say, I did not know what awaited me, [...] Here I have no friends at all, only those with whom I live, and some clients, even those who promised to marry me previously have become a regular customer, and therefore our activities are very few.” (Participant #20)*

*“Because of my work in sex, I was only able to build friendships with some clients, whom I sometimes accompanied to a cafe or club, but not really friendship unfortunately.” (Participant #20)*

The humiliation that the two women sex workers described to suffer at home within their households in Syria is only perpetuated, if not multiplied, during work and within the Lebanese society.

*“As a Syrian woman, I was subjected to many insults during sex, because the client thinks that I am his property, he pays the money and because the reputation of the Syrian girl in Lebanon is very bad.” (Participant #21)*

*“I have always heard insults during sex and I was silent because I need money, and how much I cried after the end of the sexual relation, but there is no solution for me. How many customers insulted me and treated me like an animal only because I am Syrian and because they know that I do not have residency and I cannot refuse anything imposed by him because they can harm me and hand me over to General Security and accuse me of a million accusations.” (Participant #20)*

Additionally, the lack of awareness and education in the realm of sexual and reproductive health and relationships exposed these women to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmissible diseases. This fact becomes even more dangerous in consideration of the fact that while the two transwomen are registered with the UNHCR and could count on health coverage, the two women had instead none. However, both reported that they were in contact with NGOs active in sexual health provision and supported them.

*“Unfortunately, I did not know anything about sexual infections and condoms and all these things. My mother had never told me about these matters at all, so I started to hear about it here from my cousin and her friend and from some of the men with whom I had sex for money.” (Participant #20)*

The lack of a health insurance led these two migrant workers to rely on unofficial channels of their network of colleagues and clients, and this has the potential of increasing their vulnerability to a cycle of dependency and exploitation, already linked to their undocumented status. An example is the fact that one of them had a residence permit thanks to a ‘fake’ sponsor who was also a client, but for whom she was not working; another example is that of a doctor performing an abortion who was the client of a friend.

*“One time, I had a sexually transmitted infection, and I forgot the name of this infection, so my cousin took me to a doctor she knew [...] the doctor was her client as well, for that he didn’t take money, as we don’t have any medical insurance here in Lebanon” (Participant #20)*

*“During my stay in Lebanon, I did not suffer from the issue of residency because one of the friends of the lady who stayed in her house sponsored me and I gave him money every period, and he registered me as an employee in a*

*factory he owned even though he never wanted to hire me, but he used to have sex with me only sometimes he pays me and sometimes not, under the pretext of sponsorship.” (Participant #21)*

The engagement in sex work of the two transwomen appears to be more occasional and not perceived or conducted as forced upon them, against their will. Both transwomen migrants contacted the UNHCR to register as refugees but did not find it very helpful in regards to improving their living and working conditions.

*“The first week passed quietly, and then our friend guided us to the UNHCR to register as refugees because this registration might help us to travel, and this is what happened, by the way, I did not know anybody in my area in Syria who is in my situation, so I did not previously know anything about the topic of asylum and all these things. [...] After my separation from my partner since about six months, I moved to live in the Naameh area in Chouf, in a small room because the rent is cheaper and the cost of life in this area is greater, and since I am without work and I live with the help of some organizations and some people with who I do sex for money and they are only two people, so this area is better for me.” (Participant #17)*

*“The first week passed in a very bad way, and I felt that I could not bear staying in that room, and with the constant pressure that I had to have sex for money, I called a friend of mine in Syria and told her what was happening, and she informed me to communicate with the UNHCR and register as a refugee, and she promised me to send a sum of money to be able to find a room for me. This is what really happened. I contacted the UNHCR, I registered as a refugee, and I asked for financial aid and explained my situation to them. I did not get any help from them frankly. [...] I live now in a small room in the Dora area, where there is no sunlight and it is damp in the winter, which means that it is not healthy at all, but since its rent is acceptable and I can secure it through the help of some organizations and some friends, there is no other solution for me.” (Participant #16)*

Despite having a small network of support, consisting of partners, friends, and organisations, including the UNHCR, the life of the two transwomen refugees in Beirut appears more marked by social isolation, if not segregation from Lebanese society and Beirut urban life. The lack of any form of employment is an aggravating factor, together with their belonging to the LGBTQ+ minority group. The conditions of the two migrant transwomen are different from the two women sex workers, due to several aspects already mentioned. However, regardless the length of their duration of stay in Beirut, their life can be characterised as running along marginal and half-hidden tracks with respect to the Lebanese society. The concept of segregation could arguably encapsulate their living and working experience in the country. As for the MDWs,

instead, the idea of isolation within the very centre of the Lebanese society can summarise their condition. For the Syrian professionals, despite the legal obstacles and the awareness that they are treated as ‘inferior’ foreigners, we could talk of second-class integration into the society in Beirut. Their integration is made even more evident by their access to public spaces and spatial mobility.



*Image 5. Sioufi Garden Achrafieh District in Beirut. Credit: Patrice Bon*

#### **5.4. Public Access and Spatial Mobility**

The public access and spatial mobility for the **sub-group of the Syrian sex-workers** naturally reflects their living and working circumstances addressed in the previous macro-theme. Their undocumented status, as mentioned, is an important determinant which heavily restricts the sense of being able to move freely across the city of Beirut.

*“As I am illegal in Lebanon and I do not have any residency, I do not go out often to areas outside Beirut for fear that I will be arrested by the security*

*forces or the general security [...] Sometimes I accompany clients to a café or club before having sex, but we are careful because of the residency issue.”*  
(Participant #20)

The mobility described by these participants is often circumscribed to seeing clients, friends, and colleagues within the Syrian community of sex workers or of LGBTQ+ people. The access to cafés and public places is mainly limited to work-related activities in the case of the sex workers, for example, otherwise going out is limited to basic necessities, to the private spaces of friends’ homes and occasionally night clubs.

*“My lifestyle in Lebanon was not noisy, I go out only to work, and I have no friends, so I cannot talk about free time or specific activities.”* (Participant #21)

*“Until now I have no problems in this area of my residence, I do not deal with anyone here, I go out to buy my things and return directly to my room, I also prefer not to move between one region and another, as I do not have a residence here, and in order to avoid any problem with the Lebanese General Security. [...] Since my arrival in Lebanon, I have not mainly gone out except with my partner and his friend, and after the interruption of relations with them and my move to my new place of residence, I only go out to buy some food from a place near my home, so I avoid going out alone and this reduces my exposure to insults or risks in the street.”* (Participant #17)

The undocumented status couples with the professional identity as sex workers – particularly for the two migrant women – as well as with the gender identity – particularly for the two transwomen – towards further limiting their mobility. In fact, one migrant of this sub-cohort even resolved to report the frequent harassment and insults received on the street to the UNHCR, but receive unhelpful advice. As a coping strategy (see below), Participant #16 expresses that being able to keep contact with one member of the family back in Syria and having some friends in Beirut was a great source of support.

*“I call my mother weekly, and I have some friends here, otherwise my situation would have been much worse, especially since my residential area is not safe for those in my situation. I have been subjected to insults more than once and physical assault twice in the street, and I have informed the UNHCR of this, but they gave me advice to not going out, that’s all.”* (Participant #16)

Another migrant describes how she feels that she had to conceal her profession as much as possible in the neighbourhood where she lives.

*“In order to avoid any problem or harassment in the street, I always went out while shopping in my area in decent clothes and kept my work confidential, so*

*I would not receive customers at my house, but go either to their homes or to hotels or to the homes of their friends.” (Participant #21)*

These migrants live at the margins of both Lebanese society and Beirut urban life, living essentially clandestine lives in a position of high vulnerability to abuse and lack of rights, with only the support of the minority groups they belong to. For the **sub-group of mainly Ethiopian MDWs**, as mentioned, there appears to be a significant overlap between the private and the working dimension. This may be less the case for the two women working in the beauty salon, who are also helpers in their managers’ houses, but who live in a separate apartment on their own. Generally, the mobility of the women within this sub-group means going out with the family they work for, around the neighbourhood. Many declared that they did not go anywhere, had no social life, and attended no social event. Those few who expressed that they went out sometimes, they said that they went to the closest mall and that they avoided moving around at night, as they considered unsafe. Most MDWs spent their little free time on their phone, watching the television and sometimes talking to their family back home.

*“I don’t go out or meet any friends especially at night because it is not safe.”  
(Participant #10)*

The confined (im)mobility of the MDWs group is contrasted with what could be regarded as free public access and spatial mobility for the **sub-group of Syrian migrant professionals**. This is consistent with their working and living conditions in the country that we have characterised as ‘integration’ above. This is also particularly true for the four migrants whose mother and/or husband are Lebanese and who has spent between eight and 20 years in Beirut. These women either move by taxi or by car with a friend, or by simply walking to their destination.

*“Since all of my friends have cars, I never had a problem with transportation, I would go with them, and in case it was not possible, I would take an Uber taxi, and I had never been subjected to any harassment in Lebanon and not even any discrimination as I mastered the Lebanese dialect well.” (Participant #19)*

They describe, for example, a university life among the Lebanese youth which includes several entertainments, also for the night life, and mostly the coming together of girls and boys from different religious affiliations. This is described as something very different from what happens in rural Syria.

*“Here a woman attends college among others of young boys and girls, they would hang out, gather despite their differences in religion, where Lebanon is diverse, recognizes all types of freedoms, you could meet, especially in the city, girls that are up till 5 or 6 in the morning in some clubs, others live in university dorms, there are nightclubs open all night... in the Syrian community, you never find this [...] Everything else, such as restaurants, malls,*

*is available. There is even an excess, for Lebanon is full with activities and places to go.” (Participant #14)*

Despite this, public transport is not considered safe, especially during certain times of the day. This applies specifically to women and the daily discrimination they can suffer in public.

*“According to lifestyle, every girl is exposed to harassment, the fear in walking in a certain hour of the day, how and when to arrive home, when using public transportation maybe.” (Participant #14)*

*“According to public transportation, I hear a lot, and from very close first-hand people, not some story I’ve heard, it happens with my very close friends and even me, we were exposed to many harassments, especially sexual harassments in public transportation. Many girls are daily exposed to at least touching, or someone placing his hand on her legs or saying certain talk, the harassment is physical and verbal.” (Participant #8)*

All the opportunities for leisure activities are accessed differently by different groups in society according to their economic status – as one participant rightly pointed out. It is also the case that discrimination against women can be more severe for some women and intersects with factors, such as non-cisgender, migrant status and nationality. This is the case of the homosexual woman, Participant #15, who expressed that she mainly sees her few friends in private spaces, to eat and play cards together. As noted, this participant compared the discrimination suffered in public spaces in Syria with what she experienced in Beirut.

*“Certainly, I suffered from the issue of harassment, especially in taxis and during shopping, and this matter made me feel disgusted and negatively affected my mental health, and in any case this is what I encounter in Beirut sometimes as well [...] The area in which I live is insecure, especially during the night, so a friend of mine always brings me from work to my place, so I will not be subjected to anything in the street, but during the day I go walking to work because it is not far away, and in a few times I was subjected to verbal harassment in the street. Although my clothes are usually not attractive, I ignore the matter, and according to my opinion, my clothing has nothing to do with the issue of harassment, the harasser is a sick person, and he will harass, regardless my clothes.” (Participant #15)*

For the sub-group of the four undocumented sex-workers from Syria, it seems that regardless of the number of years spent in Beirut – spanning from two to 10 years – their public access and spatial mobility were determined and limited by intersecting factors, such as social and structural discrimination because of their nationality, gender identity, professional identity and migrant status. The sub-group of mainly Ethiopian MDWs are also marginalised, but in a different way to that of the sex workers, as it runs through the relationship between the family and the worker

inside a domestic space. This means that, despite the physical proximity with middle class Lebanese families, there is a big gap between them and the larger Lebanese society and urban life in Beirut. The professional migrants, who are also for the most part half-Lebanese, enjoy a good level of integration, despite being second tier in some aspects.



*Image 6. Residents Driving over the Debris the Evening of the Beirut Explosion. August 4, 2020. Credit: Rita Kabalan*

### **5.5. Women's Agency and Coping Strategies**

The agency of the migrant women in this study can be taken from a few areas that are connected to the past, the present and the future of migrant women's lives – and how these three are interpreted by them. These areas are connected to themes and sub-themes explored above, such as the drivers and processes of migration, the experiences of discrimination at home, their living and working conditions, and ability to move around in Beirut. The quality, room for manoeuvre and implemented changes in relation to the agency of the study participants varies quite substantially. In fact, despite being a small sample where participants come from four countries only, it is however heterogenous.

The family is an effective entry point to explore the agency and coping strategies of the migrant women involved in this study. The family cuts through the different themes and sub-groups, and sometimes across temporalities and family generations. The family can be conceptualised as a

site where agency is undermined, exercised, and negotiated. For all our study participants, the family played a role in driving the decision-making to leave in the first place. In the case of the **sub-group of the MDWs**, this happened along a spectrum going from receiving considerable pressure, on the one end, to taking a decision autonomously, even against the family's will, at the other end. Even in the end where some of the women had apparently little agency in the decision-making process, from their narrative a sense of pride that they have become able to have a job and earn money that they can send home to support their family transpires. This strongly applies to those migrant women who have children, such as the Nigerian and Filipino women, and who retell a more autonomous decision-making process to come to Lebanon. Several participants expressed feeling more independent and even stronger due to being able to earn money, which they can send to their families or save for a future where they have greater independence. Some also admitted that these feelings replaced an initial homesickness and regret for having left.

*"I work independently. More responsibilities because I earn my own money now. I save money for myself, and for my family and child's education. I send them money." (Participant #5)*

*"I always plan on going back to my home country where I will open a shop or boutique and start my own business." (Participant #13)*

Despite the sense of having gained more independence and feeling proud to be able to help their families, some women confess that a sense of loneliness and sadness coexists also. This is also due to the fact that, in light of their migration and employment arrangements, they not only have a few or no friends in Beirut and little chances to make more, but also family visits – let alone family reunification – are rare, or even unimaginable.

*"I am not pleased that I left my country, but I'm pleased that I work. I don't regret it, but I'm sad that I'm away especially because my parents don't visit and don't want to come." (Participant #10)*

*"I'm not happy that they are away and I'm alone here although my sister visited once. In general, I am not pleased but my life here is okay. I earn money. I am more responsible for my own work. Control over my money increased. I save some money for myself and transfer some to my parents to help them. I don't feel stronger, I just feel more independent." (Participant #11)*

*"I am not pleased with leaving Ethiopia since I miss my son, but my life here is good. I work and I am more responsible now. Control over my money increased. I save little money for myself, the majority I send them to my husband. I feel stronger and at the same time sad that I'm away from my son." (Participant #12)*

The working conditions of the MDWs in this study mostly prevent them from cultivating a social and private life, as well as from planning visits from their family members or from planning a whole new life in Beirut. Going back to Ethiopia is also something that they all planned to do in the medium- and long-term. Yet, going back is also perceived as risky by some women as they expressed the fear of losing their current job if they went back home. For this, some declared that they intended to renew their visa. Others instead that they would go back home and then come back, even with another employer. As mentioned above, most of the MDWs feel happy with their employing family and would want to continue working with them, earn more money, and progress in their careers.

*“I wish to stay working at the salon, and get promotions.” (Participant #6)*

Finally, despite some MDWs saying that they occasionally met Ethiopian friends for festivities and cooking together, even in the households they work, their coping strategy in relation to their homesickness and isolation is by regularly phoning their family. Some MDWs said that they call their families every day, most of them do so every week.

Maintaining a sense of closeness with family members and friends left behind in the home country, via the use of mobile phones, with calls and other social media, is less of an option for the **Syrian migrant sex workers**. As we have seen above, for this sub-cohort the family is a driver of migration due to negative home environments that the women wanted to escape from. In particular, the father is identified as the first site of oppression to flee from. The paternal figure can be also seen as representative of a patriarchal society, where men in general are the main source of discrimination and abuse toward women. Social gender discrimination is also a factor that contributed to these women’s decisions to migrate. In addition, another driver is also the long-standing conflict in Syria, which exacerbated the poverty of families as well as the violence and abuses towards women. Therefore, the decision-making and the arrangement to migrate – often secretly or deceptively from the family and illegally with the help of smugglers/traffickers – signals a considerable amount of agency from the undocumented migrants.

*“We left for Lebanon in a taxi, and I brought with me a few clothes and necessities, and I was planning not to ever return to a life of poverty and humiliation in Syria, and I wanted to take advantage of this young man and delude him that I love him in order to reach my goal, but he was preparing me an opposite surprise and to be frank, he was smarter than I expected. Of course, my father thought that I would stay with that young man’s relative and work for her at home and on this basis, he accepted that I came to Lebanon.” (Participant #21)*

All participants in this sub-group are not happy with their living conditions and circumstances in Beirut, and they did not find what they expected. This is obvious for the two women who, as mentioned, appeared to have been trafficked into sex work, since they were not made aware that at destination that was the plan for them. Progressively, they started to accept their identity

as sex workers, because they could not see any other viable routes, since returning home was perceived as even more undesirable.

*“I felt tense and thought about returning to Syria, but for a moment I went back on my decision, and asked myself where to return to, poverty? misery and violence? and I convinced myself to stay here and accept my destiny, because I am uneducated and I do not know anyone, and therefore I have no other options.” (Participant #21)*

A sense of ‘no way out’ was determined by their lack of education and qualifications – as the two women participants expressed – but also by their illegal status. The fear of been reported to the authorities made them endure insults and abuses (see above). This constant blackmailing and threatening made them also engage in all types of practices, including the use of drugs, so to please their clients.

*“Even some sexual practices I was not aware of and I was forced to do them to please men and in order to get more money, so I tried everything until it came to my acceptance of using drugs with them to satisfy them, but now I got used to it and this has become my life and the source of my life, as I do not have any other qualifications to work in other fields.” (Participant #20)*

The cases of the transwomen migrants sit less clearly within the boundaries of human trafficking. Despite some pressure and expectations that they would engage in sex work from their friends/partners and host, they do that in a more sporadic and casual way, as mentioned, and exhibiting a higher level of free choice. Having said this, what these two migrants found at their arrival was very different from what they expected, but none of them would want to go back to their home countries where they consider the situation as being worse.

*“I cannot regret my coming to Lebanon, because what was going to happen to me in Syria would not be better. My sister is beaten daily by her husband, and her life is hell under the cover of marriage. [...] I repeat that, despite this situation, I preferred Lebanon a million times over returning to Syria.” (Participant #20)*

The coping strategies in this group of migrants consist of choices, actions, and narratives that can mitigate the hardships of their situations as undocumented migrants with undesired jobs, or with no job. For the professional sex workers, for example, being able to make, save and send money to their family gives them a sense of empowerment, as for the MDWs.

*“I do not deny that I collected money and used to send money to my family every month with a taxi driver, and I was able to buy my needs and moved to my own small apartment.” (Participant #21)*

As mentioned, contacting the family may also be considered a source of comfort, however the family are unaware of the women's source of income.

*"I communicate weekly with my mother and a number of my brothers, and they think that I am an employee in a factory, and when they ask me about marriage, I reply that I have no time, I want to give you money, then they will be silent." (Participant #21)*

*"As for my family in Syria, there are no relationships at all, I do not know anything about them, and this is better for me, because I do not want to remember the past even though I miss my mother." (Participant #17)*

Looking for support of a different kind in the third sector is also an important form of self-protection. The sex-workers relied on grassroots organisations for free condoms and HIV tests, whereas the transwomen registered as refugees. As noted, they were also able to find private accommodation for themselves and some comfort in spending time with friends, where they had some. In spite of this, these migrants find a great deal of inner strength in hoping for a different future, which sometimes means further migration into a country where respect for women's and LGBTQ+ community rights can be found.

*"I contacted the UNHCR, I registered as a refugee. I did not get any help from them frankly. I did not find here the comfort I was dreaming of, and my hope became to leave Lebanon and travel abroad. A large number of my trans friends left for Turkey or to Iraq because they have passports, most of them are now in Europe and Canada. To be honest, I do not know if a person in my condition has the right to dream or look forward to the future, but all what I want now is to travel to Europe or Canada to live in peace, with my dignity, where no one can be able to humiliate me." (Participant #16)*

*"Lebanon was not the paradise that I imagined, and all my hope today is to leave to a country that respects human rights, to conduct my surgeries and live my life as a woman, study and get married with someone who respects and appreciates me." (Participant #17)*

The women sex workers hope also to change their conditions, despite a certain degree of acceptance, resignation and self-denigratory attitude – which nevertheless are themselves narratives that are key to them coping with their situation.

*"Finally, I do not know if a woman in my condition has the right to dream of a better future, but I always hope that someday I will meet someone who truly loves me and appreciates me and treats me with respect and takes me away from all this atmosphere to be a wife and a mother" (Participant #20)*

*“As for my life in Lebanon, I think that it is the life that I deserve, because I told you previously that I wanted to take advantage of the young man who took me to Lebanon, but in return this was his goal as well. [...] Despite everything happening, I never thought of leaving Lebanon, I consider it my country. I don’t feel secure, for sure, my mental health was affected with all economic and security problems happening so I cannot think of any future, I cannot establish any plan for the next years, but I hope to find a true love and build a family here in Lebanon, I don’t know if this can happen one day.” (Participant #21)*

The idea that Lebanon was a transitory country was also the case for the migrant Syrian waitress. As a homosexual lesbian woman, she has a different case compared to the other women in the **sub-cohort of the Syrian professionals**. Not only due to her homosexuality, but also because she had de-skilled in her professional life, which nevertheless did not stop her determination and future plans.

*“It is one of the seventh impossible things to return to Syria, and it is also impossible for me to think of staying in Lebanon. I am planning to travel to Europe. I want as well that my mother be with me but not here, when and how I will do that, don’t know, but I hope to achieve this soon, perhaps When I collect more money, and when the dollar crisis in Lebanon ends. I am by nature an ambitious person and I hope to achieve my ambition.” (Participant #15)*

Participant #15 shares with the sub-group of sex workers the fact that she also wanted to escape the pressure from her family, to whom she lied about her actual plan to move to Beirut. Her family was in disagreement, but the fact she has been sending them remittances “made them shut up” (Participant #15). She works very long hours, and she has also encountered difficulties and discrimination (see above), however she also has friends to see, she is sharing an apartment with another homosexual woman, and she decided: “not to register as a refugee in the UNHCR, because I do not trust them, but I still have hope to leave and live outside one day”. Additionally, Participant #15 had neither a Lebanese mother or a Lebanese husband, as the other four participants in this group do. However, the family played an equally pivotal role for them. In the case of the two professionals born in UAE, migrating to Beirut was a family decision, whereas for the other two women: one moved back, with her family, to Lebanon where she had spent her childhood, and the second one, fled the atrocities of the Syrian war to marry her Lebanese fiancé. Their life in Lebanon is described as full of opportunities and entertainment. These women could get a good education, find a good job, build a life full of activities and hobbies. The two married women plan their life around their young/future families:

*“The most important thing that I can plan for is preserving my family and following up on my attempts to have children. If this happens, I will be very*

*happy, and if it does not happen, the most important thing remains my family, especially my husband. All that I can plan will be in coordination with him.”*  
(Participant #8)

*“My plan is to raise my kids in the best way I can, and put all my experience, energy, effort, and experience that I gained in the field of education to better raise my children, this is what I can plan for now, I cannot do so any further, unfortunately.”* (Participant #8)

The two younger professional migrants expressed a wish to invest their time and agency in their careers and social relations, and that they feel well integrated in Beirut.

*“As for the residential area, we still live in the Ashrafieh area [Christian district], which I love very much, because I find in it all I want cafes, restaurants, cinemas, shopping centers and it is in the heart of Beirut, and we have become friends with some neighbours as well, the Ashrafieh area is an open area, I feel free here, I can go out in my comfort, wear what I like and what it is comfortable for me, I can meet whomever I want without restrictions or fear, I can say that I am happy in my life here and I never think of returning to Syria even if the conditions improve, and my family prefers to stay here as well.”* (Participant #19)

The ‘normal’ life that this group of migrants was living is made evident when contrasted with the tremendous impact that the Lebanese triple crisis had on their lives, as we shall see in the following section. To synthesise a vast and complex theme as that of agency and coping strategies, we have used the family as a point of access, also to cast light on the broader society and the level and origins of oppression for these women. The agency and coping strategies in the sub-group of professionals can be characterised as loosely restrained and more typical of the global middle class of contemporary, neo-liberalist societies. Whereas that of the Syrian sex workers, the waitress and the MDWs had to find more subtle and micro routes of expression, as a form of resistance in opposition to blatant forms of oppression and injustice.

### **5.6. Diverse Impacts of the triple crisis**

We can think of the impact of the triple crisis in Lebanon on the social life of the three sub-groups of participants in this study as: high for the sub-cohort of the Syrian professionals, medium for the Syrian sex-workers, and low for the mainly Ethiopian MDWs. It is worth noting that this rough scale is inversely proportional to the level of integration of the women in each sub-sample. However, results of the interviews with NGOs practitioners indicate instead that the impact of the crises on MDWs, as well as on undocumented migrants from Syria, has been far more significant than the experiences of our small sample of migrant women suggest. This tremendous impact has been described in Section three above too. Additionally, when we classify the impact

of the crises on the **professional workers** as high, we mainly refer to the impact of the pandemic on their daily and social life and to an unprecedented experience of uncertainty for the future.

*“And honestly when life before COVID was normal, I had a busy life and I liked it [...] we go out together, to restaurants in pre-COVID days, we used to have nights out, dance, sing, have beach walks that I loved so much and still do it till now in spite COVID, because I’m isolated from people, I can just have some fresh air and walk around. And that’s it pretty much.” (Participant #8)*

*“Our life has changed a lot, we stopped all our social activities, parties, restaurants, cinemas, shopping centers, even before they closed, we had made a decision to stop carrying out these activities, and we adopted a system of protection from wearing masks and the use of sterilization tools. [...] even our lifestyle has changed, so many of the materials I used for cooking and preparing sweets became missing, so I overlooked them with other things. The worst thing I live today is the economic situation and fear of the COVID-19 only.” (Participant #18)*

*“Going back to the subject of my social life in Beirut, and being a woman I love life, I used to go out with my friends every weekend to drink and dance, and we used to have dinner outside, going to the cinema, ski centers during the winter and the beach in the summer, our days were full of activities and I was enjoying life, wearing what I like, and following the fashion, and now and during Covid, all these activities stopped dramatically.” (Participant #19)*

The impact of the crises on this sub-group was also described in more general terms, and expressed with a desire to leave a country affected by such profound problems, which, as mentioned, deeply shook their future planning and perspectives, shifting them to a day-to-day survival mode.

*“It would break my heart because I too have his [her husband] sense of love and belonging to Lebanon, to take my children away from here, because I worry about them growing up in such a draining country, where everything is challenging you, troubles spread everywhere, corruption and injustice dominating. They would work hard or a certain post, but wouldn’t attain it without intermediaries [...] Honestly, it’s very difficult to set goals and plans in this country, you are faced and dragged down by challenge.” (Participant #8)*

Generally, the employment of this sub-group has not been severely affected by the crises, and several commented that “not much changed”. They were able to maintain their job and salaries, either moving it online or temporarily suspend it, during periods of lockdowns, as in the case of the migrant working in the restaurant. What was subject to a negative change, for some of them, was the form of their income or the fact that they were not paid in US dollars anymore.

*“When the pandemic happened, not much change occurred to me because I was already doing my job from home. What changed, however, is the income for sure because people are not capable to pay as they did before, what was still fitting me was receiving payments from outside countries through US dollars.” (Participant #8)*

*“If talking about myself, COVID impacted our mental health and lifestyle. It may have not impacted my job, which revolves about protecting vulnerable communities in Lebanon and providing psychosocial support as well as emergency aid. We were able to perform it remotely, there were plans that we all committed to in all UN projects. So it didn’t affect me or my job. Many people, however, including my siblings, family, and even the Syrian community were affected by payments due to the economic crisis happening as well. The payments decreased and prices increased [...] COVID was the not the only cause of these details, there was Beirut’s blast, where I was working in emergency aid response to it and people who suffered from it, as well as the economic collapse. All this was affecting us, especially the Syrians. Because I was personally impacted, where it is impossible that I get paid by USD from the bank, I get paid at a certain rate that the bank assigns and changes every month and that is lower than the rest of my Lebanese companions because I am Syrian, so I have no stability.” (Participant #14)*

Besides the heavy impact on social and leisure activities described by the professional migrants who occupy a quite privileged position within the study sample, the other areas of impact are similarly highlighted by the participants in **the other two sub-groups**. This certainly applies with differences and variations, but the shared areas are: reduction and changes in income – and remittances too – and reduced mental well-being.

*“Work was reduced a little since most of the customers are married and are afraid about their families, but a few remained and the return of the money decreased and therefore my transfers to my mother in Syria dropped. There is no doubt that life has become difficult here now, because with the COVID-19 and the dollar crisis, the few customers are paying in Lebanese currency, and the profit has become less, and after the Beirut Blast the situation became worse.” (Participant #20)*

*“COVID impacted my mental health, lifestyle and my work. Because of the global epidemic, I became depressed, so just thinking about the danger is a bad thing, also I can never go out of the house, and this is annoying, as for my work, I reduced the number of clients a lot, so I stopped having sex for two months and I don’t feel secure, for sure. My mental health was affected with all economic and security problems happening so I cannot think of any future,*

*I cannot establish any plan for the next years, but I hope to find a true love and build a family here in Lebanon.’ (Participant #21)*

The impact on social connections was also felt in the other two sub-cohorts, but to a far lesser extent since even before the pandemic, as we have seen, a certain degree of social isolation and marginalisation was already characterising the life of the **MDWs and the sex workers** in Beirut. Increased uncertainty and difficulty in planning for the future were life dimensions already familiar to the undocumented Syrians as well as to most MDWs, hence these could not be areas where a change could be strongly felt. For some in severe destitution, it was even difficult to afford the protective tools to reduce risks of infections, let alone the fear caused by the lack of health insurance. Nevertheless, their circumstances are still considered better than what they were experiencing in Syria, and as described in the quotes above, some remain hopeful for a better future.

*“Before the Corona period, I used to meet some friends more than this period, but in the period of the epidemic I only meet very few friends, we play cards and have fun, or they bring things with them to prepare food together.”  
(Participant #17)*

*“The worst period I have been in Lebanon is the period of COVID-19, in addition to the fear of catching infection, I do not have enough money to buy masks and Hygiene tools, and therefore I used to stay in my room and moved away from seeing my friends and went through psychological stress and depression [...] I had to pay more attention than others, because I do not have money for medical treatment and health insurance through the UNHCR does not cover the COVID-19 [...] Because I do not work here, I spend most of my time in my room, and sometimes I visit some friends, and before the COVID-19 we used to prepare dinner together, play cards, go out to a cafe or to a friendly night Club to dance and have fun, but all these things stopped due to this virus. Lebanon remains better than Syria for me, and I prefer staying here rather than returning there, even after the Beirut blast I felt fear, anxiety, and disgust about the situation here, but compared to the situation in Syria, Beirut would be better.” (Participant #16)*

As for the MDWs and the two beauty salon employees involved in this study, the changes brought about by the triple crises appear less drastic. Some reported that their salaries slightly decreased, whereas their workload increased – for those working for families with kids at home from school. They all declared that they were given protective equipment by their employer, and that they were just staying at home, where – some said – the communication with the host family had decreased.



Image 7. MDWs Protesting during Covid-19. Credit: MOSAIC-Mena

### 5.7. NGO practitioners

The short summary, offered at the end of last section, of how the Lebanese triple crisis affected the MDWs partaking in this study is in sharp contrast with the results of the interviews with the NGO frontline practitioners. According to the NGO participants the impact of the crises on MDWs was devastating, because they were probably dealing with the worst affected. The general overview offered by the NGO practitioners of how the crises dramatically impacted vulnerable groups in the Lebanese society more can offer useful insights also in relation to the sub-groups of the sex-workers and the professionals. NGOs and the third sector in the country were called

to join forces and design emergency plans to respond to the economic, health and humanitarian disasters. The blast sharpened the dramatic situation in the country, creating a humanitarian emergency amidst an unprecedentedly critical national and international crisis. After the explosion, the actions and resources of the humanitarian sector were directed towards aiding the population affected by the blast, according to their specific needs. This population included migrant workers. The aid interventions of the NGOs ranged from housing to distributing food parcels, household and menstrual hygiene kits and reproductive health kits. During the economic collapse and the major health disaster, humanitarian organisations had to help migrants return home, or find them new accommodation, since many could not afford to pay their rent anymore.

Two of the three NGO practitioners in this study were able to offer insights into the effects of the Lebanese crises on the lives of migrants more specifically. In particular, these two study participants were very knowledgeable with regards to MDWs, both live-in – as all the MDWs taking part in this study are – and freelancers – a category not accounted for in this study (see Section 6 below). The themes, phenomena and issues stemming from these two interviews are summarised as follow, and covers both the pre- and post-crises period:

- Due to the crises, many migrants wanted and tried to go back to their home country. This is due to the fact that many lost their jobs. After the explosion, the number of migrants who both wanted and managed to leave Lebanon grew even more. However, it was financially difficult for migrants to manage to fly home, because everything is priced in dollars and the Lebanese pound was devalued. Contrary to what many people seem to believe, it is not true that migrants are paid in Dollars. Many were often not paid at all and were owed “thousands of Dollars of unpaid wages” (NGO’s participant #2). For this, some filed lawsuits against their employers, but legal processes slowed down considerably in this critical situation, resulting in many MDWs just waiting. Repatriation was also often hampered by the fact that many MDWs did not have their passports.
- The phenomenon of employers abandoning MDWs outside of their consulates started to occur, together with others who “make up” a fake lawsuit against the MDW when she is in transit, and once at the airport she is detained and arrested.
- The Standard Unified Contract of 2020 does not abolish the sponsorship system, as the minister of labour apparently announced in a Twitter post – both participants reported. It contains several positive amendments (e.g., right for the worker to take a day off, right to end the contract, right to keep their documents, and right to proper sleeping arrangements). The contract has however two fundamental pitfalls:

*“It still linked the legal status of the worker to one person who is the employer and the sponsor, so the power dynamics were still the same. The other main thing is that it was not accompanied by any implementation or enforcement mechanism, which means that it’s good on paper, but then you would have to*

*rely on the individual good intention of the employer to actually implement it.”*  
(NGO’s Participant #1)

Additionally, domestic work is excluded from the labour law, where it is stated that people who work in low-income jobs, like domestic work, construction and agriculture have to be legally tied to a sponsor. NGO Participant #2 clearly expressed that it would be simple to abolish the *kafala* system in two consecutive steps:

*“One of which is the ratification of ILO 3189 which guarantees their rights in an international way because then Lebanon will have to commit to its clauses in front of the international community (and Lebanon will have to change its laws to meet those of the convention). A second method, which could be simpler since it has less international commitment, would be to include the migrant workers within the Lebanese labor law.”* (NGO’s Participant #2)

Still in relation to the Standard Unified Contract, both these participants described several ways in which the contract was blocked by the lobbying of the union of the owners of the recruitment agencies.

- In a similar way to what happens in moments of crisis everywhere, “the foreigners” become scapegoats for the crisis. One of the allegations is that they drained Dollars out of Lebanon, which both NGO Participants argued is unfounded. As a result, domestic work has become less stigmatised, and families are encouragement to hire Lebanese domestic workers. In addition to this, the pre-existing racism against migrants has intensified and shifted.

*“The racist discourse about migrants and refugees stealing our jobs was kind of really pushed to an extreme two summers ago.”* (NGO’s Participant #1)

*“The live-in domestic workers suffered from increased exclusion, which is paradoxical. From the pandemic’s perspective, with the increased worry about cleanliness and hygiene, their work subsequently increased since they are the agents responsible to keep the place clean while the stigma that they are “dirty” also increased. [...] The kinds of racism also became slightly different for the live-in domestic workers especially. [...] Although it is not scientifically proven or anything, but we can say that the types of racism differ so we have something called the anti-blackness and the racism that the Asian population would receive is different, so they’re still not having the greatest non-discriminatory experience. [...] With COVID-19 originating from the Asian continent, this social perception of racism is starting to change in the sense that Asian population are also now perceived as sectors of the disease where it is no longer seen as better to employ a worker from the Philippines versus employing a worker from Ethiopia.”* (NGO’s Participant #1)

The negative portrayal was especially aired by the media, and not by the government which has an interest in maintaining the *kafala* system and the migration chain, having links with many politicians and business in the migrants' countries of origin (NGO Participant #1 and #2). The latter, in turn, also have great interest in keeping the system, as remittances constitute a large part of their GDP.

*“With the Kafala law they don’t have to open affordable housings for the elderly, nor affordable child care for people who have young children, nor social security or health insurances, because the care work and the bulk of the domestic work will not be at the expense of the government but rather at the expense of the individual employers. And it is done with a very low expense, because as we see in Lebanon it is not only people with a very high income that are able to afford domestic workers’ services but even middle and lower-middle class people as well; so it becomes the cheapest way for the government to sneak out of its duties and responsibilities towards its care sector and putting this burden on the people that work under the Kafala system.” (NGO Participant #2)*

- Abuses perpetrated against MDWs increased, particularly against the very young Syrian migrants:

*“Many of them are under eighteen and they are facing sexual assault, they are facing a lot of exploitation and of course mixed in a racist mix of verbal abuse, there’s also sexual abuse and sexual assault and labour exploitation like anyone else.” (NGO Participant #1)*

- The freelancers became also increasingly susceptible to abuse and exploitation:

*“As for the individuals that are living on their own, live-out workers, they risk evictions because they are not able to pay rent because of not being able to work because no one will risk bringing them into their households. If they were not in a house already and working under the Kafala system, so if they are freelancers, most probably and almost 100% of them lost their work and are no longer able to eat or pay their rent. Landlords are using this opportunity to evict them because they know that if they evict domestic workers for not paying their rent, they will not be held accountable.” (NGO Participant #1)*

Despite the tragic circumstances of MDWs abandoned in front of their embassies, or on the street, because their salaries could not be paid anymore, NGO participant #1 sees this phenomenon as having potential positive consequences, as a way of “naturally” starting to establish a freelancers-based alternative system to the *kafala* system.

- Due to the crises, many recruitment agencies closed. However, this does not mean that migrants completely stopped entering the country. Official entries decreased, but it is difficult to calculate the effect of the crises on undocumented and exploitative migration, that is smuggling and trafficking.
- Finally, there are those migrants who do not want to leave, or to leave their families or communities. In fact, despite being heavily overlooked in research, there is a growing number of MDWs who have started families in Lebanon, or have built strong communities. Many of them have been sexually abused and wanted to keep their child.

*“Many got married here or didn’t get married here but started families. And many actually got married to Lebanese men and then the men just disappeared and they were left with the children alone and many of them – I met many, many Ethiopian women that had this happen to them.” (NGO Participant #1)*

*“People have established a life here in Lebanon, despite the Kafala system forbidding life, but there are some who have romantic relationships here, family relationships, those who gave birth to their children here but aren’t able to get married or provide paperwork for their children won’t be able to travel at the moment because the general security would demand the documents for the children which aren’t available, or if the father is someone who is in a refugee or asylum situation then he would fear presenting himself to the Lebanese securities, or some Lebanese fathers who would avoid acknowledging such relationships and hence the law would not admit to their familial situation. There are other women who simply want to stay here, just because this is where their life is now; but they would be a minority.” (NGO Participant #2)*

The economic crisis, the major health disaster, and the Beirut port explosion had severe repercussions in the areas of gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHRs). NGO Participant #3 provides a picture of how the triple crisis exacerbated several aspects in these areas, where migrant women are among the most vulnerable already. This picture can be summarised through the following key points:

- As with everything else, the price of menstrual hygiene items has risen hugely and this resulted in a number of unhealthy practices, which increased the risks of infections and diseases.
- Due to the job losses and reduction/currency changes in salaries, the middle class was negatively affected by the crises (as we have seen from the responses of the migrant professionals in this study as well as of the other two practitioner participants in relation

to MDWs). One of the consequences was that many decided to send their children to state-maintained schools, which were however intermittently closed or over-subscribed. This in turn meant that many children could not attend school, and that discriminating gender norms dictated that families were prioritising the enrolment of boys in schools.

- Unemployment, economic difficulties and the inability to send children to school contribute to foreseeing a rise in child marriage, in a country where there is no law on the minimum age of marriage still.
- Child labour is also likely to increase, with boys more exploited in agriculture, and girls equally in agriculture and domestic work. However, child protection interventions and parenting support services had to decrease.
- The Lebanese government issued a domestic violence law in 2014, which makes women and girls more aware of their rights to report domestic violence. The marry-the-rapist law was also abolished in Lebanon. However, as everywhere else in the world, Covid-19 had an impact on the levels of domestic violence. This is due to prolonged lockdowns at home, and also because neither the victim nor the aid services could reach each other, certainly physically, but sometimes also remotely. This is all particularly true for remote rural areas and in a society where GBV is still a taboo to a certain extent. Not only quarantining, but in Lebanon, the shortage of fuel further hampered service reach-out. Support over the phone or via other means did not always work, for technical reasons (e.g., lack of internet connection) and contextual reasons (i.e., women often do not have the privacy to engage with services while at home). GBV within the community as well as domestic GBV has increased.
- SRH is also taboo in the country, in particular for unmarried adolescents. The situation above described additional barriers to the pre-existing reluctance to seek information and help for fear of stigma. The reduction of services and ability to reach all potential service users and more vulnerable groups has resulted in an increase in poorer SRH, as well as an increase in unwanted pregnancy and unsafe pregnancy interruptions.
- Freedom of movement was limited more for women and girls than for men and boys. This is due to the former being engaged in households and because of the higher fear of sexual harassment.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

In line with the broader, multi-country project 'Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration' involving also the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey, this study aimed to explore the interaction between economic and socio-cultural drivers of labour migrations from a gender-perspective with a focus on Lebanon. In the introductory Section two, we have seen how, from a legal perspective, Lebanon is a country characterised by a dual law system, where some policies on personal status are governed by religious entities, for example in relation to the minimum age for marriage, children's custody and divorce, and abortion. Lebanese women are not eligible to pass their citizenship and assets to their children, especially in the cases of non-Lebanese fathers or fathers of a different religion than the bride's. The result of the lack of unified code is that women's rights in the country cannot always be protected. This scenario can only be worse in relation to migrant women (World Bank and UN Women 2021), both workers under the *kafala* system – who are not protected by Lebanese labour law – and refugees and the undocumented – whose status makes them exceptionally vulnerable to abuses, expatriation and grants them few or no rights. At the same time, as we have seen, women constitute the majority of the migrants working in the service sector, coming from countries such as the Philippines, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan (Longuenesse and Tabar 2014), where some of this study's participants come from too. In relation to refugees, over 90 per cent of Syrian workers are engaged in informal work relations with no work contract and more than 50 per cent of the refugees residing in Lebanon are women, nearly 80 per cent report economic insecurity and only 1 per cent have a work permit (IPSOS Group SA 2018). For these reasons and in light of the fact that Lebanon is home to one of the largest refugee populations per capita in the world (World Bank 2021b), the condition of female migrant workers in Lebanon should be urgently addressed by the international community, the Lebanese governments and the governments of the migrants' source countries.

This study aimed to contribute to enriching the existing literature on the South-South/intra-Global South migration from a gender lens (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Kofman 2020). In addition to the broad themes guiding the investigation, others emerged from the Lebanese study and include: less stereotypical profiles of migrants domestic workers (MDWs) under the sponsorship system; insights into the experience of the unexplored migrant group of Syro-Lebanese women; 'push' factors which inextricably combine regional conflicts and discriminating gender roles – within the family and in the broader society; insights into the overlooked marginal migrants' spaces and community of LGBTQ+ and sex workers; and unique nuances of Global South migrant women's agency from a feminist perspective. This study adopted a qualitative design based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of 21 female migrant workers living in greater Beirut. Despite being a small cohort, it was however diverse enough to potentially disclose several lines for discussion. Some of these lines for discussion resonate with available literature, whereas other results have suggested relatively unexplored areas for further

investigation, about which research is still at an embryonic stage. A substantial corpus of literature could be drawn from to discuss the results of this study, ranging from MENA area-specific literature on migration, labour and gender, to literature adopting a human trafficking and modern slavery angle, from research into conflict-related migration, refugeedom and gender to a focus on global migrant domestic workers, sex workers and LGBTQ+ migrants. In what follows, we are offering a necessarily condensed version of a potentially very rich discussion, articulating it – for ease of exposition – along the three sub-groups of migrant women that we have identified: the MDWs, the Syrian sex workers, and the Syrian professionals.

The largest sub-cohort of MDWs can be considered the most internally homogeneous group. As seen, with the exception of the Nigerian and the Filipino worker, and that of the two women who worked in a beauty parlour and as cleaners at their manager's house, these migrant women have all come from Ethiopia via the *kafala* system and are live-in workers. We have above (Section 2.3) introduced the *kafala* system and some key criticisms to it. The phenomenon of Ethiopian MDWs exploited within the households of middle-class Lebanese families has been widely covered, especially by the media (Trew 2022; Zelalem 2021) and third sector report (Amnesty International 2019). The unfair terms and conditions of employment for workers under the *kafala* system in Lebanon have been summarised above, and sufficient literature, including labour legal studies, has demonstrated how the *kafala* is a violation of migrants, workers and women rights altogether. Literature has also investigated the historical connections of the *kafala* to British colonialism in the Gulf region and how Lebanese workers were themselves employed there with the sponsorship mechanism when emigrated during the Lebanese war (AlShehabi 2021). Scholarship has argued how such historical legacy is perpetuated in capitalist migrant labour expropriation of contemporary Lebanese *kafala* (Fernandez 2021). The Lebanese government takes advantage of a system which unloads the state from several welfare duties, and which, at the same time, allows the maintenance of positive and profitable relationships with migrants' source countries and with the businessmen lobby, both in Lebanon and abroad. This is a pattern scholarship has identified in relation to MDWs in several other contexts in both the Global North (Robillard et al. 2018; Kofman 2013; 2014) and Global South (Parreñas et al. 2019). These structural factors behind the *kafala* system have also been poignantly described by NGO research participants in this study. However, what this study aimed to look at is the agency of the MDWs, and their lived experiences and coping strategies in this system and broader conditions that can be described as gender-based structural violence.

Our results indicate that, generally, the MDWs were willing to emigrate, and in line with the phenomenon of feminization of migration, they were the pioneers of this journey, which carries with it a strong desire to change their own lives (Fernandez 2019). The choice of Lebanon, as obvious from the description of the *kafala* system sketched above, was to a great extent pre-determined by the existence of the well-established market of the recruitment agencies, promoting Lebanon as preferred destination. This had evidently created a word-of-mouth and a reputation of Lebanon as a good destination, in addition to having created migration chains and networks. The women's decision was personal, despite the fact that they had to agree it with

their parents/husbands, which is something that would probably occur in most families when it comes to take such an important decision affecting the whole household. Only one participant declared that she was pressured to migrate. The main, self-reported driver for leaving home was that of finding either their first employment or a new one with a higher income. This speaks to a broader picture whereby the labour market for women in Ethiopia does not offer many opportunities (Mulugeta 2021), as well as to the fact that the role of the woman in society is still largely attached to the household and to child-rearing (Semela, Bekele, and Abraham 2019), as many participants expressed. This applies in particular to poorer rural contexts – as some study participants described – which are the majority given that Ethiopia is still largely an agrarian economy (Semela, Bekele, and Abraham 2019). Normally, in fact, recruitment agencies provide the poorest women with the chance to migrate, which was previously not possible due to their lack of financial means (Fernandez 2019). In fact, while the costs of travel and necessary bureaucratic steps can be guaranteed by the employment agencies on condition of repayment by the employer, the agencies also deduct the costs from the first wage the migrant women receive for their domestic work when they start working. Poverty and restricted life prospects may therefore be considered the main drivers of migration for the MDWs. In fact, according to their words, the condition of the woman in Ethiopia is not of overt forms of daily violence and abuse, but there appear rooted gender norms sanctioning a rigid gender division of labour in the household, with an unequal burden on women. There is literature which is advancing current knowledge on domestic violence and other forms of GBV (IMMAP 2022) , but our results could not cast light on these matters. Other studies are looking to the phenomenon of irregular migration of Ethiopian women (Carruth and Smith 2022), yet likewise this study only included ‘regularised’ MDWs.

The labour migration endeavour as a MDW can be seen as perpetuating the same woman role attached to the private space of the house and of motherhood. As an aggravating factor, the house-confined role is, in Lebanon, perpetuated within a framework of “institutional humiliation” (Fernandez 2021) running along two further lines of oppression – racialisation and criminalisation (Ayoub 2020; Kassamali 2021), as we have maintained above (Section 2.3). Broader state interests, both in Lebanon and in Ethiopia – as well as in the Philippines and Nigeria – support this type of genderised migration flux, which is not only profitable, but attuned with a specific gender identity of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). It also shows the existence of gender inequality and the gendered structure of labour markets in Lebanon, where women are indeed associated with care/cleaning and, therefore, are mostly employed as domestic/care workers (Tlaiss 2014; Tlaiss and Kauser 2019; Abdou et al. 2019). In Lebanon, MDWs are received into the private space of the family only by creating and maintaining an insurmountable, racialised distancing, as seen. The disempowering working conditions under the *kafala* make MDWs even more vulnerable, relegated to second-class workers, if not of second-class human worth (Kassamali 2021). Additionally, under the racialised distancing, the inferiorisation of MDWs runs also through sexualised lines (Ayoub 2020). Feminist literature has poignantly argued how colonial white male sexualised gazed towards non-white colonised women is seen perpetuated in “post-colonial gaze of desire” in contemporary women migration (Kapur 2005). This is not only

expressed in the control and domination of migrant women bodies. As has always occurred in the history of human-to-human exploitation, male domination occurs via very tangible forms of sexual violence and abuses, or extra-marital, secret relationships – which have been interpreted also as sites of resistance and “intimate counter-spaces” (Pande 2018). These phenomena have not been reported by any of the MDWs in this study, however, it has instead been noted by the NGO practitioners. The growing phenomenon of MDWs having children from Lebanese men, both as a result of abuse and as a result of a romantic relationship is still largely overlooked in research. This is an area worth devoting further investigation, including within a broader framework of MDWs establishing families, communities and a new life in Lebanon. The modalities and nature of MDWs ‘integration’ in the country, also in face of the racialised hierarchies they are wrapped into, and how the different integration pathways affect the migration plans and status of MDWs are also related areas in need of further investigation. As Fernandez describes, legally a migrant woman can marry a Lebanese man and obtain long-term residence and job permits, however, a non-citizen, she cannot marry another migrant, unless she does so under the Islamic law (Fernandez 2019, 71). An interesting, overlooked group of MDWs in this sense may arguably be that of the freelancers, who have fallen out, or run away from, the *kafala* system as well as from the houses of the employing families. Our study sample could not include any representative of the live-out domestic workers. However, the NGO practitioner participants offered significant insights on this category of workers, who also started to increase as a consequence of the triple crisis in the country. Literature is also growing around the phenomenon of MDW freelancers, describing how both ‘run-away’ and freelance workers for other reasons, continue to work as hourly paid domestic workers, or they find jobs in the informal sector, including sex work (Fernandez 2019, 71). But scholarship is still scarce on this category of female migrant workers.

Research into MDWs coping strategies amidst Lebanese society would cast fresh light onto their agency. Fernandez, for example argues that Ethiopian migrant women’s agency must be looked at starting from their decision to leave home, when they resolve escaping oppressive life scripts. MDWs’ “intentions and desires”, as well as “their everyday practices, actions, speech, and silences” are elements useful to investigate their negotiations to effect change vis-à-vis different actors and contexts, including their families and communities at home, employers, agents, and the host country government and society (Fernandez 2019, 16). Scholarship has also highlighted other areas where MDW’s agency and resistance can be grasped, spanning from the intimate sexual and romantic sphere, as seen (Pande 2018), to more public spheres of self-organisations, in phone centres, churches and migrants homes (Pande 2012; Mansour-Ille and Hendow 2018). In our sample, all the interviewed women were at a stage where they perceived their experience in Lebanon as temporary. As typical of “circular migration” as well as “serial labour migration” (Parreñas et al. 2019), in the medium- and long-term, they envisioned returning to their home country, after saving money. In fact, money appears as the key driver for migration, but also a fundamental element whereby MDWs conceive their empowerment and agency. Being able to make, send and save money is a source of pride, which appears to set a temporal limit to their stay in Lebanon, while also making their life condition more acceptable.

On the other hand though, this fits well into the *kafala*-based labour expropriation, whereby a renewable labour force circulates and is made available, and older women come back to their chores and caring duties in their own homes (Parreñas et al. 2019; Parreñas 2021). Their limbo situation, and other specific features shared by the MDWs in this study, shows that the women did not seem to be on any pathways to integration in Lebanon, of whatever kind, which is also something available literature has shown, also in other contexts (Parreñas et al. 2019). Another interesting feature of the MDWs involved in this study is that they did not describe their working conditions in a negative way or along the line of the somehow stereotypical African or Asian MDW under the *kafala* system. Participants report many of the unfair conditions described in the literature (e.g., not having enough time for rest during the day/week, working too many hours, not having their own room). However, they do not express experiencing them as discriminatory, unfair, or abusive. This can be interpreted, in part, as a result stemming from the specific sample of this study. It can also be read as a more general sense-making of MDWs who come from a destitute background, and experience the fact that they could have a job out of their own house and earn money as emancipatory (Fernandez 2019). Finally, there may be an insufficient level of awareness in relation to migrant labour rights and women's rights, as well as specific internalised gender norms and cultural values which filter the experience of MDWs. These possibilities however are not detrimental to the sense of agency of these women. But all reinforce the need to look for a delicate balance when investigating agency among destitute social actors, between their capacity to conceive and effect personal and social change, and the violent structures moulding and orienting their capacity (Fernandez 2019; Lazzarino 2015).

Finally, we have seen how the process of acquainting with the host country and going out to public spaces is filtered by the family they live with, and, to a certain extent, necessarily hampered by their home-based work, which blurs the boundaries between private and work life. Many declared that they did not go anywhere, had no social life and attended no social events, whereas they spent their little free time on their phone, watching the television and talking to their family back home. The use of phones and social media by MDWs as their virtual place of freedom and empowerment is another area where further investigation is needed, in relation to Lebanon. With regards to other areas, literature has in fact shown how important social media fora can be to maintaining a sense of belonging and community, as well as a source of socialisation, entertainment and political empowerment (Bernal 2006; Witteborn 2015; Komito 2011).

Research into the condition and the rights of the woman in Syria generally corroborates the scenario of severe discrimination and violence that our results suggest (Ramadan et al. 2021). Particularly among the rural, poorer, less educated and more religious regions of the country, gender discrimination and GBV are present. This manifests also in practices of acute human rights violation, such as child, forced, and arranged marriage, polygamy, honour killing, marital rape and rape-marriage (Ramadan et al. 2021; Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016). There is an abundance of literature investigating conflict-related refugeedom (Freedman 2019), as well as literature highlighting how civil wars, and conflicts in general, have the effect of increasing GBV, within and

outside the walls of the private domestic space (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016). In relation to the Syrian war, literature has shown that Syrian women have suffered significantly higher level of physical and psychological violence, both in Syria and in the host countries, as asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants (Hamelink and Güngör 2022; Afyonoğlu 2021; Al-Natour, Al-Ostaz, and Morris 2019; Lancet 2013). Additionally, it is known that those bearing the harshest consequences of war and conflicts are the poorer and more deprived population groups. Finally, the links between conflict and both migrant smuggling and human trafficking are also well established (Muraszkiewicz, Fenton, and Watson 2020; UNODC 2018).

The level of urgency to flee atrocities, systemic violence and death not only determines mass exoduses, but turns migrants-to-be very vulnerable to deception, exploitation and abuses (Muraszkiewicz, Fenton, and Watson 2020; UNODC 2018). For this, literature has started paying attention to these phenomena in the Syrian context, and is suggesting an increase in cases of human trafficking for sexual exploitation of Syrian women in neighbouring countries (Healy 2016; Poggi 2017). The sub-group of the four Syrian sex-workers involved in this study represents what this body of literature evidenced. The two Syrian professional sex workers, whose stories sit within the spectrum of human trafficking, can indeed be taken as emblematic of how women's oppression and conflict intersect and result in the exploitation and abuse of migrant women. The patterns identified also align with the stories of the two trafficked women in this study, and where we normally see the presence of a small group of criminals recruiting young women with someone known to them with the deceptive promise of a better life and employment in Lebanon. The higher level of deception can be directed to the migrant's family, in particular the father – who holds the decision-making power in the household. However, the destitute conditions, aggravated by the war, makes the father easily convinced by the prospect of having some financial help in the form of remittances on behalf of one of the daughters who also ceased to be a burden on the household in this way. This is telling in relation to the level of poverty and gender discrimination of, often rural, Syrian families. It is also significantly indicative of how poverty and discrimination are intrinsically connected with larger structural factors which are at the root of social inequalities and injustice. In contexts of extreme poverty, the desperate conditions of rural families and communities have been explored, in relation to the labour exploitation and even sale of children, for forced marriage and sex work (Boender 2021; ILO, Walk Free, and IOM 2022), also among Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon (Bartels et al. 2018). Allurement and deception are obviously also directed towards the young women who desperately wanted to leave the horrors of the war and the abuses they suffered at home, and were unaware of the plans to push them into prostitution once in Lebanon.

Their desire and will to effect change to their lives show a great level of agency, as well as a certain level of decision and self-determination in continuing their work as sex workers. We are aware that this affirmation must be taken with extreme caution, because there are several factors which limit their agency, such as, in the very words of our participants, undocumented/illegal migrant status and lack of education. However, there are also several studies which documented the inappropriateness of an over-victimising and criminalising stance

towards women whose migration trajectories may fall within the boundaries of the sex trafficking phenomenon (O’Connell Davidson 2006; Bernstein 2012; Kempadoo 2015). These studies emphasised women’s agency against the “colonialisms, cissexisms and racism” inherent in the anti-trafficking discourse (Stabile 2020; Doezema 1998) and have also showed that when women resolve to change their conditions, they tend to find a way to do so, alternatively they resort to other coping strategies within and out of what has become their professional identity as sex workers. The coping strategies that emerged from our study in relation to this sub-group of participants, including the two transwomen, consist in choices, actions, and narratives that can mitigate the hardships of their situations as undocumented migrants with undesired jobs, or with no job. For the professional sex workers, for example, being able to make, save and send money to their family gives them a sense of empowerment, as for the MDWs. Additionally, an attitude of hope to change their conditions coexists with an attitude of acceptance, resignation and self-denigratory attitude – which are themselves key narratives for them to cope with their situation. Plans for future migration endeavours are also signs of inner orientation towards change (Boccagni 2017). However, more research would be needed to better understand the lived-experience and support needs of migrant sex workers in Beirut and Lebanon more generally.

The two migrant transwomen in this study declared to be less systematically engaged in sex work, and appear to exhibit a higher level of free choice in this respect. This can be for several reason, not last the hyper-hidden nature of the non-cis sex industry (Matthen et al. 2018; Stabile 2020). This greater flexibility has also been noted elsewhere, with LGBTQ+ Brazilian migrants, for example (Teixeira 2008; Ferreira 2018), or in the US where LGBTQ+ migrants are less victimised, but more criminalised (Fehrenbacher et al. 2020). The two LGBTQ+ migrants in this study are, however, equally disappointed by what they found upon arrival, which was very different from what they expected. Nevertheless, neither of them would want to go back to what they considered worse than what they had found in the host country. This experience discloses questions around the reputation of Lebanon as a country of freedom in contrast to a country where discrimination against different types of minority groups is in reality widespread. Finally, in the case of the transwomen, it is important to value how looking for support of a different kind in the third sector can be seen as an important action of self-protection and coping with difficulties. As mentioned above in Section 3.2, there is little research into the experiences of Syrian LGBTQ+ migrants in Lebanon, and in general, academic attention and specialised services have been scarce, but also growing, on LGBTQ+ refugees and victims of human trafficking (Lazzarino, Wright, and Jordan 2022). Taken together, the sub-cohort of the undocumented Syrian sex workers poignantly represents the intersectionality of several lines of oppression this exceptionally vulnerabilised and marginalised category of migrants suffer from, including gender identity, profession, migrant status, socio-economic status, and education.

The third sub-group of this study is categorised as that of the Syrian professional migrants. This group, as mentioned, is heterogenous and opens up several lines for discussion and further investigation. Among these, one important line of inquiry is that of South-to-South skilled female mobility (Izaguirre and Walsham 2021). Looked at from a gender perspective, this would entail

acquiring a better understanding of the experiences of professional, skilled migrant women workers in the host country, in this case Lebanon. Of interest would be to cast light onto several related factors, such as family ties, drivers and processes of migration, deskilling processes and other aspects of the processes of integration, from both a formal and a social perspective. The invisibility of skilled female migrants has been highlighted over the past 20 years, in relation to the European context for example (Kofman 2000; Christou and Kofman 2022). An attention to skilled migrant women invites a recognition that they are present in several realms and contexts of reproduction, beyond domestic work and care, and are part of globalised labour markets in complex ways, which involves several circuits around the world, instead of being mono-centric (Kofman and Raghuram 2006; 2015). This invites us to de-centre the perspective on Global South to North migration, opening up more nuanced pictures of intra-Global South flows, policies, racialised hierarchies, and knowledge production in relation to female migrant workers and their contribution to welfare and social reproduction (Kofman 2020; 2022; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Mora and Piper 2021). Two participants in this study have a story of family migration from Syria to the UAE – where they were born, and then moved to Lebanon. Their migratory route is a good example of a South-to-South circuit revolving around the regional centre of the Emirates (Parreñas et al. 2019). Labour migration to the Emirates from the Middle East is a historic phenomenon literature has investigated, as we mention above. However, there is not an abundance of scholarship on the establishment of migrant families by Lebanese migrants in the Gulf region, which intensified after the 1950s, or on the social upward mobility of these families upon return to the Middle East, afforded by the wealth that they could accumulate as migrants (Hourani 2010; De Bel-Air 2017).

Two other overlooked areas that our results indicated in relation to the sub-cohort of the Syrian professionals are: that of the effects of conflict and wars onto what we can refer to as middle-class professional migrants; and that of mixed-family Lebanese-Syrian migrants. These latter include those who are Lebanese on the mother's side, who are not officially recognised as Syrian by the Lebanese government. As well as those who are instead married to a Lebanese man, and therefore are naturalised as Lebanese citizens. These areas of investigation further disclose potential for research into middle-class Syrian communities in Lebanon, both long-term and more recent, as a result of the Syrian war. Stemming from the words of this study's participants, it would be interesting to understand how their negotiation shifted between integration and remaining instead a foreigner belonging to another inferiorised minority. The life of these women in Lebanon is described as full of opportunities and entertainment. They could get a good education, find a good job, build a life full of activities and hobbies. The two married women plan their life in relation to their young/future families. However, these women are also the ones talking of a racialised attitude and referring to practices of institutional racism of Lebanese society against Syrian people.

In Lebanon and worldwide, women migrant workers still do not enjoy standard labour conditions, while suffering social and institutional discriminations. National and international tools to protect female migrant workers are still insufficient and it is thus important to explore the relationships

between the state, international and national institutional actors, and civil society, including migrant associations, to gain an understanding of the limitations of the attempts at global and local governance. The aim is to find actionable possibilities of improving the working and living conditions of migrant workers in several sectors, from the domestic and the informal to higher-skilled industries, and in several countries around the world.

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